



The Return of the Partisan Art


REVIEW OF

KOMELJ, MIKLAVŽ, 2009: *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?*

Ljubljana: Založba /*cf.

PAVLINEC, DONOVAN, ed., 2008: *La stampa partigiana*. Trans. Maria Rita Rodinò, Claudia Roma and Costantino Saccheddu. Ljubljana: International Centre of Graphic Arts; National Museum of Contemporary History.

ŠKRJANEC, BREDA, and DONOVAN PAVLINEC, ed., 2004: *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*. Ljubljana: International Centre of Graphic Arts; National Museum of Contemporary History.



After the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Partisan movement, too, has dissolved as a legitimate object of public discussion. Moreover, after 1991 this sudden lack of interest in the People's Liberation Struggle 1941–1945 was itself left unnoticed in the ex-Yugoslav societies for almost two decades. This lack of interest (in the lack of interest) cannot be explained away by simply presuming a kind of overcoming of the grip of distant past. For in the same time much more remote cultural phenomena were given new attention in the post-socialist identity discourse; historically and conceptually pre-modern folklore practices were revamped as so many pillars of the newly invented identity communities. At the same time, the culture of the Yugoslav Partisans, whose unique role in the international anti-fascist struggle had long been acknowledged all over the world, was treated in an undeservingly patronising tone, if not completely ignored. The postmodern and post-socialist culturalisation and depoliticisation of the public discourse has led to the oblivion of the most widespread burst of cultural activity ever recorded in the territory of today's Slovenia. In short, culturalisation manifested itself as oblivion of culture.

This process is not without a certain real-socialist pre-history, however. As early as the 1980s, two major interpretations of the Slovenian Partisan culture competed for domination. On the one hand, the official Yugoslav narrative granted this culture a key role in the political formation of the Slovenian nation. On the other hand, many of the so-called dissidents within the official cultural apparatus developed the idea that the Partisan culture, which they tended to reduce to artistic artefacts, was an overvalued regression in comparison to pre-war artistic models as well as to the post-war production of the dissidents' own cultural apparatus. What these dissidents ignored was the fact the prestigious status of Slovenian and Yugoslav culture post World War II was secured

precisely by the cultural and political intervention that was the Partisan movement. In other words, the success of the Partisan culture manifested itself as the rejection of the Partisan culture.

But no matter whether the Partisan culture was indeed indispensable for the Slovenian political development, as the official Yugoslav line went, or a mere politically motivated myth, as the dissidents implied, the sudden pacification of both contradictory narratives is all too symptomatic to be neglected. Even if the official interpretation of the Slovenian Partisan culture was indeed biased, as certain commentators have long claimed, the general (and sudden) amnesia still demands explanation. If nothing else, in the supposedly undemocratic Yugoslavia there were at least two major interpretations of the Partisan culture, whereas in the supposedly pluralist Republic of Slovenia there suddenly was none. In short, pluralisation manifested itself as dismissal of a productive debate.

By the early 2000, the lack of interest in (the lack of interest in) the Slovenian Partisan culture would truly deserve the status of a rather urgent object of analysis, had there not appeared a genuine new wave of reflection on the Partisan movement. This new wave coincided with processes that have significantly altered the conditions secured by the People's Liberation Struggle for the Slovenian national culture; most of these processes had to do with the integration of the Republic of Slovenia into the EU and NATO. Interestingly, this did not strengthen the trend of the disappearance of the Partisan heritage from the public space. Quite the contrary, as Slovenia was joining major anti-socialist alliances the Partisan culture slowly reappeared as a legitimate topic. This reappearance was first limited to critical public intellectuals. As a consequence, these new studies on the Partisan culture included as their side effect some of the most pertinent social criticisms of con-

temporary public amnesia regarding the Partisans. The lack of interest in the Partisan culture eventually manifested itself as a pre-text for a return to this culture.

Furthermore, these critical intellectuals, far from simply readjusting the Partisan perspective to the present historical frame, approached this perspective as a violently quelled legacy that has yet to be understood at its own level. So, in 2004, the year Slovenia entered the EU and NATO, the International Centre for Graphic Arts in Ljubljana and the National Museum of Contemporary History hosted the exhibition *Partizanski tisk* (The Partisans in Print). Curated by Donovan Pavlinec, the exhibition attracted a lot of attention, especially through the bilingual catalogue *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print* (see Škrjanec and Pavlinec), which contains essays by major Slovenian experts on the topic. Four years later, the year the Great Recession truly started to be felt in Slovenia, Pavlinec brought the exhibition to the A + A gallery in Venice, on which occasion he edited the Italian edition of the catalogue, titled *La stampa partigiana* (see Pavlinec). In the same year, Sebastijan Horvat's new staging of Matej Bor's Partisan play *Raztrganci* (The Ragged People) was awarded for its innovativeness at the annual national theatre festival, while a group of young critical theorists organised the international conference *Uneventment of History: The Case of Yugoslavia* (see Centrih, Krašovec and Velagić). Next year, poet and essayist Miklavž Komelj released his ground-breaking book *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?* (How to Think the Partisan Art?). By 2011, Lev Centrih published the book *Marksistična formacija: zgodovina ideoloških aparatov komunističnega gibanja 20. stoletja* (The Marxist Formation: A History of the Ideological Apparatuses of the Communist Movement in the Twentieth Century), and three years later Gal Kirn published the book *Partizanski prelomi in protislovja tržnega socializma v Jugoslaviji*

(The Partisan Ruptures and the Contradictions of Market Socialism in Yugoslavia). In the meantime, Tanja Velagić edited numerous volumes of the journal *Borec* (The Fighter) and publications of the publishing house ZAK, while colleagues from other parts of former Yugoslavia produced such volumes as *Partisans in Yugoslavia: Literature, Film and Visual Culture* (see Jakiša and Gilić) and *Retracing Images: Visual Culture after Yugoslavia* (see Šuber and Karamanić). In other words, the turn away from a culturalised politics and an unpolitical culture revitalised the idea of political culture—and of cultural politics.

There are obviously many differences between these projects; none of them, however, is as notable as the difference between them as parts of a new wave, on the one hand, and the most prestigious socialist project on the same topic, on the other. This was a project that ran for almost two decades (1970–1986) under the leadership of Boris Paternu, Professor of Slovenian literature at the University of Ljubljana, and his assistants Irena Novak-Popov and Marija Stanonik. Generously state-funded, the project enabled dozens of professors, lecturers and students to collect more than 12,000 Slovenian poems that were written both by canonical poets and anonymous fighters, prisoners and refugees between 1941 and 1945 (see Paternu); a selection of this enormous archive was published in the four-volume anthology of Slovenian poetry of resistance titled *Slovensko pesništvo upora 1941–1945* (Slovenian Poetry of Resistance 1941–1945). The new wave of studies on the Partisan culture, on the other hand, consists of monographs and essays written by individuals or small collectives, in most cases without any public funding and in all cases in a time when public project funding is no longer a welcome addition like in Paternu's case but more or less the only source of project work in Slovenian humanities and social sciences. As a result, these studies were not able to expand or revise the

archive produced by Paternu's project; instead, they reinterpreted, even rehabilitated this archive, thus effectively saving Paternu's project from the institutional amnesia that had set in even before the publication of that project's four volumes. The most important new publications in this respect arguably include the catalogue to the 2004 exhibition and Miklavž Komelj's book, which partly grew out of his reply to Rastko Močnik's contribution to the catalogue; both this reply and the subsequent dialogue between Komelj and Močnik are published in this volume of *Slavica tergestina*.

The introductory chapter of the catalogue *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*, written by Lilijana Stepančič, Director of the International Centre of Graphic Arts at the time, sketches the history of Slovenian exhibitions of the Partisan art. Stepančič notes that the more the Partisan struggle was distant in time the more it was commemorated, with the fortieth anniversary of the Slovenian Liberation Front in 1981 witnessing the most comprehensive commemoration. This, however, was followed by a rapid decline: 'Just four years later, in 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the end of the war and victory for the revolution, not one major exhibition of Partisan print was staged to mark the occasion.' (Škrjanec and Pavlinec 13)

If Director Stepančič offers a sketch of the history of the reception of Slovenian Partisan art, Pavlinec, the curator of the exhibition, sketches the history of this artistic production itself. Pavlinec focuses on the graphic art, which peaked after the first congress of Slovenian cultural workers in January 1944, when the quality of printed matter improved, especially in the regions of Kočevje and Bela Krajina, the locations of two major printing plants. In the process, Pavlinec provides numerous details that speak of the artists' extraordinary imagination and flexibility in creating ad hoc materials: 'For example, they made

knives for linoleum cutting from spoons, steel umbrella tips, watch springs and English machineguns; to obtain material, they scrapped linoleum off floors; the wooden rollers for applying colour to linoleum were coated with patches of bicycle inner tubes.' (Škrjanec and Pavlinec 73)

If Pavlinec's chapter is focused on graphic art, Božo Repe's contribution addresses the Partisan press. In 1944, for example, Slovenian Partisans have printed 378 serial publications, including two daily newspapers, 60 periodicals and 30 wall newspapers. *Partizanski dnevnik* (The Partisan Daily), one of the very few European daily resistance newspapers, is particularly indicative of the rapid popularisation of the Partisan movement, according to Repe; initially released in 400 copies as a gazette of the Partisan Triglav Division (later the Thirty-First Division), its circulation rose to 20,000 by the end of the war and continues to be published widely to this day as *Primorski dnevnik* (The Littoral Daily). On the other hand, *Delo* (Labour), the main Slovenian daily since 1959, took its name from a paper with a different aim and recurrence: in the interbellum and in 1941–1942, *Delo* was the gazette of the central committee of the Slovenian Communist Party, whereas the daily newspaper of the same name appeared only in 1959 after the merger of two dailies, *Slovenski poročevalec* (Slovenian Reporter) and *Ljudska pravica* (People's Justice).

Breda Škrjanec, who co-edited the catalogue with Pavlinec, provides a welcome addition to both Pavlinec and Repe, as she sheds light on the material basis for the production analysed by them, namely the illegal printing plants. Škrjanec meticulously traces the logistical problems in the occupied territory and the ways in which they often dictated the final form of the Partisan graphics as well as of their many newspapers. In this way, Škrjanec manages to demonstrate the incredible contrast

between the extreme conditions and the extraordinary quality and quantity of the Partisan print production. This contrast also shines from Andrej Šemrov's chapter on the design of the Partisan money, coupons and bonds. This design was often of outstanding quality, as it was regularly entrusted to architects and artists such as Edvard Ravnikar and Marijan Tepina, who both studied with Jože Plečnik and Le Corbusier.

The central chapter of the catalogue comes from Rastko Močnik. Močnik focuses not only on the Partisan graphic art, but makes a further step to discuss the Partisan symbolic production in general. His text comes closest to the new critical generation of researchers of the Yugoslav Partisan movement. Compared to most of the chapters of the catalogue, Močnik's essay does not take the post-1991 capitalist restoration as the point from which to approach the Partisans. Instead, Močnik rejects the question of whether or not the Partisan movement lead to the supposed political culmination of 1991, and thus clears the space for new interpretations. He begins by discarding the widely accepted idea that only now, after the end of socialism, the Partisan art can again be received as art; for him, this notion is premised on the bourgeois aestheticist ideology according to which art is perceived as art only if its material conditions and impacts are ignored or at best degraded to the level of anecdote. Nothing could be further from the program of the Partisan symbolic production, according to Močnik, which did want to intervene in its own material conditions, the conditions brought about by the same bourgeois ideology that is reproduced in the contemporary idea that the Partisan art can only be viewed as art once the conditions of its production have become a thing of the past. The Partisans wanted social emancipation through art, not the emancipation of art from its social conditions.

This radical position prompted one relatively young public intellectual to start what Močnik (82 n. 52) later termed ‘a productive dialogue’ by writing a review of the exhibition and in particular of Močnik’s essay, which he later described as ‘one of the key theoretic interventions in the discussion on the art of the People’s Liberation Struggle in recent years’ (Komelj 350). This was Miklavž Komelj, the author of the above-mentioned book *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?*, a groundbreaking volume that appeared only four years after his review of the exhibition and its catalogue. In the book, Komelj boldly sets on the path demarcated by Močnik. The original polemic between the two, however, is still buried within the impressive 640 pages of Komelj’s book. In the polemic, Komelj criticises Močnik for not taking into account the positions among the Partisans themselves that demanded artistic autonomy, albeit not in the bourgeois sense of the autonomy of art from society. For Komelj, not every suspension of artistic autonomy is emancipatory. Indeed, ‘in the years before World War II the problematisation of the autonomy of art was characteristic of the Slovenian clero-fascist press—and aimed precisely at the Marxists, who were said to refer to the autonomy of art in order to serve their Marxist poison to the people under the guise of art’ (Komelj 352). Komelj draws on propositions by such divergent thinkers as the Partisan leader Boris Kidrič and contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou to demonstrate the necessity of distinguishing between art and propaganda as two separate procedures of truth. Combining such seemingly incommensurable figures as Alejandra Pizarnik and the early Mao Zedong, he consistently shows that the political potential of progressive art lies precisely in its inherent artistic qualities (Komelj 353–356).

For Komelj, the Partisan movement is neither a famous episode from the standpoint of continuity (which was the standpoint of the official

socialist interpretation), nor an infamous episode from the standpoint of discontinuity (which is the standpoint of the mainstream post-socialist revision). Instead, it is a famous episode from the standpoint of discontinuity: according to Komelj's main thesis, the Partisan art was a ground-breaking transformative practice that set new coordinates of thinking about art in connection to the formation of a new revolutionary subjectivity (Komelj 7).

This kind of conceptual work is completely absent from Paternu's project, which limited itself to archiving and anthologising the poetry of anti-fascist resistance. This self-limitation to the empiricist scope of the mainstream literary studies of the time is perhaps even the reason why the work on the four-volume anthology (1987–1997) survived the state that had funded it from the beginning; the culturally invaluable yet theoretically and politically conventional achievements of the project may have been the main reason why the anthology was able to escape the fate of such similar projects as critical editions of Marx and Engels, Boris Kidrič, Edvard Kardelj or even Anton Fister, the most internationally acclaimed Slovenian in 1848. When only slightly later the last consequences (of the consequences) of the Partisan political culture were undone, the lack of criticism that can be traced back to the early 1980s became evident again. And yet it is not enough to say that what has here been dubbed 'the new wave' of commentators is rethinking the 1980s and the 1990s in their studies on the 1940s—what they are rethinking is, first and foremost, our time. ♡

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