



MARSHAL TITO SQUARE

Zagreb, Croatia

43.5090, 16.4346



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Executive Summary

The Republic of Croatia Square in Zagreb has been renamed numerous times since the 20th century. Although its geographical place name sometimes referred to it, it was most well-known as the Square of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After Croatia's independence in 1991, the perception of the communist era and Tito's legacy began to change and aroused controversy. Since 2006, the group Circle for the Square has organised regular protests to urge city officials to rename it. In 2017, Milan Bandić, the former mayor of Zagreb, promised to conduct a referendum on the issue. However, shortly after this proposition, he agreed to rename the square as a part of a political compromise with the right-wing party, Independents for Croatia, sparking a major controversy.

Introduction

In 1946, one of Zagreb's most iconic central squares was renamed after Marshal Tito, the leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The square's name was controversially replaced in 2017 with 'Republic of Croatia Square' as part of a political deal. This change was preceded by over a decade of regular protests and counter-protests, which reflect the varied perceptions of the communist era and Tito's figure in contemporary Croatia.

Background

Josip Broz Tito

Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), born into a Croatian-Slovenian family in the Zagorje region, remains controversial in post-socialist Croatia. He was radicalised during the Russian Revolution as an Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war and rose through the ranks to become the leader of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the period between the World Wars.¹ During the Second World War, he successfully led the Partisan guerrilla movement to victory against Axis occupiers and domestic collaborators.² After the Second World War, he was the chief architect of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, creating a powerful cult of personality, bringing the country to the global stage, and skillfully negotiating between the East and the West during the Cold War.³

On the one hand, Tito is viewed as a key figure behind Yugoslav unification and modernisation, credited with developing a type of socialism that successfully advanced economic growth, education, and, on several levels, multiethnic coexistence. Notably, many people are nostalgic for the education, social, and economic security they associate with the period.⁴ Tito is also remembered as the leader of the antifascist movement, although communism is often difficult to separate from antifascism in Croatia.⁵ Tito's Yugoslav Partisans were able to recruit Serbs, Croats, and other nationalities in the antifascist resistance to both Croatia's collaborationist government and the Serb nationalist Chetnik movement during the Second World War. Croatia's current borders, including islands and coastal territory occupied by Italian rule since the end of the First World War, were secured by the Partisans and Tito's federal reorganisation of the Yugoslav state after 1945.

However, the Tito government is also responsible for the murders and suppression of political opponents following the Second World War. The Yugoslav regime sanctioned the imprisonment, expulsion, and execution of Italian and German minorities in the post-war

¹Ivo Banac, "Josip Broz Tito," *Britannica*, last updated May 3, 2021.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Cathie Carmichael, "Introduction: The Yugoslav Communist Legacy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62(7) (2010): 1046.

⁵Sanja Potkonjak and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, "In Friction Mode: Contesting the memory of socialism in Zagreb's Marshal Tito Square," in *Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspective*, ed. John F. Bailyn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 198.

period, imposing collective guilt upon them and other suspected enemies of the people.⁶ After Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in 1948, real or perceived Stalinists were also rounded up and sent to prison camps, most infamously on the prison island of Goli Otok.⁷ The early years of Tito's leadership were characterised by brutality, imprisonment, and the arrest of any political opposition to the communist regime. It is these acts that contribute to a fair amount of controversy, combined with Tito's suppression of many acts of nationalist agitation in the Yugoslav republics. He is viewed as having artificially created a sense of brotherhood without addressing underlying tensions while also actively suppressing any type of nationalist sentiment that could potentially threaten the maintenance of the Yugoslav state.

After Tito died in 1980, Yugoslavia was destabilised by economic crises, a lack of political legitimacy, and the rise of various nationalist movements. After failing to negotiate a peaceful solution to Yugoslavia's political paralysis, Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in 1991, plunging the country into a bloody conflict. Tito, symbolising both communism and the unified Yugoslav state, was increasingly seen as a negative historical figure as Croatia fought a brutal war against the Yugoslav People's Army (controlled by Belgrade) and rebel Croatian Serbs who refused to recognise Croatia's newly elected democratic leadership.⁸ Although the First Article of the Croatian Constitution recognises the historical importance of the antifascist struggle as part of Croatian statehood, it also explicitly rejects the communist system.⁹

The square itself

The square is located in the central part of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. The area was originally known as a 'Fairground' (Sajmište) due to a regularly held cattle fair.¹⁰ Gradually, new buildings began to be built around the area, turning it into a district of science and art.¹¹ Nowadays, the square is surrounded by prominent buildings, i.e. the National Theatre of Croatia, the rectorate of the University of Zagreb, several faculties, a school, numerous museums, a publishing house, and the Institute of Lexicography.¹² While the square is dominated by the architecturally impressive National Theatre building, designed by the famed Austrian firm Fellner and Helmer and opened in 1895, four sculptures are located around the building. On one corner stand St. George and the dragon, while in front of the Music Academy, the abstract forms of a sphere and sunray (or needle) give the Square a more

⁶Cathie Carmichael, "Introduction: The Yugoslav Communist Legacy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62(7) (2010): 1046.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Sanja Potkonjak and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, "In Friction Mode: Contesting the memory of socialism in Zagreb's Marshal Tito Square," in *Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspective*, ed. John F. Bailyn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 197.

⁹Croatian Constitution, Chapter I, consolidated text 2010.

¹⁰Tihomir Ponoš, "ŠESTO IME TRGA MARŠALA TITA Kako je Zagreb kroz povijest mijenjao mišljenje," *Novelist.hr*, last updated July 28, 2017.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Sanja Potkonjak and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, "In Friction Mode: Contesting the memory of socialism in Zagreb's Marshal Tito Square," in *Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspective*, ed. John F. Bailyn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 199.

contemporary look.¹³ The other two statues are masterpieces by one of Croatia's greatest sculptors, Ivan Meštrović: the Well of Life and the History of Croats.¹⁴

While initially the area was called the 'Fairground,' after 1878, the Square was frequently renamed. It was often named after historical figures, such as US President Woodrow Wilson or Aleksandar the First, the ruler of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.¹⁵ Other names referred to the Square's functions or the institutions situated there, like Market Square, University Square, and Theatre Square, which it was named from 1945-46.¹⁶ In 1946, this was changed to "Marshal Tito Square" and its current name, since the controversial change in 2017, is the "Square of the Republic of Croatia."

According to the data from 1979, over 200 memorials in Zagreb commemorated the socialist revolution and Partisan struggle.¹⁷ After the first democratic elections in 1990, the new Croatian government changed street names, removed communist symbols, and dismantled monuments in Zagreb and throughout the country. Once the conflict escalated, approximately 3,000 out of 6,000 antifascist monuments, memorial sites, and plaques were destroyed, damaged, removed, or altered. Even after the war ended in 1995, monuments and other sites of memory associated with the Partisans continued to be targeted. For example, the monument to People's Heroes in Zagreb's Mirogoj Cemetery was damaged by a bomb in 2001, while Tito's statue in his birthplace of Kumrovec was nearly destroyed by an explosive device in 2004. Simultaneously, new monuments honouring fascist collaborators were erected, sometimes next to destroyed memorials or incorporated into sites of memory dedicated to the Croatian War of Independence.

History of the Contestation

'Circle for the Square' initiative and their protests: 2008-2017

The civic initiative 'Circle for the Square' (Krug za trg) was founded in 2006,¹⁸ following a resolution condemning totalitarian communist regimes made by the Council of Europe¹⁹ Circle for the Square, which had attracted mostly right-wing individuals and groups, sought the removal of what they considered to be totalitarian symbols from public space based upon that resolution. The organisation held regular protests from 2006 to 2017 until the square had been renamed. The protests were usually held around two important dates - Victory in Europe Day (May 7/May 8, also known as the Victory over Fascism Day, and locally known as Liberation Day of Zagreb) and International Human Rights Day (10 December).²⁰

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Jelena Stanić, Laura Šakaja, and Lana Slavuj, "Preimenovanja zagrebačkih ulica i trgova," *Migracijske i etničke teme* 1-2 (2009): 101.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Laura Šakaja and Jelena Stanić, "Other(ing), self(portraying), negotiating: the spatial codification of values in Zagreb's city-text," *Cultural Geographies* 18, 4 (2011): 499.

¹⁸Stipe Majić, "Inicijativa Krug za trg: Trg maršala Tita je mjera naše zaostalosti," AA.com.tr, last updated May 6, 2017.

¹⁹Council of Europe Resolution 1481/2006, issued 25 January 2006.

²⁰Sanja Potkonjak and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, "In Friction Mode: Contesting the memory of socialism in Zagreb's Marshal Tito Square," in *Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspective*, ed. John F. Bailyn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 203.

On February 9, 2008, two protests happened at the Square. One was organised by Circle for the Square members, with a gathering of about 2,000 people, demanding that Tito's Square be renamed 'Theatre Square' since the Croatian National Theatre is located there.²¹ The protesters carried candles and wore red aprons with the 'Crime is Crime' slogan. Young Antifascists, a left-wing youth organisation from Zagreb, organised a counter-protest on the other side of the Square, rejecting the ongoing erasure of the Partisan heritage from Croatian public space.

On December 10, 2008, another protest was organised by Circle for the Square to coincide with International Human Rights Day. This time, the protesters wore scarves with 'Theatre Square' written on them and symbolically placed a plaque that read 'Theatre Square.'²² On the other side of the Square, a counter-protest gathered around 300 people, mostly members of the Young Antifascists organisation.²³

In the following years, the Circle of Square organised numerous different protests - placing plaques referring to 'Tito's Criminal Square' (June 2009)²⁴ and 'University Square' (May 2012),²⁵ demanding to 'remove the Marshal from Zagreb and Croatia' (May 2015),²⁶ and calling Tito 'a mass murderer' (May 2016).²⁷

In December 2011, the Committee for Naming Settlements, Streets and Squares of the Zagreb City Assembly rejected Circle for the Square's proposal to rename the Square.²⁸ The chair of the Committee, Marin Knežović, explained that Tito earned "great merit in the peoples' liberation and antifascist fight, which served as the foundation for establishing the contemporary Croatian state".

In 2016, a petition to the Committee for Naming Settlements, Streets and Squares was filed by the centre-right party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), proposing to rename it 'Theatre Square.' It was once again rejected, the decisive vote being an abstention from MP Sunčana Rupnik Blažeković from the Bandić 365 party, founded by the Mayor of Zagreb in 2015.²⁹

Renaming - 'Republic of Croatia' Square

For many years, Zagreb's Mayor Milan Bandić opposed the renaming of the Square. However, in 2017, he gave into political pressure after he was re-elected for the post for the sixth time and struggled to establish a majority in the City Assembly.³⁰ During a press conference on

²¹New Europe, "Marshal Tito Square brings controversy," last updated February 18, 2008.

²²Tportal.hr, "Prosvjed za promjenu imena Trga maršala Tita," last updated December 13, 2008.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Index.hr, "Inicijativa Krug za trg na Trgu maršala Tita: "Ni jedno mjesto se ne smije zvati njegovim imenom," last updated June 6, 2009.

²⁵Index.hr, "Čičak stavio natpis "Kazališni trg" preko imena "Trga maršala Tita"," last updated May 5, 2012.

²⁶Index.hr, "Tisuću prosvjednika tražilo da se Titu oduzme trg u Zagrebu," last updated May 9, 2015.

²⁷Index.hr, "NOVA DRAMA RADIKALA ISPRED KAZALIŠTA S Markićkom i Hasanbegovićem prosvjedovali protiv Tita," last updated May 6, 2017.

²⁸Translation by author, Pise A.E., "Trg maršala Tita ostaje Trg maršala Tita," Dnevnik.hr, last updated December 8, 2011.

²⁹Vedran Pavlic, "Marshal Tito Square in Zagreb Will Not Be Renamed For Now," Total Croatia News, last updated November 16, 2018.

³⁰Guardian, "Zagreb strips Marshal Tito name from square," last updated September 1, 2017.

June 12, 2017, Bandić announced that he would organise a referendum on whether the Square should be renamed or not.³¹

The referendum was never held. To secure the majority in the City Assembly, Mayor Bandić agreed to ally in August 2017 with a newly formed right-wing party, Independents for Croatia. Zlatko Hasanbegović, a controversial former Minister of Culture, created this right-wing party after being expelled from the more centrist HDZ.³² The Independents for Croatia agreed to ally on the condition that the Square's name was changed.³³ On September 1, the city assembly voted by a small majority to change the square's name.³⁴ Mayor Bandić chose the name "Republic of Croatia Square", whereas Hasanbegović preferred the square to be called "Theatre Square".³⁵ The decision to rename the Square was met with fierce criticism from the opposition parties. Peđa Grbin, an MP from the left-wing Social Democratic Party, defended Tito as an antifascist.³⁶ Meanwhile, the New Left party called on NGOs and the public to sign a petition to keep the Square's former name, but the mayor's decision was final.³⁷

In 2018, the renaming of the Square remained controversial. The leader of the new local party, 'Zagreb is OURS!' Tomislav Tomašević described the change in the name as a 'cultural war'.³⁸ After being elected as the new mayor of Zagreb in 2021 on the Možemo (Yes We Can) platform, Tomašević has expressed support for returning Tito's name to the Square but has focused his first mandate on resolving Zagreb's more pressing issues rather than reopening this ideologically charged topic.

Decision-Making Processes

The city officials had always made the decision about naming the Square. The name depended on the current political ideology and regime, resulting in names such as President Woodrow Wilson, King Aleksandar I, or, as in 1946, Marshal Tito.

After Croatia's independence in 1991, the communist era and Tito's role underwent significant historical revisionism and were often portrayed as harmful to Croatian statehood continuity. However, not everyone had rejected the antifascist legacy, and the ongoing divisions over the past were evident by the large number of protests and counter-protests which took place between 2006 and 2017 over the Square's name. However, city authorities, especially Mayor Bandić, did not consider those competing views in making a decision to change the name of the

³¹Lauren Simmonds, "Milan Bandić wants Referendum on Renaming of Marshal Tito Square," Total Croatia News, last updated June 12, 2017.

³²Vedran Pavić, "Hasanbegović Evicted from HDZ," Total Croatia News, last updated May 8, 2017.

³³Guardian, "Zagreb strips Marshal Tito name from square," last updated September 1, 2017.

³⁴Vedran Pavić, "Zagreb City Assembly Renames Marshal Tito Square," Total Croatia News, last updated September 1, 2017.

³⁵Sven Milekic, "Zagreb Mayor Decides to Rename Tito Square," Balkan Insight, last updated June 27, 2017.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/27/zagreb-mayor-opts-for-renaming-tito-s-square-06-27-2017-1/>.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Giovanni Vale, Jelena Prtor, "Zagreb is ours, a movement on the side of citizens," Balcanicaucaso.org, last updated September 19, 2018.

Square in 2017. It was rather political expediency that guided the choice, despite Mayor Bandić promising to conduct a referendum. The renaming itself remains controversial, with left-wing parties and organisations continuing to oppose it. However, even the proponents of renaming may still be disappointed by the result because of the imperfect process leading to it and the lack of consultation on the new name. Circle for the Square, for instance, had been advocating for the Square to be named 'Theatre Square' rather than the 'Republic of Croatia Square' chosen by the former mayor.

Some of the dynamics to consider in the decision-making process include the importance of considering grassroots efforts (as opposed to merely delivering the results they are advocating for) and the difficulty of naming public spaces after historical figures (whose role may come to be reinterpreted over time).

Summary and Conclusions

After over a decade of protests and counter-protests at Marshal Tito Square, it was renamed to secure a political deal made by the former mayor of Zagreb. The new name - Republic of Croatia Square - was not the choice of the Circle for the Square, the most vocal organisation that had led the protests. The more left-wing parties within the City Assembly and left-wing organisations such as Young Antifascists oppose the measures taken in 2017. Since its construction, the name of the Square has been changed numerous times, and it remains to be seen if it will be changed again.

Research by Aleksandra Ruzikowska and Melanie Reixach-Wong

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Figures

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

Institute for Historical Justice &
Reconciliation
contestedhistories.org

EuroClio - European Association of
History Educators
Bankplein 2, 2585 EV
The Hague, The Netherlands
+31 70 3817836
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

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