

***Povijest Golog otoka***. By Martin Previšić. Zagreb: Fraktura, 2019. 634 pages. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustration. Photographs. Tables. Maps. 249 Kuna, hard bound.  
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For foreign tourists visiting Croatia, Goli Otok (Barren Island) is just one of many rocky islets visible from the winding Adriatic coastal road or offered by boat tour operators as an afternoon destination. For many citizens of the Yugoslav successor states, however, Goli Otok epitomizes the physical and psychological torture committed by the Titoist regime. In recent years, Goli Otok and the infamous prison camp it housed has been the subject of documentary films, an extensive exhibition in Belgrade, a virtual tour created by the Croatian NGO Documenta, a dark tourism segment on National Geographic, and initiatives to establish a memorial museum on the site. Despite its oversized presence in the collective memory across the former Yugoslavia, prior to Martin Previšić's encyclopedic *Povijest Golog otoka* (A History of Goli Otok) there was very little serious scholarship on the subject, primarily due to the veil of secrecy the communist regime used to enshroud the island and its victims for decades. This volume systematically describes every aspect of the prison camp on Goli Otok, established by the Yugoslav security services to neutralize supporters of the Cominform Resolution (1948), from the moment suspected opponents of Josip Broz Tito were arrested through the daily routines and harsh living conditions on the island, as well as the post-Goli Otok lives of survivors. Although the book suffers from some typical weaknesses of Croatian historiographical production, such as an overabundance of anecdotal details and a dearth of comparative analysis, Previšić's inclusion of survivor testimonies and careful reading of the available archival material has resulted in an important contribution that will set the standard for all future research on Goli Otok and related topics.

The book is based on Previšić's dissertation, written under the mentorship of Ivo Banac, the former Yale professor who had authored the most important English-language book dealing with Goli Otok, *With Stalin Against Tito* (1988). Previšić not only had considerably more access to archival sources than his mentor, but he also personally interviewed twenty-five individuals (all of them former prisoners except for one member of UDBA, Yugoslavia's notorious state security service), whose recollections are extensively cited throughout the book. Even after the opening of various archives and access to numerous other sources of information, Previšić admits that many details remain murky, including the deaths of some prisoners and the exact locations of infamous toponyms such as *Petrova rupa* (Peter's Hole), reserved for the most ideologically resilient prisoners. Nevertheless, this book has been able to effectively demystify many aspects of "Tito's Gulag."

After several introductory chapters that briefly explain the Yugoslav communist regime after 1945 and the circumstances of the Tito-Stalin split, Previšić describes how the first group of Cominformists arrived to Goli Otok's wind-swept shores on July 7, 1949, although he was unable to find any document ordering the creation of the prison camp. Interestingly, conditions were initially not particularly harsh as both prisoners and the UDBA guards had to work together to build the infrastructure of the camp. The arrival of a group of UDBA collaborators, former fascists, and criminals referred to as "the Bosnians" (*Bosanci*), according to Previšić, "was the moment Goli Otok became *Goli Otok*" (202). They introduced many of the psychological and physical tortures that characterize the collective memory of the prison island, such as the *špalir*, a gauntlet that new arrivals had to pass through while being beaten by fellow prisoners. Since Goli Otok

was primarily concerned with breaking the will of veteran communists who had sided with the USSR rather than Tito, the administrators of the prison needed to create an atmosphere that prevented the kind of prisoner solidarity among communists that had developed in the jails of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia or during the Axis occupation. The daily routines of both prisoners and guards, descriptions of abuse and interrogations, rumors of escape attempts and killings, and individual life stories are presented in great detail, often with long excerpts from the author's interlocutors.

In addition to the descriptive texts and personal narratives, Previšić offers readers a lot of statistics conveniently organized in numerous tables throughout the book. We learn that there was a total of nearly 16,000 Cominformist prisoners in all of the camps and prisons located in Yugoslavia, while approximately 13,000 ended up on Goli Otok (including 600 women prisoners) between 1949 and 1956 (462–69). There were usually 3,500 to 4,000 prisoners at a time, and while some spent only a few months on the barren island, others were sent back several times if the authorities felt their loyalty to Tito was not genuine. Calculating that the total number of prisoner deaths was 287 (the vast majority due to poor hygienic conditions and a typhus epidemic), Previšić concludes that “contrary to some perceptions, the application of the most brutal methods on Goli Otok, for which it became infamous, actually lasted for a relatively short period of time” (469).

Particularly interesting is Previšić's analysis of the businesses associated with the camp, since the prisoners did not only perform senseless tasks as punishment, but actually created a variety of products, such as tiles, that filled the coffers of UDBA and its agents via a number of proxy companies. While some former prisoners were able to reintegrate into society and even hold fairly high positions as managers and administrators, everyone was forced to sign that they would work as informants for UDBA and undoubtedly carried the trauma of the experience their entire lives, powerfully articulated in the testimonies of the former prisoners. The ethno-national composition of the Cominformists explains why Goli Otok has not been fully exploited as an official site of memory by right-wing (or for that matter, left-wing) Croatian governments: not only were the prisoners during this phase all communists, the majority were Serbs (44.24%) and Montenegrins (21.07%), while Croats made up only 15.48% of the total.

While Previšić's book sets a high bar for all future research on Goli Otok, the book does have some weaknesses, beginning with the title: the volume is not in fact a complete history of the various prisons on Goli Otok, but only the Cominform camp from 1949 to 1956. The oral histories, while essential for understanding many aspects of the functioning of the camp, nevertheless could have been shortened or integrated more smoothly into the author's analysis, since the book becomes repetitive at times and overall a bit too long. In addition to a lack of synthesis and more rigorous analysis, the book's relevance could have been strengthened by a more comparative approach and placing the Goli Otok experience in the broader mosaic of political internment camps that characterized Europe's twentieth century. The book does offer a wealth of primary source materials, and an English language version (ideally with help from a skilled editorial team) would enable the story of “Croatia's Alcatraz” to reach a much broader international readership. The author's passion for unraveling the mysteries of Goli Otok are conveyed in his energetic writing style, resulting in a book that is of interest for both scholars and the broader public interested in the darker side of Titoist Yugoslavia.

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