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13. The Island of Violence: Goli Otok, the Yugoslav Prisonscape

Milica Prokić

Though I come from the continental, land-locked Serbia, I agree with Peter Conrad's idea that every person is related to an island, either one allotted to them by birth, or one they adopted, or one they were adopted by later in life. No human is without an island. Mine is Goli otok. I inherited (a connection with) it from my maternal grandparents, for their years spent there. Before the political prisoners planted trees there in the early 1950s, during the first decade of Tito's Yugoslavia, Goli otok had been bare and treeless – a cruel habitat, bleached by the Mediterranean sun, whipped by winds from both sea and the land. Today, the prison complex on the island stands abandoned and ruined, an obscure symbol of political oppression and human suffering. When two things came into my possession – a book by former Goli otok prisoner Vera Cenić, and a small notebook with my own grandmother's prison memories – I went to meet the island for the first time. It wasn't what I expected. In the decades of quiet abandonment, the acacias and pines planted by the prisoners grew to shade small portions of its terrain. Strong branches of fig trees now wrap the crumbling prison buildings, growing inwards through rusty window bars. Flocks of sheep wander around. Little yellow butterflies flutter around decomposing sheep carcasses peppered around the rock, small colourful lizards slither between stone cracks. The walls are covered with stuff written by lovestruck teenagers, nationalist football fans and aspiring graffiti artists. The island is its own blend of compelling, idyllic and bizarre. Beyond the family memories and the stories I heard, I felt my own, unexpected, instant connection with the island. I have been studying it for more than a decade and a half now. Goli otok is not the easiest island to be related to. It shaped my career, my work and at times even my mental health. For me, writing about it is a strange concoction of constant, ubiquitous and impossible. How to tell, over and over, the tale of savagery, chaos and despair on the barren sharp rock if not to go back there, each time? Writing

about it can also be an intense bodily experience, making the island, in a way, a physical part of me. It is my island, for better or worse, so I find comfort in knowing that there are strands of beauty in the harrowing memories of its prisoners, that there are flowers growing from the stone, and that there are stories of human gentleness, friendship and rectitude, even in times and environments of 'endemic' violence such as Goli otok once was.

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Introduction

Only stone upon stone
to commenced eternity departed
whole

Oh, the shame
the shattered souls of my brethren
shall carry it, crumbled
to bottommost circle

...
Stone without man is no stone nor
drystone wall,
nor is Goli otok where the sea
foretells the storm¹

To begin a story of Goli otok (meaning literally *barren island* in Yugoslav languages) with the above verses of the poet, partisan, revolutionary and former Goli otok prisoner Ante Zemljar is particularly fitting. The time between 1949 and 1956, when the harsh limestone terrain of Goli otok was commandeered as the site of the master political prison and labour camp of Tito's Yugoslavia, long occupied a peculiar space in Yugoslav history – one that historian Pamela Ballinger defined as 'an open and shameful secret ... that underlined the regime's power'.² For a complex set of reasons, the absence of substantial historiographical accounts on Goli otok persisted from 1956, when the political prison was discontinued, all the way up to the 2000s and 2010s when the archival materials of the Yugoslav State Security Service (UDB) became largely, though not entirely, accessible to researchers.³ For decades, Ante Zemljar and his fellow former prisoners had kept

1 Ante Zemljar, *Pakao Nade* (Zagreb: Trgorast, 1997). All translations of poetry and oral histories (originally in Serbo-Croatian) are by the author.

2 Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 108.

3 Alongside a handful of recent scholarly articles, the first doctoral thesis in the field of history is Martin Previšić's 'Povijest informbirovslog logora na Golom otoku 1949–1956' (University of Zagreb, 2014). The first and to date the only doctoral thesis in environmental history focusing on Goli otok is 'Barren Island (Goli otok): A Trans-Corporeal History of the Former Yugoslav Political Prison Camp and Its Inmates' by Milica Prokić (University of Bristol, 2016). Many of Previšić's sources are already

from oblivion the story of the barren island and the fate they shared in its limestone quarries, as their poetry, memoirs and novels substituted for its glaring absence in historiography.⁴

Goli otok was part of a carceral network for ‘self-managed political re-education’ of the so-called *ibeovci* (or Cominformists): those who sided or were accused of siding with Stalin and the Soviet-led Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) in the 1948 Tito–Stalin rift, an event which brought hostility to the Yugo–Soviet relations that lasted until partial rapprochement after Khrushchev’s ascent to power. The ‘Cominformists’, men and women, were Tito’s fellow antifascist partisan fighters from the Second World War, seasoned veterans from the Spanish Civil War, and often highly regarded cadre of the Yugoslav Communist Party. These arrestees, however, were joined and soon outnumbered by civilians, non-party folk, students and even high-school pupils who, though having no ties with Stalin or the Cominform, criticised (often only jokingly) certain aspects of Tito’s leadership. From remand facilities on the mainland which started overflowing with arrestees as Yugo–Soviet relations further deteriorated in 1949, the Cominformists were sent to ‘revise their political stances’ through ‘socially beneficial labour’ at a ‘designated place’, away from the eyes of the Yugoslav public.

The ‘designated place’ which served as the master site of this carceral network and where the majority of about 16,000 prisoners were sent to physically ‘rebuild’ their political stances was Goli otok – 4.3 square kilometres of uninhabited, treeless rock in the Kvarner Bay, set between the regions of Istria and Dalmatia, at the foot of the Velebit mountain range. The signature UDB invention was the ‘self-management’ component of the Cominformists’ sentence: alongside labour in the island’s limestone quarries, the prisoners were forced, through a series of extreme physical and psychological pressures, to prove their successful political ‘re-education’. The required proof was inflicting those same pressures on their fellow inmates. Within their insular carceral environment, this quickly rendered any camaraderie among the inmates virtually impossible and plunged the prisoner community into a vicious cycle of mutual abuse.

The secrecy that surrounded the prison site was also imposed on the prisoners after release. Being forbidden to speak about their experiences of

known through the works of his mentor Ivo Banac, such as *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

4 Andrej Inkret, quoted in Banac, *With Stalin against Tito*, 12.

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unsettling acts of brutality, of gruelling forced labour in the island quarries, of torture, disease and shame, wrapped in opacity the barren rock and the human stories alike. The substantial body of former prisoners' poetry and prose, the Goli otok camp literature⁵ which largely surfaced after Tito's death in 1980, was quickly submerged by the wave of the tragic war-ridden 1990s dissolution of Yugoslavia. When historians revisited the stories of Goli otok prisoners, cutting through the layers of secrecy, censorship and neglect, they found that the intra-human relations on the island constituted, as Ana Antić defined them, a 'unique culture of violence'.⁶

Another careful look at the verses that opened this chapter, now with the image of the secretive barren island in mind, and with the notion of a *unique* violence that grew on its rocky terrain, shows the layers of Ante Zemljarić's aptitude to speak of Goli otok and of the human fate there. Even visually, his scarce and fragmented verses resemble the sharp, uneven, rugged boulders of the island's peculiar karst terrain. Born on the nearby island of Pag, the site of a death camp ran by the Nazi collaborators Ustaše, Zemljarić writes of Goli otok with the compelling authority of one who possesses tangible knowledge of these arid Adriatic rocks and the nuances between the acts of violence each of them fostered. Zemljarić's frantic, spiky verses seem to pour from his painfully intimate bond with the island, bringing an insight that a historian alone could hardly access through archival materials.

Indeed, people who are bound to islands, those who live with them, study them and think with them, know that every island is peculiar, with its own environmental traits, endemic species, communities, and behaviours. As literary scholar Peter Conrad notes, islands 'narrow and concentrate the rules of selection'; as such, they are 'breeding grounds for idiosyncrasy'.⁷

5 Writers such as Antonije Isaković and Abdulah Sidran (whose father was imprisoned within the Goli otok network) are in this context the most notable contributors to Goli otok literature. However, memoirs, poetry and unpublished manuscripts, as well as oral accounts by former Goli otok prisoners constitute the body of sources which give us the most direct insight in the everyday life on Goli otok. See Banac, *With Stalin against Tito*; Oskar Gruenwald, 'Yugoslav Camp Literature: Rediscovering the Ghost of a Nation's Past-Present-Future', *Slavic Review* 46 (3/4) (1987): 513–28.

6 Ana Antić, 'Therapeutic Violence: Psychoanalysis and the "Re-Education" of Political Prisoners in Cold War Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe', in *Psychoanalysis in the Age of Totalitarianism*, ed. by Matt Ffytche and Daniel Pick (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 163–77.

7 Peter Conrad, *Islands: A Trip Through Time and Space* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), p. 13.

With this in mind, the following chapter engages with the crucial question that historians of islands as places of human incarceration must address: if islands tend to foster zoo-biological endemism and distinctive communities, can we also speak of prison-islands as shapers of island-specific, 'endemic' human violence?

With its own environmental oddities which brought about a site-specific set of relationships between the island, the carceral project and the imprisoned humans, Goli otok presents a good point of departure towards studying the distinct environmental history of prison-islands. In other words, through the story of Goli otok, this chapter seeks to capture the conception of prison-island, this entanglement of societal and environmental insularity: is it a place, a space, or – a process? Since Goli otok was not inhabited before 1949, this chapter traces its becoming a prison-island where this stone-crumbling, soul-shattering 'circle' of violence emerged. The written and oral accounts by Ante Zemljarić and his fellow former prisoners trace this becoming from the very 'beginning' – when the first prisoners set foot on this bare rock in the Kvarner Bay.

The blank page

In July 1949, when the first transport of political prisoners arrived at the cove of Goli otok, there was no pier for the ship to dock. 'There was nothing', recalled Radovan Hrast, aged eighteen at the time of his arrest, save for the 'two wooden planks' provided for the human cargo to come ashore, 'a table with a large book on it', and two chairs, against the backdrop of the vast whitish rock.⁸ Hrast defined this image as 'the beginning of Goli otok'. Coming from Dalmatia, the coastal area of Croatia adjacent to Kvarner Bay, Hrast was somewhat familiar with this arid stretch of the Adriatic karst. However, this scarce inventory of human-made objects necessary to establish the labour camp and its administration only underlined the sense of void, an absence of any familiar elements to identify with in this new place. Even to Hrast, the sun-bleached rock seemed prodigiously vacant.

Those from elsewhere in Yugoslavia, like the seventeen-year-old high-school student Vladimir Novičić who was shipped from the hilly and verdant central Serbia and who had never seen the sea or an island before, admitted

8 For Radovan Hrast's testimony, see Previšić, 'Povijest informbirovske logore na Golom otoku', p. 96.

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having ‘rather naïve expectations’ of how an island, any island, should look: ‘with luscious greenery, like from the novel about Robinson Crusoe’. His first encounter with the sea gave him an ‘immense feeling of excitement and exaltation,’ as he noted in his unpublished manuscript: ‘under the blue cupola of the sky, the waves, illuminated by the morning sun, sparkled on the ink-blue water vastness’. Immediately thereafter, however, he faced the barren island ‘so true to its name – terrifying’, with nothing but ‘stone boulders and sharp limestone gravel, all in the same shades of off-white, without a single tree’ in sight.⁹

Indeed, before the UDB chose it as the site for its master political prison and labour camp, Goli otok had been uninhabited by humans for a reason. Its sharp rock, sticking out of the sea in the remarkably stormy Gate of Senj, has no sources of water suitable for human consumption. It is a place with extreme temperature oscillations between the blazingly hot long summers and stormy, icy winter months. As Vladi Bralić, researcher of the prison architecture of Goli otok, noted, ‘the summer temperature frequently rises above 34 °C’. This is a conservative estimate: having been on the island myself in the scorching August of 2011, I measured the temperature as 44 °C when standing on the rock without shade. At the same time, Goli otok is one of the northernmost, coldest and windiest of the Mediterranean islands. In winter, the frequent, storm-force gusts of the chilling *bora* wind (in Yugoslav languages referred to as *bura*) bring temperatures on the island down to eight degrees below zero.¹⁰ This makes the shores of Goli and (partially) the shores of the adjacent Prvić the only ones among both Adriatic and Mediterranean islands that tend to freeze over, with the ice cover reaching up to a metre in thickness.¹¹ Yet despite its apparent hostility to human habitation, the UDB chose Goli otok to set up a prison and labour camp there. ‘Only a bird can escape it’, boasted Aleksandar Krstić, a high UDB official, following the report by his officers who scouted the terrain.¹² Thanks to its location in the

9 Vladimir Novičić-Trocki, unpublished manuscript, 24.

10 Vladi Bralić and Damir Krajnik, ‘Anthropogenic Elements of the Cultural Landscape of the Island Goli Otok in Croatia’, *Prostor, A Scholarly Journal for Architecture and Urban Planning* 29 (1) (2021): 32–41, at 34.

11 Andrija-Željko Lovrić, ‘Biocentical Ecozonation in Mediterranean Karst of W. Dinaric Alps, Adriatic Islands and Sea Bottoms’, *Documents de cartographie écologique* 24 (1) (1981): 69–78, at 70. See also Andrija-Željko Lovrić, ‘Eolski kserobinomi od Jadrana do Irana’ (Ph.D. thesis, Zagreb, 1995).

12 Božidar Jezernik, *Goli Otok-Titov Gulag* (Ljubljana: Modrijan založba, 2013), p. 39.

stormy sea strait which renders escape by swimming virtually impossible, the island seemed a perfect, *natural* partner to the jailers.

The larger islands of the Kvarner Bay – Rab, Krk, Cres and Lošinj, known to and named by sailors and settlers at least since antiquity – burst with human histories, cultures and myth. The island of Rab (known as Arba in antiquity), for example, was home to the stone cutter and early Christian saint Marino who, after escaping the purges of Christians orchestrated by the Roman emperor Diocletian, built the stone chapel on Monte Titano – the founding building of the *Serenissima Repubblica di San Marino*. Meanwhile, the islands of Cres and Lošinj are also known as *Apsyrtides*. According to *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes, they rose from the sea as petrified body parts of the mythical hero Apsyrtus, ripped apart and thrown in the sea there by his sister Medea, who was helping Jason and the Argonauts escape with the golden fleece stolen from her father's kingdom.

By contrast, Goli otok's only known name – meaning barren island and also being a homophone for *naked swelling*, as in bodily swelling caused by an injury or a disease – is Slavic, and could not have been given before the sixth century AD when Slavs settled in the area.¹³ The human past of the long nameless and long uninhabited Goli otok, or, more to the point, the production of a significant number of human accounts concerning the island, only began with the human carceral experience in the mid-twentieth century. To say this, however, is not to deny its geological, material and temporal reality: the island has been there, in its island form, since the Pleistocene glaciation. Its long existence only briefly overlapped with the timeline of the human carceral project. Yet, to recall Zemljari's verse, Goli otok is not (only) a barren island, where 'the sea foretells the storm', but a prison-island entity – partly, therefore, of human making. And as far as human stories of the island go, the blank book awaiting the names of the newly arrived prisoners on the 'vacant' bare rock, could indeed be seen as Radovan Hrast saw it: as 'the beginning of Goli otok.'

Unlike the subsequent transports, Hrast and his fellow prisoners from the initial groups (the first known human inhabitants of the island) who arrived between 7 and 15 July 1949, were not rushed or beaten upon ar-

13 Though Slavs settled the area in the 6th century, it is possible that the island was named significantly later.

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rival.¹⁴ While they had endured beatings at the hands of their interrogators in remand as well as in transit to the island, the guards *on* the island itself rarely laid a finger on the inmates.¹⁵ This allowed them to approach and observe their surroundings somewhat placidly. To notice, within the first minutes, the improvised prison camp of wooden barracks located up the hill from the big cove where the ship left them. Or to hear the screeches of seagulls – the island signalling presence of more-than-human animate life, despite its seeming ‘void, dead and desolate’, ‘dried dead from the winds and the waves’ as one former prisoner, Slovenian writer Cveto Zagorski, noted, recalling his first encounter with the island.¹⁶ Upon disembarking, the guards ordered the prisoners to strip and throw their clothes on a pile, and then to wash in the sea, which was a boon after the cumbersome, dark ship journey.

Those first moments and days in early July, as the former inmates recall, were clear, with the calm indigo sea surrounding them and their bone-white new habitat. Yet the newcomers had a lot to adjust to in the new landscape. Those who spent months in the cold, dark, and damp cells in remand facilities peppered across the Yugoslav mainland, instantly felt their skin burning under the summer sun. Their eyes were also still to adjust to the brightness reflecting off the stone. Their ‘tender feet’, ‘immediately wounded’¹⁷ by the sharp rock of the island, also signalled that the interrelation of the island and the humans would be a resoundingly corporeal one. The line of hundreds of naked, pale, squinting barefoot men on the vacant whitish rock, clutching newly received island uniforms is an image often recalled in the testimonies of those among the first transport groups.¹⁸ The painter and illustrator, Holocaust survivor and former partisan Alfred Pal described this long line of his ‘strikingly white’ peers moving up the hill of limestone gravel towards the camp on the first day as ‘looking like some strange angels climbing towards the sky.’¹⁹

14 Testimony by Radovan Hrast given to Previšić, ‘Povijest informbirovslog logora na Golom otoku’, p. 96.

15 Author’s interview with Damir Pavić, 24 May 2015, Belgrade, Serbia; author’s interview with Vladimir Novičić, 25 May 2015, Belgrade, Serbia; testimony by Radovan Hrast given to Previšić, ‘Povijest informbirovslog logora na Golom otoku’, p. 96.

16 Cveto Zagorski in Jezernik, *Goli Otok–Titov Gulag*, p. 212.

17 Novičić-Trocki, unpublished manuscript, 25.

18 Ibid.

19 For the number of prisoners who arrived on 15 July 1949 with the contingent from Croatia proper, see Previšić, ‘Povijest informbirovslog logora na Golom otoku’, p. 83;

The long shifts of labour started immediately, lasting ‘from the last morning stars to the first stars of the night’ (in July the sun rises above Kvarner around 5.00 a.m., and sets around 9.00 p.m.).²⁰ The prisoners quickly familiarised themselves with the stone: constructing roads to the stone quarries, blasting the boulders with dynamite to produce stone gravel, crumbling it into smaller pieces suitable for building, transporting the stone to the building sites, and even looking for marble among the limestone of the island, as the UDB’s intent, alongside ‘re-educating’ the ‘stranded’ comrades, was also lucrative. Nevertheless, the initial days of carceral dwelling on the island were ‘almost idyllic’ for this first group consisting mainly of young and healthy men – in contrast to subsequent transports which carried the communist veteran cadre. They also spent these days doing practical tasks under the guards’ orders: making initial steps towards the building of the pier for later transports, setting up the electricity generator for the camp, and even building facilities for baking fresh bread. They also made friends among each other and moreover managed to play some organised pranks on their guards – one day, they submerged the entirety of their tools in the soft cement, earning themselves a ‘shirk’ for the afternoon.²¹

The island also showed itself to the humans as an increasingly vivacious place: apart from seagulls that nested on the island alongside several other bird species, the prisoners soon noticed the snakes which slithered out the rock’s crevices disturbed by the picks, shovels and dynamite blasts. These of course frightened the labourers, as Alfred Pal recalled in a conversation recorded by his fellow inmate, writer Dragoslav Mihailović:

There were two open latrines ... Down there, five or six snakes, killed. There were many snakes, terrifying. Venomous snakes at that. There were venomous snakes, understand? We had to be very careful. You’d lift a stone, and you would have to be cautious if there is a snake under it.²²

for Pal’s account, see Dragoslav Mihailović, *Goli otok, knjiga četvrta* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2011), p. 247.

20 Novičić-Trocki, unpublished manuscript, 24.

21 Conversation with Alfred Pal in Mihailović, *Goli otok, knjiga četvrta*, p.207; Novičić-Trocki, unpublished manuscript, 25–26.

22 Conversation with Alfred Pal in Mihailović, *Goli otok, knjiga četvrta*, p. 252. There, however, was no cause for concern. Goli otok’s highly salinised rock is not tolerated by, and is even lethal to, the venomous local species that tend to suffocate in contact with this type of terrain. Therefore, the only reptiles the rock tolerated and supported were completely non-venomous snakes and small lizards.

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Figure 1.

Goli Otok terrain; view of the island's highest peak. Photograph by the author, Milica Prokić.

Moreover, though virtually treeless when the humans first arrived, Goli otok hosted scarce, yet remarkably diverse Mediterranean shrubbery, as well as the barbary fig cacti, and other plant species capable of weathering life on the sun-scorched, stormy rock. Thus, as vacant as it might have appeared to its initial prisoner inhabitants at the time of their arrival, the limestone landscape quickly began to fill before humans' eyes, both with the other-than-human life, and with human-made structures. It was the same with the pages of the once blank registry book, filling with names of the new prisoner transports arriving at an increased pace. Among them, there was a particular transport that changed the course of how the prison-island evolved.

The 'self-managed re-education'

Unlike Hrast, Novičić or Pal, the inmates from this transport were able to view their surroundings, the sea and Goli otok, as they approached it from atop the ship deck. This group's arrival at Goli otok was also recorded in

the inmates' testimonies as abrupt, loud, violent, and disturbing. The members of this group, although of various ethnicities, were colloquially called 'the Bosnians': this referred to them being arrestees of UDB Bosnia and Herzegovina rather than their nationality.²³ Damir Pavić, aged nineteen at the time of his arrest, was on the construction site when the ship arrived:

On the day when they came, I was working ... breaking off a rock. And then, we heard the *Pumat* ship approaching, the flags, the five-pointed stars, the songs. And some terrible noise was heard, as if the *Flying Dutchman* arrived, singing, shouts of some well-known slogans and chants crystallised through the air ... 'Tito – Party – People – Army' ... and then the 'Bosnians' disembarked, the stout ones. They started beating us, immediately and heavily.²⁴

The strange, instantly violent new cohabitants did indeed differ from the island's existing inmates: they seemed well fed, strong and clean, and did not undergo the naked sea-bathing ritual. According to Novičić, they were greeted by the guards 'with visible relief and even triumphant attitude, as if they boasted with the ace they were hiding up their sleeve'. The detail that indicated that they were no ordinary Cominformist prisoners was that they wore 'dandy' sturdy yellow leather shoes.²⁵ Recalling the disturbing changes this group brought to the inmate population, Novičić defined it as consisting of 'various agitators, criminals, convicted members of Ustaše's Youth, arrested sympathizers of the *Četnik* movement' who had been promised by the UDB 'to be exonerated of their wrongdoings' or who 'revised their stances under physical and moral violence' and agreed to 're-educate' the Cominformists in turn.²⁶

The new hierarchy among the prisoners was immediately established. Those greeted by the guards, who were allowed and encouraged to beat the inmates, who came onto the island fully clothed, their feet unhurt by Goli otok's stone, were obviously the authorities. They immediately started demanding spoken revisions of political stances of the men on the island, alongside reports of 'enemy activity' on the mainland – the 'enemy' often being inmates' friends, parents, siblings or spouses. They also demanded that the inmates report on each other's political stances, and 'take an active part' in each other's 're-education'. Those who refused were repeatedly

23 Novičić, unpublished manuscript, 28.

24 Author's interview with Damir Pavić, 24 May 2015, Belgrade, Serbia.

25 Novičić, unpublished manuscript, 28.

26 Ibid.

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and brutally beaten. Yet, in the beginning, almost everyone refused: there were many friends among those who shared the first days and moments on the island. They even physically resisted the new authorities and the newly imposed system.²⁷

However, their camaraderie and resistance were promptly snuffed. On 22 July 1949, the first inmate was beaten to death. While this murder was a relatively 'silent' act, in a barrack at night,²⁸ the murder that happened two days later, on 24 July, was deliberately performative and public. Blažo Raičević, 'an old-school communist, a veteran, a legend', as his younger inmate peers remember him, was brutally beaten, kicked and hit with sticks in front of everyone in the camp, including his fellow inmate son.²⁹ Novičić was among many eyewitnesses, and he noted in his manuscript that one Omer Pašić from the group of the newly arrived 'gave Blažo the final blow, hitting him on the head with a hammer'.³⁰ The crushed skull and the blood squirting on the sun-bleached rock signalled, as Alfred Pal recalled, 'that there was no more tolerance' for incongruence.³¹

As the inmates buried their first comrades under heaps of rocks in those days of late July, their tangible and material relationship with the island and its stone, now commandeered by these new authorities, also changed. With the members of 'Bosnian' group among them in the barracks, during meals,

27 Novičić, unpublished manuscript, 28–29.

28 The death of Petar-Nika Andrijašević is recalled in the accounts by his non-inmate friends, who, anecdotally, heard what happened to Andrijašević from some of his barrack mates upon their release, as Dragoslav Mihailović notes in his book *Goli otok, knjiga četvrta*. In the archival materials, the name of Petar Andrijašević appears in several convict lists and registry books. In the federal UDB (now BIA) Archives, held in the Serbian National Archive in Belgrade in the Registry book of the convicts who passed through 'Marble' I/16/II, Dosije 110 fascikla CII, on page 3, the name of Petar (Nikola) Andrijašević appears with the date of his arrest and the date written in the of 'date of release' column with a word 'died' added - noted as 22 July 1949. However, in the 'List of Persons' (CII I/6) registry book which contains the names of all 16,101 known inmates of the Goli otok network his name reappears, with the 'date of release' noted as 22 August 1949. The first inmate group however was not released until 1 October 1949, so this date in the 'List of Persons' registry book can be deemed invalid with a high level of certainty.

29 Miša Pifat in Mihailović, *Goli otok knjiga četvrta*, p. 41.

30 According to the BIA archives, Blažo Raičević died on 24 July 1949.

31 Interview with Alfred Pal in Previšić, 'Povijest informbirovskog logora na Golom otoku', p. 173.

and on the worksite, the moments of observing, familiarising themselves with the rock, shirking and playing pranks on the guards were taken away from the prisoners. The gruelling labour, part of the ‘self-managed re-education’, also became a means of torture: they were now forced to carry heavy stone loads from one point to another without any constructive or productive purpose, stone becoming the ally of the ‘re-educators’. This purely punitive labour, *on* the rock and *under* the rock, ‘sharp as razor’ against the skin as inmates recall, in the blazing summer sun or in the gusts of freezing *bura* in winter, further served the stratification of the inmates. The ‘collective’ and the ‘activists’, those who agreed to revise their political stances and co-operate with the UDB, were allowed to take shifts, at times have rest and drink water, while the so-called *banda* – the newly arrived to the island as well as those who refused to alter their politics or abuse fellow prisoners – would carry heavy stone loads all day every day, stretching their three-decilitre³² water ration as thin as they could over the blazing summer days.

The particularly oppressed ones among the *banda* were the so-called *boycotted* – the pariahs of the inmate hierarchy, those who were not allowed to sleep at night, but were rather forced to ‘guard the kibble’ – meaning to stand, head over the large bucket which served as the toilet for the entire population of their barrack. During the day, they were forced to crumble the limestone with another piece of rock. Using this ‘tool’, the *boycotted* were also compelled, like all others, to fulfil the daily production norm: one cubic metre of crumbled limestone gravel.³³ They were also forced to work in the so-called *shit brigades* – trying to empty the latrines on the worksites with buckets with holes at the bottom. Everyone was encouraged, and with time, expected to ‘re-educate’ the *boycotted* by beating and insults. Those who did not take part, or refused or rebelled against such treatment were deemed obstructors of the re-education programme, and as such themselves *boycotted*.

However, as Novičić notes, as time went by, and ‘through the hellish combination of the concrete threats of falling under boycott themselves and the daily torture measures which everyone underwent, a number of inmates started making “moral compromises”, by throwing a harsh word or a projectile of spit at the *boycotted* instead of rocks’. But the greatest indicator of the deterioration of the intra-human relationships was, according to him, the fact that many convicts reacted to ‘more and more of new forms of torture

32 Author’s interview with Vladimir Bobinac, 23 Aug. 2011, Krk, Croatia.

33 Novičić, unpublished manuscript, 30.

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with an outward expression of contentment.’ Thus, the new ‘self-managed re-educational component’ which stained the rock with human blood and faeces, also sullied the relationships among the humans, who walked back each day increasingly bruised, soiled, agitated and disturbed to the quarries at heart of the island, their yells, picks, shovels and punches out-sounding the seagulls, the snakes and the waves. The elusiveness of time was another added pressure: most of the sentences to ‘socially beneficial labour’ were from six months to two years in length, but they could be prolonged or curtailed at the authorities’ discretion. Some Cominformists were even released – only to be arrested and sent to the island again after several months or even a year.³⁴

As the camp management sought to prevent any camaraderie between the inmates on the island and the subsequently arriving transports, the first ‘gauntlet’ (or *espalier*, an age-old punitive practice where the subject is forced to run between two rows of people, normally fellow soldiers, and be beaten by them) was organised by the ‘Bosnians’ at the arrival of the next transport. Everyone was forced to attend, as Novičić recalled: ‘When the *Punat* ship appeared, we were all withdrawn from the worksite ... and the two-line row was already formed consisting of the “Bosnians” and the “youth brigade”.’ The so-called youth brigades Novičić mentions here consisted of inmates who revised their stance, agreed to co-operate with the UDB, and were promised a prompt release, working and living outside the main camp.³⁵ ‘The atmosphere was euphoric. Shouting became howling’, recalled Novičić and further noted:

The first people appear, completely naked, and they are ‘greeted’ by the convicts. In front of the row, one ... from the youth brigade, wearing a stethoscope and a white coat, as if in some kind of fancy-dress costume, greets all of the confused and shocked newcomers, in some jester-like tone, asking humiliating questions: Do you have syphilis, lice, nits, fleas, bedbugs? ... From the dark and mould of the remand prison cells, starved, in poor bodily shape, barefoot, these people are now about to run the gauntlet. If it was not for the shower of blows from everywhere and the bloody footprints on the sharp rocks, maybe this whole scene would have resembled some kind of hellish vaudeville, because everyone was deliriously joyful, like in some kind of medieval execution.³⁶

34 See Dragan Marković, *Josip Broz i Goli otok* (Belgrade: Beseda, 1990), p. 453.

35 See Prokić, ‘Barren Island (Goli Otok)’.

36 Novičić-Trocki, unpublished manuscript, 38–39.

With the disturbing injection of the violent human factor, the process of Goli otok becoming prison-island had thus unfolded, from 'pale angels' on the vacant rock, to the bloodied 'hellish vaudeville', in a matter of weeks.

The 'seventh circle'³⁷

If the two planks and an empty logbook against its rock in early July 1949 was 'the beginning' of Goli otok, then 1951 was the peak. The 'self-managed re-education' had reached full swing. When Alfred Pal, who was temporarily released and then re-arrested, came back to the island in April 1951, the place which once smelled like fresh bread and the sea received him with the special gauntlet for returning convicts, 'coiled like a gargantuan snake', through which he was made to run in circles until he was so heavily beaten that he was taken straight to the infirmary where he lay slipping in and out of consciousness for two days. As he shared with a fellow inmate, writer Dragoslav Mihailović, after he came to, he stood outside the infirmary on the hill, having a panoramic view of the entire camp and an opportunity to observe the 'progress' of the self-managed re-education system in his seven-month absence:

I heard a strange murmur and noise underneath. I pushed up the bandage away from my eye to see what was going on, since that noise, or murmur, or thunder, was incredible indeed. The strange noise could be understood only if you could see the situation. It sounded like a dull banging ... I saw a scene worthy of Dante's *Inferno*. There were eighteen barracks in a row beneath. In front of each barrack there was an espalier through which the inmates were pushed. Since the path in front of the barracks was covered with gravel, the crushed stone which was sprayed with chlorinated lime for disinfection, a strange mist, dust, rose as they were running. The visual and sound impressions were mixed with the smell of sweat, the smell of chlorine, into an incredible, horrifying symphony. It seemed like Hell. The yelling: 'Boo! Ugh! Banda! ... Down!' could be heard from all sides. I stared astounded ... and, whenever it comes to my mind, I have the same feeling, a thought: Is it possible? Is it possible?³⁸

Historian and Goli otok prisoner Vladimir Bobinac, in our 2011 interview asked *what happened to humans on Goli otok*, another question key to

37 In Dante's *Inferno*, the seventh circle is the circle of violence, towards self or other.

38 Mihailović, *Goli otok, knjiga četvrta*, pp. 351–52.

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understanding the story of the prison-island. What did indeed happen to humans on *Goli otok in particular*, as opposed to the rest of the sites within the Cominformist political prison and labour camp network which operated the same 'self-managed re-education' system? Cruel and violent as it was in these other places, only on Goli otok the *boycotted* were forced to work in the so-called shit brigades even amid a raging epidemic of dysentery. Only in the female camp on Goli otok were the *boycotted* women literally immured – immobilised by cement and mortar and attached to the outer walls of their own prison for days and weeks, as captain Miljuša Jovanović, a People's Liberation Struggle veteran, recalled of her fellow prisoner:

There was one, Grandma Ruža ... a petite little old lady ... they built a niche, like some kind of a highchair, so she could not sit down, and building around that they immured her into the wall ... it was a picture of living sorrow, it was hard to watch. Seven days was she immured into that wall, they were only giving her tiny bits of bread and a little water ... that's where she also urinated and defecated ... When she was let out, she was even tinier, like a little hen she looked, her skin was peeling off. Bless her soul, poor grandma Ruža!³⁹

Nowhere else in the Cominformist prison network were the prisoners forced to build their own torture chambers, carving them into the very rock of the island: small niches colloquially called doghouses (because of their size), where men were crammed in and left for days, unable to move.

Moreover, nowhere else, it seems, were the prisoners so inextricably materially and corporeally interconnected with the environment of their incarceration as they were on the rocky island. They laboured on it, they were crushing their skulls against it, they buried their comrades under heaps of rocks, they built their own prison on it, with their bodies debilitated by the sunstrokes, dysentery, thirst, avitaminosis and injuries. They also afforested a portion of it, as Bobinac explained:

People wonder how the forest on Goli otok came to be. Because everything that happened on Goli otok, every rock moved from its original place, was moved by a convict. And every tree planted at the first stage in the development of the camp, was planted by a convict. They dig in the ground in between the rocks, put the fertile soil where there was room, then plant the seedling ... into it. But the seedling needs to survive the scorching summer sun. And the man, the convict, must shield the seedling with his shadow. He stands

39 Miljuša Jovanović, in Dragoslav Simić and Boško Trifunović, *Ženski logor na Golom otoku – Ispovesti kažnjenica i islednice* (Belgrade: ABC Produkt, 1990), p. 198.

above it, back turned to the sun, shielding the young plant from the heat. And [he] always moves along the same trajectory as the sun in the sky, so that the plant would always be in the shade. That is how the forest came to be.⁴⁰

The rock, in turn, in one of its multifaceted 'behaviours' when it was not commandeered by the prison regime, offered the inmates 'gifts' of sustenance, healing and solace. On the savage rock, the inmates competed with their serpentine cohabitants for seagull eggs, thereby replenishing the badly needed protein in their bodies. They ate the flowers of the island cacti to save their teeth. The clay from between the rocks which they found in one spot helped the women to heal their wounds and sunburns. Moreover, it gave them the tenderest signs of solace when they most needed it. In the pains and humiliations of the stone labour, covered in sunburn and bedbug bites, struggling to endure the final days before her release, 21 years old at the time, Vera Cenić recalled:

Maybe that is why I found *her*, the little blossomed violet. It emerged, grew, and blossomed from a crack in the stone. On a tiny green stalk, with no leaves. We look at one another. I kneel before her and plunge into her scent. I kiss her. I don't dare to touch her with my hands, rough and toughened. I just kiss her, gently, sadly.⁴¹

And those who could not endure until the release, the rock assisted in their escape through death, as Vladimir Bobinac recalled:

There was one, from Belgrade, a young man, a student. And when he saw that evil there, evil unimaginable, in him rose the desire to escape. But there is no escape. So he moved to the side as we went to work with stone ... grabbed a stone, and with the stone in his arms jumped off the cliff into the sea ... And they look for him for three days, but he is nowhere to be found. On the third day they hire professional divers to search the seabed. And they find him, on the sea bottom, stone in his arms.⁴²

From the whitish rock wounding the pale, tender feet of the newly arrived prisoners, to the stone partnering with prisoners in this tragic, final act of rectitude, the 'shattered souls' figuratively and materially carried the stone to the 'bottommost circle'.

40 Author's interview with Vladimir Bobinac, 23 Aug. 2011, Krk, Croatia.

41 Vera Cenić, *Kanjec filjma. Povest* (Vranje: Književna zajednica Borisav Stanković, 1994), p. 201.

42 Author's interview with Vladimir Bobinac, Krk, Croatia 24 Aug. 2011.

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Conclusion

After the political prison was discontinued in the 1956, the island, complete with the prison complex built through the forced labour of the Cominformists, was handed over from federal jurisdiction to the Socialist Republic of Croatia to serve as a regular prison for felons. It was finally discontinued in 1988, to be abandoned and left to ruin. The trees planted by the political prisoners between 1949 and 1956, the acacias, common figs and various evergreens, have grown in the subsequent decades to shade one eighth of the island's terrain. Local shepherds from Rab have been bringing their flocks to the island: just as humans could not escape the island alive, the sheep cannot wander off this natural pen. Semi-wild, the sheep now inhabit the old, abandoned prison cells. They roam, die and decompose on the island, feeding the roots of its forest. It is, then, perhaps safe to say, in answer to the question of how to define a prison-island, that Goli otok is indeed a *process*, or rather, a conglomeration of processes, triggered by the human carceral dwelling in the mid-twentieth century, unfolding to this day.



Figure 2.

Goli Otok's post-prison afterlife with one of its current inhabitants. Photograph by the author, Milica Prokić.

With this in mind, I turn to Zemljar's verses once again, for the concluding layer of wisdom they offer: 'stone without man', he declares, does not assemble into a drystone wall; the rock wrapped in winds and waves, in and of itself, is *not* Goli otok. It is the entanglement of the human and the rock within a slight, seven-year slice of its Pleistocene-old past, that rendered the island's materiality, as well as its identity, into the Goli otok of which we speak today: the now abandoned prison-island that between 1949 and 1956 fostered the unique culture of violence, not seen in that scope, variety and disturbing intensity in the rest of the Cominformist political prison network. In his seminal work *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that, although stone 'is a primal matter, inhuman in its duration ... despite its incalculable temporality, the lithic is not some vast and alien outside. A limit-breaching intimacy persistently unfolds'.⁴³ Drawing on that very limit-breaching intimacy with the island's stone, material and embodied, Zemljar and his fellow prisoners gave us a platform to examine this peculiar lithic island environment as the shaper of human experience.

Zemljar's collection of poems about Goli otok is named *The Hope's Inferno*. Since Dante's *Inferno* has been the trope also used by others who recalled and recorded their experience as political prisoners on Goli otok, it seems only appropriate that the voice of this poet, a local, stone-bound Virgil, has been our guide in parts of the journey. The section of *Hope's Inferno* from which the opening verse comes is named 'Barren stone spikes, barren stone scars' (*Goli kameni siljci Goli kameni ožiljci*). The former does not go without the latter in the material existence of the prison-island: whether the scars are those the former prisoners carried throughout their lives, or those they gouged into the stony body of the island in the project of the forced corporeal 'rebuilding' of their political stances. Examining stones, as Cohen suggested, as 'something more than fixed and immobile things ... as partners in errantry', this chapter has engaged with the barren rocky environment of Goli otok as humans' partner in life, in suffering, in solace and in death – with its scar-inducing stone spikes or with its scarce, improbable violets that grow, leafless, from the rock, offering a glimpse of gentleness to young, imprisoned women.⁴⁴ Just as peculiar traits of islands enable them to foster idiosyncrasies such as

43 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 70.

44 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Geophilia, or 'The Love of Stone'', *Continent* 4 (2) (2015): 8–18, at 8.

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giant tortoises or colossal monitor lizards, it is perhaps in the nature of the painful bond of humans and this peculiar rock sticking out, bone-like, from the tempestuous sea, that the 'endemic' origins of violence of the Goli otok political prison and labour camp are to be sought.

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