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Contested Memories and the Dynamics of Remembrance in Slovenia Related to the Second World War: 1941–present

Abstract: The article illustrates the dynamics of (collective) memory and remembrance related to the Second World War in Slovenia in the period from the beginning of the War to the present. Still today, there is a strong polarization in Slovenian society and especially among political elites about what “really happened,” who was right and who was wrong. During the War, the division arose between two major groups: 1) the members and supporters of the National Liberation Struggle (NLS), the so-called Liberation Front [Osvoobodilna fronta], i.e. the Partisans; 2) those who collaborated with the occupying forces, especially the Slovenian Home Guards [Slovensko domobranstvo], and their supporters. The contribution is framed by the propaganda that was shaped during the War, by the collective memories that were consolidated during the period of Socialist Yugoslavia and the contested memories that emerged after the independence of Slovenia in 1991. All these facilitated and created the divided memory that is even now evident in Slovenia. The historical analysis is based on newspaper articles and other publications published during the war and in the years following the war by both groups. Furthermore, to understand the turn after the independence of Slovenia, the authors also analyze the Interim report of the *Commission of Inquiry into the investigation of post-war massacres, legally questionable trials, and other such irregularities*, which took place in Slovenia between 1993 and 1996. The article raises the question of how to alleviate the bifurcated situation to look forward with more optimism to a more nuanced view of the Second World War. Based on previous research, the authors argue that a “middle voice” approach can—in the long run—lead to a more constructive dialogue in Slovenia.

Keywords: *cultural memory, collective memory, contested memories, Second World War, National Liberation Struggle, Slovenian Home Guards, Slovenia, Yugoslavia*

Introduction

During the Second World War, the Slovenian territory faced four occupation regimes: German, Italian and Hungarian, while a very tiny zone was ceded to the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).¹ In all respects, the war was exceedingly brutal for the Slovenian people. Numerous studies testify to the violent occupation regime under German Nazism, as well as Italian Fascism (Godeša 2012), while less is known about the Hungarian and NDH occupations. Along with significant military losses, the occupation resulted in many civilian casualties, either through deportations to Nazi or Fascist camps, as well as through the burning of villages and reprisals.² As previous studies have shown, the occupiers shared the common goal of annihilating the Slovene nation, differing in terms of the timeframe within which this goal was to be achieved and the methods to be employed (Deželak Barič 2014). The latest estimates on the number of victims of the war and post-war in Slovenia show that during the war, the number of people who lost their lives was 100,133 (Logar, Rendla 2025).³

The war interfered and intersected with people's lives, and decisions taken and the events which occurred were often very complex. The complexity is clearly indicated by the fact that even now there is a strong polarisation in Slovenian society and especially among political elites about what "really happened", who was right and who was wrong. In fact, already during the war, a strong antagonism arose between two major groups. The first group were the members and supporters of the National Liberation Struggle (NLS), the

¹ This article is the result of the research project *Divided Memory and the Collectivisation of Individual Memories in Slovenia between 1941 and 1996* (ARIS J6-60100) and research programmes *Practices of Dispute Resolution between Customary and Written Law in the Area of Present-day Slovenia and Neighbouring Countries* (ARIS P6-0435) and *Slovenian Identity and Cultural Awareness in Linguistic and Ethnic Contact Areas in the Past and Present* (ARIS P6-0372), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

² On occupation and violence in Slovenia during and after the war, see: Ferenc 2006, 2009, 2010; Troha, Čepič 2013; Troha 2014; Luthar, Verginella, Strle 2023.

³ The latest research data on fatalities (dated 1 August 2015) showed that there were 99,931 casualties, of whom 88,480 people were identified, while the identities of 11,451 persons remain unknown. Among them, the largest number of deaths were civilians, 31,121 (31.1%), followed by Partisans, 28,444 (28.5%), and members of collaborationist formations, 15,514 (15.5%). Most of the latter died in extrajudicial killings at the end of the war. According to these data, the total number of Slovenians killed at the end of the war was 13,781, of which the vast majority were members of the Home Guards (11,616), some were Slovenian Chetniks and members of the police forces, and the rest were civilian victims, see: Čepič, Guštin, Troha 2017: 426, 429.

so-called Liberation Front [*Osvobodilna fronta*], i.e. the Partisans. Although the organization was pluralistic since its foundation in April 1941, from February 1943 the Communist Party of Slovenia formally took the leading role. The second group was composed of those who collaborated with the occupying forces, especially the Slovenian Home Guards [*Slovensko domobranstvo*], established in September 1943 by the German administration in the Ljubljana province to fight the Partisans and the Liberation Front. They were formally incorporated into Nazi SS units.

The aim of this article is to analyze the dynamics of (collective) memory and remembrance related to the Second World War in Slovenia in the period from the beginning of the War in Yugoslavia to the present. The contribution focuses on the propaganda that was shaped during the Second World War, the collective memories that were consolidated during the period of Socialist Yugoslavia and the contested memories that emerged after the independence of Slovenia in 1991. The historical analysis is based on newspaper articles and other publications published during the war and in the years following the war by both groups. Furthermore, to understand the turn after the independence of Slovenia, the authors analyze also the *Interim report of the Commission of Inquiry into the investigation of post-war massacres, legally questionable trials and other such irregularities*, which operated in Slovenia between 1993 and 1996.

The Birth of Polarisation: Inter-war Propaganda

The Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation [*Osvobodilna fronta slovenskega naroda*] was founded at the beginning of the war, after the attack on Yugoslavia, on 27 April 1941. After the attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the leadership called for an armed uprising against the occupier—especially Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Most commonly referred to as the Liberation Front, its main task was the organization of armed resistance against the occupier until the final liberation of Slovenia. While being composed of groups of different (political) orientations (among them the Christian Socialists and Slovene Sokols), control was mostly in the hands of the Communist Party. The leading role of the Communist Party was officially confirmed after the Dolomiti agreement in February 1943 between the members and groups of the Liberation Front.⁴

⁴ For details on the Resistance and the Liberation Front, see: Mikuž 1960–1973; Pirjevec, Repe 2008; Mally 2011; Repe 2015; Pirjevec 2020.

On the other hand, the Slovenian Home Guards were officially established after the capitulation of Italy in September 1943. One of the most prominent figures of the Home Guards was general Leon Rupnik, mayor of the city of Ljubljana during the Italian occupation of the region. The group was a collaboration unit, formed under and armed by the Third Reich. They considered collaboration a means of national survival for the Slovenian nation while, at the same time, a means of resistance against communism.⁵

The conflict and the resulting schism have been a recurrent theme in Slovenian historiography. The (also necessary) revision of history in the 1990s began to raise many questions about the activities of the Liberation Front and, in particular, about the role of the Communist Party,⁶ which allegedly planned the takeover of power from the very beginning. Although we do not yet have in-depth studies of inter-war propaganda, studies conducted till now (Gerbajs 2005; Petek 2019; Jakomin Kocjančič 2021) demonstrate a high level of animosity between the two groups, accompanied by intense propaganda through newspapers, brochures, posters, books, etc. Despite some attempts made during the war to reconcile the opposing parties (Godeša 2013), these were not successful.

As noted by Borut Gerbajs, the propaganda of the Liberation Front was mostly devoted to promoting the resistance and persuading people to contribute food, clothing and other goods on a voluntary basis, as well as to join the Partisans themselves (Gerbajs 2005: 26–27). In so doing, they tried to convince the Slovene population that the Liberation Front and the Partisans were the only legitimate force fighting for the benefit of the Slovene nation. Furthermore, while approaching the end of the war, propaganda was directed at Slovenes in occupier or Home Guard units, encouraging them to join the Partisans (Gerbajs 2005: 43–45). The Liberation Front and Partisans were portrayed as “the only way” for the survival of the Slovenian nation. This is also indicated in one of the titles of the first (out of 6) issues of the journal *Osvobodilna fronta*, published by the Liberation Front. The issue was published in November 1941, claiming under the title “The only way!” [*Edina pot!*] that “[w]e Slovenians are therefore confronted with the alternative of life or death.

⁵ The most relevant study related to the activities and role of the Slovenian Home Guards to date is Mlakar 2003.

⁶ The list is long, but to name only some of the most relevant studies, see: Vodušek Starič 1992; Godeša 1995; Dornik Šubelj 1999, 2013. For an analysis of the Slovenian historiography related to the communist seizure of power, see: Bajc 2025.

Either to resist German barbarism and Italian hypocrisy, or to sink into a sleep leading to death and willingly place ourselves in the hands of the robber. There is no third way out.”⁷

On the other hand, the propaganda portrayed occupiers and their collaborators⁸—especially the Home Guards after their official formation in autumn 1943—as “Fascist helpers”, “executioners of the nation” and “traitors to the Slovenian people” (Gerbajc 2005: 69–70). One of the central journals of the Liberation Front in this period was *Ljudska Pravica* [People’s Justice], which began publishing in 1934 as the journal of the Communist Party of Slovenia. Although it was issued only sporadically during the pre-war period, it began to be published regularly—twice a month—in October 1943. In the period when the Communist Party of Slovenia officially took control of the Liberation Front, propaganda became increasingly ideological. What did not change was the central narrative, which saw the Liberation Front as the only saviour of the Slovenian nation and collaborationists and Home Guards as traitors. For instance, on 22 December 1943, *Ljudska pravica* published an article titled “The last hour is ticking for Rupnik and his defenders of Swabians” [*Rupniku in njegovim švabobrancem bje zadnja ura*].¹⁰ Leon Rupnik was portrayed as a “fifth columnist” who “betrayed the interests of the peoples of Yugoslavia long before the break-up of Yugoslavia”. The central motif of the article—and propaganda in general—is precisely the “betrayal” of the Slovenian nation.

⁷ “Slovenci smo torej postavljeni pred alternativo, ali življenje ali smrt. Ali se upreti nemškemu barbarstvu in italijanskemu hinavstvu ali pa se zazibati v smrtno spanje ter se radovoljno izročiti rablju v roke. Tretjega izhoda ni.” Edina pot, *Osvobodilna fronta* (middle of November 1941). All translations are provided by the authors.

⁸ It is important to emphasize that the Home Guards were not the only collaborationist unit in Slovenia. In the period before that, especially in the Littoral—under Italian occupation—the so-called *Vaške straže* [Village Guards] were organized under the *Milizia volontaria anticomunista* [Anti-communist volunteer militia, MVAC]. After the capitulation of Italy, in vast majority the Village Guards joined the Home Guards. It is also necessary to mention the Slovenian Chetniks, while in the German occupation zone the main apparatus of collaboration was the German minority, see: Mlakar 2005.

⁹ “Švabobranci” literally means “defenders of the Swabians”. The imagery was often used in the press of the Liberation Front when referring to the Home Guards, who were described as the defenders of the Germans (“Swabians”), as opposed to the Liberation Front, which defended the Slovenes.

¹⁰ Rupniku in njegovim švabobrancem bje zadnja ura, *Ljudska pravica* (22 December 1943), 121–122.

On the other hand, the Slovene Home Guards grounded their propaganda on the premises that the Liberation Front was actually working against the Slovene nation and that it was a purely communist movement whose main goal was the “Bolshevisation of the Slovene nation” (Črne bukve 1944: 3). This is also the reason why the units were formed, given the need to crush this “communist threat.” The propaganda approach of the Home Guard press was explicit and clear from the very beginning. This is evident, for instance, already from the title and introduction to one of the most well-known propaganda books of the Home Guards—the “Black Books” [Črne bukve], which was published in 1944 and subtitled “About the work of the communist Liberation Front against the Slovene nation” [*O delu komunistične Osvobodilne fronte proti slovenskemu narodu*].¹¹ In the first sentences, the unknown author/s of the Black Books state that:

The present book contains a selection of facts and documents, the purpose of which is to prove irrefutably that the so-called “Slovene National Liberation Movement” or “Liberation Front”, as part of the “Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia”, was and is entirely communist and identical to the “Communist Party of Slovenia”—and after it with the Comintern—with its plans, its aims, i.e. identical to the aims of Soviet imperialism in Europe. [...] All this proves that the real purpose of the Liberation Front was the Bolshevisation of the Slovenian nation—even before the end of the present war. (Črne bukve 1944: 3).¹²

Thus, as we can see, two contested narratives had already emerged during the Second World War. The propaganda of the Liberation Front was crucial in consolidating support for the Partisan movement, as well as influencing the perception of the Partisans as the only true fighters for the Slovene nation. On the other hand, the propaganda of the Slovene Home Guards was

¹¹ Although the first prominent Home Guard book was published already in 1943 under the title “In the name of the L[iberation] F[ront]” [*V znamenju OF*].

¹² “Pričujoča knjiga vsebuje izbor dejstev in dokumentov, katerih namen je neizpodbitno dokazati, da je tako imenovano “slovensko narodno-osvobodilno gibanje” ali “Osvobodilna fronta” kot del “Antifašističnega sveta narodne osvoboditve Jugoslavije” bilo in je docela komunistično ter istovetno s “Komunistično partijo Slovenije”—in po njej s Kominternom—z njenimi načrti, njenimi cilji, torej istovetno s cilji sovjetskega imperIALIZMA v Evropi. [...] Vse to dokazuje, da je dejanski namen Osvobodilne fronte bil boljševizacija slovenskega naroda—še pred koncem sedanje vojne”.

based on discrediting the Liberation Front as a communist threat and aimed at legitimizing its own existence and mobilizing against communist influence. This situation, as we will see, was an early indication of the gradual polarization of opinions and (collective) memory related to the war in Slovenia.

Post-war Narratives: between Collective and Individual Memory

As Tony Judt argues, in 1945 Europe there was “little of which to be proud and much about which to feel embarrassed and more than a little guilty” (Judt 2005: 41). This is why after the Second World War there was a need in each European country to reconstruct the events in the form of a collective memory and narrative that was acceptable for the nation. As a result, each country developed its own “Vichy Syndrome” (Judt 2005: 808). However, as Luisa Passerini notes, what they wanted to remove and forget, had to be replaced by another set of memories (Passerini 2014: 18). Most countries therefore consolidated the new era on the foundations of the liberation struggle and resistance against Fascism and Nazism. In so doing, as Stefan Berger notes, individual countries created a set of narratives that were a combination of accounts of victimhood and stories of heroic resistance. These have gradually pushed narratives of collaboration and other negative aspects of the war and NLS out of the public and into private memory. These suppressed narratives could remain hidden until the 1970s and 1980s (Berger 2010: 122–123). In Eastern Europe, the turning point came only after 1989. In most Eastern European countries, these events were accompanied by a rapid delegitimisation of the former state-supported national narratives. Memories and narratives previously hidden and repressed began to spread rapidly. The process often did not mean the expected pluralisation of memories, but rather a “replacement” of ideologies and collective memories, and thus an uncritical conversion of the previous official narrative (Karge 2010: 137).

The process in Yugoslavia was similar to that in Eastern Europe. The post-war years were marked by a narrative of the heroic NLS, with a desire to conceal the national hatred that had erupted in all its brutality during the Second World War, in the spirit of brotherhood and unity. Events that shone a negative light on the NLS were publicly silenced, since the state-controlled narrative glorified the NLS, making it the foundation of a new Yugoslav identity and a source of state legitimation. In fact, while taking control of power, the Communist party also took control of memory and collective narratives.

The Communist takeover was particularly violent in Slovenia, where, according to the latest estimates, about 15,000 people, mainly members of the

Home Guard (11,616), lost their lives in post-war mass killings. 90% of the killings were extrajudicial, since no legal proceedings had been taken against the victims (Deželak Barič 2014: 34–35). In addition, in the months and years following the war, there were numerous trials of alleged war criminals and collaborators of the occupying forces (see Vodušek Starič 1992; Griesser Pečar 2004; Jeraj, Melik 2015). Slovenian newspapers reported daily on the trials and the crimes of which they were suspected. On the other hand, the newspapers did not report about mass executions, which quickly became the darkest secret of the Slovenian Communist Party and new authorities.

Thus, as Tea Sindbæk states, the “war had also left a difficult, painful and potentially divisive historical legacy to Yugoslav society; the history of these massacres could easily invoke national enmity or reawaken the political divisions of wartime Yugoslavia” (Sindbæk 2012: 7). Narratives that did not conform to the official collective memory were silenced. People were afraid to talk publicly about the crimes and negative aspects of the Partisans and the Liberation Front.¹³ There was no room for the memories of those whose narration was not in line with this “official collective memory”; counter-memories were pushed into the individual sphere and limited to the closed circles of the like-minded. In Slovenia, dating from the period of the Second World War, we can speak of a series of memory narratives, where on one hand, we witness the official collective memory and individual narratives supporting it, and on the other hand, counter-memories and individual memories which were pushed to the margins.

However, where circumstances allowed—especially among Slovenians beyond borders and who had emigrated—the counter-narratives related to the Second World War continued to evolve. Soon after the end of the war, they resumed the narrative that the Home Guards had consolidated during the war; namely, that the Liberation Front was just a tool in the hands of the communists, whose main aim was the seizure of power after the war. For example, the right-wing newspaper *Ameriška domovina* [The American Home], published by the Slovenian community in Cleveland (Ohio, United States), regularly published excerpts from the book “In the name of the L[iberation]F[ront]”. Starting publishing from 22 May 1945, the editors justified this decision as follows:

¹³ For instance the case study of the camp for Italian deportees and prisoners of war in Borovnica (Slovenia), see: Lampe 2021.

Readers will see from this that already in 1942, Catholic circles in Slovenia knew exactly that behind partisanship lies pure communism. In America, many Catholics refused to accept, until very recently, that Tito's partisanship was genuine communism and that the word "Liberation Front" was just a fig-leaf with which to cover up the ugliness of the communist dictatorship. It will also be seen from the book that it was only logical that the people began to fight the partisans and organize self-defense. Therefore, all accusations of treachery are just fabrications of propaganda, which, unfortunately, many in America have fallen for as well.¹⁴

In the following weeks and months, the newspaper continuously published reports on the events in Slovenia. The reports summarized the atrocities allegedly committed by the communists and the new authorities against former collaborators of the occupiers, as well as against civilians. One of the first such news was published on 30 June under the headline "The tragic exodus of Slovenes fleeing the communists" [*Tragičen beg Slovencev pred komunisti*].¹⁵ In the news, the Resistance and Partisans were often portrayed as exclusively communist units, thereby justifying the urgency of the existence of the Home Guards and the National Army, who were fighting the Communists from the very beginning.

Already at that point, the central stumbling blocks were the post-war mass killings in Slovenia and trials against former Nazi collaborators. While the rumours accompanying the events were silenced in Yugoslavia, among Slovenians beyond the border, the executions and trials of anti-Partisan fighters liquidated by the communist authorities were loudly decried. *Ameriška domovina* published its first article on the mass post-war killings as early as 5 July 1944 under the headline "Slovenian national army¹⁶ massacres" [*Pokoli slovenske narodne vojske*] and the subtitle "The English first welcomed our boys with kindness, but then turned them over to the Communists, who then slaughtered most of them" [*Angleži najprej prijazno sprejeli naše fante,*

¹⁴ Odlomki iz knjige: V znamenju Osvobodilne fronte, *Ameriška domovina* (22 May 1945), 2.

¹⁵ Tragičen beg Slovencev pred komunisti, *Ameriška domovina* (30 June 1945), 1.

¹⁶ The "Slovenian National Army" [*Slovenska narodna vojska*] was a short-lived Slovenian counter-revolutionary force during the Second World War. It was established on 21 January 1945 and consisted of Slovenian counter-revolutionary forces—mainly by Home Guards, but also other groups, who were opposing the Communist seizure of power, see: Mlakar 2003: 454–466.

potem pa jih zavratno izročili komunistom, ki so večino poklali].¹⁷ The title itself, therefore, clearly highlighted the responsibility of the British who, after a few weeks in refugee camps in Carinthia, returned the Home Guard troops to Slovenia. Most of them were executed after being returned from the refugee camp in Viktring (slov. *Vetrinji*), which is preserved in the collective memory as one of the largest mass killings of Home Guard soldiers in Slovenia. In the article, they invoked the “betrayal” of the English as follows:

But what is almost more terrible is the fact that the English first received the Slovenian national army with kindness and sent them to the camp at Viktring, and then on 27 May suddenly began to send the men by rail to Jesenice and Prevalje, as well as by truck, and to hand them over to the Communists, who massacred over 3,000 of our boys with machine guns in Jesenice. The fate of the others is unknown, probably the same happened to them.¹⁸

Many other records were published in the press in the following months. In addition, the testimonies and memoirs of survivors were published by Slovenes abroad, e.g. in Buenos Aires (*Zgodbe mučeništva Slovencev* 1949), in the following years.

On the other hand, there was no talk of massacres and Partisan crimes in Slovenia. Predictably, Slovenian newspapers were full of praise for the Liberation Front and the Partisans, who were raised to the status of national heroes. This was particularly characteristic of the articles in *Ljudska Pravica* [People’s Rights]. At the same time, they also published accusations against the most famous and influential collaborators of the occupying power, for example the bishop Gregorij Rožman and Leon Rupnik.¹⁹ Newspapers also reg-

¹⁷ Pokoli slovenske narodne vojske, *Ameriška domovina* (5 July 1945), 1.

¹⁸ “Pa je še skoro strašnejše dejstvo, da so Angleži najprej prijazno sprejeli slovensko narodno vojsko in jo poslali v taborišče pri Vetrinju, potem pa naenkrat začeli 27. maja pošiljati fante po železnici na Jesenice in v Prevalje, pa tudi s kamioni, in jih izročati komunistom, ki so na Jesenicah poklali čez 3000 naših fantov s strojnimi puškami. Usoda drugih ni znana, najbrž se je zgodilo z njimi isto.” Pokoli slovenske narodne vojske, *Ameriška domovina* (5 July 1945), 1.

¹⁹ Krivda škofa dr. Gregorija Rožmana za zverinsko klanje poštenih Slovencev, *Ljudska pravica* (26 May 1945), 3; Belogardistična zverstva po Dolenjski, *Ljudska pravica* (6 June 1945), 5. Rožman and Rupnik were both convicted on 30 August 1946 by a military court in one of the most important political trials after the war. Rupnik was sentenced to execution—which took place on 4 September 1946—while Rožman was sentenced in absentia to forced labour and loss of his civil rights, see: Dolinar 1996; Griesser Pečar, Dolinar 1996.

ularly published the convictions of collaborationists, who thereby received their “deserved punishment.”²⁰ Although the treatment of the returnees from Carinthia, the camps where they were held and the post-war killings were not mentioned in the press, a brief analysis of the articles in *Ljudska pravica* between May and July 1945 shows that accounts of the punishments and treatment of collaborationists were written in such a way as to whip up public opinion against them. The press repeatedly reported that the collaborationists would receive the punishment they deserved and listed numerous crimes committed by collaborators against the Slovenian nation,²¹ and published daily excerpts from public trials.²² The central motive was, of course, justice—that is, that they would receive a just and deserved punishment.

As in other parts of Eastern Europe (Karge 2009), news about post-war killings in Slovenia only began to emerge in the 1980s. However, a few years before, in 1975, the first to speak out publicly—having a strong resonance in Yugoslavia—about the post-war massacres (and thus about the silenced memories of them), was Edvard Kocbek. Kocbek was a Christian socialist and one of the founding members of the Liberation Front. In his book “Fear and Courage” [*Strah in pogum*] published in 1951, he articulated the individual’s doubts about the moral integrity of certain actions taken by the NLS—especially the liquidations of enemies, about which discussion was prohibited in the years after the war. As a result, he was forced to resign from all political functions and withdraw from public life in the 1950s. In 1975, the magazine *Zaliv* [The Gulf] from Trieste, published a small book titled “Edvard Kocbek: A witness of our time” [*Edvard Kocbek: Pričevalec našega časa*], edited by Boris Pahor and Alojz Rebula. Although published outside Yugoslavia, the book had a strong resonance in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, despite having been banned. As a consequence, Kocbek was once again marginalized, and Boris Pahor was denied entry into Yugoslavia for several years (Bajc 2025). Among others, the book featured an interview with Edvard Kocbek where he publicly condemned the post-war killings (Pahor, Rebula 1975: 150), claiming also that he found out about the killings in

²⁰ Izdajalci slovenskega naroda so prejeli zasluženno kazen, *Ljudska pravica* (10 June 1945), 5.

²¹ Odgovornost, *Ljudska pravica* (12 June 1945), 2.

²² Prva javna razprava poti vojnim zločincem v Ljubljani, *Ljudska pravica* (24 June 1945), 3; Za svoje težke zločine nad slovenskim narodom so vojni zločinci prejeli zasluženno kazen, *Ljudska pravica* (26 June 1945), 3.

summer of 1946,²³ when he came back to Slovenia from Belgrade: “I couldn’t believe the news. I began to check the details, but all routes to the truth were hermetically sealed, not even the vast majority of communists knew about it, much less the rest of the citizens” (Pahor, Rebula 1975: 147). According to his words, he became aware of the issue when he started receiving anonymous eye-witness accounts from survivors. At this point, it is worth problematizing his words to a certain extent, although we do not yet have a detailed study regarding this matter. It is difficult to believe that no one knew of the mass killings, after all, the numbers of dead were high and could hardly have remained hidden. What is certain is that rumours about the killings in Slovenia were suppressed and confined to individual accounts—as those mentioned by Kocbek—remaining mostly within families and small circles of people who could be trusted.

A great upsurge of talk about this taboo subject began in the 1980s, with Spomenka Hribar’s essay “Guilt and Sin” [*Krivda in greh*], published in Kocbek’s anthology in 1987. The anthology was published with a three-year delay due to censorship precisely because of this essay (Bajc 2025; Verginella 2019: 197; Godeša 2019: 205–206). In her work, the Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Spomenka Hribar openly problematized the post-war killings, describing them as a terrible crime against the Slovenian nation. She questioned the ethics, morality and justice of what was done, referring to Kocbek’s writings and conversations with his comrades (Hribar 1987). The publication of an essay of this kind was, nevertheless, possible, since at that point, the narrative of the war of liberation gradually began to be abandoned because, as Marta Verginella notes, the “ideological glue” that had bound the peoples of Yugoslavia together had cracked and the victims of Communist violence were gradually placed at the centre of public discourse (Verginella 2019: 191; Rožac Darovec 2016: 893–894).

Personal memories of the war were therefore often in contradiction with the official narrative and consequently limited to the family circle. As Ilana R. Bet-El explains, these were “private words, delivered while fields were tilled or over a family meal, painful personal experiences slowly transmuted into collective, but still largely private memory” (Bet-El 2004: 208–209). Even years after it was forcibly pushed into oblivion, these painful memories were easily brought to the surface (Bet-El 2004: 212). In the

²³ It is, however, important to emphasise that according to some historians, Kocbek knew about the post-war killings since at least September 1945, see: Bajc 2025.

1980s, individual memories thus gradually began to collectivize. With Tito's death, this memory became public. As a result, according to Bet-El, these memories were often distorted, especially in cases of very painful personal or family experiences: "the personal context of the memories, their narrative coherence, was eliminated; all that was left was the pain of the past, and anger at its suppression" (Bet-El 2004: 209). The outburst of personal memories and the emergence of a new narrative, which turned the previous communist interpretation of the war and the narrative of the pure Partisan struggle completely upside down, took place in Slovenia after independence in 1991.²⁴

The Independence of Slovenia—the Pluralisation of the Space of Memory

The dissolution of Yugoslavia "created an entirely new memoryscape in the region" and "radically transformed the way in which each country commemorated the Second World War" (Pavlaković 2020: 12). This often included the rehabilitation of Nazi-fascist collaborators, which is particularly true for Slovenia (Luthar 2017). This has reflected in the emergence of strongly divided and contested narratives, causing an increasing polarisation of politics and society in the field of historical memory.

Historian Luisa Passerini notes that memories can be repressed for a variety of reasons; whether because of trauma, dissonance with the present, individual and collective conflicts, or simply because circumstances do not allow this memory to unfold (Passerini 2014: 16–17). In some cases, these memories may never be disclosed, but sometimes there is a change in circumstances that enable and allow them to be revealed. These circumstances occurred in Slovenia in the 1990s, which facilitated and partly caused these memories to surface. In this spirit, a reconciliation ceremony was held on 8 July 1990 at Kočevski Rog—a symbol of the post-war massacres in Slovenia. Then President of the Republic of Slovenia, Milan Kučan, in the presence of the Archbishop of Ljubljana Alojzij Šuštar, in the spirit of reconciliation, expressed respect for all victims of the Second World War, including those killed in postwar extrajudicial executions. Despite the initial momentum, however, the polarisation of memory was apparently inevitable (Godeša 2016; Vergi-

²⁴ Regarding the revision of memory after 1991 and the issue of "reconciliation" between the proponents of different memory narratives and memory politics, several important contributions have been published in recent years, see: Luthar 2012, 2019a; Rožac Darovec 2016; Pušnik 2019a; Verginella 2019; Godeša 2016, 2018, 2019; Zajc 2019.

nella 2019). The “confession of guilt” by symbolic figures of the previous regime (Milan Kučan)²⁵ was logically followed by the desire of the surviving members of the anti-Partisan camp or their relatives to compensate victims of historical injustices. This opened the door to repressed memories to come to the surface, and people who had been silent for decades about their fate or the fate of their relatives were given the opportunity to talk and seek restitution for historical injustices.

The situation in the 1990s was well described in 1996 by the theologian and historian Jože Dežman:²⁶

The ghosts of history are rising, who, for political-ideological reasons, have been pushed under the carpet of silence and in the past have not had a patriotic right in public memory or in the daily political events. In short, the monopolistic party truth has found a rival, History has been replaced by histories whose holders have different ambitions. Some want to turn losers into winners, others are only interested in financial gain, others seek the most objective truth. (Dežman 1996: 175).²⁷

This led to the gradual collectivisation of individual memories which had been previously hidden and banned from public memory. As a consequence, the memory of the heroism of the NLS was no longer immaculate—on the contrary, some sought to portray it (suitably revisionistic[ally] in character) as exclusively criminal, as was a general tendency in the post-Yugoslav states. One of the leading Slovenian experts on the issue, anthropologist and historian Oto Luthar, summed up the situation with these words: “Instead of the previous balancing of guilt and the reframing of occupation and resis-

²⁵ Milan Kučan was the penultimate president of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia (1986–1989) and was elected president of the Presidency of the Republic of Slovenia in the first free elections in April 1990. He held this position during the Slovenian War of Independence. In 1992, he was elected the first president of independent Slovenia.

²⁶ Jože Dežman was also appointed chairman of the *Commission on Concealed Mass Graves in Slovenia* after its establishment in 2005 and is still holding the position.

²⁷ “Vstajajo duhovi zgodovine, ki so bili zaradi politično-ideoloških razlogov potisnjeni pod preprogo molka in niso imeli domovinske pravice v javnem spominu oz. v dnevno-političnem dogajanju. Skratka, monopolistična partijska resnica je dobila konkurente, Zgodovino so zamenjale zgodovine, katerih nosilci imajo različne ambicije. Nekateri bi radi iz poražencev postali zmagovalci, drugim gre le za rente, nekateri si želijo čimobjektivnejše resnice.”

tance against it into civil war, the revised or sanitised interpretation simply reversed the roles of victims and perpetrators.” (Luthar 2019b: 182).

In order to resolve the historical issues of the crimes and guilt of the communist regime after the Second World War, in 1993 the Slovenian government established the *Commission of Inquiry into the investigation of post-war massacres, legally questionable trials and other such irregularities* (hereinafter: *the Commission of Inquiry*). The Commission was also called *Pučnik’s Commission* after its president, politician and sociologist Jože Pučnik, a prominent dissident in Socialist Yugoslavia. The Commission was made up of a balanced group of individuals with various (political) views; in addition to the president and vice-president, the commission was composed of eight representatives from the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, while another member was added in January 1996. The work of the Commission was far from easy. Although we still do not have an in-depth analysis about its work and operation, it is well known that at the end of their mandate, the Commission of Inquiry had not reached a consensus on the joint report. Its president, Jože Pučnik, stated that the report was entitled “interim” because “the commission failed to complete all the work for which it was established, namely the one that includes legally questionable processes and other such irregularities” (*Poročevalec*, 17. 10. 1996).²⁸ We also learn from the report that the Commission did not reach a consensus nor come to an agreement on Part I of the report, especially on the key findings of the investigation and the proposed conclusions. As a consequence, a minority of the Commission adopted and published a separate opinion. What we can understand from the final conclusions of both opinions is that the members of the Commission disagreed on two central issues: (1) the need for the prosecution of those responsible for the crimes and mass-killings that took place at the end of the Second World War; (2) the role and position of the NLS in the collective memory of an independent Slovenia.

In fact, in its conclusion—“Proposal for resolutions” [*Predlog skle-pov*],—the majority of the Commission (6 members) condemned the mass post-war killings and attributed legal and moral responsibility to the previous authorities: “the legal and moral responsibility for the post-war mass killings, especially of returned Home Guard soldiers, falls on the previous authorities

²⁸ “[...] ker komisija ni uspela dokončati vsega dela za kar je bila ustanovljena, in sicer tiste-ga, ki obsega pravno dvomljive procese in druge tovrstne nepravilnosti”. The report was published also as a book in 2010, see: Jančar, Letnar Čerňič 2010.

and their state-law predecessors” (*Poročevalec*, 17. 10. 1996, 9).²⁹ They did not suggest the prosecution of those responsible for the crimes, but instead invited “all citizens of the Republic of Slovenia to remember the tragic acts and divisions during the Second World War in Slovenia and their consequences after the war as cruel historical facts, the use and abuse of which must not cause new divisions, antagonisms and hatreds”. However, it also emphasized the “unequivocal and historically and internationally politically recognized role of the NLS in national liberation and the building of Slovenian statehood” (*Poročevalec*, 17. 10. 1996, 9).³⁰ The majority of the commission thus did not question the moral victors of the war, i.e. the NLS. Despite its condemnation of the post-war killings, it recognized the NLS as the moral foundation of Slovenian statehood and nationhood.

On the other hand, the minority of the Commission (5 members) strongly recommended criminal prosecution, especially in the last two paragraphs of the separate opinion:

VIII.

[...]

5) The Republic of Slovenia is a state governed by the rule of law and has a duty to investigate and clarify this tragic chapter in our national history. It is also obliged, for reasons of culture and respect, to give proper burial to the remains of the victims of mass killings and to redress the injustice as much as is still possible today.

6) Due to its international legal obligations, the State of the Republic of Slovenia is obliged to clarify, through the legal authorities, which categories of war crimes the post-war killings of captured soldiers and civilians in Slovenia fall under and to take criminal legal action. (*Poročevalec*, 17. 10. 1996, 12).³¹

²⁹ “[...] pravno in moralno odgovornost za izvršene poveljne množične poboje, posebej vrnenjenih domobrancev, nosi prejšnja oblast in njena državno-pravna predhodnica.”

³⁰ “[...] nedvoumno in zgodovinsko ter mednarodno politično ovrednoteno vlogo NOB za narodno osvoboditev in graditev slovenske državnosti.”

³¹ “5) Republika Slovenija je pravna država, zato je dolžna odkrivati in razčistiti to tragično poglavje nacionalne zgodovine. Prav tako in tudi iz razloga kulture in pietete je dolžna primerno pokopati ostanke žrtev množičnih pobojev in popraviti krivice, kolikor je danes to še mogoče.

6) Zaradi mednarodno pravnih obveznosti je država Republika Slovenija dolžna preko sodnih oblasti natančneje precizirati, v katere kategorije vojnih zločinov spadajo poveljni poboji ujetih vojakov in civilistov na Slovenskem in kazensko pravno ukrepati.”

Moreover, in no part of its separate opinion did it acknowledge the role of the NLS in the collective memory of the newly formed Slovenian state. The emergence of separate opinions was in fact a mirror of a society trying to come to terms with its past and to create the foundations of a new independent state. The central question was, on what foundations should the new state build its identity?³²

In the same year, the *Redress of Injustices Act* was adopted (Official Gazette 59/96, 25 October 1996), and a year later the Slovenian Government established the *Commission of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for the Implementation of the Redress of Injustices Act*. Furthermore, in 2005, the government established the *Commission on Concealed Mass Graves in Slovenia*, with the main task to record larger cemeteries and areas of massacres during and after the Second World War. This new situation and the raising of a new collective memory, on the other hand, caused a re-examination of the crimes of anti-Partisan formations from some successors of the Partisan movement.³³

Alongside the fundamental belief that the past must be investigated and injustices redressed, there was also the question of what positive legacy has the NLS actually left behind? Indeed, with a highly revisionist interpretation of the Second World War, the emergence of a new collective memory that competed with the previous one took over the legacy of the Second World War and portrayed the NLS as nothing more than a tool in the hands of the Communist Party, which had been plotting a communist revolution from the very beginning.

Conclusion: Slovenia Towards Multidirectional Memory Traditions

As we have seen, during the Second World War, hotly contested narratives developed as a result of propaganda by both the NLS and the collaborationists—especially the Home Guards. After the war, events that shone a negative light on the NLS were publicly silenced, since the state-controlled narrative of socialist Yugoslavia glorified the NLS, and the mythicized lib-

³² Regarding the struggle for memory and the rule of media in the period after 1991, see: Pušnik 2019b.

³³ For instance, in 1995 Silvo Grgič published the first of three extensive books entitled “Crimes committed by the occupier’s collaborators” [*Zločini okupatorjevih sodelavcev*], focusing especially on the crimes committed by collaborationists against the Partisans, see: Grgič 1995. The following two books were published in 1997 and 2002.

eration struggle became the foundation of a new Yugoslav identity and a source of state legitimation. Anything contrary to this ideal was hostile and dangerous to the state. There was no room for the memories of those whose narration was not in line with this official collective memory. However, as we have seen, where circumstances allowed—especially among Slovenians beyond borders and further abroad—the counter-narrative was maintained in the years after the war. This only intensified the dynamics of these memories at the time when circumstances allowed them to become part of the public discourse in Yugoslavia and Slovenia as well. After the democratisation of the political space and thus the space of memory, these previously silenced individual memories were collectivized. This situation led to division in public discourse and the emergence of two diametrically opposed collective memories and contested narratives.

Slovenia is of course not the only former Yugoslav Republic facing this situation. Generally speaking, the countries of the former Yugoslavia have become the site of several revisionist interpretations of history, frequently abused for political purposes, especially during pre-election periods.³⁴ Although, as Pavlaković rightly observes, “Slovenia and Montenegro exhibit more continuity in the commemoration of the Second World War” (Pavlaković 2020: 14–15) especially in comparison to Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the polarisation of memory has been becoming more and more evident in Slovenia as well. In fact, the contested memories result from different interpretations of the Second World War and still continue to divide the Slovenian political, cultural and social space.

The emergence of new media and social networks which allow for a rapid flow of information and, above all, an incomparably greater participation of individuals in discussions on the common past, does not make this situation any easier. Recent research has revealed a strong polarisation in the debate around the central Slovenian day of remembrance related to the Second World War—the Day of Resistance against the Occupier—which is celebrated on 27 April as a commemoration of the day on which the Liberation Front was founded. The study shows that comments on social media (Twitter/X), exhibit higher levels of antagonism in comparison to online news articles,

³⁴ In former Yugoslav Republics, the situation has become so delicate that in 2020 historians (and other scholars) from the region have issued the Declaration “Defend History”, in order to “stand up in defence of history and do everything in our power to stop its abuse”, see: *Odbranimo istoriju* 2020.

which feature “more centralized and ideologically stable narratives” (Horvat et al 2025: 22). Furthermore, the authors argue that “[s]ocial media [...] not only permits but arguably encourages an ongoing fragmentation of historical interpretation, whereby personal experiences and narrower group perspectives supplant community-validated narratives.” (Horvat et al 2025: 25).

Consequently, Slovenia remains trapped in a “competitive victimhood” that blocks the path towards dialogic memory and remembering. As Aleida Assmann argues, there is a need to create models in society to deal with the (traumatic) past, where social groups have to “mutually acknowledg[e] their own guilt and empathy with the suffering they have inflicted on others” (Assmann 2010: 19). In present Slovenia, society faces a challenge on how to respond to Michael Rothberg’s call for a more interconnected way of thinking about memory that avoids the pitfalls of exclusivity and competition. Multidirectional memory opposes the idea of competitive memory, in which memories fight for dominance (Rothberg 2009), and encourages “dialogic memory” and “dialogic remembering” (Assmann 2014). However, the situation in Slovenia shows that as “implicated subjects,” both groups and bearers of opposing narratives “help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present” (Rothberg 2019: 1; Rothberg 2023; 2024). The question of who inflicted the greater (sacrificial) damage on whom and who was actually fighting for and who against the Slovenian nation is constantly being raised. And this is a legacy that Second World War propaganda and post-war memory space have left.

The question remains, what can be done to change this situation, to look forward with more optimism? The first step—from historians—would certainly be to give voice to those who were not allowed to speak their truth after the war. Even though they had been given the chance to speak in the 1990s, especially if they sought to redress the injustices through various legal procedures, they have mainly achieved legal rehabilitation. However, as Dominick LaCapra puts it, the question is “whether historiography in its own way may help not speciously to heal but to come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past” (LaCapra 2014: 42). Slovenian historiography in general seems to be avoiding the topic, especially the long-term consequences for the victims and their families,³⁵ which to some extent continue to perpetuate

³⁵ There are a few exceptions where experts also focus on individual memory and testimonies, especially of families and descendants of the victims. Often, however, such publications are subject of controversy, see: Dežman 2004.

the schism. The historian Jože Možina has, for instance, analysed and researched the schism that emerged during the Second World War, based both on archival research and testimonies (Možina 2019). His book has achieved great success and undergone several reprints but has been subject to debate and controversy from the very beginning. These are linked especially to the author's profile, as he is known for his selective choice of witnesses—mainly anti-communist—and the “manipulative use of oral testimonies” during his television series “Witnesses” [*Pričevalci*] (Verginella 2023: 425). In addition to that, other historians also criticise him for his regular omission of the controversial role of the Church and the anti-communist militias during the war (Verginella 2023: 424–426). This, of course, deepens the split between the seemingly two options for historians in Slovenia and especially continues to perpetuate the schism. The situation only serves to justify the constant, unproductive competition between the two opposing memory narratives.

Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting some good examples that can serve as a reference for future research. Luthar, Verginella and Strle (2023) have very successfully combined a classical historiographical archival research and oral history during their extensive study on internments of Slovenian civilians in Italian Fascist camps during the Second World War. A similar approach was applied by other authors (Rožac Darovec 2012) and by one of the authors of this article in her research focused on the families of former Italian prisoners of war in Yugoslavia. Lampe applied a “middle-voice” methodology and realized that this had a positive effect on the families and testimonies she has been working with (Lampe 2024). Thus, we strongly believe that this approach can—in the long run—lead to a more constructive dialogue in Slovenia. The final aim, however, should not be to “reconcile” the two parts in classical terms. The final aim should be reconciliation through acknowledgement of the existence of different interpretations of the past and inter-war and post-war events that should not influence the present and especially the future.

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