

EXTINGUISHED COUNTRIES: GUIDEBOOKS TO COUNTRIES THAT NO LONGER EXIST¹

Can tourism unite us? Through travel, might we discover that our neighbours aren't so different, that in fact we share traditions, expressions or favourite dishes? At a time when borders seemed to be back in vogue and countries are shutting themselves away, at *Paper Boat Stories*, we launched a project that intends to stir up things a bit. *Extinguished Countries* is a series of travel guidebooks to countries that no longer exist. It is a project at the crossroads of history, journalism and travel literature, which started with an original idea, a crowdfunding campaign and a team of young and enthusiastic creative people.

The idea

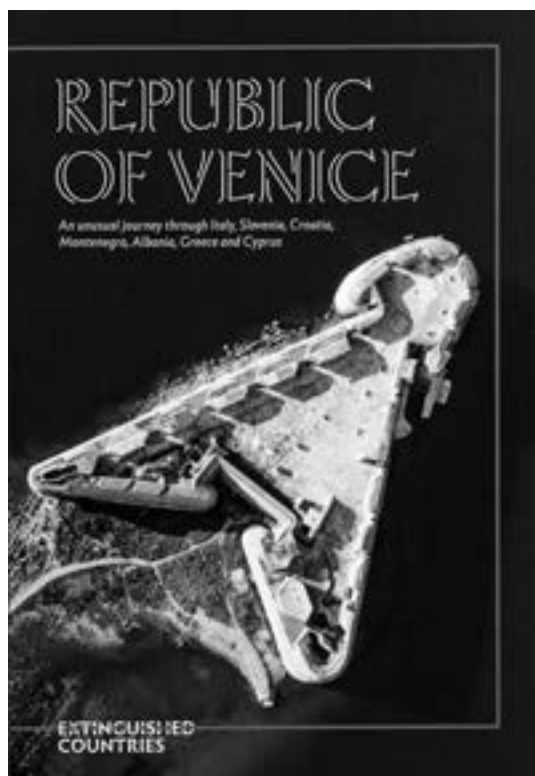
A few years ago, in December 2017, Giovanni Vale, an Italian journalist and foreign correspondent for several European media outlets as well as a travel writer based in the Balkans, was struck by an inspired idea.

He was strolling through Dubrovnik's old town together with his wife Ivana, looking at the shop windows decorated for Christmas. Here and there, an advertisement reminded him that the TV series *Game of Thrones*, a worldwide hit produced by HBO between 2011 and 2019, was filmed there. The main set was in this small Croatian town, and many shops and tour guides had decided to adapt their offer to the growing number of fans of the series coming to Dalmatia. Even in winter, one could find souvenirs related to the fantasy world of George R. R. Martin (the author of the novels on which the series is based) or take a guided tour of the places where the most famous scenes were shot. Surprisingly, however, for those wishing to discover the epic of the Republic of Dubrovnik, just as rich in intrigue and plot twists, there were far fewer organised tours available.

And yet – Giovanni and Ivana thought – Dubrovnik has an incredible history behind it: that of a small republic that existed in Europe between the 14th and 19th centuries, independent for almost 500 years. Its monumental walls were not just a stunning film set but had actually served to defend the town from enemy attacks. At the Rector's Palace, located at the end of the elegant Stradun street, not actors but real delegates of kingdoms and empires had met to discuss wars, plagues, trade agreements and dynastic successions. Merchants and soldiers, clerics and spies passed through the narrow streets of the centre, among the inns and storehouses, just like in the TV series, while at the harbour the great wooden galleys creaked, laden with products bought on the other side

¹ Piedaloties 8. starptautiskajā konferencē "ICARUS Horvātijas dienas" (8th ICARUS Croatia Days), kas norisinājās Šibenikā (Horvātija) 2023. gada martā, žurnāla "Latvijas Arhīvi" redakcijas pārstāvji iepazinās ar projekta "Zudušās valstis" (*Extinguished Countries*) izpilddirektori Kjaru Markesīni (*Marchesini*). Uzzinot vairāk par projektu un par tikko publicēto "Venēcijas Republikas ceļvedi", kas tika prezentēts konferences ietvaros, uzrunājām gan Kjaru Markesīni, gan projekta "Zudušās valstis" dibinātāju un direktoru, kā arī ceļveža autoru žurnālistu Džovanni Vali (*Vale*), kuri ar prieku piekrita padalīties ar šī unikālā projekta koncepciju un tā tapšanas posmiem.

Piedāvājam K. Markesīni un Dž. Vales iesūtītu rakstu, kas iepazīstina ne tikai ar pašu projektu, bet arī ar autoru pieredzi, veidojot ceļvedi, un tālākiem plāniem šī projekta ietvaros.



The cover of the guidebook “The Republic of Venice. An unusual journey through Italy, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece and Cyprus” released in the series *Extinguished Countries*

of the world. Why wasn’t this story told with the same enthusiasm as the highlights of *Game of Thrones*? Wouldn’t visitors to Dubrovnik be more interested in learning about these events?

That first conversation was followed by many others as the idea of *Extinguished Countries* took shape: a series of travel guides dedicated to countries that no longer exist. We called them “extinguished”, because, even though they are no longer alive, their heritage has remained like the ashes of an extinguished fire, providing a source of inspiration or material for research. Giovanni decided to start with the Republic of Venice, whose history he knew the best and whose territory, concentrated mainly around the Adriatic, was geographically more accessible to him from Zagreb. As a journalist, he interviewed historians, linguists, anthropologists and others with a wide range of backgrounds, learning from them how to bring an extinct state back to life. Over two years, he collected hundreds of stories, analyses and anecdotes related to the Serenissima and its legacy: they relayed not only the compelling parable of Venice, but also revealed how collective identities, whether local, national or regional, develop. The points of view he came across, from interlocutors across more than seven European countries, often differed, hinting at what seemed to me to be a lively debate between neighbours.

The crowdfunding campaign

At the end of 2019, however, Giovanni still did not know whether a guide to the Republic of Venice would attract general interest or intrigue only a few history buffs. In previous years, in addition to working as a foreign correspondent, he had worked on updating several travel guidebooks for a number of European publishing houses, and he knew that these were very different texts from what he had in mind for *Extinguished Countries*. Mainstream guides summarise the history in a few pages and include long lists of restaurants and hotels. Who would buy a book that turned that ratio upside down? To answer that question, at the beginning of 2020 Giovanni gathered a team of young creatives (whose biographies are on our website www.extinguishedcountries.com) and together with them he launched a crowdfunding campaign on *Kickstarter*. Their goal was to raise 10,000 euros to cover the costs of printing and shipping the first copies.

With the help of award-winning photographer and videomaker Paul Prescott, Giovanni recorded a video presentation of the project, while together with French radio journalist Julien Trambouze, he produced a podcast developing some stories related to the Republic of Venice. All these tools were used during the communication campaign to tell people about the idea of *Extinguished Countries* and to convince the first readers to support the project, i.e. to pre-order a copy of the future book. And it worked! The *Extinguished Countries* project passed the crowdfunding test with flying colours, raising over 25,000 euros in just three weeks, thanks to the support of around 600 people from all around the globe. Crowdfunding thus proved once again to be a very useful tool for cultural projects that require an initial budget that is not within everyone's reach.

It was the starting point of an exciting adventure, albeit in a difficult year, what with the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes that hit Croatia. The interviews Giovanni had made became small reportages, full of visiting tips and keys to understanding past events and their legacy. The information was transformed into maps and illustrations, giving shape to a guidebook whose ambition is to propose a new way of travelling, in space and time. A year after the crowdfunding campaign, the first copies were printed, just after founding the publishing house in Zagreb that is now managing the project: *Paper Boat Stories*, which already in its name invites us to travel, be it a geographical or literary journey.

History told in new ways

With the guidebook in hand, the next step was to spread the word about the project and promote the book. This was accomplished through three distinct methods: book presentations in Italy, Croatia, Belgium and Greece, media coverage, and a novel approach using podcasts. While traditional events and articles were part of a more traditional strategy, Giovanni also wanted to innovate and explore the potential of podcasting. He turned again to Julien Trambouze and produced a second podcast series.

While the first podcast, *The Republic of Venice in a Nutshell*, shares the most captivating stories from the book in 5-minute interview segments, the second series, *Republic of Venice Tour*, documents the bicycle journey that Giovanni and Julien took in June 2021 from Bergamo to Venice to promote the book, and culminated with a presentation at the Council of Europe's Office in Venice. This innovative approach helped to expand the reach of the *Extinguished Countries* project and engage with a wider audience. Once



again, the idea was to explain history in new ways, with an appealing slant and in light formats – from travel guides to podcasts.

The book was very well received by the press and thousands of copies were sold, so much so that the Italian version had to be reprinted immediately. What brought about this success? We believe it all depended on the purpose of the *Extinguished Countries* guides, which is what sets them apart from other guidebooks. Indeed, the aim of this project is to recount cultural heritage in an innovative way, focusing on what unites today's diverse peoples, instead of what divides them. With this in mind, the writing process changes radically: these guides, in fact, do not contain any kind of advertising or ratings. Instead, the thread that guides the writing of the book are the hundreds of interviews with academics, as well as chefs, activists and artists. The result of this process is hence a light, entertaining guide that finds a place in every reader's bookshelf as a collector's item, without ever becoming obsolete.

Furthermore, as sustainability is one of the core principles within the project, *Extinguished Countries* guides are committed to recommending more environmentally friendly itineraries and providing information on how to reduce environmental impact when travelling. Finally, part of the project's strategy is to work closely with local communities. Not only do they play a crucial role in caring for the cultural heritage, but they also provide the guide with a unique perspective and interpretation of the historical period in question, helping visitors to establish a deeper connection with the places they

are discovering. The contents of the guide, indeed, are not only historical or touristic, as one might think, but extend to include cuisine, folklore, linguistics... all framed by the magnificent maps and illustrations by Iva Hrvatin, *Extinguished Countries*' designer.

Towards new adventures

In March 2022, Chiara Marchesini, an Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe graduate, joined the *Extinguished Countries* team. The first objective of the newly formed *Extinguished Countries* team was to strengthen the community that gravitates around the project: from social media to the newsletter, our content begins to multiply, and numerous collaborations arise from correspondences with the community. The material expands to such an extent that an effective method of collecting it had to be found; it is during this period that the *Extinguished Countries* website is revamped, and begins to be used to store all those stories and anecdotes that could not make it into the first guide.

At the same time, the publishing house *Paper Boat Stories* began its transition into a cultural start-up, and embarked on diverse and fascinating tasks, such as producing podcasts for institutions and research centres and writing articles, consequently expanding the storytelling formats with which to tell about cultural heritage, current affairs and identity. Started with an idea and a crowdfunding campaign, our start-up is now open to new collaboration, European projects and other kinds of synergies, while we prepare our next book in the *Extinguished Countries* series. After the Republic of Venice, we are ready now to embark on a journey through the Habsburg Empire. For this purpose, in June 2023 we will launch a new crowdfunding campaign that will allow our readers and supporters to pre-order the upcoming book.

Why embark on such a journey? Rather than nostalgia for bygone eras, we are guided by curiosity and the desire to build bridges between peoples. We do not long for the – often undemocratic – empires, republics or kingdoms of the past, but we do want to do them justice by visiting them with an open mind, ready to learn new things. In our guidebooks, we visit places in different countries, but linked by a common thread: famous tourist regions, less visited destinations and ghost towns – all places which belonged to the extinguished country we are exploring, having played a role within it. Some of these cities have become metropolises, others have lost their former glory.

The adventure we are about to embark on is slow-paced and light, both in content and in the footprint we leave behind us. We are convinced that – if done in a responsible way, respectful of the environment and open to encounters – travel can still offer us its greatest gift, that of making us feel part of one big family. These guidebooks will take you to meet many people and visit new places. Inside, you will find the keys to understanding a particular historical era and plenty of ideas to continue your research. With a bit of luck, you will also find a part of your own identity on the journey, which got stranded who knows when and who knows where in the maze of an extinguished country.

Chiara Marchesini, Giovanni Vale