

**Title: Partisan iconography, socialist Yugoslavia and a modest contribution to global history**

**1. General state of current research projects**

It should be said that presently I have no knowledge of fellow young researchers in that have a luxury to work only on one project, which would unfold in a long-term fashion. Most often the conditions for the young researchers are precarious, which means that we keep applying from one job to another, from a fellowship x to fellowship y, while at the same time trying to write new articles, keep ourselves updated, teach and finish the old writing debts. The old ideal of academic quality and critical engagement of the researchers is substituted by the sheer academic output, an imperative to publish as much and if possible, in the most respected peer-reviewed journals. This is a part of the larger academic institutional apparatus that becomes openly subjugated to the profit-oriented higher education institutions, industry and academic publishers' business. Unquestionably, there are other professions and many other segments of populations, which are far worse off than young academics in Europe – but the tendency I want to portray is clear: over-all precarisation with little security and tough prospect for the old dream of tenure or any sort of stable employment within academia. This tendency within academic condition in a large way determines our work, which then becomes more superficial and centred around the topics that might have applicative, political, or economic value.

So to answer the question what is my current research, I shall reply that there has never been only one current research, but always a few different subfields, which at some points intersect: *firstly*, I have been working most deeply on the topic of (post)socialist Yugoslavia and its culture of memory (Kirn 2012). I plan to publish a manuscript on the topic of partisan counter-archive at Brill next year, and a small aspect of this research I conducted and presented at GWZO-Leipzig in October. *Secondly*, I am researching the long history of avant-garde art and especially film, focusing on question in what way avant-garde was related to the field of progressive politics, socialist state and technology. In a more detailed way I will attempt to work

on the topic under the title “Cinema-train: between avant-garde utopia and motion-vision apparatus” during my research stay at TU Dresden. *Thirdly*, I have been working on political theory and history of *emancipation*, while taking a comparative view from Marxian to post-Marxian positions. This work includes a theoretical work on the key concepts such as “people”, “sovereignty”, “revolution”, “emancipation”, “class”, “race”, “hegemony”, “ideology”, “transition”, figure of poor and “surplus population”, while it also enables to rethink specific historical ruptures, past and present. Looking in retrospect these three fields have been framing my research from the period of my dissertation and enabled a more interdisciplinary perspective, which engages in a dialogue between political theory, history, cultural and media studies. There is no single method that I use in my research, however I would say that each discipline contributed a few elements that constitute “materialist epistemology”. This means that conceptual works precedes “empirical” and historical data, the latter are already informed by different theoretical and ideological positions. However, theory does not stand in abstract way, but gets then molded in the process of working through concrete cases – material that one researches. Institutionally, I have been affiliated with Institute of Cultural Inquiry and Humboldt University in Berlin, and University of Primorska in Koper, while my near future shall be spent at TU Dresden.

## **2. Summary of my research stay EEGA**

**a.) General context of my research within GWZO:** I was working mostly around the topic of cultural icons in Eastern Europe, to which I contributed a critical and affirmative understanding of scandal that socialist Yugoslavia brought during and after WWII. I argued that socialist Yugoslavia can re-orient a neatly constructed binary of the Cold War with divisions on East and West, North and South. Moreover, socialist Yugoslavia is a political and historical example that refutes a thesis on the existence and pre-dominance of “two totalitarianisms”. The latter term, totalitarianism, which allegedly explains history of fascism and state socialism, would be most likely rejected by Hannah Arendt herself. Such a weak analytical claim that equates two different forms of domination, state, ideas was foreign to her rigorous thinking, while it is also noteworthy that she initially used the term in relation to Belgian colonial rule and

atrocities in Congo. Thus, if something than a long history of the Western, and European colonialism, should seriously address its own “totalitarian” legacy and rule. It is evident that this should belong to the central stage of cultural memory of Europe, and it is also symptomatically absent.

But to return to the frame of two totalitarianisms one understand how this destructive history became a part attributed to Germany, since the West and East variation meant that Germany practiced and lived through both totalitarianism. However, part of the same European history could be ascribed by the affirmative struggle against these same totalitarianism: socialist Yugoslavia. The affirmation of difference cannot be explained through some culturalist approach but through a clear universalist stance, a politics that was addressed to all that fought external occupation and internal domination based on ethnicity and class. Partisan and socialist Yugoslavia became a political site of “three partisan ruptures” between 1941 and 1955: *the first partisan rupture* took place within the times of WWII, where partisan forces, in a similar vein like in Greece, waged a successful struggle and liberated themselves from fascist occupation largely with their own forces. The People’s Liberation Struggle can be defined as “rupture with strong consequences” and resulted in a new political form: the federative and at that time “the Partisan anti-state” of Yugoslavia. In other words, apart from the partisan war against the occupiers, partisan organized a social revolution, which simultaneously waged struggle against the representatives of the old Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which were for the most part directly collaborating with fascist powers (Ustashi, Chetniks, Home Guards to name a few). *Second partisan rupture* is located in the context of post-WWII dominated by Stalinist and US neoimperialism(s), when socialist Yugoslavia found itself isolated between East and West. Political resistance to implement Stalinist command economy that would come at expense of own autonomy and overall dictate over the politics on Balkans was opposed by Yugoslav communists. The price paid was high, since split with Stalin in 1948 meant the exclusion from the bloc and any international credits, while at the same time within Yugoslavia a huge popular support of Tito was formed. This lead to a renewed reliance on its own forces, which we could name as partisan politics *continued with other means*. The Yugoslav communists, despite their international isolation, developed the first independent path towards socialism that directly

challenged the tutelage of one and only path. Communist Party was renamed into the League of Yugoslav communists and called this path “workers self-management”, which paradoxically, came into existence as a state reform “from above”. And lastly, *the third Partisan rupture*, which followed after 1955, when the Yugoslav foreign policy helped to create the Non-Aligned Movement against the Cold War division. I claim that it was within the perspective of (partisan) political autonomy that one can understand the “leverage” and insistence on independent path to socialism, which can contribute in a large way to understanding specific and global road taken by Tito and his entourage to completely reorient themselves and play a large role in the creation of the non-aligned movement. The latter performed a rupture with the Cold War division –despite some of its members belonged also to other military alliances- and made a vigorous support of nuclear disarmament, peaceful co-existence and support of anticolonial struggles. If this was most vocally absorbed in the platform of United Nations from late 1950s onwards, we would find more than one echo of this in May 1968.

#### **b.) Concrete research-presentation**

This general historico-political frame of three partisan ruptures stands in stark contrast to the current memory policies in the nationalist(ic) situations of the post-Yugoslav states, where historical revisionism and rehabilitation of local fascism has been on the agenda of main political parties. Writing new textbooks, exhibitions, documentary films have been all dedicated to demonization of socialism and Yugoslavia, some accounts going as far as proclaiming the totalitarian dictatorship, which is embodied in the figure of Tito. Not that Tito does not deserve the criticism, it is more that antitotalitarian critics hollow out any emancipatory potential-traces of the partisan past. This is why my research revisited the partisan archive, those forgotten poems, monuments, films and move beyond helpless nostalgia. I have envisioned a work on those alternative artworks that kept the partisan ruptures alive and group them under a common platform “partisan counter-archive”. These artworks share specific features: they all work on the partisan and revolutionary process in terms of its “unfinished” project. Concretely, the partisan rupture(s) combined a “negative” struggle (antifascism) and an affirmative programme (social

revolution), which was not finished. Moreover, the partisan counter-archive not only undermines the conservative revisionism and nostalgia, but elaborates on the paradoxical and contradictory relationship between memory and revolution that is reflected in the form and content of particular works (Walter Benjamin's "tendential art"); the potential for a current and future mobilisation of past resources (interventionism). In the lecture organized by GWZO and Salon Similde I presented a few important partisan films and monuments. Apart from historical exposition I juxtaposed diverse groups of works: departing from a dominant artwork on the partisan struggle, which promoted or was in line with the official socialist authority, then proceeding to "alternative" artworks that undermined the official status of partisan struggle or at least its dominant representations. One example to illustrate this method of presentation: in the late 1960s partisan films reached its climax with "red westerns" that performed epic and partisan iconography, which was exported to Western audiences. The major case was *Battle of Neretva* (Veljko Bulajic, 1968) that is still the highest budgeted film in (post)Yugoslav times and included international casts with almost mythological scenery of wounded partisans signing in the midst of battle. I argued that rather than films of auteurs that attempted to show more complex and existential dilemmas of the partisan struggle and war in general, the most exciting case of alternative production can be found in the film of Zelimir Zilnik: *Uprising in Jasak* (1972). Zilnik took the camera to a trip to Jasak, a village in Vojvodina, where he interviewed the local villagers, who were engaged in the antifascist struggle. We witness a collective reconstructions of the people's narrative of antifascist resistance. The real heroes are not only the mythologized leaders in famous battles (which stayed leaders in the post-war Yugoslavia), but people without whose support partisans would have never prevailed in the war. *Against banality of evil*, Zilnik puts forward a *case for banality of heroicism*.

Moving from film to monumental production I registered a major shift that took place in the 1960s. In terms of form and space of the major monuments these moved away from realist and humanist figuration towards a more abstract and late modernist forms. Also they moved away from most visible public spaces in the big cities and towns towards the nature: middle of the forest became a venue for major late modernist memorial complex-es. But contrary to some top-bottom pedagogical

models they have started to function as venues for picnic, debate, and official and unofficial celebrations. Last but not least all these works, films and monuments, official and also alternative, dissident and highly critical were sponsored either by state budget or self-managed communities, which put them in ambivalent position with state authority and its ideological investments. The central lesson of this presentation was not to show a simple dichotomy between the state and alternative partisan archive, but to point to contradictions, tensions and inconsistencies within both sides, and in what way socialist culture of partisan can testify to specific differentiation of Yugoslav enlightenment and modernism. Moreover it wanted to sharpen specific relationship between memory formation and revolutionary legacy. Evidently, in the time of historical oblivion of antifascism, when the revisionists openly rehabilitate those that were defeated in WWII, working on this topic cannot be but to remain engaged in the present times.

**c.) Contacts:** Undoubtedly my research, presentation benefited from the ongoing discussions with Matteo Colombi, Christine Gölz but also a few inspiring guest researchers at the GWZO - I do hope I will be able to build on these contacts and perhaps organize something in the future.

**d.) Overlaps with EEGA research areas and potential outcomes:** Most clearly it intersects with the cultural aspects but also generally with the topic of specificity of the global history of East, and communism (one such case conference that was organized by Katja Naumann). I hope to be able to contribute in some specific panel – publication in the future and will be able to host some of the fellow researcher at TU Dresden. My immediate goal is to finish the manuscript for Brill Publisher, which will be than available to a larger audience and hopefully taken on by those that promote global history with the stress on the emancipatory past.

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### **My selected bibliography on the topic**

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