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*How Not to Constitute a Minority.  
The Slovenians in Austrian Styria  
at the End of World War Two*

## 1. Introduction

During the past fifteen years, the issue of the "Slovenians of Austrian Styria" ("Steirische Slovenen" in German and "Slovenci na avstrijskem Štajerskem" in Slovenian) has become an indicator of the political climate between Slovenia and Austria. There is no doubt of the existence of a Slovenian-speaking population in the southern parts of the Austrian Federal Province of Styria, but its will to become officially recognized as a minority is still in question. It is even questionable whether this population forms a homogenous group which could be called "the Slovenians of Austrian Styria". In my opinion, the question of the Slovenians in Austrian Styria is not only one of formal recognition as a national or ethnic minority, but also a projection of well-meaning Austrian and Slovenian intellectuals. In general terms, we might call the "Slovenes of Austrian Styria" a phantasm, and, with respect to the vivid example of the Carinthian Slovenians, a simulacrum. To clarify, there is solid historical, ethnographic, and linguistic evidence to suggest the existence of small groups of people who live on the territory of the Austrian Federal Province of Styria and speak Slovenian vernacular in private,<sup>1</sup> but it is another issue if the various uses of the signifier

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<sup>1</sup> An incomplete survey of recent works since 1989 would comprise: Mirko Križman: *Jezik kot socialni in nacionalni pojav: primerjalno z jezikovnimi odnosi v Radgonskem kotu* [Language as Social and National Concept: Comparative Language Relations in Radgona Corner], Maribor 1989; *Blatten. Ein Dorf an der Grenze*, Johannes Moser and Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch (ed.), Graz 1992; *Slovenci v avstrijski zvezni deželi Štajerski. Zbornik referatov na znanstvenem srečanju v Mariboru, 25.–27. maja 1993*, [Slovenians in the Austrian Federal Province of Styria. Memorandum from scientific meeting in Maribor, May 25–27, 1993], Ljubljana 1994; Christian Promitzer: *Verlorene Brüder : Geschichte der zweisprachigen Region Leutschach in der südlichen Steiermark (19.–20. Jahrhundert)*, (unpublished doctoral dissertation) Graz 1996; *Slowenische Steiermark. Verdrängte Minderheit in Österreichs Südosten*, Christian Stenner (ed.), Vienna-Cologne-Weimar 1997; Mirko Križman: *Jezikovna razmerja : Jezik pragmatike in estetike v obmejnih predelih ob Muri* [The Language Situation, Pragmatics and Aesthetics in the Mura Borderlands]. Maribor 1997; Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik and Christian Promitzer (ed.): *Grenzenlos zweisprachig : Die Erinnerungen des Keuschlersohnes Anton*

'the Slovenians of Austrian Styria' coincide with the actual interests of the signified population.



*Areas with a Slovene population in Austrian Styria*

The reasons for the introduction of such a signifier can be found in the particular situation of this population after World War Two. 'The Slovenians of Austrian Styria' are, on the one hand, the product of the interpretation of the Slovenian national program by the Slovenian Communist Party since 1937,<sup>2</sup> and, on the other hand, of recent multiculturalism.<sup>3</sup> The 'Slovenians of Austrian Styria' were also a modest, and one might be inclined to say, justified response

Šantel (1845–1920) *an seine Kindheit in Leutschach und Jugend in Marburg*. Graz, 2002; Andrea Haberl-Zemljič: *Die Sprache im Dorf lassen : Festhalten und aufgeben der slowenischen Sprache in Radkersburg Umgebung*, Graz-Bad Radkersburg 2004; Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik: *The Hidden Slovene Minority in Soboth (Austrian Styria) : An Example of Assimilation in Borderlands. Times, Places, Passages. Ethnological Approaches to the New Millennium*, Budapest 2004, pp. 135–142; Peter Čede and Dieter Fleck: *Die steirischen Slowenen im Spiegel der amtlichen Volkszählungen*". In: *Europa ethnica*, 2005, No. 3–4, pp. 101–114; Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik: *Eine versteckte Minderheit. Mikrostudie über die Zweisprachigkeit in der steirischen Kleinregion Soboth*, Weitra 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Tone Zorn: *Nova Jugoslavija in vprašanje severne meje 1943–1945 [The New Yugoslavia and Questions of the Northern Border]*. In: *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja*, 1968–1969, No. 1–2, pp. 311–318, esp. p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the activities of Pavlova hiša and the Cultural Association Article VII for Austrian Styria (*Kulturno društvo člen 7 za Avstrijsko Štajersko*) in the neighbourhood of the Radkersburg (Radgona in Slovenian) – cf. <www.pavel.at>.

to German nationalism and National Socialism; the German-Austrian elites perceived the incorporation of the Slovenian part of the old Archduchy of Styria with its centre, the city of Maribor, into the first Yugoslav state in late 1918 as a traumatic event, as 'sundering of Styria' ('Zerreiung der Steiermark' in German) and as a 'bleeding wound'.<sup>4</sup> The 'healing' of the wound called for reintegration, which would have dangerous and racist consequences. The situation reached a climax during the annexation of Slovenian Styria by the Third Reich in 1941 when the continued existence of the Slovene nation was put into question. At the end of the war and the years that followed, Slovenian experts worked out territorial claims vis-à-vis Austria. They were thinking in terms of using Austrian territory as a sort of compensation for the German occupation during the war. In order to justify Yugoslav claims, Slovenian experts had to start from the idea that a Slovenian minority in Austrian Styria existed, as it did in Carinthia. In this paper, I will concentrate on the situation of the Slovenian-speaking population of Austrian Styria in this period and attempts to 'proclaim them a national minority'. First of all, we must examine term 'national minority'.

## 2. National minorities in the Interwar and Early Postwar Periods

The end of World War One led to the division of the multiethnic Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and the creation of nation states or states which were to some extent 'synthetic states': for example, Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). The ideal case, where state territory and (ethnic) nation were in concordance, hardly ever occurred. Large portions of populations that were considered 'ours' in national (ethnic) terms remained beyond new state borders. This was the fate of quite a number of Germans and Hungarians, the big losers of the war. But not even Slovenians, nominally among the winners of the war, found themselves united in the new Yugoslav state. This meant that unrealized national programs often remained an ongoing irritant. Secondly, the principles of the nation state did not anticipate ethnically-mixed territories or ethnic enclaves. Their difference and eccentricity resisted the unambiguous consequences of the new state borders.<sup>5</sup> As a remedy,

<sup>4</sup> Christian Promitzer: *The South Slavs in the Austrian Imagination: Serbs and Slovenes in the Changing View of German Nationalism to National Socialism*. In: *Creating the Other : Ethnic Conflict and Nationalism in Habsburg Central Europe*, New York-Oxford 2003, pp. 183–215, esp. 195; *ibid*, "A Bleeding Wound" : How the Drawing of Borders Effects Local Communities : A Case Study from the Austrian-Slovenian Border in Styria. In: *Nationalising and Denationalising European Border Regions, 1800–2000. Views from Geography and Historiography*, Dordrecht et. al, 1999, pp. 107–130, esp. 120.

<sup>5</sup> *Sprachliche, kulturelle und ethnische Zwischenrume als Zugang zu einer transnationalen Geschichte Europas*, Philipp Ther, idem., *Regionale Bewegungen und Regionalismen in europischen Zwischenrumen seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts.*, Marburg 2003, pp. IX–XXIX.

the term 'national minority' entered the various peace treaties and the regulations of the League of Nations. The kin-states of the minority groups performed the role of protecting powers, while the states that the minorities lived in were compelled to grant them a certain amount of protection and some autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

In many cases, minority protection was not practiced. Minorities faced various forms of discrimination with respect to education, culture, freedom of assembly and expression, communication in their mother tongue with government officials and institutions, adequate representation in political life, etc. These forms of discrimination, that are basically strategies of 'exclusion', were accompanied by various assimilation policies that are strategies of 'inclusion by subordination' applied to members of minority groups willing to be absorbed by the majority population. The institutions that conducted these assimilative policies were police (monitoring loyalty), schools (inseminating majority language and culture), and institutes of social control in general (the civil society of the majority population). This was the most common narrative of the fate of national minorities after World War One.

This narrative is not inaccurate since it does reflect the various violations of minority rights that took place during the interwar period. And yet its major flaw resides in the dichotomy that sets nations and minorities apart, and defines them as essential entities. It neglects the historical and flexible character of manifestations of group consciousness, suggesting that meaning is derived only as a construction of modernity. Namely, nations and national minorities are not preset. They are artificially established.<sup>7</sup>

This dichotomy between nations and national minorities is a result of their treatment by international law and in some ways provides a reflection of the level of knowledge and awareness during the post-World War One era when the laws were drafted. The blunt dichotomy does not adequately reflect findings of more recent cultural studies on identity and ethnic affiliation, nor does it recognise the indifference toward national identity (of so-called *sujets mixtes*), or the fact that national affiliation and linguistic affiliation are not always in agreement.<sup>8</sup> Cases when a minority group does not show a will to be politically recognized as such are not represented within this dichotomous scheme. These are minority groups that would prefer to stay hidden from the public and whose members overtly claim to belong to the majority population.<sup>9</sup> History shows,

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<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Ortakovski: *Minorities in the Balkans*. Skopje-Štip 1998, pp. 109–118.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London-New York 1995; Ernest Gellner: *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford 1988.

<sup>8</sup> "Speaking Slovene – Being Slovene. Verbal Codes and Collective Self-Image: Some Correlations between Kanalska dolina and Ziljska dolina". In: *Slovene Studies*, Munich 1988, No. 2, pp. 125–147.

<sup>9</sup> Kristijan Promicer: *(Ne-)vidljivost skrivenih manjina na Balkanu : Neka teorijska zapažanja*. In: *Skrivene manjine na Balkanu*, Beograd 2004, pp. 11–24.

however, that such strategies of self-protection did not necessarily help these populations to evade aggressive policies of assimilation.<sup>10</sup>

The interwar system of international law, which was built on this dichotomy of nations and national minorities, was destroyed during the rule of the Nazis in Europe. The Nazis transformed the ethnic picture in Europe through mass deportations and genocide. Immediately after World War Two, most members of German minorities were expelled from eastern Central Europe and Italians from communist Yugoslavia. Admittedly, a new treatment of ethnic groups, similar to the Soviet model, was introduced in the people's democracies of eastern Central Europe. That this model proved to be selective, however, can be seen in the suppression of the Albanians in Kosovo and the aggressive policy of assimilation toward Turks in Bulgaria, to just to name only two ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup>

On the western side of the Iron Curtain, the reestablished democracies were reluctant to employ essentially new forms of minority protection. This is especially valid for those states whose minorities had a communist kin-state. Ignoring Finland with its small Russian minority, three states fell into this category: Greece with its Slavic-Macedonian minority, Italy with its Slovenian minority, and Austria with its Slovenian minority.<sup>12</sup> In Greece, the outcome of the Civil War sealed the fate of the Macedonian minority that had sided with the Greek communists. In Austria and Italy, official policies also considered the Slovenian minority groups to be supporters of the communist cause. The displacement and resettlement of Germans and Italians from Yugoslavia likewise did not contribute to a positive climate. However, the negative climate towards Slovenian minority groups was also a direct result of early Cold War power relations and particularly unsettled border issues with Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time – and this is no contradiction – we can observe in the immediate years after the war the increased self-awareness of Slovenian minority groups in Italy and Austria. This has to do with the nature of the communist seizure of power in Yugoslavia which was not a *coup d'état* as was the case in other countries of eastern Central Europe, but instead was the consequence of a popular movement of anti-fascist resistance that – albeit controlled by a Stalinist party and its security police (OZNA) – nevertheless had many followers not only inside the country, but also among the Slovenian populations beyond the borders of the old Yugoslav state. From the Slovenian point of view, the post-

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Promitzer: *Body, Race and the Border : Notes on the Paradigm of German National Thinking about the Slovenians*. In: *Zbornik Janka Pleterškega*, Ljubljana 2003, pp. 597–608.

<sup>11</sup> Wolfgang Höpken: *Muslimische Emigration nach dem Ende der Osmanischen Herrschaft*. In: *Comparativ*, 1996, No. 1, pp. 1–24.

<sup>12</sup> One should also mention the Croatian minority in Austrian Burgenland which was separated from its kin population since the early modern age and the Pomaks in Western Thrace which official Bulgaria considered to be Bulgarian Muslims.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Knight: *Ethnicity and Identity in the Cold War: The Carinthian Border Dispute, 1945–1949*. In: *The International History Review*, June 2000, No. 2, pp. 273–303.

war situation opened a 'window of opportunity': namely, the possibility of realizing the aims of the mid-nineteenth-century Slovenian national program and, if this could not be achieved, at least to guarantee the existence and legal protection of the Slovenian minorities in Austria and Italy. Any success in pressing these goals was to a large degree owed to the fight of the resistance movement.

### 3. The Slovenians of Austrian Styria during the Interwar Period

In the case of the Slovenians of Austrian Styria, however, the window of opportunity was missed. During the interwar period, this group did not respond to the dichotomous scheme of minority protection and opted to remain hidden in order to avoid stigmatization by the majority population and institutions of the Austrian state. I will now demonstrate that in the days and weeks after World War Two, Slovenia and Yugoslavia did not make use of a favourable historical situation in order to constitute such a minority. I will further argue that Yugoslav authorities had an ideologized image of their 'lost brethren' across the border<sup>14</sup> and were not attentive to the group's actual circumstances and way of life. Thus Yugoslav territorial claims were not responded to by the population on behalf of whom the claims were made.

Before going into detail, some general remarks should be made on the ethnic group in question. The Slovenians of Austrian Styria lived (and still do) in three small rural areas close to the border with Yugoslavia (now Slovenia): the Radkersburg Triangle (Radgona in Slovenian), the area south of the small market town of Leutschach (Lučane) in the district of Leibnitz (Lipnica), and the area of Soboth (Sobote) to the west. Until the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy, these three areas fell within the Archduchy of Styria, and their location in the transient area between compact Slovenian and German territorial regions made them subject to interventions of competing German and Slovenian nationalisms. In the struggle for the souls of the people, the German nationalists tended to gain more adherents among the population because of their superior position in education and local politics. Already in this period, the use of the Slovenian language often did not coincide with Slovenian national affiliation. After World War One, these three areas remained in the Austrian Federal Province of Styria despite claims by the first Yugoslav state. The three areas were isolated from each other and there were no mutual contacts, so these population clusters did not form a collective awareness of being Slovenians in Austrian Styria. Nor were there contacts between Yugoslav authorities and the population of these three areas that would have been typical of contacts between a kin-state and its diaspora. During the interwar period, Slovenian intellectuals and institutions did occasionally refer to these areas as lost territory.<sup>15</sup> But we should also quote the

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<sup>14</sup> The first use of this phrase can be found in the March 18, 1907 issue of the newspaper *Domovina*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Promitzer, *Verlorene Brüder*, pp. 274–275.

historian and ethnographer Franjo Baš (1899–1967) who declared in 1936: "Our prewar ethnographic border became our state border. [...] So that, with the exception of Radkersburg, our current border is the approximate ethnographic German-Slovenian and Hungarian-Slovenian border."<sup>16</sup>

In those years, the Slovenian speaking population in Austrian Styria formed three distinct 'hidden' minority groups. They were not present in the public, did not ask for minority rights, and were in the process of being absorbed by the German-speaking majority population. This process accelerated during the Nazi rule of World War Two, though its course was not as smooth as this short description might suggest. I have already mentioned the diverse strategies of exclusion and of inclusion by subordination. The institutions of assimilation used the power of authority, be it the church that abolished Slovenian sermons after World War One or the schools that made German the sole language of instruction, and the interventions of the German national association Deutscher Schulverein Südmark in this effort. Although there was no open manifestation of 'being Slovenian' nor any demands for minority rights, during the mid-twenties police searched out nationalist attitudes in the population and when Austria was annexed to the Third Reich, the Nazis seriously considered the 'ethnic cleansing' of Slovenians from the region along the Yugoslav border.<sup>17</sup>

The Nazis needed to assess the concrete numbers of Slovenian-speakers in the Styrian borderlands. In 1938, a group of students counted 1,588 people who spoke Slovenian in everyday life in the Leutschach area – specifically in the municipalities of Schloßberg (Gradišče in Slovenian) and Glanz (Klanci) – among a population of 3,858.<sup>18</sup> The population was far more cautious in the official census of 1939. That census listed only 445 Slovenian speakers of the 3,089 people with German citizenship in the two municipalities. Similar underestimates might have been made in the Radkersburg Triangle: here the official census of 1939 listed 305 Slovenians in a population of 868 in the five villages that were considered Slovenian: Laafeld (Potrna in Slovenian), Sichelendorf (Žetinci), Dedenitz (Dedonci), Zelting (Zenkovci), and Goritz (Gorica).<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, we have no data about the Soboth area during those years.

<sup>16</sup> Franjo Baš: *Slovenska narodnostna meja na severovzhodu* [Slovenian National Borders to the Southeast]. In: *Naši obmejni problemi. Referati na omladinskem narodno-obrambnem tečaju Družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda v Ljubljani*, Ljubljana 1936, pp. 19–35, esp. p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Promitzer, *Body, Race and the Border*, pp. 604–605.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Library of the University of Graz, II 199.142: *Lebensfragen der Grenzbevölkerung untersucht an der Steirischen Südgrenze. Reichsberufswettkampf der deutschen Studenten*, Kennnummer 967, Gau Steiermark, Vol. 4, Graz, unpubl. manu, 1938/39, pp. 317–318.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Arhiv Inštituta za narodno vprašanje, Ljubljana (AINV) [Archive of the Institute for Ethnic Studies], Zgodovinski arhiv, Severni oddelek: box 53, folder 493 "Sonderzählung der Volkszugehörigkeit und der Muttersprache 1939, Auszählunggebiet Steiermark, Kreis Leibnitz, Kreis Radkersburg, Die Reichsangehörigen ohne Juden nach der Muttersprache"; cf. also Tone Zorn: *Prispevek k ljudskemu štetju 1939. leta na zgornjem Štajerskem*. In: *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje*, 1971, No. 2, pp. 329–335, esp. 332–334.

#### 4. The Role of the Partisans

After the German occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941, the plan for 'ethnically cleansing' the three small Slovenian areas lost its meaning. With the re-conquest of Slovenian Styria, they were no longer situated at the border. Moreover, for the Nazis, the issue of the Slovenian population south of the former border was far more pressing.

This is not the place to discuss the deportation of parts of the Slovenian population from Slovenian Styria and the various other measures of Nazi policy aimed at the extermination of the Slovenian nation. Nor will I go into detail about the formation of the military resistance by the communist-led Liberation Front in Slovenian Styria. Among the partisan units that operated in this region, the Lackov partizanski odred [Lacko Partisan Detachment] would become important for the Slovenian population on the northern side of the former state border with the defunct Yugoslavia. In early 1944, the Lackova četa [Lacko Company] was established and in spring was renamed the Lackov partizanski bataljon [Lacko Partisan Battalion]. The unit was named after Jože Lacko (1894–1942), a Communist peasant activist from the region of Slovenske gorice who died in custody after being tortured by the Gestapo.<sup>20</sup> The Lacko battalion operated around the city of Maribor and Dravsko polje, the western part of Slovenske gorice to the Kozjak mountain range (Poßruck or Remschnigg in German), and the eastern part of the Pohorje mountains close to Maribor. In early summer 1944, the battalion was given the task to concentrate its field of operation in the Kozjak mountain range north of the Drava River. The intent was to expand the northern flank of the Partisan movement between Carinthia and Hungary and to sabotage German communication routes and power supply systems.<sup>21</sup> The former state border between Austria and Yugoslavia ran alongside the Kozjak mountains, the northern rim being ethnically mixed and including the already mentioned areas of Leutschach and Soboth and their Slovenian-speaking populations.

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<sup>20</sup> Milan Ževart: *Lackov odred : Lackova četa, Lackov bataljon, Pohorski – Lackov odred*, 2 vol. Maribor 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Ževart, op. cit., p. 70.





*The role of the partisans (the Lacko Unit – Lackov odred)*

During the weeks that followed, Franc Zalaznik-Leon (1907–1973), a leading activist of the Slovenian Liberation Front, explored the prospective operation zone on what had been the Austrian side of the former border. He came in contact with Slovenian peasants and with a German the priest from Leutschach and tried to persuade them to join the Liberation Front and establish a local committee, but the conspiratorial talks took place in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and proved fruitless. It was the Christian convictions of the Austrian participants that caused their disapproval of the Nazi regime. And, what is more, their sympathies lay with the British; they had no desire to cooperate with Yugoslav Communists.<sup>22</sup> What were the reasons for Zalaznik-Leon's attempt to recruit Slovenians north of the former state border? We know that in February 1944, the Scientific Institute of the Slovenian Liberation Front discussed the future borders of Slovenia and requested the annexation of those territories of Austrian Styria that were inhabited by Slovenians.<sup>23</sup> We did not find evidence, however, of the extent to which Zalaznik-Leon's activities were motivated by the institute.

<sup>22</sup> Franc Zalaznik-Leon: *Dolga in težka pot 1941–1945* [A Long and Difficult Path]. Maribor 1963, pp. 242–259, 300–303, 314–317.

<sup>23</sup> Fran Zwitter: *Priprave znanstvenega Inštituta za reševanje mejnih vprašanj po vojni* [Preparations of the Scientific Institute to Salvage the Postwar Border Questions]. In: *Osvoboditev Slovenije (referati z znanstvenega posvetovanja v Ljubljani 22. in 23. decembra 1975)* [The Liberation of Slovenia], Ljubljana 1977, pp. 258–276, esp. pp. 258, 262, 264–265.

In late September 1944, the Lacko partisan detachment, the main body of the partisans with approximately three hundred fighters, arrived in the Kozjak mountain range. Their job was to escort a small group of Austrian Communist partisans, who were trying to find recruits in the German hinterlands, and to begin to disseminate propaganda among the Austrian population. Zalaznik-Leon's failure to recruit the people of Leutschach, however, influenced their decision to harass only the peasants on the Austrian side of the border and spare the population on the southern and formerly Yugoslav side of the Kozjak mountains.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, this reduced the possibilities of effective propaganda activities and confidence-building among the Slovenian population on the Austrian side. The situation became worse in late autumn 1944. More and more civilians on both sides of the former state border became collateral damage in the heavy fighting between the Nazis and partisans. The partisans hid in the hillside forests and launched sporadic assaults on police stations in the valleys, while the regime police, Gestapo, and SS Wehrmacht controlled the fortified villages and market towns in the valleys from which they launched concerted actions to hunt down partisans.<sup>25</sup>

In early 1945, the partisans were preparing for the situation after the capitulation of the German Wehrmacht. The local Slovenian population on the Austrian side of the former border, who the previous summer had met representatives of the Liberation Front with distrust, was again the object of the organization's calculations. The situation had changed however; back in the summer, the fighting had not yet begun. By early 1945, the population realized that other than the dangerous option of siding with either the partisans or the Nazis, there was only prevarication. What could be done if in the morning partisans arrived at a farmstead, requesting food and asking household members if they had been visited by the Gestapo, and in the afternoon the Gestapo came knocking and asked if they had been visited by the partisans?<sup>26</sup> In the first months of 1945, locals suspected of helping the partisans were arrested. A handful of them were transported to the Dachau concentration camp from where they never returned.<sup>27</sup>

We do not know of propaganda activities used by Lacko detachment to press territorial claims, except that in February 1945 the secretary of the Communist Youth (SKOJ) of the detachment declared that the partisans must not repeat the

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<sup>24</sup> Zalaznik-Leon, op. cit., 318, 322–323.

<sup>25</sup> Archive of the Diocese Graz-Seckau (ADGS), fund "Dechantl. Visitationen, Dekanat Leutschach, Kirchenvisitationen 1900–1955", letter of the priest of Leutschach dated December 31, 1944; Herbert Blatnik: *Zeitzeugen erinnern sich an die Jahre 1938–1945 in der Südweststeiermark*. Eibiswald, 2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 268–311.

<sup>26</sup> ADGS, letter of the priest of Leutschach dated December 3, 1944; Blatnik, op. cit., pp. 353–381.

<sup>27</sup> Zalaznik-Leon, op. cit., p. 470; Arhiv Republike Slovenije (ARS) [National Archives of Slovenia], AS 1856, Lackov odred narodnoosvobodilne vojske in partizanskih odredov Slovenije, 1944–1945, Štab Lackovega odreda, obveščevalni center, status report of January 24, 1945.

mistakes of the Yugoslav troops after World War One who squandered the positive feelings of the local Slovenian population.<sup>28</sup> This warning referred to the fact that the temporary Yugoslav occupation of the Slovenian areas of Austrian Styria from 1918 to 1920 had been notorious for its requisition of cattle and other infringements to the degree that even the local Slovenian population considered the Yugoslav troops occupiers rather than liberators.<sup>29</sup>

A diplomatic step to secure territorial claims at the international level was taken by the Yugoslav government on April 2, 1945. Namely, it demanded the allocation of an occupation zone in Austria that would be made up the Slovenian territories of Austria. In fact, only the Soviet Union allowed Yugoslavia to participate with its troops in the provisional Soviet occupation zone in Austrian Styria.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, activists of the Liberation Front in Slovenian Styria already realized that territorial claims would be unlikely to succeed if they were not supported by the local population. The young men from the Austrian side who had fled into the forests during the last weeks of the war in order to escape recruitment by the Nazis were welcomed among the ranks of the Lacko detachment. Unfortunately, we do not know either the number or identities of these men.<sup>31</sup> A more palpable measure was the establishment at the end of March of three local committees of the Slovenian Liberation Front on the Austrian side. It appears though that even this was conducted in a rash and half-hearted manner. The committees were supposed to prove the legitimacy of the territorial claims on the spot. Two of the three committees were in the municipalities of Leutschach and Glanz, while the location of the third one is unknown (perhaps Schloßberg). Zalaznik-Leon, the activist mentioned above, organized the foundation of the committee in Glanz. In his memoirs, we read that he needed a translator, since not all of the committee members understood Slovenian.<sup>32</sup>

We can assume that the committees were conspiratorial and could not exercise authority during the last days of war while the fighting continued. The three committees were affiliated to the District Committee Maribor-Left Bank (Okrožni odbor Maribor-levi breg) of the Liberation Front. But there were no representatives at the first meeting of the local committees of the district which took place on April 27, 1945 when the annexation of the Slovenian territories on the Austrian side was being discussed. The report of the meeting made only a half-

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<sup>28</sup> Ževart, op. cit., p. 567.

<sup>29</sup> Haberl-Zemljič, op. cit., pp. 73–93; Promitzer, *Verlorene Brüder*, pp. 205–211.

<sup>30</sup> Dušan Biber: *Britansko-jugoslovanski nesporazumi okrog Koroške* [British-Yugoslav Misunderstands around Koroška]. In: *Zgodovinski časopis*, 1978, No. 4, pp. 475–488, esp. pp. 482–483; Janko Pleterski: *Slovenci na avstrijskem Štajerskem in člen 7 pogodbe o Avstriji* [Slovenians in Austrian Styria and Article 7 of the Austrian Treaty]. In: *Avstrija in njeni Slovenci 1945–1976*, Ljubljana 2000, pp. 227–236, esp. 231–232.

<sup>31</sup> Ževart, op. cit., p. 683.

<sup>32</sup> Zalaznik-Leon, op. cit., 481–482.

hearted claim that the people on the Austrian side generally wanted to join Slovenia.<sup>33</sup>

Thereafter we hear nothing more about these local committees. It is not known when, how or why they withered away, but we can assume that they did not manage to rally a sufficient number of people who would lobby to join the new Yugoslav state. If during the next weeks the Slovenian Liberation Front had tried to keep these committees alive, they might have become more than just a passing phenomenon and at least established a platform for the permanent representation of the local Slovenian population. But this was not the case. On the contrary, the way the occupation was conducted in the Leutschach area deterred the Slovenian population from constituting themselves as a distinct minority, still less from expressing a preference to join Yugoslavia. Despite the warnings of the secretary of SKOJ, the mistakes of the Yugoslav occupation after World War One were repeated.

## 5. The Yugoslav Occupation

On May 11, the Lacko detachment commenced the formal occupation of the Leutschach area. When they arrived in Leutschach, they discovered that a commando of the First Bulgarian Army had already taken the little town. The Bulgarians were behaving violently; looting property and raping women. By restoring public order, the partisans of the Lacko detachment won the sympathy of the local population.<sup>34</sup> But on May 13, the Lacko detachment departed and were replaced by a unit of the Fourteenth Shock Division of the Yugoslav Army.<sup>35</sup> A soldier of the Fourteenth Division described the local population as follows:

Possibly some people will be surprised when I say that the majority here are Slovenians. I have been in these areas before as a partisan and therefore I have some knowledge. [...] Truly, German power has put the locals under severe pressure. The majority of them have been defeated for there have been no Slovenian schools or any other cultural institutions in our language. [...] The people are not evil; they are not in the slightest like the Prussians. They still have our Slovenian character, even if they are not able to speak our language anymore. [...] Our aim is to win over the sympathies of these people with our behaviour; in this way, they will grow fond of us, will develop an interest in us, and will learn Slovenian as soon as possible.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> ARS, AS 1741, Okrožni odbor Osvobodilne fronte Maribor 1944–1945, Okrajni Odbor OF Maribor levi breg, status report of April 27; Okrožni odbor OF Maribor, report of May 6, 1945, p. 4; Ževart, op. cit., p. 410.

<sup>34</sup> Ževart, op. cit., p. 402; ADGS, letter of the priest of Leutschach dated December 31, 1945.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ževart, op. cit., p. 402–404.

<sup>36</sup> ARS, AS 1868, Štirinajsta divizija Narodnoosvobodilne vojske in Partizanskih odredov Jugoslavije, 1943–1945, propagandni odsek XIV. div., črtice, razni spomini.

First, we note how the self-assigned stereotype in 'our Slovenian character' contributed to the creation of a simulacrum – the Slovenians of Austrian Styria – and second the fact that the liberator had to imbue the local population with the need to be liberated.

The incarnation of this would-be liberation would be a mysterious person who held civil power for about forty days. This person, Andreas Fišinger, called himself 'commissar' and 'local commander of the militia'. He said that he had been appointed by the civil authorities in Maribor in order to prepare the area of Leutschach for annexation by Yugoslavia. Fišinger was born in Maribor and had been apprenticed in Leutschach some years before. His reign polarized the local population. He was apparently supported by the Yugoslav troops and given executive power over the local gendarmerie. He tried in vain to introduce Slovenian as the official language of the town and prevent the local population from attending church. Fišinger demanded that the Austrian flag only be displayed next to the Yugoslav one. Local chronicles record that during the reign of the commissar, death threats, rapes, and looting took place.<sup>37</sup> On July 1, the Yugoslav troops left the area and were replaced by a Soviet unit that arranged the return of Fišinger to Yugoslavia. On July 24, when the whole of the Austrian Federal Province of Styria became part of the British occupation zone, Soviet troops were replaced by British troops.<sup>38</sup>

The episode of the self-appointed commissar who established a severe local regime in the name of the Yugoslav state would have been comical if it did not reveal such a high level of cynicism. A well-meaning observer might note that the treatment of the area, which was supposed to join Yugoslavia, had nothing more than amateurish and superficial. But in fact, it destroyed any possible sympathy for the Yugoslav cause among the population. Moreover, it was terribly misguided as it attempted to Slovenize a small market town that had always been German. By the end of the commissar's reign, there were virtually no people in the region who supported union with Slovenia. Unlike Carinthia, there was no pressure group, no substrate, no local Slovenian organizations in the area of Leutschach that would lobby for Yugoslav territorial claims.

The situation in the region of Soboth to the west was similar. The population in this area had suffered even more as a result of intense fighting during the last months of war. When the Lacko detachment reached the small market town of Eibiswald (Ivnik in Slovene) on May 10, its local headquarters asked to establish a Slovenian school<sup>39</sup> – a request that was understandable only in the euphoria of victory since the population of the town had always been German and the Slovenian-speaking population in the mountains to the south had never devel-

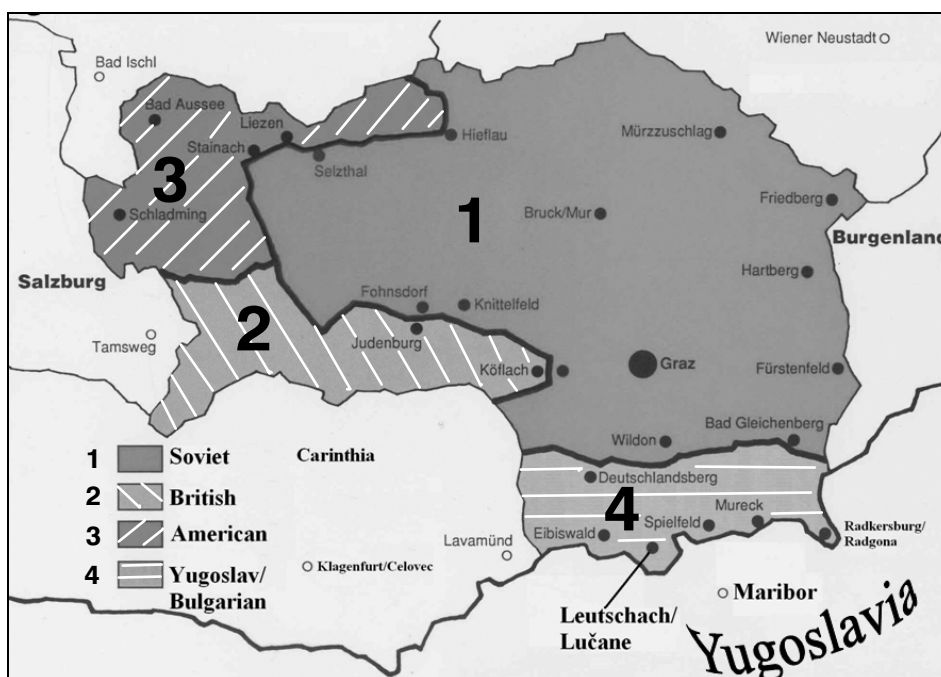
<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Chronik der Gemeinde Glanz*, Glanz, p. 119; *Schulchronik von Leutschach*, Leutschach, 1944/45.; *Steirerblatt*, August 2, 1947, p. 2; *Zeitung der Woche*, June 21, 1952, p. 1; *Kleine Zeitung*, July 4, 1952, p. 7 and July 5, 1952, p. 6; October 17, 1956, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Cf.

<sup>39</sup> Ževart, op. cit., pp. 397–399.

oped a nationalistic sense of being Slovenian. As far as poor behaviour on the part of the Yugoslav, Bulgarian and Soviet troops was concerned, the situation around Eibiswald was similar to the one in Leutschach.<sup>40</sup>

Yugoslav armed forces were also present in the Radkersburg Triangle up until July 1945. During this period the new mayor of the town of Radkersburg championed the annexation of the area to Yugoslavia and, on July 1, 1945, local activists in a meeting in Radenci in Slovenia declared that they wanted to participate in the new federal and democratic Yugoslavia.<sup>41</sup> We can assume, however, that these manifestations reflected above all insecurity about the future of the region or, if serious, were the expression of a small minority. For the majority of the population on the southern border, the trauma of the 'sundering of Styria' was palpable and was part and parcel of the general anti-Slavic sentiment toward the Soviet, Bulgarian and Yugoslav occupiers throughout Austrian Styria.<sup>42</sup>



*Occupation zones in Austrian Styria (9. 5. 1945–2. 7. 1945)*

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Blatnik, op. cit., pp. 426–459.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Haberl-Zemljič, op. cit., pp. 195–196.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Siegfried Beer: "Das sowjetische 'Intermezzo' : Die Russenzeit in der Steiermark. 8. Mai bis 23. Juli 1945". In: Joseph F. Desput (ed.), *Vom Bundestaat zur europäischen Region. Die Steiermark von 1945 bis heute*, Graz 2004, pp. 35–58, esp. pp. 36–37.

## 6. Territorial Claims

Given the behaviour of the partisans and the poor implementation of the Yugoslav occupation, we must also shed some light on how Slovenian experts articulated Yugoslav claims to parts of Austrian Styria. Yugoslavia's position was weak in comparison to its situation after World War One. After the retreat of Yugoslav troops in July 1945, it had no control over the territory that it was claiming. In the period from 1945 to 1948, the British occupation forces in Carinthia looked suspiciously at minority claims as a kind of 'fifth column activity'.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, we can assume that the Slovenian issue coming to the fore in Austrian Styria was against their interests.<sup>44</sup> As a result, Yugoslavia's position in Austria was reduced to that of powerless bystander. When the first Austrian elections for the parliament and the provincial diets were announced for November 25, 1945, the Yugoslav government could only deliver a letter to the Allies (dated November 14) in which they opposed the elections to be held in contested areas since international negotiations should have been held to first determine their affiliation to Yugoslavia or Austria.<sup>45</sup>

In the meantime, the department for border issues of the Slovenian Scientific Institute was working to substantiate Yugoslav territorial claims vis-à-vis Austria. Julij Felaher (1895–1969), the referent for Carinthia, was responsible for overseeing the work, while Franjo Baš, who in 1936 had declared that the state border was almost identical to the ethnographic border, worked on the specific Yugoslav claims to Austrian Styria. In the early summer of 1946, Baš presented his first report which included two maps that were intended to document that the contested territories gravitated towards Slovenian Styria as regards ethnography and transportation lines. He also attached photographs, mostly of ethnographic artefacts, to illustrate his claims. The institute produced several reports in 1946 and 1947, most of them authored by Baš.<sup>46</sup> The institute also intended to publish an anthology on Austrian Styria in order to demonstrate the injustice of the border of St. Germain, a result of the historical retreat of the Slovenian national position to the south and the takeover of property by German capital.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Knight: *Peter Wilkinson and the Carinthian Slovenes*. In: *Zbornik Janka Pleterskega*, pp. 427–42, esp. p. 439; cf. Knight, *Ethnicity and Identity*.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Felix Schneider: *Britische Besatzungs- und Sicherheitspolitik*, Desput (ed.), *Vom Bundesstaat zur europäischen Region*, pp. 60–98, esp. 80–83.

<sup>45</sup> Pleterski, op. cit, p. 233.

<sup>46</sup> AINV, Zgodovinski arhiv : box 1, uprava – korespondenca (oddelka z v.d. direktorjem Lojzetom Udetom) 1946–1947, "korespondenca med Lojzetom Udetom in referentom za Koroško Julijem Felaherjem, June 29, 1946, July 5, 1946, July 15, 1946.; box 2, uprava – korespondenca, (uradi v SFRJ) 1945, 1947, 1950, Izvršni odbor Osvobodilne fronte slovenskega naroda 1946, 1950, 1951, July 24, 1946; box 80, zasebni arhiv Lojzeta Udet, Franjo Baš 1945; AINV Zgodovinski arhiv, Severni oddelek: box 65, folders 630–631; box 71, Štajerska in Pomurje – članki, elaborati, poročila, program za Štajerski zbornik; box 81, folder 405–406; AINV Tekoči arhiv, Franjo Baš, Korektura jugoslovensko-austrijske granice u Štajerskoj.

The anthology was never finished, however, since peace negotiations started earlier than expected.<sup>47</sup>

The material was eventually used in the "Memorandum of the Government of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia on Slovene Carinthia: The Slovenian Border Regions of Styria and the Croats of Burgenland."<sup>48</sup> This memorandum was presented in January 1947 at a meeting of special deputies for the Austrian Treaty. The deputies were appointed by the Council of Foreign Ministers, namely by the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> The Yugoslav delegation justified its territorial claims with Austria's 1941 participation in Nazi aggression against Yugoslavia and its occupation of Yugoslav territory. Aside from the southern part of Carinthia, it claimed the Radkersburg Triangle, a major part of the Leutschach area, and the municipality of Soboth with an area of 130 square kilometres and a population of 6,000 to 10,000 Slovenes.<sup>50</sup>

Yugoslav claims were rejected not only by Austria as the concerned party but also by the Allies.<sup>51</sup> In April 1948, Yugoslavia reduced its claims by one for Soboth.<sup>52</sup> After the break between Stalin and Tito, Yugoslavia also lost Soviet support. In the next round of negotiations, Yugoslavia insisted only on the protection of the south Slav minorities in Austria, including Austrian Styria, and this formed the basis for the August 1949 compromise among the foreign ministers of the Allies. The compromise became part of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955.<sup>53</sup>

The inclusion of Austrian Styria among the territories where the minority protections articulated in the Austrian State Treaty would be applied was a relative success for Yugoslavia, first because Carinthia and its Slovenian minority were much more important for Yugoslavia than Austrian Styria, and, second because throughout the period of peace negotiations, Slovenian experts for the Yugoslav delegation had no access to the contested areas and therefore no real insight into the situation. They had to make use of pre-World War One ethnographic and census data in order to legitimize the Yugoslav claims.

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<sup>47</sup> AINV, Štajerska in Pomurje – članki, elaborati, poročila, program za Štajerski zbornik.

<sup>48</sup> AINV, Zgodovinski arhiv: box 1, uprava – korespondenca (zavodi, ustanove, založbe, uredništva, društva, privatniki) 1945–1948, 1950, korespondenca dr. Jože Vilfan, January 8, 1947.

<sup>49</sup> Gerald Stourzh: *Um Einheit und Freiheit. Staatsvertrag, Neutralität und das Ende der Ost-West-Besatzung Österreichs 1945–1955*. Wien, Köln, Weimar 1998, pp. 63–64.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia on Slovenian Carinthia, the Slovenian frontier areas of Styria, and the Croats of Burgenland, 1947.

<sup>51</sup> Stourzh, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Stourzh, op. cit., p. 135; Feliks J. Bister: *Vprašanje štajerskih Slovencev v avstrijskem časopisju po Drugi svetovni vojni*. In: *Slovenci v avstrijski zvezni deželi Štajerski*, pp. 113–121, esp. 116.

<sup>53</sup> Stourzh, op. cit., pp. 147–148, 155–161; Bister, op. cit., pp. 117–119.



## 7. The Local Population

But did the Yugoslav claims correspond with the will of the population in question? Had this population expressed its wish to unite with communist Yugoslavia? Did they even request minority status and rights?

As noted on several occasions, there is no doubt that the Slovenian language and those who spoke it in public were objects of persecution and targets of linguistic assimilation programmes since the late nineteenth century in the areas of Austrian Styria where the language was present. This was true immediately after World War One, during the interwar period, and in the Nazi era.<sup>54</sup> There was no significant change during the years of British occupation. German national ideology had roots in the local public and public institutions even in the decades before the Third Reich. This situation was simply taken for granted and not even the fall of the Nazis dislodged or altered it. The power structures established by the hegemony of German or German-Austrian ethnic politics, by definition excluded the Slovenian population that might have declared its sympathy for Yugoslavia. As I mentioned, the establishment of real resistance against this policy might have had a chance if the partisan movement had used a different approach with the local population and if the Yugoslav occupation had taken a different course. In the decisive years after July 1945, however, there were no contacts between Yugoslavia as kin-state and the Slovenian minority in Austrian Styria. The beginning of the Cold War and the subsequent closing of the borders by the British occupation forces made it virtually impossible.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, there was no connection between the position of Yugoslavia and the actual will of the population in question. All the same, the Yugoslav position with respect to Austrian Styria survived without such a connection. It relied on features such as language and ethnography (although using outdated sources) and on the principle of territorial compensation for Austrian participation in the aggression of the Third Reich against Yugoslavia. Thus for Yugoslavia, the Slovenians of Austrian Styria became a phantasm of an enslaved ethnic group striving to be liberated from its oppressors. It was the art of Slovenian experts such as Franjo Baš to make connections between an imagined situation and the actual traits of the population in concern (such as the slow passing of the Slovenian vernacular), while ignoring the fact that the population itself expressed no desire to be treated as Slovenians.

With the goodwill of the British occupation forces and the ongoing news of the persecution of non-Communist opposition inside Yugoslavia it was rather easy to strengthen the adverse ideological position of the population. These factors, along with the hegemonic character of local German-Austrian ethnic

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<sup>54</sup> Promitzer, *A Bleeding Wound*; idem, *Body, Race and the Border*.

<sup>55</sup> Schneider, *Britische Besatzungs- und Sicherheitspolitik*, p. 80.

politics, made it more likely that the population, if asked, would declare its loyalty to the Republic of Austria and repudiate Yugoslav demands.

But what was the Austrian policy in the case under consideration? In answering this question, we must keep in mind that the border issue in Styria was secondary vis-à-vis the case of Southern Carinthia. This order of priority was also valid for the negotiators on the Yugoslav side.

On the Austrian side, the strategy was threefold:

1. Austrian politicians, from the Federal Chancellor down, rejected Yugoslav claims and denounced them as illegitimate.<sup>56</sup>

2. Austrian newspapers denied the existence of an autochthonous Slovenian population in Austrian Styria.<sup>57</sup>

3. Local politicians, together with Josef Krainer, member of the Styrian provincial government, organized mass pro-Austria demonstrations in Soboth, Leutschach and Radkersburg in January and February of 1947. In April 1948, when Yugoslavia repeated her claims to the regions around Leutschach and the Radkersburg Triangle, Josef Krainer escorted a delegation from these two regions to the Federal Chancellor in Vienna who declared once again that he rejected all Yugoslav claims. In April 1949, when Samuel Reber, the head of the American delegation at the London Conference, visited the borderlands of Austrian Styria, he was met by massive pro-Austria demonstrations and the mayors of the contested municipalities submitted a memorandum to him in which they asked to remain in Austria.<sup>58</sup>

This strategy of creating reality on the ground worked perfectly. Nevertheless, the local Austrian authorities did not fully believe in their power and behaved as if they had a more effective Yugoslav adversary. What if the Yugoslav propaganda about the Slovenians of Austrian Styria was true? As a result of their uncertainty, they behaved fiercely, as if they had an enemy that had to be defeated at any price. Thus one reads in a local newspaper a description of the population in the Soboth area: "And if this is now the Slovenian territory of [Austrian] Styria, let us have a look at the boys and girls with their blue eyes and their blond mops of hair, their open regards and their unfettered cheerfulness, and tell us if you can see anything Slavic about them."<sup>59</sup> Such evocations indicate a certain insecurity, the existence of which led to paranoid behaviour as the following anecdote about a disobedient district council reveals. In early 1947, when Yugoslavia announced its claims, the provincial government of Styria ordered unanimous resolutions from the district councils in the contested municipalities of Radkersburg and surrounding villages. In Radkersburg itself

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<sup>56</sup> Stourzh, op. cit., pp. 65–67, 69–70, 81, 136; Bister, op. cit., pp. 115–116.

<sup>57</sup> Bister, op. cit., pp. 114–115.

<sup>58</sup> *Chronik der Marktgemeinde Leutschach*, Leutschach, 1947, p. 185; *Steirische Bewährung 1945–1955. Zehn Jahre Aufbau in der Steiermark*, Graz, s. d. [1956], pp. 18–20; Bister, op. cit., pp. 114–116.

<sup>59</sup> Julia Enzi: *Bergheimat Soboth*. In: *Weststeirische Rundschau*, No. 4, January 1, 1947, p. 2.

and in the village of Sichelendorf (Žetinci in Slovenian), the district councils could not reach an agreement about the resolution. The issue was not that they wanted to declare themselves Slovenians, but that some of them owned vineyards on the Yugoslav side of the border and feared losing them if they signed a pro-Austrian resolution. Because of their failure to comply, the district councils of Radkersburg and Sichelendorf were dissolved and replaced by new ones.<sup>60</sup> In this way, the phantasm of the Slovenians of Austrian Styria fused with the compulsive repetition of the old trauma of 'sundering Styria'.

In the area of Leutschach, the head of the elementary school and the priest of Leutschach tried their best to explain to an inquiry commission that the population was almost exclusively German and that there was only an insignificant number of Slovenians all of whom were loyal Austrians.<sup>61</sup> It is not without irony that in a letter to the Bishop in late 1944, when the partisans had become a strong local factor, the very same priest had declared that Leutschach was "predominantly a Slovenian parish" ("*eine vorwiegend sloven[ische] Pfarre*").<sup>62</sup> But in early 1947 panic in Leutschach reached its climax in early 1947. The priest wrote in another letter to the bishop that the people of the town were bracing for the arrival of Yugoslav occupation troops that would come any day now, that the townspeople had stopped working, prostrated themselves before the allied inquiry commissions, and in their desperation sought refuge in drink.<sup>63</sup>

The reason for this desperation was probably not the Yugoslav claims alone but the general insecurity in the region. In 1946 and 1947, the Yugoslav state security service, UDBA, had launched a cross-border operation in the municipality of Schloßberg where they engaged an anti-Communist gang of royalist Yugoslav émigrés (so called Matjaževa vojska) and their ringleader Ferdinand Sernec. Together, British troops and the UDBA (working independently of each other) ended up eliminating most of the gang in the early summer of 1947. Those who survived were convicted in trials in Ljubljana, Maribor, and Graz.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Haberl-Zemljič, op. cit., pp. 207–208.

<sup>61</sup> Provincial Archive of Styria, Graz, fund Archiv des Marktes Leutschach box 3, folder 16, declaration of May 1, 1948; Bister, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>62</sup> ADGS, letter of the priest of Leutschach dated December 31, 1944.

<sup>63</sup> ADGS, fund Leutschach – Pfarre (Neubestand), Verschiedenes, letter of the priest of Leutschach dated June 15, 1947.

<sup>64</sup> Felix Schneider: "Military Security" und "Public Safety". *Zur Arbeit des Kontroll- und Sicherheitsapparates der britischen Besatzungsmacht in der Steiermark 1945–1948*. In: *Österreich unter alliierter Besatzung 1945–1955*, Vienna – Cologne – Weimar 1998, pp. 465–493, esp. 475–478; Rudolf Jefábek: *Zur Tätigkeit von "Partisanen" in Österreich nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*. In: *Österreich im frühen Kalten Krieg 1945–1958*, Vienna – Cologne – Weimar 2000, pp. 137–170, esp. 160–169; Christian Promitzer: *Aus den Archiven der UDBA : Der "heiße" kalte Krieg an der österreichisch-jugoslawischen Grenze*. In: *23. Österreichischer Historikertag Salzburg 2002*, Salzburg, 2003, pp. 297–302; Mateja Čoh: *Ilegalna skupina Ferdinanda Serneca* [The Illegal Gang of Ferdinand Sernec]. In: *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje*, 2004, No. 2–3, pp. 529–546; Martin Premk: *Matjaževa vojska 1945–1950*. Ljubljana 2005, pp. 158–177.

While the fighting went on, both groups, the gang and the UDBA, were in contact with the population of Schloßberg with whom they spoke Slovenian. In March 1947, three Austrian citizens disarmed three members of the Serneč gang and delivered them to the Yugoslav border guards.<sup>65</sup> As late as 1948 and 1949, the UDBA maintained regular contacts with Austrian Slovenians and particular with a peasant who lived in the hillside south of Leutschach.<sup>66</sup> In 1993, the peasant, by then an old man, came to Maribor to attend the first academic conference regarding the Slovenians of Austrian Styria, as living proof that the group existed at all. He was presented and interrogated like an exotic foreigner.

Before he died, I had the chance to talk to him in private. His father had been killed in Dachau because he had aided the partisans of the Lacko detachment. He himself was reluctant to give information about his own activities at the end of World War Two. He only said that he had fled into the woods when the Nazis tried to recruit him (born in 1928, he was seventeen at that time). Although anti-Fascist and a self-declared Slovenian, he and his wife – who was also Austrian Slovenian – decided to bring up their children using only the German language.

This can only make us wonder: is it not a sad paradox of history and symbolic of the whole complex question of Slovenians of Austrian Styria, that in the late nineteen forties Yugoslav UDBA agents had more contact with the local population for the sinister purpose of gathering intelligence than did the Slovenian experts<sup>67</sup> who were busy developing a phantasm: the noble idea of their 'lost brethren' on the other side of the border?

## *Povzetek*

### *Kako ne osnovati etnične manjšine. Slovenci na Štajerskem v Avstriji ob koncu druge svetovne vojne*

Konec druge svetovne vojne in začetek hladne vojne sta pripeljala tudi do novega doumevanja etničnih manjšin v srednji Evropi. To pa zato, ker se je njihov matični narod v nekaterih primerih znašel na drugi strani železne zavese. Kljub ločitvi Jugoslavije od sovjetskega bloka leta 1948 je velik del avstrijskega prebivalstva južnoslovanske manjšine, ki so živele na njihovem ozemlju (Gra-

<sup>65</sup> Cf. fund "bande", "Sernečeva banda", fol. 41; cf. also Premk, op. cit., pp. 163–164.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. AS 1931, fund "bande", folder "analize – bande in ilegalne organizacije 1945–1951", pp. 70, 98.

<sup>67</sup> It would take until 1954 before Lojze Ude (1896–1982), scientific collaborator of the Institute for Ethnic Studies, paid an incognito one-day visit to the areas of Soboth and Leutschach in order to ascertain that the people were still speaking Slovenian. – cf. AINV, Zgodovinski arhiv, Severni oddelek: box 96, folder 658, unit 6.

diščanska in Koroška), še naprej obravnaval kot izpostavo komunizma (Titoizma); to je veljalo še posebej za Slovence na Koroškem. Splošno protikomunistično ozračje je bilo tudi eden izmed razlogov, da se v avstrijski zvezni deželi Štajerski slovenska manjšina nikdar ni osnovala. Kljub temu pa je treba upoštevati, da: 1) je slovensko govoreče prebivalstvo živelo v treh regijah v bližini meje z Jugoslavijo (Radgonski trikotnik/the Radkersburg; območje južno od Lučan/Leutschach v okraju Leibnitz/Lipnica; in na zahodu v regiji Sobote/Soboth); 2) je Jugoslavija v mirovnih pogajanjih v drugi polovici štiridesetih let ta območja zahtevala zase; rezultat tega je bil, da je bila v Avstrijski državni pogodbi Štajerska omenjena kot območje, kjer morajo južnoslovanske manjšine uživati določene pravice.

Ob upoštevanju tega širšega konteksta predstavljam razmere slovensko govorečega prebivalstva ob koncu vojne na območju južno od Lučan. To območje je bilo v precej edinstvenem položaju ne le zaradi tam živečega jezikovno mešanega prebivalstva, temveč tudi zato, ker je ni osvobodila sovjetska vojska, temveč slovenski partizani Lackovega odreda, ki je na tistem območju deloval od sredine leta 1944.

Dogodki, ki so se zgodili na območju južno od Lučan v letih 1944–1945, kažejo na nekonsistentno politiko slovenske Osvobodilne fronte in komunističnega režima do vprašanja Slovencev na avstrijskem Štajerskem. Pripadniki Lackovega odreda so namreč na začetku še hoteli priti v stik z nasprotniki nacističnega režima na avstrijski strani (nekdanje) državne meje, kasneje pa so se odločili, da tja usmerijo svoje zahteve. Pozimi 1944/45 je bilo slovensko prebivalstvo na obeh straneh (nekdanje) državne meje vzdolž gorovja Požbruck-Kozjak žrtev hudih bojov med pripadniki nacističnega režima in partizani. V zadnjih tednih vojne so se celo domači Avstrijci pridružili Lackovemu odredu in na avstrijski strani so se ustanavljali krajevni odbori Osvobodilne fronte. Kdaj in zakaj so izginili, ni znano.

Le nekaj dni po koncu druge svetovne vojne je bil Lackov odred, ki je prevzel vojaško zasedbo tega območja, razpuščen, namesto njega pa so tja prišli druge enote jugoslovanske vojske. Ti pa z lokalnim prebivalstvom niso imeli nobenih izkušenj. Maja in junija 1945, ko je bila avstrijska Štajerska še pod sovjetskim vojaškim nadzorom, je samooklicani komisar v imenu jugoslovanske države vzpostavil strog režim in si prizadeval slovenizirati malo mesto Lučane, ki je bilo od nekdaj nemško. Ko pa je sovjetska vojska Štajersko prepustila britanskim okupacijskim silam, se je komisar vrnil v Jugoslavijo.

Nekonsistentna slovenska politika do vprašanja Slovencev na Štajerskem se je v naslednjih letih še nadaljevala. Slovenski strokovnjaki v jugoslovanski delegaciji, ki je sodelovala pri mirovnih pogajanjih z Avstrijo, niso imeli vpogleda v dejansko situacijo na etnično mešanih območjih, poleg tega pa so za legitimiziranje jugoslovanskih teženj uporabljali zastarele etnografske podatke in popise iz časov pred prvo svetovno vojno. Po drugi strani pa je imela jugoslovanska služba za državno varnost (UDBA) s Slovenci, ki so živeli na avstrijski

strani, precej zarotniške stike. UDBA je v borbi proti slovenskim protikomunističnim skupinam, ki so delovale na območju južno od Lučan, delovala celo podtalno. Nazadnje je leta 1947 mešano avstrijsko prebivalstvo na javnih manifestacijah zavrnilo jugoslovanske zahteve in proglasilo zvestobo Republiki Avstriji.

Kaj je šlo narobe? Zakaj "izgubljeni bratje" z druge strani meje niso želeli, da jih osvobodi "nova" Jugoslavija? Zakaj so se raje odločili za asimilacijo kot za osnivanje etnične manjšine? Preveč enostavno bi bilo trditi, da je bila za to odgovorna le nemška asimilacijska nacionalna politika in nacionalsocializem. Tu je treba spomniti tudi na odgovornost Jugoslavije, ki je v odločilnih trenutkih po koncu vojne le postavljala zahteve, ni pa bila sposobna presoditi situacije, v kateri se je to prebivalstvo dejansko znašlo.