

www.forumhistoriae.sk



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



© 2025 The Author(s)
© 2025 Institute of History,
Slovak Academy of Sciences

Politicization of Theatre Audiences Through Historical Opera and the Use of National Myths: A Case-study of *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*

Petra Babić 


Keywords

politicization of the audience, historical opera, Nikola Šubić Zrinjski, Ivan Zajc, collective memory, reception

DOI

[10.31577/forhist.2025.19.2.7](https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2025.19.2.7)

Author

Petra Babić
Hrvatsko katoličko sveučilište
Ilica 244
10000 Zagreb
Email: petra.babic10@gmail.com
 0000-0001-6405-6204

Cite

BABIĆ, Petra. Politicization of Theatre Audiences Through Historical Opera and the Use of National Myths: A Case-study of *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*. In *Forum Historiae*, 2025, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 98–116, doi: [10.31577/forhist.2025.19.2.7](https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2025.19.2.7)

Abstract

BABIĆ, Petra. Politicization of Theatre Audiences Through Historical Opera and the Use of National Myths: A Case-study of *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*.

The paper deals with the process of politicization of the theatre audience through historical operas, exploring the subject via a case-study of the Croatian historical opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* (1876) by Ivan Zajc. The author argues that for an opera to be able to fulfil its intended political function, an a priori positive attitude towards the subject or the protagonist in the national collective memory had to exist. The first part of the paper explores the development of the historiographical narrative and the collective memory, showing how the historiographical narrative was fixed as late as in the 19th century. The collective memory leaned on this narrative and was fixed precisely due to Zajc's opera. The second part deals with patriotic and political elements of the libretto, focusing especially on the concepts of freedom, identity, continuity and community. The final section focuses on the reception, particularly during the second half of the 20th century—a period when Croatia's autonomy within Yugoslavia was limited and *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* functioned as a cultural platform for expressions of Croatian patriotism.

It is well known that national operas held an important role in the national movements of the 19th century, conveying ideas of patriotism, national perseverance and steadfastness, while portraying what an ideal representative of a certain nation was like. These operas frequently depicted actual events or periods from their respective national pasts—often moments that were crucial points in the course of national history that were perceived as national tragedies—in order to highlight the nation's ability to overcome difficulties and to resurrect itself after catastrophes. Such operas had strong potential to rouse the public and were usually very successful in stimulating patriotism and the sense of national belonging, with performances of such operas occasionally becoming forums of—often very fiery—displays of patriotism or opposition to the government if that administration was perceived by the public as foreign, imposed or unjust. However, in most cases, the national rousing and political character ceased with the completion of the national formation or state unification process, which most often took place during the 19th century or right after the First World War. Later, these operas maintained a prominent place as favourite pieces, but more so in the context of the

This work was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2020-02-4277 “Institutionalization of Modern Bourgeois Musical Culture in the 19th Century in Civil Croatia and the Military Frontier.”

audience's enjoyment of the feeling of legitimate patriotism and contentment with the success of the nation building project. On the other hand, Croatia did not achieve independence after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. On the contrary, the country became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918–1941) and eventually of the socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991), both unitarian regimes, attempting to diminish or even annihilate any distinctive national identity(s), and adversely oriented towards the expression of desires for Croatia's freedom, greater rights within the multinational state or even public expressions of patriotism. For that reason, the most famous Croatian national opera—*Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* (1876)¹ by Ivan Zajc had great importance. The opera deals with an actual historical event—the siege and the Battle of Szigetvár (Siget in Croatian)—corresponds closely with historiography on the event and contains many rousing scenes which were meant to spur patriotism. It is, thus, no wonder that ever since its first performance, *Zrinjski* has become synonymous with declarations of Croatian patriotism and continued to rouse and provoke patriotic feelings well into the 20th century—especially because performances of *Zrinjski* were at times the only public event at which one could, by expressing enthusiasm for the opera, express one's Croatian patriotism. For that reason, this opera provides an excellent example of a work that reached the full force of its potential for politicization in the domain of reception.

The reason why *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* became so popular and influential was due to the prominent place that its protagonist held both in Croatian historiography and in collective memory, as an important national symbol even before the opera was composed. Because of this, and to provide information that is as complete as possible, the present article will first describe the development of the narrative of the Battle of Szigetvár in historiography in an attempt to paint the version of events with which the audience was familiar in the context of collective memory, and secondly, point out elements of the libretto that bear political or patriotic meaning. Finally, the opera's reception is discussed, focusing particularly on the period of socialist Yugoslavia.

The Battle of Szigetvár in Historiography

The Battle of Szigetvár, fought in 1566, was one of the most significant engagements during the period of intense warfare against the Ottoman Empire. The approximate 2 300 defenders withstood a month-long siege against a more than 100 thousand strong Ottoman army, led by sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, but all perished in a final stand.² Their steadfastness, as well as the fact that the sultan died during the siege, had effectively saved western Hungary—and even Vienna—from the Ottoman invasion, and the brave chivalry demonstrated there astounded contemporaries. The memory of the battle quickly surpassed the level of ordinary historical information, and turned Nikola Zrinski

1 The opera is entitled *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*, while the Croatian Viceroy who inspired it was called Nikola Šubić Zrinski. Thus, the name Zrinski is used here when referring to the historical person, and *Zrinjski* when referring to the opera.

2 For more details on the siege and the battle see: MIJATOVIĆ, Anđelko. *Obrana Sigeta*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 2010.

and the defenders into heroes—of national (both Croatian and Hungarian) and general European mythology. The tale of the siege and the Battle of Szigetvár became a frequent subject of contemporary historiography, epic and folk poetry, dramas and a variety of musical works,³ and through all these works became an integral factor of the community's identity.⁴ The process of the formation of the memory of the battle occurred in the domain of both culture and historiography. However, in the 19th century, both Theodor Körner, author of the drama *Zriny* (1812), and Hugo Badalić, author of the libretto of *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*, who used Körner's *Zriny* as a template, strove to base their works on credible historiographical sources. Thus, the most important elements of the formation of this collective memory in the relevant literature from the 16th century to the 19th century are discussed below.

Historical Memory of the Battle of Szigetvár and Nikola Zrinski

Information on Nikola Zrinski himself, and the siege and the Battle of Szigetvár started to appear in a range of media almost immediately after the fall of Szigetvár—leaflets, *Imagines virorum illustrium*, epic and folk poetry, and historiography. All of this contributed to the formation of a strongly present collective memory of the battle, and enhanced the reception of the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* and its status as the pinnacle of the siege's memorialisation, both after the first performance in the 19th century, and throughout the 20th century as well.

The most valuable source of information on the siege and the battle is the first-hand testimony of Zrinski's chamberlain, Franjo Črnko, who kept a detailed diary during the siege. Črnko reported that Zrinski knew in advance of the planned Ottoman campaign aiming to conquer Vienna, and that he had even previously been victorious in some smaller conflicts with the Ottoman army's vanguard. When he learned that the sultan was planning to attack Szigetvár, he gathered both his army, consisting of some 2 300 men, and the town's civilian population inside the city walls and swore:

3 A detailed analysis of all of these works would far exceed the scope of this paper, and constitute an excessive digression from its main topic. Instead, the interested reader is directed to relevant literature: BANOVIĆ, Estela. Naracija o junaštvu kao dio kolektivnog pamćenja. Nikola Zrinski u usmenim i pučkim povijesnim pjesmama. In *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Splitu*, 2018, no. 11, pp. 111–133; BLAŽEVIĆ, Zrinka – COHA, Suzana. Zrinski i Frankopani – strategije i modeli heroizacije u književnom diskursu. In *Radovi zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, 2008, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 91–117; KOLAR, Mario. *Između tradicije i subverzije*. Zagreb : FF Press, 2016; KEKEZ, Josip. Sigetska bitka u usmenoj književnosti i usmena književnost u sigetskoj epopeji od Krnarutića do Vitezovića. In *Zadarska revija*, 1986, vol. 35, pp. 165–181; KOLUMBIĆ, Nikica (ed.) *Sigetska epopeja od Krnarutića do Vitezovića*. Zadar : Hrvatsko filološko društvo – Narodni list, 1986; BRATULIĆ, Josip – LONČAREVIĆ, Vladimir – PETRAČ, Božidar (eds.) *Nikola Šubić Zrinski u hrvatskom stihu*. Zagreb : Društvo hrvatskih književnika, 2016 (especially the introductory study: BRATULIĆ, Josip. Sigetska epopeja u hrvatskoj književnosti. In BRATULIĆ – LONČAREVIĆ – PETRAČ 2016, pp. I–XXV); PRANJIĆ, Ivan (ed.) *Sigetski boj u hrvatskoj epici*. Čakovec : Matica hrvatska, ogranak Čakovec, 2016; GRGEC, Petar. Ciklus narodnih pjesama o hrvatskim banovima. In *Hrvatsko kolo*, 1942, vol. 23, pp. 257–274; KATALINIĆ, Vjera. Četiri Zrinska. In *Krležini dani u Osijeku 2000 "Hrvatska dramska književnost i kazalište - Inventura milenija, I. dio"*. Zagreb; Osijek : Zavod za povijest hrvatske književnosti, kazališta i glazbe HAZU; Odsjek za povijest hrvatskog kazališta; Hrvatsko narodno kazalište u Osijeku, 2001, pp. 118–124.

4 For a more detailed explanation of that process, particularly regarding Nikola Zrinski, see: BANOVIĆ 2018, p. 112.

[...] firstly to the almighty God, then to the illustrious Emperor [...] and to you, here present knights [...] that I shall never leave you, but I shall endure evil and good with you, and I shall here with you live and die.⁵

Zrinski then asked everyone present to swear the same oath, and proclaimed the rules of conduct during the siege as well as measures of punishment for offences or disobedience. Črnko described the siege day by day in great detail, including the individual Ottoman attacks, how they tried to break into the city and the numerous smaller battles fought during the siege, always emphasizing the huge disparity in strength between the Ottomans and the defenders, the serious casualties that the defenders suffered, and also their bravery. Describing the final battle on 7 September, Črnko wrote that after the Ottomans had set the town on fire, instead of remaining in the burning city, Zrinski decided to launch a final charge. He dressed ceremoniously, in his best attire, including the hat he wore at his wedding, his father's sabre and a small shield,⁶ but no armour or helmet "because he was not charging to exit the Szigetvár, but to meet the fate that God intended him,"⁷ and had the town keys and 100 golden Hungarian ducats sewed into the lining of his tunic so that the Ottomans could not capture the town as long as he was alive, and so that the enemy looting him would not say that they had not found anything on him. Then he called on all the men ready for battle to follow him and charge out of the city, promising them once again that he would lead them and never leave them. In the battle, Zrinski was shot three times and when he fell, the Ottomans burst into excitement. The defenders then retreated back inside the town with the Ottomans following, killing most of them and capturing women and children. However, while the battle and pillaging were still taking place, the fire reached the town's powder magazine, which produced a devastating explosion that killed 3 000 Ottoman attackers.⁸

Shortly after Črnko's description was published, Samuel Budina translated it into Latin and published it as *Historia Sigethi* (1568). This translation became the key work that carried the details of the siege and Battle of Szigetvár across western Europe. Budina's Latin translation was further translated into German and Italian, with both versions becoming very popular and further disseminating the story of Zrinski's bravery.⁹ Apart from these translations, *Imagines virorum illustrium* were very important for the formation of the memory of the battle in (western) Europe. Such encyclopaedic works were similar to today's modern biographical lexicons and dealt with the most important and well-known men of their age. Nikola Zrinski appears in four such works:¹⁰ *Teutscher Nation Heldenbuch* (1570) by Heinrich Pantaleon; *Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes*

5 ČRNKO, Ferenac. *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta*. Edited by Milan Ratković. Zagreb : Liber – Mladost, 1971, pp. 3–8.

6 ČRNKO 1971, pp. 18–20.

7 ČRNKO 1971, p. 20.

8 ČRNKO 1971, pp. 18–22.

9 JOZAK, Kristina. *Historia Sigethi* Samuela Budine i njegov opis sigetske bitke. In TUKSAR, Stanislav (ed.) *Odjeci bitke kod Sigeta i mita o Nikoli Šubiću Zrinskom u umjetnosti*. Zagreb : Hrvatsko muzikološko društvo, 2018, pp. 404–405.

10 For a more detailed analysis on that matter, see: PELC, Milan. *Immortali laude dignus Nicolaus illustris comes Serinensis*. Nikola Zrinski Sigetski u knjigama sa životopisima i portretima znamenitih ljudi iz 16. stoljeća. In TUKSAR 2018, pp. 217–236.

illustres grecz, latins et payens (1584) by André Thevet; *Atrium heroicum. Caesarum, regum aliarumque summatum, ac procerum. Qui intra proximum seculum vixere aut hodie supersunt* (1601) by Dominik Kustos, and *Der aller durchleuchtigsten und großmächtigen Kayser, Durchleuchtigsten und Großmächtigen Königen & Ertzhertzen, Durchleuchtigen und Hochgebornen Fürsten, wie auch Grafen, Herrn vom Adel, und anderer treflicher berühmter Kriegshelden [...]* (1603) by Jacob Schrenck von Notzing. All of them share a few common motifs: Zrinski's noble character, the fact that he had been a successful warrior against the Ottomans for a long time, the long Ottoman siege of Szigetvár, the heroic final charge by the defenders, and the indebtedness of Christian Europe to the stance and actions of Zrinski.¹¹

In the Croatian context, the following works of Croatian or Hungarian provenance were considered: *Zigethi Hungariae claustrae praestantissimi vera Descriptio et Obsidionis Epitome* (1587) by Ferenc Forgách; *Historiarum de rebus Ungaricis libri XXXIV ab anno 1490 ad annum 1605* (1622) by Miklós Istvánffy; *Memoria regum et banorum regnorum Dalmatiae, Croatiae et Sclavoniae* (1652) by Juraj Ratkaj; *Stemmatographia Mavortiae Familiae Comitum de Zrin* (1663–1665) by Marcus Forstall; *Kronika aliti spomen vsega svieta vikov* (1696) and *Plorantis Croatiae saecula duo* (1703) by Pavao Ritter Vitezović, and *Život Nikole Zrinjskoga, sigetskoga junaka* (1866) by Matija Mesić. Studying the narrative's formation is important because it can be very clearly observed that the authors were true to the narrative established by Franjo Črnko, however, they most likely did not take information directly from his testimony, but rather from their immediate predecessors, thus forming a complementary narrative of the Battle of Szigetvár which highlighted some different details.

Ferenc Forgách was the first to add new information to Črnko's narrative, stating that the sultan had offered Zrinski rule over Croatia if he surrendered the city and, after Zrinski declined, threatened to execute his son George, whom the Ottomans had allegedly captured, if he declined. Zrinski remained steadfast, refusing all offers and threats and even encouraged his soldiers to find inspiration for further battles in his paternal sacrifice.¹² Forgách is also the first to introduce the story that the wife of one of Szigetvár's defenders—"the unknown heroine"—persuaded her husband to allow her to fight alongside him in the final charge,¹³ a motif that found a place in several literary and theatrical works, including the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*. While we lack confirmation of this information in primary sources, Forgách, a contemporary of the events, is generally considered to be a trustworthy historian, who incidentally did not favour Zrinski personally, and would not have had the motivation to invent any information presenting Zrinski in a more favourable light.¹⁴

11 SCHRENCK VON NOTZING, Jacob. *Der aller durchleuchtigsten und großmächtigen Kayser*. Innsbruck : Daniel Baur, 1603, p. 228; PANTALEON, Heinrich. *Teutscher Nation Heldenbuch*. Basel : [n.p.], 1568, pp. 479–480; THEVET, André. *Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres grecz, latins et payens*. Vol. V. Paris : [n.p.], 1584, pp. 435–437.

12 FORGÁCH, Franciscus. *Zigethi Hungariae claustrae praestantissimi vera descriptio, et obsidionis epitome*. In ALBINUS, Petrus (ed.) *De Sigetho Hungariae propugnaculo, a Turca anno Christi MDLXVI obsessio & expugnatio, opusculum Consecratum*. Wittenberg : [n.p.], 1587, pp. [4–5].

13 FORGÁCH 1587, p. [10].

14 On Forgách as historian see: BRADÁCS, Gábor. Ferenc Forgách (Forgách Ferenc). In THOMAS,

Miklós Istvánffy knew Zrinski personally and held him in the highest esteem, even considering him to be, alongside king Matthias Corvinus, the most important person in Croatian and Hungarian history.¹⁵ His description of the siege and the battle was true to Črnko's, but, however, did not yet contain Forgách's report of the sultan's offers and threats, nor of the "the unknown heroine." He described the battles between the Ottomans and the defenders during the siege in great detail, highlighting the defenders' bravery and military skill as well as the fact that they were far weaker in numbers.¹⁶ He also dedicated special attention to Zrinski's oath, portraying the speech as especially eloquent and ornate.¹⁷ In this, the existing tendency to perceive the oath as one axis of the narrative of Szigetvár can be observed. Additionally, Istvánffy's version of Zrinski's last speech before the final charge is also more ornate than Črnko's version, interestingly including notions that Zrinski himself sensed his (moral) superiority over the Ottomans and that he was aware of the admiration he would receive in the future because of his glorious end,¹⁸ which are, again, motives that can be found in Zajc's opera. Istvánffy was the first to introduce the fact that the sultan Suleiman had died during the siege, but that his grand-vizier Mehmed-pasha Sokolović kept it a strict secret so that the army would not lose morale.¹⁹

The other analysed texts, by Ratkaj, Forstall and Vitezović, all mention the great disparity in numbers between the defenders and the Ottomans, the bravery that the defenders displayed and the heroic final charge they undertook. However, they are all rather short in volume and do not introduce any new information, and for that reason will not be analysed in detail here.²⁰

In 1866, an important historiographical work especially relevant for Croatian audiences was published, *Život Nikole Zrinjskoga, sigetskoga junaka* by Matija Mesić. This book was important for the formation and affirmation of the collective memory of the Battle of Szigetvár for several reasons. *Život Nikole Zrinjskoga* is a fully scientific work; Mesić employed numerous primary sources and was the first to write a detailed biography of Nikola Zrinski, which was accompanied by an extensive chapter on the history of the Zrinski

David – CHESWORTH, John A. (eds.) *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America (1500–1600)*. Leiden : Brill, 2015, p. 462. Matija Mesić claims that he was inclined against Zrinski in his writings, cf. MESIĆ, Matija. *Život Nikole Zrinjskoga, sigetskoga junaka*. Zagreb : [n.p.], 1866, p. 64.

15 MANDUŠIĆ, Iva. Ugarski povjesničar Nikola (Miklós) Istvánffy (1538–1615) i njegovo djelo *Historiarum de rebus Ungaricis* u hrvatskoj historiografiji. In *Croatia Christiana periodica*, 2009, vol. 33, no. 64, p. 36.

16 Cf. ISTVÁNYFFY, Miklós. *Historiarum de rebus Ungaricis libri XXXIV ab anno 1490 ad annum 1605*. Köln : [n.p.], 1622, pp. 479–484.

17 Cf. ISTVÁNYFFY 1622, p. 478.

18 Cf. ISTVÁNYFFY 1622, p. 486.

19 ISTVÁNYFFY 1622, p. 485.

20 See: RATTKAY, Juraj. *Spomen na kraljeve i banove Kraljevstva Dalmacije, Hrvatske i Slavonije/ Memoria regum et banorum regnorum Dalmatiae, Croatiae et Sclavoniae*. Zagreb : Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2001, p. 215; FORSTALL, Marcus. *Stemmatographia Mavortiae Familiae Comitum de Zrin*. Manuscript, kept in the National and University Library in Zagreb, Manuscripts and Old Books Collection, R 3031, 36r; RITTER VITEZOVIĆ, Pavao. *Kronika aliti spomen vsega svieta vikov*. Zagreb : Artresor, 2015, pp. 335–337; RITTER VITEZOVIĆ, Pavao. *Dva stoljeća uplakane Hrvatske/Plorantis Croatiae. Secula duo*. Edited by Zrinka Blažević – Bojan Marotti. Zagreb : Matica hrvatska, 2019, p. 81.

family before the 16th century, a not very well researched topic at the time and therefore a valuable scientific contribution on its own. His work also contains a highly detailed description of the siege, for which he mostly used the information provided by Franjo Črnko, but also included the parts later introduced into the narrative by Ferenc Forgách and Miklós Istvánffy.

While describing Zrinski's actions, Mesić largely stayed true to Črnko but made sure to emphasize Zrinski's strategic brilliance, magnanimity and bravery, and excluded any information that might have presented him as harsh or strict. He was also the first to introduce the idea that the sultan Suleiman wanted to capture Szigetvár, but also to defeat Zrinski personally as revenge for earlier defeats he had inflicted on the Ottoman army.²¹ When describing Zrinski's character, Mesić, in the spirit of 19th-century romanticism, depicted him as a gentle and caring commander, and insisted that both he and his soldiers felt strong Croatian patriotism.²² Even though such attributed feelings were anachronistic to the 16th-century protagonists of the battle, they were very close to 19th-century Croatian readers. Precisely that element was particularly important in strengthening of the cult of Nikola Zrinski in the 19th century because it suggested the existence of continuity of the Croatian national idea for—at the least—300 years.

Taking all these elements into account—the fact that it gathered the most plausible and emotionally captivating elements from Črnko's, Forgách's and Istvánffy's histories into one single narrative, the fact that it was published in the year in which the 300th anniversary of the battle was celebrated as well as the growing national sentiment that was present in the general public—Mesić's work represented the final stage in the creation of the concise version of the Battle of Szigetvár in Croatian 19th-century historiography, one which would be influential on the Croatian collective memory.

The Battle of Szigetvár in the Theatre

In the 19th century, the already popular theme of the Battle of Szigetvár began to appear as a topic of theatrical works in national movements. In 1812, Theodor Körner, a young German poet then serving as the court poet at the Viennese Burgtheater, wrote his drama, *Zriny*. He is said to have used historiographical sources when writing it, especially, according to Kálmán Kovács, *Österreichischer Plutarch* (1807) by Joseph von Hormayr.²³ This text is notably quite similar to one by Franjo Črnko. However, Körner's drama also contains information provided in historiography by later authors such as Ferenc Forgách (e.g., Suleiman's proposals and the threats that the grand-vizier conveyed to Zriny,²⁴ or Eva throwing the torch in the powder magazine during the final

21 MESIĆ 1866, p. 276.

22 Cf. MESIĆ 1866, pp. 242, 246, 273, 287–289, 297.

23 KOVÁCS, Kálmán. Die Rezeption von Theodor Körner mit und ohne *Zriny*. In HORVÁTH, Andrea – KOVÁCS, Kálmán – PABIS, Eszter (eds.) *Dialogische Erinnerung*. Debrecen : Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó – Debrecen University Press, 2017, p. 41.

24 Cf. KÖRNER, Theodor. *Zriny, ein Trauerspiel*. Karlsruhe : im Bureau der deutschen Klassiker, 1827, III act, 9 scene.

battle, reminiscent of “the unknown heroine”)²⁵ and Miklós Istvánffy (Suleiman’s death before the fall of the city and Mehmed-pasha Sokolović keeping it a secret so as not to demoralize the army).²⁶ In that way, Körner’s drama was one of the key works that contributed to “the crystallization” of the narrative in the 19th century.

Containing emotionally and politically rousing scenes and dealing with the most noble motivations, *Zriny* quickly came to be perceived as allegory for steadfastness in the battle against foreign invaders and the ideal of self-sacrifice for one’s homeland. As such, it became one of the most popular plays in the Habsburg Monarchy at the height of the Napoleonic wars, performed all over the Empire.²⁷ Körner’s drama was indeed so popular that it was also used as a template for a number of musical works for stage; Franz Xaver Kleinheinz composed a musical accompaniment for *Zriny*, Franz Joseph Gläser composed a melodrama on Körner’s text, August Abramović Adelburg adapted the drama into a libretto for his own opera *Zrinyi*, and Hugo Badalić used Körner’s drama as a template for the libretto of Ivan Zajc’s *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*.²⁸

The libretto of *Zrinski* was well balanced, including an obligatory Romantic-era love story and military scenes, which are notably consistent with the information provided in historiography by Črnko, Forgách and Istvánffy, and likewise with Körner’s *Zriny*. Furthermore, there are elements reminiscent of Matija Mesić’s characterization of protagonists (Suleiman’s determination to defeat Zrinski personally, Zrinski is presented as a gentle and caring commander, and his Croatian patriotism is very strongly emphasized), which is not surprising given that Hugo Badalić, a professor at the Zagreb Gymnasium at the time, would have surely known and taken from the very popular book. Both art works, Körner’s *Zriny* and Zajc’s *Zrinski*, included the most important—or more precisely, the most emotionally impactful—episodes of the siege and the Battle of Szigetvár in their plots (Suleiman’s determination to defeat Zrinski personally, disparity in numbers between the two armies, Zrinski and his soldiers’ oath, Zrinski’s rejection of Suleiman’s threats and offers, and the heroic final charge), and in doing so, they created a condensed and concentrated version of the narrative that in turn became the principal version in the Croatian collective memory.

Political and Patriotic Elements of the Libretto

The 19th century was equally challenging and crucial for the formation of Croatian identity. Croatian historical lands—the Kingdoms of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia—were not united as one political unit, but were instead parts of the Lands of the Hungarian Crown (Croatia and Slavonia) or were administratively subordinate to Vienna (Dalmatia). There also existed a strong desire on the part of ultra-nationalist Hungarian politicians to negate Croatian historical rights completely and to reduce the two kingdoms to mere Hungarian

25 Cf. KÖRNER 1827, V, 9.

26 Cf. KÖRNER 1827, IV, 6, 7.

27 Cf. KATALINIĆ, Vjera. Ponovno o Zrinijadi na glazbenoj sceni u ‘dugom 19. stoljeću’. In TUK-SAR 2018, pp. 112–114.

28 Cf. KATALINIĆ 2018, pp. 115–119.

counties. At the same time, the national movement grew stronger in Croatia as well, reaching its peak in 1848 when the newly elected Ban (Viceroy) Josip Jelačić proclaimed the end of all state and political relations between Croatia and Hungary as a response and in opposition to the Hungarian April laws. Due to their long-shared history, the majority of Croatian politicians were not against the later renewal of the state union in the 1860s, but insisted that the Hungarian side must respect Croatian historical municipal rights. An agreement was finally reached with the Croatian-Hungarian settlement in 1868. However, that settlement, and especially its financial aspect, was a source of dissatisfaction among a substantial part of the Croatian public and political class. On top of that, three subsequent Viceroys were members of the Unionist party, and thus strongly pro-Hungarian. However, in 1873 Ivan Mažuranić, a member of the National party, became Viceroy. His time in office was marked by modernizing reforms, a stronger development of bourgeois society and a sense of national freedom.²⁹ In such socio-political circumstances—political dissatisfaction both with the Settlement and with the Croatian position in relation to both Hungary and Austria, as well as with optimism under Mažuranić—Ivan Zajc composed his most famous opera, *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*, which was meant to encourage and strengthen Croatian patriotism and the sense of national identity.³⁰

Given the political context in which it was created and the challenges Croatia was facing—especially the fact that it was not directly threatened by invasion or foreign cultural hegemony but was, rather, part of a multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, where tendencies existed to further narrow its political rights within the lands of the Kingdom of Hungary, the political messages which *Zrinjski* conveyed were the validation of Croatian identity, historical continuity and historical importance of the nation. Consequently, that is also the reason why the libretto and the music of *Zrinjski* were not inherently adversarial, not towards Austria, Hungary or even the Ottomans. There are certain elements in the opera that can be interpreted as critical of the ruler,³¹ but criticism is notably less prominent than in some other operas that were created in other parts of the Habsburg Monarchy in the 19th century (specifically, Ferenc Erkel's *Hunyadi László* can be, and very

29 For more details about the political context of Croatia in the 19th century, see: MARKUS, Tomislav. Trojedna Kraljevina Hrvatska, Slavonija i Dalmacija od 1790 do 1918: Osnovne smjernice političke povijesti. In ŠVOGER, Vlasta – TURKALJ, Jasna (eds.) *Temelji moderne Hrvatske. Hrvatske zemlje u "dugom" 19. stoljeću*. Zagreb : Matica hrvatska, 2016, pp. 3–26; MARKUS, Tomislav. Between Revolution and Legitimacy: the Croatian Political Movement of 1848–1849 and the Formation of the Croatian National Identity. In *Review of Croatian History*, 2009, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 13–45.

30 Cf. PALIĆ JELAVIĆ, Rozina. Nikola Šubić Zrinjski u Zajčevoj hrvatskoj nacionalnopovijesnoj opernoj trilogiji. Utjecaj ideja i svjetonazora 19. stoljeća na oblikovanje sadržaja i likova. In TUK-SAR 2018, pp. 143–145.

31 Namely, in the scene in which Zrinjski decides to set the part of town they can no longer defend on fire and young officer Juranić angrily asks why the king is not coming to their aid. However, Zrinjski quickly shuts down his questioning of the king's reasons and reminds his army that they should remain steadfast because: "For his homeland and his people, / A Croat will readily give his life!" ZAJC, Ivan – BADALIĆ, Hugo. *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*. Zagreb : C. Albrecht, 1876, Act II, Setting 5, Scene 1. Through that, the audience is reminded that the king, at the time Maximilian II Habsburg, had left the defenders in the lurch, but the focus still remains on the ideas of identity and patriotism.

often was, interpreted as an anti-Habsburg opera, while some others, such as Erkel's *Bánk bán* or Bedřich Smetana's *Braniboři v Čechách* could be seen as anti-German). In her research on national operas, Vjera Katalinić argues that there exist three national concepts: those of identity, continuity, and community, which are aligned with the five founding myths of a community: internal consolidation, demarcations towards the others, unity of its members, spiritual boundaries towards the outsiders and territorial demarcation.³² The idea of national perseverance was equally important. The artistic implementation of these concepts corresponded to contemporary political demands for greater autonomy and to the desire to strengthen the sense of identity in a wider strata of society. Topics like the Battle of Szigetvár were well-suited in such contexts, taking into account that in the opera, historical events could—also—have been interpreted as a defence of the nation as a whole and the country's freedom, and be simultaneously seen as “a promise” of the perseverance despite all the hardships. In addition, Etienne François and Hagen Schulze have concluded that in the formation of myths of a nation, the most important events on which they were founded were the great challenges that the nation in question faced. It should be pointed out that in such a process, it was not important if the protagonist's side emerged victorious from that struggle, but rather the importance lay in the display of steadfastness, courage and the readiness to sacrifice one's own life for the nation, which served, in turn, as elements that secured the legitimacy of the nation in question and its right to live in freedom and unity.³³ Those concepts—steadfastness and self-sacrifice on one hand (in this instance of Zrinski and his men), and freedom, identity, continuity and community on the other (of the Croatian nation)—were the key ideas on which *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* was based.

The question of continuity is displayed in two ways in the opera; one is the continuity of the historical narrative and the other is the continuity of patriotism that the opera aimed to establish. The libretto is consistent with the historiographical narrative in all crucial elements of the plot. The eight scenes tell of the Sultan's preparation for the campaign and his determination to conquer Szigetvár and defeat Zrinski personally (1); Zrinski's preparations for the siege and the oath that he and the defenders took to defend Szigetvár until their last breaths (2–3); Mehmed-pasha Sokolović conveying the Sultan's offer to Zrinski of ruling over Croatia if he surrenders the city, as well as his threat to execute Zrinski's son and torture his wife and daughter if he does not (5); the Sultan's death and Sokolović's decision to keep it a secret (6); and the heroic final charge of Zrinski and his men (8). It is worth noting that the elements conveying the message of the defenders' courage and heroism were especially emphasized (the oath; Zrinski's rejection of the Sultan's offers, and the final charge), and all were placed at the ends of acts to maximize the emotional impact on the audience,

32 KATALINIĆ, Vjera. Ideja nacije i nacionalnog u nekim glazbeno-scenskim djelima: uz početak djelovanja zagrebačke opere (1870–1876). In GLIGO, Nikša – DAVIDOVIĆ, Dalibor – BEZIĆ, Nada (eds.) *Glazba prijelaza. Svečani zbornik za Evu Sedak*. Zagreb : Artresor, 2009, p. 141.

33 FRANÇOIS, Etienne – SCHULZE, Hagen. Das emotionale Fundament der Nationen. In FLACKE, Monika (ed.) *Mythen der Nationen. Ein europäisches Panorama*. Berlin : Deutsches historisches Museum, 1998, p. 22.

while any mention of the difficulties in the besieged town (such as food, water and ammunition shortages) were omitted. Furthermore, at several points in the libretto, the importance of the Zrinski family was accentuated. For example, in Zrinski's daughter Jelena's romance in which she sings about the castle of Zrin that stands on a steadfast ancient hill in fair Croatia;³⁴ in Zrinski exclaiming that he now feels himself to be Zrinski after his wife and daughter decided to remain in the soon-to-be besieged town instead of taking shelter in Vienna;³⁵ and in the scene between Zrinski and Sokolović in which Zrinski is astounded by Sokolović's assurance that the sultan will have mercy on him, saying: "His mercy? / I'm Šubić-Zrinski! / If your Sultan wishes to take this town, / Let him come and get the keys himself!"³⁶

The continuity of patriotism is an even more important aspect of the opera. Even though the type of patriotism attributed to the opera's characters would not have been known in the 16th-century society, in the context of the 19th-century operatic plot, it made perfect sense, and as such could successfully be used to incite the feeling of actual patriotism amongst the audience. The following idea was conveyed implicitly: if the 16th-century defenders of Szigetvár felt the same as the 19th-century audience, then the Croatian national idea existed, unaltered, long before the 19th century. Thus, the movement gained concrete historical legitimacy, and the historical figures who were battling either against foreign invaders or unjust rule were fighting exclusively for the rights of Croatia and its freedom and autonomy. Examples of such patriotism appear throughout the entire opera, taking on special importance when incorporated within some key scenes which correspond with the collective memory at the ends of acts.³⁷ An especially striking example is the opera's *finale*, in which immediately before the charge, the defenders lead by Zrinski reiterate their willingness to die for their homeland and express the certainty that the future generations will feel the same.³⁸

The idea of patriotism was also intertwined with the idea of community, i.e., of a togetherness that enables the nation to resist the difficulties it faces. Again, in collective memory the Battle of Szigetvár gained the status of a national myth that glorified the defenders' unity, their loyalty to the entire Christian community as well as their readiness to sacrifice themselves for their homeland.³⁹ Furthermore, *Zrinjski* highlighted the idea of national perseverance which was shown both as an intimate personal motive of the opera's protagonists (in Zrinski and

34 ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 2, 1.

35 ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 3, 2.

36 ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, II, 5, 4.

37 E.g. before taking the oath, Zrinski reminds his soldiers that: "Wherever a Croat takes on the Turkish flood, / It's to defend his land, his home! / Wherever a Croat fights to the last drop of blood, / He fights the glorious fight for freedom!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 3, 3. After declining Sokolović's offers, he calls for his family and commanders to come and repeat their convictions before the vizier: "Zrinski: Tell the Turk: / Repeat our holy oath!, Juranić and Paprutović: To the last breath! [...], Eva and Jelena: It is sweet to die for our homeland [...], Zrinski: Go tell your Sultan / What you have seen!, All: For our homeland!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, II, 5, 5.

38 "Zrinski, Eva, Juranić, Paprutović: Farewell now, / Oh, our homeland, farewell, forever, / from all sides / the enemy is charging against you. / And your holy body already descends to grave – but no! / Every son of yours shall fight to defend you! / Oh, our homeland, you shall stand forever!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, III, 8, 4.

39 Cf. KATALINIĆ 2009, p. 144.

Eva duet in Act 3),⁴⁰ and as a certainty which will be really achieved sometime in the Croatian future.⁴¹

The question of community is further intertwined with that of identity, and the question of what the community to which the protagonists—but also the audience—belong to is like. In terms of values, the Croats are presented as a loyal, proud, brave, truthful and selfless people, and Nikola Zrinski as an ideal—and idealised—version of Croatian personhood.⁴² In the plot, Zrinski is proud of Croatian freedom⁴³ and holds military victories,⁴⁴ the display of belligerent courage,⁴⁵ belonging to a community (the family or the nation)⁴⁶ and his own integrity in high esteem.⁴⁷ Consequently, these were to be understood as key elements of idealized Croatian national identity at large. On a more general level, *Zrinjski* depicts Croats as belonging to the (western) European cultural circle, very different from the Ottoman one—or the ones influenced by the Ottomans. In the same context, it emphasizes the importance of the Croatian role of *antemurale Christianitatis* and simultaneously reminds the audience how important Croatia was for the survival of the Habsburg Monarchy. Finally, at the level of operatic music material itself, Rozina Palić Jelavić has identified certain connections with the Croatian traditional folk idiom in the music (on the level of musical associations, *couleur locale*, and stylized folk motives in two numbers—Jelena's romance *Cvate ruža rumena* and Jelena's dream/lullaby *Ljubio je goluban*) and forms characteristic of folk epics in the libretto (such as usage of decasyllable, fixed epithets or use of terms and concepts that had symbolical meaning in the opera's national aspect).⁴⁸

40 "Zrinski: [...] Zrinjski will fall, / And his small troop too, / But Croats will stand tall, / And bonds of slavery undo!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, III, 8, 1.

41 "Zrinski, Eva, Juranić, Paprutović: Farewell now, / Oh, our homeland, farewell, forever, / from all sides / the enemy is charging against you. / And your holy body already descends to grave – but no! / Every son of yours shall fight to defend you! / Oh, our homeland, you shall stand forever! [...] Zrinski: To perish for the homeland, oh what delight! All: Take on the enemy! He will fall, he must!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, III, 8, 4.

42 Cf. PALIĆ JELAVIĆ 2018, pp. 149–150. For more details on the characterization of the protagonist's side in *Zrinjski* see: BABIĆ, Petra. *Hrvatske nacionalno-povijesne opere od druge polovice 19. do kraja 20. stoljeća. Intencije i recepcija*. Zagreb : Despot Infinitus, 2021.

43 "Zrinski: Men! My brothers! / Wherever a Croat takes on the Turkish flood / It's to defend his land, his home! / Wherever a Croat fights to the last drop of blood, / He fights the glorious fight for freedom!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 3, 3.

44 "Zrinski: My men are brave. / Croats are always first: / For their home, their kind, / They spare no blood!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 2, 4; "Soldiers: Long live Alapić and Juranić / Our honour and our pride! / A Croat knows / How to make his sword flame. / He knows no fear before the enemy; / Yet knows full well the road to fame, / Glorious battles he's seen many!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 3, 1.

45 Both examples from the previous footnote; also: "Juranić: [...] Our accursed enemy will fall. / In many a battle I've tried / To smite the Devil and stand tall. [...] In battle I prove my honour and my worth, / The power I hold is in my sword. / I've pledged my right hand true / To serve our God and country too [...]" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 2, 5.

46 "Zrinski (to his wife): I know you, my wife, I know your courage! / When the Sultan goes to war, Szegedvár will be his aim, Zrinski (to his daughter): To your mother be a worthy daughter, And to your father dear." ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 2, 3; "Eva (to Zrinski, referring to their daughter): Look, dear husband, / An offspring of a heroic heart., Zrinski: Now I truly feel myself to be Zrinski!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, I, 3, 2; "Zrinski (to Sokolović): Let him make Zapolya king. Zrinski will never accept! Never!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, II, 5, 4; "Eva (to Zrinski): Your deeds will forever live, / And with you, they'll remember me, too / And the daughter of Zrinski Nikola." ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, III, 8, 1.

47 "Zrinski (to Sokolović): Let him make Zapolya king. Zrinski will never accept! Never!" ZAJC – BADALIĆ 1876, II, 5, 4.

48 For a more detailed analysis of these aspects see: PALIĆ JELAVIĆ 2018, pp. 157–161.

When the three ideas—that of long-existing patriotism, loyalty to one's community, i.e., the nation, and of readiness to self-sacrifice for the benefit of the nation—were combined, the general and most powerful message of the opera was that the Croatian nation has already resisted in the past and will also in future resist all the difficulties it faces because of the strong patriotism and courage that is inherent to the Croatian people. This is a message of hope and optimism, strongly suggesting that the audience not give up and not surrender, inciting them at the same time not to accept the unfavourable (political) situation they faced, but to try to resist it.

Politicization in the Reception

Turning our attention to the audience, it has been established that it was advantageous for national movements if the national opera depicted events from the distant past because the historical event was then elevated from a mere narration to a level in which it represented abstract principles such as national ideals.⁴⁹ Furthermore, by the 19th century such events would have already attained the status of national myths, and come to be perceived as “everlasting truths” in the collective memory. In turn, when these “everlasting truths” were subjects of theatrical works, it usually sparked a positive attitude towards such works, and the performances often became instances of their own for the display of patriotic emotions.⁵⁰ One of the best examples of that process is the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*.

The very first performance of *Zrinski* (Zagreb, 1876) received an enthusiastic reaction from both the audience and critics, and this enthusiasm only grew with each subsequent performance. Because of the great historical importance of the Battle of Szigetvár and Nikola Zrinski in Croatian collective memory, the opera was perceived as a work of exceptional national importance, which is best observed in a text published in the daily *Narodne novine* following the premiere where the critic noted that the opera was performed successfully and congratulated the composer, as well as the Croatian nation, on it.⁵¹ Such national relevance is also evident from the fact that it was often performed in celebration of important moments, e.g. for the reopening of the Zagreb Opera in 1884, as the last performance before the second closure of the Opera in 1902, and again the first to be performed after the restoration in 1909.⁵²

Zrinski quickly attained the aura of a sort of guardian of national identity, i.e. the opera that unequivocally accentuated ideas of Croatian patriotism, freedom and readiness to fight for one's ideals. This aspect had been very important during the period of Austria-Hungary, but even more so in the 20th century, for the better part of which, Croatia found itself part of a multinational state in which its autonomy and political freedoms were limited, and public displays of patriotism were more or less frowned upon.

49 KATALINIĆ, Vjera. Nikola Zrinyi (1508–1566) as a National Hero in 19th-century Opera between Vienna, Berlin, Budapest and Zagreb. In *Musica e storia*, 2004, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 630.

50 Cf. KATALINIĆ 2004, pp. 629–630.

51 Različite vesti. (Narodno kazalište). In *Narodne novine*, 6 November 1876, p. [5].

52 RUBIN, Drago. Obnovljena je opera Ivana Zajca „Nikola Šubić Zrinski“. In *Narodni list*, 22 June 1952, p. 3.

Before focusing on the reception of *Zrinjski* in the period 1945–1991, let us provide a short cross-section of the opera's reception in the earlier periods. In Austria-Hungary, *Zrinjski* was not seen as politically problematic and could be freely performed, because in 1566, Nikola Zrinski defended the Habsburg Monarchy in Szigetvár, so his glorification was not perceived as directed against the state. Later, during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918–1941), an unusual phenomenon occurred—*Zrinjski* was so popular and always excellently attended that the quality of performances gradually declined and the opera was reduced to a piece for young singers to gain experience and to fill up the performance calendar. Nevertheless, that did not affect the audience's perception and love of this opera (although it did not please the critics). Interestingly enough, although *Zrinjski* was regularly performed during the period of the Independent State of Croatia from 1941 to 1945 and was obviously not considered politically problematic, it was not particularly emphasized in political terms. Instead, *Porin* (1851–1897) by Vatroslav Lisinski was the go-to opera to be performed on dates symbolically important for the state because that opera, unlike *Zrinjski*, ended in victory.⁵³

In the period of socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991), culture was very important for the conservation of identity, and *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* was a key work in that aspect since the mere attendance of its performance tacitly expressed patriotism—but with full awareness that the vast majority of the audience did the same. Applause at the end of the opera's performances was not meant only for the performers, but also for the ideas that the opera represented.⁵⁴ The establishment quickly understood that *Zrinjski* was too strong a political symbol not to be taken into account. Thus, critics adopted an array of counter-approaches, from belittling the very sentiment of patriotism *Zrinjski* provoked to interpreting it as a work that should provoke pro-Yugoslav feelings. Nevertheless, none of those approaches had any influence on the way the audience perceived the work. It seems that the theatre administration tried to take the middle ground by performing *Zrinjski* freely, which was something the audience desired, but also performing it at events that held cultural and political importance: the opera's *finale* was performed in 1945 at the 50th anniversary of the new theatre building,⁵⁵ a festive, 300th performance was given on Republic Day on 29 November 1952,⁵⁶ and Army Day (22 December) in 1962 was celebrated with a festive performance of *Zrinjski*, as well.⁵⁷

Choosing *Zrinjski* as a sort of go-to opera for state celebrations was actually a sign that the establishment understood that it provoked positive reactions

53 For a more detailed analysis of *Zrinjski*'s overall reception see: BABIĆ 2021, pp. 109–116, 128–132, 139, 148–158, 172–173.

54 The following passages dealing with the reception of *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* during the second half of the 20th century, are based on research conducted for the study *Croatian National-Historical Operas from the Second Half of the 19th to the End of the 20th Century. Intentions and reception*. For more details, see: BABIĆ 2021, pp. 148–158.

55 HEČIMOVIĆ, Branko. *Repertoar hrvatskih kazališta. Vol. I*. Zagreb : Globus – JAZU, 1990, p. 228.

56 F. P., B. Tristota izvedba opere "Nikola Šubić Zrinjski". In *Narodni list*, 2 December 1962, p. 3.

57 ZOKOVIĆ, Zoran. Svečana predstava "Nikole Šubića Zrinjskog" u čast Dana Armije. In *Borba*, 22 December 1962, p. 1.

and stimulated national feelings, and by choosing precisely that opera, leaders tried to transpose those feelings from (a more autonomous) Croatia to Yugoslavia, i.e. to show that the new Yugoslav state was not anti-Croatian. Awareness of this potentially politically problematic dimension was especially strong during the 1950s and 1960s, and can best be observed from the newspaper critiques. One prominent critic of the time was Nenad Turkalj, and his articles show not only a particular stance towards *Zrinjski* at certain periods, but can also be used to track changes in the ways the establishment saw the opera. In one of his earliest writings on *Zrinjski*, he patronisingly noted how very fond the audience was of it, but also stated that it was of inferior quality to *Ero the Joker* and *Porin*, that the libretto was written in the distinct style of national romanticism, and that such “naivety and superficial effects could have satisfied the audience of the time,” concluding that the final chorus “To battle, to battle” “has been endlessly abused due to its over-emphasized melodiousness and zest.”⁵⁸ On the other aspect of the interpretative spectrum of the same period, a different music critic, Drago Rubin, used the fact that *Zrinjski* was encouraging Croatian nationalism in the period of Austria-Hungary to interpret it as an opera that encouraged opposition to any tyranny, and did not consider it to be politically problematic when interpreted in that key—despite many instances of Croatian patriotism that could have been perceived as separatism in Yugoslavia. He wrote that:

Zrinjski is not only Zajc's most important work, but also the most important work in the history of our opera because it thematises struggle against a foreign oppressor and the need to express patriotism, which was not possible under that [Austro-Hungarian] government, although today, we have come much further regarding that matter than Zajc could have even dreamt of.⁵⁹

Similar interpretations based on the notion that the desire for freedom was accomplished with Croatia becoming part of Yugoslavia, can also be found in some other texts published during the 1960s. For example, Nenad Turkalj made efforts to transform *Zrinjski* into a supra-national, Yugoslavian symbol by expressing the need to move away from the emphasis on Croatian patriotism (e.g., he claimed that *Zrinjski* belongs to a period of Romanticism, for which reason the term “Croat” was usually synonymous with “hero”),⁶⁰ and that those “layers of false pathos,” the “aura of national revival” and the “pseudo-political sediments” do damage to the opera. He stated that although Zajc was considered to be the most prominent composer of musical “Croatianism,” he was also the author of the first sketch for the Yugoslavian anthem⁶¹ and appealed to the audience to take other aspects of the opera, not just its patriotism, into account, so that *Zrinjski* could take its proper place in the history of Yugoslav music.⁶² An attempt to deter the potential separatist ideas that the opera could provoke can also be observed in a critique by Krešimir Kovačević, distinguished musicologist

58 TURKALJ, Nenad. Izvedba “Zrinskog” u Hrvatskom narodnom kazalištu. In *Vjesnik*, 27 June 1952, p. 5.

59 RUBIN 1952, p. 3.

60 TURKALJ, Nenad. Očekujemo pravilno vrednovanje opere “Nikola Šubić Zrinjski” I. Zajca. In *Vjesnik*, 21 November 1962. Cited according to the Newspaper archive of the Department of History of Croatian Theatre of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts. 1952–1963, unpaginated.

61 TURKALJ 1962.

62 TURKALJ 1962.

and later Dean of the Academy of Music, who recognized the importance of the idea of resistance to a foreign invader, but concluded that “in a free socialist community” there is no longer a need for the patriotic motifs from that opera. He stated that “Today, *Zrinjski* no longer stirs rising romantic fervour,” (which has allowed the focus to settle on the opera’s artistic qualities).⁶³ This statement was obviously not based in reality and can thus be seen as another attempt to shift the attention from the national component of the opera to the artistic.

While the abovementioned approaches of professional critics and theatre management provide one view of understanding a potentially politically problematic work and the attempt to adapt interpretations to the new political reality, it is extremely interesting to observe the phenomenon of the reception of *Zrinjski* from the perspective of the audience. In this context, it is important to once again mention the *topos* of resistance to a foreign oppressor, which was always very well received by the audience, but after 1945 the establishment feared that the parties that opposed the new state might once again use *Zrinjski* for the incitement of national feelings and to spread national ideas. For that reason, during the 1950s and 1960s performances of *Zrinjski* were often attended by the agents of the Yugoslav secret service (UDBA) dressed in plain clothes, whose task was to observe the audience and arrest those who were expressing too much national enthusiasm. A valuable source of information on such events are testimonies of the people who experienced them first-hand and since the period in question is relatively recent, the author of this paper was able to conduct a series of interviews with a number of people who were university students during the 1960s and 1970s and are prominent figures in Croatian public life today. Among those spoken to were distinguished historian Anđelko Mijatović, president of the Zagreb branch of the Association of Political Prisoners and retired doctor of dental medicine Marijan Čuvalo, and president of the Croatian Helsinki Committee Ivan Zvonimir Čičak.

Anđelko Mijatović pointed out that *Zrinjski* was so stimulating for the audience due to its patriotic charge, the lyrics of the most famous chorus “To battle, to battle” and the use of the Croatian (and not Yugoslav) flag as the defenders’ banner in the opera *finale*. In addition to the patriotic message, *Zrinjski* was also valued as an important work of national culture, so the artistic value of the stage action and the aesthetic quality of the music and performance also contributed to the audience’s enthusiasm. Speaking of a performance that took place in December 1962, Mijatović recalls that there were individuals who applauded so hard at the end that sweat dripped from them, and the applause and shouting throughout the theatre lasted for a good 10–15 minutes. He emphasized that regardless of the enthusiasm, there were never any inappropriate statements but assumes that the authorities were still bothered by the energetic expressions of national feelings, which they interpreted as separatist and “pro-fascist” oriented, so they tried to suppress the emotion by making arrests and issuing prison sentences. Although Mijatović himself was not arrested after a performance of *Zrinjski*—but also emphasized that he and his colleagues refrained from overly enthusiastic

63 KOVAČEVIĆ, K. Premijera u Hrvatskom narodnom kazalištu. „Nikola Šubić Zrinski“. In *Borba*, 4 December 1962, p. 4.

reactions because they noticed a couple of people that they had seen in police uniforms on other occasions in the audience and were thus wary—a number of his acquaintances were. He gives the example of Smiljan Štimac, then a student and later a diplomat and Croatian ambassador, which best proves to what absurd extent the fear of nationalism went. Štimac was arrested after one performance of *Zrinjski* and while the agents (in plain clothes) were taking him to the station, his twin brother, coming from the opposite direction, encountered and greeted them, thinking that the men were his colleagues. Confused with the situation, the agents arrested the brother as well, probably just to be on the safe side. They were both detained in jail for five days, and while the brother was eventually released without charges, Smiljan Štimac was sentenced to 30 days in prison. Mijatović states that a dozen of his acquaintances were also sentenced to 30 days in prison and two years of exile from Zagreb. He did not mention their names, but pointed out that they all eventually graduated from university and became respected members of society.⁶⁴

One was Marijan Čuvalo, who was also arrested and sentenced after a performance of *Zrinjski* he attended in January 1963. Describing the events, he recollected how he ended up at the theatre that day: While on his way to dinner at the main students' cafeteria, he walked past the theatre where he noticed quite a long queue, stretching some 50 meters. When he learned that *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* was on the program that evening he immediately joined the line himself because he was very keen to see it. He recalls the atmosphere being different than at the other plays, the usual murmuring and coughing in the audience was absent and the performance began in such silence, peace and dignity that he got goosebumps. After certain scenes, frenetic applause would break out, which seemed to start and end in the same fraction of a second, and would cease as soon as the performance continued so that every note could be heard. Čuvalo, like Mijatović, also emphasized that the only shouts that could be heard were “Zrinjski, Zrinjski!” and “Encore, encore,” because the atmosphere in the theatre was so dignified that no one dared to even cough, let alone say something inappropriate. Since he had a cold, Čuvalo tried to leave the theatre quickly after the performance and in doing so, he crossed a barrier that separated the standing section, where he was, from the balcony, and exited through the balcony. He believes that the agents must have noticed him doing that because he did not stand out from the crowd in any other way. When he exited the theatre, he stopped to see if he might meet any acquaintances, finding two colleagues with whom he went for a drink. The agents followed them and approached the trio in the bar they went to, asking for their documents and ordering them to come to the station in the morning. That first day he was only interviewed and allowed to go home, but he was arrested a few days later. He was detained for two weeks and repeatedly interrogated. The questions he was asked reveal that the authorities indeed perceived *Zrinjski* as a forum for the expression of a nationalism dangerous for the state, even though this time they were not as absurd as arresting the arrestee's twin brother who happened to come by. The secret service wanted him to confess with

64 Interview with Anđelko Mijatović, PhD., interviewer Petra Babić, from 6 December 2016.

whom he made arrangements to go to the theatre to see *Zrinjski* and whether he would have gone if the institution was called the Srpsko narodno pozorište (Serbian national theatre) and not the Hrvatsko narodno kazalište (Croatian national theatre). Other questions concentrated on his contacts in Zagreb, whom he socialized with, what their political stances were and what topics they discussed. They also asked where he was from and which side his family was on in the Second World War. The judge ruled that Čuvalo had disturbed public order and used the performance for a nationalistic rampage and nationality-based insults and sentenced him to 30 days in prison and two years of exile from Zagreb.⁶⁵

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the general atmosphere in society changed compared to the period of 1950s and early 1960s. A student at the time, Ivan Zvonimir Čičak, described that in the period of Croatian Spring,⁶⁶ when optimism was strong in Croatia, *Zrinjski* was seen as an opportunity to publicly express one's patriotism. Describing the atmosphere in the audience in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he said that the performances were always completely sold out and that the student gallery was always crowded, with students being the loudest in the audience. They always wondered which flag would be used in the *finale*—a Croatian banner with checkerboard or “some rag.” If a flag with the checkerboard was used, the audience would burst into delirium, they would cheer and shout “Zrinski, Zrinski,” and some even joined the choir singing “To battle, to battle.”⁶⁷

65 Interview with Marijan Čuvalo, DMD, interviewer Petra Babić, from 8 December 2016.

66 The Croatian Spring was a Croatian cultural, social, and political reform movement that started in the late 1960s and reached its peak in 1971. Its primary objective was to legitimize Croatian national identity within a multinational and centralist Yugoslav state, based on the notion that Yugoslav unitarism was equally detrimental to the state's stability as particular nationalisms. The reform movement took place on several levels: among the pro-reform elements within the League of Communists of Croatia, in the cultural circles around *Matica hrvatska*, and among students who, inspired by student movements in other European countries, demanded reforms. The movement was a reaction to tendencies within Serbian politics that aimed to strengthen Serbian influence through stronger unitarism, and it expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that Croats were poorly represented in important state institutions (such as the police, the army, and the judiciary), whereas key positions were often occupied by Serbs. The Croatian Spring called for reforms that would ensure Croatia and Croats were fairly represented in state institutions, for the Croatian language to be equally represented in the public sphere on an equal footing with the Serbian language, and for economic reforms as well. It called for the abolition of economic centralism and statism, but most of all, it called for an end to the practice by which state profits were sent to the central treasury and then redistributed to the republics, a system that resulted in economically stronger republics such as Croatia and Slovenia receiving less money than they generated, while less developed republics benefited from this redistribution. In the autumn of 1971, students went on strike under the slogan “Croatian foreign exchange to Croatia,” supported by *Matica hrvatska*, while the political leadership of the LCC distanced itself from the students and *Matica*, fearing repercussions. Although Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito did not initially object to the mass movement, he changed his stance after the student strike and demanded that the leaders of the LCC resign. After their resignation, a period of strong repression followed, with a number of prominent intellectuals, as well as several hundred students, being arrested and sentenced to prison terms, a few thousand people prosecuted for “political offenses” or “crimes against the people and the state,” and several hundred members of the LCC demoted or expelled from the League. Cf. Hrvatsko proljeće. In *Hrvatska enciklopedija, mrežno izdanje*. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2013–2025, <https://enciklopedija.hr/clanak/hrvatsko-proljece> [last viewed on 5 October 2025].

67 Interview with Ivan Zvonimir Čičak, interviewer Petra Babić, from 6 December 2016.

After the Croatian Spring movement was crushed, according to Čičak and Mijatović, the atmosphere around *Zrinjski* also became subdued. However, until the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, *Zrinjski* remained an opera that the audience attended in order to—at least indirectly—express their patriotism. A similar trend can also be seen in newspaper articles; while in the first part of the observed period, the 1950s and 1960s, the critique dealing with *Zrinjski* was regularly a polemical discussion about various elements of the opera (primarily about the ideological message and patriotism, which were deemed as positive or negative; but also about the music and the performance), in the 1970s and 1980s, musical criticism concentrated exclusively on the performance itself—evaluating the quality of the singers, the way they performed their roles and commenting on the direction, staging and costumes. An example of this change of paradigm comes once again from critic Nenad Turkalj. In an article published after the new premiere in 1982, he evaluated *Zrinjski* exclusively through its musical quality and only casually mentioned that in earlier times it had been perceived as reactionary work.⁶⁸ As Turkalj was the main critic for a number of important newspapers for several decades, it is reasonable to read his stances as those of the establishment rather than of the general public. In that sense, this attitude change should also be interpreted as an “official” change of approach, i.e. a shift from attempts to deal with or alter political interpretations to a complete avoidance of political implications and a focus on exclusively artistic elements.

Even though *Zrinjski* was no longer needed in the way it had been during the previous period after independence from Yugoslavia was gained, it kept its former aura as a symbol of national identity in the collective consciousness and is still a very much loved and well-attended opera that continues to touch audiences.

Conclusion

The successful use of a theatrical work in the process of politicizing the audiences was a result of much more than just the author's intention. The work had to clearly address the issues that the nation in question was facing at the moment of its first performance, but in order for it to truly be successful, a deep inclination in the audience towards the subject had to exist, one that had been previously shaped through historiography and perpetuated within the collective memory. A prime example of such a work is the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*, which dealt with a battle that in the Croatian collective memory was perceived as the crucial fight that saved Croatia, Vienna and Christian Europe from the Ottomans. Due to the existing positive attitude towards the subject, the opera itself achieved great success quickly and came to be perceived as a national symbol in its own right. As such, in the 20th century, it came to be a platform for the display and reaffirmation of Croatian patriotism during the political periods in which public displays of such feelings were not permitted, as they were interpreted as expressions of opposition to the state order.

68 TURKALJ, Nenad. Legenda o Zrinjskom. In *Večernji list*, 29 April–13 May 1982. Cited according to the Newspaper archive of the Department of History of Croatian Theatre of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts. 1981–1986, unpaginated.