

## **Tracing Oblivion: The Ustaše Concentration Camp System of Gospić-Jadovno-Slana**

**Dates: 2022-2023**

During the Second World War, the Independent State of Croatia and the Ustaše promoted and organized the genocide of ethnic and religious minorities within its territory, as well as the systematic repression of political opponents. Since the 1990s, many of the sites related to this process were destroyed or were subjected to oblivion, whereas the memories of organized violence were marginalized and silenced. Memorials built after 1945 to commemorate victims of fascism were specifically targeted in this context and continue to be threatened by politically inspired acts of destruction. Similarly, the preservation of sites of former concentration camps has been neglected by state authorities and their material traces risk to disappear under the threat of unregulated tourism, urban development, and agricultural works.

The memory of camp sites such as Slana, organized in 1941 by the Ustaše on the island of Pag, has oscillated between state-sponsored narratives and local or individual perspectives. Local perspectives tended to be more resilient, and often clashed with initiatives pursued by heritage institutions and researchers. The significance of stories that get to be told about the camps are constantly disputed and negotiated in the public sphere, subjected to historical and political contexts. Yet, the materiality of those camps grounds the society's relationship with the history and memory of genocidal practices. In this project, we challenge the transformation of Slana into a blind spot of Croatia's contemporary society. Despite the publication of memoirs, documents, journalistic and academic research about the history of this Ustaše camp, state authorities and heritage institutions are reluctant to acknowledge its existence and encourage the transformation of Slana into a site of remembrance and the commemoration of its victims. By documenting and studying the camp, as well as discourses produced about the camp, we aim to promote its preservation and encourage conversations about the role of such sites in ongoing debates about human rights and democracy.

The project's research team consists of a group of heritage professionals with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This team critically mobilizes concepts and methods of archaeology, anthropology, art history, and cultural studies to work with multiple stakeholders, including descendants of victims and the local community, in the definition of an open, collaborative research agenda. So far, the team has shown that the traces of Slana's concentration camp might take many forms: they might be small things lost under rocks, pieces of broken memorial plaques or fascist graffiti on monuments, or memories that have remained private since the war. Each one of these traces carries a transformative potential.

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