



WER IST WALTER?

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Edited by

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What Remains from the Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia? A Personal Perspective

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The collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (*Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija* – SFRJ) and the establishment of the Republic of Croatia in the early 1990s greatly affected heritage and museum institutions. Like the other Republics in the SFRJ, Croatia had a Museum of Revolution largely dedicated to the Partisan struggle during World War II and the establishment of the new socialist order in its capital city, Zagreb. As in other former Yugoslav Republics, the name, the aims and the content presented in those institutions changed completely during the 1990s.

In June 1991, the Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia (*Muzej revolucije naroda Hrvatske* – MRNH), which had been established in 1945 and was run by the Republic, was merged with the Historical Museum of Croatia (*Povijesni muzej Hrvatske* – PMH) which was run by the City of Zagreb. This produced a new state institution, named the Croatian History Museum (*Hrvatski povijesni muzej* – HPM). While the MRNH was officially integrated into a new structure, this merging meant de facto abolition for the MRNH. Since then, there has not been a single museum in Zagreb dedicated to the antifascist struggle of World War II.

Faced with this situation, I started an initiative to establish a new museum, which in 2022 led to a first result: the opening of a virtual museum, called the Museum of Antifascist Struggle (*Muzej antifašističke borbe* – MAB), by the Union of Antifascist Fighters and Antifascist of Croatia (*Savez antifašističkih boraca i antifašista Hrvatske* – SAB AH) and with the financial support of the Ministry of Croatian Veterans (*Ministarstvo hrvatskih branitelja*). Hopefully, this is the first step on the way to the establishment of a three-dimensional museum on this topic.

In this text, I will present and analyse the different steps leading from the abolition of the MRNH to the creation of the new virtual museum. I will do

this from the perspective of someone who has been part of this process. Indeed, from 1984 on, I have worked as curator in the MRNH, overseeing the Collection of photographs, films and negatives. I also worked in the Croatian History Museum from 1991 to 2021. I will focus on the establishment and work of MRNH, its integration with PMH and my efforts to establish a new museum of Antifascist Struggle. I will try to explain these processes by including my personal experience over the decades and present the arguments for why I think it is necessary that Zagreb gets a real museum about the antifascist struggle in Croatia during World War II once again.

The history of the Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia

The idea of gathering and keeping “materials of the history of the uprising” already started to rise during World War II. It was realised shortly after the war ended with the founding of the Museum of People’s Liberation (*Muzej narodnog oslobođenja*) in Zagreb.

Preparations for the establishment of the Museum of People’s Liberation began in September 1945 at the Third session of the Presidency of the Croatian National Assembly. The Act on the Establishment of the Museum was passed by the Presidency of the Croatian National Assembly of the Federal State of Croatia (*Federalna Država Hrvatska – FDH*) on 16 October 1945. The decision to establish the museum at the highest level of the Croatian government speaks of its importance for the country at that time, as well as throughout almost the entire time of its existence.

The museum’s aim was “to collect, preserve and exhibit all objects and documents about the course and development of the people’s liberation struggle and all the great achievements that were won and to nurture the cult of national martyrs and victims, fallen fighters and heroes of the people’s liberation struggle”.¹

The museum’s main task was aligned with the political and ideological context of the time, in which the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička Partija Jugoslavije – KPJ*) played a dominant role. The museum, as an institution that was most trusted and had indisputable authority when it

1 FDH (Zagreb): *Službene novine* no. 47 (1945).



Fig. 1: View of the MRNH building on Trg žrtava fašizma, museum entry ticket – postcard.
(Courtesy of Croatian History Museum, Zagreb)

came to events from the past (because museums cannot lie), was supposed to promote the KPJ's political programme and ideological positions in public discourse.

In the 45 years of its work, its name changed three times. In its first years, the museum focused on the period of the People's Liberation Struggle (*Narodno-Oslobodilačka Borba* – NOB) from 1941 to 1945. The Museum of People's Revolution (1953-1960), the second variation, focused on the history of the Workers' Movement and KPJ. The later Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia (1960-1991) chronologically and thematically expanded on the subjects with documents concerning socialist construction. These changes were mostly conditioned by the social context in which the KPJ's politics and ideology had a major influence. It was the first and largest museum of its kind in the country and there were efforts to make it the main museum in Croatia.

In fall 1949, the museum moved into its permanent location in the building of the House of Fine Artists on the Square of Victims of Fascism (*Trg žrtava fašizma*), i.e. the Meštrović Pavilion (named after its architect, Ivan Meštrović). The monumental circular building, on one of the most beautiful squares in Zagreb, was certainly not chosen by chance. The Meštrović



Fig. 2: Second permanent exhibition of the MRNH, museum entry ticket – postcard.
(Courtesy of Croatian History Museum, Zagreb)

Pavilion occupies an exceptional place in Croatian and European architecture of the interwar period and is an exceptional work of Croatian architecture. It is cylindrical in shape with a colonnade of rectangular columns, covered with an elliptical glass-reinforced concrete dome, which represents the largest construction of this type in Europe. Its monumental architecture must have had a significant psychological impact on every visitor.

On 15 May 1955, the museum's first permanent exhibition was officially opened. At the time of its creation, it was, according to the press, "an exemplary type of contemporary historical collection" and one of the "most beautiful and modern in the country".² On 9 April 1959, on the eve of the 40th anniversary of KPJ, the first permanent display was removed for the opening of an exhibition titled "Forty Years of KPJ" (*Četrdeset godina KPJ*). After minor architectural interventions on the building, the second permanent exhibition was opened to the public in 1962. It was mainly dedicated to the NOB and remained unchanged until 1991.

The MRNH became the central institution of all museums of the revolution in Croatia. After 1955, regional museums of the revolution were

2 Pavle Franjković, "Četvrt stoljeća Muzeja revolucije naroda Hrvatske (1945-1970)", *Vijesti muzealaca i konzervatora Hrvatske*, no. 6 (1970).

established in other major cities (Pula, Rijeka, Slavonski Brod, Makarska, and two in Split). Departments of the revolution were also created at memorial museums and memorial areas, to which the museum provided professional assistance and also allocated its materials. Examples of such places are the museum in Kumrovec, the birthplace of Josip Broz Tito, and the memorial museum part of the Jasenovac Memorial Area, the concentration and extermination camp run by the fascist Ustasha between 1941 and 1945.

There were six memorial museums in Croatia under the MRNH umbrella. These museums were external parts of the MRNH and were linked to important events and figures of the KPJ and the NOB in Croatia. The museums were: Memorial Museum of the Fifth Country Conference of KPJ, Memorial Museum of the First Conference of the Communist Party of Croatia (*Komunistička Partija Hrvatske* – KPH), Memorial Museum of the Eighth Conference of the Zagreb organisation of KPJ (all in Zagreb), Memorial Museum of Rade Končar³ in his birth house nearby the Plitvice Lakes, Memorial Museum of Ivan Goran Kovačić⁴ (in his home village, Lukovdol) and the Memorial Museum of the Supreme Headquarters of the People's Liberation Army and Partisan detachments of Yugoslavia and the People's Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia (on the island Vis).⁵

The Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia in the 1980s: New approaches and challenges

In 1984, the museum hired four new young employees as curators. That the political situation was slowly changing is evident from the fact that it was no longer necessary to be a member of the Alliance of Communists (*Savez Komunističke Partije* – SK) to be employed there. We were chosen because we scored

3 Rade Končar was one of the leading figures of the KPJ and the Partisans in Croatia, He was executed in 1942 by the Italian occupation forces in Šibenik. Posthumously he was named the first People's Hero of Yugoslavia. His left shoe is preserved as a museum object in the Collection of three-dimensional objects. How the shoe came to the museum is not recorded. The shoe's museum signature is: *Hrvatski povijesni muzej/Muzej revolucije naroda Hrvatske* – HPM/MRNH:V-564.

4 The poet and writer Ivan Goran Kovačić joined the Partisans and was killed in 1943 by Chetnik troops. His most famous work is the poem "Jama" (The pit) about the atrocities committed by the Ustasha.

5 After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943, the island of Vis became a Partisan military fortress. The Germans never managed to conquer it.

the highest on a test about the World War II period. I was appointed curator of the Collection of photographs, films and negatives.

At that time, the MRNH was one of the best organised museums in Croatia. It had over 125.000 original museum objects that, thanks to the efforts of 18 professional employees, also included objects from daily life that went beyond the prescribed thematic scope. It also had one of the best organised museum depots where museology professors from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb brought their students.

The museum's exhibitions in those years were still limited by the calendar of significant events and personalities from the period of the People's Liberation Struggle, which was established by the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia (*Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Hrvatske – SSRNH*).⁶

The first exhibition on which I collaborated was related to the 40th anniversary of the holding of the National Antifascist People's Liberation Council of Croatia (*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske – ZAVNOH*)⁷ in Topusko in May 1944 and the holding of the Congress of Cultural Workers in June 1944, a unique cultural event in all of occupied Europe. My colleague and mentor, Rudolf Polšak, the author of the exhibition, struggled with the supervisor's request to have both the Croatian and Serbian flags in one photo, because there was simply no such photo. So, he took a pair of scissors and cut the two photos into one that met the requirements.

By hiring young curators unencumbered by ideology, completely new and unexpected perspectives opened up for the museum. Thus, at the Professional College of the Museum, we combined our efforts to destroy the concept of the exhibition on the Spanish Civil War and created a completely new, previously unseen exhibition at the MRNH. Instead of a flat, linear exhibition full of facts (to avoid that something is not accidentally forgotten or someone not mentioned) and photographs, my colleagues Snježana Pavičić and Đurđa Knežević created, in 1986, an exhibition with ambient scenes from the war. The exhibition aroused the interest of the wider public. There were also envious people who reported to the local SK committee that the exhibition's authors had painted the originally black Nazi swastika

6 The SSRNH was the largest social-political organisation in Croatia.

7 The ZAVNOH was founded in June 1943 in Otočac. It was the highest political body of the NOB in Croatia.

in red. However, everything ended without any consequences for the exhibition's authors.

In the 1980s, we opened many other exhibitions. I note in particular "Andrija Maurović, an old cat in NOB" (*Andrija Maurović, stari mačak u NOB-i*, 1986) by Snježana Pavičić, dedicated to an exceptional Croatian artist, antifascist, author of comics motivated by the People's Liberation Struggle. This highlights that artistic and cultural dimensions of the Partisan movement became one of the most important topics we worked on.

In those years, we organised the following exhibitions, among others: Women of Croatia in the Revolution (*Žene Hrvatske u revoluciji*, 1985); The War in Spain 1936-1939 and the Yugoslav Interbrigadists (*Španjolski građanski rat 1936.-1939. i Jugoslavenski interbrigadisti*, 1986); The Liberation – We don't want what doesn't belong to us – we don't give what belongs to us (*Oslobođenje, Tuđe nećemo – svoje nedamo*, 1985); The Third session of ZAVNOH in Topusko (*Treće zasjedanje ZAVNOH-a u Topuskom*, 1984); First Congress of Cultural Workers of Croatia (*Prvi kongres kulturnih i javnih radnika*, 1984); First Conference of JNOF Croatia⁸ (*Prva konferencija JNOF Hrvatske*, 1985); First Session of ZAVNOH in Otočac (*Prvo zasjedanje ZAVNOHA u Otočcu*, 1988); Croatian Fine Arts in NOR⁹ (*Hrvatska likovna umjetnost u NOR-u*, 1987); Ivan Goran Kovačić (1983); People's Front (*Narodna fronta*, 1984); Testimonies of the Uprising in Croatia (*Svjedočanstva o ustanku u Hrvatskoj*, 1981, traveling exhibition); Vladimir Bakarić¹⁰ (1987); New Acquisitions (*Nove akvizicije*, 1984), Republic Awards and Social Recognitions in Socialist Republic of Croatia (*Republičke nagrade i društvena priznanja u SRH*, 1988); Petar Šimaga Šumski¹¹ (1989); Partisan Caricature 1941-1945 (*Partizanska karikatura*, 1989); The War Years of Edo Murtić¹² (*Ratne godine Ede Murtića*, 1988).

8 JNOF is the abbreviation for *Jedinstveni narodnooslobodilački front Jugoslavije* – Unitary People's Liberation Front, which was headed by the KPJ and gathered parties and individuals from different political tendencies during World War II. In 1945, it was renamed *Narodni Front*, People's Front of Yugoslavia.

9 NOR is the abbreviation for *Narodnooslobodilački rat* – People's Liberation War.

10 Vladimir Bakarić was one of the organisers of the NOB in Croatia during World War II. He became one of the highest ranking politicians in Croatia and Yugoslavia in the decades after the war. He died in 1983.

11 Petar Šimaga Šumski, academic painter, since 1942 in the Partisans. During the war, he was nicknamed Šumski (*šuma* – forest).

12 Edo Murtić, academic painter. In the spring of 1944, Murtić joined the Partisans, with whom he designed graphics, posters, and books.

That the concept of MRNH was changing in terms of content is best evidenced by the “Croatian Political Poster 1940-1950” (*Hrvatski politički plakat 1940.-1950.*) exhibition, by Snježana Pavičić. For the first time, almost all museum material from the Art Collection of MRNH related to the subject was shown at the exhibition, regardless of the ideological side. This also meant posters made by the Ustasha authorities. The accompanying catalogue provided an aesthetic valorisation of all the exhibits. The exhibition and the catalogue were made at MRNH and for MRNH, but the exhibition was realised as HPM’s first exhibition in 1991.

Publishing was a constant form of communication between the museum and the public. Along with the exhibitions, catalogues, brochures, posters and accompanying materials were printed. We also used part of the exhibition space for guest exhibitions on various topics in the framework of inter-republic and international cooperation. Furthermore, we cooperated with primary and secondary schools and the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb to educate pupils and students about the past using original museum objects. At the same time, as one of the first museum institutions in the country, we started building an IT system for which we were also technically well equipped.

In spring 1986, we launched the “Bulletin MRNH” magazine, which was supposed to report on the work of the MRNH and other museums of the revolution in Croatia and Yugoslavia, bringing “scientific contributions from the field of museology, research and placing museum materials in a historical context”.¹³

However, in contrast to our efforts to form a diverse and thematically broader collection of museum materials, the permanent exhibition and the quality of the exhibits was far below the (qualitative and quantitative) potential of the contents of the museum depot. The permanent exhibition was frozen for almost 30 years. It was characterised by historical and scientific unsustainability (separation from the historical whole, glorification of the KPJ’s role and ignoring the existence of all other political parties) and outdated museological presentation (a museum object was added to certain content as a mere illustration, and not an object that speaks for itself, numerous legends that explained events abstractly or very generally). This also triggered objections from the professional public. At the end of the 1980s, when the party’s influence on the museum’s activities was weakening

13 MRNH (Zagreb): *Bulletin MRNH*, no. 1 (1986).

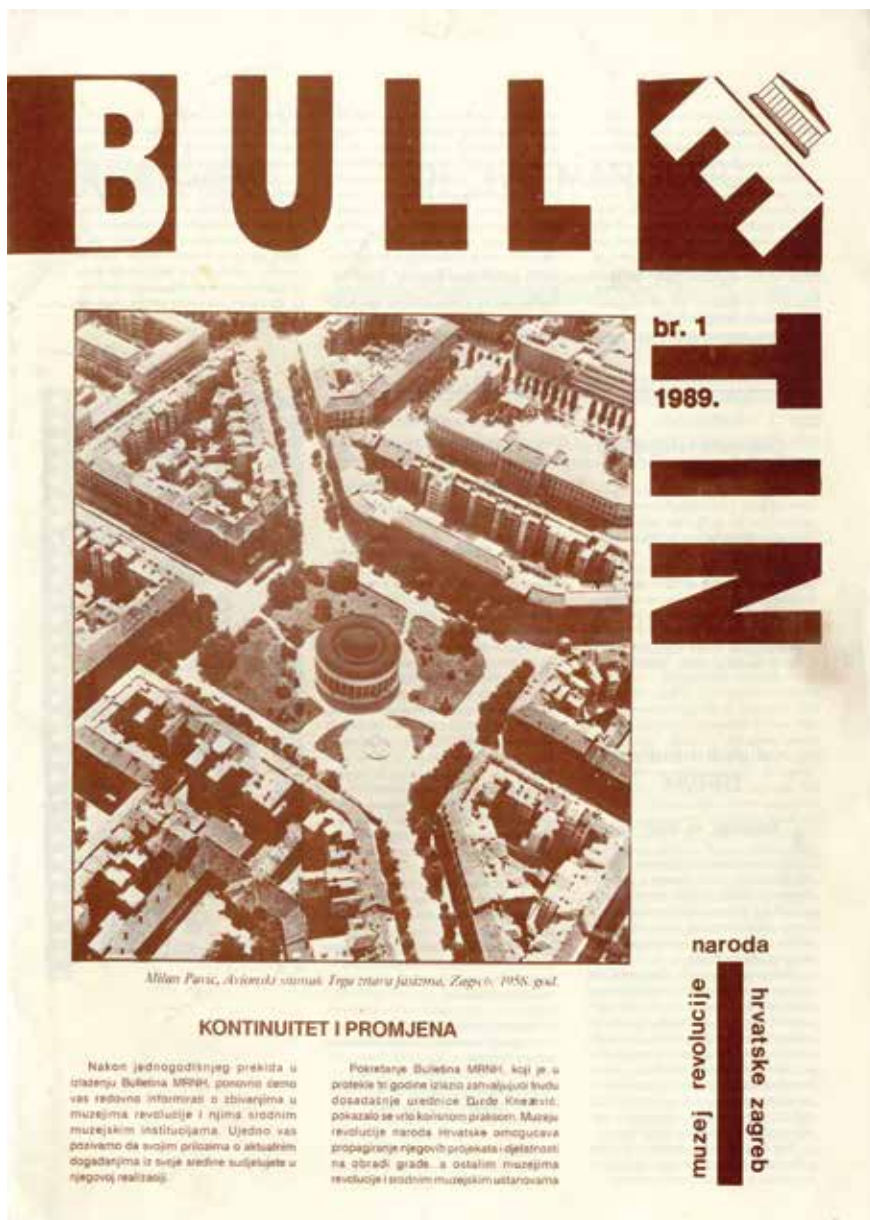


Fig. 3: Cover page “Bulletin” number 1/1989, MRNH, Zagreb.
(Courtesy of Croatian History Museum, Zagreb)

or almost non-existent, the museum’s Expert Council set itself the priority task of changing the permanent exhibition. The new permanent exhibition was supposed to use modern museological and museographic means to show the completeness of the historical development of Croatia from the

19th century to the present. An initiative was launched to create an architectural project for remodelling the interior of the building and returning it as much as possible to its original form. At the same time, the museum's employees tried to convince the relevant experts and the Croatian public of the need to expand the concept and scope of the museum's work.

The last issue of our Bulletin was published in autumn 1989. At this time, the existence of the museums of the revolution had already started being questioned. In the introductory text of the magazine, editor Dubravka Peić-Čaldarević stated:

We emphasise once again the necessity of their [museums of revolution] recognition and not degradation... Highlighting some of the unavoidable problems not only of recent practice, but also of the perspective of the museum of the revolution in general, we would like to initiate a discussion that, with the help of similar and conflicting reflections, would contribute to an introspective analysis, the establishment of professional ambitions and rational reflection of our "professional" future.¹⁴

In the early 1990s, despite all our efforts, the museum's future seemed increasingly uncertain. Those "smarter" museum workers, not just the curators, who were former members of SK, very quickly joined the new political party, The Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ) which won at the first free parliamentary elections in spring 1990. And then, what we feared most happened.

The policy that created the MRNH in certain socio-political conditions and promoted its ideological and program tasks, sent the MRNH, when in its opinion it became unnecessary, to history. This is best evidenced by the opening speech of the President of the Executive Council of the Zagreb City Assembly, Mladen Vedriš, at the working meeting with the representatives of the MRNH held on 17 August 1990: "In changing social conditions and within the framework of the new cultural policy, there is no justification for further retention in its current form and content, historical and other materials from the period of the People's Liberation Struggle and the revolution of 1941-1945." He declared his support for moving the Museum

14 MRNH (Zagreb): *Bulletin MRNH*, no. 2-3 (1986).

of the Revolution to the History Museum, seeing it “not only with regard to the current social, democratic and civilizational moment” as justified, reasonable and professionally-scientifically based.¹⁵

Vedriš obviously ignored that the museum preserved and collected material from 1918 to 1990. In order to address his incorrect statements and his ignorance of the real situation, on 24 August 1990, the museum’s Expert Council (not all members because some feared losing their jobs) sent an open letter to the then-minister of education and culture of the Republic of Croatia. We emphasised that the City Assembly’s initiative, which was characterised by haste and lack of any cultural context, had two intentions: 1. evict the MRNH and 2. disintegrate it as an independent institution, under the euphemistic name of integration with the Historical Museum of Croatia. Although published in the daily press, our open letter did not receive a response. The articles in the press were on our side or against us.¹⁶

In September 1990, all the museum’s curators, reflecting on its future, drew up an “Elaborated proposal for changing the activity and the name of the MRNH”.¹⁷ The proposal was based on the analysis of the museum’s funds and the permanent exhibition, as well as new museological, historical and scientific findings. Basically, it was to become an independent, complex museum determined to deal with the entire social reality of Croatia from 1918 to the modern day.

Work on the conceptual design of the new permanent exhibition was at the final stage. The exhibition covered the period from the end of World War I to the 1990s, with special emphasis on World War II and the antifascist struggle.

All our efforts, desires and hopes soon went into oblivion.

The de facto abolition of the Museum of Revolution in 1991

In June 1991, the Law on the new Croatian History Museum (HPM) was published in the “Official Gazette”, ending the MRNH employees’ months

15 “Podsjetnik o radnom sastanku s predsjednikom Izvršnog vijeća Skupštine grada Zagreba Mladom Vedrišem održanom 17. kolovoza 1990”, (Private property of the author).

16 For example “Muzej na političkoj vjetrometini” *Vjesnik* (20 May 1990), “Nepodoban vremenu i prostoru – novo jednodimlje”, *Vjesnik*, 9 September 1990.

17 Andro Purčić, *Elaborirani prijedlog za promjenu djelatnosti i naziva Muzeja revolucije naroda Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Vlast. Nakl., 1990). In the library of the MRNH.

of agony.¹⁸ With this act, the two museum institutions were integrated into one: MRNH (national level) and the PMH (municipal level) joined to form the HPM (national level). And what did we get? A megalomaniac national museum characteristic of the periods of national integration in the 19th century.

The authorities' motivation for merging the two museums into one remains unknown to me. Perhaps one of the reasons lies in the fact that the PMH collected and processed museum materials from the 13th century to 1941 and the MRNH from 1941 to modern times, and their integration would result in a rounded whole telling the story of seven centuries of Croatian history? However, the main reason may also lie in the banal fact that the MRNH had to be expelled from its premises in the Meštrović Pavilion where Franjo Tuđman, who had become president of Croatia in 1990, wanted to place some kind of Croatian pantheon dedicated to Croatian rulers. This hypothesis is supported by the following facts: All the streets leading to the Square of the Victims of Fascism bore the names of Croatian national heroes from World War II. Soon after the HDZ came to power, they were renamed after Croatian mediaeval rulers, and the Square Victim of Fascism itself was renamed the Square of the Croatian Greats.¹⁹ At the same time, the building of the Meštrović Pavilion, in which the MRNH was located, was exempted by law from the possession of the newly founded HPM.

Integration was carried out hastily, without prior consideration of the museum's structure, premises and the fate of the employees. This meant the de facto abolition of the MRNH. This is confirmed by the fact that out of 39 MRNH employees, only three professional employees and several

18 RH (Zagreb) *Narodne novine*, no. 27 (1991).

19 The changes of the name of the square and the purpose of the building are also interesting. Designed in the 1920s, the square was first called Square N, then, from 1927 to 1941, King Peter I Liberator Square, from 1941 to 1942, III Square, from 1942 to 1946, Kulina bana Square, from 1946 to 1990, Square of Victims of Fascism, when it became the Square of the Croatian Greats. In 2000, after a long struggle between non-governmental organisations and the authorities, the name Square of Victims of Fascism was returned. During World War II, it was precisely on this square that important Ustaša authorities were located. Many citizens of Zagreb, Croats, Jews and Serbs who were deported to camps departed from that square. In that sense, it was a truly authentic square of victims of fascism. Regarding the Meštrović Pavilion built in 1938, it was primarily dedicated to art. However, during the war it was turned into a mosque at the request of the Ustasha authorities. After 1945 it was briefly returned to its original purpose, and then turned into the People's Liberation Museum. The idea of turning it into a pantheon did not come to life, and the building was returned to the Croatian Society of Fine Artists in 1993. This was also supported by former MRNH employees.

auxiliary, technical employees remained employed in the newly founded museum. A little later, two more professional employees were hired (one of them was me).²⁰ None of the employees of the HPM were affected by this harsh and unfair selection, which was orchestrated by the then-ruling political party.

These were terrible times for all MRNH employees. In those harsh times of war, which started in July 1991 after Croatia's declaration of independence, we witnessed the bombing of cities, including Zagreb. Most of the MRNH employees had been dismissed, but still had to come to work during the notice period. We did not know why some were selected to stay and others were fired, but every day, we came to work and had to look each other in the eye. It was prescribed: four hours at work, four hours looking for another job.

By integrating two museum institutions, the systematisation of individual museum collections was defined superficially, without investing in their actual material content and/or chronological determination. The collections of the former MRNH (apart from the Fine Art Collection and the Collection of Photographs, Films and Negatives) were thus disbanded, and divided according to the type of material into individual collections in the HPM.

Despite the efforts made by the museum's administration and its employees, the HPM still does not have, more than 30 years after its creation, a permanent exhibition to present national history from the Middle Ages until the times of sovereignty, including the World War II period.

Over 30 years of collaborative and joint efforts, our curator team created numerous thematic exhibitions. But only about one third of the realised exhibitions interpreted different themes of the 20th century. After a period of silence about the period of World War II, at the end of 2007, a team of authors under my leadership (the team was composed of former employees of MRNH: Dubravka Peić Čaldarević, Snjezana Pavičić and Rhea Ivanuš) organised an exhibition titled "El Shatt – Refugees from Croatia in the Sinai Desert, Egypt 1944-1946". The exhibition received the Croatian Museum Society's annual award as the best museum project in the year 2007. At the same time, the exhibition catalogue was awarded for the design. Without

20 After I had been fired, I asked my friend, then in a high position in the city's HDZ, to return me to the position of curator at HPM. One phone call, I don't know to whom, was enough to bring me back to my old workplace.

much publicity, the exhibition aroused great interest of the public, as evidenced by the largest number of visitors to that time in HPM (13.000 visitors from December 2007 to December 2008) as well as the completely sold-out first edition of the catalogue. The reason for such success lies in the multitude of awakened emotions related to the topic, as to the way in which its content was presented: photographs and documents about life and work, original objects made in the workshops in El Shatt from the collections of the HPM and other museums, personal objects of people who were there and their stories, film footage and more.²¹

An antifascist no-man's land? World War II's place in Croatia's museum landscape since the 1990s

The de facto abolition of the MRNH also affected the fate of the six memorial museums that had been under its umbrella. In January 1991, the buildings of the memorial museums of the first and fifth conferences of the Communist Party were handed over to the Zagreb City Assembly for management and use. During the Croatian War of Independence, also called Homeland War, the Memorial of Rade Končar was destroyed and all materials stolen. Of the six former MRNH memorials within the HPM, only the Memorial Museum of Ivan Goran Kovačić in Lukovdol remains. Regarding the memorial museum on the Partisan movement on the island of Vis, I proposed transforming it into a more general museum about the island. In this perspective, the exhibition "Towards the Native Museum of the Island of Vis" was opened in 1999, with a selection and reinterpretation of the museum materials kept in the Memorial.²² Due to numerous problems and with the consent of the Ministry of Culture and the Split Archaeological Museum, it was incorporated into the Archeological Museum in 2004.

Other museums of the revolution related to the content of the labour movement, the People's Liberation Struggle and socialist revolution had similar destiny to the MRNH. The Museum of the People's Revolution in

21 I will quote one note from the book of impressions: "I am glad that the exhibition shows the refugees from World War II. The organisation of life can be seen and is clearly shown... As one of these refugees, I confirm all this..."

22 Nataša Mataušić, "Prijedlog transformacije Memorijalnog muzeja VŠ NOV i POJ i NKOP u Zavičajni muzej otoka Visa" *Informatica museologica* 26, no. 1-4 (1995): 70-73. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/144370>. All internet sources were last accessed on 2 April 2024.

Split was abolished, and its materials were handed over to the Museum of the City of Split; the Museum of the People's Revolution in Istria in Pula was renamed the History Museum of Istria. The Museum of the Revolution in Rijeka became part of the Museum of the City of Rijeka.

What led to the renaming, cancellation and/or devastation of all these museums after Croatia gained its independence and after the Homeland War? We have to take into account that many of the aforementioned museums had been founded during socialist Yugoslavia as a result of politically dictated decisions. This occurred even when there were no real preconditions prescribed by the museum law (original museum material, professional staff, means for maintenance...), and that museum presentation was dominated by ideological rather than scientific and professional motivations. With independence and the Homeland War, new ideological visions came to dominate in Croatia. This led to new interpretations of World War II: the KPJ's role in the liberation movement was contested or perceived negatively while there were simultaneous attempts to rehabilitate the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH) created in 1941 as a German-Italian puppet state and run by the fascist Ustasha. The Ustasha were presented as Croat patriots or at least emphasised as victims of the Partisans in 1945. At the same time, the crimes the Ustasha committed against Serbs, Jews, Roma and antifascists during the war were downplayed. This resulted in regular polemics and controversies not only in professional and scientific literature, but also in public and social consciousness. Since 1990, a large number of professional and scientific books, syntheses and articles have been published about the period of World War II. Nonetheless, a consensus on certain topics has not been reached, and a system of values based on the realistic and scientifically founded meaning of certain historical events, processes, events and personalities from the recent past still does not exist as we yet have to define it.

Today, there are only four museums that deal with individual themes of World War II left in Croatia. These are: the memorial dedicated to the Battle of Batina in eastern Croatia,²³ the Memorial "Lipa remembers" in

23 Author of the new exhibition inaugurated in 2001: Nataša Mataušić, See: Nataša Mataušić, *Batinska bitka* (Zagreb: Ministarstvo kulture Republike Hrvatske, 2001). Catalogue in Croatian and Russian. The battle of Batina, which took place in November 1944 near the Danube River, was one of the most important battles on the Yugoslav soil during World War II. It was fought by units of the Red Army and the Yugoslav Partisans against the Wehrmacht and its allies.

Istria,²⁴ the Memorial Museum in Jasenovac,²⁵ and the Museum of Victory in Šibenik about the war and the liberation of Dalmatia, which was organised by members of the Alliance of Antifascist Fighters and which is the only new museum related to World War II that was opened since Croatian independence.

As the registrar for all historical museums and historical collections in the Republic of Croatia, I can emphasise that all materials related to the period of World War II and the antifascist movement that had been gathered by the former museums of revolution have been preserved and are further processed according to all the rules of the museum profession. But, these materials do not yet have the right to be exhibited in most museums. Exceptions are only confirmation of such a state. It is most likely a case of self-censorship by museum staff who avoid proposing exhibitions with NOB themes in their work programs.

In a country that can be proud of its antifascist movement, this pride has today been replaced by amnesia. The reason for this lies in a contradictory and inconsistent government policy: Politicians gladly refer to Croatian antifascism and at the same time silently pass over every increasingly present form of its denial, that is, affirmation of the Ustasha movement and its followers. Most of us have ancestors who were Partisans or Ustasha and Home Guard (the army of the NDH) during World War II. Although emotionally attached to them, we cannot turn their faults into virtues if historical facts say otherwise.

The struggle to establish a new museum of antifascist resistance

Like other European countries where the history of World War II is documented and presented in modern museums, for example the Warsaw Uprising Museum and the German Resistance Memorial Center in Berlin, I believe that it is necessary to establish a museum of that kind in Croatia as well.

24 Lipa is a village in Istria whose inhabitants were subject to a terrible terror unleashed by German units in April 1944. All those caught – men, women and children – were locked up in one of the village houses and set on fire. The new Memorial Centre was inaugurated in 2015, on the site of the older memorial that was created in 1968 and closed in 1989 due to lack of funds.

25 Conceptual design of the new exhibition inaugurated in 2006: Nataša Mataušić. Authors: Nataša Mataušić, Filip Škiljan, Jelka Smreka, Đorđe Mihovilović and Rosana Ratković.

Why? One of the strongest antifascist resistance movements in all of occupied Europe was the one that emerged on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which includes Croatia. More than 11 percent of Croatia's total population participated in the antifascist resistance. In Zagreb, where the most important German authorities and the administrative apparatus of the NDH were located during World War II, every fourth resident participated in the antifascist resistance movement.

These are indisputable facts. However, there is little or almost no mention of those facts in current school textbooks, daily newspapers or on television. Many streets and squares, schools, kindergartens and industrial plants were once named after "People's Heroes" from World War II. Today they all bear other names. From 1990 to 2000, 731 monuments and 2.233 other symbols of fallen fighters and civilian victims of World War II were destroyed.²⁶

In the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia from December 1990, the historical right of the Croatian people to full state sovereignty is based on the period of World War II, i.e. on the decisions of the National Antifascist Council for the People's Liberation of Croatia from 1943. However, that is unimportant to those who, despite the historical facts, continue to tie contemporary Croatia to the puppet and fascist NDH, created and defeated during World War II.

Preservation and promotion of positive ideas of antifascist resistance, their enduring values and significance for the contemporary status of Croatia in a united and decidedly antifascist Europe is necessary for current and future generations living in the society faced with accelerated globalisation processes and the resurgence of extreme right movements across Europe.

In 2008, I wrote the conceptual design of a new museum of antifascist resistance, which I presented at the Eighth colloquium of the International Association of Historical Museums in Belgrade.²⁷ The somewhat modified and expanded concept was supported at the meeting of the SAB AH in the same year. But the journey from an idea to its realisation is sometimes long and arduous.

26 For a list of the destroyed monuments and symbols see Juraj Hrženjak ed., *Rušenje antifašističkih spomenika u Hrvatskoj 1990-2000* (Zagreb: SABA RH, 2002)

27 *Museums as places of reconciliation: collection of papers from the 8th colloquium of the International Association of Historical Museums* (Beograd: Istorijski muzej Srbije, 2009), 253-267.

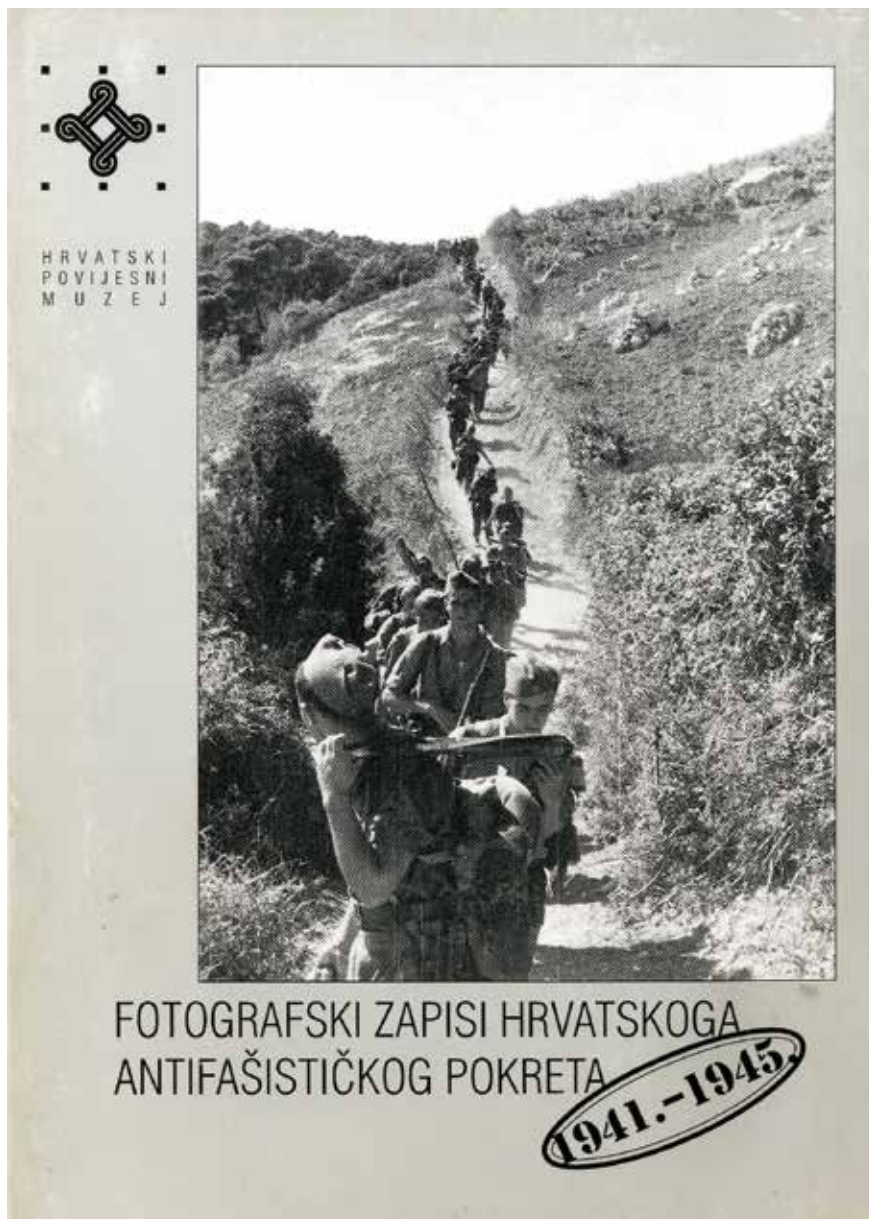


Fig. 4: Cover page catalogue of the exhibition “Photographic records of the Croatian Antifascist Movement 1941-1945”, HPM, Zagreb, 1995. (Courtesy of Croatian History Museum, Zagreb)

My first contact with the SAB AH happened quite by accident in 1995. That year, I was asked to create an exhibition on the antifascist resistance in Croatia on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War

II. The exhibition was also supported by the Ministry of Culture where one of the former employees of the MRNH worked as a cultural consultant. Financial resources were scarce, and the task in those times was extremely demanding. The anathematization of the Partisan resistance movement was already widespread in the general public and Partisan songs almost forbidden and undesirable. In this context, I decided to select 50 photographs from our Collection of Photography to show and document the antifascist movement in Croatia. Photographs are not just illustrations; they are just as valuable documents as written ones. It was a cold, snow-covered day when the exhibition was planned to open at the Mimara Museum in Zagreb. I thought that no one would come and that all my efforts were in vain. Little by little, visitors arrived and filled the large exhibition hall to the last place. My dad also came, a Partisan and a wounded fighter. And when the Partisan songs were played, the whole hall sang along with the choir members present there. It was an indescribable event. After years of silence, a Partisan song was finally heard. Of course, no one from the then-ruling political party attended the event, and of course there were no journalists to report on it, but our hearts were filled with happiness and pride at the glorious days of the Croatian past in which many gave their lives for the freedom of Croatia. For reasons unknown to me, the exhibition was taken down, long before the scheduled date.

Conceptual idea of the a new museum of antifascist resistance

In the initial phase of development of the Museum of Resistance's content structure, it was necessary to define the basic conceptual design. This basic concept establishes the criteria for selecting facts and artefacts. From the wealth of facts at our disposal, I needed to select precisely those that would mediate and reaffirm the subject matter without any ideological overtones. Content-wise, I wanted to show the Partisans' importance. I also sought to show other forms of resistance, for example in camps, or helping and rescuing neighbours, and other activities of non-armed resistance. At the same time, I wanted to emphasise the basic differences of the Croatian (Yugoslav) antifascist movement in relation to other countries that resisted Nazism and fascism, as expressed in the set goals, methods of struggle and numerous organisational forms.

My concept focused on the “Brotherhood and Unity” slogan, which was proclaimed in the war. I decided to attribute a universal meaning to it as the slogan refers to understanding and accepting others and those who are different. The Partisan slogan “Death to Fascism – Freedom to the People” also gained universal meaning. It meant refusal of all forms of totalitarianism, racism and wars.

Content structure:

1. Introduction – the pre- World War II period
 2. World War II
 - 2.1. The Independent State of Croatia
 - 2.2. The forms of resistance:
 - 2.2.1. Organised antifascist resistance under the leadership of the KPJ/ KPH: The People’s Liberation Movement
 - 2.2.2. Examples of individual civil resistance
 - 2.2.3. The Croatian righteous – heroes from our neighbourhood
 - 2.2.4. Resistance in the wires
 - 2.2.5. Resistance within the ruling group
 - 2.6. The Allies
 - 2.7. Civilian life
 - 2.8. The Catholic Church and the clergy
 - 2.9. Culture and art in the service of propaganda
- And as separate entities:
1. Art collection of SAB AH
 2. Library of SAB AH (list of book collection)
 3. Video testimonies of fighters
 4. Exhibitions about World War II realised by SAB AH

In 2015, we established and professionally processed the SAB AH’s Collection of art works, protecting it according to all the museum profession’s rules. Knowing that it would not be realistic to get enough funding to establish a museum in a physical place, we decided to first try to establish a virtual museum. In 2016, for the first time, we applied to the Public Tender of the Ministry of War Veterans of the Republic of Croatia. We repeated this in the following years, and in 2020 we were finally granted 20.000 euros in funding.

At the end of 2021, a webpage was launched as the initial elaboration of the thematic structure. It is officially named Museum of Antifascist Struggle

(*Muzej antifašističke borbe* – MAB), but also referred to as Virtual Museum of Antifascist Resistance (*virtualni Muzej antifašističkog otpora*) and as Museum of Antifascist Heritage (*Muzej antifašističke baštine*).²⁸ Unfortunately, the variety of names of the website points to initial misunderstandings in the approach of the topic: heritage, struggle, resistance... which are three different terms in many ways. But we did our best with the available financial resources. I hope this is just the beginning of a systematic upgrade of our website.

In the introduction, I emphasised the following: “The content elements of the virtual Museum of Antifascist Resistance presented here are only a matrix for its further systematic reflection and elaboration. However, they already indicate that antifascist resistance in Croatia, both organized and individual, civil, is one of the concrete elements of our history and cultural-historical identity.”

Reactions to the website reflected the socio-political situation in Croatia. These reactions ranged from approving of to demanding the resignation of Croatian Minister of Defence Tom Medved because he approved the financing of what some called lies and the revision of history.²⁹

There is no interest in establishing a Museum of Antifascist Struggle in Croatia. When the HPM elaborated a conceptual design for a permanent exhibition in 2011, I was the author of the part for the period from 1941 to the present. Out of three reviewers, one gave a negative review because, according to that person, I used only literature from socialist Yugoslavia and gave too much importance to antifascist resistance, which had its ugly sides. The first remark was completely unfounded because I used all available literature in my work. Yes, the antifascist resistance had its ugly sides, especially in dealing with political dissidents, but the Croatian Partisans, together with the other peoples of the former Yugoslavia, won with great sacrifices over Nazism, fascism and the Ustasha regime. The moral value of this fight against fascism cannot be emphasised enough.

28 Homepage Museum of Antifascist Struggle/*Muzej antifašističke borbe*, <https://mab.hr/>.

29 For media reports about the virtual museum, see: “Virtualni Muzej Antifašističke Baštine u Hrvatskoj”, *Historiografija.hr: Portal hrvatske historiografije*, 15 February 2023, <https://historiografija.hr/?p=34480>; “Pokrenut virtualni Muzej antifašističke baštine. Financiran je novcem Ministarstva branitelja”, *Novilist*, 3 June 2023, <https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/pokrenut-virtualni-muzej-antifasisticke-bastine/>.

Conclusions

Over the last three decades, and especially in recent years, the minimisation and criminalisation of the antifascist Partisan movement has been increasingly present in Croatia. Many important historical dates were erased from the calendar of public holidays, the names of streets and squares were changed, the institutions of the “old socialist order” were abolished and many monuments demolished. In the collective consciousness, the attitudes towards the antifascist heritage, moral values and righteousness of persons and events from the period of the People’s Liberation War are re-examined. Commemorations for victims of fascism provoke controversy, and monuments are erected to people from the Ustasha troops who are glorified as the only fighters for a free Croatia.

We historians and the broader public, are faced with division, polemics and controversies on topics on which we should have agreed upon a long time ago. In a situation where the competent state authorities do not respond to Holocaust denial and genocide committed against compatriots during World War II, along with the anathematization of the antifascist Partisan movement, it is difficult to find the right interlocutor for the establishment of the Museum of Antifascist Struggle. The culture of remembrance is under attack from new historical narratives. It is turning into a culture of oblivion, or a loud silence in which censorship and self-censorship are present.

Why do I think that museums of antifascist resistance are important to us? I will quote a part of the text from the brochure “Instructions for the collection of materials for the history of the national uprising in Croatia” from June 1944:

It was a difficult journey, until it was possible to convince the foreign world that the struggle in Croatia was being led by the People’s Liberation Army... The enormous sacrifices of our people, the great feats of the People’s Liberation Army, the great help that we provided to the Allies in the most critical days of the war, must be known to our people and to the entire cultured humanity. This will give impetus to our new generations, that they will know how to appreciate the freedom and progress for which such great efforts and sacrifices were made.³⁰

30 *Upute za prikupljanje materijala za povijest narodnog ustanka u Hrvatskoj* (Propagandni odjel Oblasnog odbora JNOF za Istru, 1944.)

At the same time, we should look at the need for a museum of antifascist resistance in the European context as well. European history is marked by numerous conflicts based on national, ethnic and religious diversity. But the community exists. It is based on common history, established social values and culture regardless of the differences between nations. So, instead of emphasising the differences, we should focus on what unites us morally and what we had in common during World War II, regardless of the differences in intensity and goals: resistance to Nazism and Fascism. Museums of the antifascist struggle or museums of resistance can become places to connect different European nations, to oppose revisionist and nationalist interpretations of this period of our common history, and to contribute to tolerance and respect for the role of each individual nation in the victory over Fascism and Nazism.

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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