

Destroyed in War, Colossal Croatian Anti-Fascist Monument Recreated as Art

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Kamenska

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A 30-metre-high monument by sculptor Vojin Bakic celebrating the World War II defeat of fascism was blown up during the 1990s war in Croatia, but it's now been recreated as an electronic art installation, with enthusiastic help from locals.

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From the main road that passes through the abandoned village of Kamenska in Croatia's Pozega-Slavonia county, a turnoff leads up towards the plateau where the Yugoslav-era Monument to the Victory of the People of Slavonia used to stand.

The road had been covered over with bushes and vegetation for years. But recently, it was cleared, and the cracked asphalt leading to the top of the hill was revealed under the fallen trees and foliage.

There has been no monument on the massive concrete pedestal near Kamenska for a long time. It was blown up by the Croatian armed forces in February 1992, during the war for independence from Yugoslavia.

Last Saturday however, scaffolding was erected to support a 20-metre-tall LED screen on which an image recreating the former monument was displayed. As it turned out, however, the original sculpture had not been erased from the memories of people living in the area.

The Monument to the Victory of the People of Slavonia, created by sculptor Vojin Bakic, was colossal, took a decade to build and was finally completed in 1968. It was one of around 3,000 monuments in Croatia dedicated to the anti-fascist struggle led by Josip Broz Tito's Communist Partisan movement during World War II that were demolished during the 1991-95 war.

As Croats fought for independence, their desire to renounce the Yugoslav past and forget communism led to the removal of anti-fascist monuments, often with the help of explosives.

The monument created by Bakic on the slopes of mount Papuk in Slavonia was one of the largest and undoubtedly the most artistically significant to be destroyed.

But on Saturday evening, it reappeared in the electronic art installation that was realised using augmented reality techniques. Hundreds of local residents and anti-fascists, as well as visitors from other parts of Croatia, gathered at the site to see its inauguration.



Milorad Pupovac at the opening of the installation. Photo: Vuk Tesija.

The installation created by multimedia artist Sandro Djukic and curator Davorka Peric, a project called ‘The Silence that Brought Down the Monument’, was initiated by Milorad Pupovac, president of the Serbian National Council, the organisation that represents minority Serbs’ interests in Croatia.

“This monument is such a great work of art on a global scale and great in historical times, so it was a duty to ‘bring it back’, even if it was a virtual creation,” Pupovac told BIRN.

“The monument combines unique beauty and strong morality, so we restored it,” he added.

He explained that the project was realised with funds from the Croatian state budget and the government’s Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities.

Saturday’s event was attended by many members of the Croatian Serb community in Croatia, as well as Budimir Loncar, the last foreign minister of Yugoslavia, who joined the Partisan movement as a 17-year-old.

Curator Peric told BIRN that she was glad that so many local people attended the opening. Many locals remember how the illuminated sculpture gleamed so much at night that it could show them their way home in the darkness.

“The sculpture remained inscribed in people’s consciousness. That’s why they came,” Peric said.

After the scaffolding is dismantled and the LED screen removed, a QR code will remain at the site that visitors can scan and see how the sculpture once looked on their phones.

‘Something fantastic happened’



The installation was created by multimedia artist Sandro Djukic. Photo: Vuk Tesija.

Bakic's monument had an ideological purpose, but it also reflected progressive currents within Yugoslav society, and was significant for the local population because it brought artistic modernism to this rural area and suggested that modernisation was coming.

"What is specific when we talk about Bakic and this monument, he was actually terribly radical at the moment when he built it, in a positive sense. He started a new abstract form," Djukic, the artist responsible for the execution of the project, told BIRN.



When the monument was built, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Yugoslavia wanted to show it could use its knowledge and technology to create a place for community rituals, believes Djukic. "I think it succeeded," he said. Local people would come to have celebratory souvenir photos taken in front of the monument after weddings. But in the years after it was demolished, the site was abandoned to nature.

"Until we got here, the road to the monument was impassable. We hired some machinery, but then something fantastic happened. Local people came to help," said Djukic. "There were about 50 people who came with their tools, rakes, shovels..."

Many locals still have photos from the site in their family albums, he explained. "So there are still people who are bound by the memories and rituals that happened there."

Djukic remains astounded that artistically-important monuments like the one designed by Bakic were destroyed during the 1990s war.

“We had places in Dalmatia where people blew up monuments bearing the name of their grandfather, a Partisan. We can understand that there was a period of madness, but something like this monument goes beyond that,” he said.

“It is definitely an anti-fascist monument, that is its primary function... [but] it had an artistic value that crossed the local border, absolutely.”

Villages without people



Dragan and Ljubica Trglavcnik, summertime residents of the village of Sazije. Photo: Vuk Tesija

The mountains surrounding the town of Pozega were strongholds of the Partisan movement during World War II, and a refuge for thousands of Serb civilians who were fleeing persecution by the Ustasa, the army of the quisling state at the time, the so-called Independent Croatian state, where racial laws were implemented against Jews, Serbs and Roma people.

Today, the villages in this part of Croatia are mostly half-empty, populated mainly by elderly people, or completely abandoned, like Kamenska. Pozega is the regional centre of Pozega-Slavonia County, but as one gets further away from the town, the more obvious the depopulation becomes.

In the village of Sazije, less than a kilometre from the monument, most of the houses are empty and some are crumbling. An old ruined house with a tree growing out of it stands next to it a nearly-renovated property where no one lives.

Sprightly 70-year-olds Ljubica and Dragan Trglavcnik are part-time residents of the village.

“Last year, two young men came and asked about the monument. Art historians from Belgium carry a photo of the monument and ask how to get to it. I told them ‘no way’ ... They tried to go up the road but failed,” said Ljubica Trglavcnik.

“When I told them that there was no monument and that there was a war and it was demolished, they were surprised,” she added.

Although she still returns every summer, she left to live in Belgrade long before the war. Life in the village was very different then, her husband Dragan recalled.

“You know how rich the neighbourhood was? Livestock fair every Wednesday, cattle, sheep, piglets, grain, corn... the country benefitted so much from this area,” he said.

“The milk tanker used to come every morning for purchase, and now we import all that,” he added.

The couple have five grandchildren; one daughter lives in Canada. This is now a common story in the Balkans: rural villages dying out and families whose members are scattered around the world, from Melbourne to Ottawa.

People no longer want to live in villages like Sazije, where a house with three bedrooms was recently sold for the meagre price of 14,000 euros, Ljubica Trglavcnik explained.

“This village is also dying out, we come and stay over the summer for three months. There are some old people and the rest of the houses are empty.”

In 1991, the year the war started, 40 people lived in Kamenska, the village nearest to the huge monument. Now there is no one, and no monument either.

However, the importance of sculptor Bakic’s art lives on, Milorad Pupovac said at Saturday’s inauguration of the new installation. “But we, who were left without a unique work of art, have lost out,” he lamented.

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