

Warfare with songbooks

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In its implementation, war, any war, is “a social activity of collective violence” (Sylvester 2013, 65). Every such regime of violence creates a wide variety of experiences. At the same time, people, because of their affinities, belief systems, mutual ties and relationships, influence the institution of war (Sylvester 2013, 4). Some of their activities may even seem to contradict common preconceptions about war. For instance, the focus of my current research is the Yugoslav theater of the Second World War,¹ particularly the People’s Liberation Struggle.² I am examining the activities of the participants of this antifascist resistance movement from the perspective of having fun. While it might seem antithetical to it, fun is part and parcel of war, and it was an essential component of the People’s Liberation Struggle. In addition, in the words of sociologist Gary Alan Fine, “[a]ll leisure worlds are material worlds” (Fine 1989, 332). That is, in order for a group of people to engage in a leisure activity, it is necessary to take care of an array of resources, including material means. For instance, in spite of the raging war and shortages of everything from food and clothes to arms and ammunition, materials that would facilitate leisure-related activities – such as songbooks– were in high demand in World War II Yugoslavia. In fact, it seems that the war-themed music –created by Partisan soldiers and civilians, most of them peasants, but also by educated musicians and poets, and imported, primarily from the Soviet Union– was in such a high demand that the local representatives of the Partisan forces never had enough printed material for everyone. Reciprocity both of pursuits and of affinities between the officials who considered it important to write down or collect and print songs about the People’s Liberation Struggle and the locals in search of means for education and entertainment are the focus of this text.

1 This text is based on the research conducted through the ERC project “War & Fun: Reconceptualizing warfare and its experience” (WARFUN), hosted by Christian Michelsen Institute (Bergen, Norway).

2 The People’s Liberation Struggle [Narodnooslobodilačka borba, NOB] is the name of the armed resistance of the United People’s Liberation Front of Yugoslavia [Ujedinjeni narodnooslobodilački front Jugoslavije, JNOF] and the Partisan military units against foreign occupying forces, Germany and Italy, and their domestic collaborators in the territory of Yugoslavia during the Second World War (1941-1945). The Communist Party of Yugoslavia [Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, KPJ], led by Josip Broz Tito, played a leading role.

The longer the war went on, the better organized the antifascist resistance movement in Yugoslavia became. Because of that, more and more active participants could become part of the administration of this guerilla force that had ambitions to create a new state. On the territory of the Independent State of Croatia [Nezavisna država Hrvatska, 1941-1945], the State Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia [Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske, ZAVNOH] established in the beginning of 1943 became the main administrative body of the resistance.³ At the time of the founding of this council, more than 1,600 People's Liberation Committees, local administrative offices, were already functioning on the territory of Croatia. So, the State Antifascist Council became "the first and highest People's Liberation Committee of Croatia, responsible for the overall further development of the people's government" (Sirotković 1973, 49). Performing the functions that were intended for it by the communist leadership as well as imposed by daily practice, this body oversaw the organization of the entire life in the home front, which included but was not limited to the organization of administration, judiciary, economic life, health services, education, and handling the evacuation of the civilians and care for them in the event of an enemy invasion.

It, of course, also sought to broaden the appeal of the Partisan antifascist resistance through so-called cultural and educational work. Because of this, the propaganda department [Propodjel] was among its first established sections (Sirotković 1971, 28).⁴ In general, its wartime activity was meant to be analogous to the work of such departments in other Yugoslav territories. Differences typically arose only due to uneven development of the resistance with stronger activities in areas with a greater concentration of military resistance forces and where civilians better accepted their presence. In addition, specific forms of cultural production were the product of varying political and cultural circumstances in which individual ethnic and religious groups of Yugoslavia developed (Petranović 1988, 357-358). The people in charge of the cultural and educational activities were primarily concerned with raising the basic educational and cultural level of the population, especially through the elimination of illiteracy. Wall, oral and, of course, printed newspapers as well as innumerable brochures and books were published with the same aim in mind. In addition, acting groups, bands and choirs that prepared their own performances and participated in celebrations were

³ It is important to note that the Ustasha-led Independent State of Croatia included most of the Croatian territory and Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, in the state-building processes of the Yugoslav antifascist resistance movement, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were viewed as two separate state units. Accordingly, the State Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Bosnia-Herzegovina [Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine] was responsible for the liberated territories within B-H state borders.

⁴ Apart from the propaganda department, there were educational, health and social departments, as well as the department for administration and judiciary.

supposed to entertain the civilians and, in that way, get them interested to support the People's Liberation Struggle. Therefore, even songbooks featured political messages. The State Antifascist Council in Croatia, as well as its local representatives, printed songs, as it was succinctly explained in the letter from Bjelovar, through which “the masses will get to know our struggle and our songs better.”⁵

Yet, the songbooks were a product of a broadly conceived collaborative process. The most exemplary in this regard is a collection entitled after one of the songs popular among the Partisans' supporters, *Comrade Tito, White Violet* [Druže Tito, ljubičice bijela] (Figure 1). In the end of 1943, teacher, and poet Đuka (Đuro) Kosak and Milan Apih, the head of the cultural and artistic department⁶ of the *Propodjel* at the time, came up with the idea to collect and publish the songs sung by Partisan soldiers and civilians. They sent a request to the People's Liberation Committees and military units to collect popular Partisan songs. Kosak and poet Vladimir Popović processed the received material, mostly rhyming folk couplets. They made an effort to match thematically similar ones and combine them into longer poems, and at times they made some stylistic changes in the texts as well. According to Kosak,

[w]hen two or three couplets formed a whole, we wanted to connect them with those that were similar, so if they needed ‘plaster,’ we ‘plastered’ them, tied them together; and if it was necessary to complete them, to put a roof on the building, we put it on (Bošković-Stulli 1960, 396).

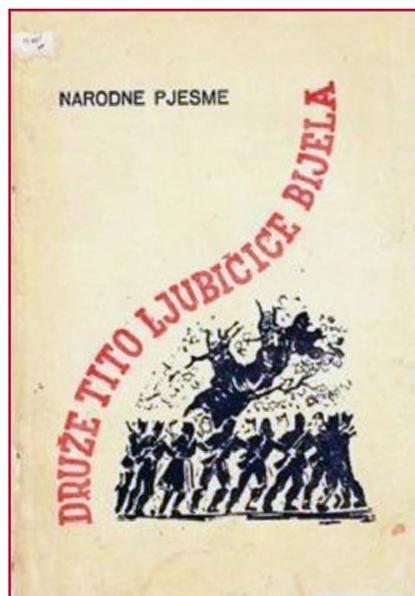


Figure 1. Songbook *Comrade Tito, White Violet* [Druže Tito, ljubičice bijela], edited by Đuka Kosak and Vladimir Popović and published in 1944.

⁵ “A note of the District *Propodjel* of Bjelovar to the ZAVNOH’s Cultural-Artistic section,” 24 December 1944, box 53, HR-HDA-207-ZAVNOH (1943.-1945.), *Hrvatski državni arhiv* (HDA).

⁶ The *Propodjel* of the State Antifascist Council had two branches, the political-propaganda section and the cultural-artistic section. The first managed written and oral propaganda through the publication of newsletters and radio reports, and the organization of events such as conferences, public discussions, and so-called oral newspapers. Cultural and artistic section encompassed activities related to any type of artistic expression (theatrical art, literature, visual arts, music) and the related happenings.

Importantly, composer Natko Devčić worked with Vladimir Popović on another seminal collection published by the State Antifascist Committee that was entitled *Our Songs* [Naše pjesme] (the first volume first printed in 1944 [Figure 2], and then in 1945 [Figure 3]). These songbooks also included the anthems of Yugoslavia and the republic of Croatia, revolutionary songs from different parts of the emerging country as well as some written and composed by music professionals, and music notation. For example, there was *Fall, (oh) might and injustice* [Padaj silo i nepravdo] a 1922 revolutionary song inspired by the 16th century Hvar Rebellion, and a jocular marching song *Mitraljeza*⁷ –“Kata left me, then Anđa, then Reza / But the one who never left me is my *mitraljeza*” the text seemed to cheer –written by the then most famous author among the Partisans, Vladimir Nazor, and set to music by Devčić himself.



Figure 2. Songbook *Our Songs* [Naše pjesme], edited by Natko Devčić and Vladimir Popović and published in 1944.

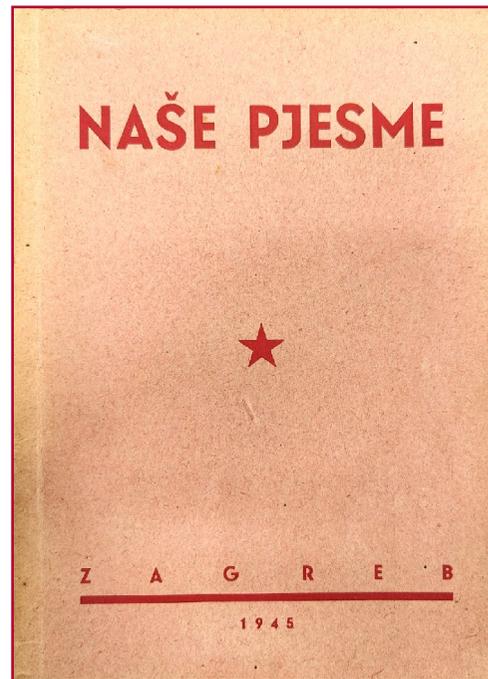


Figure 3. Second edition of the songbook *Our Songs* [Naše pjesme], published in the second half of 1945.

⁷ *Mitraljez* in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages means “machine gun”. By adding the letter ‘a’ at the end of the noun, otherwise nonexistent form, it becomes feminine.

Due to its relevance in the emerging system, the State Antifascist Council in Croatian territories was since its creation the recipient of a flurry of requests for all kinds of aid, particularly material support. Its collection in the Croatian State Archives is overflowing with notes in which various People's Liberation Committees sought help from the relevant department. The *Propodjel* got its fair share of such notes. In addition to testifying to the degree of development of the resistance movement and its reach, the documents sent to the *Propodjel* also testify to the nature of practiced cultural activities and to the success of the initiatives set in motion "from above". Some undoubtedly indicate that collections of popular wartime songs and their publication responded to the need of many of the resistance's supporters. Moreover, in the absence of published materials or paper on which to write music or text, some local initiatives resorted to creating from memory. As members of the People's Liberation Committee of Primorje wrote in their note to the State Antifascist Council's *Propodjel*, they organized printing of their own songbook equipped only with their "good intentions" that were aimed at contributing to the war effort. Although, by their own admission, the songbook contained a few errors, it nevertheless was in high demand among the local population. What is more, maybe because they had no more paper to print their songbook on or because they wanted a collection of better quality, they inquired if they could get more copies of the songbooks compiled and printed by the Council itself. This "unusually great need" for more and more songbooks was caused by the fact that "old and young sing all day long, wherever you pass you only hear our song".⁸ Similarly, since they did not have paper to (re)print their own songbook, members of the People's Liberation Committee of Pokuplje requested from the State Liberation Committee whatever they could spare because

[...] the need for a good songbook is increasing. Comrades from organizations, the army and various institutions, the youth and others come to us every day and ask us for songs and songbooks.⁹

Notably, the widespread desire to sing together, that is, to participate in joint activities that sometimes only included and sometimes explicitly focused on the pleasure and comfort of music is only hinted at in the mentioned notes. After all, however interesting and, I would dare say, charming these notes are, they are a remnant of a wartime administrative system. Yet, as an entry point into everyday experience of the People's Liberation Struggle, these short notes efficiently highlight how widespread enthusiasm for cultural activities was during the war. The reason

⁸ "A note of the District *Propodjel* of Primorje to the ZAVNOH's Cultural-Artistic Section," 14 August 1944, box 31, HR-HDA-207-ZAVNOH (1943.-1945.), *Hrvatski državni arhiv* (HDA).

⁹ "A note of the District *Propodjel* of Pokuplje to the ZAVNOH's Cultural-Artistic Section," 25 November 1944, box 34, HR-HDA-207-ZAVNOH (1943.-1945.), *Hrvatski državni arhiv* (HDA).

for that may have been that those songbooks, just like cultural activities in general, enabled people to replace fear and pain at least temporarily with enjoyment and share it with their friends and comrades. But also, because the content of the songs they learned and sang was adapted to the wartime circumstances and guided by the demands of politics and ideology, shared fun could include the sensation of hope in the better future as well. The editors of the songbook *Naše pjesme* may not have been exaggerating too much when in the introduction they wrote that:

there is no matter of our Partisan reality, to which the people have not found an answer in the song” which made them “songs of struggle, songs of new want and new life (Popović 1944, 3).

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