

# Goli otok 1949–1956

The history of the camp in 16 chapters

Goli otok "Ante Zemljar" Association

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## CONTENTS

- 1 Historical Context of Yugoslavia: The 1948 Split and the Beginning of Political Persecution

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- 2 The Founding of the Camp

---
- 3 Why the Goli Otok Regime Was Neither Constitutional nor Lawful

---
- 4 Who Were the “IB-ists” and Why People Ended Up in the Camp

---
- 5 The Men’s Camp on Goli Otok (1949–1956)

---
- 6 The Camp for Women IB-ists (1949–1956)

---
- 7 The Secret Camp Within the Camp

---
- 8 Re-education on Goli Otok: Violence as a Method of Loyalty

---
- 9 Camp Architecture of Goli Otok and Sveti Grgur (1949–1956)

---
- 10 Mermer and Velebit: Forced Labour, Production and Profit

---
- 11 Mortality in the Cominform Camp (1949–1956)

---
- 12 Two Levels of Power: the UDBA and Prisoner Self-Administration

---
- 13 The Return of the “Former People”

---
- 14 The End of the Cominform Camp and Later Use of the Site (1955–1992)

---
- 15 Goli Otok Today

---
- 16 Goli Otok in the European “Landscape of Camps”

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## Historical Context of Yugoslavia: The 1948 Split and the Beginning of Political Persecution



### Context: Yugoslavia after the Second World War

After 1945 a one-party system was established in Yugoslavia, in which the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) took the leading role in state administration, the economy and public life.

The reconstruction of the country, nationalisation and the planned economy went hand in hand with tightening political control. OZNA, the wartime and post-war security service, gradually grew into the UDBA, a permanent secret police, and from 1946 the authorities increasingly restricted public and political dissent.

In such a system sanctions were often imposed by administrative decision, without court proceedings, especially at times when the authorities feared unrest and loss of control.

### The Cominform and the Cominform Resolution (1948)

The Cominform (in Yugoslavia often also called the Informbiro) was founded in 1947 as an international organisation for coordinating the activities of

communist parties. It brought together the parties of the Soviet Union (USSR), Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France and Italy. Its first session after its founding was held in Belgrade.

The Cominform Resolution of 28 June 1948 publicly condemned the leadership of the KPJ and marked the beginning of Yugoslavia's split with the USSR and its expulsion from the Cominform. The Albanian communist party, although not a member of the Cominform, supported the condemnation of Yugoslavia.

### **What the Resolution meant within Yugoslavia**

The Cominform Resolution accused the KPJ leadership of deviating from the "correct line" of communism and called on Party members to remove the Yugoslav party leadership.

The Resolution made public and further intensified the conflict with the USSR, which had begun even before it was adopted. Within the country it opened the way to political persecution, as any disagreement by citizens with state policy was increasingly interpreted as disloyalty to Yugoslavia.

Behind this policy lay the fear that the USSR might start a war against Yugoslavia, either directly or through its allies, the other members of the Cominform.

### **Relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union before the split**

After the Second World War Yugoslavia largely modelled itself on the Soviet Union and cooperated with the communist parties gathered in the Cominform, while at the same time seeking to make its own decisions independently.

As this striving for independence grew stronger, so did tensions – which gradually led to open conflict in 1948.



A public procession with portraits of leaders. Before the split, Stalin's image was part of official Yugoslav iconography.

### Consequences of the split: isolation and internal repression

After the Resolution, Yugoslavia found itself isolated among communist states and parties. The authorities tightened border control, the political leadership felt threatened, and there was growing insistence on complete political unity among citizens.

In this atmosphere waves of arrests and expulsions from the Party began – both of members who openly opposed the break with the USSR and of those merely suspected of holding such views.

The UDBA soon began detaining a growing number of people, many of whom ended up in custody or in forced labour. Estimates of how many people were

affected vary from source to source.

### The logic of “loyalty”

The split created an atmosphere in which the individual was required to condemn the Cominform Resolution clearly and publicly.

“

Any criticism of the regime, any joke, even silence at meetings could be interpreted as a sign of unreliability.

THE LOGIC OF “LOYALTY” AFTER 1948

Loyalty became the measure of political suitability, with consequences for one's job, position and freedom.

### The road to the camp system (1949)

Arrests of people labelled “Cominformists” began as early as 1948, and the prisoners were initially held in existing prisons. As the conflict with the USSR dragged on and the number of detainees grew, several camps were secretly opened in July 1949, such as the one on Goli otok in the Adriatic Sea and at Ramski rit near the Romanian border.

|           |                                                                                                       |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1945      | Establishment of the one-party order                                                                  |
| 1946      | Strengthening of the state apparatus and security services                                            |
| 1947      | Founding of the Cominform                                                                             |
| 1948      | <b>The Cominform Resolution and the condemnation of Yugoslavia</b>                                    |
| 1949      | <b>Opening of the camp on Goli otok</b>                                                               |
| 1950–1953 | The Korean War and intensified internal surveillance in Yugoslavia                                    |
| 1953      | Death of Joseph Stalin and a change in the international climate                                      |
| 1955      | Beginning of the restoration of relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union                     |
| 1956      | <b>Goli otok ceases to be a Cominform camp and becomes a prison for criminally prosecuted persons</b> |
| 1958      | Visit by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and normalisation of relations                              |

#### CHRONOLOGY OF KEY YEARS

From the one-party order to the closure of the Cominform camp.

#### GLOSSARY

|      |                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| KPJ  | Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije).                                                                                                                             |
| OZNA | Department for the Protection of the People (Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda) – the Yugoslav security and intelligence service founded during the Second World War, the predecessor of the UDBA. |

**UDBA**

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

**Korean War**

The 1950–1953 conflict in which North Korea, backed by China, fought against South Korea, which was supported by United Nations forces led by the USA. For Yugoslavia, which had already broken away from the USSR, the war further deepened Cold War divisions and accelerated its turn towards a policy of non-alignment.

**Joseph Vissarionovich  
Stalin**

Soviet communist leader and dictator who ruled the Soviet Union from 1924 (after Lenin's death) until his own death in 1953.

## The Founding of the Camp



### Political framework (1948–1949)

After the split with the Cominform (Informbiro), the security apparatus chose Goli otok as the site of the main labour camp: uninhabited, away from the main shipping and transport routes, with natural barriers that made escape difficult but allowed reception and supply by sea.

Goli otok proved a location that suited the UDBA, as it combined extreme isolation with the possibility of constant surveillance and regular supply by sea.

### The site selection process (spring 1949)

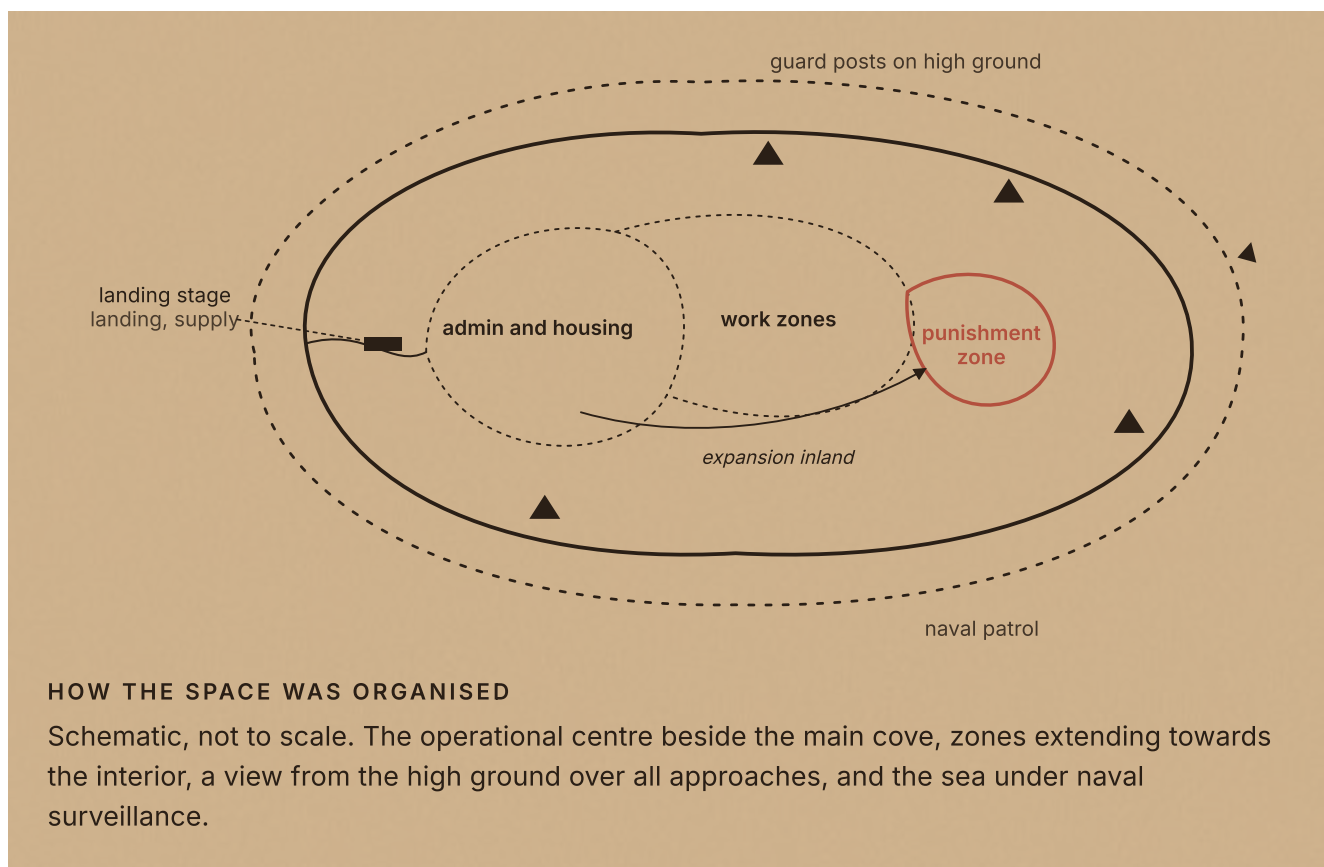
In early 1949 field teams systematically toured the northern Adriatic, particularly the area between Rab and Krk.

Goli otok stood out because it met the security parameters most consistently: it was completely uninhabited, had coves suitable for discreet landing and supply, terrain that made surveillance easier, and a position that allowed the site to be kept out of public view.

## Security and spatial reasons for the choice

The bare, rocky terrain and sparse vegetation meant high visibility and few natural hiding places. The coves allowed discreet arrival and continuous supply from the mainland.

Control of the surrounding waters was simpler, as the navy could monitor approaches and traffic. Difficult access and isolation further separated the detainees from the local population.



## Preparing the camp before the detainees arrived (June–July 1949)

The first camp buildings were prepared before the arrival of the first political detainees in July 1949. The work was carried out by prisoners brought from mainland penitentiaries, who had no connection with the Cominform.

In the first phase, temporary accommodation and service buildings were erected. A fence, guard posts and lighting were installed, and basic paths and

passageways were laid out within the camp. After the work was finished these prisoners were returned to their home institutions and never met the arriving IB-ists ("ibeovci").

## Early layout and expansion of the system

The operational centre was located beside the main cove for landing, supply and traffic control. As the number of detainees grew, the complex expanded towards the interior, with separate zones: administrative, residential, work and punishment.

From the outset the layout was designed so that everything could be easily monitored: with many vantage points overlooking the surroundings and clearly defined routes of movement that made escape difficult and reduced the possibility of spontaneous contact.

## DRAWINGS OF THE CAMP FROM THE ASSOCIATION'S ARCHIVE



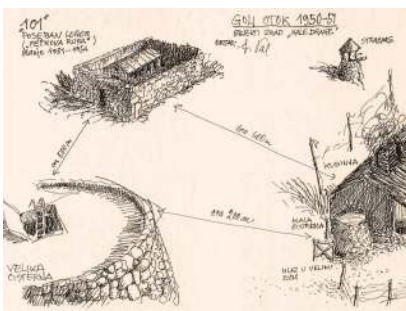
Drawing of the camp with individual buildings labelled.



A fenced compound with barracks on a slope.



A barrack behind a wire fence.



Drawing with scenes and handwritten notes.

## “Peter’s Hole” as the most isolated zone

In the interior of the island there is a pit known as “Peter’s Hole” (Petrova rupa). Former senior KPJ cadres who had been convicted for agreeing with the Cominform Resolution were held there. Because of its isolated position and controlled approaches it was turned into the strictest punishment zone, with a level of isolation greater than standard camp surveillance. More in the chapter [The Secret Camp Within the Camp](#).

## The role of the actors and the management framework

The political decision was secured by the leadership of the state and the Party. Operational management was the responsibility of the security structures (the UDBA) at federal and republic level, together with field work and officers charged with establishing the regime on site.

“

The site was chosen and shaped to allow maximum surveillance, minimum visibility and uninterrupted logistical supply.

ON THIS THE SOURCES AGREE

Although testimonies may differ in detail, the sources agree on the essentials.

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## GLOSSARY

### **Informbiro**

Colloquial name for the Cominform – an international organisation of communist parties founded in 1947 for political coordination under the leadership of the USSR.

### **UDBA**

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

**KPJ**

Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije).

**Cominform Resolution**

The 1948 political decision of the Cominform accusing Yugoslavia of deviating from the Soviet model of socialism, which led to the break with the USSR and the beginning of political persecution within the country.

## Why the Goli Otok Regime Was Neither Constitutional nor Lawful



A legal assessment of Goli otok requires one important distinction: the detainees were not all punished in the same way. There were two basic forms of sentencing and deprivation of liberty.

### 1. Administrative punishment

Most of the prisoners were sent to Goli otok by administrative means, by decisions of the security apparatus, without a regular court judgment and without an effective legal remedy.

In these cases the key problem lies not only in the repressiveness of the system, but in the absence of basic legal guarantees:

- deprivation of liberty was decided not by a court but by the UDBA
- there was no real possibility of a defence
- there was no effective legal remedy
- in a great many cases the regime operated secretly and beyond public scrutiny

For this reason, administrative committal to Goli otok was seriously at odds with the principles of legality, legal certainty and judicial protection.

## 2. Trial before a military court

Another group of detainees, particularly among military cadres and senior officers of the Yugoslav Army (JNA), were formally tried before military courts.

This means that in these cases there was a legal form of trial, but that in itself does not mean the proceedings were lawful or fair. Testimonies and archival material indicate that many such trials bore the hallmarks of politically directed or fabricated trials.

For this group of detainees the main legal question is not only whether a judgment existed, but:

- was the court truly independent?
- was the defence effective?
- were the charges supported by evidence?
- were the proceedings politically fabricated?

### Two forms of punishment, two different legal problems

These two forms of repression should not be treated as legally equivalent. With administrative punishment the main problem is the absence of judicial protection. With trial before a military court the main problems are the lawfulness of the proceedings, the independence of the court and the real evidential basis.

In other words:

- **administrative punishment** means punishment without regular judicial oversight
- **military trial** means that a formal procedure existed, but with serious doubt as to its fairness

## Administrative punishment of corrective labour as a means of political re-education

The Cominform Resolution was published on **28 June 1948**. Shortly afterwards, on **18 October 1948**, Article 6 of the Basic Law on Misdemeanours was amended, extending the penalty of **socially useful, or corrective, labour**.

It was precisely on the basis of this legal framework that a large number of people were arrested and punished by being sent to Goli otok. As Dragan Marković states:

*"Others were punished with the administrative penalty of corrective labour, under the 'Basic Law on Misdemeanours' (passed in the 'Official Gazette of the FNRJ', No. 107 of 17 December 1947) and the amendments to that law (in the 'Off. Gaz. FNRJ', No. 87 of 18 October 1948). Art. 1 of that law reads: 'Misdemeanours are violations of the legal order established by regulations of the state bodies of the FNRJ and of the People's Republics, for which, owing to their negligible social danger, an admin. penalty is prescribed.' Art. 6 of that law sets the level of the administrative penalty: 'corrective labour'."*

Dragan Marković, 1990, p. 453

This very wording reveals the legal paradox of the system: an institution formally intended for acts of **"negligible social danger"** was turned, in political practice, into a mechanism for the **removal, isolation and re-education of real or alleged opponents of the regime**.

As a result, the administrative penalty of corrective labour lost the character of an ordinary misdemeanour sanction and became an instrument of political repression under the control of the security apparatus.

## The constitutional minimum: what the system of the time had to guarantee

The constitutional framework of the 1946 FNRJ was based on at least three requirements when someone is deprived of liberty:

#### LEGALITY

- There must be a clear legal basis.

#### PUBLICITY

- Rules must be publicly promulgated before they are applied.

#### JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT

- There must be a court decision or at least effective legal oversight, with the possibility of a defence and a legal remedy.

#### THREE CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES

The 1946 Constitution of the FNRJ.

“

Deprivation of liberty was decided by the security apparatus, not by a court. Detainees had no real access to their file, to defence counsel or to an effective appeal.

IN A GREAT MANY ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEES THE GUARANTEES WERE ABSENT

#### The problem in international law: what was already contentious at the time

Goli otok was also contentious from the standpoint of international law. The relevant documents were the Charter of the United Nations, which Yugoslavia ratified on 19 October 1945, ILO Convention No. 29 on forced labour, which Yugoslavia ratified on 4 March 1933, and the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which Yugoslavia ratified on 21 April 1950. Secret internment without a court decision, forced labour without a judgment and inhumane treatment of detainees were therefore hard to reconcile with the standards these documents had already set.

## Three key legal questions

When Goli otok is considered from a legal perspective, three fundamental questions arise:

1. **Was there a prior and publicly promulgated legal basis** for a special regime of internment and forced labour?
2. **Was there judicial oversight and an effective legal remedy** for persons deprived of their liberty?
3. **Was such practice compatible with the minimum international standards of protection** that the state had already accepted at the time?

Administrative committal to Goli otok and the forced labour associated with it hardly pass any of the three tests. In the case of formal military proceedings, the problem lies not only in the existence of a procedure, but in whether the trial was truly fair and whether the charges were actually proven.

### PHOTOGRAPHS



An inscription carved in stone.



Worked stone on the island.



A path across bare karst.

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### GLOSSARY

#### UDBA

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Legal remedy</b>          | A prescribed means (e.g. an appeal or a lawsuit) by which a review and the amendment or annulment of a decision of a competent authority is sought.                                                                                                          |
| <b>JNA</b>                   | Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslavenska narodna armija) – the official name of the Yugoslav armed forces.                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>FNRJ</b>                  | Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (Federativna Narodna Republika Jugoslavija) – the official name of Yugoslavia from 1946; in 1963 it was renamed the SFRJ (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia).                                                 |
| <b>People's Republics</b>    | The republics of the Yugoslav federation of the time: Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Serbia included the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija (later a province). |
| <b>ILO Convention No. 29</b> | The International Labour Organization's Convention on Forced Labour. Yugoslavia ratified it on 4 March 1933 (as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), and international obligations as a rule continue in later forms of the state, including communist Yugoslavia.    |

## Who Were the “IB-ists” and Why People Ended Up in the Camp



### 1. The official reason: “IB-ist” (“ibeovac”) = supporter of the Informbiro (IB)

After the Cominform Resolution of 28 June 1948, the leadership of the KPJ decided to isolate everyone it considered inclined towards the Soviet Union.

Archival material and analyses of UDBA files show that the term “IB-ist” was often defined very loosely: as a “supporter of Stalin”, an “Informbiroist”, a “Cominformist” and the like. As relations with the USSR deteriorated further after the publication of the Cominform Resolution in 1948, and the hostility did not abate the following year, 1949, more and more people were imprisoned and punished “under the IB”.

### 2. What was enough in practice for someone to end up in the camp?

On the basis of UDBA files and the statements of those punished, **in practice serious reasons such as these were rare:**

- collaboration with Soviet intelligence services

- writing or signing pro-Cominform letters
- participation in illegal groups (e.g. the "Bolshevik Faction of the KPJ", the "New KPJ", etc.)
- distributing leaflets or organising meetings in favour of the USSR

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In the majority of cases, actions that did not demonstrably involve any political activity were also “enough”.

FROM UDBA FILES AND THE STATEMENTS OF THOSE PUNISHED

- **verbal offences and criticism of the regime**, including criticism of Tito's policy towards the USSR, opposition to anti-Soviet propaganda in Yugoslavia, and open dissatisfaction with the party bureaucracy and the privileges of the leadership
- **criticism of economic measures and living standards** – complaints about shortages and the difficult economic situation could be interpreted as “supporting the Cominform Resolution”, especially in poorer regions
- **listening to the “wrong” radio** – merely listening to radio stations of the Cominform countries (e.g. Radio Moscow) could be read in UDBA documents as agreement with Soviet or Cominform propaganda
- **“fault-finding” and doubtful loyalty** – insufficient condemnation of the Soviet Union or of the parties that signed the Resolution, public agreement with the Resolution or parts of it, silence at party meetings or a neutral stance, helping the family of an already convicted Cominformist
- **biographical “guilt”** – old communists with ties to the USSR (veterans of the October Revolution, Spanish fighters, pre-war communists), people who had lived or studied in countries whose parties had signed the Resolution, people with spouses from those countries or whose spouses had already been accused under the IB, officials in foreign affairs – often arrested because they were regarded as potential “Stalin's cadre” in the event of Tito's fall

- **denunciations, personal revenge and local campaigns** – the system rested on a network of informers; anonymous reports, feuds between neighbours and score-settling among communists ended up in UDBA reports and could lead to arrest

### 3. Who were these people – by social group?

Estimates of the number of prisoners differ depending on the definition.

Research states that around 13,000 people passed through the camp on Goli otok (1949–1956), while the number of those placed under surveillance or detained elsewhere was considerably higher.

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≈ 13,000

people passed through the camp on Goli otok, 1949–1956

According to analyses of the files:

- most were members of the KPJ – from ordinary party members to senior officials
- a large proportion were veterans of the NOB and officers of the JNA
- those arrested included workers, peasants, intellectuals, university students and secondary-school pupils
- women form a distinct segment – senior officials in post-war Yugoslavia or women who were linked to the Cominform Resolution in the ways described above, as well as women imprisoned as wives or relatives of IB-ists

### 4. What did this look like in concrete terms for the individual?

The typical path was as follows:

- 1 Someone reports a statement, an attitude or a connection with an “IB-ist” group.

The UDBA generally assumed that IB-ists formed groups.

- 2 The UDBA arrests the person and conducts an investigation in the remand prison.

- 3 The investigation has two aims: that under heavy pressure the person confess to “IB-ist activity” and that they denounce others.

Associates, sympathisers, “radio listeners”.

- 4 This is followed by trial before a military court (for senior JNA officers) or the imposition of an administrative penalty of “socially useful labour” – internment in a camp.

- 5 Before internment almost everyone passes through special wings of regular prisons.

E.g. the former prison in Petrinjska Street in Zagreb or Zabela in Požarevac.

- 6 Transport into the camp system – the largest being that of Goli otok and Sveti Grgur.

#### FROM DENUNCIATION TO THE CAMP

The typical path of an individual, according to files and testimonies.

#### PHOTOGRAPHS



A carved inscription with a year.



An inscription scratched into concrete.

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## GLOSSARY

|                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>KPJ</b>                          | Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije).                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>UDBA</b>                         | State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.                                                                      |
| <b>Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin</b> | Soviet communist leader and dictator who ruled the Soviet Union from 1924 (after Lenin's death) until his own death in 1953.                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Cominform Resolution</b>         | The 1948 political decision of the Cominform accusing Yugoslavia of deviating from the Soviet model of socialism, which led to the break with the USSR and the beginning of political persecution within the country.                                               |
| <b>Cominform countries</b>          | Socialist states under Soviet influence (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia) that made up the Cominform. Yugoslavia was a member until its expulsion in 1948.                                                                                    |
| <b>October Revolution</b>           | The Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 and the beginning of the Soviet state. Some South Slavs were in Russia at the time as prisoners of war or workers, and some took part in the revolution or served in the Red Army.                                 |
| <b>Spanish Civil War</b>            | The 1936–1939 war between the Republic and the nationalists of General Francisco Franco, who established a dictatorship after his victory. Volunteers from Yugoslavia ("Spanish fighters") fought mainly in the International Brigades on the side of the Republic. |
| <b>NOB</b>                          | People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba) – the Partisan resistance and armed struggle against the occupiers and their collaborators in Yugoslavia in 1941–1945, led by the KPJ.                                                                    |
| <b>JNA</b>                          | Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslavenska narodna armija) – the official name of the Yugoslav armed forces.                                                                                                                                                             |

## The Men's Camp on Goli Otok (1949–1956)



From 1949 to 1956 transports of men arrived on the island from all parts of the Yugoslavia of the time. The camp was a closed system of isolation under the control of the security apparatus, with clearly defined rules of conduct, movement and daily life.

Most detainees came from Serbia and Montenegro, followed by Croatia and then Slovenia and the other republics. The men's camp was the largest and longest-running camp unit of the Cominform period (1949–1956).

### The rhythm of the camp and the organisation of daily life

Conditions changed over the years and between sections, but the basic rhythm of the day was similar. The day began with an early wake-up and a head count, continued with lining up and assignment to work groups, and ended with evening duties in the pavilions and night-time rest under constant surveillance.

① Early wake-up and head count

② Lining up and assignment to work groups

③ Forced labour

Quarrying, construction, carrying loads – under supervision and with checks on output.

④ Evening duties in the pavilions

Conferences, the "political hour".

⑤ Night-time rest under constant surveillance

#### A DAY IN THE CAMP

The basic rhythm, similar throughout all the years of the camp.

Detainees were assigned to work brigades, sections and pavilions. This arrangement made it possible to carry out daily duties and to control the internal life of the camp.

The camp functioned as a closed system in which rules and assessments of behaviour directly affected the position of the prisoners and the conditions of their stay.

#### Re-education on Goli otok: violence as a method of loyalty

Political "re-education" on Goli otok was not an educational process but a system of controlled violence. A prisoner's position, length of stay, type of work and chances of survival often depended on their readiness to publicly renounce their "IB-ist" guilt and to demonstrate loyalty to the party leadership.

The mechanisms included physical torture, ritual humiliation, imposed collective aggression, a strictly supervised hierarchy among prisoners, and working and climatic conditions as a permanent form of punishment. The system was set up

so that the violence appeared to be an “internal” matter of the collective, while real control and direction were maintained through the power structure.

### Forced labour as an integral part of the regime

**Forced labour was a constant obligation.** It included heavy physical work and tasks related to the maintenance and running of the camp system, as well as work in quarries in all the camps of the Goli otok network, some of which were located on the mainland.

Through heavy forced prison labour, the quarry on Goli otok produced large quantities of crushed stone, which supplied public buildings, enterprises and trades outside the camp, at both republic and international level. This means that the UDBA, in addition to defining stonework as a “re-educational” form of forced labour, was at the same time making a profit – both in dinars, the currency of the former Yugoslavia, and in foreign currency.

Labour was at the same time part of discipline: through duties, pace of work and checks on output, control over daily life was maintained.

The daily life of the camp was also changed by the **Bosnian group** – a group of detainees who arrived on Goli otok **in the second half of July 1949**, about a month after the first transports. Sources state that it was assembled in **CEZABiH (the Central Prison of Bosnia and Herzegovina)** and used as an UDBA mechanism for putting pressure on others, along with the introduction of new methods of torture.

The mechanisms of political “re-education”, hierarchy and violence are examined in more detail in the chapter [Re-education on Goli Otok: Violence as a Method of Loyalty.](#)



Foundations of vanished buildings in the former camp compound.

### Expansion of the system and closure of the camp

As the number of internees grew, the system expanded and was organised into several zones and worksites. Alongside the main parts of the camp there were separate places of work and residence, sometimes with a special regime, but within the same camp framework.

After 1953, with changes in relations between Yugoslavia and the USSR, the number of new arrests fell, and some of the detainees were released or transferred. Individual parts of the system were gradually closed or repurposed, and the regime increasingly approached the model of a prison holding fewer politically designated prisoners.

## PHOTOGRAPHS



Stone steps in the camp compound.



A collapsed stone building.



The concrete base of a vanished barrack.



Remains of walls on a slope.



A building with a porch on a stone retaining wall.



View from Goli otok towards the surrounding islands.

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## GLOSSARY

### UDBA

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

## The Camp for Women IB-ists (1949–1956)



The women's camp for real and alleged supporters of the Cominform Resolution was a **gender-segregated segment of the Yugoslav system of political internment**. Unlike the men, whose internment is most often associated with Goli otok, **the main place of internment for women changed over the years**.

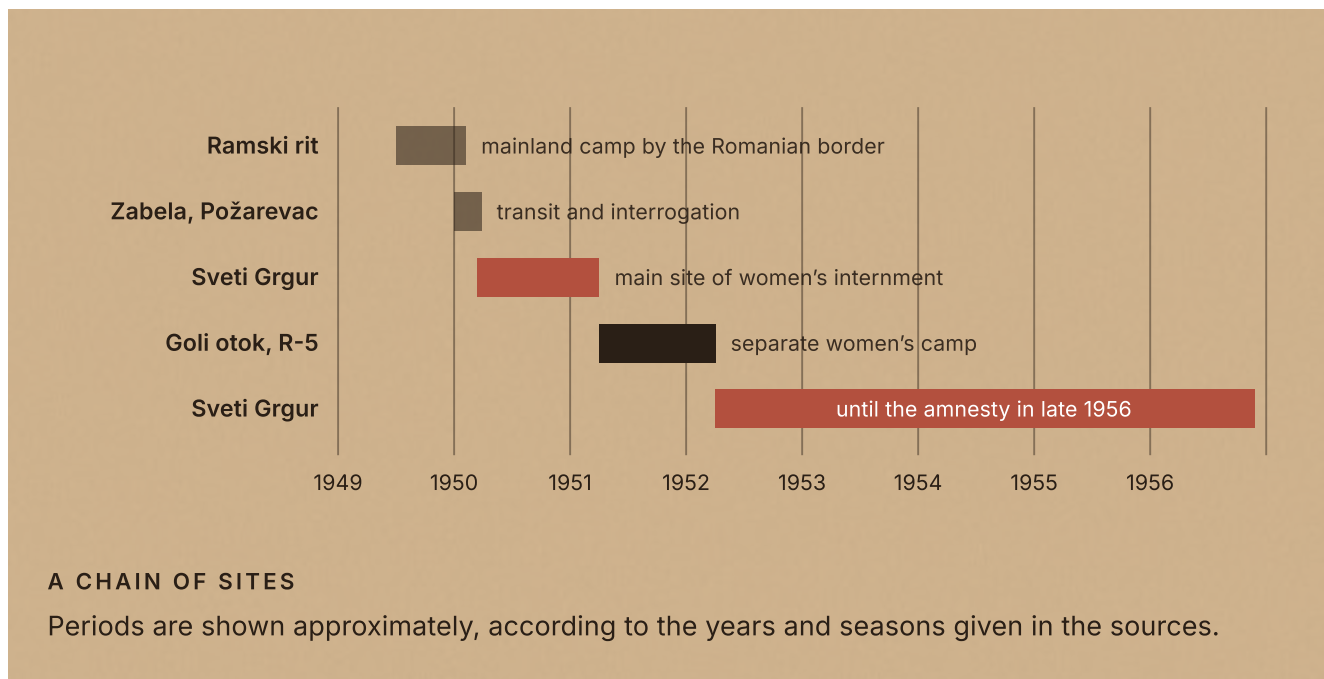
The women's segment of Cominform internment was **numerically smaller than the men's**. The main island location was **Sveti Grgur**, while on Goli otok there was a **short-lived separate women's sector**. The literature cites around **870 women**, with differences depending on the criteria and the available records. Most came from **Serbia and Montenegro**, followed by **Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina**, with smaller numbers from other republics and several foreign nationals.

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≈ 870

women interned in the Cominform period

## Spatial development: a chain of sites



### Ramski rit (1949–1950)

This represents the initial mainland phase: women suspected of links with the Cominform were sent to forced labour in a camp near the Romanian border.

### Zabela, Požarevac (1950)

This functioned as a transit and investigation phase, under a prison regime, in which interrogations and administrative processing were carried out before the women were sent to the islands.

### Sveti Grgur (spring 1950 – spring 1951)

Sveti Grgur emerged as the main place of internment for women in the Cominform period. Although the women's and men's camps were strictly separated, so that female and male prisoners did not meet, camp facilities existed on both islands at various stages. Nevertheless, women **remained predominantly and for longer tied to Sveti Grgur**. The men's camp on Sveti Grgur was associated with **military personnel**.

## Goli otok – Worksite V / R-5 (spring 1951 – spring 1952)

This was a separate women's camp on Goli otok, physically separated from the men's worksites.

## Return to Sveti Grgur (1952–1956)

The women returned to Sveti Grgur and remained there until the amnesty in late 1956. In the final phase a small number of women are also recorded together with the remaining administrative prisoners on Grgur.

## Legal status and the course of internment

Like the men, the women were interned by the **administrative measure of DKR** (socially useful labour): without a public trial, without a lawyer and without procedural guarantees. Decisions were made by the security services and the party leadership, on the basis of UDBA reports, and the length of stay could be **extended by new rulings**.

A small number of women received **court sentences**, but these cases too belonged to the political rather than the conventional criminal justice system.

## Special groups within the system

Particularly notable are the **"Ramričanke"** – women sent to Ramski rit, among the first female prisoners arrested after the Cominform Resolution. Their testimonies are an important source for understanding the early phase of women's internment.

Also mentioned are the Bosnian **"revidirke"** – women who had "revised" their stance in Bosnian prisons and were then sent to put further pressure on other women and to incite violence in the camp. Their arrival is most often associated with **1951**.

## The women's camp compared with the men's camp

While the men's camp is most often associated with Goli otok as the central place of internment, **the women's camp system was organised across several sites and transfers**, depending on the phase of repression, construction and labour. Alongside Zabela, Sveti Grgur and the women's sector on Goli otok, an important role was also played by the camp in **Stolac in Bosnia and Herzegovina**, where women were likewise subjected to a regime of forced labour in a quarry.

The women's camp therefore cannot be described simply as a single island unit, but rather as a **network of internment and labour sites**. Nor was the men's system entirely tied to one place, as men too were transferred between different sites, including Sveti Grgur, and later other worksites such as Bileća.

“

Forced labour in quarries and on harsh karst terrain was the material basis of so-called “socially useful labour”.

WHAT LINKS THE MEN'S AND WOMEN'S CAMPS

## PHOTOGRAPHS



Ruins on a slope above the sea.



A stone building in a karst landscape.



A domed stone structure.



A memorial plaque.



Ruin of a two-storey building.



Foundations of a former building.



A roofless stone building.



Interior of a collapsed building.



Walls above a cove.



A small stone hut above the sea.

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## GLOSSARY

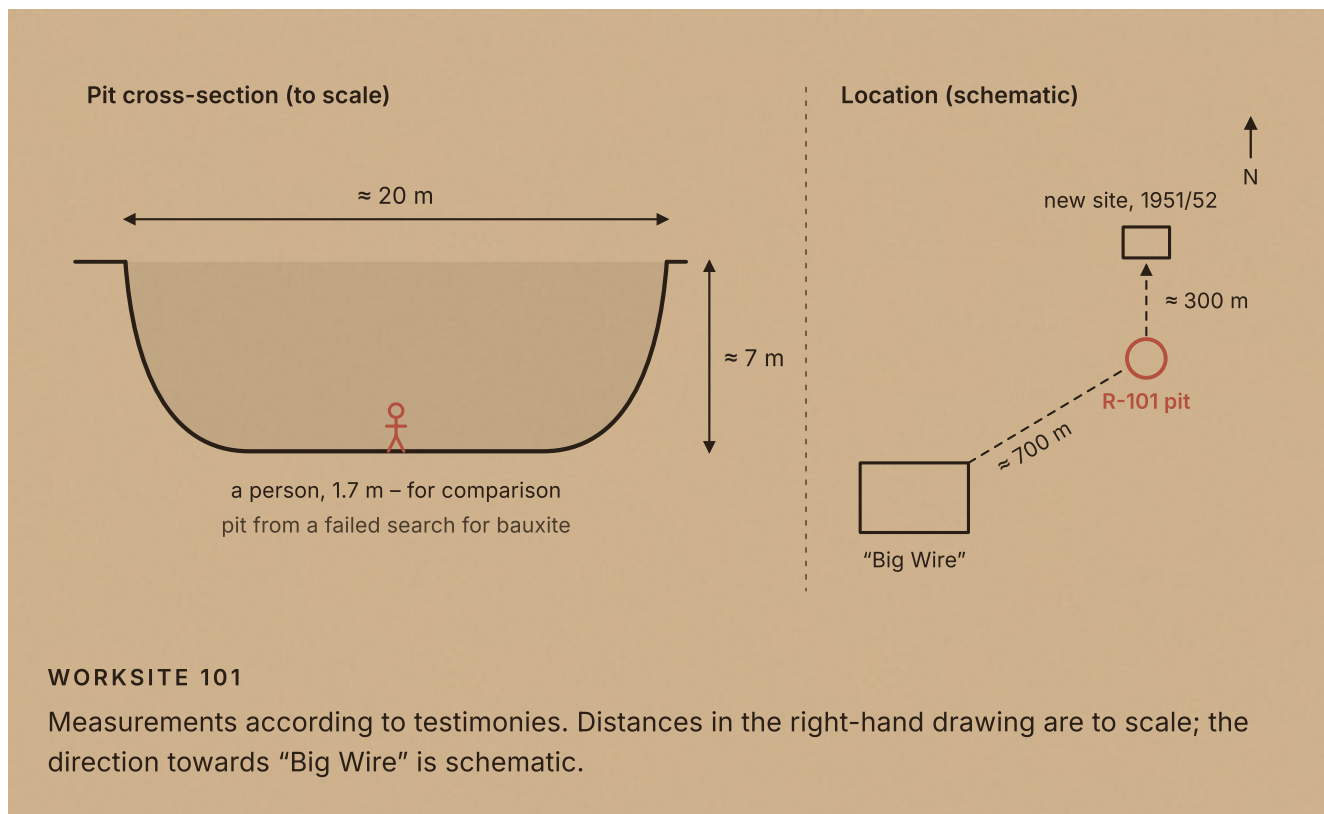
|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>DKR</b>  | Socially useful labour (društveno-koristan rad) – an administrative measure by which persons could be sent to forced labour without regular court proceedings.                                 |
| <b>UDBA</b> | State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime. |

## The Secret Camp Within the Camp



Worksite 101 (R-101) was set up in the first half of 1950, at the height of the repression following the conflict with the Cominform (Informbiro). Unlike other worksites such as “Old Wire” (Stara žica) and “Big Wire” (Velika žica), it was a hidden, separate space – the most isolated part of the system.

The first location was a large circular pit about 20 metres in diameter and 7 metres deep, created during an unsuccessful interwar search for bauxite. The site lay about 700 metres from “Big Wire”, the men’s camp for most of the other prisoners, near a water cistern. The existence of the camp was kept a strict secret and was unknown to most of the other prisoners.



## Why "Peter's Hole"?

The official UDBA name was Worksite 101 (R-101), after the number of the first detainees. The prisoners named it "Peter's Hole" (Petrova rupa) after Petar Komnenić, the former president of the Assembly of Montenegro, who, on being told that he would change his stance at the "worksite", replied:

“

This is no worksite. This is a hole.

PETAR KOMNENIĆ

Another name was "Manastir" ("Monastery"), because of the complete isolation of the small group.

## Who were the detainees of Worksite 101?

Some 135 prisoners passed through Worksite 101 – few in number, but the most politically sensitive core of the camp. They were mostly older communists and international cadres: participants in the October Revolution, fighters from the Spanish Civil War, pre-war communists linked to the Comintern, senior officers of the NOVJ, and republic and federal officials.

---

≈ 135

prisoners passed through Worksite 101

1950–1954

from July 1950 to March 1954

Because of their potential ideological authority they represented a possible alternative to Tito's line, so their isolation was both repression and the preventive "neutralisation" of a pro-Soviet core. The detainees were exclusively men.

## Regime, daily life and labour

The organisation followed the general Goli otok model: a barrack, a room elder, a camp doctor who was himself a prisoner, a hygiene orderly and a cook. The day was structured by the wake-up, work, head counts, meals and rest.

Everyone slept in a single barrack, in two-tier wooden bunks. There was no work on Sundays – the day was used for cleaning, shaving and haircuts. There were no cultural activities, which further intensified the isolation.

## Relocation and the disappearance of traces

Worksite 101 operated from July 1950 to March 1954, when the last detainees were transferred to the island of Sveti Grgur. The camp in the original pit functioned for a shorter time: as early as 1951 (according to some testimonies, 1952) it was moved to the surface, about 300 metres to the north.

At the new location there was a larger barrack (20 × 6 m), an infirmary and a kitchen within a fenced area of about 2,100 m<sup>2</sup>, with a double row of barbed wire and a wall about 2 metres high. A model of it was reconstructed by former detainee Nikola Golubović.

#### THE PIT TODAY



The edge of the pit.



Dry-stone wall at the bottom of the pit.



The bottom of the pit today.



View across the pit.

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#### GLOSSARY

##### **Informbiro**

Colloquial name for the Cominform – an international organisation of communist parties founded in 1947 for political coordination under the leadership of the USSR.

##### **UDBA**

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

|                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Petar Komnenić (1895–1957)</b> | Montenegrin communist politician, president of the Constituent and People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Montenegro and a minister. After the conflict with the Cominform he was arrested for supporting the Cominform and interned on Goli otok.           |
| <b>Manastir</b>                   | Serbian word for monastery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>October Revolution</b>         | The Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 and the beginning of the Soviet state. Some South Slavs were in Russia at the time as prisoners of war or workers, and some took part in the revolution or served in the Red Army.                                 |
| <b>Spanish Civil War</b>          | The 1936–1939 war between the Republic and the nationalists of General Francisco Franco, who established a dictatorship after his victory. Volunteers from Yugoslavia ("Spanish fighters") fought mainly in the International Brigades on the side of the Republic. |
| <b>Comintern</b>                  | The Communist (Third) International – an international organisation of communist parties founded in Moscow in 1919, under strong Soviet influence; dissolved in 1943.                                                                                               |
| <b>NOVJ</b>                       | People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije) – the Partisan armed forces led by the KPJ in the Second World War; later the Yugoslav People's Army.                                                                              |

## Re-education on Goli Otok: Violence as a Method of Loyalty



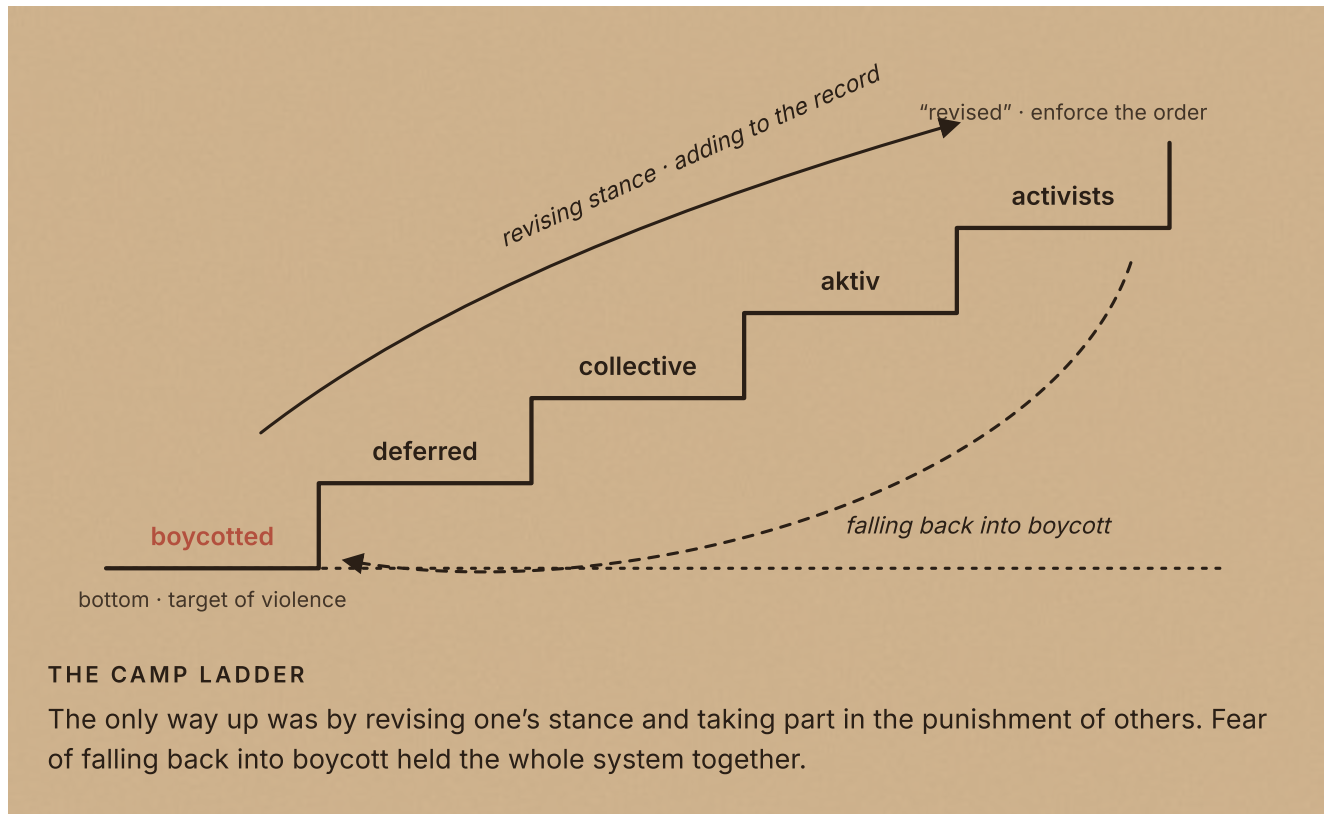
Political “re-education” on Goli otok was not an educational process but a system of controlled violence. A prisoner’s position, length of stay, type of work and chances of survival often depended on their readiness to publicly renounce their “IB-ist” guilt and to demonstrate loyalty to the party leadership.

The mechanisms included physical torture, ritual humiliation, imposed collective aggression, a strictly supervised hierarchy among prisoners, and working and climatic conditions as a permanent form of punishment. The system was set up so that the violence appeared to be an “internal” matter of the collective, while real control and direction were maintained through the power structure.

### Hierarchy and mutual punishment

The camp functioned on the principle of hierarchy: the boycotted → the “deferred” (odloženi) → the “collective” → the “aktiv” → the activists. The boycotted were at the bottom of this hierarchical ladder – those who had just arrived and had not yet “revised” their political stance; “revising one’s stance” was the compulsory initial phase of political re-education. The “deferred” were a transitional category – those who had agreed to revise their stance and had

entered the initial phase of the re-education procedure. Above the "deferred" came those with a better status in the camp, the so-called "collective", "aktiv" and activists – the grades of the "revised".



In narrower jargon the word "revised" was often applied specifically to the activists – those who had proven that they wanted to collaborate with the UDBA, the most privileged, involved in enforcing the order. The revised organised conferences, gauntlets and "lines", passed on the demands of UDBA investigators and supervised punishments.

Fear of falling into boycott drove prisoners to take part in punishing others. In this way the camp turned prisoners into an instrument of control: survival became bound up with participation in the torture of others.

### Boycott: the bottom of the hierarchy and legalised violence

Boycott was both a status and a punishment. The boycotted wore markings (e.g. a rag around the arm or a black shirt), could be beaten with impunity (and

this was encouraged), no one was allowed to speak to them, and they had to walk with their heads bowed and stand in the corner at conferences.

They received even less food and water than the other prisoners and did the hardest work. They were also called the "gang", in line with the UDBA's belief that IB-ists ("ibeovci") always banded together in groups. In practice, boycott meant complete exposure to the "collective" and the "activists": a person became a target.

### Adding to the record and interrogation: the condition for "progress"

Adding to one's written record (dopuna zapisnika) was the key condition for advancement in the camp hierarchy and for getting out of boycott. The UDBA held that IB-ists were connected in groups and that a prisoner knew other members still at liberty. The prisoner therefore had to compile a list of "IB-ists and sympathisers", often friends, colleagues, neighbours or family members, under pressure to single out in particular the "hostile elements" in his own life. The prisoner wrote all of this into the record.

The record was also supplemented during interrogation: the prisoner would be summoned, or would report of his own accord, to the UDBA building, where he would talk to the interrogator, that is, the UDBA agent in the camp. In some cases the people named in the records also ended up in the camp.

After this phase, the prisoner who had "revised" his stance, now promoted to the status of "deferred" or "activist", was expected to take part in "correcting" the boycotted. This included physical and verbal violence as well as various forms of humiliation. The reviser was expected to show disgust for and distance from the boycotted in this way.

### Revising one's stance: the price of escaping violence

Revising one's stance is a term meaning that a prisoner had repented of his views, which the UDBA had declared anti-state, and was ready to collaborate with the UDBA.

Revision was achieved through a combination of behaviours: taking part in the psychological and physical abuse of the boycotted, "snitching" on others, adding to the record, and distinguishing oneself through work and cooperation with the revised.

Cases in which someone did not revise his stance and was nevertheless released were rare.

“

In the camp mechanism loyalty was not a conviction but a performance: it had to be shown, repeated and confirmed, and in the form of violence against others.

REVISING ONE'S STANCE

### Rituals of confession and public humiliation: the political hour and "stating one's stance"

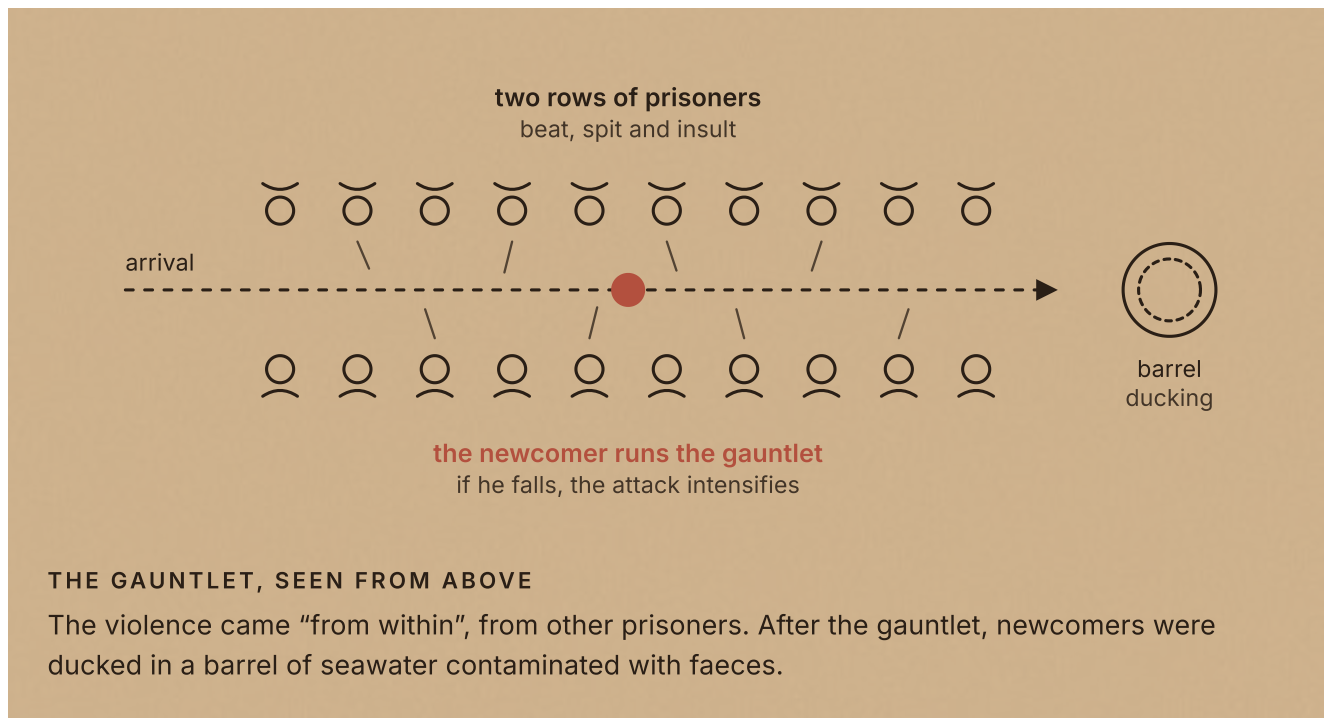
The central ritual was the evening political conference (the "political hour"). Often under the supervision of the room elder and an UDBA investigator, the prisoners took part in a public "trial" of a chosen individual. The person called out had to recount his life "up to the Cominform Resolution", admit to "Stalinist sympathies" and accept the label of "IB-ist".

The conference measured "activity": the vehemence of verbal attacks on the USSR, the Cominform Resolution and "lukewarm comrades". Any attempt at resistance was interpreted as "obstinacy", including a prisoner's claim of innocence. The outcome was often boycott – the bottom of the camp hierarchy.

It is important to stress that many ended up in the camp for trivial reasons (see the chapter Who Were the "IB-ists"). In such a framework "guilt" was not a legal fact but an UDBA decision that had to be admitted for any path towards "progress" in the camp hierarchy to open at all.

## Collective lynching: the gauntlet, the “line” and the pavilion line

The term gauntlet (špalir) or “line” (stroj) meant passing between two rows of prisoners who beat, spat on and insulted the person passing through. It was the “welcome” for newly arrived prisoners, but also a regular punishment.



The ritual combined physical pain with the message that violence came “from within”, through the collective. If a prisoner fell, the attack did not stop but intensified.

In the gauntlet one could also sense who was trying to soften the blows. Some struck with “empty fists” or only pretended to strike, and this detail too became part of camp psychology: in the same row of people one could recognise a potential threat, but also a rare chance of relief.

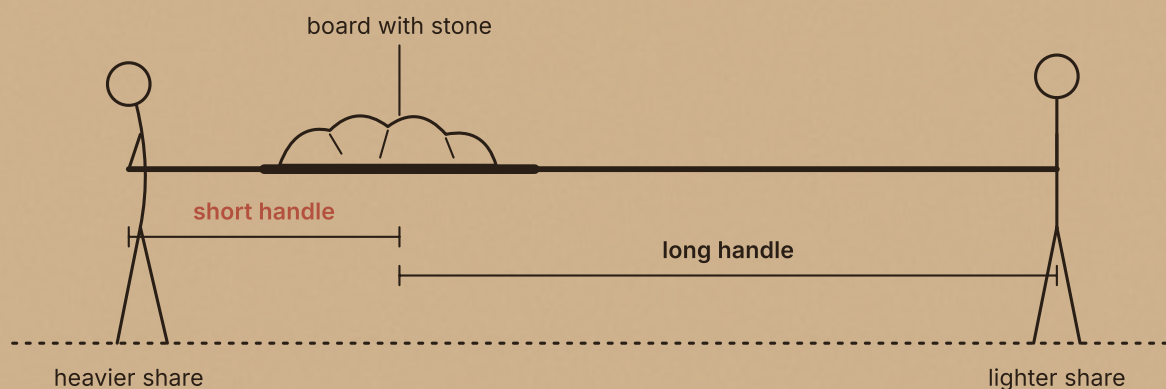
In the later years of the camp the gauntlet was in places reduced to spitting and insults without physical violence. After the gauntlet, newcomers were ducked in a barrel of seawater contaminated with faeces and other filth.

## Labour as a means of “re-education”: quotas and punishment through output

The hardest work (the quarry, carrying blocks, work on exposed parts of the island) was assigned to the boycotted and the “insufficiently revised”, while lighter work, assigned to the “aktiv”, was a reward for the “correct stance”.

Quotas had a political meaning: poorly performed work was interpreted as “incorrectness”, not exhaustion. Insufficient “effort” was presented as resistance to “the progress of Yugoslavia and the people”. In this way the physical limits of the body were turned into proof of political “guilt”.

A particular form of labour was being driven with the tragač (stone-carrying stretcher), as the everyday tool for carrying stone, materials, water, faeces or urine was called. A board or container was fixed between two poles so that one prisoner carried the heavier part of the load (shorter handles) and the other the lighter part (longer handles) – the imbalance was part of the punishment.



### TRAGAČ

One prisoner carried the heavier part of the load on the shorter handles, the other the lighter part on the longer ones. The imbalance was part of the punishment.



A relief carved into rock on Goli otok: figures under a load.

### Hunger, thirst and the body as a target

Very small food rations further broke the prisoners: polenta, beans, rarely fish. When prisoners showed physical effects of vitamin deficiency, they were given pieces of onion or small apples. On top of everything else, many testify that the worst punishment was the lack of water.

Hunger and thirst were not merely a consequence of the conditions. In the logic of the camp they became an instrument: a way of keeping a person in a constant shortage of strength, in constant dependence, and in a state in which it was harder to think, harder to defy and harder to preserve one's own dignity.

### Climatic torture

Goli otok used its bare surface as a means of punishment. Work was done in the bora, in scorching heat and in rain, with minimal protection. Even "tree planting" could be a punishment: standing for hours in the sun or the bora, shielding the saplings with one's own body, and exhaustion from work made harder by the rocky slopes.

### Torture by noise: tension, sleeplessness and forced chanting

The day-long shouting of the elders, orders without respite, the din of conferences and the noise in the pavilions created a state of constant tension. Combined with sleeplessness and threats, the noise caused disorientation, loss of the sense of time and psychological breakdown.

During work the prisoners often had to sing party songs (e.g. "Comrade Tito, we pledge to you") and chant slogans ("Thanks to Tito, the Party, the UDBA!").

The prisoners sometimes also composed songs themselves, which they would sing. At times well-known melodies (operatic themes, foreign war songs) were given "Goli otok" lyrics.

### Torture by sleep deprivation: the night as an extension of punishment

The prisoners had an intensive daily schedule of work and duties and did not sleep much.

The boycotted were often not allowed to sleep at all and would sleep next to the kibla (latrine bucket), while the punishment of "guarding the kibla" meant

standing over it all night with head bowed, breathing in the foul smell of urine and faeces.

After exhausting work prisoners would sometimes be allowed to fall asleep and then deliberately woken for questioning about their "views" and "enemies". They slept on straw mattresses, which was particularly hard during the bora and in winter.

### "Camp performances", cinema and propaganda: the public stage as discipline

Under coercion, sketches and parodies of the prisoners' lives were performed. The audience's laughter was part of the punishment, and the activists assessed "fervour" – too little enthusiasm meant the risk of a return to boycott. Sometimes well-known literary works were adapted in order to humiliate particular prisoners and incite further violence.

The camp also had a cinema hall. Screenings often took place after exhausting work; prisoners would fall asleep and then be beaten for "boycotting" the instruction that the Party provided through film. The UDBA showed foreign, Western-produced films.

The wall newspaper ("Goli otočke novine") published the names of the "unreformed", caricatures of the boycotted and comments on behaviour. Reactions (laughter, silence, looking away) were recorded.

### Disfigurement

Uniforms were often deliberately ill-fitting (trousers too short or too long), which made work harder and increased exposure. Hair was cut with crude shears (for sheep's wool) or pulled out. Footwear was too tight or too wide, so prisoners often worked barefoot.

Clothing and footwear contributed to wounds, burns and exhaustion. These "minor" tortures were not incidental: they were a constant reminder that the

body was under someone else's control and that humiliation was carried out through details as well.

### Other punishments and individual experiences

Besides the methods described, there were other punishments: flogging, carrying loads despite injuries, beating with poles, fights between prisoners and various improvised tortures.

It is essential to say that every prisoner had a unique experience of violence.

---

#### GLOSSARY

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>"IB-ist" guilt</b>           | Real or alleged membership of the pro-Cominform current, i.e. support for the Cominform Resolution or opposition to Tito's regime, for which a person was labelled an IB-ist ("ibeovac").      |
| <b>Boycott</b>                  | The bottom of the camp hierarchy and a punishment at the same time: the boycotted wore markings, no one was allowed to speak to them, and they could be beaten with impunity.                  |
| <b>UDBA</b>                     | State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime. |
| <b>IB-ist (ibeovac)</b>         | A real or alleged supporter of the Cominform Resolution, i.e. a sympathiser of Soviet policy in the period 1949–1956.                                                                          |
| <b>Interrogator (isljednik)</b> | The UDBA's political investigator in the camp. Through interviews and written records he determined a prisoner's "guilt" and monitored their "progress".                                       |
| <b>Revising one's stance</b>    | Public "repentance" for views that the UDBA had declared anti-state, and consent to collaborate with the UDBA. It was a condition for advancement in the camp hierarchy.                       |

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cominform Resolution</b>     | The 1948 political decision of the Cominform accusing Yugoslavia of deviating from the Soviet model of socialism, which led to the break with the USSR and the beginning of political persecution within the country.                                                                      |
| <b>Gauntlet (špalir, stroj)</b> | Passage between two rows of prisoners who beat, spat on and insulted the person passing through; the "welcome" for new arrivals and a regular punishment.                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Tragač</b>                   | A board or container fixed between two poles for carrying stone, water or faeces. The carriers were deliberately made to bear unequal loads.                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Vitamin deficiency</b>       | Hypovitaminosis or avitaminosis – a prolonged lack of one or more vitamins. Its consequences include weakness and fatigue, lowered immunity, anaemia and bleeding, changes to the skin and mucous membranes, nerve damage and weakening of bones and muscles, in severe cases permanently. |
| <b>KPJ</b>                      | Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije).                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

## Camp Architecture of Goli Otok and Sveti Grgur (1949–1956)



### From barren islands to a system of camps

Goli otok and neighbouring Sveti Grgur were uninhabited, harsh islets in the northern Adriatic. That is precisely why they were chosen in 1949 as sites for secret political camps: isolated, without a local population and far from public view.

After Yugoslavia's conflict with the Cominform (Informbiro) in 1948, the first camp was hastily erected on Goli otok. Then, through the forced labour of the detainees, new fenced compounds and supporting infrastructure were built. On Sveti Grgur a separate camp for women was established, following a similar spatial and administrative logic but adapted to a smaller number of female detainees.

### Building the camp: local stone and forced labour

Construction began literally on empty karst terrain. Prisoners from mainland penitentiaries were the first to be brought to the island, under the supervision of

the UDBA, to prepare the ground and build basic structures before the arrival of the first political prisoners.

As early as the summer of 1949 a makeshift landing stage was set up in Tatinja cove and the first wooden barracks surrounded by barbed wire were erected. These were simple, temporary dwellings – the beginning of the transformation of the island landscape into a prison space.

The island's natural resources were exploited immediately. Limestone from the quarries became the key building material: it was extracted, broken, carried to the building sites and built into buildings, infrastructure and roads. Timber for the barracks and auxiliary structures was shipped in from the mainland.

Within a short period a network of roads (about 12 km) was also built, linking the landing stages, camp compounds, coves and worksites. All of this was done by prisoners in harsh conditions, under constant surveillance, with physical labour serving both as an instrument of the regime and as a way of having the camp built by its own inmates.

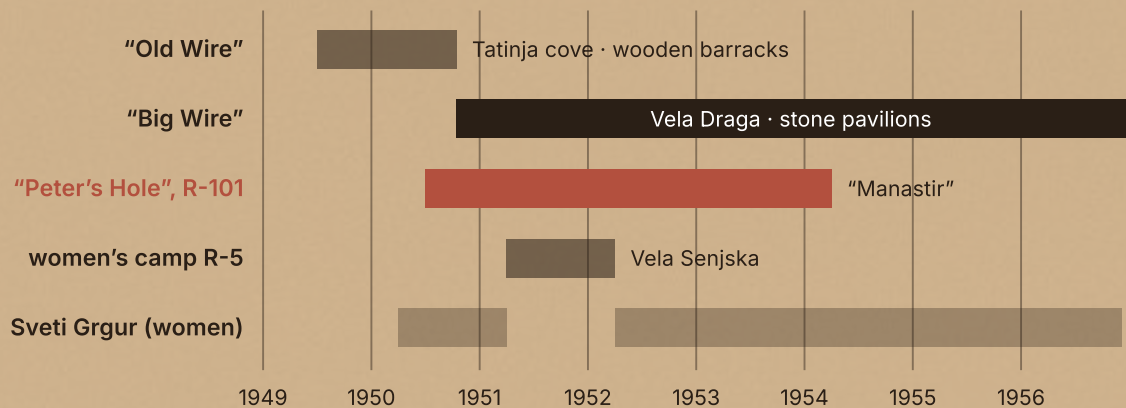
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≈ 12 km

of roads built by forced labour

### Camp compounds on Goli otok

Several fenced compounds with different roles and levels of isolation were formed on Goli otok.



#### CAMP COMPOUNDS OVER TIME

Periods are shown approximately, according to the years and seasons given in the sources.  
Sveti Grgur was temporarily empty while the women were in R-5.

**"Old Wire" (Stara žica) (Tatinja cove, 1949).** The first, initial camp, based on wooden barracks and improvisation. As the number of detainees grew it soon became too small, and the detainees were moved to a larger camp. The site was later repurposed: the barracks were removed, and workshops and plants of the camp enterprise as well as administrative buildings were built in Tatinja.

**"Big Wire" (Velika žica) (Vela Draga, late 1950).** The central and largest part of the complex. Instead of wooden barracks, masonry pavilions of stone were built, arranged along internal paths and an open space (the "Square") for gatherings, roll calls and ideological events. This compound also contained administrative buildings, kitchens, storehouses, workshops and facilities for the staff (names mentioned include the "Hotel", the "Bowling Alley" and the "Summer Restaurant").

**"Peter's Hole" (Petrova rupa) / Worksite 101 (R-101) (from July 1950; closed in 1954).** A separate "camp within the camp", intended for the strict isolation of so-called "incorrigible" Cominformists. Located in a remote rocky area, with a single barrack and a fenced compound. In camp parlance it was also known as

the "Manastir" ("Monastery"), because of its complete separation from the rest of the system. More in the chapter [The Secret Camp Within the Camp](#).

**The women's camp on Goli otok / Worksite R-5 (1951–1952).** In the spring of 1951 some 500 female political prisoners were transferred from Sveti Grgur to Goli otok, and a separate fenced area was established in Vela Senjska cove. It existed for about a year. The women took part in building basic infrastructure (a cistern, small landing facilities), and in March/April 1952 they were returned to Sveti Grgur.

### The women's camp on Sveti Grgur

The camp for women on Sveti Grgur was set up in early 1950. The first female prisoners arrived in March 1950, after the mainland sites (Ramski rit, then Zabela).

At first the camp was in Pladnja cove, with wooden barracks and essential facilities. As early as 1950 the female prisoners built, with their own hands, a stone cistern for rainwater, as the island has no water source. Because of the cramped conditions the camp was then moved to the larger Sveti Grgur cove, with a landing stage, barracks and administrative and storage buildings.

In March/April 1951 the women were moved to Goli otok (R-5), and the camp on Grgur was temporarily empty. After the women's section on Goli otok was closed, in the spring of 1952 the female prisoners returned to Sveti Grgur, where they remained until 1956.

### Architecture as a mechanism of control

The camp architecture developed from temporary wooden structures to permanent stone buildings, but the logic remained the same:

“

Space was subordinated to surveillance and discipline.

ARCHITECTURE AS A MECHANISM OF CONTROL

Coves surrounded by hills created a natural “vessel” containing movement, and barbed-wire fences (often in several rows, with lighting) enclosed the camp compounds.

Guard positions were placed on high ground, along with guardhouses and bunkers, overlooking the fenced areas and approaches. Inside the camp, regularly arranged pavilions, paths (“streets”) and a central open space (the “square”) allowed rapid lining up, head counts and gatherings. The spatial layout also served internal control, as camp functions and the “self-administration” were organised by pavilion.

### What remains today: the disappearance of the barracks and reading the landscape

After the closure of the camp and later of the penitentiary, much of the material remains decayed or was removed. The wooden barracks and temporary structures have almost completely disappeared, both on Goli otok and on Sveti Grgur.

The remains of masonry buildings and infrastructure are more visible: ruins of administrative buildings, water cisterns, traces of roads and dry-stone walls, and remains of bunkers and guard points above the camp compounds. In the quarries, traces of extraction and stone-breaking are visible.

For this reason the camp is understood today above all by “reading” the landscape as a whole: coves, terraces, embankments, foundations, paths and remains of fences, with the help of historical sources, memories and cartography (including analyses of aerial photogrammetric images). Although the remains are fragmentary, the islands bear the recognisable “imprint” of the

system that operated here – a sprawling, controlled architecture created by forced labour.

#### REMAINS TODAY



A stone guardhouse on a headland.



Remains of a bunker on a headland.



Entrance to a stone shelter.



A roofless building above a cove.



Terraces and paths on a slope.



Drawing of a camp compound from the Association's archive.

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#### GLOSSARY

##### **Informbiro**

Colloquial name for the Cominform – an international organisation of communist parties founded in 1947 for political coordination under the leadership of the USSR.

##### **UDBA**

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

## Mermer and Velebit: Forced Labour, Production and Profit



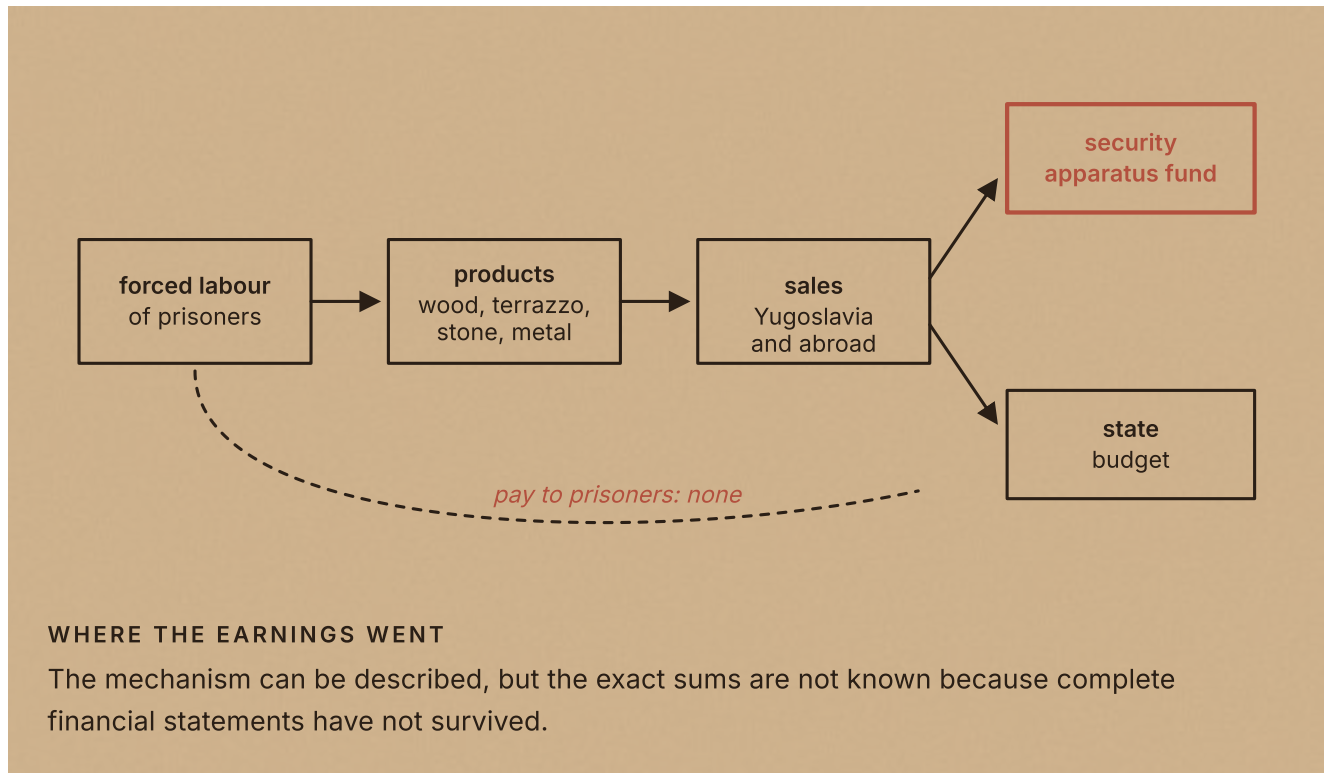
### The enterprise as a front and an instrument of management

Many products made on Goli otok and Sveti Grgur were sold outside the camp, often in foreign countries as well. The products of Goli otok were presented as products of the Mermer enterprise.

From the outside "Mermer" operated as an ordinary enterprise, but all its products were made through heavy physical labour whose main purpose, besides profit, was the torment of the prisoners. Within it operated a Technical Bureau which designed and coordinated the construction of camp buildings (the administrative building of "Big Wire", the pavilions and other structures).

The structure of the enterprise, which did business with other commercial entities, was gradually expanded and formalised: **Mermer** (a smaller enterprise with limited production) → **Kombinat Mermer** (several plants and a larger volume of business) → **Kombinat Velebit** (reorganised production with an emphasis on wood and stone plants and wider distribution, including sales outside Yugoslavia). The products were sold both on the domestic market and abroad.

Mermer's earnings ended up partly as an internal fund of the security apparatus and partly in the state budget, while the prisoners received no payment for their work.



### From an improvised camp to an “economic system” (1949–1956)

In the first phase (1949–1950) work was directed at building the camp's infrastructure: unloading materials, building barracks, cisterns and landing stages. In this phase work was devoted mostly to constructing the camp infrastructure.

In the second phase (1950–1953), with the move to “Big Wire”, work was reorganised on an “industrial” basis. Three main branches were established: woodworking, stoneworking (the quarry, terrazzo), and a metalworking and small shipbuilding workshop. At the same time the construction of pavilions, administrative buildings, a hospital and storehouses continued – formally as “work for Mermer”.

In the third phase (1953–1956) production entered the stage of series production. Terrazzo tiles were produced in large series and distributed throughout Yugoslavia. In parallel a sawmill was developed, and logging on Velebit and transport to the coast and to Rijeka were organised – work extended beyond the island but remained tied to the camp enterprise and the supervision of the services.

The phases are explained here using the largest camp, the men's camp. The women's camp went through similar phases, although the products differed.

### Three types of prisoner labour

Labour in the Mermer/Velebit system can be described in three basic categories.

**1) Constructive labour (building the camp).** Building pavilions, administrative buildings, hospitals, cisterns and landing stages (camp infrastructure).

**2) Punitive “re-educational” labour (discipline and exhaustion).** Pointless tasks (taking stone out of the sea and then putting it back into the sea), the hardest work in the quarry, extracting sand from the sea, and work in the bora and exposed conditions (for the “punished”). Afforestation of Goli otok, with prisoners using their bodies to shield saplings from the bora or to provide shade during the summer heat. The purpose was primarily disciplinary: control and breaking people through exertion, exposure and humiliation.

**3) Profit-making labour (workshops and production for the market).** Work in the sawmill and wood processing, making terrazzo tiles and decorative stone objects, work in the metalworking plant and work in the small shipyard. Besides the workshops, some prisoners worked in administration (bookkeeping). Work in certain workshops and in administration was considered privileged, while most remained in the hardest jobs in the quarry and on the building sites.



Tiles with an embossed inscription.



A tile with an embossed inscription.



Remains of tiles on the ground.

### Mermer/Velebit and the UDBA's "invisible budget"

Complete annual financial statements for the period 1949–1956 have not survived. Part of the business documentation was later destroyed, particularly after the removal of Aleksandar Ranković in 1966, which makes precise calculations difficult.

The literature states that the UDBA ran the enterprise and its key internal services, and that revenue from the sale of timber, terrazzo and other products served in part as an off-budget fund for the operations and needs of the security apparatus. After 1966 a more intensive destruction of financial records is mentioned, which is interpreted as an attempt to erase the traces of the scale of exploitation.

Because of this state of the sources we can today describe the mechanism relatively clearly, but it is difficult to reconstruct the exact volume of production and the profits made.

### The Brioni Plenum (1 July 1966) and the absence of accountability

The Brioni Plenum (the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia – CK SKJ) was held on 1 July 1966 on Brijuni. It was a session of the highest party officials at which decisions were taken with a direct effect on the state apparatus. There, under the chairmanship of Josip Broz Tito, the question of the work of the security services and the so-called

“wiretapping affair” was raised, after which Aleksandar Ranković was removed and the power of the State Security Service (SDB; formerly the UDBA – see names of the UDBA) was formally curtailed.

Some accounts and interpretations mention that within this framework questions of the financial power of the security apparatus were also touched upon, including the earnings connected with Goli otok and the funds generated by forced labour, along with suspicions of malfeasance.

At the same time, the absence of key consequences is emphasised: no court proceedings were brought against Ranković, the camp system was not systematically investigated, and the economic dimension of forced labour remained outside political and judicial focus. A further problem is the claim that it was precisely then that the destruction of financial documentation intensified, which today makes it difficult to reconstruct the financial flows and the scale of the “camp economy”.

### Why is it important to talk about profit today?

The reconstruction of the “Mermer” enterprise is important because it shows the dual function of the camp: political repression and planned economic exploitation. It also reveals how the security apparatus was able to create extraordinary funds outside the usual oversight.

“

When we speak of profit, we are not speaking only of figures, but of a system in which the forced labour of political prisoners was turned into gain for institutions – without payment and without reparation.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT PROFIT



An abandoned machine in a former plant.

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## GLOSSARY

### **Aleksandar Ranković (1909–1983)**

Yugoslav communist politician, long-time head of the security apparatus (the UDBA), a close associate of Tito and Vice-President of the SFRJ from 1963 to 1966.

### **UDBA**

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

### **The wiretapping affair (1966)**

The accusation that the security apparatus had illegally wiretapped Tito and the state leadership; it served as the key pretext for Aleksandar Ranković's removal at the Brioni Plenum. The suspicions were never fully proven in court in public proceedings.

## **Names of the UDBA**

In 1946 OZNA was reorganised as the UDB/UDBA (Uprava državne bezbednosti, colloquially "Udba"); after 1966 the name changed to SDB/SDS (State Security Service).

## Mortality in the Cominform Camp (1949–1956)



According to a document from the Croatian State Archives, **399 deaths** were recorded for the period of the Cominform camp (1949–1956). Mortality was concentrated mostly in the early years of the system, especially **1950–1952**, peaking in **1951**.

### Key figures

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**399**

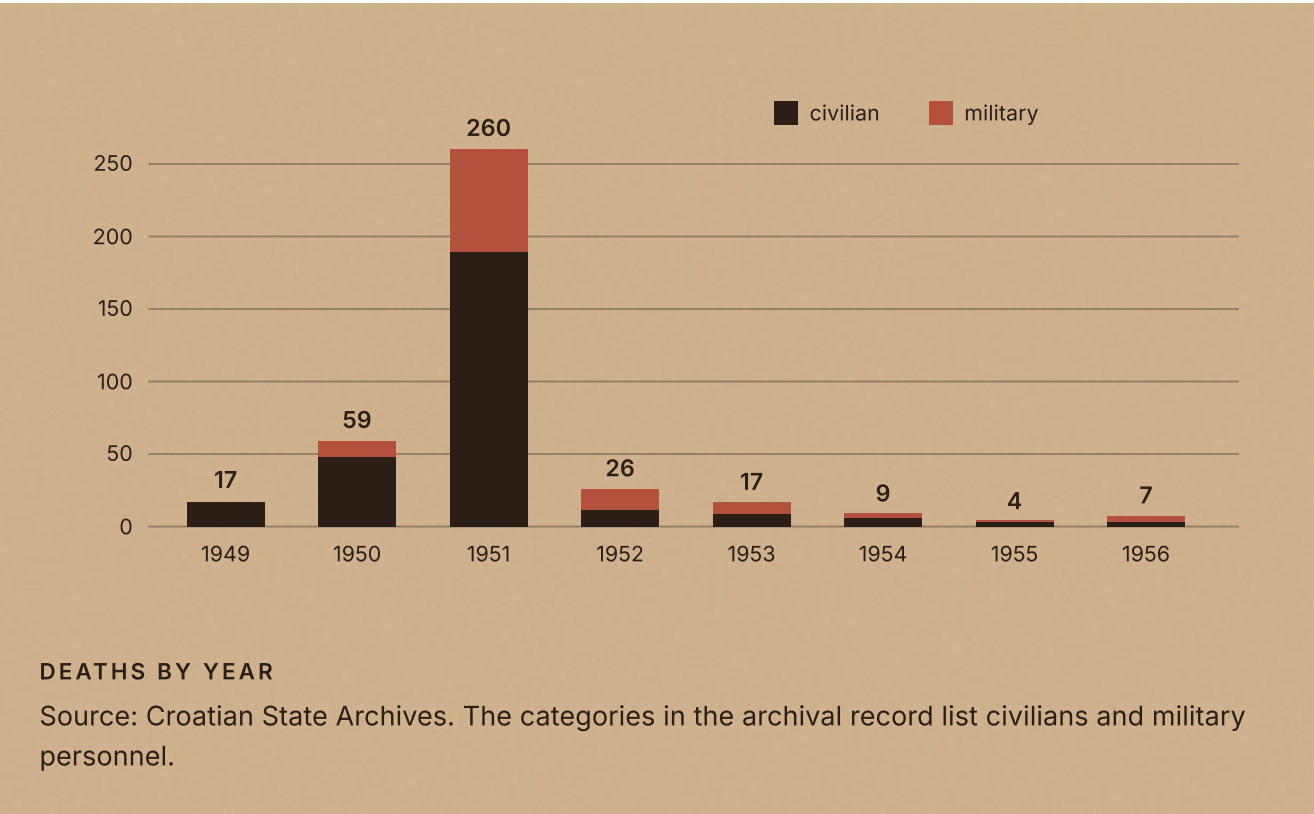
total deaths, 1949–1956

**260**

deaths in 1951 – more than half of the total

After **1953** mortality fell sharply, in the broader context of changes in international relations and the death of Stalin (**5 March 1953**).

Deaths by year (HDA)



| YEAR  | TOTAL | CIVILIAN | MILITARY |
|-------|-------|----------|----------|
| 1949  | 17    | 17       | —        |
| 1950  | 59    | 48       | 11       |
| 1951  | 260   | 189      | 71       |
| 1952  | 26    | 12       | 14       |
| 1953  | 17    | 9        | 8        |
| 1954  | 9     | 6        | 3        |
| 1955  | 4     | 3        | 1        |
| 1956  | 7     | 3        | 4        |
| Total | 399   | 287      | 112      |

## What did people die of (1949–1956)?

The archival table does not give causes of death, but testimonies and research point to a combination of several factors:

- exhaustion and malnutrition combined with heavy labour (the Mermer quarry, building pavilions, harbours and roads, worksites)
- infectious and chronic diseases (respiratory and digestive), together with overcrowding, poor hygiene and scant medical care
- illnesses caused by climatic extremes (summer heat without shade or water; winter bora and rain)
- violence and the consequences of beatings, with deaths possibly recorded administratively as "illness"
- workplace accidents (quarries, work at unsecured heights), often recorded as an "accident at work"
- suicides and cases designated as an "attempted escape"; in practice families were often given a general cause ("illness")

## How were the bodies dealt with?

For the period 1949–1956, three patterns of practice can be distinguished.

**Burials on the island.** In the early phase some of the dead were buried in the camp cemetery on Goli otok. The graves were dug by prisoners under guard, and the markers were temporary or anonymous. According to testimonies, some burial plots were later levelled and covered over.

**Transfers to mainland cemeteries.** Most of the bodies were transferred to mainland cemeteries (Zagreb, Rijeka and other towns). In some cases, owing to administrative circumstances (e.g. non-payment of grave fees), the remains ended up in communal graves, with limited or inconsistent notification of families.

**Unidentified burial sites.** Because of secrecy, inconsistent records and later reorganisations, it is not possible to establish reliably where some of the dead

were buried.



A memorial with wreaths on Goli otok.

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## GLOSSARY

**Joseph Vissarionovich  
Stalin**

Soviet communist leader and dictator who ruled the Soviet Union from 1924 (after Lenin's death) until his own death in 1953.

## Two Levels of Power: the UDBA and Prisoner Self-Administration



From the founding of the camp in 1949 the system functioned as a double pyramid of power. Alongside the visible, “conventional” administration there was also an invisible level that made the key decisions. The rules were set by the UDBA, and the camp enforced them “from within”, through coercion and a hierarchy among the detainees.

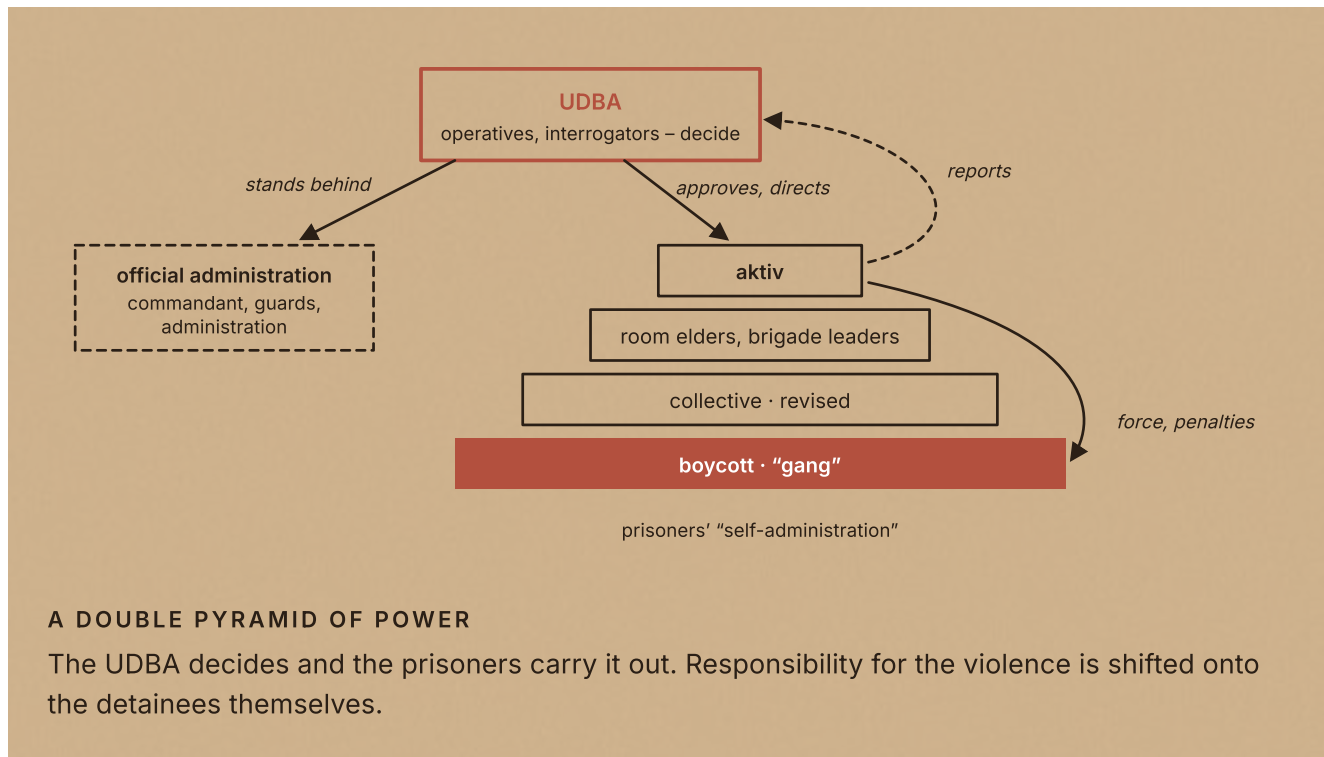
This internal system was an original UDB “invention” in methods of camp administration. Self-administered re-education meant that a prisoner proved his own “re-education” by taking part in the re-education of others, through pressure, violence, blackmail, intimidation and humiliation.

“

Historians of psychiatry have described it as a “unique culture of violence”, not encountered in other camps and repressive systems.

SELF-ADMINISTERED RE-EDUCATION

Such a system quickly destroyed solidarity among the prisoners and produced an endless cycle of violence, in both the men's and the women's camp.



### The invisible, decisive power: the UDBA

Behind the formal administration stood the UDBA, through operatives responsible for interrogation, classification, "re-education" and surveillance. In practice the UDBA decided who was "revised" and who remained part of the "gang"; who joined the "aktiv", who moved into the "collective" and who fell into boycott.

The UDBA also directed the punishment regime: who went to harder labour, to isolation or to be beaten, and under what conditions. Without its approval, leaving the system was in practice hardly conceivable.

### Prisoner self-administration: governance under coercion

In the barracks and at the worksites a prisoner self-administration was established: a network of functions performed by the prisoners themselves

(room elders, brigade leaders, members of the "aktiv" and others). Formally it looked like "self-management", but without any real autonomy.

The key logic was that of blackmail: a prisoner could obtain a better position only by enforcing the system on others. Anyone who did "not fit in" could be removed and returned to boycott.

There were also police in the camp, and the JNA guarded the island, but they took part in the prisoners' daily life to a lesser extent.

### Terms of the hierarchy: degrees of coercion and consent

The internal order was built around one's "political stance". These terms were not neutral labels but practical steps through which life in the camp was managed.

**The "gang" and boycott** denote the bottom of the hierarchy: those who had not "revised". Total terror was inflicted on the boycotted: no one was allowed to address them, help them or sit with them. They were given the hardest work and were invariably subjected to abuse. Boycott was at once a punishment and a means of coercion: the way out was tied to accepting the "position".

The **"collective"** was the stage after boycott and a public admission of "guilt". In the "collective" violence was often less overt, but surveillance continued. The work was lighter and conditions more stable, limited privileges were possible (parcels, correspondence), and participation in maintaining order was expected.

The **revised** were those who, after interrogation, written records and public statements, were deemed to have accepted the official policy of the KPJ and renounced the IB. They typically received better accommodation and lighter work, could advance, and improved their chances of entering the "collective" and being released.

The **“aktiv”** was the political core of the camp: revised prisoners who took on “political work” and became the key link in the self-administration. The “aktiv” led political meetings, directed criticism and attacks against the “unreliable”, proposed who should leave boycott and who should return “to the bottom”, and wrote and passed on reports to the UDBA. It was the UDBA’s extended arm, with real influence over the fates of others.

### What “administration” meant in the camp

On Goli otok the word “administration” in practice covered two levels.

The first was the **prisoners’ administration** – self-administration in the barracks and brigades: the room elder (order and the “political atmosphere”), the brigade leader and work supervisors (quotas and discipline), members of the “aktiv” (political surveillance and reporting), and those in charge of food and the allocation of work. Candidacies were approved by the UDBA, and responsibility for violence (gauntlets, humiliations, extorting a “position”) was often shifted onto the prisoners.

The second was the **administration of the UDBA and the official apparatus**: UDBA operatives, together with the commandant, the guards and the administrative staff, decided on internment and the length of stay, on classification (who was “hard”, who was “on the way to revising”, who could join the “aktiv”), on the regime (boycott, parcels, correspondence, transfers) and on release.

### The interrogator (isljednik / isljednica)

The interrogator was the UDBA’s political investigator. Through interviews, written records and “supplements”, he linked the camp to the state security apparatus: he steered classification (revised / boycott / aktiv), defined “guilt” and monitored “progress”. Almost every prisoner went through at least one interview with an interrogator during their stay, and the tone and pressure of the interrogator could change depending on the wider political circumstances.

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## GLOSSARY

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>UDBA</b>                     | State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime. |
| <b>JNA</b>                      | Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslavenska narodna armija) – the official name of the Yugoslav armed forces.                                                                                        |
| <b>Boycott</b>                  | The bottom of the camp hierarchy and a punishment at the same time: the boycotted wore markings, no one was allowed to speak to them, and they could be beaten with impunity.                  |
| <b>KPJ</b>                      | Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije).                                                                                                                              |
| <b>"IB-ist" guilt</b>           | Real or alleged membership of the pro-Cominform current, i.e. support for the Cominform Resolution or opposition to Tito's regime, for which a person was labelled an IB-ist ("ibeovac").      |
| <b>Aktiv</b>                    | The political core of the prisoners' self-administration: prisoners who had revised their stance, led meetings, directed attacks on the "unreliable" and reported to the UDBA.                 |
| <b>Interrogator (isljednik)</b> | The UDBA's political investigator in the camp. Through interviews and written records he determined a prisoner's "guilt" and monitored their "progress".                                       |

## The Return of the “Former People”



For most of those who returned from Goli otok and Sveti Grgur, freedom did not mean a real return to normality. In the society of the 1950s and 1960s they remained politically marked as “former people”: suspect, isolated and easily removed. In many communities they were met with silence, fear and avoidance, and the stigma often extended to the whole family.

### Conditions for release: “revision” and adding to the record

Release was rarely experienced as simply “having served one’s sentence”. In practice it often involved:

- accepting the accusations of the UDBA and “adding to the record” (naming all potential enemies of the state at liberty and listing all of one’s own hostile acts)
- leaving the position of a boycotted prisoner (the lowest hierarchical status among prisoners) through revising one’s stance (the prisoner strives to prove loyalty to the UDBA)
- joining the camp “aktiv” (the association of prisoners striving to prove their loyalty to the UDBA) as a sign of “rehabilitation”

- agreeing to full collaboration with the UDBA and to continued UDBA surveillance after release

### Surveillance after return: interviews, assignments and self-censorship

On their return some former prisoners were given "assignments" or expectations: to report to the local UDBA, to monitor the mood around them and to pass on information about other returnees. Even when there was no formal "assignment", occasional summonses for "interviews" kept up a feeling of constant scrutiny.

“

The camp did not end with leaving the island.

AS MANY RETURNEES DESCRIBED IT

Many described how the camp did not end with leaving the island; the terror moved into everyday life through summonses, questioning and the feeling that every word could become evidence against them. In such an atmosphere caution spread: people avoided public contact and feared being associated with a "Cominformist", and returnees often lived under the pressure of silence and self-isolation.

### Employment and education: control beneath the surface

Employment was often a "test of rehabilitation". Although many had been interned by administrative measure (without a conventional court judgment), in practice the stigma acted as an informal ban on employment. Enterprises did not hire people with suspect biographies.

Typical patterns:

- inability to return to former skilled jobs
- assignment to lower-level, often manual jobs

- interrupted studies and difficulty continuing education, although some former prisoners did manage to complete their education

### The family as an extension of punishment

The pressure did not affect the prisoner alone. During internment families could be subjected to humiliation and blackmail: the expectation that the spouse would divorce and publicly disown the prisoner, loss of entitlement to social welfare, discrimination against children and the spread of fear among relatives. In some cases families had no reliable information about where the detainee was or whether he or she was alive.

On the prisoner's return the family often entered a period of "normality" that was only an illusion. Many prisoners did not speak about the camp even to those closest to them – out of fear, shame or a wish to protect their family.

### Tangible consequences: what could be seen on the body and in behaviour

Those close to them might notice:

- sudden weight loss and exhaustion
- permanent injuries to the limbs and difficulty moving
- loss of teeth and visible consequences of poor hygiene and violence
- scars (from labour, injuries and punishment)
- sleep disorders (shouting in their sleep, nightmares)
- turning to alcohol
- depressive phases, sudden mood swings and phobias (e.g. fear of people and of the dark)

### Political silence and “apoliticism” as a survival strategy

Reports of the security apparatus (the UDBA) recorded the passivity of returnees: avoidance of social organisations, caution in their contacts and

warning others to keep silent. For many, the experience of the camp meant a final break with politics.

At sensitive moments (e.g. visits by important statesmen or diplomatic delegations) former prisoners could in practice be subjected to additional restrictions: summonses for interviews, bans on movement or other forms of "preventive" surveillance.

### From the 1990s: late recognition and unequal rights

The changes of the early 1990s opened up space for speaking publicly about the repression and for founding associations. But recognition and compensation were not automatic. Political prisoner status was often obtained through individual procedures: applications, providing proof and contending with inadequate archives.

Common problems:

- incomplete documentation and slow procedures
- inconsistent practice in recognition and compensation
- costs and exhausting court proceedings for those who sought formal rehabilitation

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#### GLOSSARY

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>UDBA</b>                  | State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime. |
| <b>Revising one's stance</b> | Public "repentance" for views that the UDBA had declared anti-state, and consent to collaborate with the UDBA. It was a condition for advancement in the camp hierarchy.                       |

**Aktiv**

The political core of the prisoners' self-administration: prisoners who had revised their stance, led meetings, directed attacks on the "unreliable" and reported to the UDBA.

## The End of the Cominform Camp and Later Use of the Site (1955–1992)



The Cominform camp on Goli otok and Sveti Grgur ceased operating in the mid-1950s. It was wound down in the context of the gradual normalisation of relations between Yugoslavia and the USSR after the **Belgrade Declaration (2 June 1955)** and the dissolution of the Cominform (1956).

The system of administrative internment of IB-ists ("ibeovci") was gradually abolished, and in official records the same site is presented as having been **reorganised into a penal and correctional institution**, which operated until the end of 1988.

The **Belgrade Declaration** is a document (a joint political statement) by which Yugoslavia and the USSR marked the restoration and normalisation of their relations in 1955. It signalled an easing of the exceptional "confrontational" atmosphere that had accompanied the Cominform period, and the closing of this phase of repression accelerated.

|                  |                                                                            |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 June 1955      | The Belgrade Declaration – the beginning of the normalisation of relations |
| 1956             | Dissolution of the camp on Goli otok; end of the Cominform camp regime     |
| 1956–1988        | Goli otok operates as a penal and correctional facility                    |
| 20 July 1987     | Decision to abolish the penal and correctional facility on Goli otok       |
| 31 December 1988 | Official closing date of the penal and correctional facility               |

#### KEY DATES

A short timeline from 1955 to 1988.

### The end of the Cominform period (1955–1956)

In the final phase the change is presented in official records as a “reorganisation”: the system of internment of persons linked to the Cominform was transformed into a penal and correctional facility. This put an end to the model under which, from 1949, large numbers of people had been sent **by administrative means**, without a court judgment and without standard procedural guarantees.

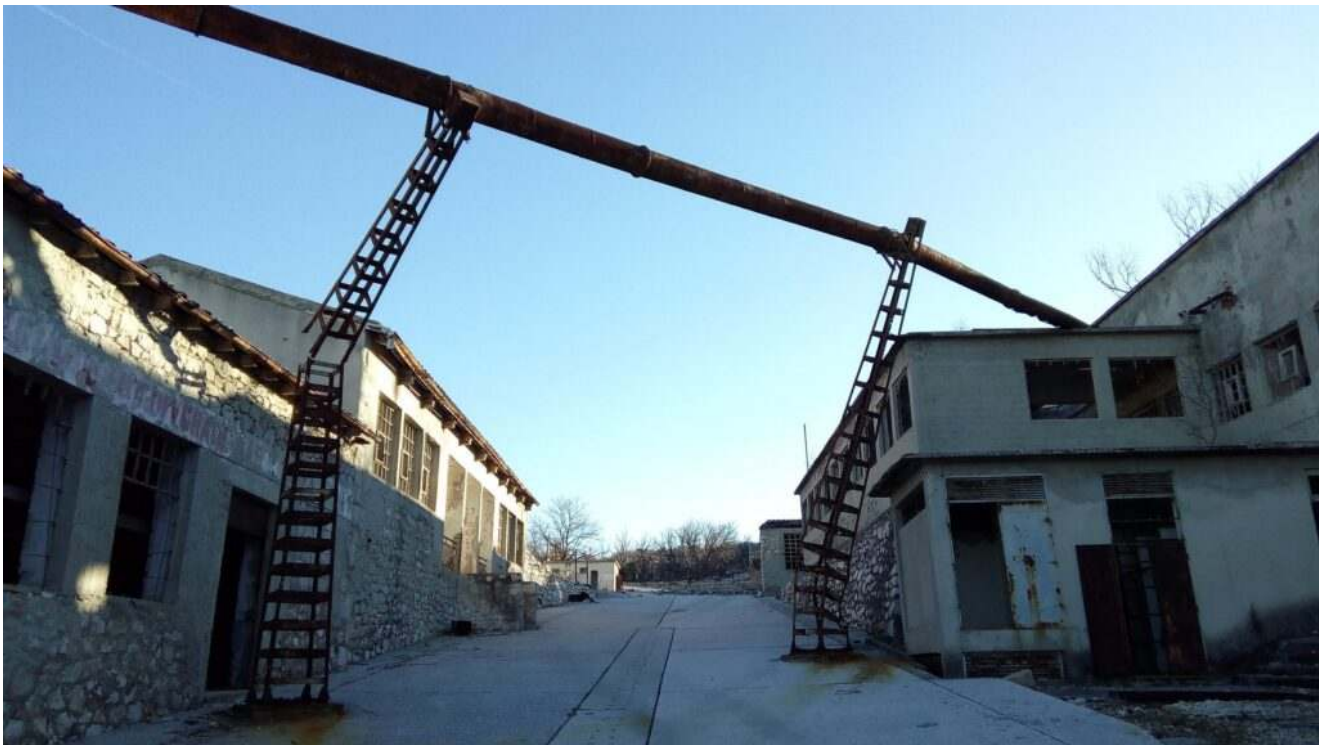
By November 1956 the UDBA had released most of the remaining detainees. A small number were transferred to other institutions or remained until the end of their sentences. From the end of 1956 the site was used as a prison within the “regular” prison system.

### The Rab Penal and Correctional Facility – Goli otok (1956–1988)

After 1956 Goli otok and Sveti Grgur were incorporated into the system of the Rab Penal and Correctional Facility, and from 1967 the institution came under

the republic-level jurisdiction of SR Croatia. The site of the former camp was thus formally integrated into the regular system for the execution of sentences.

The prison received various groups of convicts: political prisoners of the new period, persons convicted of ordinary crimes and, from the 1960s, young adults. Different surveillance regimes were introduced, and although the official emphasis was on work, education and training, some testimonies point to continued humiliation and violence.



Buildings from the prison period.

### The role of Sveti Grgur

Sveti Grgur operated as a separate part of the same system, mainly for women, while men were mostly held on Goli otok.

### Abolition of the institution (1987–1988)

The penal and correctional facility was abolished by decision of the republic authorities and closed on 31 December 1988. The “Velebit” enterprise unit also

ceased operating at that time. The reasons given were socio-political, economic and penological.

“

This brought to an end almost forty years of  
deprivation of liberty on Goli otok and Sveti Grgur.

31 DECEMBER 1988

### After the closure (1988–1992)

After the prison was abolished, the management of Goli otok passed to the Municipality of Rab, which transferred the right of use to local enterprises for tourist and commercial purposes. In the early 1990s surveillance and maintenance ceased, and from 1992 the complex was left without guards. Devastation followed, with equipment carried off and the buildings rapidly falling into decay.

### Sveti Grgur after 1988

Sveti Grgur remains uninhabited, with visible remains of camp and prison buildings. Today it is regarded both as a site of former repression and as a destination for day trips, but without a systematically developed interpretation that would match the gravity of the site.

## REMAINS OF THE PRISON



The “Stadion Mladost” sign from the prison period.



An abandoned corridor.



Remains of furniture.



A collapsed roof.

---

## GLOSSARY

### UDBA

State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti) – the Yugoslav secret political police responsible for the surveillance and persecution of real or alleged opponents of the regime.

### SR Croatia

Socialist Republic of Croatia – one of the six republics of the SFR Yugoslavia.

## Goli Otok Today



Today Goli otok is a seasonally visited site without a permanent museum or memorial institution and without unified management of the whole of the former camp and prison.

Visits mostly take the form of short excursion tours, with fragmentary explanations and little context about *what* the island was – and *why* it is the way it is.

### What does the visitor find?

The visitor moves among the ruins of pavilions and workshops, overgrown paths and makeshift tourist stalls.

There are a few plaques and signs, but no comprehensive exhibition that would connect the creation of the camp, the forced labour regime, survivors' testimonies and the present state of the site.

### Why is Goli otok neglected?

The neglect is the result of three interrelated processes:

- **physical decay after the closure of the prison** – once constant surveillance and maintenance ceased, Goli otok soon began to change through lack of upkeep (collapse, devastation, frequent bora winds)
- **an unresolved model of management and responsibility** – without a clear manager and plan, the site remains “no one’s” in practice (the owner is the Republic of Croatia, but it has not been clearly agreed which local authority Goli otok falls under)
- **the predominance of tourist logic over memorial logic** – tourism is developing faster than any systematic interpretation of the site of suffering, so the large number of visitors, without systematic protection of the site, is endangering Goli otok

#### BETWEEN TOURISM AND DECAY



The abandoned “Goli otok Excursion” tourist train.



A commercial photo shoot among the buildings of the former camp.



The collapsed interior of a building.



An abandoned building and a bent railing.

## Preventive protection (2016–2019) and what happened afterwards

**Preventive protection** is a temporary regime under which a cultural asset is protected until an expert assessment is prepared and a decision is made on permanent protection.

“

For Goli otok, excluding Sveti Grgur, preventive protection was adopted in 2016 and expired in May 2019, without a comprehensive decision on permanent protection having been adopted.

PROTECTION STATUS

## Why the issue is not being addressed systematically

In practice the same obstacles recur:

- **finances and organisation** (costly processes of conservation, infrastructure, safety and expert teams); the local administrative unit has not been agreed, and Rab and Lopar are engaged in legal proceedings over Goli otok
- **conflict between commercial and memorial interests** (a stricter memorial-site regime would necessarily change part of the “excursion” model from which the local population profits)
- **political and symbolic sensitivity** (it raises questions of the responsibility of the apparatus of repression and of attitudes towards the Yugoslav past)

## Why preservation is in the interest of Croatia, the region and the EU

**Croatia:** this is one of the key sites of 20th-century political repression on Croatian territory; developing it would enable a serious reckoning with the past, educational programmes and a research framework.

**The region (former Yugoslavia):** detainees came from all the republics; a shared approach reduces the fragmentation of memory and revisionism.

**The European Union:** Goli otok belongs to the European history of the Cold War and repression; the site has the potential to become a regional centre for learning about the abuse of security apparatuses and about human rights.

Read more about why a memorial site is needed on the [Memorial Site](#) page.

#### GOLI OTOK TODAY



The camp complex beside the cove.



The island's rocky shore.



A bunker on the shore.



A toppled pillar on the shore.



A faded mural.

## Goli Otok in the European “Landscape of Camps”



Even before 1949 Europe had known various camp systems: Nazi and Fascist camps, Italian internment of civilians, the Soviet Gulag, and post-war camps and internments. Goli otok entered this landscape later, but with a particular role: it was created after the war, in a period of stable state power, as an internal camp of a socialist state directed against its own citizens accused of political unsuitability.

### What most 20th-century camps had in common

Regardless of ideology, camp systems often share similar features: isolation from the outside world, forced labour, scarcity of food and water, a strict internal hierarchy, and privileged roles for certain detainees in maintaining order and discipline.

### What made Goli otok distinctive

Goli otok differed above all in that it was a post-war camp for the state's own citizens, labelled as politically suspect. It did not arise under conditions of occupation or open war, but as an instrument of internal political control.

Goli otok was also distinctive in the way it was run. The system developed “self-administering” methods of surveillance, in which certain prisoners were

given a privileged position and took part in putting pressure on others. Within this framework specific camp terms also took shape, such as the “gang”, “boycott” and “revising one’s stance”, which were part of the camp’s particular language and practice.

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Its most striking distinctive feature was the logic of violence of “victim against victim”.

WHAT MADE GOLI OTOK DISTINCTIVE

Detainees were required not only to obey, but also to take an active part in humiliating and punishing others as proof of their own loyalty. Violence was thus not only a means of control but also a measure of political suitability.

### How the system worked

The system rested on a hierarchy of survival. The “revised” could obtain a better position and a certain degree of power, while the “unrevised” fell into isolation, boycott and the harshest forms of labour and punishment. Taking part in pressuring others brought an easier position, while refusal led to new punishments. In this way violence gradually became an internal norm of the prisoner community. The mechanism is described in detail in the chapter Re-education on Goli Otok.

### Goli otok compared with other camps

Like other 20th-century camps, Goli otok shared the basic features of repressive systems: isolation, forced labour, scarcity and hierarchy. But it differed in that it operated after the war, against the state’s own citizens, and in that it developed a particularly powerful model of internal coercion in which the detainees themselves were turned into instruments of surveillance and violence.



Islands of the northern Adriatic from the air.

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## GLOSSARY

### **Boycott**

The bottom of the camp hierarchy and a punishment at the same time: the boycotted wore markings, no one was allowed to speak to them, and they could be beaten with impunity.

### **Revising one's stance**

Public "repentance" for views that the UDBA had declared anti-state, and consent to collaborate with the UDBA. It was a condition for advancement in the camp hierarchy.