

Myths and Symbols in Interwar Croatia: The Case of Matija Gubec

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*Nema seljaka, nema junaka,
Kao što je bio Gubec Matija.*

*There is no peasant, there is no hero,
The likes of Gubec Matija.¹*

Historical symbols and myths were an integral part of political life in 20th century Southeastern Europe, used to justify separatist or unitary goals in a region that witnessed the disintegration of empires, the creation of new states, two world wars, and both right-wing and left-wing totalitarian regimes. Some myths were used as arguments for independent nation-states, while other myths supported multiethnic states such as Yugoslavia. As scholar George Schöpflin notes, “through myth, boundaries are established within the community and also in respect to other communities. Those who do not share in the myth are by definition excluded.”² The Croatian people had a long history of heroes and martyrs who were venerated in the modern era as individuals who had fought for the creation of a Croatian state. There was also a tradition of Yugoslavism, the goal of creating a south Slavic state, which also drew on historical figures who were seen as champions of what Yugoslav communists later dubbed “Brotherhood and Unity.” Rarely, however, were historical figures and myths co-opted by supporters of radically different political ideologies. Yet Matija Gubec, the leader of a 1573 peasant rebellion, became a symbol for Croatian communists, nationalists, and fascists in the first half of the twentieth century. Gubec as a political symbol illustrates how the selective interpretation of history for political purposes is a manipulation of the past for specific interests in the present. In the case of Gubec, a legendary hero who served to mobilize support for various Croatian political movements, his use as a political symbol was relatively benign. However, that is not the case in the decades since World War Two, as the line between hero and war criminal became increasingly blurred and manipulated in nearly all the ex-Yugoslav states, with dangerous consequences for inciting future conflicts.

Murray Edelman’s classic work on political symbology, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, illustrated how regimes use and manipulate symbols to legitimate their power and policies,³ while a number of other scholars have subsequently explored how non-elites have challenged regimes through the use of counter-symbols.⁴ Croatian political culture had developed within the legalistic milieu of the Habsburg Empire, and thus protest and obstruction were the tactics suited to the Croatian opposition rather than armed resistance. Consequently, symbols played a central role in opposition to Belgrade’s rule.⁵ The Croatian

¹ The first lines of a partisan song about Matija Gubec, quoted in Ćedo Kapor, ed., *Krv i život za slobodu: Slike iz života i borbe studenata iz Jugoslavije u Španiji*, 4th ed. (Belgrade: Unija-publik, 1978), p. 61.

² George Schöpflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths,” in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin, eds., *Myths and Nationhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 20.

³ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967).

⁴ For example, see Jan Kubik, *Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); and David Kowalewski, “The Protest Uses of Symbolic Politics in the USSR,” in *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 42, no. 2 (May 1980).

⁵ The US Consul in Zagreb, James McKenna, observed that HSS leaders were able to effectively mobilize their followers in displaying the Croatian flag on key dates, such as the anniversary of Yugoslav unification or the birthday of the HSS president, often backed with threats to break the windows of shops and houses flying a

Peasant Party (HSS) was a modern political party (founded in 1904 by the Radić brothers, Antun and Stjepan), yet it sought a symbol that could connect it to the centuries long struggle of Croatia's peasantry to improve their difficult living conditions.⁶ Hence the emergence of Matija Gubec, the leader of a 1573 peasant uprising, as a powerful symbol of the HSS during the interwar period in order to create a continuity with the peasant historical and folk tradition.

In spite of the HSS's seemingly unified front against the regime in Belgrade and mobilization of the peasant masses behind symbols such as Gubec, the Croatian national movement was in fact exposed to the centrifugal forces caused by the unstable political situation in Europe in the second half of the 1930s. Whereas the HSS followed a pacifistic and democratic strategy in its opposition to the regime, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ – *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*) and supporters of the fascist Ustaša movement promulgated more militant solutions, i.e., social revolution or intervention by the Axis powers, respectively.

Interestingly, all three political forces adopted Gubec as a symbol even if they were ideologically antagonistic. His power as a symbol of resistance is illustrated by the fact that the HSS, the radical right, and communists each manipulated the Gubec narrative to fit into their own ideological platforms. For the Peasant Party, Gubec embodied their own struggle for peasant rights and the goal of a "peasant democracy" in Croatia. Extreme right-wing nationalists focused on the national struggle of Gubec's peasants against "foreign" masters, which fit nicely into their interpretation of Croatian history as a fight to overthrow Hungarian, Austrian, and finally Yugoslav (for them synonymous with Serbian) rule. The communists, who increased their activity among the peasantry as well as the left wing of the HSS in the 1930s, presented Gubec in the context of a class struggle, which failed because the peasants had lacked the support of a developed working class. This article examines the discourse used by the various Croatian political factions to lay claim to the Gubec symbol during the interwar period, and the aspects of the Gubec narrative that were emphasized by each one.

Peasant Rebellion of 1573

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the history of the 1573 peasant rebellion and Matija Gubec was often mythologized and romanticized, not only by historians but in the novels of Croatian writers such as Ivan Kukuljević (1816–1889), August Šenoa (1838–1881), Rudolf Horvat (1873–1947), and others. Stories about Gubec were also actively told among the peasantry of northern Croatia, taking on legendary and mythic proportions as the archetypal tale of the peasant hero fighting against an oppressive system.

The most recent historical analyses conclude that the nature of the uprising was not a "national liberation," but rather an attempt to abolish serfdom and prevent abuse by cruel feudal lords.⁷ The apparent spark of the uprising was the unbearable conditions of the peasantry under Franjo Tahy, lord of Susedgrad and Stubica in the Croatian Zagorje region (north of Zagreb), who was "a true personification of a medieval tyrant."⁸ Communist historians, however, criticized earlier historiography, which blamed only Tahy for his cruelty, and not the oppressiveness of the feudal system itself, as witnessed by numerous other peasant revolts before and after the 1573 one that were likewise ignored in the non-communist historiography.⁹ The peasants had evidently been planning an armed uprising for some time,

Yugoslav flag. Letter from James McKenna to Ambassador Charles Wilson, 20 July 1935, Doc. 860H.00/790, U.S. National Archives, RG 59, Department of State Microfilm, M1203, roll 2, p. 663.

⁶ In 1904, Antun (1868–1919) and Stjepan Radić (1871–1928) formed the Croatian Popular Peasant's Party (HPSS), which became the main opposition party in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In 1920 the party was renamed the Croatian Republican Peasant Party (HRSS), and in 1925, when Stjepan Radić was offered a position in the parliament, the Republican part was dropped and remained simply the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS).

⁷ Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska povijest* (Zagreb: Novi liber, 2003), p. 117.

⁸ Ferdo Čulinović, *Seljačke bune u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Seljačka sloga, 1951), p. 57. In 1567 Tahy had been put on trial because of claims that he was abusing his feudal privileges, and despite the testimony of several hundred witnesses he continued to mistreat the peasantry, which was the immediate cause that set off the rebellion.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

and on 29 January 1573 they revolted against their lords throughout Zagorje, spreading the rebellion north towards Varaždin and into Slovenia as well. The peasants formed a kind of war council, which elected Gubec as its overall commander, and Ilija Gregorić, an experienced soldier, to be in charge of military planning. Not much is actually known about the personality of Gubec, and in fact there exists some debate about whether his first name is really “Matija” or “Ambroz”, since existing documents mention him only as “Gubec called Beg”, in reference to a Turkish word for a noble. The first time Matija is mentioned as Gubec’s first name is in the works of a Hungarian historian, Nikola Istvanffy, published in 1622, while Church documents in Zagorje list an Ambroz Gubec who could have likely been the real peasant leader.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the name Matija Gubec stuck, even though the historical evidence seems to indicate otherwise.¹¹

As a number of manors fell to the rag tag peasant army and noblemen lost their lives, Juraj Drašković, the Bishop of Zagreb and *Ban* of Croatia, mobilized an army to quell the uprising. Drašković also sent an army of some 5,000 men against the 10,000 peasants massed under Gubec at the town of Stubica. The feudal army attacked Gubec’s forces on 9 February, and although the peasants were initially able to hold their ground against the cavalry attacks and heavily armed infantry, after several hours the better organized and armed troops were able to shatter the peasant army. Most of the peasants were either killed or captured, and the sources indicate that the victorious army was allowed to rampage in the countryside to punish the serfs for their uprising.¹² Gubec was captured and brought to Zagreb, where *Ban* Drašković decreed that the so-called “peasant king” was to be crowned with molten iron, while other peasant leaders were also executed as a warning to any other potential rebels. The uprising was effectively crushed with the defeat of the peasant army at Stubica, as evidenced by a letter sent by *Ban* Drašković to Emperor Maximilian II on 11 February, informing him that no assistance would be necessary since the revolt was completely subdued.¹³

The symbol of Matija Gubec, however, was not destroyed, and would be evoked repeatedly in Croatian political life over three hundred years later. Gubec was alive in the memory of the Croatian peasants, especially those in the Zagorje region. In a volume on the uses of history and memory, Maria Todorova concludes “it is hardly surprising...that historical memory should be invoked as the principal tool of explanation, legitimation, and mobilization,” which is precisely what happened with Gubec in Croatia during the interwar period.¹⁴

The peasant hero Matija Gubec

The HSS resurrected Gubec in the 1930s as a symbol of peasant resistance. HSS ideologues – such as Rudolf Herceg, Josip Predavec, Božidar Magovac, Ivo Šarinić and others – promoted the 1573 uprising as the “beginning of the great Croatian peasant movement,” and attempted to portray the aspirations of the Croatian peasant movement in Yugoslavia as the ideological inheritors of the sixteenth century revolt.¹⁵ Historian Jaroslav Šidak argues that it was in 1922 that Rudolf Herceg began forming a cult around Gubec, and that Josip Predavec’s publications in 1933, including articles in the Zagreb daily

¹⁰ Josip Adamček, “Seljačka buna 1573,” in *Matija Gubec* (Zagreb: Spekter, 1975), no page number. A number of local legends about “the good king Matija” had existed since the fifteenth century, so it is possible this name was then transferred to Gubec at a later date.

¹¹ As Schöpflin argues, “it is the content of the myth that is important, not its accuracy as a historical account.” Schöpflin, “The Functions of Myth,” p. 20.

¹² See Čulinović, *Seljačke bune*, pp. 66–69. The peasants were poorly armed, mostly with farming implements, such as pitchforks, flails, scythes, and a few outdated swords, while Alapić had at his disposal firearms and two units of *haramija*, special lightly armed troops used in warfare against the Turks, who seem to have entered the battle at a crucial stage and contributed to the collapse of the peasant defense.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁴ Maria Todorova, “Learning Memory, Remembering Identity,” in Maria Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 3.

¹⁵ Ivan Jelić, “O značenju tradicije velike seljačke bune 1573. u povijesti komunističkog pokreta i revolucije u Hrvatskoj,” in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1973), p. 85.

Obzor, specifically connected Gubec to a political party.¹⁶ *Hrvatski radnik* (*Croatian Worker*), the newspaper of the HSS-led Croatian Worker's Union, reflected on the significance of Gubec's uprising for the situation facing Croats in the 1930s:

That was not the last uprising; a whole series of revolts followed, which supported the continuity (ties) of the social and national struggle of the Croatian peasant, for social rights and freedom. On those traditions the Radić brothers organized the strong movement of the Croatian peasant, which today, under the leadership of Dr. Vladko Maček, is reaching its peak.¹⁷

The newspaper also gives credit to the Radić brothers for keeping the "cult of the peasant uprising" alive, which would have otherwise been forgotten.¹⁸ Other newspapers published by the HSS, such as *Hrvatski dnevnik* (*Croatian Daily News*) and the weekly *Seljački dom* (*Peasant Home*), annually carried articles commemorating the events of 1573, as well as poems, historical essays, and images related to Gubec. For example, an editorial in *Hrvatski dnevnik* proclaimed that the month of February was the most fruitful month for the peasant movement because it was dedicated to Antun (Ante) Radić and Matija Gubec: "While Matija Gubec is the symbol of the Croatian peasantry's struggle for justice and human dignity, Ante Radić was the great awakener of the Croatian peasantry."¹⁹

The HSS increasingly promoted the symbol of Gubec as a martyr in the 1930s, its press actively comparing Gubec's death with Radić's assassination in the Belgrade parliament in 1928. Pål Kolstø identifies the *martyrium* myth as one of four main clusters of myths that serve as the foundations of national identity (the myths of *sui generis*, *antemurale*, and *antiquitas* are the others).²⁰ According to Kolstø, "the experience of victimization and its presence in the collective memory raises group awareness."²¹ Thus the HSS sought to use Gubec the martyr, directly associated with the current party leadership, as a means of mobilizing the Croatian peasantry, which had been oppressed and traumatized by the Serb-dominated gendarmerie and army in Yugoslavia. During a public meeting in the town of Velika Gorica in 1938, a young girl introduced the HSS leader Vladko Maček with a speech full of *martyrium* myth imagery:

The first martyr was Matija Gubec, the second was the late Ante Radić, the third – the organizer of the Croatian peasantry, the Teacher and Martyr, Stjepan Radić – and the fourth is you, Mr. President, our leader, who is leading us along the way paved by former Teachers and Martyrs. Therefore, Mr. President, I beg the good God that you would live with your nation in the free Croatian homeland!²²

The martyr image associated with Gubec was one that would be repeatedly used in the HSS newspapers, especially on the anniversary of his death. The party leaders could claim they empathized with the suffering peasantry precisely because they represented the continuity with martyrs from Croatia's past.

The HSS, while emphasizing Gubec's struggle for the rights of the peasantry, was a conservative and, at its core, fervently anti-communist party, and thus made sure to emasculate any revolutionary significance of the peasant uprising. For example, HSS members argued "Matija Gubec, who in fact fought for 'old rights' [*stare pravice*], did not want anything else but to establish the old social order,

¹⁶ Jaroslav Šidak, *Kroz pet stoljeća Hrvatske povijesti* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1981), p. 27.

¹⁷ *Hrvatski radnik* (Zagreb), 13 February 1938, p. 2. Vladko Maček (1879–1964) became president of the HSS after Radić was killed in 1928.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Hrvatski dnevnik* (Zagreb), 5 February 1937, p. 5.

²⁰ Pål Kolstø, "Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society," in Pål Kolstø, ed., *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe* (London: Hurst and Company, 2005), pp. 17–22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²² Translation of *Hrvatski dnevnik* (7 June 1938), included in letter from James J. Meily to Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane dated 8 June 1938, in US National Archives, RG 84, Belgrade Legation and Embassy, General Records 1938, box 17, vol. 10.

which existed during the old Croatian kingdom.”²³ They alleged that in the romanticized old Croatian kingdom Croats “had lived under a democratic form of government,”²⁴ which is what the HSS was fighting to recreate with its peasant democracy.

HSS publications focused not only on the peasant aspect of the Gubec story, but included the national component as well. While admitting that the uprising did have “social-economic and liberation characteristics,” it was also highlighted that in the revolts the peasants had the role of “the state-forming [*državotvorni*] factor and the defender of national individuality.”²⁵ *Seljački dom* referred to Gubec as a “true Croatian peasant citizen.”²⁶ It is also worth pointing out the role of “workers” in the peasant rebellion mentioned in some HSS publications. In the 1930s the Croatian Worker’s Union was competing with the socialist and communist worker’s union, the United Worker’s Syndicalist Alliance, for the support of the Croatian working class, and thus frequently promoted the notion of a peasant-worker alliance, which was not unlike communist propaganda at the time. For example, *Hrvatski radnik* claimed that the only allies of the peasant rebels were the “workers,” a reference to a unit led by Pavao Šterc from Celje that joined up with the forces under Ilija Gregorić in Slovenia.²⁷

The anachronistic portrayal of the townspeople from Celje as some kind of working class was overlooked by HSS ideologues who sought not only to show continuity between Gubec and the contemporary Peasant Party, but to create the same kind of connection with the workers who needed to be pulled away from communist-controlled unions. Gubec could therefore be a symbol not only for the peasants, but for workers and all members of the Croatian nation, which the HSS claimed to represent. The KPJ, which also spoke of the peasant-worker alliance, argued that it was precisely the *lack* of a working class (and naturally the Communist Party to lead it) in the sixteenth century that was the main reason for the defeat of the peasant rebellion, which made the contemporary coalition of workers and peasants more urgent to ensure the success of the liberation of the Croatian nation.²⁸ As seen below, the communists could emphasize the revolutionary aspect of Matija Gubec to mobilize the workers, which the HSS was careful to avoid.

Matija Gubec, fighter for Croatian national rights

Although in subsequent communist historiography all extreme nationalists and right-wing Catholics in the 1930s were labeled fascist and pro-Ustaša, in reality not every nationalist was a supporter of Ante Pavelić’s organization.²⁹ However, many of their goals and world views overlapped, so it is possible to group them together as the “nationalist right-wing” with the caveat that not all, although many, were pro-fascist. For the radical right, the fact that Gubec was a peasant was incidental and only because at that time the Croatian nation happened to be mostly peasants ruled by foreign feudal lords. But Gubec could be taken out of the context of the sixteenth century and thus transformed into a timeless symbol of the struggle for Croatian independence, as can be seen in the right wing press in the 1930s, and his depiction after the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) in 1941.

²³ *Narodni val* (Zagreb), 16 February 1940, p. 1. *Narodni val*, originally founded by Stjepan Radić in the 1920s, was renewed by his son Vladimr Radić in 1937.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Hrvatski radnik* (13 February 1938), p. 1.

²⁶ *Seljački dom* (Zagreb), 11 February 1937, p. 1.

²⁷ *Hrvatski radnik* (13 February 1938), p. 1

²⁸ Čulinović, *Seljačke bune*, p. 162.

²⁹ The extreme nationalists were referred to by contemporaries as “frankists” [frankovci], named after the followers of Josip Frank (1844–1911), founder of the Pure Croatian Party of Rights whose militant followers became the model for the Ustaša. The HSS was also a Croatian nationalist organization, but differed from the Ustaša in that they advocated peaceful and democratic political solutions to the national question, promoted cooperation with Croatian Serb political parties, and sought greater rights for Croatia within Yugoslavia rather than exclusively independence.

In order to break the HSS's seeming monopoly on the symbol of Gubec as a peasant leader, the leading Ustaša newspaper, *Hrvatski narod (Croatian People)*, argued that "never has one class been the same as the entire nation,"³⁰ thus shifting the emphasis from the 1573 rebellion as a struggle for peasant rights to that of a struggle for Croatian national rights. The paper even claimed that "if Matija Gubec was alive today, he certainly would not be what he was 336 years ago, namely the representative of one class."³¹ By portraying the "ruling class" as being exclusively foreigners, the peasant rebellion could be explained as the first attempt of the Croats to fight for the return of their independent state. Just as for the communists the lack of a working class explained the defeat of Gubec, for the extreme right the lack of national consciousness among the Croatian nation doomed the peasants to failure. Seeking to make a connection between Gubec and the Ustaša movement, which fought exclusively for Croatian national rights, *Hrvatski narod* claimed that the 1573 rebellion "was the first time in the history of the Croatian nation that could be found one man, who was not the exponent of any class, but rather a man who was a reflection of an entire nation's beliefs."³² Even though the Croatian people in the sixteenth century were not nationally conscious in the modern sense, Gubec apparently was and therefore found a place within the pantheon of martyrs fighting for the Croatian state in the right-wing's interpretation of the past.

Right-wing publications also sought to deny Gubec as a symbol for the communists, who were always portrayed as being internationalists and against Croatian national interests. *Mlada Hrvatska (Young Croatia)*, a virulently anti-Semitic weekly published in Zagreb, had a special "anti-communist" issue whose self-appointed task was to "show in pictures and numbers all of the rottenness and perfidy of Judeo-Marxism, in fact Bolshevism, united with Jewish democrats and free masons, and to finally present to our Croatian public in compact form those who are now preparing the final strike against national independence, positive culture, European civilization, and a better future for all European nations, including the Croatian nation."³³ This article was accompanied by images of "Our Leading Figures", showing Matija Gubec, Eugen Kvaternik (leader of a failed 1871 uprising against Austrian rule in the Military Frontier), Stjepan Radić, and Ante Starčević (founder of the Croatian Party of Right), in contrast to "Communist Leading Figures," which included the "Jew Karl Marx," the "Jew Leon Trotsky," the "Red Tsar Stalin," and the "Jew Zinoviev."³⁴ A newspaper published by the Catholic Church, *Hrvatska straža*, stated that Croatian communists celebrated the peasant hero Gubec, not as decent people did, but rather as

a rebel, a revolutionary. As a person who loves blood, killing, and violence. But this same Matija Gubec would fight with the same determination against these domestic degenerates [i.e. communists] who work for foreigners' money and for someone else's goals...Matija did not fight craftily, secretly for some foreign ideas, for violence and robbery. No! Only for pure national rights – for mankind's freedom.³⁵

Since Gubec was seen almost exclusively as a fighter for the Croatian state, the right denied any attempt by the communists, considered to be simply minions of Moscow, Jews, and Freemasons, to co-opt him as a symbol of a leftist revolution.

The Ustaše continued to promote the cult of Gubec as an exclusively Croatian hero after they established a so-called "independent state" under the tutelage of both Germany and Italy in 1941; Gubec

³⁰ *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), 12 May 1939, p. 2. *Hrvatski narod* was published by Ustaše, notably Mile Budak, who had returned to Croatia after living in exile for a number of years during King Aleksandar's dictatorship. The paper did not openly promote its connection with the Ustaša movement (Ante Pavelić and most of its leadership was still in exile in Italy), but was nonetheless anti-communist, anti-Serb, and critical of the HSS. After fifty-four issues (from 1939–1940) it was banned by the Croatian Banovina authorities, but became the official daily newspaper of the NDH after April 1941.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Mlada Hrvatska* (Zagreb), 3 April 1938, p. 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁵ *Hrvatska straža* (Zagreb), 17 October 1937, pp. 3–4.

appeared regularly in the regime's press and on its postage stamps. However, the revolutionary aspect of the 1573 peasant rebellion, which was celebrated by the communists, posed a threat to the NDH regime. Although the Ustaša organization was founded as a "revolutionary" group willing to go to any extreme for an independent Croatia – the very name Ustaša was derived from the word *ustanak* [uprising] – once in power the main goal of Pavelić's government was to establish control and ensure stability over the NDH's territory. The Gubec story thus became completely stripped of its rebelliousness, yet could not be completely erased from the national memory – as the nobility had tried unsuccessfully in the decades after the peasant rebellion – and had to be modified to fit the needs of the Ustaša regime.

The weekly *Spremnost (Readiness)* carried an article on the anniversary of the peasant rebellion that attributed the emphasis on "disorder" in the historiography to liberalism, and within that "framework of understanding Matija Gubec was presented as a forty-eight [četrdesetosmaški]³⁶ liberal, so that later in the period between the two world wars he even became a champion of the Popular Front."³⁷ Rejecting the characteristic of disorder as being completely fabricated by misguided liberals, the article concluded that

In the [Gubec] rebellion certain traits were expressed, which are vital for the survival of the Croatian nation as a moral unit. These traits are: 1) moral orientation; 2) the principle of order; and 3) social harmony.³⁸

The Ustaša Gubec, deprived of his revolutionary and class characteristics, was left only as a hollow "national" symbol, as ineffective as the NDH regime itself. Ultimately it would be the communists who would gain control of the symbolic heritage of Matija Gubec, as they realized the political, and ultimately revolutionary, value of the national question in interwar Croatia.

The revolutionary Matija Gubec

For the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Gubec was an ideal symbol for politically mobilizing Croats into the ranks of an organization that was consistently labeled as anti-Croat by its opponents; not only was Gubec considered a revolutionary, he had powerful symbolic value for the long-oppressed Croatian peasantry. Realizing the importance of the national question in Croatian politics, the KPJ decided to create the Communist Party of Croatia (KPH – *Komunistička partija Hrvatske*) in August 1937, and in proclamation of the founding congress it was noted that for the Croatian nation Gubec was considered to be a "great fighter for social justice."³⁹ The crucial element in the communist interpretation of the peasant rebellion was that it was a result of the class struggle:

That uprising, we repeat, was neither national, nor religious, but rather of a pronounced class character, and for its revolutionary quality it takes first place among all of our social movements in the feudal period of Croatia.⁴⁰

The use of Gubec as a political symbol by the KPJ became pronounced during the years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), continued during the National Liberation Struggle in Yugoslavia (NOB), and was transformed into a true cult after the communist victory, embodied in the massive monument and museum complex in Gornja Stubica.

A history of peasant rebellions published in the first decade after the Yugoslav communist revolution, *Seljačke bune u Hrvatskoj* (1951) by Ferdo Čulinović, draws numerous parallels between the uprising led by Gubec and the one led by Tito over three hundred years later. First of all, the peasant uprising of 1573 was seen as an attempted social revolution, a "movement of the peasantry against their

³⁶ A reference to the revolutions of 1848.

³⁷ *Spremnost* (Zagreb), 14 February 1943, p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ivan Jelić, "O značenju tradicije velike seljačke bune," p. 88. The Communist Party of Slovenia (KPS) was likewise founded in 1937, but both had little autonomy under the KPJ.

⁴⁰ Čulinović, *Seljačke bune*, p. 71.

class enemy,” the feudal lords.⁴¹ The peasantry was often referred to as the working class in the villages, and thus Gubec could serve the dual purpose of representing the struggle of the peasantry from exploitation as well as a symbol of the worker-peasant alliance. For example, Miroslav Krleža, Croatia’s leading author and Marxist theoretician of the twentieth century, commented that for him “the only proper concept of Croatianness was the rebellion of Matija Gubec and the contemporary revolutionary workers’ movement.”⁴² Just as Gubec had wanted to overthrow the feudal system, the KPJ sought to overthrow the capitalist one. A second parallel was the national liberation [*narodno-oslobodilački*] character of the peasant rebellion. Although the Ustaše and HSS had focused on the national aspect of the 1573 uprising, in the communist interpretation this did not imply the creation of a Croatian national state, but rather the overthrow of foreign oppressors in the same way Tito’s Partisans defeated German and Italian occupiers. For communist ideologues, the victory of Gubec would have created a peasant state, not an independent Croatia.

The communist historiography noted a third characteristic of the peasant rebellion, its revolutionary character, arguing that “the peasantry in these rebellions spoke the language of revolution, which went towards the violent destruction of the old, and the creation of the new.”⁴³ It was even emphasized that Matija Gubec had “a significant revolutionary program” and mentioned the “enterprising serfs of Stubica and Susedgrad who worked on propaganda” in order to spread the revolutionary message.⁴⁴ In the 1975 film *Peasant Rebellion of 1573* (a Croatian-Serbian co-production), Gubec tells Ilija Gregorić that “a new world is being formed,” while peasants charging towards feudal manors carry banners saying “freedom” [*sloboda*], in scenes not unlike that of Partisan films being produced during that same time period.⁴⁵ The final parallel drawn between the Gubec led rebellion and the KPJ was that both were multi-ethnic. The fact that Ilija Gregorić was an Uskok⁴⁶ and that the Slovenian peasantry joined the uprising in the Croatian Zagorje was proof that “Brotherhood and Unity” was alive in the days of Gubec. Čulinović states that “in these peasant rebellions it was not looked at which religion or which nationality an individual belonged to, but rather if he was a peasant and if he was an opponent of the class enemy of the peasantry – the feudal lords.”⁴⁷ This last characteristic allowed Gubec to not only be a valuable symbol for Croatian communists, but a symbol which all Yugoslavs could fight under.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939), the KPJ helped nearly 1,700 Yugoslavs (about half of them from Croatia) to volunteer in the International Brigades, communist-led units that fought on the side of the democratically elected Republican government. The KPJ used Matija Gubec in its propaganda to mobilize Croatian support for the Spanish Republic, which was at war with the fascist-backed Nationalists under General Francisco Franco. On 4 July 1937, the first company of the Dimitrov Battalion, composed of Balkan volunteers, was officially named after the legendary peasant hero, Matija Gubec.⁴⁸ Some 350 Spanish volunteers eventually made it back to Yugoslavia, of which more than 250 participated in the National Liberation War. Just as Gubec provided inspiration for volunteers in Spain, the Spanish veterans, who had first taken arms against fascism, served as an example for the Partisans in Yugoslavia.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 158.

⁴² Mladen Iveković, *Hrvatska lijeva inteligencija, 1918–1945*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1970), p. 123.

⁴³ Čulinović, *Seljačke bune*, p. 158.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 71.

⁴⁵ Fabijan Šovagović (Gubec) and Bata Živojinović (Gregorić) were veteran actors who often played the roles of heroic partisans, making the similarity between this film and the partisan genre even more striking.

⁴⁶ The Uskoks had originally fled from Hercegovina during the Turkish invasions, and eventually settled in Senj on the northern Adriatic, from where they became known as notorious pirates against Venetian and Turkish shipping. They were forcibly moved inland by the Habsburgs in the seventeenth century when they became a serious diplomatic nuisance to Venetian-Habsburg peace treaties.

⁴⁷ Čulinović, *Seljačke bune*, p. 159.

⁴⁸ “Dnevnik potpukovnika Vladimira Čopića komandanta 15. Internacionalne Brigade,” in Čedo Kapor, ed., *Španija 1936–1939: Zbornik sećanja Jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u Španskom ratu*, vol. 2 (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1971) p. 269.

Matija Gubec and revolution in Yugoslavia

On 25 July 1941, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia issued a call for the peoples of Yugoslavia to rise up against the fascist occupiers and their domestic collaborators. Specifically addressing the Croats, Josip Broz Tito invoked the spirit of Matija Gubec, as the greatest of the Croatian heroes “who had fought in the past for justice and freedom,”⁴⁹ in order to mobilize them against the murderous Ustaša regime. In later years Tito, who was from the Zagorje region of Croatia himself, recalled how as a child he had listened to local peasants recounting the legends of Gubec and the peasant rebellion.⁵⁰ The Partisans, who made use of local legends such as the belief that Gubec did not really die and was beneath the ground waiting to lead the peasantry once again, were successful in convincing Croats to join them in armed resistance; as historian Ivan Jelić argues, “the development of the revolution indisputably showed that the emphasis on that traditional rebellion and resistance became a significant component in the relatively complex process of including the Croatian peasantry into the national liberation movement.”⁵¹

Eventually fifteen Partisan units were formed bearing the name Gubec, from the first Zagreb detachment of thirty-seven communists founded on 16 August 1941, to the Matija Gubec Brigade founded near Čazma on 12 December 1943 with over 650 soldiers, most of which fought in either Croatia or Slovenia.⁵²

The victory of the communists in Yugoslavia in the Second World War cemented their control over the Gubec legacy, especially since every other political option ceased to exist except in exile. Their interpretation of Gubec as a social revolutionary became the only version, and the history of the KPH was written with the 1573 rebellion as the beginnings of a revolutionary movement leading inevitably to the Partisan triumph in 1945. Gubec became a chapter in the Partisan myth, and in 1973, the four hundredth anniversary of the peasant rebellion became an occasion not only to celebrate Gubec, but to reinforce the legitimacy of communist regime. At the opening of the Gubec monument and museum complex in Gornja Stubica on 14 October 1973, Tito made the connection between the peasant rebellion and the Partisan movement explicit:

Everything indicates that the rebellion had a class character, and that class consciousness was its driving force. That is why that rebellion, unlike any other – and there were others before and after – left such deep tracks in the history of the people, in our souls, from that time to our revolution...we are also denoting the continuity of the progressive aspirations of our peoples, through their long-suffering history, whose greatest achievement was realized in our national liberation struggle and socialist revolution. The ideals that Matija Gubec heroically died for, that many sons of our peoples gave their lives for, the ideals of the liberated peasant, the liberation of mankind in general, have been realized in our socialist society for a full three decades.⁵³

In addition to the museum complex, the cult of Gubec was promoted in numerous publications as well as the feature film *Seljačka buna 1573*, released in 1975. For the communists of Yugoslavia, the sixteenth century Croatian peasant hero's struggles had come to an end with the victory of Tito's Partisans in the Second World War, three hundred and seventy years later.

⁴⁹ Narodina Jugoslavije!, issued on 25 July 1941, reprinted in Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, vol. 7 (Belgrade: Komunist, 1983), p. 61.

⁵⁰ Phyllis Auty, *Tito: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), pp. 8–9.

⁵¹ Ivan Jelić, “O značenju tradicije velike seljačke bune,” pp. 89, 92.

⁵² The first Zagreb detachment was destroyed shortly after being formed in battles with the Ustaše. Another Matija Gubec unit of note was the Matija Gubec Battalion, also known as the First Zagorje Detachment, founded in March 1942, which was active throughout the war in the region north of Zagreb. A list of the units can be found in “Partizanske jedinice imena Matije Gupca,” in *Matija Gubec*, no page number.

⁵³ Speech by Josip Broz Tito, given on 14 October 1973, reprinted in “Ideali seljačke bune ostvaraju se danas,” in *Matija Gubec*, no page number.

Conclusion

During the 1930s, as Croats turned to increasingly radical political options to solve the national question in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, few symbols cut across ideological lines such as the sixteenth century peasant leader Matija Gubec. Communists, fascists, and the leading force of the Croatian national movement, the HSS, all used the symbol of Gubec to mobilize their followers. The story of Gubec thus became viewed through a number of ideological prisms: he became simultaneously a radical social revolutionary as well as a champion for order and morality. All sides realized the potential of Gubec as a Croatian national symbol, even the communists, who sought to counter their opponents' claims that they were internationalists in the service of foreign powers.

With the end of communism and the collapse of Yugoslavia, Gubec lost the political symbolism that had once inspired revolutionaries to fight under his banner in distant lands. Under Croatia's first democratically elected president, Franjo Tuđman, who was also from the Zagorje region, the cult of Gubec faded away. Not only was Croatia no longer a country with a majority of peasants, but after 1945 Gubec had essentially become a communist symbol and thus could not immediately be incorporated into the body of new (or renewed) political symbols that were required by an anti-communist and newly independent Croatia. Other myths and historical symbols, including some from the defeated Ustaša movement, predominated. In January 2004, the Zagorje district where the 1573 battle took place could not even raise enough money to fund anniversary activities to commemorate the event, which included a 3.5-kilometer walk from Gubec's Linden Tree (where the peasant leaders allegedly met) to the site of the museum and a reenactment of the trials of Franjo Tahy and Matija Gubec.⁵⁴ The memory of Matija Gubec has not died out, but has shifted away from political manipulation to the realm of historians and cultural heritage.

⁵⁴ See *Zagorski list* (Krapina), 27 January 2004, p. 11; and 10 February 2004, p. 13. On 7 February 2004 about one thousand people attended the celebrations in Gornja Stubica for the anniversary of the fateful battle between the feudal army and the peasant rebels.