

GOLI OTOK



**A SHORT GUIDE THROUGH THE HISTORY OF
THE INTERNMENT CAMP ON GOLI OTOK**

The regional office of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Zagreb

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Contents

Why this publication on Goli Otok is important	2
Why we remember Goli Otok	3
The historical context of the creation of the Goli Otok camp	5
Goli Otok 1949-1956	7
Goli Otok 1956-1988	9
A 60-minute tour of Goli Otok	10
1 - Quay	12
2 - Hotel	13
3 - Great Wire	14
4 - Camp self-administration centre	15
5 - Petar's Pit	16
6 - The water reservoir	17
7 - Workshops	18
8 - The stone building	19
Women's camps	21
Goli Otok – Yugoslavia's open secret	25
Goli Otok in the contemporary Croatian culture of remembrance	27
Literature	31
Geographical map of Goli Otok	32

Why this publication on Goli Otok is important

For the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, an institution engaged in political education, history is always a site of learning – those who confront history should do so with a twofold epistemological interest: above all, to grasp what happened, when, for which reasons and with what consequences; but also to draw lessons from history for the present and the future. The FES, with its own history department, has, for over many years, made extensive contributions to the research of Fascism in Germany, the history of the workers' movement and its central agents, and social history at large.

Guided by the paradigm of critical historical science, the FES hopes that this brochure will help you to understand what exactly took place on this small Adriatic island – Goli Otok – and allow you to draw lessons for the present and the future.

We hope that if you read this brochure, and visit Goli Otok equipped with it, you may experience not only the natural beauty of the island, but also understand the human suffering that took place there. By confronting Goli Otok's past you will make sure that the suffering of the inmates who had been interned there between 1949 and 1956 is not forgotten. You will grasp how unacceptable it is to deprive people of their freedom because their thinking is different from those in power. Ultimately, we hope that this brochure will encourage you to stand up for freedom and solidarity, and against injustice and repression. I offer my heartfelt gratitude to the authors of this publication, Martin Previšić, Vladi Bralić and Boris Stamenić, who have made this important historical research available to a wider group of readers. I also thank Vesna Ibrišimović for the visualising of the text and to Blanka Smoljan from the FES for her passionate and immaculate behind the scene work without which this brochure would not have materialised.

Türkan Karakurt

Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation office in Zagreb

Why we remember Goli Otok

Goli Otok is a place marked by the Yugoslavian Communist regime's repression against the thousands of individuals held captive on the island. The inhospitable and uninhabited island between Rab and Senj is one of the sites with the greatest symbolic significance in the contemporary history of Croatia, and of its time as a republic in the former Yugoslavia. However, only run-down and derelict buildings remain of the erstwhile prison camp, which later became an actual prison on Goli Otok. Sheep graze among these ruins during winter, while in the summer, tourists wander around in search of experiencing the "Alcatraz of the Adriatic", as the island is pitched to them by tourist agencies and local boat operators.

Although almost everyone in Croatia has heard of Goli Otok, few can say more than a couple of meaningful sentences about it. One of the more important reasons for this discrepancy lies in the lack (until recently) of comprehensive scholarly research about Goli Otok. The publishing of Dr. Martin Previšić's book, *The History of Goli Otok*, in early 2019, represented a great step forward in the scholarly research of this important topic. However, with its six-hundred-or-so pages, Previšić's book vastly exceeds the wider public and the average visitor's interest in the matter.

This brochure, created in cooperation with Dr. Martin Previšić, is a short introduction to the political history of Goli Otok, and a guide to the part of the island most frequently toured by visitors. Readers are presented with the results of Dr. Previšić's years-long research in a plain and simple form, suitable for those with no previous knowledge of Goli Otok, or the political history of Croatia.

In addition to providing basic information about the prison camp, and prison, on Goli Otok, the aim of this brochure is to stimulate readers to think about ideologically motivated violence within the framework of various regimes that held sway on the territory of today's Croatia. At the same time, we wish to stress the importance of safeguarding the human rights and freedoms of each individual, and encourage empathy with the victims of political and ideological violence.

We hold educating the public while stimulating critical reflection and public dialogue to be the fundamental postulates in shaping active citizens, ready to stand against the restrictions against the freedom of speech, thought and action within the framework of the constitutional-legal order. With this brochure on Goli Otok, we wish to contribute to the development of a society founded upon democratic and civic values, a society in which Goli Otok will never again happen.

Dr. Boris Stamenić

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CREATION OF THE GOLI OTOK CAMP

In the years following World War II, Yugoslavia was one of the most loyal followers of the Soviet Union. Yugoslav Communists sought to imitate the Soviet model in politics, culture, economy, and the judiciary, as well as in many other fields. Images of Stalin were a common sight in various state institutions, while limitless glorification of the Soviet Union and its leader saturated the public sphere. However, in so doing, Yugoslav Communists were guided by the conviction that they had to strengthen their regional role and spread Communism beyond Yugoslavia's borders. This policy brought them into conflict with the Soviet Union, which was not in favour of Yugoslavia acting independently in Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. The relationship between Belgrade and Moscow deteriorated quietly for months before escalating publicly. On 28 June 1948, the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), an international organisation of Communist parties controlled by the Soviets, issued a resolution aiming to put pressure on Yugoslavia, hoping for a change in the then-leadership. As the conflict had hitherto been secret, the Cominform Resolution (*Rezolucija Informbiroa*) came as a shock to the citizens of the country. After three years of intense Stalinisation in Yugoslavia, it was hard for much of the populace to comprehend the fact that the Soviet Union and Stalin were no longer friends; however, the Communist party leadership in Yugoslavia did not fall. Following this, the Soviets isolated Yugoslavia, both economically and diplomatically, and there were even indications that they might intervene militarily. At the same time, the Cominformists [Ibeovci – Informbiro being the Yugoslav name for the Cominform] began to emerge. The Cominformists had been the followers of the Soviet Union as well as people confused by the new political situation due to the Yugoslav government's information bias. Half a year after the Cominform Resolution was issued, when it became clear that there would not be a reconciliation with the Soviet Union, and that Yugoslav-Soviet relations could only be expected to further deteriorate, Yugoslavian Communists began a confrontation with the opposition in their ranks, both real and potential, and began organising a system of camps and prisons to imprison the Cominformists, the largest of which was the Goli Otok camp, established in July 1949.

Throughout history, numerous islands around the world have served as sites where political opponents were imprisoned. This

GOLI OTOK 1949 - 1956

isolated Adriatic island, situated far from the eastern boundaries of Yugoslavia, was the natural choice for the Yugoslav secret police, which was then called the State Security Service (UDBA – Uprava državne bezbjednosti), as the logical solution to the challenge of isolating real and alleged followers of Stalin. As the island has no drinking water, and both its soil and climate are unfavourable, it was neither inhabited nor capable of sustaining agriculture, other than some fishing and sheep farming. In spite of its position within a relatively densely populated part of the Adriatic, Goli Otok, 4.54 km² in size, has remained deserted. The greater part of the island is exposed to frequent blasts of a strong northern wind, the Bura, with just a segment of the south-western coast of Goli Otok partially sheltered. It is on this part of the island that a natural access point was formed, which later, when the camp was being built, provided the site for the harbour. The remainder of the inaccessible shoreline, especially the northern and eastern side of the island, is characterised by a chain of cliffs around 200 metres tall, and some 4 km long. The island's highest peak is Glavina (227 m), while the sea surrounding it reaches a depth of 30 metres, and, off the eastern shore, as much as 103 metres. Due to such characteristics, the island had remained naturally isolated.

Its geological composition, dominated by limestone rocks, was the primary cause of the nonexistence of any sources of water, or permanent surface flows on the island, which meant that vegetation on the island is also scarce. The rocky inclines are covered by patches of dry grassland. After the camp was established, reforestation began on the south-western part of Goli Otok, which is nowadays the only "green" part of the island.

According to classifications, the island's climate is dominantly temperate, warm and wet, with hot summers. During winter, gusts of Bura very often reach a speed of up to 150 km/h, in such time the temperature can drop to -8°C.

Taking into account all these geographical determinants, Goli Otok was a suitable place to establish a prison camp. The harsh climate would become ingrained in the inmates' memories as one of its main characteristics.

Goli Otok was the largest camp in the camp and prison system where Cominformists were imprisoned. In its six year existence, 13,000 people went through it, 287 of whom died of various causes. In the period between 1949 and 1956, there were several smaller camps on Goli Otok; three for men, and a single women's camp. The UDBA ran the camp, forcing inmates to abuse other inmates. The entire system on Goli Otok was based on the idea that an inmate had to denounce other followers of Stalin on the mainland, and physically and verbally attack those inmates who still supported the Soviet Union. A system of industry was established on Goli Otok, where inmates laboured under harsh conditions; quarries, sawmills, furniture manufacturing, sand extraction, repairing smaller boats, and tile-making, etc. Inmates would spend the greater part of the day at work in one of these plants, thus generating revenue for the secret police. The camp was closed in late 1956, after the conflict with the Soviet Union had ended.

When it comes to specific camps (so-called worksites) on Goli Otok, it needs to be stressed that during the relatively short period between 1949 and 1956, after the publication of the Cominform Resolution in 1948, the authorities at the time turned the isolated island into a secret camp to serve the purpose of the so-called political re-education of convicts (Cominformists). In just a couple of years, various buildings that were to receive inmates were erected and fitted out in the greatest secrecy, while a multi-functional industrial plant was also soon to be set up.

In organising the carefully chosen spots where convicts were to be isolated were adapted to the specific landscape of the island, while at the same time designed to strictly serve the basic functions of the camp. These locations were fenced with barbed wire or surrounded by tall walls, and included the quarters for collective accommodation, individual cells for solitary confinement, administration buildings for the interrogators and the security staff, bunkers and guardhouses for guards, and areas for forced labour (quarries, areas for reforestation of the island, agricultural areas). All these spaces and buildings promoted isolation, camp discipline and a pyramidal system of administration and surveillance,

guaranteeing, to the greatest extent possible, the basic political function of the camp: the political re-education of the inmates.

There were four camps on Goli Otok. The first camp (Old Wire), which lasted from 1949 until 1950, the second camp Great Wire (1950-1954), and the third Goli Otok camp R-5, or the women's camp, which lasted from 1951 to 1952, all of them situated above the natural coves of Tatinja, Vela Draga and Vela Senjska, amid the island's bare terrain, on the peculiar spot where torrents ripping through the stone had formed rocky depressions, thus creating a natural location for camps. Unlike the other three Goli Otok camps, the fourth camp (Petar's Pit), which lasted from 1950 to 1954, was located in the island's interior. However, this fully isolated camp, intended for "incorrigible Cominformists" was hidden from the other Goli Otok camps so as to isolate this group of special Cominformists from other convicts. This is how this camp came to be, situated in an abandoned mining pit that was worked and dug out between the two world wars, during excavations prospecting for bauxite.

It should be stressed that Goli Otok was the largest internment camp for real and alleged followers of Stalin, where the largest number of people were imprisoned. However, it was not the only one. There were two more camps on the Grgur island – a women's camp, and a camp where Yugoslav Army officers were held. In addition, Cominformists were also interned in prisons in Bileća, Požarevac, Stara Gradiška, the Ugljan island prison and the Ramski Rit camp, near the Romanian border, but the Goli Otok camp was the only one that functioned as a site where Cominformists were interned over the entire duration of the Yugoslav-Soviet dispute, from 1949 to 1956. There were a total of 15.737 registered prisoners interned in various prisons and camps in Yugoslavia during the aforementioned period, on charges of supporting Stalin.

GOLI OTOK 1956 - 1988

One should distinguish between the Goli Otok camp, established with the aim of "political re-education" of Cominformists, and the latter Goli Otok prison. The initial camp was directly managed by the federal UDBA, while the latter prison was under the jurisdiction of the Republic SUP (the Secretariat of Internal Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Croatia). The organisation and rationale of the latter prison were also different, much like the composition of the inmate population.

When the conflict with Stalin ended, Goli Otok was temporarily closed, but the country's secret police decided that the industrial production on the island was too profitable to be shut down. Although the Goli Otok camp (previously called the Mermer [Marble] Worksite) was named the Penitentiary and corrections facility [KPD – kazneno popravni dom] Rab – Goli Otok already in 1953, it was only after 1956 that a prison for delinquents, young adults, criminals and political prisoners became operational. The share of political prisoners on Goli otok in the period after 1956 is subjected to different estimations. Some of the captives of the former camp had been sentenced to additional imprisonment and brought back to the island after 1956. In addition to returnees, the prison hosted an unknown number of convicts found guilty of ideological offences, frequently including accusations related to ethnic nationalism. Despite the gradual liberalisation of Yugoslavia after 1955, political prisoners were detained on the island until the 1980s.

The current appearance of the remains of Goli Otok largely dates back to the Goli Otok prison, although many existing buildings survived from the time of the camp. The Goli Otok penitentiary was shut down in 1988, and has subsequently become nearly entirely ruinous.

Photograph: Darko Bavoljak



A 60-MINUTE TOUR OF GOLI OTOK



- 1 Quay
- 2 Hotel
- 3 Great Wire
- 4 Camp self-administration centre
- 5 Petar's Pit
- 6 The water reservoir
- 7 Workshops
- 8 The stone building

1 QUAY

Ships carrying not only inmates, but also various materials, largely set off from the Bakar port, arriving at the Goli Otok Quay, built during the construction of the camp in 1949. Various outbuildings and the accompanying infrastructure of a small harbour were soon also built, as well as a small dry dock for repairs.

The Quay is ill-remembered by inmates for the cordon they had to run between two lines of inmates that stretched far, as the lines sometimes consisted of more than a thousand people who punched and kicked the passing newcomers. According to records numerous arriving inmates died, failing to make it through the cordon.



Image source: Archive of the Goli Otok "Ante Zemljar" association, author unknown

2 HOTEL



Image source: Archive of the Goli Otok "Ante Zemljar" association, author unknown

The so-called Hotel is an edifice built during 1950, which served as the accommodation facility for interrogators, members of the UDBA (1st floor), and the space where inmates were interrogated, as well as a canteen (ground floor). The forest surrounding the Hotel building today is the result of the reforestation that began in 1950. The establishment of the camp did not only affect the inmates held there, it changed Goli Otok and its environment. The area in front of the building was originally bare rock, as seen in the photograph. The camp administration wanted to reforest Goli Otok, or at least those parts of it where such a feat was possible. Soil was brought from nearby islands and used to plant trees, mainly pines. Here as well, the secret police combined political re-education with forced labour. The inmates had to stand in one spot for hours, in order to protect the saplings from the intense sun.

With the growing number of arrested Cominformists, the number of inmates on Goli Otok also rose. This meant the accommodation capacity of the first camp (called Old Wire or Small Wire) was no longer sufficient, so the camp administration decided to build a second, larger camp, called Great Wire or sometimes just Wire. The camp was built in 1950, with more than 20 structures made from stone, each of which could hold more than 250 convicts. The Wire was encircled with barbed wire and line with guardhouses. There was also a small pier. In addition, buildings housing the culture department, kitchen, warehouses, the medical facility were also erected. After the camp was closed, the Wire was rebuilt, and the KPD Goli Otok prison was established there. The original buildings from 1950, visible on the illustration, have been destroyed. Nowadays the location of the Wire reflects the appearance of the prison from later decades.



Image source: Archive of the Goli Otok "Ante Zemljar" association, author unknown



Photograph: Darko Bavoljak

The Goli Otok camp had a peculiar administrative structure. The UDBA, the Yugoslav secret police, was itself almost never present within the camp. It established a system of camp self-administration where privileged inmates controlled the other convicts. An entire system of privileges and internal hierarchy among inmates was established to function as a lever of "political re-education". The building that housed the Centre, the highest level of the camp's self-administration, is one of the few authentic camp buildings in the Wire. Here, the camp's self-administration bosses would coordinate tasks received from the UDBA, implementing work plans or accepting inmates and collaborators. This place was especially hated by the camp population, as the prisoners knew very well that the obedient inmates housed at the Centre were the long arm of the UDBA. The Centre leadership enjoyed many privileges that common inmates could only dream of: beds, unlimited food and drink, even alcohol. They did not need to work, but they made others work. Incidentally, similar organisational models, with inmates having authority over other inmates on behalf of the authorities, could be found in Nazi prison camps, as well as in the Soviet Gulags.

5

PETAR'S PIT



Photograph: Darko Bavoljak

The Petar's Pit camp, also known as R-101 and the Monastery, consisted of one large barrack that housed around 130 people, and two smaller stone buildings for the camp kitchen. The camp was built in a pit some ten metres deep, one of several such pits dug on Goli Otok between the two world wars for the purpose of bauxite mining. The inmates in Petar's Pit were mainly convinced Cominformists, old Communists, leaders of the Yugoslavian Communist Party before Tito, people who had spent years of service in the Soviet Union, and celebrated Partisan commanders. Due to their long years of party service, all of them were ill-disposed towards Tito, and mostly supported Stalin. In order to isolate them from other inmates, they were housed in this lonely place, where they were submitted to severe forms of torture. After the camp was decommissioned, it was levelled, and this location is where it was most likely situated.

6

THE WATER RESERVOIR

Inmates remember thirst as one of the gravest problems on Goli Otok. One of the best assignments an inmate could receive in the camp was the role of the water carrier. These were people whose task was to portion out water during meals or work. The water carrier had the power to decide whether to give inmates less or more water. He could drink water himself, whenever and however much he wanted, but he was always under the threat of other inmates. They all desired his position, and were willing to do anything to achieve it. Simply, there was never enough water. In addition to punishment sometimes being meted out in the form of reduced water rations, logistically it was difficult to bring water to Goli Otok. There was a water carrying ship called "Izvor", which supplied the camp with water. One of the ways to deal with the problem of water scarcity was to build a large sloped surface as a reservoir for a rain-water capture and storage.

Photograph: Darko Bavoljak



7

WORKSHOPS

Goli Otok was not just a place where people were tortured and interned, but a highly elaborate industrial complex. Since the beginnings of the camp, the secret police used the inmates to perform various jobs: from building the camp, reforesting the island, to quarrying for Goli Otok stone. With time, other industries developed, such as stone-masonry, iron-working, woodworking, ship repairs, and sand extraction. The UDBA, the secret police, made good money from these industries and from trading in various Goli Otok products and raw materials. Numerous workshops emerged at the site of the first camp, the Wire, which were moved to their current sites after 1956. It is interesting to note that for a long time, Goli Otok was the only place where the terrazzo tiles, used to surface numerous public institutions, were made.

Photograph: Darko Bavoljak



8

THE STONE BUILDING



Photograph: Darko Bavoljak

The stone building is the first stone building erected on Goli Otok. It was built in 1949 by inmates, to house the camp administration and interrogators. In 1950 this was moved to a newer and larger (see point 2), and the stone building was used for the guards' accommodation. Later on, the building frequently changed its function.

VERA WINTER (1923 - 2015)



Image source:
the Winter family's private album

When the Cominform Resolution was issued in summer 1948, Vera Winter, née Barišić, was a young official in a federal ministry in Belgrade. One of her superiors was a Stalin sympathiser, which was reason enough for her to be considered suspicious as well. She was apprehended very soon after she naively told two UDBA officials at her office that she listened to Radio Moscow. After a harsh investigation, she was deported to the camp.

„I was in the brigade that transported stone, from the coast all the way up to the hill. The difficult thing, apart from the carrying itself, was that we had no footwear at all, just a pair of rubber sandals each. These were actually old tyres tied to our feet. Horrible. After a short while, blood began to run down our feet, so I had to tear up my blouse to make the sandals (...) The physical labour without rest was the hardest thing for me. The ceaseless hauling of rocks or bags of cement from morning to nightfall. I had visible scars until recently; some are visible still today, even though it's been 60 years. That's the first thing. The second was the psychological exhaustion, such that I was breaking up inside. I couldn't go on, I told myself, I'll do whatever they ask of me, just to die that instant. Can you imagine that?“

Statement from an interview with Martin Previšić, Zagreb, 2009

WOMEN'S CAMPS

There were 862 women arrested and interned in camps during the dispute with Stalin. The charges levelled against them were much the same as those levelled against men. From the moment they were arrested, the women were kept physically separated from men. During investigation, they were held in special prisons, that is, in special prison sections. They were tried in separate proceedings, after which they were transported to camps and prisons where they continued to be kept apart from men. The first camp where they were held was Ramski Rit, on Yugoslavia's Romanian border, which existed from August 1949 to January 1950. The camp was in a swampy area near what was then a hostile country, so the prisoners were transferred to the Zabela prison in Požarevac.

Afterwards, the women were moved to the camp on Sveti Grgur island, where they spent about a year, from April 1950 until April 1951, after which they were transferred to Goli Otok, to a camp named Radilište 5 (Worksite 5, R-V). Here again they spent a year. During this time, although they shared the island with men, they had no contact with them. According to former inmates' testimonies, the two groups only occasionally sighted each other from afar. The women's camp on Goli Otok was situated at a particularly inaccessible location, with particularly severe weather conditions as it was exposed to constant bursts of wind. Similar to the administration structure of the male camps, the interrogators were women, and the living and working conditions were hard. After Goli Otok, the inmates were transferred back to the neighbouring island, Sveti Grgur, where they saw the dismantling of the camp system and their own return to freedom.



The remains of the women's camp on Goli otok.
Image source: Darko Bavoljak



The remains of workshops on Goli otok.
Image source: Bruno Loje

ALFRED PAL (1920 - 2010)



Photograph: Darko Bavoljak

Alfred Pal was a graphic and visual artist. Much of his family perished in the Holocaust, and he himself was imprisoned in Fascist Italian and Ustasha camps. In 1943, he joined the Communist Partisans. After the dispute with Stalin broke out, he spent nearly four years on Goli Otok. He was arrested in 1949 as a supporter of the Cominform Resolution, and released in 1953. Later on, Pal would remember what he found hardest in the camp:

“For me personally, the most difficult thing on Goli Otok was to remain human. I believe everyone found it so, as what was demanded from an individual was the opposite of what is expected of a normal man. I didn’t want to do it, and in this I went all the way. I didn’t want to snitch on my comrades, I didn’t want to beat other convicts, I didn’t want to run to report to the interrogator. I paid the price. I was subjected to mandatory social boycott thrice, took a number of beatings, and ultimately became synonymous with “the gang”. That was the price, but I didn’t want to budge one inch from remaining human on Goli.”

Statement from an interview with Martin Previšić, Zagreb, 2009

GOLI OTOK - YUGOSLAVIA'S OPEN SECRET

The Yugoslav secret police forbade the released inmates from speaking about Goli Otok and their experiences there. Before they could go free, inmates had to sign the so-called “Commitment”, committing them to silence about what went on in the camp, under threat of re-imprisonment. Those who returned to freedom mainly only discussed Goli Otok with people of their utmost trust. This way, Goli Otok remained Yugoslavia’s open secret. The subject-matter of the score-settling with Stalin’s followers first began to emerge in literature, as early as the late 1960s, in Dragoslav Mihailović’s novel, *When Pumpkins Blossomed*. After Tito’s death in 1980, dozens of novels were published (Isaković, Hofman, Selenić, Mihailović) that were based on the testimonies of former inmates, who broached this issue in the years of the gradual liberalisation of society. At the same time, very sketchy and belated echoes of an official historiography began to appear, as well as apologies by people who were in the state security apparatus during the Tito-Stalin rift, who justified the internment camps’ existence by claiming that “without Goli Otok, the entire Yugoslavia would have become a Goli Otok”. In the early 1980s, the repression and violence that marked the period of conflict with Stalin also became the subject-matter of feature films, the most popular being *Balkan Spy* and *When Father Was Away on Business*. The emergence of films, testimonies and so-called “Goli Otok literature” had a strong effect on Yugoslav society, which was already facing various crises. Despite the historical context in which the camp came into existence, the revelations about the torture on Goli Otok and the brutal repressive apparatus further disillusioned many people, adding to the growing legitimacy crisis of the Yugoslav Communist system. However, due to the break-up of Yugoslavia, the camp remained a poorly studied topic, a legacy of the erstwhile community of little interest to the new successor-states.

VLADIMIR BOBINAC (1923 - 2014)



Photograph: Zoran Petrić

Vladimir Bobinac was arrested as a history student at the Philosophy Faculty in Zagreb. He spent two years on Goli Otok. After the democratic transition in the 1990s, when access to Goli Otok was allowed, Bobinac began guiding private tours of the island. Until his death he showed the island to thousands of people, passing on his experiences from the camp. Vladimir Bobinac described his experiences from Goli Otok:

„Goli Otok is the masses. Goli is not Alfred Pa, Pavle Ravlić or me. Goli is not an individual, because it's the masses. Goli is a beating administered to a comrade by his wartime comrades, reporting on each other. This is difficult to describe. Goli is like the Eisenstein film about the seamen's rebellion in Odessa, where there is no lead actor with nice teeth, but where the main role is played by the masses. There are no heroes on Goli, because you can't be a hero for two years or more. A hero dies or doesn't die in a second, while on Goli you are dying for years. You can only suffer up to a certain point, after which you stumble and become part of the raging mob fighting and threatening one another. The only condition for survival is for you to become part of this mob. It's difficult to describe how the Goli Otok system changed a man to make him do whatever he had to do. That's my view of all of that.“

Statement from an interview with Martin Previšić, Zagreb, 2009

GOLI OTOK IN THE CONTEMPORARY CROATIAN CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

Goli Otok is one of the places of greatest historical and symbolic significance in contemporary Croatian history. The inhospitable island in the shadow of the Velebit mountain bears the stamp of having been the central site of the Yugoslavian Communist regime's repression against dissenters. Still, despite its historical and symbolic significance, only derelict, dilapidated buildings decaying in the island's stony landscape serve as an indication of the camp, and later the prison's, former existence. The more careful visitor to the island will notice several informational displays, or commemorative plaques dedicated to the victims, as well as tourist and hospitality features of highly questionable appropriateness. At this stage one can only dream of a museum and educational institution that would make Goli Otok its subject-matter, and be based on professional scholarly research, museological, and educational standards.

The destruction of the erstwhile camp, and later prison, vividly illustrates the relationship of the Croatian state and Croatian society towards Goli Otok and its victims. Goli Otok and its victims are today just one of a number of secondary issues in the culture of remembrance, left to the care of the few enthusiasts most commonly tied by family history to the painful subjects. Considering the importance of addressing dictatorships in building a democratic political culture, as well as the prominent role of Communist repression in the culture of remembrance of the majority of contemporary post-communist societies in Europe, the question arises why is this the case.

The reasons for the modest visibility of Goli Otok in Croatian culture are manifold. Speaking of how marginally represented the subject of Goli Otok is in the Croatian culture of remembrance, and the rare expressions of empathy towards the victims, one should say for a start that the ambivalent relationship towards the victims of the site dates back to the period of Socialist Yugoslavia. A combination of ignorance as to the circumstances of the arrests, deportations and the conditions in which the inmates lived on the one hand, and the fear of Soviet invasion and its consequences on the other, has resulted in suspicious questions that continue to shape public opinion on this topic to this day. Some of the questions are: were the inmates on Goli Otok political prisoners or common criminals? If they were political prisoners, were they really fervent backers of Stalin? If they were Stalinists, whatever

else could have been done other than to intern them at an isolated place? If they were not Stalinists, how did they even find themselves in the situation where they would be arrested and imprisoned?

It is a fact that some of the inmates on Goli Otok were fervent followers of Stalin, which complicates the situation with recognising the victim status of those inmates who only ended up on Goli Otok because they were maliciously denounced as alleged supporters of the Cominform Resolution. The political elites of Communist Yugoslavia sought to conceal, or justify political repression against their opponents, which partly explains the ambivalent relationship towards Goli Otok in Socialist Yugoslavia. Silence, and the arbitrary construction of justifications and defamation of political adversaries are the legitimisation strategies of every dictatorship.

However, the answer to the question why have the victims of political repression on Goli Otok are still not met with unambiguous respect and broad social recognition in today's democratic, post-communist order, requires a more detailed understanding of the contemporary Croatian culture of remembrance and the ideological framework of contemporary Croatian society.



Photograph: Boris Stamenić

After the closing of the prisons and the departure of the last prisoners in the late eighties, the plan was to build a tourist colony on the island, but plans to develop tourism on the island were interrupted by the outbreak of the war in Croatia in 1991. Although outside the area directly affected by the military conflict, the facilities belonging to the former prison on Goli Otok were thoroughly pillaged, laid waste to and left to be forgotten. Farmers from neighbouring settlements use Goli Otok to graze their sheep, which can wander around the island unmolested.

The first reason for the marginalisation of Goli Otok in the Croatian culture of remembrance lies in the ethnic composition of the inmate population. After 1990, an ethnocentric politics of history prevailed in the post-communist societies. The relatively low proportion of Croats among the inmates means it does not qualify as a site of national suffering.

The other reason lies in the victims' ideological orientation. Regardless of whether they were or were not supporters of the Cominform Resolution, many inmates were staunch communists, Yugoslavians and veterans of the People's Liberation War. This fact has also had a negative effect on their perception among part of Croatian society. Due to the ideological orientation of a large number of prisoners, Goli Otok does not fit into the new historical narratives. Although publicly recognised and accepted as a symbol of repression in Communist Yugoslavia, Goli Otok does not represent a pivotal element of the anti-communist discourse in Croatia, which consequently reduces its general visibility.

The third reason for the marginalisation of Goli Otok in the Croatian culture of remembrance lies with the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), that is, the fact that while it was still going on, it was affirmed as the central value and identity symbol of Croatian society. War in the context of the dissolution of the socialist order and the multinational federation is a collective experience that differentiates Croatia from the majority of European post-communist societies, and partly explains the differences on the issue of the memorialisation of the contemporary past.

On the other hand, it bears emphasising that the multiple experience of wars and ideologically motivated violence in the 20th century in areas that today belong to Croatia is apparent in the slow yet noticeable trend in the pluralisation of the Croatian culture of remembrance and a coexistence between once-irreconcilable antitheses, if only implicitly. Although this is a positive process in principle, the pluralisation of remembrance culture does also result in the perception of competition amongst the victims, and a feeling among a section of the public "that they only care about their own; they don't see or recognise our victims", which in turn leads to new divisions and conflict.

The extent to which a section of the public is preoccupied by political violence and its victims can be seen in the bitter comments on web portals and social networks. The anonymity of participants in internet discussions certainly contributes to the radicalism of the expressed views that frequently veer into insults and threats. At the same time,

more and more people withdraw from discussions in the public space, whether scared off by hate speech, or with an assertion that neither history nor politics interest them. In such circumstances, the victims of political violence frequently fade into the background, or become entirely irrelevant.

It is positive that representatives of the authorities, or at least their envoys, can be seen at anniversary commemorations on Goli Otok. Representatives of the political institutions of the Republic of Croatia most frequently visit Goli Otok on 23 August, the International Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. However, it is one thing to send envoys with wreaths, and quite another to build a museum and educational infrastructure, with professional staff and programmes. The path between the two is very long, and requires significant investment and a readiness on the part of various political and social actors to support this process.



Photograph: Boris Stamenić, 2018

In spite of there being no memorial institution and the accompanying features, interest in seeing Goli Otok among local and foreign visitors has led to the development of a tourism infrastructure organised by entrepreneurs from nearby towns on Krk and Rab, and in Senj and Jurjevo. The former camp, that is, the prison on Goli Otok is thus used to advertise excursions and crafted souvenirs that trivialise the suffering of the Goli Otok prisoners. Visitors to the island can thus ride around the rocky paths in a trailer pulled by a tractor bearing the sign, "Goli Express" [sic]. Visitors can also buy refreshments at a bistro called "Pržun", the local colloquial word for "prison". The island is also occasionally visited by so-called "party boats" playing loud music.

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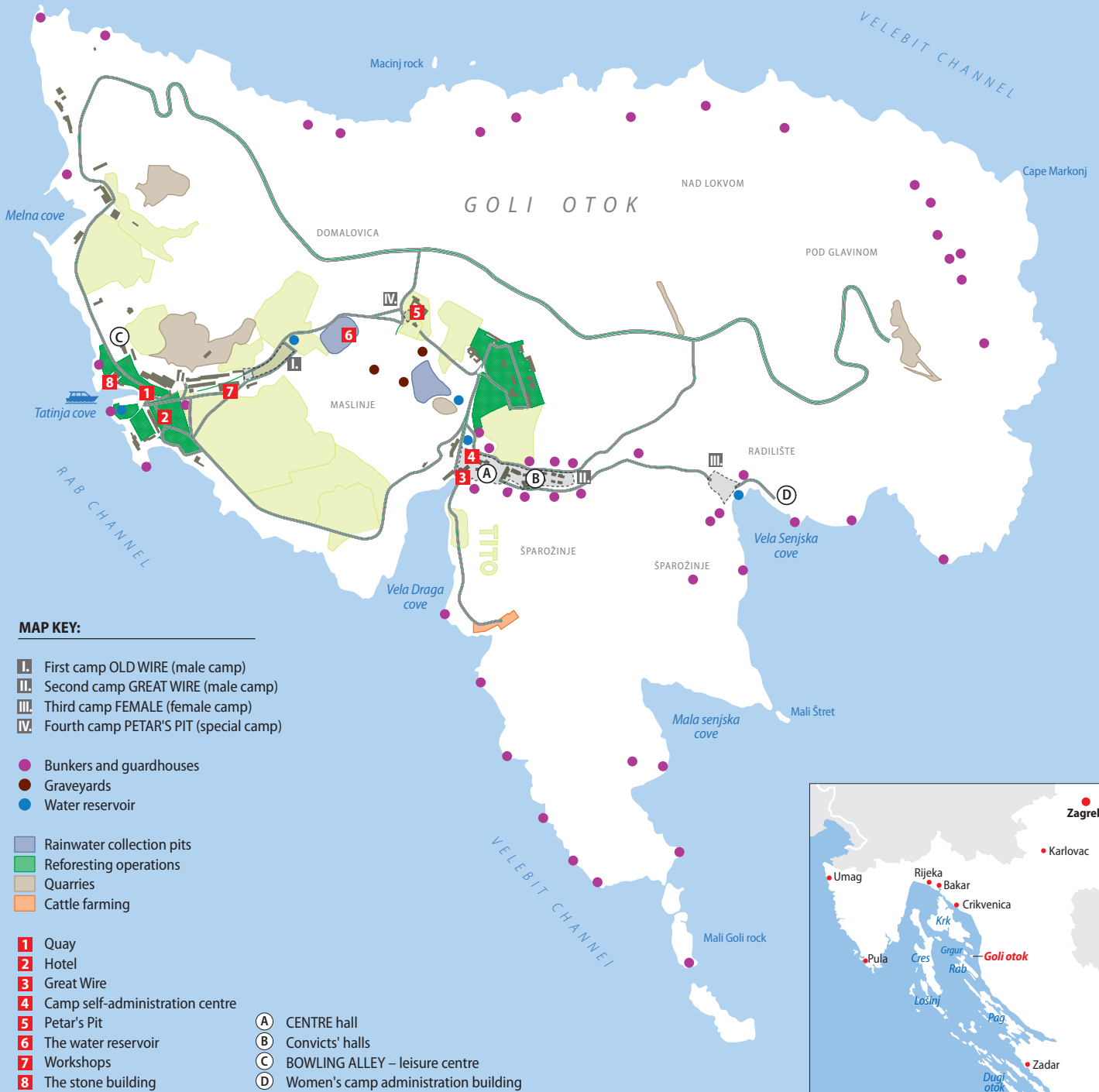
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GOLI OTOK 1949 - 1956

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MAP KEY:

- I First camp OLD WIRE (male camp)
- II Second camp GREAT WIRE (male camp)
- III Third camp FEMALE (female camp)
- IV Fourth camp PETAR'S PIT (special camp)

- Bunkers and guardhouses
- Graveyards
- Water reservoir

- Rainwater collection pits
- Reforestation operations
- Quarries
- Cattle farming

- 1 Quay
- 2 Hotel
- 3 Great Wire
- 4 Camp self-administration centre
- 5 Petar's Pit
- 6 The water reservoir
- 7 Workshops
- 8 The stone building

- A CENTRE hall
- B Convicts' halls
- C BOWLING ALLEY – leisure centre
- D Women's camp administration building



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