Goli Otok : Challenging oblivion and heritage dissonances where the tourist dollar rings

Description

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The Prison camp of Goli Otok functioned up to 1956 as a high-security Yugoslav penal institution, before it became a regular public penitentiary under the authority of the Socialist Federal Republic of Croatia for criminal delinquents, political detainees and juveniles. It became especially known for the harsh disciplinary punishments and penal servitude, which Josip Broz Tito between 1949 and 1956 imposed on his pro-Stalinist antagonists as well as other political, military and intellectual dissidents[1]. With few hundreds deceased and around 16.660 detainees documented in this period, the numbers seem modest. Yet, for the people reconciled with the traumatic memories of that black rim of the Communist past epitomized in Goli Otok, the theme became strongly fictionalised, perhaps to fill in the historiographical lack of it.

The Barren Island: “ruins don’t lie”

During the summer months, almost every day an elegant excursion-boat docks for several hours on the white rocky grounds of island Goli Otok to provide visitors with the opportunity to go over the abandoned island buildings. Left from the berth, sandy grounds are stretching out, on which four worksites with access to the port surrounded by few tens of bunkers. On the right hand a bituminous road meanders up to the more forested hills, where the former prison compounds are located. Visitors arriving at the port are immediately drawn to a prominent tall wooden Catholic cross placed at the crossroad in front of the mooring place. A few meters from it, a marble plaque commemorates the former prisoners on Goli Otok, with the signature of the Government of the Croatian Republic.

The cement buildings that have replaced the once wooden prisoner barracks stand window- and roofless, just like the industrial working places do. The white stone buildings from the former camp Administration, with seaside view by the shore, have remained more or less intact, but inside it is devastated, the interior design annihilated, and the ransacked rooms having been subject to a process of material destruction. The previous bald, rocky and windy landscapes, for which the Island’s location once had been chosen, have been transformed by the atrocities and are now replaced by lawns and an attractive sunny vegetation. Garbage is spread around and the walls are sprayed with graffiti. All together, the remnants form a poignant symbol of oblivion and overall neglect.

The decrepitude in which the buildings on the one-time campsite find themselves is not, as one would expect, the result of the vitality of nature nor of the passing of time, but of conscious demolition, trashing and looting. Places with a difficult past are difficult to remember. Camps – ‘non-places’ or sites of ‘anti-memory’ as how Dutch archaeologist Jan Koolen named them – refuse to be commemorated[2]. By their traumatic and shameful past, camps almost naturally disappear from the collective memory or are just reabsorbed themselves by their surrounding scenery.

Landscape of oblivion, absence and trauma

While moving around, the oblivion and absence of people are everywhere present. In contrast with musealized places, where the set-up of otherwise preserved objects is arranged, it is precisely the dereliction that produces the powerful

images of Goli Otok. Spacious white rocky grounds, the boundlessness of the omnipresent sky and seawaters and their simultaneous limitations reinforce the sense of captivity, isolation and desolateness.

In Goli Otok, several recognizable prison-attributes are scattered on the terrain. They testify to the experience of communist repression. In the theatre room, the practice of political re-education is revived by the arrangement of the chairs and the rotten curtains. The industrial forced labour is reproduced by the engines, the workbenches, the motor drive and the sawing machines. The corroded bedframes outside the pavilions of the inmates, the prisoners' graffiti, and nursery garden act as relicts of daily life. The experience of the violence that once occurred is somehow tangible. The debris of the administration's basements where the interrogations took place and the isolation chambers remain visible as architectural testimonies of their terrifying purposes of those people killed there.

But the landscapes in Goli Otok mostly take a de-individualized shape. No names, no pictures, no visible human testimonies are left to give a human face to the story of the survivors. The replacement of photographic illustrations, museological presentations or personal objects by the heritage of the location is typical for the musealification of political prisons. Oblivion, solitude, anonymity give meaning to the experience of the visitor. They resonate with the experience of the inmates, once fully subordinated to the totalitarian communist regime.

The Memory Agents: tourism figureheads as the local heritage managers

When in 1988 the Yugoslav Federal prison was closed and the island vacated, Goli Otok shortly reopened its doors to tourism and economic exploitation under the courtesy of local entrepreneurships and the Croatian Socialist Federal government. These business development plans have been revived in 2005. They envisage a small memorial centre and the transformation of the bulk of the prison complex into a seaside hotel and leisure accommodation.

This project, today, is mostly in hands of local agents now. Goli Otok and its neighbouring prison island Sv. Grgur can nowadays be experienced as part of a tour, in a somewhat rigmarole combination of leisure and sightseeing, gastronomy, hunting, and archaeological excursions. The local tourist organisation Lopar, the capital of the Island Rab, is the organizer of the on- and off-site presentation of Goli Otok. The island is presented to potential tourists in various brochures, by holiday apartments in neighbouring coast villages, a website, and Wikipedia-content. Commercial associates of the tourist organization provide the souvenirs merchandising, the Goli Otok catering, transport and excursions. In the summer season, the former convict-ship Sv. Juraj sails out to Goli Otok and Sv. Grgur on a daily basis to offer visitors a shade of authenticity in the 'Croatian Alcatraz'.

On-site, the private tourist agencies organize and stage the excursions, but in a mix of arbitrariness and without historical frame. A short factual description of the function of seven of the island's buildings is given in six languages, but the description tends to downplay the infamous period of anti-Stalinist repression. What is remarkable in the tourist agents' accounts is the continuity in the islands' various historical phases, from the Stalinist inmates to the political convicts later referred to as 'members of the national community who committed themselves to the Croatian case'[3]. In discordance from the survivor narratives, there is a confluence of the pre-1956 history on Goli Otok into a wider national narrative on anti-communist and anti-totalitarian opposition.

Ex-inmates, who serve as tour-guide, have a defining and close to monopolistic influence in shaping the story. 'Professor' Vladimir Bobinac (1926), imprisoned between 1951-1953 on Goli Otok, is the only regular tour guide on the Island. Bobinac focuses in his stories on the particular period of 1949-1956, describing the system of Goli Otok as dehumanizing and immoralizing: '*On Goli Otok, there were no nationalities, no faith, no heroes. Everyone was guilty. Therefore you have to remember now that the person is important. Not the stone*'[4].

Dark tourism and the Yugoslav Alcatraz

Goli Otok is a burgeon-budding sightseeing for domestic and foreign visiting summer guests of surrounding North-Adriatic seaside resorts. But another category of visitors, though marginal, is influential in constructing the image of Goli Otok. These are the adventurists, historical collectioneurs, sensation seekers, and documentalists of ruins interested by the once forbidden and now forgotten 'Alcatraz terror' in Croatia. The abandonment and unreclaimed virginity of the site

meets their search for authenticity. These explorers spread pictures on the internet from their findings on the island as trophies. This type of visitor is interested in Dark tourism, a term coined by Lennon and Foley describing the act of pilgrimage to historic sites where person-specific features of atrocity and death are found[5].

The tourists are lured by the commercial heritage managers, who (ab)use the lack of historiographical framework. They come to Goli Otok to experience another “Alcatraz”. Global tourism has an organizing power of landscapes and heritage, and local communities are likely to meet the visual expectations of the visitor, as sociologist John Urry’s thesis contends[6]. In Goli Otok’s case, it is the solitude and the geographic location on the picturesque Adriatic seacoasts that strengthens the island’s function as touristic destination. One can only wonder to what extent such a type of destination branding conflicts with historical awareness of the Communist past and elbows out other types of memories on Goli Otok, nor if it promotes the silencing of other – still persisting – domestic political sensitivities that have come to occupy this landscape of turbulent and sometimes antithetic memories.

Translation in French

Notes :
[1] Banac, Ivo. 1988. *With Stalin against Tito. Cominformist splits in Yugoslav Communism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. x-xi.
[2] Kolen, Jan. 2005. *De biografie van het landschap. Drie essays over landschap, geschiedenis en erfgoed*. Proefschrift VU: Amsterdam, pp. 265-268.
[3] Leaflet on Goli otok, in hands of author, distributed via Restaurant *Porat*, Goli otok/Lopar, March 2014.
[4] Interview with Vladimir Bobinac, Goli otok, 11.4.2014.
[5] Lennon, John and Malcolm Foley. 2000. *Dark tourism: The attraction of death and disasters*. London: Thomson Learning.
[6] Urry, John. 2002. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage.

Vignette : Goli Otok (Irene Arnold, March 2014).

* Irene Arnold (post)graduated in Slavic and Russian Studies. She participated in a research project on “Terrorscapes. Transnational memory of totalitarian and genocide in postwar Europe” at the Vrije University, Amsterdam.

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Auteur-article : Irene ARNOLD*