

Istrian graffiti in World War II - Meanings and experiences

Eric Ušić

Fakulteta za družbene vede
Sveučilište u Ljubljani
Slovenija

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During World War II, graffiti writing was a particular practice widely used by the People's Liberation Movement (NOP). In this article I am analyzing the meanings and experiences of graffiti writing on three levels, asking three interrelated questions: how was the practice conceived and interpreted by the organizations of the NOP, how it was represented in Partisan media (Glas Istre), and how it was understood and experienced by their authors and witnesses? The article focuses on Istria, precisely on three levels/case studies that are related to the research questions: reports of the People's Liberation Committee of Kastavština, the Glas Istre papers, and memories and experiences of graffiti writers and related subjects. The meanings of both graffiti and the practice of writing were multilayered and articulated differently from diverse social and ideological positions: they were perceived as symbolic “weapons” for the anti-fascist movement, as ways to participate in the struggle and ways of communication of the NOP, and as threats for local communities. For the writers, the practice of graffiti writing was an emotionally and psychologically intense, hazardous life-threatening experience.

Keywords: graffiti, slogans, Istria, World War II.

When it comes to anti-fascist, Partisan and pro-Yugoslav bilingual graffiti written in the (post)World War II period in Istria and which are still visible across the peninsula, one question comes to mind: how were the graffiti and the practice of writing interpreted, understood and experienced in the historical, socio-political context of their production? By this, I mean the ways of interpreting, understanding and experiencing graffiti and the practice

of graffiti writing by the organizations of the People's Liberation Movement (NOP) and Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), the then active media, the authors, the various activists of the NOP and KPJ, and by witnesses.

In this paper, I will focus on graffiti produced *during* the wartime period - more precisely, from the arrival of the first "political workers" of the KPJ in Istria (late 1941), the capitulation of Italy and the Istrian uprising in September 1943, until the end of armed conflicts in early May 1945¹, since the immediate *post-war* context represents a different and specific socio-political and geo-political situation². During the wartime period, the practice of graffiti writing was an *illegal* and de facto criminal activity, and - as I will show later in the text - the authors were putting their life at risk while writing slogans on Istrian walls. In the immediate post-war period (1945-1947) the meanings and purpose of graffiti changed, and the practice of writing was instigated and organized by newly formed government units. While wartime, Partisan graffiti were written in conspiracy, post-war graffiti were part of a broader, "official" political and propaganda enterprise of local committees and Communist organizations³. Thus, graffiti of the post-war period demand a broader contextualization and analysis. For purpose of the article and due to the consistency of the text, I will focus "only" on wartime graffiti in this paper.

I will pull the previously raised questions through different examples and concentrate on three main sources (published archival material/documents, wartime media, and memoirs/testimonies) that define the three case studies and three-layer structure of this article: the reports of the People's Liberation Committee (NOO) of Kastavština (1943-1944), the *Glas Istre* papers (1943-1945) and memories/diaries and testimonies by the activists of the NOP and authors, i.e. graffiti writers. Before delving into the analysis of the cases, I will briefly make an overview of historical studies by those authors who analyzed the period in question. After that, I will put forward the question of terminology, in order to frame my theoretical position and methodological approach.

1 For more complex and detailed overviews and analysis of the period, see: Darko DUKOVSKI, *Rat i mir istarski: model povijesne prijelomnice (1943.-1955.)*, Pula: C.A.S.H., 2001.; Mario MIKOLIĆ, *Istra 1941.-1947.*, Zagreb: Barbat, 2003.; Antun GIRON, *Zapadna Hrvatska u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, Rijeka: Adamić, 2004.; Herman BURŠIĆ, *Od ropstva do slobode: Istria : 1918-1945. : male bilješke o velikom putu*, Pula : Histria Croatica C.A.S.H., 2011.

2 Namely, from June 1945 until September 1947, Istria was demarcated by the Morgan Line and divided in two zones: the Zone A was administered by the Allied Military Government, while the Zone B was administered by the Yugoslav People's Army. The status of Istria and the border between Italy and Yugoslavia had to be decided at the Paris Peace Conference. Different political, social and economic processes took place in that period, reshaping the socio-political structure of the region. For a brilliant account and detailed analysis of this complex and tumultuous period, see: Gianna NASSISI, "Istria: 1945-1947", in: *Storia di un esodo. Istria 1945-1956*, ed. Cristiana COLUMMI - Liliana FERRARI - Gianna NASSISI - Germano TRANI, Trieste: IRSMLFVG, 1980, p. 87-144.

3 See, for example: Andrej FERLETIC, "Propagandni in politično-propagandni napisi ter grafiti na Primorskem v letih pred, med in po drugi svetovni vojni", *Zgodovinski časopis*. 61, 1-2 (2007): 113-140.

Information on walls, slogans, unarmed actions or... graffiti?

In this chapter I will examine how did various authors write about and depict graffiti in the wartime context. The aim is to put the question of Istrian graffiti in relation with the broader context and larger scale of activities of the People's Liberation Movements. Were the graffiti mentioned and analyzed in a particular way, or were they marginalized and overlooked?

Mahmud Konjhodžić, a Yugoslav journalist and participant of the People's Liberation War (NOB), put forward a chronological and systematic review of various ways, organizations and instruments of journalism activities and distribution of information of the People's Liberation movement in his book *Riječi istine (Words of Truth)*⁴. In a short chapter, entitled "*Special forms of information*", Konjhodžić described "other" tools and ways of sharing information in wartime: bulletins, wall newspapers, oral newspapers and "information on walls", that is - graffiti⁵. It is interesting how Konjhodžić used different terms to write about graffiti: besides "informations on walls", he conceived them as "a special mode of written information", "slogans on walls", "very short information", "slogans" and asserted that they were an effective mean to inform "the masses"⁶. He emphasised that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia used to practice this method of sharing information illegally in the interwar period⁷, that they were written on every wall within the reach of the "Partisan hand", and that no one could simply pass beside without reading them⁸. He concluded: "These were much more permanent information that, for a long time, were striking for every passer-by and spoke about the truths of a victorious war and revolution"⁹. Konjhodžić visualized them with four photos containing different examples of graffiti: two photos from Kordun region (1944), and two from Istria (1945). Istrian graffiti consisted of short utterances as: *Long live Tito, Long live the C(ommunist) P(arty), Long live the 1st Brigade Vladimir Gortan, Long live the Communists - Everything for the victory, Long live our Stalin, Long live the 13th Division*, etc. To describe them, he wrote:

*On every wall where something could be written, information similar to titles of articles, as well as latest news and propaganda slogans, emerged.*¹⁰

4 Mahmud KONJHODŽIĆ, *Riječi istine. Novinarstvo, informacije, publicistika i štampa u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi Hrvatske*. Zagreb: Stvarnost, 1975.

5 Ibid, 121-128. At the end of this chapter, I will explain why I use the concept of graffiti instead of terms used by other authors.

6 Ibid, 124.

7 Hence he describes the graffiti as an "old experience" of the KPJ. Ibid, 124.

8 Ibid, 124.

9 Ibid, 124.

10 Ibid, between pages 136 and 137.

While Konjhodžić was quite modest in writing about graffiti, the historian Slavko Vukčević gave them much more space ten years later in his book *struggles and resistance in occupied Yugoslav cities from 1941 until 1945*¹¹. He dealt with the topic of graffiti alongside the practice of dissemination of flyers and pamphlets, and wrote about the graffiti writing practice as “writing of slogans and symbols”¹². Vukčević’s approach can be understood as an exhaustive and chronological overview of the practice of graffiti writing by NOP activists: he remarks who wrote them, where and when, while describing some situations as they have been depicted in various archives. Graffiti are denominated in different ways, as was the case with Konjhodžić: they are “antifascist slogans”¹³, “revolutionary slogans”¹⁴, “propaganda actions”¹⁵, or simply “slogans”, that is the most common term he used in the whole book. Vukčević put them in the broader category of “unarmed actions” alongside distribution of pamphlets, journals, sabotage acts, etc. However, even if Vukčević offered a detailed overview of graffiti writing practices in different places and times, his approach is limited to a report-style listing of events with no deeper examination or interpretation.

In regard to scholars who focus their research on Istria and/or the broader region, the historian Antun Giron¹⁶, in his thorough book about Western Croatia in Second World War, mentioned graffiti only in the context of activities of the local branch of the Communist Party in Rijeka, where Giron indicated that an activity of “writing slogans” was organized in January 1942. Graffiti in the Istrian territory were not mentioned - Giron focused mainly on military and political processes, relations and events. In his account of Sušak and Rijeka in the Second World War, Radule Butorović mentioned graffiti a few times, but only as parts of complex actions by the NOP activists: he listed some “slogan writing” events alongside activities such as distribution of pamphlets, sabotage actions, etc.¹⁷

More recently, the historian Darko Dukovski, who wrote a large amount of texts about Istria in the (post)war period, mentioned graffiti only on a few occasions. For example, in his book about Istria and Rijeka from 1918 to 1947, Dukovski didn’t pay attention to graffiti, nor did he mention the practice of graffiti writing as a specific or relevant practice in the (post)war period in

11 Slavko VUKČEVIĆ, *Borbe i otpori u okupiranim gradovima Jugoslavije - 1941-1945*. Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1985. It has to be underlined that Istria was not part of Yugoslavia until 1947, while some parts were integrated in 1954. Thus, Vukčević is not dealing directly with the wartime situation in Istria, but I am including his analysis in order to relate Istrian graffiti with the broader context of the Partisan struggle and with the broader scale of NOP’s activities - precisely, with the practice of graffiti writing, since Istrian organizations and committees followed instructions and suggestions by other, superior NOP organizations that were actually based in Yugoslavia.

12 Ibid., 24.

13 Ibid, 24.

14 Ibid, 36.

15 Ibid, 41.

16 GIRON, *Zapadna Hrvatska u Drugom svjetskom ratu*.

17 Radule BUTOROVIĆ, *Sušak i Rijeka u NOB*. Rijeka : Centar za historiju radničkog pokreta i NOR Istre, Hrvatskog primorja i Gorskog Kotara, 1975.

Istria¹⁸. Furthermore, in another book that examines the period from 1943 to 1955 in Istria in great detail, that is the actual context of graffiti production, Dukovski wrote about various media, as well as propaganda, informative and cultural activities, and interrelations among them, but he again overlooked the practice of graffiti writing. Dukovski mentioned graffiti a few times primarily as side effects of other ideological and socio-cultural relations, processes and tensions, and framed them mostly as “incidents”¹⁹. In another text Dukovski refers to graffiti in order to illustrate the tensions and misunderstandings between members of Italo-Croatian antifascist movement and some members of the Italian Communist Party²⁰. He wrote how Lelio Zustovich, a local Italian Communist leader, protested against actions of graffiti writing because he thought that these activities were only provoking the Fascist regime and didn't contribute to the anti-fascist cause, a case that is related to the memoirs of Ljubo Drndić²¹, and that will be analyzed in the third chapter of this article.

Another historian and witness/participant of the these events, Herman Buršić, in his voluminous account of the socio-political and economic situation in Istria from 1918. to 1945, wrote about graffiti in different occasions, in order to sketch the functioning of the repressive apparatus of the Fascist regime before 1943²², and to point out to the development of the anti-fascist movement. In Buršić's book, graffiti are mainly described as “proofs” of existence and spreading of the anti-fascist movement in Istria, same as they were depicted by Giron and Butorović, but he didn't delve deeper in their examination.

In all of the previously mentioned works, the broader social, cultural and subjective meanings of graffiti are somehow overlooked. Graffiti, as a phenomenon, are marginalized and subordinated or, more precisely, *overshadowed* by other activities of the NOP that apparently seems “more relevant” (i.e., the press, Partisan theaters, pamphlets)²³. In short, it seems that the practice of graffiti writing has been uncritically taken for granted or treated as a “trivial”, peripheral practice that doesn't need deeper explanations or re-evaluations from different and contemporary positions, with the application of contemporary graffiti theories, which rely on visual anthropology, semiotics, cultural studies and/or critical theories.

18 Similar to Giron, Dukovski points only to one graffiti writing activity in 1942. in Rijeka as part of a short-termed political/media venture by the local communists, with the aim of fostering the antifascist resistance. Dukovski too named the graffiti as “slogans”. Darko DUKOVSKI, *Istra i Rijeka u prvoj polovici 20. stoljeća (1918-1947)*. Zagreb: Leykam international, 2010., 70.

19 See, for example: DUKOVSKI, *Rat i mir istarski: model povijesne prijelomnice (1943.-1955.)*, 174., 224., 240. Graffiti as “incidents” were mentioned also in Butorović's account of Sušak and Rijeka in the People's Liberation War, see: BUTOROVIĆ, *Sušak i Rijeka u NOB*, 238.

20 Darko DUKOVSKI, “Odnos hrvatskih, slovenskih i talijanskih komunista prema NOP-u i državno-pravnom statusu Istre (1941. - 1945.)”, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 41 (2), 427..

21 Ljubo DRNDIĆ, *Oružje i sloboda Istre: 1941-1943*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga; Pula: Glas Istre, 1978.

22 He quoted from the archives of the Fascist *prefettura*, where the *prefetto* Cimatorani from Pula defined the graffiti as “subversive slogans”. Thus, although it wasn't his intention, Buršić at least showed another way of understanding the graffiti in the context of their production. See: Herman BURŠIĆ, *Od ropstva do slobode: Istra : 1918-1945. : male bilješke o velikom putu*. Pula : Histria Croatica C.A.S.H., 2011., 98.

23 The only author that examined them more carefully, is Vukčević.

However, there are two works that undermine this understanding of graffiti and emphasize their relevance for the historical context in which they were produced. More subtle and comprehensive approaches dealing with the topic can be found outside of the historiographic field. There are two contemporary ethnologists that delved into the study of graffiti in wartime Slovenia. Andrej Ferletic wrote a brilliant historical-anthropological account of the development and practice of graffiti writing in the Primorska region²⁴. He methodically analyzed the topic and provided a thorough “archaeology” of (pre/post) wartime graffiti writing in Primorska²⁵. His empirical approach combined the “top-down” and “bottom-up” perspective, showing how both the authorities and authors/local inhabitants participated in writing. He correctly avoided the term “slogans” and understood them in a specific way, dividing them into three categories: graffiti, propaganda writings, and propaganda/political writings. Ferletic understood the first category - graffiti - as writings of “public relevance” but that were *not* “ordered” by institutions; the second - propaganda writings - as “public writings” *without* political meanings; the third - propaganda/political writings - as “public writings” *with* political connotations and related to political organizations, and which were the main focus of his research²⁶. What should be emphasized here, is that Ferletic conceived the graffiti as *reflections* of socio-political events and turmoils of the historical context in which they were produced. However, Ferletic’s terminology is a little bit confusing, as the different concepts overlap each other and thus the analytical lenses are blurred.

Another perspective, conceptually more consistent and based on a broader theoretical framework, is that of Helena Konda²⁷. Unlike the authors previously mentioned, she operates exclusively with the concept of *graffiti*, in order to analyze what other scholars referred to as “slogans”, during wartime Ljubljana. This approach proved to be analytically more accurate and productive: using the term of graffiti and framing her work in contemporary graffiti theory,²⁸ Konda opens not only the question of authors and technical elements, but expands the perspective in order to grasp contextual, aesthetic, semantic and perceptive dimensions of the phenomenon. She takes into account the relation among graffiti writing and various subjects and institutions - i.e. between writers (activists of the Slovenian *Liberation Front*), potential readers, and the repressive institutions of the fascist regime. Konda does not isolate

24 FERLETIC, “Propagandni in politično-propagandni napisi ter grafiti na Primorskem v letih pred, med in po drugi svetovni vojni”.

25 Following his account, and that of Vukčević, it is pretty clear that graffiti writing was a widespread practice, not to say a “massive” enterprise. So it is really strange that historians didn’t pay much attention to this, but wrote about graffiti only sporadically, on the margins of their works.

26 FERLETIC, “Propagandni in politično-propagandni napisi ter grafiti na Primorskem v letih pred, med in po drugi svetovni vojni”, 114.

27 Helena KONDA, *Grafiti v Ljubljani : zgodovina, grafitarji, mesto*. Ljubljana : Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2017.

28 In particular with: Mitja VELIKONJA, Politika v zidov: Zagate z ideologijo v grafitih in street artu. *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, 36(231/232), (2008): 25-32.

graffiti from their context, but analyzes them from within it, as is the case with other authors that investigated *political* graffiti in different contexts²⁹.

I position myself precisely within the latter theoretical framework: I understand wartime inscriptions on walls as *graffiti*, as texts *and* images inscribed on public surfaces that are interrelated with the context of production and perception, and are inseparable neither from the subjective experience of authors, nor from a heterogeneous public/readership. In this article, I am particularly interested in the subjective and experiential dimension of these features: the ways of understanding, interpreting and experiencing by various subjects.

The concept of graffiti, as Konda showed in her research, proves to be analytically more accurate than “slogans”, as the majority of the scholars named them, since the latter term is used extensively across books, documents/reports and memoirs to connote different *utterances in general*. The term “slogans” does not have a precise analytical and informative strength. Namely, it is a vague and general term that was used in wartime context to name more-or-less-short spoken and written utterances that, once formulated, could have been expressed and verbalized in a multitude of occasions (eg. demonstrations, meetings, public speeches, protests, everyday life, etc.) or inscribed and materialized on a variety of surfaces, media and material (eg. newspapers, documents, walls, sheets, flags, vehicles, etc.). It was used alternately across literature and documents/memoirs to denote political mottos, statements, “rumors”, propaganda acts, unspecified words and phrases, and - graffiti. The term “slogans” is thus inadequate for the purpose of this research. Another term is needed here, in order to provide a consistent analytical framework and differentiate between slogans-in-general, and slogans that were written in *public space*, mainly on *walls*. That is why the concept of graffiti is a more precise analytical term in this research, since the concept implies those utterances, symbols and images written, painted or scratched on public surfaces and, in the majority of cases - on walls. I use the concept of graffiti in this precise way. That is why the approach has to be based on a close reading of texts: as I showed in the overview of the published literature, the graffiti are mainly denominated as slogans. The same occurs in primary and secondary sources of the historical context that I’m studying. Thus, I had to be careful while reading and analyzing the texts (published archival materials/documents, Partisan media, memoirs/testimonies), in order to individuate and make a clear distinction between *slogans-in-general* and *slogans-as-graffiti*.

29 Compare with: Julie PETEET, The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2., (2009): 139-159; S.T. OLBERG, *Political Graffiti on the West Bank Wall in Israel/Palestine*. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2013.; Mitja VELIKONJA, “Yugoslavia After Yugoslavia: Graffiti About Yugoslavia in the Post-Yugoslav Urban Landscape”, In: *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and Its Other*, eds. Dijana JELAČA - Maša KOLANOVIĆ - Danijela LUGARIĆ, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 323-345.

A last word about terminology. One could ask - why they (both scholars and participants) did not use the term graffiti? There is a potential answer that is quite practical and simple: graffiti was a “highly academic” term, introduced by classical archaeologists in nineteenth century to study inscriptions in Pompeii³⁰. Thus, “graffiti” was a specific term used by groups of specialists who were trying to learn about the language, habits, and socio-political and cultural life of ancient societies and communities, by reading inscriptions they found (mainly) on walls of ancient towns. Graffiti as a wider sociological and anthropological term entered in wider use only in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly after mid-1980s and 90s, when sociologists, anthropologists and art historians delved into the investigation of urban graffiti and re-defined the concept³¹. The articulation of, and the scholars interests for, graffiti as means of broader political and symbolic struggles were “triggered” mainly by student protests in 1968, and were studied mostly on particular sites of conflict and struggle, as for example graffiti on the Berlin Wall, Northern Ireland and in Palestine³². Therefore it is not surprising that the term wasn’t used in the historical context I’m studying, since it was concentrated mainly in the academic discourse. As for the historians whose works I mentioned so far, it could be said that they followed the discursive logic of the NOP, relying on the “original” concept of slogans, as it was used by the protagonists. However, as I will show in the next chapter, the protagonists themselves had “conceptual” difficulties in finding the “correct” position of slogans-as-graffiti in their wider political and propaganda scheme. That is way, to repeat once again, I avoided the term slogans (except when quoting from original sources) and based by analysis on the concept of - graffiti.

Kastavština - Graffiti in the reports of the NOO

The documents that I have analyzed were collected and published by Antun Giron³³. The documents or, more precisely, the reports collected and made public by Giron offer an overview of the development of the People’s Liberation Committee (NOO) of the Kastavština territory, from February 28,

30 For a broader and deeper examination of the history and uses of the concept, see: Chloé RAGAZZOLI, Ömür HARMANSAH and Chiara SALVADOR, “Introduction”, in: *Scribbling through History: graffiti, places and people from antiquity to modernity*, ed. Chloé RAGAZZOLI - Ömür HARMANSAH - Chiara SALVADOR - Elizabeth FROOD, 2018.

31 See: J.I. ROSS ed., *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. London, New York: Routledge, 2017.

32 See, for example, a detailed and critical study of political graffiti in Palestine: Julie PETEET, “Wall talk: Palestinian graffiti”. In: *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, ed. J.I. ROSS, London, New York: Routledge, 2017, 334-345

33 Antun GIRON, *Začeci i razvoj narodne vlasti u Kastavštini : narodnooslobodilačka borba Kastavštine u dokumentima NOO-a Kastav*. Rijeka : Izdavački centar Rijeka, 1990. As he wrote in the introduction of the book/collection of documents, Giron published the reports of the NOO of Kastavština without his own interventions in the original texts. He provided additional information in footnotes, thus publishing the documents in their original form and with their original content, with their missing parts, mistakes and flaws. In my analysis, I did not rely on Giron’s footnotes - I focused only on the content of published documents.

1943 to December 1, 1944. Although it is not “officially” a part of Istrian County today, the territory is geographically, culturally and historically tightly connected to the Istrian peninsula. During World War II, it was one important part of the Istrian district, as it was stipulated by the main organs of the NOP. As was stressed by Giron in his introduction³⁴, Kastavština represented a “bridge” between Istria and the Croatian Littoral, and all of the preserved archive material of the NOO that Giron found and presented in the book is dated from the period when the Kastavština NOO was a part of the Istrian district. That is why, because of its liminal position, it represents a particular and interesting case for my research. The reports were written by the central NOO of the Kastavština district that supervised and managed the broader territory and other minor, local NOO’s in the countryside. Through the examination of these historical sources, I have tried to answer the research question: how were the graffiti perceived, depicted and understood in the “official” reports?

In the documents, graffiti are denominated exclusively as “slogans”, but there is a certain ambiguity in the writings of the NOO. This ambiguity seems to emerge from a rupture within the NOO formal discourse, which occurred under the pressure of the experience on the ground. On the formal level, the members of the NOO tried to depict the graffiti mainly in a pragmatic way. By this I mean that it seems that the only information that was important was whether the graffiti were written or not. There are no specific explanations that would touch upon their content and quality or even function, or the mere practice of writing, nor is there any precise information about the authors³⁵. Furthermore, there is no word on *what* is being written, except in one occasion, as was stressed in the report dated June 13, 1944. Here, the NOO emphasized: “*This was written: The Allies are coming - The Allies help us, and other slogans*”³⁶.

However, what is interesting and striking here, is how much attention the members of the NOO paid to the ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing of other subjects - i.e. “the people” (*narod*). In other words, the NOO kept track of the perspective of witnesses. The writers of the reports depicted how the witnesses, i.e. local people, perceived and interpreted the graffiti, and I would say that there was a noticeable discrepancy between the two ways of seeing. While the NOO understood graffiti unequivocally and pragmatically as an integral part of the web of political-propaganda activities and as a task that had to be done, the witnesses - at least according to the reports - saw them and interpreted them differently in different situations. This divergence of ways of seeing and interpreting is in line with the theoretical assumption of the interconnectedness between writers, graffiti, public and social situations or, in a broader theoretical perspective, between authors, texts, readers and contexts.

34 Ibid, 24.

35 Only in one occasion the NOO mentioned that “*in some places the youth writes slogans*”. Ibid, 94.

36 Ibid, 104.

For example, in the report dated May 12, 1944, it is written how the people were scared, since *“a rumor³⁷ came from Istria saying that in every village were the slogans were written and roads blocked, they [Germans] burn and slaughter everyone, while where there are not [slogans and roadblocks], they don't do it”³⁸*. The report goes on, and under the propaganda section the NOO wrote: *“In every village the people cry not to do any actions, nor to write slogans. Political morality has fallen dramatically”³⁹*. Here it has to be noted that the report described the situation at the time of a strong German-Italian offensive, during which many civilians were killed and some villages were completely destroyed. The most famous case is the Lipa massacre - on April 30, 1944 the Nazis and Fascists surrounded the village, entered and slaughtered every person they found there. More than 260 civilians were killed and the whole village burned. The dramatic situation is condensed in this phrase of the report: *“People are afraid to read”⁴⁰*. In short, the social context affected the relation between local people and graffiti (writing). However, the NOO continued to write graffiti throughout Kastavština. Thus, on June 13, 1944 they pragmatically reported how graffiti were written in southern parts of the territory, but did not forget to describe the “atmosphere” on the ground: *“The people were certainly scared when they saw the slogans, since the Fascists threatened to burn every house on which a slogan is written, and to kill everyone inside”⁴¹*.

The divergence in the ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing was emphasized in the report of June 23, 1944. The NOO wrote: *“Slogans were not written because the people are fiercely attacking [us] [asking] why the slogans have to be written at all”⁴²*. So, while the NOO took the graffiti for granted, the witnesses saw them differently - there was a conflict of perspectives. But the conflict and discrepancy was present in NOO itself. On July 30, 1944 the central NOO wrote: *“Often the aldermen themselves were protesting against the writing of slogans and it was emphasized [to them] that they are wrong and that their wrong view is based on an incorrect assumption that slogans caused various burnings [of villages], while the need to write slogans was stressed [to them]”⁴³*. There is no deeper explanation of “the need to write slogans”.

On November 11, 1944, the propaganda section of the NOO reported and described a shift in the attitude of “the people” toward graffiti: *“Slogans that we wrote, were strongly condemned by the people, out of opportunism of course, but in regard to current writing in the occasion of the 27th anniversary of the October Revolution, the people were not protesting since the slogans appeared all over the district”⁴⁴*. The day after, on November 12, 1944, the general report

37 In the original text, the writers are using the same term - *parole*/slogans - which they use to denote graffiti, to speak about rumors. This is another confirmation of the vagueness of the term.

38 Ibid, 84.

39 Ibid, 85

40 Ibid, 85.

41 Ibid, 104.

42 Ibid, 111.

43 Ibid, 130.

44 Ibid, 167.

of the NOO confirmed: *“On the 27th anniversary of the October Revolution, in every village slogans were written, bonfires were lit and shots fired everywhere. Until now, the people always protested against such actions, but not now”*⁴⁵.

Beside the divergence between the formal and subjective, or “theoretical” and “empirical” points of view, I noticed another, more subtle, ambiguity in the NOO discourse when it comes to graffiti. Mainly, there is a “problem” of definition and categorization. While graffiti are for the most part included in the propaganda sections of the reports, since their writing was under the direction of the propaganda unit (*prop-odjel*), there were no exact sub-sections in which the graffiti could fit in. I have encountered the same problem in other sources. For example, there is a text by Ante Drndić, one of the main KPJ/NOP activists in Istria and the founder of the *Glas Istre* papers which I will analyze in the next chapter, containing his report at the First Party Council for Istria, held on December 10, 1943, in Brgudac. In his report on agitation and propaganda, Drndić divided propaganda as oral and written. Under the written category, he listed six types, but there wasn't a sub-section for graffiti writing. However, Drndić said: *“Here we could mention the writing of slogans too”*, and continued: *“In them, the line of our entire struggle has to be condensed. They are written on visible places with readable letters and colours, that will not spill and mess up under the first rain. Slogans have to be renewed according to the situation and actual events. Here in Istria, the dialect can be used in written propaganda, that is often more accessible and closer to the masses. Equally, in the regions where the majority of the population is Italian, [the slogans] will be written in Italian”*⁴⁶.

The position and semantics of graffiti varied in the reports of the Kastavština NOO: graffiti were unsystematically mentioned alongside wall-newspapers, bonfires, shootings, distribution of flyers, etc. In one occasion, they were included in the sub-section “press”⁴⁷, in another occasion in the sub-section “miscellaneous”⁴⁸. They were understood not only as means of popularization of NOP's politics or dissemination of information as it was implied by Konjhodžić, or simply “actions”⁴⁹ as was partly implied by Vukčević, but even as “decorations” during meetings and celebrations⁵⁰. Thus, the formal-pragmatic discursive line of the NOO, the subjectivities of the witnesses (“the people”), the interpretative differences in the NOO itself, and the problem of definition and categorization, offer a broader, more complex view on the topic of graffiti and a variety of *meanings* attributed to them.

45 Ibid, 174.

46 Ante DRNDIĆ, “O agitaciji i propagandi”, in: *Nepokorena Istra : sjećanja i dokumenti : sa dva historijska zapisa Franje Debeuca, te brojnim priložima istarskih boraca*, Dušan TUMPIĆ, Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1975.

47 GIRON, *Začeci i razvoj narodne vlasti u Kastavštini : narodnooslobodilačka borba Kastavštine u dokumentima NOO-a Kastav*, 167.

48 Ibid, 152.

49 Ibid, 94.

50 Ibid, 38, 40-41.

***Glas Istre* - Representation of graffiti in the media**

The *Glas Istre* papers were launched in August 1943, and during the war it had the role of the central NOP media across the Istrian peninsula⁵¹. *Glas Istre* was actually the first widespread paper in the Croatian language that emerged after years of fascist repression and Italianization of the private and public sphere. Because of its contextual relevance and its position as one of the most important media of the resistance movement, *Glas Istre* represents a fundamental locus of my research. The papers that I have analyzed included the period from August 1943 until April 1945 - from the first *Glas Istre* publication, to its 35th publication in April 1945, on the eve of liberation. The original sources, i.e. *Glas Istre* papers, were collected and made public by Vinko Antić⁵². I have focused my analysis on the content of the sources as they were published by Antić, thus avoiding any relation with interpretations and comments by other authors. The questions I wanted to address by examining this particular medium are - how were the graffiti represented in the central media of the NOP in Istria? How the authors of articles did depict and understand them?

The terminology used in *Glas Istre* was the same as that of the Kastavština NOO: the graffiti were denominated as “slogans”. For example, in the first issue, published in August 1943, an article dealt with particular fascist activities and repressions, providing examples of their operations. One of the cases was the arrest of 300 people in Kopar: the arrests occurred because the day after a fascist public meeting, “Fascist posters were stained and slogans in favor of the People’s Liberation War were written on walls”⁵³. But, unlike the Kastavština NOO, *Glas Istre* conveyed “exact” information about the writers of graffiti, as well when and even *how many* graffiti were written. The quantitative approach to graffiti is interesting here, since it is repetitive and represents a sort of “empirical” data on the basis of which the authors of articles valued the activity of different groups and individuals. In this sense, the number of graffiti written on particular occasions was conceived as a *proof* of industriousness and the commitment to the NOP cause. For example, an article dated March 24, 1945, underlined that there were written “*more than 5,000 slogans*” across nine Istrian districts during the celebrations of the anniversary of the Red Army, and that the youth from Labin was particularly efficient and distinguished, since they “*wrote 2,940 slogans*” alone⁵⁴.

51 For more information, see: DUKOVSKI, *Rat i mir istarski: model povijesne prijelomnice : (1943.-1955.)*.

52 Vinko ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945)”, *Vjesnik historijskih arhiva u Rijeci i Pazinu*, 6-7 (1961-1962): 547-697. Available on: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/126651>; Vinko ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945) Broj 16-25”, *Vjesnik historijskih arhiva u Rijeci i Pazinu*, 8-9 (1963-1964), 291-386. Available on: [s https://hrcak.srce.hr/126659](https://hrcak.srce.hr/126659); Vinko ANTIĆ, “Glas Istre III nastavak”, *Vjesnik historijskih arhiva u Rijeci i Pazinu*, 11-12 (1966-1968), 389-527. Available on: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/128871>.

53 ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945)”, 565.

54 ANTIĆ, “Glas Istre III nastavak”, 507-508.

Why the authors of the articles stressed the “exact” number of graffiti and praised some groups? Because graffiti writing wasn’t only a tool for sharing information, propaganda and decorations; it was conceived as a *competitive practice* too, an essential part of competitions between groups around Istria. An article of August 20, 1944 listed the “rules” and “instructions” for such a competition that would occur in the context of the celebration of the first anniversary of the Istrian uprising, dated September 9, 1943⁵⁵. The article emphasized the “humanitarian” character of the competition, which would be held in favor of Partisan hospitals. The criteria on which the final score would be based included different acts, as for example gathering of food, medicine, and various useful and helpful materials for the Partisans, families whose members died in the war, war prisoners, etc. Beside the material part, one “branch” of the competition was oriented toward the *symbolic* dimension of the struggle and framed around what Vukvčević would name “unarmed actions”. These types of actions implied the spreading of information, propaganda, and attempts of mobilization. One of the criteria in this category was graffiti writing - the group that would have written the biggest number of graffiti, would gain more points. Hence, it was important to keep track of the quantity of graffiti.

However, graffiti were not reported only on a quantitative level. For example, Sonja R., an unidentified author of one article, wrote on May 13, 1944 that during the celebrations of the First of May in the district of Buje, “600 slogans and 200 stars were written”⁵⁶. But, Sonja R. didn’t pay attention only to the quantity of graffiti, but kept in focus the qualitative dimension too, thus emphasizing: “Near Grisignana, two fiery slogans ‘W Tito’ were stressed on high columns, and the Fascists shot at them frenetically”⁵⁷. Hence, the qualitative aspect of graffiti writing, the description of particular situations, was quite important and relevant for the *Glas Istre*.

Particular micro-cases concerning graffiti or graffiti writing were depicted, and in this way the authors of articles described the “atmosphere” from the field, promoted the “commitment” to the antifascist cause, framed the “bravery” of the writers, the “diligence” of graffitists, thus finally sketching the figure of the “ideal” *youth* activist⁵⁸. Thus, in the article “*The brave pioneer*”, an unnamed author told the story of a thirteen-year-old pioneer from Ćiritež: the fascists took him to Buzet, and threatened to kill him if he does not confess where are the bunkers and “*who wrote the slogans*”. The article concludes: “*The brave pioneer didn’t betray anyone and the next day managed to escape*”⁵⁹. On January 14, 1945, an article stressed how the Italian youth from Rovinj wrote 148 graffiti in one night, and how the Italian youth from

55 ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945) Broj 16-25”, 344.

56 Ibid. 669.

57 Ibid. ‘*W Tito*’ is a graffito that can be found very often around Istria today. It is written in Italian: the *W* means *Viva*, i.e. long live. Thus, *W Tito* would be roughly translated as - *Long live Tito*.

58 I emphasized youth, since in the articles the youth (*omladina*) are mentioned as the most common writers.

59 ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945)”, 690.

Pula covered the whole city with graffiti, after the fascists spread word that they arrested those who wrote *W Tito (Long live Tito)* on the walls. The article underlined: “*In this way, the Italian youth demonstrates its will to live in a free and democratic Croatia*”⁶⁰. So, the graffiti writing practice was conceived as a way *through* which to affirm, validate and demonstrate someone’s commitment and participation in achieving goals of the NOP. One example is emblematic here. The article, published on September 30, 1944, described the celebrations of the first anniversary of the Istrian uprising, reporting on the story of an *omladinka*, a young girl member of the youth organization:

*“An omladinka tells how she left home in the afternoon telling her mother that she is going to a meeting, but she didn’t return from the action until late night. She was afraid that her mother could admonish her, but the mother asked instead where did they [omladinke] wrote the slogans, and criticized the girls because they didn’t go even closer to the enemy garrisons, since from that point the enemy could have seen better the fiery slogans of the people’s struggle.”*⁶¹

The figure of the mother here functions as a reminder that graffiti writing is a very important practice for the resistance movement or, in other words, that the *symbolic struggle* is an essential part of it, and that the commitment to the cause should be uncompromising. She didn’t bother about her daughter returning home late at night in very dangerous times: she was bothered because the *omladinke* didn’t venture even further into danger. Her critique aims at encouraging her daughter for future actions, sketching the coordinates in order to follow the “ideal” activist. The first step in that direction is to remind the *omladinka* of “how graffiti writing should be done”.

Seeing and writing graffiti during wartime

After the examination of several reports of the Kastavština NOP, and after analysing the representation of graffiti in Partisan media, I will now look at the individual level, through the analysis of published memoirs and testimonies, in order to grasp how various subjects perceived, interpreted, and experienced graffiti and the practice of writing in Istria.

After the collapse of Fascist Italy in early September 1943, the NOP activist Dušan Diminić travelled to Istria. When he arrived in Klana, Diminić wrote in his diary: “*Everywhere can be heard the Croatian language. However, there are still Italian writings on the houses*”⁶². As he emphasized, one of his tasks was to distribute the NOP press among the peasants and to distribute “*slogans*” - here it is not clear if Diminić gave them some instructions as what to write, or gave them some templates to facilitate the writing, or he distributed something else. However, although he noticed and recorded the

60 ANTIĆ, “Glas Istre III nastavak”, 433.

61 ANTIĆ, “Građa za povijest narodnooslobodilačke borbe u Istri “Glas Istre” (1943-1945) Broj 16-25”, 372.

62 Dušan DIMINIĆ, *Istra u partizanskom notesu: (1943-1945)*. Pula: Istarska naklada, 1986, 8.

presence of Italian writings on walls, Diminić didn't pay much attention to NOP's graffiti. Actually, there is no mention of them in his diary. It seems that *flags* attracted him the most. "*Labinština was on its feet, all covered with red flags*", he wrote⁶³. But, Diminić repeated a few times that some places were "decorated" - if the graffiti were, as the NOP from Kastavština depicted them, used as "decorations", maybe Diminić saw the graffiti and perceived them simply as "decorations"? From my point of view, it is difficult to provide a plausible answer here, since the sources I have analyzed in this particular case (i.e. Diminić's memoirs), are silent about this.

However, there were others who noted the presence of graffiti, and described the environment they have encountered. Marijan Grbac, member of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ) of the Buzet district, recorded on February 27, 1944 in his "Partisan notes" that the "*Germans found written slogans in the middle of the village [Slum]*", but they didn't react⁶⁴. Describing the situations he encountered in other villages, such as Klenošćak and Prapoće, Grbac wrote how the people protested and wanted to erase the graffiti, since they saw a fire nearby and deduced that a neighbouring village is burning because of graffiti. According to Grbac, they thought that "*if they [Germans] come, will burn down their homes*"⁶⁵. The local inhabitants removed the graffiti, but then realized that the nearby village wasn't burning; hence, Grbac noted that they instantly wrote "*slogans on paper in order to attach them on walls*"⁶⁶. Although Grbac did not sketch his way of seeing, he put forward the positions of the witnesses, as was the case with the Kastavština NOO. The perception and understanding of graffiti were conditioned by immediate subjective experience in a turbulent context, and this example shows how these layers are interdependent and dynamic - in this case, the varying intensity and closeness of danger shaped the ways of seeing and understanding graffiti. First, they were perceived as "dangerous" for the village and removed; after the peril passed, they were re-created and "attached"⁶⁷ as something "usual", as a constitutive part of the place.

Another divergence in the ways of seeing and understanding graffiti and the practice of their writing was described by Ljubo Drndić, a prominent activist of the NOP in Istria⁶⁸. Drndić wrote about tensions between members of the Italian Communist Party, and the NOP and KPJ. The local Istrian leaders of the Italian CP criticized what they saw as a "nationalist" tendency of the NOP/KPJ⁶⁹. Thus, according to Drndić, the local leader Lelio Zustovich

63 Ibid, 24.

64 The "notes" of Marijan Grbac were published in: Dušan TUMPIĆ, *Nepokorena Istra : sjećanja i dokumenti : sa dva historijska zapisa Franje Debeuca, te brojnim priložima istarskih boraca*, Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1975, 378.

65 Ibid, 379.

66 Ibid, 379.

67 In modern graffiti jargon, "graffiti" that are attached on walls are named - *stickers*.

68 Ljubo DRNDIĆ, *Oružje i sloboda Istre: 1941-1943*.

69 Fractions of the Italian CP foregrounded the class dimension of the struggle, while the NOP/KPJ foregrounded *both* class and national-popular struggle.

protested against activities of the NOP/KPJ in the Labinština territory that was under the supervision of his party organization. Among the activities, he mentioned the practice of graffiti writing:

*When our press, written in Italian and Croatian, arrived in Labinština, and when the NOP activists - among whom, in the first lines, were members of the party organization led by Zustovich - wrote across the area of Raša mines antifascist slogans as "Down with the war!", "Long live the unity of Italians and Croats in Istria!", and other in Italian and Croatian language, Lelio Zustovich protested.*⁷⁰

But, why did he protest against graffiti, written by his comrades, which condemned the war and affirmed/celebrated the cooperation between Italian and Croatian antifascists? First, Drndić wrote how Zustovich thought that *"we are provoking the Fascist authorities and the police"*. Secondly, he questioned why *"the journals are written in Croatian and why the slogans are written in that language, since the miners speak Italian, and barely understand Croatian"*⁷¹. Here, the graffiti functioned as a "trigger" for the dispute between the two parts. I would say that Zustovich's way of seeing indicates three ways of understanding graffiti in this particular situation. First, despite the fact that there were Italian graffiti, it seems that he read the Croatian writings as a "proof" of nationalism; thus, his reading was selective and informed by his ideological position. Secondly, he thought about how the fascists would perceive the graffiti, and thus conceived them as a "menace"; here, he contextualized the graffiti, but only partially, in relation to the hegemonic power, i.e. the fascist way of seeing. Thirdly and more subtly, it seems that Zustovich understood these graffiti as a menace to *his* position, that is his leadership in Labinština. Following Drndić's account and version of the story, graffiti were perceived as symbolic, spatial markers or oppositional "political signifiers" that have "invaded" his territory.

Different perspectives, shaped by specific experiences and ideological positions of particular subjects, can be found in the writings of some Partisans who sketched their impressions after their arrival in Istria during the last phase of World War II. Thus, Branko Milinković, a Partisan soldier in the 2nd Dalmatian Brigade, described his experience when his group landed on "Istrian soil", coming from the island of Cres:

"All the way, from Brseč to Lovran, there were written slogans: "Istria is ours", "Trieste is ours", "Forward to Trieste", "Long live Marshal Tito", "Long

⁷⁰ Ljubo DRNDIĆ, *Oružje i sloboda Istre: 1941-1943.*, 174.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 174. As Drndić underlined, for Zustovich the *bilingualism* foregrounded by the NOP/KPJ was the evidence and confirmation of the nationalist politics of the NOP/KPJ. For Zustovich, the national-popular accent of the struggle was unacceptable: the only thing that mattered was the class struggle. However, it is unclear why bilingualism was perceived as nationalistic; following Drndić's opinion, it seems that in fact Zustovich's position was rather nationalistic, since he protested against the use of Croatian language in favour of the use of Italian - at least according to Drndić's interpretation of Zustovich's reaction. Thus, other sources should be consulted here in order to elaborate the analysis and understand the relation; an enterprise that goes beyond the limits and framework of this article. For a deeper insight in the relations between Croatian, Slovenian and Italian Communists, see: DUKOVSKI, "Odnos hrvatskih, slovenskih i talijanskih komunista prema NOP-u i državno-pravnom statusu Istre (1941. - 1945.)".

*live our Army” and others. That was the expression of the mood of the fighters and the people. It was a manifestation of an unseen unity between the people and the army.”*⁷²

Milinković went on: “*After seeing these numerous writings, slogans and banners, we were joking: ‘For those unit, that are going behind us, there will be no free space to write new slogans’*”⁷³. It is clear that, unlike Zustovich, Milinković was delighted and amazed when he saw the graffiti. For him, they were signs of “unseen unity” between the soldiers and the people; for Milinković, the graffiti were symbolic expressions and visual projections of the collective social experience, signs that “merged” the fragmented web of socio-political relations and gave them a cohesive, meaningful visual form.

Finally, what about the authors of graffiti, about the writers themselves? As was stressed in the *Glas Istre* papers, the most common graffiti writers during the war were young people, members of the SKOJ and the United Anti-fascist Youth Association of Croatia (USAOH). The main sources, i.e. memories and testimonies of wartime activists that I have examined in my research, were collected and published by Davor Mandić and the Museum of the People’s Revolution, in Pula⁷⁴. How did the authors themselves experience the practice of graffiti writing? Descriptions and recollections vary.

Mario Jadrejić, for instance, gave a technical review of the experience, pointing to exact locations where his group wrote graffiti in Pula, underlining that “*all the groups accomplished their tasks*”⁷⁵. Ivan Zenzerović had a more personal and emotive experience: “*I simply enjoyed when we were writing slogans on doors of Marčana’s Fascists and rich people I knew from before the war*”⁷⁶. Ruža Sirotić-Camlić described the “moment” of writing this way: “*We were so captivated by writing, that we forgot about the patrols that were constantly passing through the village. We did not even have a guard*”⁷⁷, while Katica Brščić-Vukelja emphasized the “*competitive spirit*” of the writers⁷⁸. Lidija Benčić-Blečić noted and memorized a particular element, the handwriting of her writer-companion Orjente: “*He was left-handed and this could be noticed by looking at the letters*”⁷⁹.

72 Milinković’s memories and testimony were published in: Filip JADRIJEVIĆ-BRAJKO ed., *Druga dalmatinska proleterska brigada - Sjećanja boraca*. Split: Koordinacioni odbor sekcija Druge dalmatinske NOU brigade, 1989, 590.

73 Ibid, 590.

74 Davor MANDIĆ, *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*. Pula : Muzej Narodne revolucije Istre, 1988.

75 Mario JADREJČIĆ, “Od pada fašizma do odlaska u partizane”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 53.

76 Ivan ZENZEROVIĆ, “Djelovanje Kotarskog komiteta SKOJ-a za Pulu”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 71.

77 Ruža SIROTIĆ-CAMLJIĆ, “Od početka suradnje s NOP-om do člana Kotarskog komiteta SKOJ-a”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 76.

78 Katica BRŠČIĆ-VUKELJA, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 186.

79 Lidija BENČIĆ-BLEČIĆ, “Kako su uspostavljane veze s gradom”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 102.

A very detailed and vivid first-hand experience from February 22, 1944 was described by Ottavio Paoletić⁸⁰. Although the action was commissioned “from above”, he said that the youth organization from Pula carried out the action of graffiti writing entirely on their own initiative. The action started with a meeting, where the core of Pula’s SKOJ group decided what will be written and where exactly, and how will the action be planned and executed. Namely, Paoletić recalled how the group set a precise hour and the starting point; divided in two groups of three people, with equal tasks - each group had to write one “slogan” in Italian language all over the town: One group had to write “*Long live the Red Army*”, the other: “*Death to Fascism - Freedom to the people*”. They determined the route of each group and even defined “*places where both inscriptions had to be interposed*”⁸¹. He described how they were wearing gloves in order to avoid messing their hands with paint, and that they used templates to facilitate and speed up the writing: “*While two comrades were holding the template against the wall, the third would quickly cross over it with a brush and the writing was done*”⁸². However, the tension and the risks were high, since the smallest distraction could have provoked tragic consequences for the group, because Pula was under a strict control regime by German and Italian troops. The experience was vividly described by Paoletić:

*“Getting caught means signing your own sentence and maybe even that of many other comrades. The nervous tension of each one of us is on the highest level, the senses are tightening in order to perceive in time every possible danger. After every inscription, a brief sigh of relief and relax, only to restart after few moments and write again, 30 meters ahead”*⁸³

Since the Italian fascists held power in Istria and, after the capitulation of Italy, the German forces occupied the peninsula, graffiti writing was in fact an illegal activity, and thus defined by risks, danger and strict punishment. Many writers emphasized this dimension of the “graffiti experience”, as Paoletić did. Đulio Premate said that after his arrest in 1944, he was tortured and questioned about graffiti and about other writers⁸⁴. Martin Brščić recalled: “*Once, the Fascists opened fire on us, but fortunately we managed to escape behind walls*”⁸⁵. Anton Buić - Tone described a dramatic experience that he shared with Ivka Vareško and Marija Perković in Marčana:

“While we were writing the last slogan “Rome has fallen, Berlin will fall soon”, the machine gun fired. The moonlight was like daylight and we managed to write around fifteen slogans on houses (...) We were shot by three Fascists who were

80 Ottavio PAOLETIĆ, “Scritte murali eseguite a Pola il 22 febbraio 1944”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 96-98.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Đulio PREMATE, “Osnivanje organizacije USAOH-a i SKOJ-a u južnoj Istri i neke njihove akcije”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 79.

85 Martin BRŠČIĆ, “Djelatnost članova USAOH-a i SKOJ-a u ratnoj općini Juršići”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 127.

*ambushed in the old school on the square. The first burst wounded all three of us (each one with two bullets)."*⁸⁶

They managed to escape somehow, and the wounded Buić took shelter outside of the village. There, he waited until morning, when a woman found him and called for help. The three activists survived.

As the reports of the Kastavština NOO showed, there were disagreements over graffiti writing. It seems that the same problem occurred in other parts of Istria too, between authors and other activists. Thus, Nevenka Borina, a *skojevka* from Lobarika, recounted her experience in detail and pointed to her way of seeing graffiti. Borina recalled in her testimony how she and her comrade Nevija Žmak-Micić, in March 1944, *constantly* wrote graffiti near Lobarika and Pula's airport: "*We were writing during night, and the next day the enemy would overpaint them but we would write them again the next night*"⁸⁷. After mentioning which "slogans" did they wrote - i.e. *Long live Tito, Long live the KPJ, Long live the SKOJ* etc., Borina described a quite interesting situation:

*"We were writing freehand with paint received from Pula, and carried out actions as far as possible from the village so the enemy would not retaliate. I remember that comrade Zenzerović told me once that we can write on the school also, but I opposed because I thought that the whole school and residents of the village would be put in danger because of that. So, all the slogans that we can find in Lobarika were written only after the war, respectively in the period of the Anglo-American military administration in Pula."*⁸⁸

The case described by Borina points to a divergence of perspectives and confirmed the *different* status graffiti had during the war and in the immediate post-war period, as I stressed in the introduction. Besides that, it reveals how the practice of wartime graffiti writing, although organized and instructed, was *negotiated* between different subjects. It reveals how the authors simultaneously followed directives from "above" but maintained certain autonomy "on the ground". The negotiation and/or disagreements took place around the question of the actual sites of graffiti production, and around the position and (in)security of local inhabitants that were not part of the movement and who could have been *affected* by graffiti.

Conclusion

The case of Nevenka Borina practically sums up the central questions of the text. It points how graffiti were perceived, made sense of and experienced in a quite complex way. Graffiti were perceived as "triggers" for Nazi-Fascist retaliation and as "menace" for the collective, as was shown on the example of the Kastavština NOO reports, in Grbac's notes and Borina's protest. Therefore,

86 Anton BUIĆ, Formiranje Općinskog komiteta SKOJ-a za Krnicu i neke akcije, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 133-134.

87 Nevenka BORINA, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 175-176.

88 Ibid.

the practice of graffiti writing was conceived, pragmatically, as a “task that has to be done”, but around which emerged interpretative differences between local leaders, authors and witnesses, between “top-down” and “bottom-up” perspectives. As some cases reported in *Glas Istre* showed, graffiti were depicted as a necessary “weapon” in the struggle and a way to actively participate in the People’s Liberation Movement. As the SKOJ/USAOH activists showed, graffiti were a participative *and* competitive practice for the youth. The *skojevka* Marija Mirković-Đorđević emphasized that the graffiti were also conceived as tools for upsetting and pressuring the occupier, demonstrating to them that the People’s Liberation Movement operates in the territory⁸⁹. In addition to all these layers, and since graffiti were written during anniversaries and particular dates (i.e. anniversary of the Istrian uprising), graffiti writing was a *commemorative* practice too.

In short, it can be concluded that various subjects understood graffiti not only as *communicative*, but also as *performative* acts, which is in line with contemporary graffiti theories. Namely, for Ragazzoli, Harmansah and Salvador, graffiti are social and performative activities, that “register and constitute social relations”⁹⁰. Milinković’s impression of graffiti points to how graffiti not only registered, but constituted the relation between him, “the people” and the social space. Another important theoretical point, is that they “create a dialogue with their reader”⁹¹. For example, the Kastavština NOO reports, Borina’s case and Grbac’s notes showed how the readers can, to borrow from Stuart Hall⁹², “decode” graffiti in different ways - follow the hegemonic discursive line, negotiate their meaning, or take an oppositional stance toward them. In line with the oppositional *and* ideological, Placido Munoz Moran wrote how (political) graffiti activate “different forms of visualities shaped by political ideologies”⁹³. That was the case with the fascist way of seeing graffiti. But, their reading was not oppositional in Hall’s sense of the concept: they read graffiti as counter-hegemonic practices that could endanger *their* hegemonic and power position.

As for the authors of graffiti, the ways in which they depicted their experiences suggests that the practice of graffiti writing was an emotionally and psychologically intense, hazardous life-threatening experience, pervaded by risks and insecurity, but fostered by a strong sense of duty and unity, by mutual support among activists, underpinned by a defined military and political goal and, I would say, fueled by *combative idealism*. Finally, it seems that it was understood as an *emancipative* practice. This complex “feeling” was condensed

89 Marija MIRKOVIĆ-ĐORĐEVIĆ, “Formiranje organizacije USAOH-a i SKOJ-a na Punteri u veljači 1944. godine”, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 119.

90 Chloé RAGAZZOLI, Ōmür HARMANSAH and Chiara SALVADOR, “Introduction”, 12.

91 Ibid.

92 Stuart HALL, Encoding, decoding. In: *The Cultural Studies Reader (Second Edition)*, ed Simon DURING, London & New York: Routledge, 2001.

93 Placido MUNOZ MORAN, “The graffiti texture in Barcelona: An ethnography of public space and its surfaces”, PhD Thesis. Manchester: University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities, 2015, 24.

in a phrase of the *skojevac* Romano Kumar who said that for him, the end of the war meant a start of a new period: that of the “*realization of those slogans that, at risk of life, I had written on walls: Union of peoples – brotherhood – equal rights for all nations and nationalities within the F.P.R.Y.*”⁹⁴.

Finally, as various subjects indicated, graffiti writing was a widespread and intensive practice during World War II in Istria. It could be said that graffiti actually “permeated” the *everyday* life of authors, NOP activists, Partisans, local inhabitants and Nazi-Fascist forces. Graffiti were actively and constantly re-shaping the landscape, constituting and disrupting social relations, fueling cooperations and conflicts. So, to understand and study these graffiti in the context of their production, means to “zoom” and focus on a phenomenon that, on first sight, could seem marginal and uniform, but when it is looked at more carefully reveals different subjectivities and relations, and offer a vivid, complex account of wartime everyday life. The relation between the perspectives or, in Munoz Moran’s words, different forms of visualities that I’ve analyzed, points to a broad range of different meanings attributed to graffiti that are (re)shaped and negotiated by particular ideological positions and experiences, but framed in the fragile, scattered wartime everyday; meanings that reflect or, better said, reveal the fragments of the elusive “lived experience”, both collective and individual. To try to understand it only from one point of view, would be a reductive and flawed approach.

94 Romano KUMAR, L’attività del Comitato cittadino dello SKOJ di Pola, in: Davor MANDIĆ ed., *Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u južnoj Istri : (1918-1945)*, 89.

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Sažetak

ISTARSKI GRAFITI U DRUGOM SVJETSKOM RATU - ZNAČENJA I ISKUSTVA

Eric UŠIĆ

Tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata, ispisivanje grafita bila je specifična praksa Narodnooslobodilačkoga pokreta. U ovom članku analiziram značenja i iskustva grafitiranja, polazeći od tri središnja i međupovezana pitanja: kako su organizacije NOP-a koncipirale i interpretirale grafitiranje, kako su praksu ispisivanja reprezentirali partizanski mediji (*Glas Istre*), te kako su akcije grafitiranja shvaćali i doživljavali autori i svjedoci? Članak je fokusiran na Istru, na tri razine/studije slučaja koje su povezane s istraživačkim pitanjima: u članku analiziram izvještaje Narodnooslobodilačkog odbora Kastavštine, članke ratnih brojeva Glasa Istre, te sjećanja i iskustva autora grafita i njima bliskih subjekata. Značenja grafita i prakse ispisivanja bila su višeslojna, na različite načine artikulirana od različitih društvenih i ideoloških pozicija: grafiti su percipirani kao simbolička “borbena sredstva” antifašističkoga pokreta, kao načini participacije u borbi, kao načini komunikacije NOP-a, te kao prijetnja za lokalne zajednice. Za autore grafita, praksa ispisivanja bila je emocionalno i psihološko intenzivno, po život opasno iskustvo.

