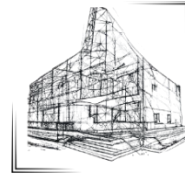


FEBRUARY 10, 2024



Co-funded by
the European Union



(IN)VISIBLE TRACES.
ARTISTIC MEMORIES OF
THE COLD WAR

(In)Visible Traces. Artistic memories of the Cold War

Prison Camp “Barren Island” (Goli otok) Desk research

DOCUMENTA – CENTER FOR DEALING WITH THE PAST

**Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them*



Croatia and the Cold War

During the Cold War period Croatia was a part of Yugoslavia. In the direct years after World War II, Yugoslavia closely collaborated with the Soviet Union. The relations between the countries were good, there were plenty political and economic similarities and also culturally there was a lot of overlap. The Cold War included an ideological war for influence. Therefore, the Yugoslav communists sought to strengthen their position with Yugoslavia's immediate neighbors. Yugoslavia did this mostly independently, which the Soviet Union took the wrong way and slowly the good relations between the countries started to deteriorate. Eventually, this led to the 'Tito-Stalin split' which prompted the Soviets to isolate Yugoslavia which then carved its own, socialist path.

Throughout the 20th century Yugoslavia eventually got the reputation of being a kind of bridge between the ideological East and West, a state where socialism prevailed but took on a milder form than in the Soviet Union and Soviet influence sphere. However, this does not mean hardships did not exist in Yugoslavia: Amongst other camps, the island Goli Otok functioned as both a re-education camp and a prison camp. After the demise of Yugoslavia, the camp fell into oblivion despite its large impact on the Yugoslav society, which is why it is central in this desk research/project for Croatia.

Goli Otok

Goli Otok, is located in the Adriatic Sea and unreachable without a ship or boat. It was one of Yugoslavia's biggest camps both for political prisoners and later also for other kinds of delinquents or criminals. The prisoners were expected to work at the camps: quarries, sawmills, furniture manufacturing, sand extraction were among the labors carried out by the prisoners. It was therefore not only a place to imprison unwanted (political) prisoners, but also an industrial model that generated profits for both the secret police and Yugoslavia. Before the socialist Yugoslavia, during World War I, Goli Otok was used by the Habsburg Empire as a prison camp to detain the Russian captives. The focus however is on the Goli Otok during the Cold War period in Yugoslavia.

1949-1956 re-education camp Goli Otok

The break with the Soviet Union after three years of intensive cooperation in 1949 was a surprise for the Yugoslav citizens and within the party. Cominformists (members of the informbiro of Yugoslavia who had been loyal followers of the Soviet Union) were confused by the sudden bad relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav communists rallied behind Tito and perceived the Soviet-aligned cominformists as a threat. Therefore, when it became clear that the Yugoslav-Soviet relations would only further deteriorate, the Cominformists as they were (real or alleged) followers of Stalin, the Yugoslav communists organized camps and prisons, among those was the

Goli Otok camp, established in July 1949 in which the Cominformist were detained. The initial purpose of the camp was therefore branded as re-education: a shift in ideology demanded a shift in mindset of the cominformists. The circumstances at the camp were far from hospitable. Goli Otok's location and harsh natural conditions would remain in the memories of inmates at the island. The island's name Goli Otok that translates to 'barren island' represents this. Within the 6 years that this camp was in function, in total 13 000 people were imprisoned there, 287 did not survive their imprisonment.

1956-1988 prison Goli Otok

The first camp was closed in 1956 after the conflict with the Soviet Union had settled down. The closing was short-lived because soon after the Secretariat of Internal affairs took over the management of the prison camp and reinstated the prison for delinquents, criminals and political prisoners. The camp remained in function in this manner until 1988, despite the gradual liberalization of Yugoslavia throughout the second half of the 20th century. The camp's remains that are left on the island stem from this period, but are in state of disrepair.

Legal status: national laws on protection

Goli Otok has not been well preserved nor protected under Croatian heritage lists. In general, in line with international conventions¹, Croatia has its national register for national significant heritage that has a protected status in Croatia in its 'Registar Kulturna Dobra'. The register consists of three lists: the list of protected cultural heritage, the list of heritage of national importance, and the list of preventive protected assets.

Several camps that stem from World War II that were located in Croatia (such as the Slana camp and Jasenovac) do for example enjoy protection on grounds of being registered as cultural heritage in that specific register. The campsite of Goli Otok, on the other hand, does not occupy a place in this register, despite frequent requests since 2005. Moreover, a special committee for Human Rights and Rights of Minorities has expressed their approval of and demand a protected status (Zakon o Spomen-području Goli otok) for Goli Otok to the Croatian government. These attempts show that there is a wish to protect and commemorate the site, but there is little attention for it on a state level.

Dealing with the past?



At first sight, the island looks completely abandoned and left to nature's vagaries. There are however several informational displays and commemorative plaques to honor the victims. The site has also been brought to the public attention by different organizations such as *Documenta*, Udruga Goli otok "Ante Zemljari" and the Friedrich Erbert Stiftung. This happened through online initiatives such as

¹ Agreements such as (not limited to) UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (tangible, intangible, underwater), the Hague Convention for the protection of Cultural heritage in times of conflict, and the FARO convention

'croatianmemories.org' or 'goli-otok.net', as well as numerous scholarly books and articles. The canonization of Goli Otok is therefore visible, but mostly online. To transfer the information physically to the site would be a fruitful next step to engage the public both in- and outside of Croatia.

Important to note is that there is not a total lack of interest from the authorities. Goli Otok is the place for the commemoration of 23 of August of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. Apart from that, there are no indications for initiatives to give the site more recognition by building a museum or information center.

Navigating dissonances

Why is it so hard to establish institutes such as a memorial center at this site? Aside from its accessibility, there are several reasons why Goli Otok evokes a sense of dissonance in Croatian society: the prioritizing of the remembrance of the 1990s war, little space to the commemoration of minorities (the ethnic composition of the victims was very diverse) plus the socialist character of the place which, all together, led people to be reluctant to address these topics that tend to cause controversy. The focus on the composition of the victims and ideology remove the focus and acknowledgement to the victims of the prison camps on Goli Otok. On the page of the Unveiling personal memories on war and detention (<https://www.croatianmemories.org/en/about-the-project/>) you can find personal memories of the former inmates:

1. **Vera Winter** was born in 1923 in Glamoč, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She comes from a family of teachers. During the period of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croat and Slovenes, the family moved all over the country, as her father would get work. At the beginning of the Second World War, her family was in Zagreb. Vera Winter was a student at the time. She criticised the Ustaše government for the poverty that had stricken the people, and so she was locked up in prison in Petrinjska Street, where she spent more than a month. She was in Zagreb when the War ended. Upon earning a degree in economics and working in Zagreb for a short time, she was directed to go to Belgrade to work at the Federal Ministry. Because she was friends with a Croatian man, who was suspected of being a Soviet spy, in 1950 she was deported to Goli Otok. In 1953 she was transferred to the female camp, at the nearby island of Sveti Grgur. She was released the same year. She first talked about her experience as a prisoner on Goli Otok in 1989. She died aged 92 on 30 August 2015. needs some more explanation maybe and examples of the interviews and personal stories can be added.
 - **Personal memory:** <https://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/vera-winter/>
2. **Vladimir Bobinac** was born in 1923 in Zagreb. At the beginning of the Second World War he opted for antifascism and joined the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia. In December 1941 he was arrested by the Ustaše surveillance service and imprisoned. He remained in prison until May 1942. Following the end of the Second World War he continued his education; in 1947 he enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. Since he was the President of the Faculty's People's Student Youth, following the Informbiro Resolution, he was expected to actively participate in the boycotting and denouncing of his colleagues, which he refused to do. As a consequence, in 1949 he was banned from the Faculty and a case was brought against him, for disloyalty to the state. In 1951 he was sent to Goli Otok, where he was imprisoned until 1953. He was both a witness and a victim of the terror that reigned there. Following his release from Goli Otok, he managed to complete his university course. However, as a former convict from Goli Otok, he encountered problems when looking for employment. Following the change in political circumstances and normalisation of relations between Yugoslavia and the USSR, he got a job as a history teacher on the island of Krk. He was an occasional tour guide around Goli Otok and had many ideas as to how to preserve the memory of all that happened on that island. He died aged 91 on Krk on 4 May 2014.
 - **Personal memory:** <https://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/vladimir-bobinac/>

Additionally, what plays a role in the silences surrounding Goli Otok, is that during Yugoslavia prisoners who had spent time in the camp had no space in society to talk about their experiences. Frequently political prisoners were detained there and they would think twice about criticizing a regime that had detained them once before. Nowadays, their experiences are still little recognized in the public sphere in Croatia, which is why it is important to devote attention to these underexposed experiences.



Dissonant heritage, such as this site, on the other hand invites and incites dialogue. Therefore, it is important to remember sites such as this one, although it is generally regarded as complicated, difficult or unimportant topic. It is about coming to terms with Yugoslavia and Cold War legacies in present day Croatia. The neglected status underwrites the struggle to deal with this past, which is why it is brought to attention also through this project.

AIM To make this heritage more accessible and tangible for a large audience, also from outside of Croatia. It is part of the European heritage of the Cold War...

Sources:

- leaflet of Documenta and Friedrich Erbert Stiftung
- goli-otok.net
- Aburtina, Zoran. "Priča o Golom otoku nikome ne odgovara." 15.08.2020
<https://www.dw.com/bs/pri%C4%8Da-o-golom-otoku-nikome-ne-odgovara/a-54570166>
- legislative document on national policies on heritage: http://www.trainmonher.uvsq.fr/index2ee7.pdf?id=8&elD=dam_frontend_push&docID=30#:~:text=The%20conservation%20of%20the%20cultural,and%20enjoy%20its%20particular%20protection
- Register of cultural goods: <https://registar.kulturnadobra.hr/#/>