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# “The cause of our poverty is colonia.” The Colonate System in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca during the Austro-Hungarian Empire\*\*

## IZVLEČEK

»VZROK NAŠE REVŠČINE JE KOLONSTVO.«  
KOLONSKI SISTEM NA GORIŠKEM IN GRADIŠKEM  
V OBDOBJU AVSTRO-OGRSKE

*Prispevek obravnava kolonski sistem – posebno obliko zemljiške odvisnosti, ki se je ohranila še skoraj stoletje po odpravi fevdalnih razmerij leta 1848. Šlo je za civilnopravno razmerje, za katero je bilo značilno, da so večinoma revne kmečke družine, ki niso imele v lasti nepremičnin, na podlagi pogodbe najele zemljišče, hišo ali celotno kmetijo v zakup, najpogosteje od plemiških družin ali bogatih kmečkih veleposestnikov. Sistem je spominjal na tlačanskega in je med koloni prehajal iz roda v rod. Kolonske družine je potiskal na družbeni rob in v revščino. V okviru habsburške države je bil uveljavljen tudi na območju dežele Goriške in Gradiške, predvsem v zahodnih predelih, ki jih je poseljevalo večinoma furlansko prebivalstvo. V prispevku bodo predstavljene splošne značilnosti sistema na prehodu iz 19. v 20. stoletje in poskusi oblasti, da bi ga formalnopravno ukinile.*

*Ključne besede: Goriška in Gradiška, kolonski sistem, gospodarske razmere, kmetijstvo, revščina, Avstro-Ogrska*

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## ABSTRACT

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*The paper examines the colonate system – a specific form of land dependency that persisted for almost a century following the abolition of feudal relations in 1848. It was a civil law relationship that involved mostly poor peasant families who did not own property, leasing land, a house, or an entire estate based on a contract, most often from noble families or wealthy rural landlords. The system resembled serfdom and was passed down from generation to generation between the coloni. It pushed colonate families to the margins of society and into poverty. The system persisted in the Habsburg monarchy, notably in the region of Gorizia and Gradisca, especially in the western parts. This paper will present the general features of the system, as it existed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the attempts of the authorities to formally regulate it.*

*Keywords: County of Gorizia and Gradisca, colonate system, economic conditions, agriculture, poverty, Austria-Hungary*

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## Introduction

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In the decades preceding the First World War, the economic situation in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca was characterised by various factors that influenced the everyday socio-economic landscape of the countryside. Among the more peculiar features was the colonate system – a form of land dependency that went on to survive the abolition of feudal relations in 1848 by almost a century.<sup>1</sup> It was particularly characteristic of the western parts of the County, inhabited mainly by the Friulian-speaking population. It was a civil-law relationship characterised by the leasing of land, a house, or an entire estate based on a contract (either oral or written), mostly by poor peasant families who did not own property. The owners of these properties were most often former feudal, noble families, rich landlords, the bourgeoisie, or ecclesiastical offices. The system resembled serfdom and was passed down from generation to generation among the coloni. It pushed colonate families to the social margins and into poverty – they were one of the most socially deprived groups in the County. Families lived in harsh and inadequate conditions, leading to physical and psychological problems, the spread of infectious

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the colonate system on the western edge of Slovene territory in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see: Peter Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem delu dežele Goriško-Gradiščanske do konca prve svetovne vojne," *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 12/13 (1987): 175–203. Peter Stres, "Oris kolonata na Goriškem od konca I. svetovne vojne do leta 1947," *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 15/16 (1989): 69–106. Peter Stres, "Odprava kolonata na Goriškem (1947–1955)," *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 35 (2011) 167–96. Sergij Vilfan, "Izročilo o kolonatu v Goriških Brdih," *Etnolog: glasnik Slovenskega etnografskega muzeja* 1 (1992): 137–50. Recent works include: Tanja Gomiršek, "Vrste zakupnih pogodb v Goriških brdih v prvi polovici 19. stoletja," *Zgodovinski časopis* 71, No. 1/2 (2017): 164–85.

diseases and often premature death. The system had a determinative impact on the local economic and social situation, which was marked by pellagra and the mass emigration of the colonate population to other parts of the country and abroad. The emergence of mass media (newspapers), democratisation (the expansion of suffrage), and the establishment of charitable structures from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards brought the issue into public discourse. The political authorities were confronted with demands to abolish the colonate system. This paper will outline the general features of the system at the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first part will focus on the socio-economic consequences of the colonate system before the First World War, especially in the Slovene-speaking part of Gorizia and Gradisca. The second part will give a more detailed description of the attempts of local and state authorities to legally abolish the colonate system.

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## **The County of Gorizia and Gradisca and Its Economic Characteristics in the Decades before the First World War**

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Gorizia and Gradisca was one of the 18 provinces that made up the Cisleithanian part of Austria-Hungary. It was included in the administrative-political unit of the Austrian Littoral (Österreichische Küstenland), whose seat was in Trieste.<sup>2</sup> It was one of the smaller provinces, but it was geographically very diverse, stretching south to north from the Adriatic Sea to the eastern Alpine peaks. In addition to its geography, the region was also defined by its ethnic diversity. In 1910, the population of the region numbered 260,000,<sup>3</sup> including Slovenes, Friulians,<sup>4</sup> Italians, Germans<sup>5</sup> and Jews.<sup>6</sup> The Italian and partly German communities in particular held a dominant position in politics, administration, education and the economy, significantly shaping the social image of the County, irrespective of its ethnic structure, which provoked opposition from the Slovene majority. As a result, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, national topics and conflicts were an everyday feature, especially those between the Slovene and Italian communities.<sup>7</sup>

Agriculture was the dominant sector of the economy in the period Austria-Hungary, with arable farming, animal husbandry and forestry being the main industries. The

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2 For more on the administrative-political situation and territorial features of Gorizia and Gradisca, see: Branko Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine Slovencev na Goriškem: 1848–1899* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 2005), 29–37.

3 Ibidem, 45. In 1910, according to the population census, which collected data on spoken languages, 62% of the population was Slovene-, 36% Italian-, and 2% German-speaking.

4 In many cases, the Friulian community was equated with and belonged to the Italian community during this time.

5 Matic Batič, “Mislimo sicer nemško, čutimo nemško, a nikomur ne bomo zamerili njegovega drugačnega mišljenja.” *Nemški goriški list Görzer Wochenblatt* in njegova politična usmeritev,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 77, No. 1/2 (2023): 88–115.

6 Renato Podbersič, *Jerusalem ob Soči: judovska skupnost na Goriškem od 1867 do danes* (Ljubljana: Študijski center za narodno spravo; Gorica: Goriška Mohorjeva družba; Maribor: Center judovske kulturne dediščine Sinagoga Maribor, 2017).

7 Branko Marušič, *Sosed o sosedu: prispevki k zgodovini slovensko-italijanskega sožitja* (Trst: ZIT, 2012), 9–42. Robert Devetak, “Razvoj slovenske prisotnosti v goriškem javnem prostoru pred prvo svetovno vojno,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 77, No. 3/4 (2023): 380–404.

best agricultural conditions were in the lowland, south-western part of the County, where, in addition to the favourable geographical location, the climate was suitable for developing specialised sectors such as viticulture, fruit-growing, and even rice-growing in the coastal lagoons.<sup>8</sup> Despite the relatively favourable climate, agriculture was plagued by a number of structural problems – uncompetitive and poorly educated farmers, the slow introduction of technical innovations, indebtedness, poverty, and significant land fragmentation.<sup>9</sup> All this resulted in a poor standard of living and a mass exodus from the County to other centres and abroad.<sup>10</sup> In addition, major crafts and industry were badly developed and confined to the major centres or urban areas. It was only in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that more intensive growth began. The capital of the County, Gorizia, had only around 30,000 inhabitants at that time and was economically overshadowed by the much larger and more important city of Trieste.<sup>11</sup>

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## Main Aspects of the Colonate System in Gorizia and Gradisca

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The social and economic situation in the flat and hilly part of the County was strongly influenced by the presence of the colonate system, which was first mentioned in the 16th century<sup>12</sup> and remained in Gorizia region until 1947, when the area was partitioned between Italy and Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup> Before the First World War, the colonate system was present in certain parts of the Slovene territory, specifically the Gorizia Hills (*Goriška brda, Collio*), Istria, parts of the Vipava Valley and Karst.<sup>14</sup> It also extended to other territories of Austria-Hungary, including parts of Croatian Istria, Dalmatia and Tirol.<sup>15</sup> In 1902, there were more than 400 colonate farms in the territory of Gorizia and Gradisca, where the Slovene population lived.<sup>16</sup> This form of land dependence originated in Italy<sup>17</sup> and was not covered by the abolition of feudal relations in 1848, because the coloni were legally-speaking free, albeit for the most part very poor, without significant assets and

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8 Branko Marušič, "Prispevki k poznavanju gospodarskih razmer na Goriškem v 19. in v začetku 20. stoletja," in Darja Skrt (ed.), *Aleksandrinke* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 2014), 59–72.

9 Alberto Luchitta, *La Camera di Commercio di Gorizia 1850–2000: uomini e lavoro in 150 anni di storia* (Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 2001), 49–51. Robert Devetak, "Gospodarska kriza na Goriškem in Gradiškem v letu 1879 ter ukrepi oblasti in dobrodelnih institucij za njeno reševanje," in Petra Kolenc et al. (eds.), *Marušičev zbornik: zgodovinsko-zahodnega roba: prof. dr. Branku Marušiču ob 80-letnici* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2019), 281–99.

10 Aleksej Kalc, "Migration movements in Goriška in the time of Aleksandrinke," in Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik (ed.), *From Slovenia to Egypt: Aleksandrinke's Trans-Mediterranean Domestic Workers' Migration and National Imagination* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, cop. 2015), 49–71.

11 Marušič, "Prispevki k poznavanju," 68.

12 Vojko Pavlin, "Primer uveljavljanja kupnega prava in kolonata na Goriškem 16. stoletja," *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 28 (2001): 289–93.

13 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 175.

14 Vilfan, "Izročilo o kolonatu," 141.

15 Gomiršek, "Vrste zakupnih pogodb," 165.

16 Vilfan, "Izročilo o kolonatu," 141.

17 Sergij Vilfan, "Agrarna premoženjska razmerja," in Pavle Blaznik et al. (eds.), *Gospodarska in družbena zgodovina Slovencev. Zgodovina agrarnih panog* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1980), 426, 427.

contractually tied to wealthy landlord families, who in certain areas owned large swathes of arable land. The system resembled serfdom and was often passed down from generation to generation between the coloni. The coloni cultivated the farmland. As sharecroppers, they were expected to send the landowners payment in the form of crops.<sup>18</sup> The contracts, which varied slightly according to time, place and the parties involved, were fixed in time, usually for a period of between one and three years, and were renewable, with the landowners having the final say.<sup>19</sup> This also put the coloni in a distinctly subordinate position. Landlords chose to use these types of contracts because they gave them more leverage over the coloni than they otherwise would have had if they had hired ordinary workers.<sup>20</sup> The colonate contracts in force in the 1870s typically required the coloni to give the landowners two-thirds of the wine crop, plus a certain amount of fruit (plums, cherries, and grapes). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rapid technological progress and faster transport brought changes, since it made fruit more commercially attractive. As a result, its share in contracts increased.<sup>21</sup> In addition, part of the obligations was paid in cash and part in unpaid work on the owner's other land (fields, meadows, vineyards, forests). Despite clearly-defined terms, landowners would frequently decide to cancel contracts.<sup>22</sup> The *Soča* newspaper wrote the following: "If the landlord is not satisfied with the colono, he dismisses him at the end of the year and the colono has to hit the road with his wife and children. The condition of the coloni is very harsh."<sup>23</sup> The contractual land dependency limited mobility and negatively affected the ability of the coloni to access complementary sources of income, such as small crafts or transportation. In addition, landowners extracted labour from the coloni on their land and protected their interests.<sup>24</sup>

While such contracts were criticised by the public, no changes were made until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, newspapers regularly published opinion pieces on the subject:

"The Friulian landlord has a lot of property, but he cannot cultivate it himself, so he rents it out to poor people and gets them to work for him. The conditions are bloody. Every year the colono must give him more than half of the total produce; he must sell all the wine to the master at the lowest price, he must do all of the work, and even cultivate his vineyard, which he has kept for his private use."<sup>25</sup>

Landowners resisted changes to the system because it provided them with a high income and, in many cases, greater political power. This type of land ownership allowed active political participation and, in line with the electoral system of the time, inclusion in the

18 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 179, 180. Furio Bianco, "L'armonia sociale nelle campagne. Economia agricola e questione colonica nella Principesca Contea di Gorizia e Gradisca tra ,800 e ,900," in Furio Bianco et al. (eds.), *Economia e società nel Goriziano tra ,800 e ,900: il ruolo della Camera di Commercio (1850–1915)* (Gorizia: Edizioni della Laguna, 1991), 44–66.

19 Vilfan, "Izročilo o kolonatu," 139.

20 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 178.

21 Gomiršek, "Vrste zakupnih pogodb," 167.

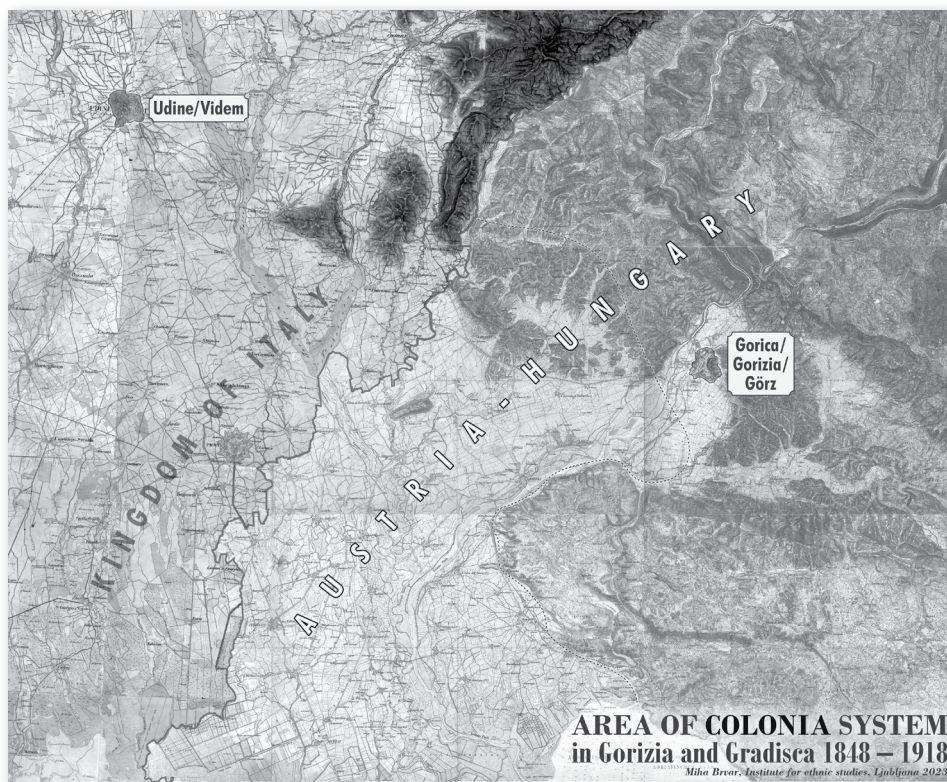
22 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 179.

23 "Furlanski koloni," *Soča*, 24. 7. 1885, 1.

24 Aleksej Kalc, "Selitvena gibanja ob zahodnih mejah slovenskega etničnega prostora: teme in problemi," *Annales* 10 (1997): 199, 200.

25 "Na Furlanskem," *Soča*, 16. 4. 1874, 1.

Figure 1: The distribution of the colonate system in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca



Author of the map: Miha Brvar

landlord curia<sup>26</sup> at regional level.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the system pushed colonate families to the margins of society and into poverty. An anonymous correspondent in the *Gorizia* newspaper wrote in 1900:

“If you walk for a long time in Friuli, you can see hundreds upon hundreds of diligent hands, working the vast fields. When you enquire: ‘To whom does this vast field belong?’, they will give you two or three names, one count and two barons, or vice versa. These are the owners, these are the lords, while everyone else are coloni, a kind of tenant farmers, and their subordinates, the ‘sottani’<sup>28</sup> – the workers, who are, of course, the most numerous. The owner, the baron or count, profits the most from the lands, because he has to live like a count or baron (?!); after him comes the colono, or tenant, who also prefers to live well rather than poorly – and third comes the sottano, or worker, who has only enough to breathe. Most of these workers are married and usually have many children. Their daily wage or salary is 50 to 80 pennies a day, and with this the worker has to support himself, his wife, and, if necessary, six to eight children.”<sup>29</sup>

26 Vasilij Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem: 1861–1918* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1965), 42–49.

27 Vilfan, “Izročilo o kolonatu,” 140.

28 Ibid., 142. Sottano was the Italian term used to denote the poorest of the coloni.

29 “Pelagra v Furlaniji,” *Gorica*, 19. 6. 1900, 3.

## The Colonate System as a Social Issue

The system put colonate families in a particularly risky position in the event of emergencies linked to economic crises, natural disasters, and other social upheavals. This was aggravated by poor education and an inability or refusal to adapt to new economic and social trends.<sup>30</sup> Poor education often affected entire colonates, who, due to the lack of resources and time, did not even receive primary education, despite it being compulsory by law.<sup>31</sup> Landowners were also opposed to any kind of schooling, since they saw educated and literate peasants as lazy.<sup>32</sup> In 1874, in an article entitled *In Friuli*, Štefan Širok<sup>33</sup> pointed out the following: “In the intellectual sense, the peasantry is completely neglected, and has not the slightest desire for education and general knowledge. This goes so far as to make them hate schools, and not only do they not send their sons to the town schools, but they are enemies of the local schools.”<sup>34</sup> Poor education significantly impacted the farmers’ ability to introduce novel economic solutions, tools, varieties and fertilisers, making the environment uncompetitive and reducing crop quality.<sup>35</sup> The colonate system itself also had a negative impact on the development of the area, since the lack of financial resources hindered the uptake of new, advanced farming techniques.<sup>36</sup> However, the (lack of) motivation of the coloni to perform work, which was neither properly valued, appreciated or paid, also had an effect on productivity and crop quantity. This type of farming has been regarded as a distinct failure in terms of productivity, as the coloni’s disinterest has often manifested as resistance against the landowners, especially when the latter exploited the system.<sup>37</sup> “The Friulian peasant has nothing else on his mind but how to deceive his master and how to cheat him in a contract. But these contracts are also outrageous; they leave the poor peasant with almost no personal freedom.”<sup>38</sup> The rents set by the landlords were unreasonably high. At the same time, they themselves set the price of the produce, which was considerably lower than the market price.<sup>39</sup>

Many landowners did not invest in housing and colonate families did not have the means to cope with poor and inadequate living conditions.

30 Peter Štih, “Kmečko prebivalstvo v grofijah Goriška in Gradiščanska je sicer delavno, vendar zelo revno –: poročilo dvornega vojnega sveta o socialnem in gospodarskem stanju na Goriškem in Gradiščanskem iz leta 1770,” in Petra Kolenc (ed.), *Marušičev zbornik: zbornik prispevkov v počastitev 70-letnice prof. dr. Branka Marušiča* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 2010): 327.

31 Tanja Gomiršek, “Pismenost kmečkega prebivalstva Goriških brd v 19. stoletju,” *Kronika* 67, No. 1 (2019): 91–104.

32 Vilfan, “Izročilo o kolonatu,” 147.

33 Branko Marušič, “Kaj so Slovenci v 19. stoletju vedeli o Furlanih in kako so Furlane spoznavali?,” *Izvestje Raziskovalne postaje ZRC SAZU v Novi Gorici*, 2015, No. 12, 15, 16.

34 Štefan Širok, “Na Furlanskem,” *Soča*, 16. 4. 1874, 1.

35 Devetak, “Razvoj osnovnega šolstva in vplivi delovanja učiteljev na gospodarski razvoj sodnega okraja Kanal v obdobju Avstro-Ogrske,” *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 41 (2017): 208–12. Kalc, “Selitvena gibanja,” 200.

36 Tanja Gomiršek, “Spremembe na področju agrarnih panog v jugovzhodnem delu Goriških brd v 19. stoletju,” *Kronika* 59, No. 2 (2011): 280.

37 Stres, “Oris kolonata v slovenskem,” 181.

38 Širok, “Na Furlanskem,” *Soča*, 16. 4. 1874, 2.

39 Gomiršek, “Vrste zakupnih pogodb,” 171.

"Almost everywhere this system has been introduced, one sees poor, dilapidated brick-buildings, whose individual buildings are not only badly positioned, but also low and cramped; and, being windowless, they lack even the necessary light and healthy air. /.../ Let us look a little more closely at the colono house. It consists almost without exception of two rooms. Below is the horribly smoke-stained kitchen, which has no windows. The floor resembles the surface of a wavy sea. The house door is wide open in winter and summer. Here, light comes into the kitchen, but there is also a vent for the dense smoke that billows in a torrential cloud through the kitchen. This place is the farmer's living room, dining room, food store, granary and often cellar. Above the kitchen is the so-called attic, a dark, almost airless room. There is no sign of windows here either; usually there is a hole in the wall through which a cat can barely crawl. But even these holes are usually hermetically sealed. Year after year, the colonate – numbering 8–12 heads – sleeps in these suffocating rooms. The attic is not only used as a bedroom, but also for storing grain, which is partly scattered on the floor or hung from the roof beams. The attic serves as a bedroom and a granary at the same time."<sup>40</sup>

This situation negatively impacted health and hygiene conditions, leading to serious and chronic diseases (e.g. pneumonia, tuberculosis) and premature death.<sup>41</sup>

Pellagra, which struck the Friuli plain in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was inseparably linked to the colonate system and the farmers' poor diet. The disease is a form of hypovitaminosis, caused by niacin (vitamin B3) deficiency, the result of an excessive and monotonous maize-based diet. It typically mainly occurred in spring and lasted until the end of summer. It manifested as physical changes to the skin, gastrointestinal tract, and brain. The most pronounced initial symptoms of the disease were fatigue, loss of appetite, indigestion, insomnia and skin lesions, especially on the limbs and around the neck.<sup>42</sup> Left untreated, the disease resulted in diarrhoea, dermatitis, dementia and psychological problems (anxiety, depression, hallucinations),<sup>43</sup> with mortality rates of up to 70%.<sup>44</sup> The disease affected the lowest classes in particular, including colonate families. Their inadequate dietary habits, stemming from the system of outsourcing crops, a lack of financial resources, and poor living conditions, led to the frequent and rapid spread of the disease. The climate and geography of Gorizia and Gradisca favoured maize as the main crop. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a third of the County's total arable land was devoted to maize.<sup>45</sup> Most of it was grown in the flat, lowland part of Friuli, which offered the best growing conditions for this type of grain. Landowners and coloni devoted more and more land to maize because of its

40 "Iz Št. Petra," *Soča*, 17. 11. 1882, 2.

41 Rachel Fuchs, *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 177.

42 Monica Ginnaio, "Pellagra in Late Nineteenth Century Italy: Effects of a Deficiency Disease," *Population*, No. 3 (2011): 588.

43 *Ibid.*, 588, 589.

44 Kenneth Kiple (ed.), *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease* (Cambridge; New York; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 918.

45 Vlado Valenčič, "Kulturne rastline," in Pavle Blaznik et al. (eds.), *Gospodarska in družbena zgodovina Slovencev: [enciklopedična obravnava po panogah]. Zgodovina agrarnih panog. Zv. 1, Agrarno gospodarstvo* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1970), 265–67.



profitability, since railway connections and steamships made it easier and cheaper to transport to more distant parts of the country or abroad.<sup>46</sup> The resulting increase in maize production altered the diet of the local population, especially the poorer segments of society.

“Polenta in the morning, polenta at midday, polenta in the evening; polenta in the spring, polenta in the summer, polenta in the autumn, polenta in the winter – in a word: polenta – without end or place – this is the only food of the Friulian worker. But if only this polenta was made of healthy corn flour!!! In fact, Friuli produces the most maize, because it is the most prolific and, consequently, the cheapest food for the local population. A colono or tenant gives his workers corn instead of money.”<sup>47</sup>

This system further tied the poor to maize, making the pellagra situation even worse. Poorly processed maize was particularly problematic, as farmers often sold their best crops to make more money, while poorer quality maize, including rotten stock, was used at home to make flour.<sup>48</sup> The situation was further worsened by poor harvests, as natural disasters led to crop failures, which greatly increased dependence on maize.<sup>49</sup> In his book *The Noble County of Gorizia and Gradisca (Poknežena grofija Goriška in Gradiščanska)*, the Gorizia historian Simon Rutar states that as much as 25% of the population, especially people from the lower classes, were affected by pellagra in some parts of the Friulian plain in the early 1890s.<sup>50</sup> During this period, up to 90% of the sufferers were rural workers or farmers.<sup>51</sup> In the 1880s, the disease developed into an endemic outbreak, killing hundreds of people, mainly women, children and the elderly, and sending many more to psychiatric or ordinary hospitals for long-term treatment.<sup>52</sup>

Poor living conditions, exploitation by landlords, and pellagra forced the population to leave their homes *en masse* and emigrate to other parts of the country, Europe, and to other continents, especially South and later North America.<sup>53</sup> In the colonate system, home abandonment became widespread as early as the 1870s and only intensified in the ensuing decades.<sup>54</sup> Friulian emigration was also a frequent topic in newspapers: “The rumour has broken out again that many of our Friulian inhabitants want to move to America. In Bruma, a suburb of the town of Gradisca, 18 families are preparing to make the long journey across the Ocean. In the Cormons district, the number of people intending to move to the Argentine has risen to 1000, mostly peasants (*coloni*) and their families.”<sup>55</sup> In 1887, the *Gospodarski list* stated:

46 See: Marušič, “Prispevki k poznavanju,” 59–72.

47 “Pelagra v Furlaniji,” *Gorica*, 19. 6. 1900, 3.

48 Ibid.

49 “Na Furlanskem,” *Edinosti*, September 21, 1887, 3.

50 Simon Rutar, *Poknežena grofija Goriška in Gradiščanska* (Nova Gorica: Jutro, 1997), 70.

51 Martin Cilenšek, *Naše škodljive rastline v podobi in besedi* (Celovec: Družba sv. Mohorja, 1892–1896), 274.

52 Robert Devetak, “Hči glada in mati umobola: bolezen pelagra in njeno preprečevanje na Goriškem in Gradiškem v obdobju Avstro-Ogrske,” *Zgodovina za vse* 27, No. 1 (2020): 5–15.

53 Aleksej Kalc, “Vidiki razvoja prebivalstva Goriške-Gradiške v 19. stoletju in do prve svetovne vojne,” *Acta Histriae* 21, No. 4 (2013): 697, 698.

54 For more on emigration, see: Kalc, “Migration Movements,” 49–71.

55 “Emigracija,” *Soča*, 29. 8. 1879, 4.

Figure 2: An example of a peasant house in the Friulian part of Gorizia and Gradisca. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dwellings were often still covered with thatch, without flooring, separate rooms, proper ventilation, heating and access to light.



Source: Giuseppe Caprin, *Pianure friulane: seguito ai libri Marine Istriane - Lagune di Grado* (Trieste: Stabilimento Artistico G. Caprin, 1892), 249

“Our landlords have lost all hope for a better future, that they are all dejected and have neither the means nor the courage to rise from their helplessness, and that the coloni – to escape the poverty and the terrible torments of the pellagra – are preparing to migrate in whole crowds to the other side of the Ocean; and this would deprive our County of hundreds of able hands, who desire nothing more earnestly than to be able to keep themselves strong, and to continue to cultivate their native soil, and, if need be, to defend it faithfully.”<sup>56</sup>

Before the First World War, thousands of people left the areas where the colonate system operated to find a better life elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> “Naša reva,” *Gospodarski list*, October 14, 1887, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Kalc, “Selitvena gibanja,” 199–201.

Figure 3: The traditional clothing of the rural population in the Furlan part of Gorizia and Gradisca



Source: Caprin, *Pianure friulane*, 9

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## The Colonnate System as a Political Issue

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Before the First World War, the most widespread mass medium was the newspaper, which actively monitored and highlighted the poor conditions of the coloni in the County.<sup>58</sup> From the very start (the 1860s), reports started appearing in various newspapers. Later on, coverage and warnings intensified and gradually became politicised. This was mainly due to the gradual democratisation and extension of voting rights. This brought the issue of the colonate system into the public arena, followed by increasing calls for action by the political authorities. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, warnings about the poor situation were relatively rare, although there are examples

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<sup>58</sup> On the development of newspapers, see: Smilja Amon and Karmen Erjavec, *Slovensko časopisno izročilo 1: od začetka do 1918* (Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede, Založba FDV, 2011), 71, 72.

of attempts to address the situation through political action. An anonymous author, writing in the *Glas* newspaper, pointed this out and presented the system as one of the main reasons for the poor social conditions in the area:

"The third cause of our poverty is the colonate system, and this cause cannot be helped except by some energetic state action, like in Poland and Russia following the 1831 uprising. The inhabitants of Gorizia Hills are thus for the most part the slaves, both in body and mind, of the Gorizian and other barons and landowners."<sup>59</sup>

The provincial and state parliamentary political system, which had been developing in the Habsburg monarchy since 1859, had not yet shown much interest in solving such economic problems in the early years. This was mainly due to the relative exclusivity of the right to vote, which until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was limited to only a small percentage of the population.<sup>60</sup> It was the political and democratic changes that finally brought the issue of tackling the colonate system to the surface. The main shift came with the gradual extension and then introduction of universal suffrage for adult men in 1907. This gave the right to vote to a wider section of society, including those from the lower classes. Political parties had to become much more proactive and base their programmes on different foundations and themes capable of bringing larger masses of potential voters to their cause.<sup>61</sup> The social problems of the impoverished population, who was now able to vote and engage politically, became part of everyday politics. This included the colonate system, which became a political issue and a subject of party and ideological struggles.<sup>62</sup> The shift in political discourse can be identified in the press quickly after the change in electoral law.

The Slovene political landscape in the County was shaped at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly by two political camps – a liberal one within the National Progressive Party (*Narodno napredna stranka* – NPP) and a conservative one within Unity (*Sloga*), later the All-Slovene People's Party (*Vseslovenska ljudska stranka* – SPP), which was founded in 1907.<sup>63</sup> Their success in the provincial and state elections between 1907 and 1913 was mixed. Seeking a better result at the ballot box, they were active in the countryside, raising various issues related to the state of agriculture and the rural population.<sup>64</sup> On both the Slovene and Italian sides, the Christian Social Group, which was part of the conservative camp, was the most active on the issue of the colonate system. Among the Italian provincial politicians, the leader of the Christian Socialists, the priest Luigi Faidutti, was the most concerned with the status of the colonate families. He based his political programme to a large extent on issues relating to social welfare measures and the improvement of the living conditions in the Friulian countryside.<sup>65</sup> In addition to the

59 "Iz Brd," *Glas*, October 8, 1875, 3.

60 Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem*, 5–9.

61 Selišnik, "Zborovanja na Kranjskem v letih 1900–1913 in razmerja moči: 'Ako hočemo biti zmagovavci moramo poučevati ljudstvo po shodih ---,'" *Zgodovinski časopis* 67, No. 1/2 (2013): 86–109.

62 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 181–201.

63 Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem*, 276–80.

64 Robert Devetak, *Društveno življenje na Kanalskem v času Avstro-Ogrske* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 2016), 117–28.

65 Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 332, 333.

Italian Catholic camp, some Slovene politicians also included support for the coloni in their political programme after 1907. The most vocal advocate of change on the Slovene side was Josip Fon, a lawyer who often called for a solution to the issue in his numerous speeches, petitions and legislative proposals. In December 1908, he called on the country's leading political decision-makers to take action, stressing, among other things, that "our coloni believe that they deserve greater respect for their legitimate wishes and that the government, understanding its own interest, should begin a greater auxiliary action in their favour."<sup>66</sup> The political mobilisation of the Catholic camp is indicated by the increasing number of newspaper articles which have pointed to the importance of political action focusing on the colonate system. Thus, as early as the summer of 1907, the newspaper *Primorski list*, which was part of the SPP, published a series of articles calling for the organisation and political mobilisation of the coloni.<sup>67</sup> An unidentified correspondent from Gorizia Hills also called on political representatives to advocate change and improvement of the coloni' situation: "The first step towards this must be the liberation of the coloni. For this reason, we call on all our elected representatives to take a firm stand on this issue and not to give up - as we certainly are not giving up - until our rights have been granted."<sup>68</sup> From the summer of 1907 onwards, the SPP began to organise a number of rallies in the Slovene countryside, where the coloni were present, and addressed the issue in its political programme. In this way, it was able to win support among the local population and, as a result, a better electoral result. However, support at the top of the party fluctuated and often depended on other circumstances and interests.<sup>69</sup>

While the Slovene catholic political camp actively fought for change and improvement in the social status of colonate families, the Slovene liberal camp addressed the issue to a lesser extent, while acknowledging the negative consequences of the colonate system.<sup>70</sup> It is evident from newspaper reports and public meetings that its political representatives tried to play down its significance and minimised its negative consequences in the countryside. Above all, they tried to present it as an "Italian" issue that had little to do with the Slovene territory and the population living there.<sup>71</sup> This view was partly the result of an intense cultural and ideological struggle between the Catholic and Liberal camps and partly due to the mutual support the NPP and the Slovene landlords offered one another. The ideological struggle, which affected political and everyday life, extended to the economy and, more specifically, to the colonate question, which took on substantial political significance. The rallies, organised by political opponents from the Catholic camp, were presented in the liberal press as unsuccessful, with the aim of creating a negative atmosphere in the local environment and causing friction with the landowners.<sup>72</sup> It was precisely the link with the latter that was an important element in

66 "Govor državnega posl. Fona," *Gorica*, December 19, 1908, 2.

67 "Iz Brd," *Primorski list*, July 1, 1907, 3.

68 "Iz Brd," *Primorski list*, July 25, 1907, 3.

69 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 197.

70 *Ibid.*, 197.

71 "Naši koloni ali: vsakemu svoje!," *Soča*, March 17, 1908, 1.

72 "Koloni," *Soča*, October 31, 1908, 2.

the work of the NPP. The party acted as a bulwark for the interests of the landowners, who did not want to see changes that would have negatively affected their economic status and power.<sup>73</sup> This is evident from the newspaper reports, with articles focusing on criticising the Catholic camp's handling of the issue and warning the coloni not to unite and resist the landowners. At the same time, they emphasised dialogue between landlords and tenants. Examples of this kind can be found in the newspapers of the day.

"The colonia question must be resolved in a way that is right for the coloni and the landlords. Or whoever wants to do good for the coloni must not incite them, because by doing so he only harms them. We are told that there are many quarrels in Gorizia Hills between the coloni and the landlords, which are certainly not in the best interests of the coloni. The Slovene clericals are only irritating, but they are not taking any real steps to settle the colonate question as soon as possible and for the better."<sup>74</sup>

The attitude of the NPP to the question is particularly telling in a longer article written in the Isonzo newspaper by a prominent member of the party, the landlord Franc Kocijančič, who first stressed that he was not opposed to the coloni, but at the same time presented their dependence on the landlords as a positive thing, describing them as incapable of acting independently:

"When talking about the colonate, the landlord is the head and the coloni are the hands; and herein lies the reason why the colono has no autonomy, that he carries on his work in a purely mechanical way, falling headlong into idleness, seeking solace and diversion in drink, and thus multiplying his misery. If coloni of this kind, and they are in the majority, say, among the 'justified malcontents', were to be helped by creating overnight conditions favourable to them, the result would be that they would become wasteful and would, in time, fall into even greater hardship and misery than they are already in."<sup>75</sup>

The Social Democratic camp also drew attention to the problem, but since the Gorizia Yugoslav Social Democratic Party (*Jugoslovanska socialdemokratska stranka*) had no political representatives in either the Gorizia Regional Assembly or the State Parliament, its manoeuvrability to actively address the problem was limited and its action was mainly focused on warnings in the newspapers and in the public space, especially at rallies. The most active of the Gorizia Social Democrats on the issue of the colonate system were the lawyer Henrik Tuma and Jože Srebrnič, who tried to bring the coloni under the umbrella of the party through active field work and appeals, but were not very successful due to the low interest of the party and other substantive goals. The party focused its efforts mainly on urban areas and expanded its network among industrial workers.<sup>76</sup>

73 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 193–97.

74 "Koloni," *Soča*, October 31, 1908, 2.

75 Franc Kocijančič, "Kolonsko vprašanje," *Soča*, March 1, 1910, 1.

76 Stres, "Oris kolonata v slovenskem," 201, 202.

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## Political Action and Attempts to Change the System

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The politicisation of the colonia system has brought with it, albeit slowly, systemic regulation and attempts to improve the rural population system. The provincial political parties helped the poorest colonate families with (relatively modest) financial support.<sup>77</sup> Political parties, and in particular some individual political representatives, have also become active. The most involved Slovene politician was the previously mentioned Fon, who also participated in the drafting of legislative solutions. The coloni recognised his activities and thanked him in the *Primorski list* at the beginning of 1908 for all the efforts he had made in the National Assembly to solve their social difficulties.<sup>78</sup> Faidutti was even more active. As early as the summer of 1907, he prepared a special memorandum for the government on the basis of an analysis of the colonate contracts, outlining the history and the main features of the system. The memorandum attracted interest among the political parties in the National Assembly in Vienna, especially the Social Democrats, and the government showed its willingness to regulate and improve the status of the coloni.<sup>79</sup> This provided the basis for further, more active work in this direction. The efforts took two forms – at the local level, where political actors wanted to mobilise the coloni and organise them to take collective action, and at national level (within the National Assembly and the sectoral ministries). From 1908 onwards, the Slovene and Italian Christian Social Groups organised several rallies for the coloni in the Friulian Lowlands and in Gorizia Hills, where speakers presented their plans and measures to improve the situation. At the same time, the coloni were able to publicly raise their concerns and draw attention to their plight. One of the largest rallies was held in Medana in February 1908, attended by around 300 people.<sup>80</sup> The coloni participated actively, organising their own events and setting up a special association to look after their interests.<sup>81</sup> The first proposal for a united action within the association was mentioned in the newspapers as early as 1901, when *Primorski list* published a series of three articles signed by “several coloni from Gorizia Hills.”<sup>82</sup> The articles described the socio-economic situation in Gorizia Hills, focusing on the difficulties of the coloni. As a solution to improve the situation, they proposed the creation of an association to fight for their interests:

“Everything is moving, everything is uniting, everything is progressing! The workers have united, the various artisans have united, the craftsmen have united to help each other with their common strength. Only the poor coloni (tenants) have not yet united anywhere. /.../ It must not and cannot be like this anymore! Get a grip and unite!”<sup>83</sup>

The appeal was not supported at that time and it remained until the beginning of 1909, when the Union of Slovene Coloni (*Zveza slovenskih kolonov*) was established. The

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77 “Za slovenske kolone,” *Novi čas*, May 8, 1914, 5.

78 “Zahvala veleblagorodnemu gospodu državnemu poslancu Josipu Fonu,” *Primorski list*, January 28, 1908, 2.

79 Stres, “Oris kolonata v slovenskem,” 183.

80 “Shod v Medani,” *Gorica*, February 25, 1908, 1.

81 Stres, “Oris kolonata v slovenskem,” 191.

82 “Iz Brd,” *Primorski list*, February 7, 1901, 3, 4; *Primorski list*, February 14, 1901, 3; *Primorski list*, February 28, 1901, 3.

83 “Iz Brd,” *Primorski list*, February 7, 1901, 3, 4.

central points of its programme were: "1. Control of colonate contracts; 2. Interest-free loans against amortisation for land purchases; 3. Credit lending in all our municipalities; and 4. Restriction of speculations in land purchases."<sup>84</sup> It was established in collaboration with the SPP, with Fon serving as President, and by May 1909 about 300 coloni had joined. The main purpose of the Union was to provide the membership with information about the political activities of the SPP for change, education and social assistance to alleviate the living conditions of the coloni.<sup>85</sup> The newspapers, the main mass media at that time, also played an important role in the mobilisation of the coloni. Here again the Catholic camp was the most active, promoting the party newsletter *Primorski List* as the main medium for informing the coloni. This is evident in one of the appeals in this newspaper:

"If you want to advance, dear coloni, you must: 1. Take care of your organisation, which is in the County of Gorizia: 'The Union of Slovene Coloni'. All Slovene coloni to the last should join this association! There is strength in unity. 2. Educate yourself. For this purpose, it is necessary that every colono subscribes to the *Primorski list*, which is the newsletter of the coloni association. 3. Live according to the teachings of the Holy Faith and educate your children in this spirit. Christian righteous living is every man's greatest asset and the best dowry for his children. 4. Beware of drunkenness and extravagance. Thrift is the greatest safeguard for a colono in times of distress and persecution. 5. Demand the redress of injustice everywhere."<sup>86</sup>

The newspaper's activities can be understood both in the direction of helping the coloni and in the direction of their political mobilisation in support of the SPP. These different forms of public action gave the coloni a voice in the society and, with the support of some political representatives, have helped them to promote their demands for change.

Faidutti's and Fon's work in Vienna brought the issue to the state level – to the National Assembly and to the government, where the colonate system was discussed on several occasions. The government side responded to the appeals and information presented in Vienna and sent a special envoy, Hermann Schullern,<sup>87</sup> to Gorizia and Gradisca. In early April 1908, he visited several places in Friuli and the Gorizia Hills and met with local political representatives, landowners and coloni. On the basis of the discussions, a review of the colonate contracts and his *in situ* findings, he drew up a memorandum which he submitted to the National Assembly Commission in June 1908, followed the next year by a text published in his book *Das Kolonat in Görz und Gradisca, in Istrien in Dalmatien und in Tirol*, in which he specifically dealt with the Friulian and Slovene parts of the County.<sup>88</sup> He pointed to the poor living conditions

84 "Zveza slovenskih kolonov," *Gorica*, January 26, 1909, 2.

85 "Odborove seje ‚Zveze slov. kolonov,“ *Primorski list*, October 10, 1912, 3, 4.

86 "Dolžnost slovenskih kolonov," *Primorski list*, January 18, 1912, 1.

87 Elisabeth Lebensaft, "Schullern zu Schratzenhofen Hermann von," in Peter Csendes (ed.), *Österreichisches biographisches Lexikon: 1815–1950* (Wien: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), 331, 332.

88 Hermann Schullern, *Das Kolonat in Görz und Gradisca, in Istrien, in Dalmatien und in Tirol: dargestellt auf Grund einer im Auftrage des k. k. Ackerbauministeriums im Frühling 1908 vorgenommenen Bereitung diser Länder* (Wien: K. K. Hof und Staatsdruckerei, 1908), 4–15.



the colonate families, especially in the swampy, flat areas of the County, and to the frequent mistreatment of tenants by landlords.<sup>89</sup> The report was the basis for further action on the matter. In early 1909, Faidutti also presented the problem to Emperor Franz Joseph at a reception who gave his approval for the issue to be resolved.<sup>90</sup> In the following years, legislation was gradually drafted with the participation of the provincial and state authorities. The first draft was prepared in mid-1909 by the Ministry of Agriculture, with the participation of Gorizia's members of the National Assembly, but the process dragged on for another five years, greatly influenced by the balance of political power in Gorizia and Gradisca, where the Italian Liberal camp played a dominant role, refusing to change the law because of its collaboration with the landlords.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, those opposed to the change – especially the landowners, who feared that they would lose their privileges and economic power – campaigned, lobbied and blocked these efforts.<sup>92</sup> The changes were slow, and even in April 1911, an unnamed *Soča* correspondent could only paraphrase authors who had raised the issue in previous years. “The worst sign of the agricultural situation in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca is the colonia system.”<sup>93</sup> The breakthrough only came in 1913, when the political cards in Gorizia and Gradisca were reshuffled. After the elections, a new provincial government was formed, with the Italian Christian Socialists in the strongest position, which accelerated the drafting of the law. It was drafted and adopted at the end of May 1914, with the help of the government departments.<sup>94</sup> It did not abolish the colonate system, but it provided a number of measures to make life easier for colonate families. The emphasis was on preventing landowners from abusing the system. It regulated the rights and duties of both parties involved. It provided for the supervision of colonate contracts, which were fixed at six years (a motion proposing nine years was defeated) and had to be in writing. It also provided for greater legal protection for coloni, penalties in cases of abuse, and maximum quantities of produce to be given to landowners in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances.<sup>95</sup> “After the abolition of slavery, this was one of the most humane acts in our County. A colono was in the true sense – a slave of his landlord, who treated him as he pleased. This law, however, arranged a decent relationship between the two human beings.”<sup>96</sup> The Slovene newspapers in Gorizia only noted the passing of the law, but did not elaborate on its content, which was likely due to the events of the summer months leading up to the global conflict.<sup>97</sup> The Law was translated into Slovene and printed in the form of a booklet, which was distributed among the colonate families by the

89 Stres, “Oris kolonata v slovenskem,” 186.

90 Ibid., 188.

91 Ibid., 197.

92 Ibid., 195, 196.

93 “50 let delovanja našega deželnega zbora,” *Soča*, April 11, 1911, 1.

94 “Gesetz vom 24. Mai 1914, wirksam für die gefürstete Grafschaft Görz und Gradisca über den Kolonatsvertrag,” *Gesetze und Verordnungen der Landesbehörden für das österreichisch-illirische Küstenland*, No. 21, 195–202.

95 Stres, “Oris kolonata v slovenskem,” 198–201.

96 Andrej Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci: narodne, kulturne, politične in gospodarske črtice: Knj. II: Od leta 1901 do 1924* (Ljubljana: Tiskarna Slovenija, 1934), 451.

97 “Kolonski zakon,” *Goriški list*, May 28, 1914, 3.

Union of Slovene Coloni, in order to make it easier for the rural environment to get acquainted with the new provisions.<sup>98</sup> It was due to enter into force on 12 November 1915, but its implementation was prevented by the First World War, which began two months after the law passed. Colonate families were hit hard by the war soon after it started, as they struggled to access the basic living necessities because of the high cost and shortages.<sup>99</sup> Many men were conscripted and took part in the fighting, leaving children, women and the elderly to tend the farmlands. The Union of Slovene Coloni also drew attention to the difficult situation in the newspapers, adding appeals for aid and measures to ease the conditions among the worst affected.<sup>100</sup> The military conflict between Austria-Hungary and Italy, which took place in May 1915, finally pushed the solution aside. The area where the colonate system was in force became a battlefield, with opposing sides fighting for more than two years without any significant shifts in the front line. The area was largely destroyed and evacuated.<sup>101</sup>

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## Conclusion

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The colonate system had a profound impact on the social and economic landscape of parts of Gorizia and Gradisca for several centuries. Thousands of people in the Friulian part of the region, the Gorizia Hills and parts of the Vipava Valley were dependent on various, often wealthy, landowners, who in many cases exploited such practices due to poor legislative protection and control. Colonate families were among the poorest people in the County, without real estate and significant assets, and were fully dependent on the conditions imposed by landowners. As a result, they were particularly exposed to economic crises, the lack of education and various diseases. The complexity of such contracts survived the abolition of feudal relations in 1848. As a result of the myriad abuses, many coloni saw their only solution in emigrating and seeking a better life abroad. It was only gradual democratisation, the establishment of political institutions at different levels, and the social shifts of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that spurred both local and state political decision-makers to face up to the problem. The road to a solution was arduous, characterised by pressures, as well as political and ideological tensions. Legislative changes, in the form of a special law on the colonate contract, were only adopted just before the outbreak of the First World War. Due to the ensuing collapse of the state, they did not bring about significant changes in the long term. It should be mentioned that the new legislation did not abolish the relations, but merely regulated them. The colonate system remained in the Gorizia Hills for more than three decades and was only abolished after the Second World War.<sup>102</sup>

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98 "Za kolone," *Goriški list*, December 3, 1914, 3.

99 Robert Devetak, "Prehrana in aprovizacija na Goriškem in Gradiškem ob začetku prve svetovne vojne," *Goriški letnik: zbornik Goriškega muzeja*, No. 39/40 (2016): 134–42.

100 "Gibanje med kolonskim ljudstvom," *Goriški list*, December 24, 1914, 2.

101 Petra Svoljšak, "Gorica, prekleto in sveto mesto med dvema ognjema," *Kronika* 60, No. 1 (2012): 79–94.

102 Stres, "Oris kolonata na Goriškem," 98–106.

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**»VZROK NAŠE REVŠČINE JE KOLONSTVO.«  
KOLONSKI SISTEM NA GORIŠKEM IN GRADIŠKEM  
V OBDOBJU AVSTRO-OGRSKE**

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POVZETEK

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Prispevek obravnava sistem kolonata – eno od posebnih oblik zemljiške odvisnosti, ki se je ohranila še skoraj stoletje po odpravi fevdalnih razmerij leta 1848. V okviru habsburške države je bil razširjen tudi na območju dežele Goriške in Gradiške, predvsem v zahodnih predelih, ki jih je poseljevalo večinoma furlansko prebivalstvo. Šlo je civilnopravno razmerje, za katero je bilo značilno, da so večinoma revne kmečke družine, ki niso imele v lasti nepremičnin, na podlagi pogodbe zakupile zemljišče, hišo ali celotno kmetijo, najpogosteje od plemiških družin ali bogatih kmečkih veleposestnikov. Šlo je za sistem obdelave polj, sadovnjakov in vinogradov v dogovoru med zemljiškimi lastniki in koloni. Sistem je spominjal na tlačanskega in je med koloni prehajal iz roda v rod. Zemljiški lastniki so v številnih primerih najemnike izkoriščali zaradi pomanjkanja zakonodajne zaščite in nadzora. Kolonske družine so bile zaradi tega potisnjene na družbeni rob in v revščino – šlo je za eno od socialno najbolj ogroženih skupin prebivalstva. Družine so živele v slabih in neprimernih razmerah, kar je povzročalo širjenje nalezljivih bolezni in velikokrat prezgodnje smrti. Posledice sistema so pomembno vplivale na lokalne gospodarske in družbene razmere, ki so bile zaznamovane z boleznijo pelagra in množičnim izseljevanjem kolonskega prebivalstva v druge dele države ter v tujino. S pojavom množičnih medijev (časopisja), z demokratizacijo (širitvijo volilne pravice) in vzpostavljanjem dobrodelnih struktur je bila problematika deležna pozornosti širše družbe, ki je od konca 19. stoletja dalje vse pogosteje pozivala politične oblasti, da bi ukinile kolonski sistem. Pot k ureditvi razmer je bila dolga, pogojena z odporom in pritiski zemljiških lastnikov ter s političnimi in ideološkimi trenji. Zakonodajne spremembe – v obliki posebnega zakona o kolonski pogodbi – so bile sprejete šele leta 1914, neposredno pred začetkom prve svetovne vojne, in zaradi razpada države dolgoročno niso dosegle ključnih sprememb. Pri tem lahko poudarimo, da nova zakonodaja ni ukinila razmerja, temveč ga je le regulirala. Kolonski sistem je ostal v Goriških brdih prisoten še več kot tri desetletja in je bil ukinjen šele po drugi svetovni vojni.