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# **Born in blood, drowned in blood and argued in blood. Croatian anti-fascism faces the rise of the extreme right**

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**Croatian anti-fascism withstood the period of relativization of war and post-war history during the nineties after the breakup of Yugoslavia, as well as attempts to rehabilitate the extreme right. Anti-fascism is still a strong part of Croatian society.**

“In the communist bloc, anti-fascism is an untouchable ideology, a concept that legitimizes all war and post-war activity of communist regimes. In this way, in these countries, anti-fascism connects with communist ideology and practice and loses its original democratic message.” These words end the word “anti-fascism” in the Croatian encyclopedia published in 1999-2009 by the Croatian state lexicographic institute. This excerpt captures the essence of the dispute about Croatian anti-fascism quite well. It is disputed whether anti-fascism is a movement in its own right, or whether it can be loosely confused with communism. After all, this is symptomatic of a significant part of Europe. Croatia, respectively Yugoslavia, however, was a country where anti-fascism formed one of the pillars of state identity. How did this perception change after the dissolution of the Commonwealth? What is left of anti-fascism in Croatian public space? And how does he deal with it?

## **Anti-fascism and state legitimacy**

The post-war regime of the new socialist Yugoslavia drew its legitimacy from, among other things, from a successful domestic anti-fascist resistance unique in its scope in Europe. This resistance was led and organized by communist partisans led by Josip Broz Tito. The wartime formation of the new Yugoslavia was thus based on anti-fascist foundations, which was also reflected in the political efforts developed by the partisans. On November 26, 1942, the first meeting of the political leadership of the resistance took place, which was called AVNOJ - Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije (Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia). The AVNOJ met twice more until 1945, declaring itself a provisional parliament just after the war. In each of the future Yugoslav republics, a local political body was also formed during the war. In the case of Croatia, it was ZAVNOH - Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske (National Anti-Fascist Council of People's Liberation of Croatia). In 1945, ZAVNOH was transformed into the Sabor - the Croatian Parliament. In post-war Yugoslavia, anti-fascism was a fixed part of the state ideology. However, it is not the case that anti-fascism as a value was directly implemented from above. After the war experience, a large part of the population identified with it, and the political and social consensus regarding anti-fascism was thus formed from below. In the course of the war, many social organizations were created that explicitly supported anti-fascism (for example, the Women's Anti-Fascist Front), took it as their foundation and continued their activities after the war. After the war, the anti-fascist struggle of the Yugoslav peoples in the new state under the direction of the communists became the state ideology, which led to its widespread commemoration in the

public space.

The consequence of the breakup of Yugoslavia was, among other things, the return of fascist symbols from the time of the Ustaše Croatia to the public space.

During the ongoing breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent events, there was a large increase in nationalist expressions. Anti-fascism also had to face these, as the question arose as to whether anti-fascism could be connected with Croatism. After all, in addition to the occupiers, the Yugoslav partisans had as one of their main enemies the Ustasha Croatian state, which some radical nationalists consider to be the fulfillment of their aspirations for Croatian statehood. It must be said, however, that this quasi-state was only a puppet entity under the protectorate of Nazi Germany, and due to the activities of the domestic resistance, it was difficult for the Ustasha to maintain control over its territory, which deepened especially after the defeat of Italy at the end of the summer of 1943. In addition, the partisans were, among other things driven by a certain degree of (not only) Croatian patriotism. After all, the Croatian state was created by them after the war as one of the Yugoslav federal republics. A question that has arisen since the 1990s is whether anti-fascism can be compatible with Croatian national identity. At least this is how the state counts on him in its official statements.

There is one more aspect to be mentioned about the issue of Croatian nationalism and anti-fascism. Tito's resistance was, in terms of its composition and its own proclamations, multinational. The slogan Fraternity and unity (Bratstvo i jedinstvo) meant cooperation and equality of the individual Yugoslav nations regardless of their differences. However, with the rise of nationalism since the 1980s, the ethnic composition of partisan units has become a problem. According to estimates, Serbs made up approximately 40 to 50 percent of the total number of partisans, around 30 percent Croats, 10 percent Slovenians, and the rest members of other nations and nationalities (it is not without interest that the Czech and Slovak, or even the German minority also had their own partisan unit). Croatian nationalists based their argument on the fact that the majority of Serbs fought under Tito, so the partisans cannot be considered a manifestation of Croatian national identity. At the same time, one may ask whether it is possible to ignore the fact that up to a third of Tito's army was made up of ethnic Croats. The paradox in this regard is that Tito had a father of Croatian nationality and considered himself a Croat. The national question and strained nationalism opened up questions of legitimacy about the connection of anti-fascism and Croatian national identity with these doubts. These questions, although not so pronounced, are still present in Croatia today.

With the disintegration of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia and the joint Yugoslav state, the political and social consensus that had been valid until that time also disintegrated. Anti-fascism also came to the fore in the nineties. And despite the rise of nationalism with the newly emerging political set, it initially maintained its legitimizing role during the creation of an independent state, and it seemed that Croatia would continue to support anti-fascism. In December 1990, the Croatian parliament, which emerged from democratic elections, approved the constitution that is still valid today. Its preamble refers to historical state law and is a list of historical events from which, according to the preamble, modern Croatia derives its legitimacy. In the last point, the Croatian constitution also refers to the existence of ZAVNOH, which it perceives as a body that laid the foundations of state sovereignty during the Second World War, despite the announcement of the so-called The independent state of Croatia, i.e. a klero-fascist quasi-state entity.

It should be emphasized that the political mainstream, represented mainly by two parties - the Croatian Democratic Community (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ) and the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, SDP), never took a hostile position towards anti-fascism

as such. This is not at all surprising for the SDP, after all, it is a party that was created by the transformation of the Union of Communists of Croatia, and as a left-wing political entity, anti-fascism is inherent to it. The situation with HDZ is a bit more complicated.

The result of the breakup of Yugoslavia was, among other things, the return of fascist symbols from the time of the Ustaše Croatia to the public space, especially through the paramilitary and also some military units of the newly formed Croatia. Hand in hand with this, the relativization of anti-fascism and efforts to rehabilitate the wartime clerical-fascist Ustasha state strengthened. In response to these tendencies and events, the Declaration on Anti-Fascism was adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2005. It perceives anti-fascism as a democratic value, important for the construction of contemporary European democracy. At the same time, he calls for the anti-fascist movement not to be confused with communist ideas. Thanks to its emphasis on the democratic tradition, the declaration on anti-fascism could also be considered as one of the manifestations of Croatia's efforts to integrate into European structures. It was supported in the vote by all parliamentary parties at the time, except for the extreme right-wing Croatian Party of Law and a few MPs from the HDZ.

## What will we celebrate?

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Franjo Tuđman - a direct participant in the anti-fascist resistance, a general and historian - was brought to the head of the state, but he went through a complex personal development in the era of socialist Yugoslavia and ended up in positions of strong Croatian nationalism. Despite this, however, and on his initiative, the Act on Holidays, Memorial Days and Days of Rest in March 1991 enacted June 22 as a national holiday as the Day of the Fight Against Fascism (Dan antifašitičke borbe). On June 22, 1941, the day the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union, the First Partisan Section was formed in the Brezovica forest near the town of Sisak. To this day, it is the only public holiday in Croatia dedicated to the anti-fascist resistance led by the communists. The calendar of the former Yugoslavia contained more such holidays, however, of all the holidays, Croatia adopted only New Year's Day and Labor Day from the old calendar. At first glance, it may seem paradoxical that in socialist Croatia, as one of the Yugoslav republics, there was no holiday dedicated to the anti-fascist uprising. But the opposite is true.

During the socialist Yugoslavia era, each of the six federal republics had one (two in the case of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) republic holiday. In Croatia, July 27<sup>th</sup> was called Uprising Day. On that day in 1941, the so-called Uprising in Serb, which is a small town in the Lika region near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reason for the uprising was repression by the Ustaše regime against the non-Croatian population, while a substantial part of the population of the Lika region was made up of Serbs. Over time, various reports and legends were gathered about the uprising in Serbia, which portrayed it as not an anti-fascist uprising, but a nationalist one. In some cases, the insurgents were even labeled as gendarmes, i.e. members of the so-called of the Chetnik movement, which during the Second World War was a Serbian nationalist-oriented resistance, which, however, during the war did not shy away from collaboration with the occupiers in the fight against Tito's partisans.

Croatian historian Ivo Goldstein, for example, opposed these narratives, who wrote that "anyone who claims that July 22 is the date of the Chetnik uprising is spouting Ustasha nonsense." Goldstein admits that the insurgents committed some crimes against the population of some villages in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, however, cannot be compared to the extent of Ustasha crimes. The establishment of the First Partisan Section in Brezovica, on the other hand, took place on ethnically Croatian territory, and of all the members of the section, only Nada Dimić was of Serbian nationality, who was murdered by the Ustaše during the war and was declared People's Hero of Yugoslavia after the war. In 1991, one anti-fascist holiday was replaced by another. July 22

fitted much better into the new, Croatian national narrative of history. However, this cannot diminish its importance, because thanks to its provisions, the anti-fascist element did not disappear from the state policy of memory.

In connection with the Uprising in Serbia, another aspect of Croatian anti-fascism and its connection with public space should be mentioned. In 1951, a monument to the aforementioned uprising was unveiled in Serbia, consisting of a fifteen-meter stone column and bronze figurative sculptures. During the Croatian offensive in 1995, known as Operation Storm, the monument was completely destroyed by Croatian soldiers. The political representation of the Serbian minority did not agree with the destruction of the monument, and in 2007 the Independent Democratic Party of Serbia negotiated its restoration. On July 27, 2011, seventy years since the uprising, the monument was ceremonially unveiled again. The monument in Brezovica from 1981, which is associated with June 22, was also damaged in the 1990s (for example, the bronze plaques disappeared), however, with the declaration of June 22 as a national holiday, it became the site of commemorative events, which are regularly attended by political elites Croatia. Despite this, however, the monument and its surroundings appear neglected, however, unlike thousands of other monuments, commemorative plaques and small reminders of anti-fascism, it survived the 1990s, and what's more, it still plays an active role in the official commemorative culture.

Monuments and commemorative plaques are a very important part of the presence of anti-fascism in public space in Croatia. Some of them attract attention just because of their artistic rendering, when it comes to artistically valued works in which important artists of post-war Yugoslavia participated. In Croatia, it is mainly the so-called The stone flower (Kameni cvijet) at the site of the Jasenovac concentration camp or the Monument to the Revolution of the People of Moslavina near Podgarić. War operations in the 1990s and heightened nationalism, however, destroyed many such monuments and they were never restored. In particular, this is a ten-meter high figural monument of the partisan Stejpan Filipović in Opuzen. The monument from the workshop of sculptor Vojin Bakić was blown up in June 1991 and the bronze from the destroyed statue was dismantled by local residents. Despite the persistent efforts of Croatian and Bosnian anti-fascist organizations, the monument was never restored and is thus a symbol of the disintegration of the anti-fascist consensus in Croatia after 1990.

## **These, streets and squares**

Using the detour monuments, you can return to the above-mentioned Franjo Tuđman. A relatively contradictory prominent figure in modern Croatian history held an ambivalent attitude towards anti-fascism. Tuđman, an active participant in the partisan movement, never condemned anti-fascism as such. He built his politics on heightened nationalism and a total break with the socialist Yugoslav past. Strengthening the role of Croatian national identity was important to him, which, of course, helped to open the floodgates of resistance in society and politics to the importance of the anti-fascist resistance in the history of Croatia. Despite these attitudes, however, Tuđman at the same time respected and recognized the role and importance of Josip Broz Tito, to the extent that in the 1990s he had a bust of the Yugoslav president placed in the residence of the Croatian presidents, a villa on Zagreb's Pantovčak (which happened to be Tito's residence in Zagreb) leader. From Tuđman's point of view, the Yugoslav partisans brought a great positive to Croatia in that they succeeded in uniting the Croatian state space by annexing Istria, the city of Rijeka, part of Dalmatia, including the city of Zadar and a large part of the Adriatic islands, and thus acquired territories that were the subject of disputes between Italy and Yugoslavia. This is precisely why he advocated actively signing up to the ZAVNOH decision, which was also included in the Croatian constitution.

Tito's Bust on Pantovčak, despite numerous discussions and polemics, remained in place until the beginning of 2015. However, the newly elected president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović from the right-

wing conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) kept her pre-election promises and Tito's bust from the workshop of a prominent Croatian sculptor Antun Augustinčić was removed from the villa and donated to the museum in Tito's native village of Kumrovec. In addition to the bust, she also had about a hundred works of art associated with Tito removed from the villa. The removal received mixed reactions, with exponents of the Croatian left criticizing it. Former President Stjepan Mesić, for example, called the removal "an attempt to remove the memory of the anti-fascist struggle, one of the brightest pages of Croatian history." Grabar-Kitarović, in contrast, referred to Tito mainly as a communist dictator.

Tito himself was one of the top symbols of the anti-fascist struggle of the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia (deservedly so, I must say). The historical and political dispute over the personality of Tito is in itself a complex and complex problem that would take up an entire book. Commemoration of Tito in public space varies regionally. Tito's busts, statues or memorial plaques can be found in coastal areas and in Istria. Especially there, the anti-fascist struggle, represented by Tito, has a special position, because thanks to him and his success, this territory became part of Yugoslavia after the war.

In a similar vein, there was also a political dispute over the renaming of one of the most important squares in Zagreb. It bore the name Marshal Tito Square until 2017 and was subsequently renamed Republic of Croatia Square. Many paradoxes can be found in the current names of Zagreb's streets and squares. In the 1990s, several streets that bear the names of persons associated with the Ustaša state were renamed. This year, the city council proceeded to rename four of these streets. On the other hand, you can find places in the capital bearing names referring to the anti-fascist struggle. The most prominent of them is the Square of Victims of Fascism. In 1990, it was renamed the Square of the Croatian Giants, but in 2000 it returned to its older name.

## **Born in blood, drowned in blood and argued with blood**

The political consensus of Croatian anti-fascism was born in blood, drowned in blood and is argued with blood. The 1990s opened the floodgates to its relativization. Anti-fascism itself is still alive and well in Croatia and is still a topic of public discussion and controversy. Historian Hrvoje Klasić aptly noted in one interview that Croats are not divided by their view of the future, economy, health care, etc., but by their view of the past. The historian also became the addressee of several letters from neo-fascists that contained death threats, as Klasić identifies with anti-fascism and belongs to a group of historians who refuse to relativize the criminality of the Ustasha state.

The complex historical development of modern and contemporary Croatia still casts a shadow on debates and approaches to anti-fascism. Whether among the lay public, politicians or historians. The current anti-fascist movement in Croatia strives to preserve the memory of the victims of fascism and war resistance, as well as resistance to right-wing extremism. In the same way, anti-fascism is a big theme of the question of national identity. On the positive side, contemporary Croatian anti-fascism has not fallen into the mold of a group of nostalgics, reminiscing about the good old days, but is trying to face modern problems, such as the pan-European rise of the extreme right.

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