

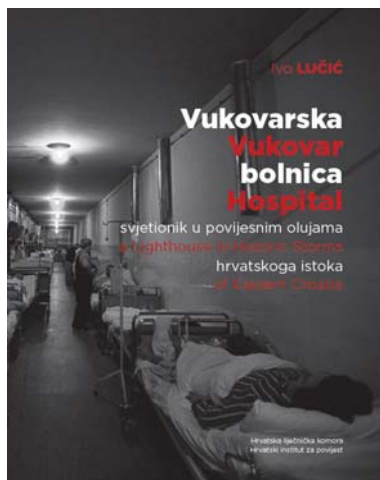
Ivo Lučić, *Vukovarska bolnica: svjetionik u povijesnim olujama hrvatskoga istoka/Vukovar hospital: a lighthouse in historic storms of Eastern Croatia* (Zagreb: Hrvatska liječnička komora and Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2017)

Summary

Conclusion

The wider area between the Danube and the Sava rivers, in which lies Vukovar, was a center for various ethnic communities, peoples, cultures and religions since the Middle Ages. More recently, in the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century, its development was essentially conditioned and marked by Croatian-Serbian relations. The struggle for national affirmation during the “spring of nations” in 1848 led to national conflict, articulated in the contradiction between the existing concept of Vukovar as the political center of the Srijem County within the Tripartite Kingdom (Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia), and that of Vukovar as a peripheral city within the just recently self-proclaimed Serbian Vojvodina . The battle for Vukovar and Srijem between Croats and Serbs has therefore lasted for more than 150 years, up until January 1998 and the completion of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Podunavlja. The battles were waged in various shapes and forms and over time were led with differing intensity.

After the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a Yugoslav state was established under the rule of the Serbian king. In this state, the government founded and maintained the idea of Serbian hegemony, which presupposed a dictatorship marked not only by repression but also by state terror. The Croatian claim for equality, expressed by political objectiveness and confirmed in its identity, was responded to with violence and the murder of Croatian political representatives in the National Assembly. In such a social and political environment, space opened up for the operations of two revolutionary organizations that had a significant impact on further social and political developments: the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Ustasha - Croatian Revolutionary Organization. Both had the



opportunity of establishing a state and both took power, but squandered this opportunity because of their totalitarian ambitions marked by brutal crimes and massive violations of human rights. Hundreds of thousands of dead were left behind in their wake. The Ustasha were in power for four years, and the Yugoslav communists for 45 years. The first came to power with the help of German and Italian, the second with the help of Soviet and British tanks. None of them were granted democratic legitimacy for their governments, but instead based their claims on revolution, national or social interests, as interpreted by them, and therefore assumed power in the name of the nation or the classes. Thus, the Croatian-Serbian conflict, enhanced by historical circumstances and in the context of events in Europe and those worldwide, took on a broader ideological significance. For the political propaganda of the Yugoslav regime, the very idea of Croatian freedom and independence was maliciously and wrongly linked to fascism, whilst the idea of the Yugoslav federal state with an undemocratic communist regime in power, was considered “anti-fascist”.

In the early 1990s, following the fall of communist regimes in Europe, an opportunity presented itself for the democratic development of the Yugoslav state and its republics. A compromise was sought, but there was no democratic potential for such progress. Civil society in its very foundations was destroyed, and socialist society had become heavily militarized, in terms of human resources society was devastated, corrupt, and unable to adapt to the new situation. Instead of building a new but unknown and uncertain future, what dominated among the structures of authority was the desire to return to the “well known” and “heroic” past, or the mythical images that the regime had been built on. Regarding Croatian demands for an independent democratic national state, the Serbian-Yugoslav leadership responded by encouraging the rebellion of Serbs in Croatia, by creating new “Serb guerrillas” or “autonomous territories”, and ultimately by undertaking brutal military aggression against the Republic of Croatia with the aim of violently overthrowing the democratically elected government, and repealing her independent statehood. The military aggression, which included a considerable amount of troops of the Yugoslav People’s Army, strengthened by Serbian paramilitary Chetniks, was interpreted as an invitation to partake in yet another myth inherited from socialism and was again depicted as an “anti-fascist” struggle. On the other hand, the Croatian democratic government was called “fascist”, as were the Croatian armed forces.

But the old myth could not stand the “test of time”. The crimes committed by the forces of the Yugoslav People’s Army and their associated Serbian paramilitary units were so widespread and so brutal that they could not hide under the auspices of the old narrative, or be attributed to the Croatian side,

no matter how much they tried. A particularly horrendous crime was committed against the wounded in the Vukovar hospital. By preventing the International Red Cross personnel from taking over supervision of the hospital and protecting the wounded and staff members in accordance with international conventions and agreements made with the Croatian Government, the Yugoslav National Army instead took them to a prearranged destination and killed them. In a long-established pattern of propaganda, doctors from the hospital who treated the wounded of all nationalities were labeled “criminals”, “fascists”, and against whom were filed a whole series of charges and court proceedings initiated.

However painful and difficult for the wrongly accused doctors and other defenders of Vukovar this was, these procedures showed the true image and character of the war for Vukovar and Croatia, and the role they played: and it was such a strong testimony that it represents values that surpass Croatian Serbian relations. Finally, the Croatian-Serbian war which lasted over a century and a half had ended. After Yugoslavia as a country had twice failed, Croats and Serbs now live in their own independent national states, where they live alongside members of national minorities. Dealing with the past, as difficult as it might be, will allow it to become history, and a knowledge and understanding of history can provide peace and the preconditions for cooperation and good neighborly relations.