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Partisan Graphic Art and the Contemporary Construction of Collective Memory

ABSTRACT

Paper examines partisan printmaking as one of the most important forms of communication, artistic expression, and propaganda in Slovenia during the Second World War, and its influence on contemporary graphic design. Effective visual communication requires messages that are clear, accessible, and quickly understood by the public. These principles were already present in early propaganda practices following the First World War and reached their peak in partisan graphic production during the national liberation struggle. Partisan print encompassed posters, leaflets, newspapers, brochures, illustrations, caricatures, book design, partisan currency, and other printed materials. Despite severe material and technical limitations, it served as a powerful tool for the dissemination of information, political mobilisation, and the strengthening of national identity. Its visual language relied on direct communication, strong symbolism, expressive figuration, reduced visual elements, and purposeful typography. Beyond supporting the armed resistance, partisan print became an integral part of a broader cultural movement that connected the visual arts, literature, music, and theatre. Building on this legacy, a design-research project marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War was carried out within the course Visual Analysis of Graphic Products. Through posters, illustrations, photography, digital collages, and animation, students explored contemporary meanings of war, peace, and freedom while establishing a dialogue between partisan visual heritage and present-day social realities. The study demonstrates that partisan print remains a relevant model of visual communication and a valuable cultural heritage that continues to inspire contemporary design through its immediacy, symbolic power, and social engagement.

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Partisan propaganda, poster, visual communication, collective memory

1. Introduction

In 2025, we commemorated peace and victory over the occupying forces that shaped the lives of countless people across Europe during the Second World War. These celebrations sought to revive the sense of relief, hope and joy that spread throughout Europe after the war had ended. The year also marked several important Slovenian anniversaries connected to the post-war period. We celebrated 80 years of *Mladinska knjiga* and commemorated the 80th anniversary of the *United Nations*. Numerous institutions founded in 1945 also reached significant milestones, including *Cankarjeva založba, DZS, Elan, Fructal, NK Olimpija,* the *RTV Slovenia Big Band,* the *Academy of Fine Arts,* and the *Academy of Theatre*. The newspapers *Večer* and *Primorske novice* were established that same year, as was *Ciciban*, the children's magazine that became an important part of Slovenian cultural life (Vurnik, 2025).

The course *Artistic Analysis of Graphic Products 2* explores the spaces and graphic artefacts that have

shaped visual culture in Slovenia over the past century. Although space itself is limitless, graphic design traditionally confines it to a rectangular format through which visual messages are communicated and interpreted. This reminds us that neither space nor peace should be taken for granted. Both are values that societies continually define, shape and strive to preserve.

1.1. Slovenian Propaganda

Twentieth-century Slovenian graphic design was shaped by four significant historical turning points that profoundly influenced its visual language, appearance, and theoretical understanding. Through bold artistic and formal solutions, designers and artists contributed to the development of graphic production and, through propagandistic methods of communication, also influenced wider social structures. The origins of propaganda in the Slovenian context can be traced back to the First World War, when new methods of informing and mobilising the public began to emerge. Its development continued during the Second World War and, in many respects, persists in contemporary society, where propaganda continues to evolve and seek new ways of achieving its objectives. The poster is a visual message that serves economic, political, or cultural interests. It functions as a medium of communication and is created through the collaboration between a client and a designer. As a communicative form, it combines photography, drawing, painting, and text into a unified visual statement (Požar, 2015).

The first propaganda turning point was the design of plebiscite leaflets for the Slovenian side, designed and illustrated by Maksim Gaspari. In 1918, the artist became an enthusiastic propagandist in Carinthia, creating a series of postcards, posters, and leaflets for General Maister (Mikuž, 1977). The second turning point was Partisan printing, which, in addition to leaflets, posters, occasional publications and periodical press, also produced artistic graphic portfolios. The visual language of Partisan printing was highly diverse. It occasionally adopted new traditions whenever it was possible to follow them. Drawing upon the tradition of pre-war realism, it also engaged with modernism. The artistic and typographic organisation of texts continued and transmitted the experience of modern graphic design, which itself found its models in the revolutionary stylistic expressions of the pre-war and interwar periods. As a temporary art form, it achieved remarkable artistic results in various environments and under spatially impossible conditions (Požar, 2015).

1.2. Partisan Art and Women

Until the Second World War, women occupied a subordinate position in Slovenian visual art, appearing either as portrait subjects or as the artist's muse. Only with the national liberation struggle, when many women took on and performed demanding work in industry and agriculture outside the battlefields, did Slovenian women become equal members of society. These developments were reflected in visual motifs printed on magazine covers, leaflets, and posters. Female and male fighters were consistently depicted with enthusiasm, in a fighting spirit, and in dynamic poses (Figure 1). The iconography is characterized by hostages, wounded people, burned villages, the aggressor, the occupier, flags, broken chains, clenched fists, and similar motifs. All of these elements symbolized the strong resistance of the people, in which women also participated.

This is evident in the work of Nikolaj Pirnat, titled *Partisan Woman in the Assault (Partizanka v jurišu)*, where one of the first depictions of a woman wearing trousers in Slovenian visual art can be observed. The partisan woman clearly points in the direction of resistance with her left hand. She is depicted as the largest figure in the central foreground, while competing visually with the tricolour flag bearing the red five-pointed star. Equal to the male soldiers, she carries a weapon in her right hand (Mikuž, 1977).



» **Figure 1:** *Nikolaj Pirnat, Female Partisan in an Assault, 1944*

The depiction of women became equal to that of men during the National Liberation Struggle. Unlike in the First World War, during the Second World War women actively participated on the battlefields and were also part of the resistance in the liberated territories, where culture and art were being established. They took part in dance and theatre performances as well as in visual art. Visual representations in Partisan art were accompanied by titles that emphasized the role of women and already foreshadowed their active inclusion in social structures after the war, when women were also granted the right to vote. A telling example is the work of Ivo Šubic, who, fol-

lowing the model of Ivan Vavpotič's *The Shackled One (Verigar)*, created the poster *Slovenian Woman, You Are Free and You Will Vote for the First Time* (1944). With clenched fists, the woman has freed herself from her chains, which flutter torn apart in the background, like her hair. The naturalistic depiction of the woman, executed in a classical graphic style with clear drawing and two colours, emphasizes the full plasticity of the body and, ultimately, the arrival of a new era, post-war reconstruction, modernization, and progress (Komelj, 2026).

2. Methods

2.1. Accompanying Exhibition of Student Responses to the Theme of the Second World War

Reflection on Partisan art was explored through contemporary forms of artistic expression and interpretation developed by students. Drawing inspiration from the graphic solutions and visual language of the past, an accompanying exhibition was conceived in collaboration with the Museum and Galleries of the City of Ljubljana. The exhibition was presented alongside Blaž Vurnik's exhibition *1495 Days: Ljubljana During the Second World War*, creating a dialogue between historical visual culture and contemporary artistic responses to the legacy of the Second World War.

2.2. Pedagogical Context and Instructions

The course *Artistic Analysis of Graphic Products 2* is, in its content, continuously based on space. Space, which is limitless, has in graphic production been confined in most cases to a rectangular format within which various artistic operations take place, and these continue and are subjectively interpreted by the recipient in public space. From this, it follows that space should not be taken for granted, and that humanity has deliberately limited it to four walls, within which the individual seeks to find peace. Even this, in contemporary times, and perhaps never, should not be taken for granted. With the second assignment, we created artistic solutions celebrating the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The visual statements, in the form of posters, were intended to interpret war and peace through metaphorical meanings, without the use of white doves, crosses, or memorial candles. Our intention was to celebrate rather than commemorate the past. The students were not limited in their approach and could address the theme and its interpretation through various fields of graphic creativity, including typography, illustration, 3D modelling, collage, photography, and abstract visual composition. The key aspect was the message and the visual appeal created either digitally or through traditional artistic media. The aim of the assignment was to encourage reflection not only on the visual message but also on the slogans that could be incorporated into the composition of the graphic work. Each work was also required to have its own title. The best works were publicly exhibited at the City Museum of Ljubljana.

2.3. How to Think about the Anniversary of the Second World War?

The artistic statements in the form of posters interpret war and peace. They also commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The statements of young people are not limited; although seemingly confined within a rectangular format, they build a dialogue between recent history and the present day. Through diverse media expressions, ranging from typographic solutions, digital illustration, photography and photomontage to traditional collages and those created with contemporary 3D graphic software, we have drawn upon the protagonists of graphic design in Slovenia.

The graphic solutions, or statements, also include slogans that further enhance the visual expression and message. Among them are: *A World That Promised Peace Again Burns in the Flames of Conflict, Inflated in Peace, The Wire Has Fallen, We Have Been Floating on the Wings of Freedom for 80 Years,* and *For 80 Years We Have Looked upon a Peaceful Sky*. Through these captions, we have presented the graphic concepts to the viewers of our posters without moralizing, but rather as a warning that, despite the appearance of peace, we can still hear the rumbling of weapons in our surroundings. And graphic art has always been a weapon. This was well understood by all totalitarian systems, which used propaganda print to construct new forms and relationships within society. Therefore, this project is also, in its own way, a tribute to Partisan art, which under impossible conditions provided information and, not least, visually interpreted messages that were printed in forests or in clandestine printing houses within urban environments.

3. Results

3.1. Manca Baša: Sredi zvezd, noč in dan

The illustration (Figure 2), created by Manca Baša, a master's student of Graphic and Interactive Communications, stems from a reflection on the image of the soldier, which in the collective consciousness is often marked by violence and fear. Soldiers are frequently perceived as anonymous actors of wartime slaughter, while overlooking the fact that beneath the uniforms are individuals.



» **Figure 2:** *Manca Baša: Sredi zvezd, noč in dan*

The author reinterpreted the image of the uniformed figure and expanded it through an accompanying soundscape, thereby evoking a sense of hope while simultaneously referencing the Allied forces whose D-Day operation heralded the eventual end of the Second World War. The depicted soldier does not carry a weapon but a musical instrument, replacing the destruction of war with the harmony of music and the promise of progress, of which graphic design also became a part in the post-war period. The watercolour transitions of blue tones in the sky surrounding the soldier-musician are complemented by a typographic slogan borrowed from the lyrics of a well-known Slovenian popular song. Zemlja pleše ("The Earth Dances") was first performed at the inaugural Slovenian Popular Music Festival in 1962. The music was composed by Mojmir Sepe, while the lyrics were written by Gregor Strniša. In the artwork, the word earth was replaced with war, drawing attention to the fact that, despite celebrating peace and victory over the occupiers, our planet continues to dance to the rhythm of wars, destruction, and human suffering.

The soldier portrayed in the illustration holds a musical instrument rather than a weapon. In this way, the work also commemorates the founding of the Dance Orchestra of Radio Ljubljana in 1945, today known as the RTV Slovenia Big Band. The element of destruction and intimidation is replaced by the melody of music, which symbolizes a quiet longing for peace, freedom, and a world beyond violence. The visual concept was further transformed from a poster into an animation in which the soldier flees from war and seeks to replace the sounds of weapons with music and marching with dance. Music and movement become a space of connection, where the rhythm of life is no longer dictated by violence but by peace. The musical score for the animated artwork was composed by Julijan Andrejaš and Timotej Duvnjak, adding a new experiential dimension for the viewer and further enhancing both the visual message and its perception.

3.2. Alen Fuks: Dance Brings Joy

The digital photomontage by Alen Fuks depicts a soldier in a cheerful pose wearing two different uniforms. This duality arises from the dialogue between a German military uniform and the uniform worn by the Partisans. During the cold winters, the Partisan army was grateful for the contributions and donations knitted for the soldiers by mothers and wives in different communities. A special issue of Mladina from the beginning of August concluded with the appeal: *Equip Our Army! Give all shoes, all clothes, everything to the fighters!*

The cut-up photograph, placed within an expanded composition, represents a dialogue between two soldiers in the contemporary era, where, dressed in different uniforms, we create alliances and fight together under the umbrella of NATO. The photograph, created in the costume collection of Viba Film, establishes a strong conceptual contrast, even though the soldier's smile remains the same in both uniforms (Figure 3). In doing so, the work offers the viewer a question and a reflection: whom? The literary work of Drago Jančar was further developed through a typographic intervention and experimentation in the form of packaging, where the author depicted the pet of the protagonist Ksenija Hribar and placed it, in the form of a preserving jar, within the context of supermarket shelves. In this way, peace and freedom were presented as values that had been preserved and canned for future generations.



» **Figure 3:** *Alen Fuks: Dance Brings Joy*

3.3. Eva Gašperič: Whose Star Is This?

The central motif of the star was adopted from a Slavic symbol of death, which, among other places, appeared on one of the sides of a cradle. By drawing the star, parents warded off evil forces from the newborn and ensured its safety. The central artistic object, which swings and is positioned on the surface of a mobile, is accompanied by the calligraphic inscription: *"Aja tu taja, peace is leaving us."*

Within this piece, we created a pattern to which a three-year-old child contributed with his drawing, while the flowers in the background of the pattern were painted by a right-handed artist using her left hand. The floral background symbolizes peace, which is being eroded by darkness in the form of a brown ground (Figure 4).



» **Figure 4:** *Eva Gašperič, Whose Star Is This?, 2026*

The motif of the star was developed through an intergenerational collaboration that included a retired woman, who hand-embroidered an enhanced version of the symbol from antique furniture using red thread. Through this gesture, we wished to draw attention to the major artistic event organized by the Partisans in Bela Krajina in 1945. Partisan art, or the art created during the period of resistance, is characterized by achievements that remain impressive even today and continue to enrich our cultural and artistic heritage. This heritage extends from visual and performing arts to literature and music. Using the tradition of Bela Krajina embroidery, we wove a new pattern around the star, complemented by an empty space that metaphorically represents an unfinished Bela Krajina circle dance.

Through this gesture, we invite viewers into a dialogue and participation, encouraging them to continue our celestial vault, which is presented frontally in the form of silkscreen stencils on textile (Figure 5), and to dance with us.



» **Figure 5:** *Screen Printing on Textile Applied to the Monumental Sculpture by Stojan Batič in Dražgoše, 2025.*

4. Discussion

4.1. Alen Fuks: That Night I Heard Him

The authorial project by Alen Fuks, which also served as the exhibition poster for the exhibition at the City Museum, was subsequently expanded into an independent exhibition. The exhibition *Tonight I Heard Him* presents a multimedia artistic exploration situated at the intersection of photography, the artist's book, the poster, and the object (Figure 6). Alen Fuks's works do not remain within the boundaries of a single medium; rather, they establish an open field of narrative in which historical memory, personal identity, and the materiality of the photographic image, together with other materials, intertwine, connect with one another, and complement each other conceptually.



» **Figure 6:** *Tonight I Heard Him Exhibition, 2026.*

The title of the exhibition refers to the novel *I Saw Her That Night* by Drago Jančar, one of the most important literary reflections within the Slovenian context on war, loss, and the fragmentary nature of memory.

In the present exhibition, photography does not function as a document of the past, nor as an attempt to imitate it, but rather as a medium of interpretation in which personal and collective memory are continuously reshaped and exchanged, becoming an opportunity for choice or rejection. At the centre of the project is the artist's book (Figure 7), which combines elements of fashion photography, archival imagery, and performative intervention into the photographic image. Images of a model dressed in historical uniforms borrowed from Viba Film establish a tense relationship between the present and the past, between individual identity and the social roles defined by political systems and historical circumstances. The uniform, which usually signifies belonging and discipline, here becomes a space for questioning the fragility of the individual, loss, and responsibility.



» **Figure 7:** *Knjiga umentika na razstavi To noč sem ga slišal.*

One of the key elements of the exhibition is the motif of the stitch. The photographs are not merely carriers of images, but material objects into which the author intervenes through cutting, stitching, and reconstructing the surface. The stitch, executed by Pia Wallner, functions simultaneously as an active line, a drawing, a scar, and a bond. It signifies interruption, damage to the photograph, and the possibility of reconnection. In this way, it becomes a metaphor for memory, which is never complete but is always composed of fragments, gaps, and subsequent reconstructions.

A special role is occupied by the motif of the crocodile, which appears in various segments of the exhibition. It refers to records from the life of Veronika Zarnik, while at the same time assuming the role of a visual symbol that connects the historical narrative with the logic of the contemporary image and its reproduction. In the series of ready-mades presented in packaging, the crocodile enters the field of mass culture and reproducibility, establishing a dialogue between the unique work of art and everyday, serially produced objects. *Tonight I Heard Him* is not merely a question of whom we hear in the echoes of the past, but above all of how we listen to ourselves.

The work explores the relationship between memory and image, between absence and presence, between personal experience and collective memory, as well as the relationship between mentor and student, and between comradeship and patience. In a world where photographs are often understood as evidence, Fuks points out that they can also be spaces of doubt, false projections, and places of silent dialogue with those who are no longer here. Within this dialogue, the image does not merely preserve the position of memory of the past, but becomes an active space in which history and the present continually meet.

5. Conclusions

The poster exhibition, developed during the academic years 2024/2025 and 2025/2026, was presented in five different exhibition venues. It began at the PeF Gallery in Ljubljana (March 2025), after which it continued in Kočevje, where it was exhibited at Šeškov House of the Regional Museum Kočevje (May 2025). There, we symbolically explored the themes of statehood and freedom and reflected upon the First Assembly of Delegates of the Slovenian Nation (1943). In November 2025, a selection of posters was presented to the public in Maribor at the exhibition space of the Museum of National Liberation Maribor. Maribor was chosen in part because Slovenian propaganda material for the Carinthian Plebiscite had been printed there under the leadership of General Maister at the St. Cyril Printing House. The themes of the Peasant Revolt (1573) and the victory of the National Liberation Front were addressed at the Cultural Centre in Krško (December 2025). We also continue to evaluate our findings at the City Museum of Ljubljana (MGML), where the students' visual statements, both in content and form, relate to Dr. Blaž Vurnik's exhibition *1495 Days: Ljubljana During the Second World War*.

Through a variety of media expressions, including typographic solutions, digitally created drawings and illustrations, photography and photomontage, as well as both traditional and digitally produced 3D collages, the students drew inspiration from key figures in Slovenian graphic design. The project concluded with a printed catalogue designed by the student Živa Juvančič. For a young creator whose artistic practice is still developing, it is essential to engage with public presentation, even when this occurs through a "static" visual artwork. On the one hand, collaboration with the City Museum of Ljubljana provided an opportunity for more ambitious artistic production; on the other, it brought a greater sense of responsibility through which

we reflected on the anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the exhibition *1495 Days: Ljubljana During the Second World War*. Equally important was the opportunity to transfer visual concepts from the digital environment to a variety of physical media.

Through the exhibition installation, a dialogue emerged between different authorial approaches and diverse interpretations of the assigned theme.

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