



YUGOSLAVIA



Goli Otok: Island of Death

Venko Markowski

In this memoir, VENKO MARKOWSKI (1915–88) sheds light on the little-known repression in Tito’s Yugoslavia that was directed at Communists loyal to the Soviet Union following the break between Tito and Stalin in 1948. At that time, Yugoslavia chose a path of “national communism” and independence from the dictates and influence of Moscow. Consequently, “Titoist” and “Titoism” became the most common terms of political abuse in every Soviet bloc country and figured prominently among the accusations put forward in the East European show trials.

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Markowski, a poet and avowed supporter of the Soviet Union, was charged with inciting antigovernment feeling in one of his poems. He was sentenced in 1956 and released in 1961. Between 1965 and 1988 he lived in Bulgaria, where he was a member of the parliament between 1971 and 1988.

Tito's government chose the inhospitable, barren island of Goli Otok in the Adriatic to imprison its political prisoners. Markowski's account reveals that the mistreatment meted out by UDBA (the Yugoslav political police) rivaled similar practices in the Soviet Union and other Communist states.

According to the author, even after the normalization of relations between the two countries (under Khrushchev) pro-Soviet prisoners remained imprisoned on Goli Otok.

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Letter Eight

You ask where I am. I am on Goli Otok. Until 1948 no one even knew that such a place existed. It is an island in the Adriatic, an island that is subjected to strange and changeable weather. If there is a storm brewing, even in the heat of summer, it is as cold as winter here. But if it is sunny, even in the midst of a severe winter, it is like the hottest of summers. The island is nothing but rocks, rocks that are enveloped in a spectral silence during our blood-red sunsets. The sinister squawking of the seagulls tears the silence like a knife. The mute sea suddenly falls calm, and for a moment one feels lost in the most terrifying corner of the world's most awful dungeon. One feels as if one has entered the anteroom of a terrestrial hell. . . .

It is possible for such an inhuman jail to be hidden from human eyes in the middle of the twentieth century? Can this have occurred in a country whose leaders fought for a brighter future, for the happiness of their people, for equality among all those people?

What in fact is Goli Otok? What is its history? Did Satan himself come to earth to create it? Is man such a hellish creature that he can create this diabolical inferno?

Shadows—not real human beings—dwell on Goli Otok; shadows of our former freedom fighters. On Goli Otok human beings are reduced to things, to numbers; they are treated as mere quantities; they live in rags and tatters. From dawn to dusk a sorrowful train of people moves back and forth across the desert that is Goli Otok. Their eyes are sunken; their hands have been broken in inhuman toiling. Their legs drag as if bound by heavy chains. Their heads are bent low. They don't talk, they don't even look around. Each of these shadows is a loose page torn from a shattered life.

Who are these people? Where have they come from? What crime did they commit? Are they really criminals? It appears that they have committed the most heinous of crimes. When the Nazi villains invaded their country they fought the invader with their bare hands. They robbed the invader of his weapons and took to the paths of the partisan movement. They have come to Goli Otok from every part of the country. Their crime is that in front of their relatives, before the investigating authorities, and at their trials, they stated openly and clearly that they stand firmly by the Soviet Union, and that the Soviet Union and its peoples have brought light to mankind and saved humanity from the cruel Nazi pestilence. Those sent to Goli Otok are the bravest of the brave, the most resolute; they are the bricklayers of the revolution. And in the dark of night, while they were asleep, the UDBA agents came to seize them, dragged them from their homes, and hurled them pitilessly to the butchers who humiliate them, degrade their most sacred feelings, deprive them of their very humanity. Many of them have already been swallowed up by the sea. Many others lie half-buried under the stones on Grgur Island. Many were clubbed with planks and spades out in the open during the night and then thrown into pits to die. When the sea is calm and the waves drop off to sleep, the cries of those who still cling to life can be heard. . . .

Not even Hitler treated his enemies in this way. Nero did not slaughter the Christians as cruelly. Where did such malice come from? The people who perpetrated these dark deeds fought side by side with their victims against the common enemy. Which hand will bring them together in an anonymous mass grave? Which hand will place the gravestone? Which will engrave their names on a cold marble slab?

As time passes, they begin to fade in my consciousness. . . . They seem apparitions in a frightening dream. . . . Inhabitants of some awful desert. . . . Men who have come to this most terrible corner of the earth to pour out all the anguish and suffering they have experienced.

Goli Otok is populated with ghosts. Here the air is as heavy as cold steel. Everything is ugly and frightening. As if speaking in some mute, fateful language, everything says: we were once alive, but now we are dead; we were happy once, but now we are filled with grief; we were once a rushing river, but now we are a stagnant swamp, a mournful desert.

The criminal has stolen everything from these brave men, smothering their brave souls. But he has not been able to rob them of their belief, the belief that they shall yet see the end of the one who has committed this terrible crime against them. He has not managed to crush their hope that they will live to see their Pilate disgraced. This contemporary Pilate wears snow-white gloves to hide his bloodstained hands. He lines the country's roads with virginal flowers, while slowly, cruelly, he kills his weak, shackled victims.

Time is an unforgiving judge. The farther away an event is, the more strongly and strikingly it shakes our memory, pervading the secret corners of

our souls. It embraces our life and as if it had happened yesterday. Everything comes alive, everything calls for revenge, everything looks to the day of judgment.

There is no mound big enough to hide the truth. Truth cannot be substituted for a lie. Lies are the ornaments of Pharisees. The lie is the sister of calumny. Many witnesses can be coerced into silence, but not time. What has occurred lives on in the book of memory. The book of the past lives in the blood, and the language of the blood is frightening. Silence echoes loudly; it echoes and grows powerful, becoming a kind of conscience. And this conscience saw the murderer in that evil hour when he stabbed his victim in the back.

Here, at Goli Otok, there are professors and students; young men and broken old men; workers and peasants; generals and soldiers; public figures and former statesmen; ex-ministers and Party leaders. . . .

Also at Goli Otok is that peasant who, after selling his wheat at the market, went to a tavern for a drink. A stranger asked him: "Uncle, if you have two glasses, one of which is Russia and full, the other of which is Yugoslavia and empty, from which one would you drink?" "From the full one, of course," he answered.

That man had never been involved in politics.

Also at Goli Otok is the colonel who said that Jovanka's legs were sexy. And also the general who was betrayed by his own small children for shooting at the portrait of the supreme commander.

A terrible, cruel, and inhuman system reigns at Goli Otok. Only after the individual has been sentenced does the inquest begin. On Goli Otok it was largely the prisoners themselves—those apostates who had submitted utterly to the will of the authorities—who were used to break the others, to destroy the honor and decency they were trying to preserve. At first many of the "trustees" had been honorable people who struggled against the insidious pressure brought to bear on them by the Goli Otok system. At first they would have preferred to have their necks broken on the rocks rather than show even a moment's weakness before the authorities. But gradually, little by little, they were worn down; they submitted and accepted as the truth those things they knew to be false.

After the normalization of relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, it became increasingly difficult for even the most committed of Communists to continue their resistance. Many of them became disheartened and started to "repent." But a minority held fast to their convictions. To help them resist the enormous psychological pressure to which they were subjected, they began to turn toward China. For them this was a time of epic struggle; struggle between truth and fraud. They knew that a deceitful sham was being perpetrated, but could not fully grasp how something of this magnitude had come about. Perhaps they had been deluded from the very beginning. Had the extraordinary victory of the national liberation struggle led them to believe in

impossible ideals? They realized that something out of the ordinary was taking place but were unable to grasp its exact nature. But, as time passed and the "normalization" of Yugoslav-Soviet relations did not bring about their release from the "Wire" (this is how the inmates referred to the inside of the Goli Otok jail), they realized that it had all been a fraud.

Later, when the French Communist Party demanded the liberation of political prisoners in Yugoslavia, the prisoners at Goli Otok understood that they had been wrong to waver in their faith in the USSR. Khrushchev had misled not only the Soviet Union, but all the parties that believed in the Bolshevik Party, the Party of Lenin. When Mao Tse-tung turned against the Soviet Union and looked for support from the LYC, the number of apostates at Goli Otok decreased. Their belief in the Soviet Union grew stronger and they became more united, more tenacious, more committed to their ideals. The number of "bandits" again increased ("bandit" is the name given to a prisoner who from the beginning to the end of his sentence remains intransigently opposed to the authorities).

Darkness cannot hide the deeds of men. Water doesn't wash away the stains. . . .

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Letter Nine

Guarded by policemen and agents we disembarked at Goli Otok. As we get off the ship we are greeted by a large group of convicts. They kick us and beat us. UDBA agents move about, seemingly prepared to cope with any emergency. Our reception party fills the air with roars and threats, and above it all one hears a howl more terrible than that of a hungry wolf.

Not even the Roman emperors treated their victims in this manner. Even the madman Caligula cannot be accused of having brutalized his subordinates and prisoners of war like this. To encourage the Romans to rise up and destroy the gladiators, Praetor Licinius Cras first plunged his dagger into Roman blood. In order to destroy communism in Yugoslavia, Tito, the secretary of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, destroys and humiliates Yugoslavia's most worthy sons. Among the prisoners on Goli Otok I recognize the leaders of the First Proletarian Brigade, from which the Yugoslav army later emerged. Here are the brave men of Sumadija's battalion. Here are the worthiest members of the Partisan movement.

Even the most shameful and degrading exile in the time of the Roman Empire was lighter and more humane than exile to Goli Otok. The great Roman poet Ovid, author of the *Metamorphosis*, was treated far better during his imprisonment. He was able to write his wonderful *Pontiki* during his exile in Dobrudja, on the Black Sea coast. On Goli Otok every lyre is muted. All in-

spiration is suffocated. Among the thousands who perished here was Yugoslavia's talented lyricist Veles Peric. Another poet, Marko Vranesevic, who had already served time on Goli Otok, killed himself to avoid arrest by UDBA and a return trip to Goli Otok. Many of the prisoners on Goli Otok were utterly emaciated specters, too weak to lift a stone big enough to crush their skulls.

We new convicts were forced to run between two rows of men. As we ran, these crazed and enraged men poured buckets of filth on us, threw stones, spit, even whipped us. And all the time they cursed and threatened us: "Bow your heads, you bandits! This is your final home; none of you will leave here alive."

As the blows rain down upon us, our steps become slower and heavier. One of us falls and the rest of us quickly run over him; we are being chased like a herd of wild animals. The tide of running men carries me along. One moment I too am almost trampled underfoot, the next I almost break free of the surging crowd. My thoughts are scattered and I cannot collect them. I am terribly agitated and cannot calm myself. I try to breathe in deeply, but lose my wind. One of the men in the gauntlet prods me in the ribs while another kicks me.

We are being chased along a steep rocky path. The sharp pointed stones pierce our leather soles. Our feet begin to bleed. Now none of us utters a word. Everyone has joined in beating us—convicts, commanders, policemen, UDBA agents. One of those standing in the gauntlet aims a blow at one of us new arrivals but then doesn't hit with all his might. Immediately they start to beat him too, because he showed a momentary weakness, because his blow was less than wholehearted. Why did this one man show mercy? Did he recognize an old Partisan comrade at whose side he had fought? Or did he recognize a friend with whom he had worked, shared his last penny, made plans for a better, happier, more human life?

Suddenly I spotted my old friend Moma Djurić among the convicts. I could not believe my eyes. Sharp questions tore at my brain. Can he really be here as well? But wasn't he the commander of the Marshal's bodyguard? What is happening here? One can hardly know whom one will encounter next.

I felt that time itself had run off the rails. It was as if the earth had suddenly opened up, sky and earth fusing together to avoid seeing this frightful human tragedy.

The silence grows more and more oppressive. Ugly clouds press close against us and furious waves slam against the island's shore. The island is dead and mute. I hear only the sound of feet pounding across the sharp rocks.

Everything is forbidden us at Goli Otok. It is forbidden to look around, to listen, and, of course, to speak. Even sighing is forbidden us. A single word can be punished by a whip, a fist, or by brass knuckles. The gauntlet seemed endless. As we ran it seemed to get longer, steeper, harder to traverse. Our hearts beat out an irregular pulse; it was as if icy hands were about to rip them out.

Our brains boiled as if they had landed in hell's fiery furnace. My eyes saw nothing, as if a thick fog had suddenly enveloped us.

Suddenly, like a sharp bayonet, a siren pierced the awful loneliness. Everyone was startled; everyone wondered where the noise was coming from. Soon the mystery was solved. Another steamer full of people was coming from Rijeka. The wail of the ship's sirens drowned out the screams of its frenzied cargo. Some of the passengers refused to disembark, their sharp cries piercing the air. "Where are you taking us? We won't go any further!"

Pistol shots rang out, the sea was stained with human blood. I heard desperate shouts: "Have mercy. I can't breathe. My hand is shattered. I am not a criminal. Stop, you murderers!" But nobody replied.

The guards forced the passengers onto the beach; those who refused to move were simply tossed off the ship like sacks of flour. The new prisoners are shaking with terror; brand new wrinkles lace their foreheads; one man's hair has turned white during the trip here. Tormented, driven mad by the tortures they have suffered, they laugh sinisterly and rend their clothing, spitting and cursing.

What have we come to? Torturing our own children as if they were cattle, harnessing them to a heavy yoke and dispersing them to these monstrous islands. Blue sea, open your unplumbed deep and swallow us. Why should the rocks, the sea, the birds mock our fate? Return our conscience! You villains, you stole it at night in the cells, but the cells are more human than you; their dark corners protect us. You robbed our hearts, but our faith will live on even in these ravaged hearts. That faith glows and broadens; its flames will burn all this dirt to ashes. The agents and the policemen are shaking; indeed, the stones themselves are shuddering too. For nobody can come near the newcomers. They are as dreadful as erupting lava, as strong as lightning; as violent as the merciless elements. Their anger is the anger of those who have been deceived. Their revenge is the revenge of villages that have been burned down and pillaged. Everything is struck dumb in their presence. Their eyes blaze like fierce bayonets; behind their silent mouths hide broken human traces. . . . The moaning of their souls echoes cries from time immemorial.

Who will demand just revenge for all their suffering? Who will take them by the hand and lead them back to their burnt and deserted homes, as a mother leads her child? Sinister birds call above their deserted hearths. Even the most evil of curs were struck dumb in front of the scoundrels from UDBA.

Lawlessness reigns from Rijeka to the Dojran Lake and anyone who raises his voice in protest is immediately crushed. The villages remember, remember the burned houses, remember the devastated huts and hovels, the torn shirts of the people, remember the mothers dressed in mourning cursing their fate. Even the plague took pity on children. Even our invaders spared the children when they burned and pillaged our villages. Even the Ottoman yatagan, which fell on the heads of rebellious men and women, made an exception for the

FROM THE GULAG TO THE KILLING FIELDS

children. But these twentieth-century cannibals have long since forgotten family and kin. They are as ready to kill their own families as they are to betray their motherland.

The evening falls, keeping one eye open. Blood-stained, the Adriatic is calm. The moon passes by astounded; fearing the ugly sight, it doesn't look down. Our heroes have fallen without benefit of arms to defend themselves. Sad words echo through the darkness. A sorrowing Yugoslavia mourns and searches for its kidnapped children. The sobs are laced with Montenegrin, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Slovenian curses, curses that recall the conjurations of earlier centuries, when the people rose up against the wild invaders. This long and wordless song in the eerie silence re-invigorates the weak. It restores some light to their smashed faces, and revives the faith that had been prostrated.

Wrapped in a blood-stained cloak, Goli Otok sinks into an uneasy silence. People sleep wide awake. Songs and sad psalms seem to emerge from the depths, as if in Old Testament vigils. Our worn-out souls lose themselves in dreaming, secretly singing and pouring out their sadness. The stars weep with grief, and their tears turn into dew and shine on the cool stones. The night has hardly come and it is already over. The stars have hardly come up when they dim and disappear. The siren has hardly signaled sleep and now it is hooting, roaring, thundering, resounding over rocks and sea and waking the dead-tired eyelids. The new day begins with the tortures that are particular to Goli Otok. . . .