

zeitgeschichte

Vienna University Press

The Memory of Guilt Revisited. The Slovenian Post-Socialist Remembrance Landscape in Transition

edited by

Oto Luthar and Heidemarie Uhl

Marta Verginella

Political Remake of Slovenian History and Trivialisation of Memory

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Searching for "1989" on the Transnational Remembrance Landscape:

A Topography

ZEITGESCHICHTE

46. Jahrgang, Heft 2 (2019)

Herausgeber: Univ.-Prof. DDr. Oliver Rathkolb (Geschäftsführung), Verein zur wissenschaftlichen Aufarbeitung der Zeitgeschichte, c/o Institut für Zeitgeschichte der Universität Wien, Spitalgasse 2–4/ Hof I, A-1090 Wien, Tel.: 0043 1 4277 41205, E-Mail Redaktion: oliver.rathkolb@univie.ac.at, agnes.meisinger@univie.ac.at; E-Mail Rezensionen: stifter@vhs-archiv.at

Diese Zeitschrift ist peer-reviewed.

Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS, AMERICA: HISTORY AND LIFE, CURRENT CONTENTS-ARTS & HUMANITIES, and ARTS & HUMANITIES CITATION INDEX.

Bezugsbedingungen

Erscheinungsweise: viermal jährlich

Abo print + online: Jahrgang € 60 [D] / € 61,70 [A], Jahrgang Institutionenpreis ab € 131 [D] / € 134,70 [A] (e-only: € 145)

Einzelheft € 25 [D] / € 26 [A]. Alle Preise zzgl. Versandkosten.

Erhältlich in jeder Buchhandlung oder beim Leserservice HGV Hanseatische Gesellschaft für Verlagsservice mbH, Holzwassenstr. 2, D-72127 Kusterdingen, Tel.: 0049 7071 / 9353-16, Fax: -93, v-r-journals@hgv-online.de.

Ein Abonnement verlängert sich automatisch um ein Jahr, wenn die Kündigung nicht zum 1. Oktober erfolgt ist. Zuschriften, die Anzeigen und Vertrieb betreffen, werden an den Verlag erbeten.

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Gefördert durch die Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität Wien und die Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien (MA 7).



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Veröffentlichungen der Vienna University Press erscheinen im Verlag V&R unipress GmbH.

© 2019, V&R unipress GmbH, Robert-Bosch-Breite 6, D-37079 Göttingen

Tel.: 0049 551 5084-415, Fax: -333, www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com, info-unipress@v-r.de

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Printed in Germany.

Druck und Bindung: CPI books GmbH, Birkstraße 10, D-25917 Leck

ISSN: 0256–5250

ISBN: 978-3-8471-1007-1



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ZEITGESCHICHTE

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Editorial

The collapse of the communist states is regarded as the starting point of the new Europe. With this turning point, historical narratives have had to be rewritten in the post-socialist countries. While the destruction of Communist monuments is imprinted on European collective memory as a visual icon reflecting this caesura, the much more complex process of opening up and diversifying the writing of history has drawn little attention. This also holds true for the nationalist and revisionist backlash in dealing with traumatic historical events, which tends to be highlighted only in the context of specific, particularly dramatic political interventions and measures, such as the marginalization of the Holocaust by the House of Terror in Budapest or the Polish Memory Laws.

Focusing on the little known case of Slovenia, this issue of *zeitgeschichte* offers a comprehensive survey of the transformations affecting collective memory and the writing of history in one post-communist country. We are very pleased to have won Oto Luthar, arguably the most distinguished Slovenian exponent of a form of memory history that meets international scholarly standards, as guest editor. His introduction and the essays in this issue analyze the ways in which Slovenian society has grappled with traumatic historical events. The authors pointedly probe the fields of history politics, memorial culture and the writing of history against the background of the Europe-wide changes in the construction of memory. Specific microhistories allow for an analysis of relevant controversies and political interventions in the struggle over the interpretation of Slovenia's past. Given the proliferating illiberal tendencies in the political culture of numerous European countries, which threaten to curtail critical scholarly discussions of the dominant versions of national history, the strategies of historical revisionism described in this issue are likely to be of considerable interest not only to scholars interested specifically in the case of Slovenia.

Introduction

After 1989, the impact of historical representation on forming new democracies has become an inseparable part of the new politics of history in post-socialist societies. According to Charles S. Maier, discussion about the changing “architecture of historical knowledge”¹ also took place in certain other European countries. Even more so, the new “hunger for memory”² became “a remarkable cultural feature” across Western Europe. Indeed memory, and particularly memory relating to *the century of extremes*, has become a subject of contemplation in its own right rather than the mere subject of the past. This change was not confined to the late 1980s, and it took place well beyond the bounds of Western Europe. To some extent, it was even the societies of the “Eastern Bloc” that experienced “an era of self-archaeologization.”³ The latter was particularly true for Yugoslavia and – within it – Slovenia. Therefore, the editors of this volume, much like Marta Verginella in her contribution, aim to draw attention to the aftermath of the so-called nationalization of the past, or the fact that the professional debate over the nature of historical explanation, which started in the 1980s, has largely been overshadowed by new attempts to monopolize historical interpretation. The once vivid interest in new forms of historical representation has given way to the politicized reinterpretation of national histories in all countries of the former Yugoslavia. In Slovenian historiography, the euphoria that accompanied the struggle for independence opened the way for a steam-roller of positivist nationalism that flattened almost every hint of interpretational polyphony. The debate that started in the early 1980s following the first critical articles on socialist historiography,⁴ and the first translations of relevant theo-

1 Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 1.

2 Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 149.

3 Ibid., 123.

4 Vodopivec, Peter. “Poskus opredelitve razvoja slovenskega zgodovonopisja z vidika zgodovina-ideologija” [A Tentative Definition of the Development of Slovenian Historiography in Light of the Relationship between History and Ideology], *Problemi*, November 1, 1984.

retical considerations regarding the nature of historical interpretation,⁵ has largely been replaced by the nationalist interpretation of national cultural heritage. Consequently, the anticipated democratization and (post)modernization of historical interpretation have been obstructed by yet another monopolization of historical interpretation, followed by a new political monopolization of a certain kind of historical interpretation. The change was, and still is, closely connected with Slovenian revisionist and negationist currents. It is based on a more or less archaic understanding of the postmodern view of history as an authoring process, while most historians have actually never stopped believing history to be a straightforward interpretative report of factual findings. In their mystification of the national past, history thus remains an interpretational and politically inspired project rather than the result of uncertainties of meanings created “through the exercise of our own mind.”⁶ Even more so, the revisionists deliberately use a narrow understanding of history to place their politicized interpretation on the agenda as completely relevant and legitimate.

Therefore, the academic colleagues⁷ who were invited to participate in this special volume were particularly encouraged to engage in fields where the dynamics of change in dealing with the politics of memory in Slovenia can be observed. In their own distinctive ways and with various disciplinary focal points, the contributors were asked to rethink 1) the emergence of the new politics of memory; that is, post-communist historiographies, particularly in relation to the question of possible political involvement in interpreting the past and its effects on discussing the theory and philosophy of history; 2) the nationalization of the past by reinventing “authentic national historical memory”; and 3) the mediatization of traumatic history (or a traumatic past) by using new communication technologies.

From these focal points, the authors – from the University of Ljubljana, the Institute of Contemporary History, and the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts – address the relationship between various modes of post-communist enactments of memory and representations of the past.

Like other former communist countries, Slovenia has also been witnessing –

5 See for example Oto Luthar, *Vsi Tukididovi možje. Sodobne teorije zgodovinarstva* (Ljubljana: Krt, 1990).

6 Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 34.

7 The invited authors have participated in the debate on the post-socialist politics of memory for at least ten years, and three of them have dealt with the topic for almost two decades. When thinking of also inviting authors pushing for the radical reinterpretation of the historical period under discussion, it became clear that over the last twenty-five years, their interpretation more or less merged with their ideological perspective. Instead of openly discussing questions of objectivity, truth and causation, they still believe that historical truth resides in justified descriptive statements that correspond to the empirical reconstruction of human intentionality, while some of them turned into political commentators.

since the second half of the 1990s – a politically motivated radical re-interpretation of the most traumatic periods of national history. The brief period of attempts toward symbolic reconciliation, a period that was underscored by a special meeting between Slovenia's first president, Milan Kučan, and the Archbishop of Ljubljana Alojzij Šuštar,⁸ boiled down to a fierce struggle over the past. A country whose population had fought tooth and nail to distance itself from the Balkans two decades or so later witnessed the entrenchment of what, according to the Slovenian diplomat Vojko Volk, is particularly characteristic of this part of Europe. In his opinion, Slovenia, too, has become known as a part of the world “where historians deal with politics and politicians with history.”⁹

While in contrast to Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina, only few Slovenian historians ended up in politics, but they crucially contributed to a polarization in the understanding of the period during and after the Second World War; a polarization that was triggered by a systematic reversal of the roles of victims and perpetrators, and a fitful advocacy of “functional” collaboration with the German and Italian forces. As in other processes of this kind, the Slovenian material and interpretative *sanitization*¹⁰ of the Second World War and its aftermath started almost immediately after independence. The material-symbolic sanitization includes the desecration of the Jewish section of Ljubljana's central cemetery, the destruction of memorial pillars tracing the barbed wire fence that enclosed occupied Ljubljana in 1942–1943, and the erection of monuments to the “victims of communist violence.” The symbolic sanitization, on the other hand, comprises historiographical reinterpretations of interwar developments, with an emphasis on the rehabilitation of local collaboration with the Fascist and Nazi occupation forces.

Since 2014, the new landscape of memory started to systematically translate the members of the Partisan resistance movement, hostages, and civilian casu-

8 At the ceremony, organized by the Slovenian Presidency, Milan Kučan explicitly acknowledged the accountability of the communist government for the postwar killings by concluding with the best speech he delivered in all of his entire presidential terms, stating: “Here they were killing us. Here we were killing each other. Here we were fighting and hiding against violence. Here we were winning and hiding the evil that was caused by our fighting and winning. Here victory often turned into defeat. Let us say to each other: here, where the bones are scattered of all who were fighting for this or that truth, with this or that thought, is the right place for reconciliation, which we need as a nation looking forward into the future. For what happened, we are sincerely regretful. Let us end it, here and now. It was.” (<http://www.bivsi-predsednik.si/up-rs/2002-2007/bp-mk.nsf/dokumenti/08.07.1990-90-92>)

9 Vojko Volk, “Zgodovina, nočna mora Balkana,” *Sobotna priloga Dela* (August 15, 2018): 15. The complete sentence is as follows: “In fact, the Balkans is wherever historians deal with politics and politicians deal with history.”

10 I have decided to use the term sanitization because of the way in which Slovenian revisionists were meticulously separating and deleting facts that would endanger their reinterpretation of the 1930s, the Second World War, and the period immediately after the war.

alties into perpetrators, while portraying collaborationist troops as victims. From that point on, all those who have opposed this reinvention have been dismissed as “arch-revisionists,” “arch-manipulators,” and “fired-up philo-communist diehards.” Instead of the previous balancing of guilt and the re-framing of occupation and resistance against it into civil war, the revised or sanitized interpretation simply reversed the roles of victims and perpetrators. Even more so, according to the authors of the revised national history, in 1945 Slovenia did not enter a period of freedom, but one of “dictatorship”, whose proponents continue to dominate the media space even after independence. One of the authors who has been consistently supportive of the radical interpretation of this part of history goes even as far as to talk of “an underground coup”, or a coup by “the former UDBA”; that is, the former secret police.¹¹ This provided the reason for one of the papers in this volume to investigate the mediatization of the past, as most discussions take place in daily newspapers and on various television channels, including national television. In recent years, this has been the medium where revisionists¹² have discussed “communist dictatorship” and “the Slovenian Holocaust.”¹³

However, rather than offering specific case studies, the authors of this volume are more interested in the use of language and the modes of historicization in which revisionists follow the “creative response concept,”¹⁴ claiming that one should never let the facts get in the way of intended interpretation.

11 Jože Možina, “Žal mi je, vse je res,” *Sobotna priloga Dela* (August 18, 2018): 20. Although the UDBA (Serbo-Croatian: *Uprava državne bezbednosti*) had a Slovenian branch of the State Security Administration (the UDV, or *Uprava državne varnosti*), authors like Možina prefer to use the Serbo-Croatian name, stressing the interpretation that communism was an import from Soviet Russia, and from other parts of Yugoslavia.

12 Here the term (*historical*) *revisionism* is understood as a practice of radical reinterpretation of the past that is unequally founded on the penchant for therapeutic values over cognitive values. Like Aviezer Tucker, I understand this as revised historiography immune to the effect of evidence; see Aviezer Tucker, “Historiographic Revision and Revisionism: The Evidential Difference,” in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, edited by Michal Kopeček (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), 3. Furthermore, the term is used here to describe the process of the post-communist radical reinterpretation of the most traumatic aspects of the past of Eastern European countries in the twentieth century. The term is, needless to say, inadequate. However, for the time being, I see no alternatives. The terms *negationism*, *the monopolization of memory*, *the distortion of history*, *rewriting*, *reinventing*, *redefining*, *re-evaluating*, *re-reading*, *abusing*, *erasing*, *changing*, *colonizing*, and ... *the past* do not cover the full spectrum; therefore, the search for a more adequate term continues.

13 The term “Slovenian Holocaust” is frequently used by Slovenian right-wing politicians. One such politician is also the former president of parliament, Dr. France Cukjati, from 2016 the president of the revisionist right-wing platform Zbor za republiko/Core for the Republic. See also Matjaž Gruden, “‘Slovenski holokavst’ ali kako manipulira zborovodja mopedšova za republiko,” in *Hokuspokus*, August 29, 2019.

14 The best proof of this concept’s scope and impact is the public relations company with the same sounding name, which has a focus on issue advocacy. According to their website

This issue has received detailed consideration in Maruša Pušnik's article, especially in terms of how the memories of the Second World War are mediated. Pušnik analyses historical revisionism in the media within the context of wider sociopolitical history-making processes in Slovenia. As her analysis determines, the mainstream media fuel memory battles in Slovenian public space, create revisionist narratives of the Second World War, and thus prompt audiences to erase old memories and create new ones. The forced forgetting of the Second World War, promoted by the current media discursive regime, also coincides with popular memories and the politics of bottom-up memory. In her opinion, such a politics of memory obscures the paradigm of the liberators and the aggressors, and influences the popular perception of developments that took place during and after the war.

Proceeding from Hannah Arendt's reflection on the political use of history (in *Truth and Politics*), Marta Verginella deals with the controversial relationship between historical truth and its political distortions. In her view, the strong political and public uses of history in Slovenia coexist with fundamental processes and transitions within Slovenian society. The Slovenian "memory boom" is in some aspects similar to what took place in the Yugoslav area, and in other European countries. On the other hand, Verginella points out certain specific aspects of the Slovenian politics of the past, claiming that the post-communist interest in "all victims" does not include the latest historical research, but tends to be substituted by a political-memorializing plan in which the victims are increasingly enveloped in a kind of sacredness and power.

The concept of national reconciliation is part of this enveloping, and this is the topic of Bojan Godeša's article. Beginning with the introduction of the concept to Slovenia in the 1980s, the author believes the idea of national reconciliation to be a suitable basis for transcending internal disparities. On the other hand, he shares the belief that the ideology of reconciliation affirms a specific type of historical revisionism, whose central point is a total silence regarding pre-war confessional and ideological anti-Semitism by the Slovenian Catholic Church and its close ally, the Slovenian People's Party. Similarly to Irena Šumi, he believes that the ideology of reconciliation likewise totally suppresses the wartime persecution of Slovenian Jews at the hands of the collaborationist authorities, as well as the post-war programmatic anti-Semitism of the revolutionary authorities. With this complete omission, the idea of reconciliation not only entirely

presentation, this is all "about shaping public opinion and creating success." Their latest project is related to the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh for the US Supreme Court.