

# Collective Memories of Everyday Life on the Isolated Island of Žirje in the Times of Socialism



Kolektivni spomini vsakdanjega življenja na izoliranem otoku Žirje v času socializma

Filip Škiljan, Ivana Škiljan and Natasha Kathleen Ružić

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines interview data exploring the collective memory of thirteen residents on the island of Žirje, focusing on life during communism. Oral histories describing collective memories are important sources of information especially in instances where archival records are either non-existent or very sparse. The paper begins by providing a brief overview of the geographical and historical context along with key concepts from the literature. The data is then compared and discussed based on the themes identified in the interviews.

KEYWORDS: isolation, island communities, Žirje, socialism, collective memories

## IZVLEČEK

Prispevek analizira podatke iz intervjujev, ki raziskujejo kolektivni spomin trinajstih prebivalcev otoka Žirje, s posebnim poudarkom na življenju v času komunizma. Ustna zgodovina, ki opisuje kolektivne spomine, predstavlja zlasti pomemben vir informacij takrat, ko arhivski zapisi ne obstajajo ali so zelo omejeni. Po kratkem pregledu geografskega in zgodovinskega konteksta ter ključnih konceptov iz literature so pridobljeni podatki primerjani in obravnavani na podlagi identificiranih tem iz intervjujev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: osamitev, otoške skupnosti, Žirje, socializem, kolektivni spomini

## INTRODUCTION: GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Croatia's National Island Development Plan 2021–2027 (Nacionalni plan razvoja otoka 2021–2027) outlines four key priorities for island development: 1) quality of life and availability of public services on the islands; 2) sustainable development of island economy; 3) smart and sustainable management of island resources and environment; and 4) mobility and connectivity of the island area. Each island has its own history, resources, needs, individual beauty and advantages. In order for these priorities to be adequately addressed on the island of Žirje, it is important to understand the history of the island in relation to the key aspects focused on. A deeper understanding of the history of the island can lead to plans for more effective strategic actions to address Žirje's needs. Because historical documents are scarce, the researchers took the approach of recording the oral histories of the islanders to examine life during socialism, which had a major impact on its functioning. The study is important because it provides historical information about a group of people during a particular time which is lacking, while also providing valuable insights for future plans for island revitalisation.

Žirje is the farthest inhabited island of the Šibenik archipelago. It is located 22 kilometres southwest of Šibenik, near the Kornati National Park. The island covers an area of 15.08 km<sup>2</sup>, stretches 12 kilometres in length, and has a total coastline length of 41.8 kilometres. It is composed of limestone and features two ridges, with a central field spanning 108 hectares.<sup>1</sup> The island is home to several caves and pits, and its highest peak is Kapić (131 m), where a prehistoric hillfort was located, preliminarily dated to the Bronze and/or Iron Age (Podrug, Jović and Krnčević 2016: 53). From as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Žirje has been an island recognised for its beauty, natural resources and advantageous strategic position for military operations. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Juraj Šižgorić described the island as “rich in harbours and fish, abundant in excellent wine, and notable for its forests of wild spruce” (Podrug, Jović and Krnčević 2016: 72).

Throughout its history, Žirje has been the hub of various economic and military activities. Žirje and another island, Zlarin, were also linked to coral fishing. The most important sites are located near Žirje, which, for example, also led to the emergence of the pier as a warehouse location. Fortis mentioned that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, coral fishing was widespread around Žirje (Kale 1994a: 8). Another example of the islanders utilising their locally available resources is the lime industry. The agency of the islanders and their networking skills enabled the joint ventures of the locals and investors from the city (Faričić and Juran, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that the most extensive data on lime production on the

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In 1876 the Monastery of St. Lawrence requested permission from the bishop to sell Žirajsko polje to the residents of Žirje. The inhabitants of Žirje purchased the privilege of the Monastery of St. Lawrence from Šibenik, effectively acquiring all the land on the island of Žirje along with 23 additional islands, totalling over 4 million square metres of land (Kupoprodajni ugovor između samostana Sv. Lovre u Šibeniku i mještana Žirja (Kale 1994b: 287–294)).

islands in the coastal waters of Šibenik come from the period between 1450 and 1550. During this time frame, at least 30 contracts for the construction of island lime kilns were recorded, with the island of Žirje being the largest construction site, followed by the islands of Kaprije, Orut, and Tijat (Friganović 1994a: 65). It is clear that these four islands, with Žirje at the head, were the main centres of lime production in the Šibenik region for centuries. Documents often state the amount of wood needed or used, which further enhances the value of the data from 1451, which mentions the planned procurement of 2,000 loads of wood for the firing of a single lime kiln on Žirje. On the original map by Kolunić, which is kept in the National Library in Paris a drawing of Žirje contains the text “Qui si fa la Calcina” (“Here lime is produced”). The same map also shows all the other islands in the Šibenik coastal waters, but apart from their geographical names, there are no other special designations.

For Croatian islands in general, the period of Austro-Hungarian rule followed by the formation of Yugoslavia saw waves of migration leading to a decreasing population (Magaš 1996). From 1918 to 1992, Yugoslavia, under its various titles, the final being the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), undoubtedly greatly impacted the way of life on the islands.

During World War II, the church gold had to be hidden and was buried in the ruins of the old parish house. In 1949, the gold was handed over to the Local People’s Committee (MNO), which later transferred it to the Šibenik Diocese. During the war, the people of Žirje stood firmly with the Partisans. The island served as a Partisan base, the insularity of the island being advantageous to the Partisans. In this regard, the military took advantage of what Dawson (2019) calls their “optimal marginality”, the benefit of their in-between position. The islanders’ support of the partisans led to several instances of arrests by the Italians and Germans. The most harrowing event was the arrest carried out by the Germans on 20 October 1943, when they assembled the residents of Žirje (men, women, and children) at Srcela and prepared the men for execution. After Don Ferdinand Kolednik, the parish priest of Žirje, fell to his knees, the Germans released part of the residents, while the rest were sent to concentration camps (Dodig 2023: 218–222).

The insular nature of life on the island and the limited access to various resources, including human resources, meant that their use was dependent on access and availability. After the war, there was no parish priest on the island (an unresolved need for human resources related to religious life), and the parish house was repurposed for various uses: it became home to the school, the post office, and a tavern. This is an example of what Broodbank (2000) discusses as the complex nature where islanders create and re-create their physical and socio-cultural worlds and identities. During the first years after the war, indicators of religious remoteness were present; for example, a priest visited Žirje only three or four times, and during this period, the residents did not baptise their children or receive the sacraments before death. Simonič (2024) supports this, claiming that the decrease in religious activity was a result of political ideology and a decrease in population. Chowdhury and Ravi (2022) and Zahnd et al. (2018) assert that remote and rural areas experience a higher rate of chronic and non-chronic diseases in their population as well as more mental illnesses and poorer oral health.

In 1949, land was confiscated from “kulaks”, or peasants who owned larger plots of land (Dodig 2023: 218–222). The inhabitants in general experienced poor quality of life due to the difficult conditions, including the lack of water, the vegetation, the climate on the island, the army presence, property issues around inheritance, as well as the loss of population. The industrial advancement of the mainland contributed to this loss (Simonič 2024). In 1946 and 1947, the Economic Cooperative and the Fishing Cooperative were established on Žirje. In 1952, the General Agricultural Cooperative was established, which became the foundation for the later Agricultural Cooperative on Žirje. Simonič (2024) points out that these cooperatives did not survive but are recalled in a positive manner. Shell (2014) notes that being geographically isolated from mainland society impacts the development of insularity. Throughout its history, along with its remoteness, Žirje has seen various political influences, effects on its lifestyle, socialising norms, religious norms, schools and organisational structures, population structures, and forms of work (Simonič 2024). Friganović points out that Žirje is like Lastovo in the South Dalmatian group of islands or Vis in the Central Dalmatian group of islands. Žirje is a prominent outpost and orientation island in the middle part of the Adriatic Sea (Friganović 1994a: 62). Its optional marginality and in-between position also provide certain advantages.

In 1954, a great tragedy occurred at the point of Kapelica. The ship Kupari was transporting the people of Žirje from Šibenik to Žirje. A great bora was blowing, and a military ship came to help the passengers who were supposed to be transferred to it in order to disembark at Muni. Unfortunately, the military ship sank during the reloading of passengers, and three people died on that occasion. Such tragedies have a strong impact on insular communities in particular, where access to psychological support and similar services is limited, if not entirely unavailable.

Another indicator of the impact remoteness/insularity has on resources is the island's relationship with power sources. In the late 1950s, a wind turbine was installed on a resident's house, producing the island's first electricity. He also owned the first radio on Žirje, and people would gather at his house to listen to it. It wasn't until 1969 that electricity was brought to the island, and in 1972, after three years of digging and erecting poles, the local residents were finally connected to the power grid (Dodig 2023: 242–256).

Žirje can be compared to several other islands in the Adriatic, but also to settlements located on the mainland. For example, there is the island of Vis, which, like Žirje, was a place where the army was stationed. In terms of distance from the coast, islands such as Unije, Susak, Silba, Lastovo, Premuda and other smaller islands are in a similar position. On the continent, like the islands, the settlements in Žumberak, in Lika, in Dalmatian Zagora and in Gorski Kotar are isolated from traffic, and their permanent residents have largely emigrated (Dugački, Peternel and Škiljan 2021).

Throughout the socialist period, Žirje remained a military base, which hindered the development of tourism on the island. The impact that a military presence has on tourism has also been recognised in the literature (Currie, Skare and Loncar 2024). Naef and Ploner (2016) assert that the relationships between memory, the heritage of war, and tourism are

very complex, noting that post-war tourism can increase with the inclusion of war tourism, where tourists come to a location to visit and see the impact of war and related artifacts (Naef and Ploner 2016: 181–188). Simonič (2024) explains that tourism has nowadays become an important part of the island economy, contributing to local family incomes on Žirje.

The impact that the military presence had on the island is also visible in the island's infrastructure. For example, the main roads were entirely military in nature, connecting the military strongholds on the island (e.g. we can see on the Franciscan land register on [mapire.eu](http://mapire.eu), before the installation of cannons at the ends of the island, how the roads stopped when they reached undivided pastures, while later the routes were connected to them and the paths widened into a vehicle profile). The insular nature of the islands can often lead to the underdevelopment of infrastructure. In this case, however, the military took advantage of its position, which resulted in infrastructure advancements that also benefitted the island community. This then impacted the economy, resulting in it being connected especially after the 1980s, and the increasingly frequent use of civilian vehicles on the island. Interestingly, the evolution of the local economy can be compared with Friganovič's (1994a) geographical article from *Žirajski libar*, where he divides the historical phases geographically by parts of the island from south to north, while the one shown earlier forms a concentric miniature from the centre of the island towards the bays of today's tourist economy.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the island had about eight hundred inhabitants. According to the 2021 census, the population is now 147, though the actual number of permanent residents is around fifty. The largest settlement is Selo, located inland near Polje. The smaller, historically newer settlement of Riva is situated at the pier in Muna Bay. Some bays, such as Mikavica and Koromašna, are inhabited seasonally, with only a few examples of permanent residence. The population primarily engages in agriculture and fishing. Many Žirje residents now live abroad, particularly in Australia and North America.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Approach: Using Oral History to Examine Collective Memory

To study the area of Žirje more effectively, this work utilised the available literature and the method of oral history, specifically through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Collective memory, even that of a micro-community, is rooted in its specific space, time, and identity (Assmann 2006: 55). Within collective memory, members of a national community conceptualise their past, present, and future. The more turbulent the events and processes, the greater the changes in collective memory (Cordonnier et al. 2022). Individual and family memories, narratives, and conversations are crucial for transmitting content significant to the history of a given nation within a micro-community. Memory and recollection are similar psychological processes, both individual and collective, yet they also differ. Memory relies on social interaction and communication from which it emerges, while the interconnectedness of these memories forms recollection. Just as individual memory is not always

reliable, neither is collective memory, as it is shaped by living human groups “constantly changing, open to the dialectics of memory and forgetting, unaware of its regular distortions, susceptible to uses and manipulations, with long periods of latency and sudden revivals” (Nora 2006: 24). Oral history aims to revive what would otherwise remain silent by reconstructing the life stories of individuals. Primarily, it records the voices of ordinary people, reflecting their daily lives and experiences, and seeks to revive what would otherwise remain devoid of any voice. Through their testimony, it captures the daily life of an era or a specific historical moment (Cupek Hamill 2002: 219–226; Dukovski 2001: 155–162; Leček 2001: 149–154; Thompson and Bornat 2017: 23).

### Research Aim

The research aimed to demonstrate how the inhabitants of Žirje perceived their customs and daily life during the period of socialism in Yugoslavia.

### Research Questions

The guiding research questions were: 1) How did the participants experience their childhood during socialism in Yugoslavia? 2) What were the customs around childbirth, weddings and funerals during this period according to the memories of the participants? 3) What was everyday life like during socialism in Yugoslavia, did it change over time according to the memories of the participants? 4) What were the migration patterns during this time according to the memories of the participants?

### Data Collection

Oral testimonies were collected during field research on Žirje in 2024, involving semi-structured interviews with thirteen individuals. Of these, twelve interviews were conducted on Žirje and one in Šibenik. The oldest female participant was born in 1937, and the oldest male participant in 1939. The guiding questions used to stimulate responses related to the main research questions were: 1) What is your full name, year of birth, and place of birth? 2) Where does your family originate from? 3) What was Žirje like during your childhood? 4) What were the customs surrounding childbirth on the island? 5) How did young people meet, and what were the customs for weddings? 6) What were the customs when someone passed away? 7) How much migration occurred from and to the island? 8) During socialism, how important were religious and national identities on the island? 9) What was life like on the island during socialism, and how isolated or closed off was it? 10) How important was the Žirje field in the past? 12) What is life like on the island now? What are the challenges, and what are the advantages?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and are held by the authors and in the archive of the Isolated People and Communities in Slovenia and Croatia project (IPS 2022-

02-3741). On average, each interview lasted about an hour and a half. While the oral history method has well-known weaknesses, it is essentially irreplaceable for studying the history of rural populations who leave no written records themselves. Typically, their stories are documented by others – members of the educated elite – who, as Suzana Leček points out, often write “in a biased, tendentious, and certainly incomplete manner” (Leček 2001: 149–154). In this process, it was necessary to create clear questions and organise them logically.

### Data Analysis

The participants have been given an identification number and their data has been de-identified for publication within this article. The data was analysed and coded according to identified consistent themes. The data was then further coded into sub-themes, for example, the theme “religious ceremonies” contains the sub-themes “marriage” and “funerals”. The commentary within the subthemes was then compared and analysed for similarities in answers, complementary answers building a more in-depth understanding of a theme or inconsistency in individual experiences. Key quotations were identified for use in the data analysis.

### Research Limitations

Several challenges arose during the interviews, such as the unreliability of memory, the tendency to adapt responses to meet the perceived expectations of the interviewer, and the selection of questions and answers. The participants were sometimes hesitant to discuss the Croatian War of Independence and its events on Žirje. However, we do not claim that all events described in the narrators’ accounts occurred exactly as described. Instead, we have sought to convey the emotional states of individuals as part of the collective memory of the local population, enabling an understanding of a segment of the history of everyday life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Origins of the Island Inhabitants

The surnames of present-day Žirje residents partially date back to the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. The island has been inhabited since prehistoric times, as evidenced by the hillforts on the island. Fortifications and archaeological sites from antiquity and the early Middle Ages further testify to the island’s habitation. The first recorded mention of the population of Žirje comes from 1298, when 103 inhabitants lived in 23 houses (Friganović 1994b: 76–79). The surnames of some of the participants were identified as belonging to the island’s history from as early as 1419 (Kale 1994 a: 9), or as arriving during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, with names present on family tombstones (Dodig 2023: 278–288). Table 1 shows the participants’ place and date of birth.

Participant number	Birthplace	Year of birth
1	Konjic	1963
2	Šibenik	1956
3	Šibenik	1952
4	Šibenik	1969
5	Žirje	1956
6	Žirje	1951
7	Žirje	1939
8	Žirje	1949
9	Sarajevo	1945
10	Žirje	1950
11	Šibenik	Undisclosed
12	Žirje	1946
13	Žirje	1937

Table 1: Participants' place and date of birth.

Participant 4, who has researched the history of Žirje and wrote an unpublished chronicle of the Žirje parish, explained: "Some families came to Žirje to defend the island and were granted land for use in return". Participant 8 noted that he believes his ancestors arrived during the Ottoman incursions into Bosnia: "The [...] family came from Bosnia during the spread of Islam in the Balkans." In later migrations, families came from Istria after World War I, "...bringing fishing traps with him, teaching the Žirje residents how to use them". Based on the information shared, it seems that at least some of the informants are knowledgeable about their ancestry.

### Everyday Life on Žirje During Socialism

Most of the participants, born during early socialism or in the late period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, recall the era of socialist Yugoslavia and daily life on Žirje during socialism. Having a small population meant that the services available to the islands were shared among the neighbouring islands. The islanders' agency and their ability to find ways to cope with their insularity via networking with others to share resources with nearby islands in similar situations is apparent. Participant 1 commented: "The island always had a clinic and a post office. Occasionally, a doctor would visit once a week. The doctor's base was on Zlarin, and from there, they travelled to other islands like Kaprije and Žirje". Limited medical services are another identified issue pertaining to remoteness and insularity. Participant 1 also discussed the impact of having a military base on the island had on the local population during socialism: "Some girls from the island married soldiers stationed there from across Yugoslavia. Some of those soldiers stayed on the island, while others left with their wives for the cities where the soldiers were from. A large number of locals emigrated to North and South America".



## Education on Žirje

Participant 12 mentioned that when he started school, there were 16 children in his generation: “There were two teachers, one teaching from first to fourth grade and the other from fifth to eighth. In 1953/54, there were 76 of us at the school”. Participant 1 reported that the “school on the island functioned until 1973. The last students born on the island were from 1962/63”. Participant 2 recalled a time when the school on Žirje was thriving and the classrooms were full: “We had a school, and during my time, there were 26 students in my class. When I was little, there were 38 children just in our part of the village. The school went up to the fourth grade, and from the fifth grade, we went to Šibenik.” Participant 3 remembered that in 1963, there were still 105 students at the school: “The teachers were from Serbia, and one of them married a man from Žirje.” Participant 2 discussed how the issue of remoteness along with the impact of migration later led to the school closing, and the students needed to travel by boat to Šibenik, stating: “We travelled back and forth, spending the whole day commuting. That was one of the reasons many Žirje residents bought houses in Šibenik”. This comment illustrates the subsequent impact of further migration to the mainland and the developing temporary migration. In this example, the lack of resources and human capital in the form of teachers and students resulted in the need to connect with communities on the mainland, and also negatively impacted the students’ quality of life with the extended travel time to and from school. The islanders then found a method to improve the situation for their children by temporarily migrating, thus displaying their agency in resolving this issue.

Participant 9 explained the temporary migration to Šibenik during school terms as a result of the hardships of travelling: “While my children were attending school, I rented a place in Šibenik. Sometimes, the children would catch the boat at 5:30 a.m. and return home at 4 p.m. They spent the entire day at school, waiting for the boat to depart. The route included Zlarin, Zabláče, Krapanj, Kaprije, and Žirje. The worst was during the *jugo* [southern wind] or *bura* [northern wind].” Participant 12 confirmed the difficulties faced: “It was unbearable for the children to travel like that. When we finished primary school, we went to Šibenik. We travelled every day by boat. [...] It was impossible to endure, so we became boarders in Šibenik.” Interestingly, Participant 3 commented that prior to socialist Yugoslavia, women on Žirje were illiterate: “Both of my grandmothers were illiterate, but one of them still taught me the multiplication table.”

## Economic Life on Žirje During Socialism

The development of the island was reflected in the existence of several institutions that operated during socialism, making life easier for the residents. Participant 2 highlighted this progress: “The lower part of the village on Žirje began to be built in 1978 when tourism started. We used to have a post office, a clinic, a youth centre, a cooperative, and a tavern in the village. The shop was initially in [somebody’s] house but later moved to the Riva [Muna]. There was also an olive oil mill, and above it, a restaurant, both of which operated until the 1980s.” Par-

ticipant 5 added that the locals had “a shop in the village until 1961. I remember my mother sending me there to shop. You could buy feed, fuel, gas, barrel hoops, and kerosene.” This comment highlights the participant’s understanding of their insular position, demonstrating the sentiment that the necessary resources at those points in time were nevertheless available.

The island was predominantly inhabited by women, as many men worked as sailors or in factories on the mainland. Participant 3 stated: “My father was a sailor and worked as a head chef on a ship, while my mother worked the fields.” Participant 5 shared a similar story, emphasizing how family, agriculture, and livestock were his mother’s responsibilities: “My father was a sailor, and my mother took care of the chickens, sheep, and lambs. She also tended the land – vineyards and olive groves. Žirje was particularly known for its green plums, which were either sold at the Šibenik market or traded for tomatoes and potatoes.” The foundation of the island’s economy was agriculture, sheep farming, and fishing. Participant 12 emphasized the significance of selling green plums at the Šibenik market:

The green plum was introduced to Žirje by an Austrian soldier, who brought it in his bag. Between 1 July and 15 August, the island would sometimes send between two thousand and six thousand kilograms of plums daily to the Šibenik market. When I was a student, I operated the cooperative boat. I would leave at 4:30 a.m., arrive in Šibenik around 6:00 a.m., and by 6:30 a.m., Žirje’s plums were being sold. Now, those plums are completely gone. The land has been overtaken by brambles and grass.

This final comment marks a change in a once important island produce which nowadays no longer exists. The network between the island and the mainland and the inter-relationship is highlighted by these economic activities.

Participant 3 stressed the importance of the island’s agricultural activities: “Once, the island was covered with vineyards, and the land was grazed bare by sheep. There were between two thousand and three thousand sheep on the island, each marked on its ear.” Participant 4 noted how livestock shaped the island’s landscape: “There used to be so many animals that they kept the island bare, and there were no fires. The pines were planted only after World War II.” Participant 9 believes that sheep were the most numerous animals on the island:

The island once had around four thousand sheep. Each sheep had its own marking and was inspected every Sunday. Sheep were sheared near the sea and bathed in the sea, making them white as swans. They were kept in the western and southern parts of the island. They were dyed and had pierced ears to identify their owners. Everyone knew their marking.

### The Role of Fishing and Cooperatives in Žirje’s Economy

Fishing was a vital economic activity for the people of Žirje. Participant 5 emphasized its importance in daily life:

We had special boats for fishing. *Plivarice* [seine boats] were used for pelagic fish, and in front of my house, there were two *leuts* [eight- to eleven-metre-long boats]. There was plenty of fish, especially bogue, sardines, salem, and mackerel. The people of Kaprije would come to work on Žirje’s olive trees because Kaprije had no fields like we did. Once, no one wanted to eat octopus.

I remember fishermen trading octopus for water, and my mother would cook it with potatoes. Fishermen would bring us crates of fish because it would spoil otherwise. I'd carry the crates home, and my mother would curse because we couldn't eat it all, and it would stink unless we salted it.

Participant 12 recalled the fishing techniques used in Žirje's waters:

In the 1960s, there were three seine boats on Žirje. These boats had lamps to attract fish. They'd encircle the fish with nets, and that's how they caught them. The fish had to be sold at the Šibenik market. This way, ninety people had lunch and dinner. There were poor and elderly Žirjani who didn't go fishing, but every time fish were caught, they were given a kilo or two to survive.

Žirje's fishermen travelled far for their catches, as Participant 8 explained: "Our people went fishing around Kornati. Fishermen from Betina and Murter also fished there and had their facilities in Kornati. Žirjani clearly had facilities there as well." Again, in the fishing industry, the inter-relationship between Žirje and Šibenik is demonstrated with both communities displaying an economic need which the other could solve. Although the community was insular in many ways, it was also strongly connected and inter-dependent.

### Post-War Changes and the Rise of Cooperatives

After World War II, industrial development and better employment opportunities led to younger generations leaving the island for work on the mainland or as sailors. Participant 12 recalled how life on the island improved after 1945 but also led to depopulation:

Socialism emphasized the formation of cooperatives. After the war, an agricultural cooperative was established on Žirje. Maritime industries began to develop in Yugoslavia, and many people joined ships as sailors in the 1950s. The salary was reliable, and life improved. Part of their pay was in dinars, and part in the currency of the country they were in. These sailors brought back a certain culture of dress and behaviour.

This final sentence demonstrates the impact of institutions on local cultures.

In Šibenik, factories like the light metals factory and the electrode factory were opened between 1950 and 1960, employing around six thousand people. People from Žirje started working in these factories. The villages gradually emptied. Life in the city was better. People lived as tenants initially, then received apartments after seven or eight years of service.

Migration to the mainland was a dominant theme. Participant 12 recollected:

In Šibenik, many houses were built, and half of Mostarska Street residents were from Žirje. With fewer people on the island, there was no labour left for fishing or farming. The agricultural cooperative became the centre of island life. There was harmony between the locals and the cooperative. Together, they built the Cooperative Hall through volunteer work, as well as a restaurant and an olive oil mill on the waterfront.

The cooperative also engaged in ambitious initiatives, such as sponge and coral harvesting in Libya. Participant 12 explained:

The Yugoslav government initiated sponge and coral harvesting in Libya. The centres were based in Zlarin and Krapanj. Seven or eight teams were formed, taking loans to buy engines and repair boats. However, Libya's coast turned out to be sandy, with no sponges or coral. This left the cooperatives in significant debt. Despite this, the Žirje cooperative survived.

### Community Efforts and the Cooperative Hall

Participant 9 recalled the communal effort to build the cooperative hall:

Crveni dom (*Red Hall*) was built by the residents of Žirje. Women carried stones on their heads and using slings. If you didn't show up to work, you had to pay a daily wage to those who did. The hall functioned until the Croatian War of Independence, after which the cooperative collapsed. The cooperative had a shop and a restaurant on the waterfront [Muna], but everything fell apart.

The cooperative and the fishing industries were essential pillars of Žirje's economy during socialism, shaping the island's way of life while also illustrating the gradual shift in livelihoods as modernisation and urbanisation drew people away from the island. This shift demonstrates a decline in a sustainable network of inter-dependence between the island and the mainland and the greater impact of insularity on the islanders, their needs and lack of resources resulting in migration.

### Importance of Water

Participant 4 recalled how ships delivered water: "Our cisterns were always very important to us. A ship would come and stretch out a large hose to fill the cisterns located in the hills. As children, we used to collect water because the pipe had multiple leaks." Participant 10 spoke about the importance of the pond and water for the island:

There was a cistern near the school, and water was drawn from it twice a week. We drank water from the pond, and there were little frogs in it. We had no issues. The fields were fully cultivated, all by hand, and there were gardens around the houses. The pond would sometimes freeze over, with up to twenty centimetres of ice. There was even snow on Žirje sometimes, with temperatures as low as minus fifteen degrees.

### On Poverty During Socialism

Participant 3 reflected: "My father didn't own shoes until he was sixteen. He had to drive a donkey barefoot. He would go to the forest because there was nothing to eat at home." Participant 9 also recalled the severe poverty, which forced people to save and organise their work efficiently. With the men away, all the responsibilities of daily life fell on the women:

When I came to Žirje in 1961, the place was beautiful, full of vineyards, with cultivated fields and even a health clinic. The fields looked like a park, not a single weed in sight. The youth cleaned the paths every Sunday. It was a time of great isolation. You had nowhere to go. Every day, you had to take a hoe and work. Sailors wouldn't return home for two years, only when their ship docked at

its home port. When you married into a family, you had to keep your head down. Everything was strict. There were four sisters-in-law, a mother-in-law, and a father-in-law. In the evening, the father-in-law would decide who would go where and what tasks needed to be done. Everything had to be completed. When a child was born, the mother-in-law would take care of the child, and the younger women would work. My workday was from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. When you returned from the fields, you had to clean yourself and the child, then wash the dishes. It was best to just put on a mental 'plaster' – see nothing, hear nothing. The sisters-in-law got married and left, and I was left with my father-in-law, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law. I cared for them on my own. I prayed to God to work for daily wages, mixing mortar or pushing a crusher, just so I could pay the taxes.

We also went fishing. My cousin would tell us where to cast the nets. At home, everything was fuelled by wood. We had a *bruzin* [a round pot] hanging on a tripod. We had kettles for pears and two pots. The *pinjurs* [ladles] were made from olive branches, and the spoons were aluminium. We also had two large iron pans.

The island used to have Dalmatian evergreen oaks. We collected leaves for the sheep and goats. There was also a forester, [name omitted], who monitored the fields with binoculars. There were at least thousand sheep, and from 1970, rabbits and pheasants.

Their isolation, the impact of the men needing to leave to work and the lack of resources and means (poverty) is clearly demonstrated in this statement. The resilience of the island population and their mental and emotional strength is evident in the participant's approach to the harshness of the situation.

Participant 10 described the poverty his family faced: "I was born in a small house measuring 6x4 meters. We all lived in one room. In the attic, there was a fireplace where we cooked, all fuelled by wood. Three brothers, one sister, and our mother lived there. My father was a sailor, and poverty was even worse because of that." Poverty determined everything – how long you went to school, when you married, where you worked, and more:

We lived off child allowances. There was great poverty. Once a year, we ate meat, and we lived off farming. We ate potatoes, beans, peas, and Swiss chard. My mother worked for daily wages, and my brothers later became sailors. My sister worked at the Žirje Agricultural Cooperative, and I went to school until the fourth grade. Every day, I took a boat to Šibenik and returned. In the evenings, I went with my mother to eat wherever she went to work. *Zaguzin* was the term used when parents went to work for daily wages, and the child followed them to get some food as well. (Participant 10)

Participant 11 described how poor people from Žirje lived during the first half and middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Families were larger back then, and the houses had a fireplace where they would cook and warm up. The shepherdesses took care of the sheep and had to bring a bundle of branches from some tree to use as fuel for the fire. There were only a few dozen houses in the village, and all of them had a fireplace. There was a large consumption of biomass on the island, so there were no plants except for agricultural crops. Even the roots were saved because there were no branches to break off. There was no indoor toilet; people had to go outside. When someone needed to take a photo, they would borrow clothes so they wouldn't appear in the ragged clothes they wore daily. There was no cooling system or distribution network, so they had to transport fish for hours to Šibenik to sell them. There was no method for drying or preserving food, except for salting the fish. They didn't catch white fish or shellfish, just sardines. A boat was a valuable asset. There might have only been two boats in the

village. The boats were six metres long, without cabins or roofs, and they worked solely using oars and sails. It was very difficult during World War I, so the Catholic Church organised the transport of children from Žirje to Slavonia to survive the hunger. My grandmother went to Slavonia.

This comment also highlights the role of the Catholic Church in assisting its remote community members.

Due to great poverty, the population began to migrate from Žirje. Again the impact of the insularity of the island on their economic opportunities resulted in a decreased island population. Some moved to larger cities in Yugoslavia while others emigrated (often illegally) to overseas countries or Western Europe. Their departure from Žirje was often first limited to “navigating” the Adriatic, and later beyond. Participant 7’s story speaks about the difficult journey and arriving in foreign countries:

When I was old enough, I worked on the Pula-Ulcinj line with Jadrolinija, which was a passenger and freight route. I wanted to board a ship to Italy, but I didn’t tell anyone. There was a ship from Rijeka to Venice. That’s where I disembarked, and when it was time to return, I escaped. I slept in a gondola in Venice. I was sixteen years old at the time. Since my older brother and some others had already escaped, I knew the procedure. Five of them had escaped from Stupica on the Feast of the Assumption in 1952 to Italy. My brother and his colleagues were in a camp in Udine. I reported myself to the police in Venice and told them that I had escaped from the boat. They registered me and took me to a refugee camp. I stayed there for two days. Then I was in Cremona. My brother found out I was in Cremona.

The brother and the others wanted to find work in Italy, but there were no jobs there. Their plan was to escape to France through Monaco or to Germany through the Alps.

I joined them at the refugee camp in Udine, and we took a train to Milan, then a bus to Turin. In Turin, we took a taxi that drove us up to the Alps. That’s how we crossed the Alps to the first city in France. Then we passed through Grenoble, Lyon, and took a train to Paris. We knew that there was work in construction or the automotive industry there. When we arrived at Gare de Lyon, we looked for a policeman, who took us to the police station. It was the central police station for Europe. They gave us a medical examination and checked our political statements. After that, we got a job at Citroën. As a minor, I couldn’t get a full salary, so they gave me half. I wasn’t there for a full year. From there, I went to Australia. In Australia, I worked in glass and fertiliser factories. I received a weekly salary. (Participant 7)

Participant 8 recalled how his uncle left the island:

Since the 20th century, our people have been leaving the island. They went to Chile, Argentina, Peru, and Venezuela. My uncle left for Slavonia at seventeen in 1910, and my grandmother spent her whole life longing for him. From there, he went to South America. He never came back here. Around 1973, I visited him in San Pedro, and he didn’t remember anything about Žirje anymore. His wife was Dutch, and his children didn’t know Croatian.

Emigration from the isolated island was indeed significant. Leaving for overseas and Western European countries was an escape from poverty, backwardness, and isolation, and anyone who had the opportunity fled the island. Initially, the escapes were illegal, but later they were legalised. Few returned to the island.

During socialism, the island housed a military presence. Soldiers stood guard facing Italy, and most of them came from other Yugoslav republics. With the local men needing to work away from the island, the women lacked potential partners (human capital decreased due to a lack of work as a result of the insularity of the island). This situation provided an opportunity for the soldiers. Some of them married Žirje women and stayed on the island, while others took Žirje women back to their republic. Participant 10 recalled the intense cooperation with the military:

Most of the soldiers were from Serbia. They guarded the border with Italy. There may have been up to three hundred of them. Although we were friendly with the military, we often got into fights with the soldiers at Saturday dances. I remember when one soldier brought the first battery-powered gramophone. Some of those soldiers who fell in love with our women stayed here.

Participant 9 explained how important the military was for the islanders:

In Yugoslavia, there were bases in Zvizdulje and Vela Glava. After the war, there was a barracks in Mikuljice. There were up to 250 soldiers and at least four officers because of the border. The border was drawn in the direction of Lastovo-Vis-Žirje-Dugi Otok. The coexistence with the soldiers was excellent. They always helped us and entertained us. They would bring trumpets and accordions, and there would be a dance in the middle of the village. The dances were for 29 November, 1 January, 4 July, 1 May, and 25 May. We also had a relay race for Tito's birthday. Our youth would read messages to Tito. Tito was especially respected.

The locals were not burdened by nationalism; as former partisans or their descendants, they believed in the new Yugoslav state.

### Customs of the Inhabitants (Birth, Marriage, Death, and Church Practices After World War II)

Life on the island was difficult, and during the most significant moments of life, all the islanders participated. The birth of a child was undoubtedly one of the most important events in the life of a family from Žirje. Due to the lack of professional midwives and doctors, complications during childbirth sometimes resulted in the death of newborns. The insularity resulting in a lack of human resources in the form of medical staff impacted the survival rate of newborns. Participant 11 highlighted the cases of “newborn deaths due to umbilical cords wrapping around their necks, and it was especially challenging when a large baby was to be born.” Nevertheless, the islanders demonstrated their agency even in these conditions, and Participant 9 recalled three midwives who were self-taught. When a woman was about to give birth, *Kartuljina* would move into the household for seven or eight days. In other words, the self-taught midwife stayed on even after the birth to assist the mother. Children were sometimes even born on boats, as was the case with the youngest sister of Mire Alić. There were many children because there was no contraception or knowledge of calculating fertile and infertile days. Participant 3 noted that childbirth took place in very modest conditions:

Women would lie down on bedsheets and give birth like that. When I was born, there were no stillbirths. My great-grandmother had thirteen children, but only five survived. When she was old, she would say, “Look at my children, angels walking.”

Thus, in the period after World War II, there were significantly fewer deaths of newborns, mothers, and infants. Participant 6 recalled that he was the only male child, “so they treated me like the apple of their eye.”

### Cultural and Social Life on Žirje During Socialism

A special place in the social life of the island was held by a theatre group. Participant 2 recalled that every New Year’s, the locals would organise a performance featuring sketches inspired by everyday life on the island. These performances were prepared throughout the year, with actors gathering sketches in which every islander could recognise themselves.

### Young People, Weddings, and Traditions on the Island of Žirje

Young people on the island would meet while playing, in school, while tending sheep, and they often fell in love at dances or religious processions. Over time, as Žirje residents began working on the mainland, many married girls they had met there. Participant 12 recalled:

When I was a child, every Sunday afternoon, we would play a traditional circle dance. It had a specific step, ‘our way’, which I’ve never seen anywhere else. People would watch each other, and young folks would flirt. Many girls who got married on Žirje came from surrounding islands or the area around Šibenik. My mother was from Tisno. My father worked at an olive mill in Tisno, where he met my mother.

Participant 2 highlighted that on Žirje, “they were careful to ensure the bride and groom weren’t related up to the ninth degree. On Kaprije, people married among themselves more often, which sometimes led to developmental issues.” She also mentioned that “[t]he last traditional wedding was that of [name omitted]’s mother.”

Most of the village residents attended the weddings. During socialism, weddings often weren’t held in church but at the registrar’s office. Wine and brandy were brought out, and flowers were thrown at the bride and groom. The Yugoslav flag was often displayed at weddings during socialism. Here is how Participant 9 remembered her wedding:

My future husband came to Šibenik and asked my mother if she would give me to him. She told him he couldn’t even support himself. I wanted to become a nurse, but my mother got rid of me. We agreed he would propose in May and marry me in July. When he came back from the ship, we got married. We had a civil wedding in Šibenik, then took a boat to Žirje. The wedding party started at the pier and continued in the village. The family came to the house, where there was singing and the traditional circle dance. The celebration lasted day and night at our house. A basket was passed around. The master of ceremonies, Krste, would take a knife, dressed in traditional attire, and go to the first family member, asking for money: ‘How much will you give for this head?’ They gave until the last clasp from the crown [the bride’s headpiece]. Then a relative would fire a pistol. I didn’t have a church wedding.



## Funeral Traditions

Funeral customs were also traditional. Today, these customs are changing, as Žirje residents no longer pass away on the island. Participant 12 recalled the lack of medical care on the island as a result of its remoteness, noting:

It was hard when someone got sick. One woman had seven daughters and two sons. Both sons started coughing. Four men rowed the more seriously ill son to Zlarin, but he died on the way. When they returned, the other son, who stayed on Žirje, had also died. When someone dies, all the houses are empty as everyone goes to the funeral. Even Žirje residents living in Šibenik come for the funeral. We are united in this.

Once again, the impact of insularity on medical provisions resulted in negative consequences for the islanders. As with weddings, in death, all the residents showed solidarity, regardless of whether they had good or bad relations with the deceased's family or the family of the groom or bride. Participant 5 noted that the deceased were kept overnight:

There was laughter, jokes, and card games. After two days, the deceased would be buried. Graves were small, so coffins wouldn't fit; the deceased would be buried in sheets.

Participant 9 recalled that when someone died in the village, the bell would ring:

The priest would be notified. Then we would find strong young men in the village to place the deceased in a coffin. If someone died in Šibenik, young men would carry the coffin uphill from the pier, and the bell would ring the entire time. The men would take turns because the coffin was heavy.

The islanders displayed solidarity for each other, understanding the impact of their insularity and the need to maintain a strong sense of community. The priests didn't attend the funerals of partisan fighters. The military would fire salutes at the cemetery, and the deceased would be buried with the Yugoslav flag.

## Religious Traditions

Religious customs were observed during Christmas, Easter, St. Anthony's Day, St. Mark's Day, Corpus Christi, and the Feast of the Assumption. Participant 9 recalled:

On Christmas Eve, we went to Midnight Mass. The next day, there was Mass and celebrations. People danced and exchanged greetings. For Easter, on Good Friday, children would look for snail shells. The shells would be soaked in kerosene, lit, and placed along the path, creating light. There was a Way of the Cross procession, and a cross in the church would be kissed. Women would sometimes crawl on their knees if they had made a vow. Processions were held on St. Anthony's Day, St. Mark's Day, and Corpus Christi, going through the fields, which were blessed. On the Feast of the Assumption, the procession went through the village. After World War II, a permit was required to hold the Feast of the Assumption procession.

Today, religious processions and holidays are still observed, but the number of participants has significantly decreased.

## CONCLUSION

This research is a valuable contribution to the data on the collective memories of the people of the island of Žirje during socialism. The memories we have collected are the only reminiscences that remain of the history of the island of Žirje, today a largely demographically devastated area. It is therefore necessary to emphasise that this work is based on the so-called culture of memory and oral history. The memories of individuals that have been collected do not necessarily have to be accurate. They only show us how individuals experience their past, both their personal past and that of their village or homeland (Assmann 2006).

Key themes were identified during the thirteen interviews, such as the impact of insularity on education systems and access to resources, including medical and religious services. The population decreases due to migration were the result of changes in the advancements and opportunities available on the mainland and in other countries, as well as a lack of resources and opportunities due to the insularity of the island. Daily and short-term migration patterns featured for work and schooling when these were not available on the island. The political and industrial climate affected many aspects of life, such as religious, the changing presence of military and its impact, marriage and migration patterns (women marrying soldiers and leaving), to name a few. The macro features, the politics, laws, regulations and institutions of the mainland as well as the island, influenced both the meso-level social networks as well as the micro-level of individual people's lives. Individuals can also have an impact on the meso and macro features, for example, one person's electrical device caused the local people to gather and socialise, in the above example, by listening to the radio together. The inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of the island community and the mainland changed over time as a result of historical and political events and economic advancements. This inter-dependence decreased with time and the impact of the insularity of the island resulted in migration.

Today, Žirje is almost completely deserted. The population decline has been ongoing since 1948, with the exception of the latest census in 2021, when the population increased from 103 to 147. Although the population is growing, it remains very low. Only a few permanently employed individuals live on the island, and all of them are non-locals. Among them are a postwoman, a nurse, municipal sanitation workers, a firefighter, and Jadrolinija employees, such as a cashier and sailors who moor the boats. Additionally, the island hosts a military base. Administratively, the island falls under the city of Šibenik, but the president of the local community does not live on the island. Life on the island today largely depends on maintaining a few olive trees and vineyards, while livestock is almost entirely absent. Participant 6 perhaps summarised the state and outlook of the island best: "Today, Žirje no longer exists. It's not about water and land, but about our *Boduli* [islanders], who are no longer here. We are disappearing. We no longer bury ourselves on the island, but wherever we die. Here, one dies to live." This statement highlights the disappearance of traditional life on the island and points out that while the physical space remains, the island's spiritual heritage is declining, making way for a new, different

life that will continue on Žirje in a different manner. This study's results highlight the key factors from its history that have impacted the island population, the results of insularity and world events. The important lessons learnt in this period are still relevant today, with Žirje experiencing limited resources and the impact of insularity. The inter-connectedness between the mainland and Žirje today is limited and better reflects the needs of Žirje that the mainland can address. The research results demonstrate the importance of inter-connectedness between islands/rural areas and cities. The results can inform and should be considered by the institutions undertaking the development of the implementation activities related to Croatia's National Island Development Plan 2021–2027 (*Nacionalni plan razvoja otoka 2021-2027*) to assist in developing a resilient, sustainable and inter-connected island community.

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## POVZETEK

Prispevek raziskuje kolektivne spomine 13 prebivalcev otoka Žirje, oddaljenega hrvaškega otoka, s poudarkom na življenju v obdobju socializma v Jugoslaviji. Zaradi pomanjkanja arhivske dokumentacije se raziskava opira na ustno zgodovino, zbrano s poglobljenimi intervjuji. Namen je dokumentirati življenjske izkušnje otočanov, vsakdanje običaje in družbene spremembe skozi čas. Žirje ima bogato zgodovino, ki se razteza od prazgodovinskih naselbin do strateške vojaške rabe v času socializma. Tradicionalno je otok znan po kmetijstvu, pridelavi apna in ribištvu, geografska odmaknjenost Žirja pa je pomembno vplivala na njegov razvoj, kulturo in družbene strukture.

Raziskava je na podlagi spominov prebivalcev opredelila več pomembnih tem:

a) Otoška lega in viri. Oddaljenost otoka je vplivala na izobraževanje, zdravstveno varstvo, infrastrukturo in versko življenje. Storitve so si pogosto delili s sosednjimi otoki, nekateri viri (voda, elektrika) pa so bili omejeni do konca 20. stoletja.

b) Vojaška prisotnost. V socializmu je otok služil kot vojaška baza, kar je omejevalo turizem, a izboljšalo infrastrukturo. Družbeni in zakonski odnosi med otočani in vojaki so bili pogosti.

c) Gospodarsko življenje. Glavni viri preživetja so bili poljedelstvo, ovčereja in ribištvo. Zadružništvo je imelo ključno vlogo, čeprav je veliko mlajših prebivalcev boljše življenjske pogoje iskalo na celini ali v tujini, zlasti kot pomorščaki.

d) Migracije. Tako začasne (šola, služba) kot stalne migracije so močno prizadele prebivalstvo, povzročile depopulacijo in kulturne spremembe.

e) Izobrazba. Šole so delovale do zgodnjih sedemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, potem pa so morali otroci potovati v Šibenik, pogosto v težkih razmerah.

f) Običaji. Običaji ob rojstvu, poroki in pogrebu so odražali tradicionalno podeželsko življenje, nanje pa sta vplivala solidarnost skupnosti in otoška izoliranost. Verska praznovan-

ja so se ohranila kljub socialističnim omejitvam.

g) Revščina in stiska. Življenje je bilo zaznamovano z revščino, samozadostnostjo in odpornostjo, zlasti za ženske, ki so same vodile gospodinjstva, ko so moški delali daleč od doma.

h) Družbeno in kulturno življenje. Dogodki kot so plesi, amatersko gledališče in verske procesije so bili ključnega pomena za kohezijo skupnosti.

Danes je otok Žirje skoraj zapuščen, z malo prebivalci in omejenim dostopom do storitev. Tradicionalni način življenja je bolj ali manj izginil, udeleženci raziskave pa so v intervjujih izrazili nostalgijo in zaskrbljenost zaradi izginjajoče identitete otoka. Raziskava kaže, kako so otoška lega, družbeno-politične sile in migracijski vzorci oblikovali družbeno tkivo in gospodarstvo na otoku. Poudarja pomen ustne zgodovine pri ohranjanju spominov mikro-skupnosti ter razkriva medsebojno povezanost otoškega življenja s celinskimi institucijami in globalnimi silami. Spoznanja, pridobljena na podlagi raziskave, so uporabna tudi pri razvijanju sodobnih strategij razvoja otokov, zlasti za hrvaški Nacionalni razvojni načrt otokov 2021–2027.

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