

*Božidar Flajšman, Bojan Balkovec**

Occupation Borders in Bela krajina 1941–1945**

The Italian occupation zone, known as Provincia di Lubiana (the Ljubljana Province), comprised Notranjska, Ljubljana, the bulk of Dolenjska, Bela krajina or the area of the Črnomelj *srez*. Bela krajina was occupied in the spring of 1941.¹ By land, the border ran from Trdinov Vrh (or the Church of St. Gertrude to the mouth of Kamenica) to Kolpa near Božakovo, continuing along the river Kolpa as far as Predgrad. Even before 1941 the Črnomelj *srez* (or Bela krajina) included the then Municipality of Radatovići in Žumberak; consequently, the entire area was in 1941 occupied by the Italians.² With the Italian occupation, the border of the Drava Banovina became the border between Fascist Italy and Ustashe Croatia. The arrival of occupying troops evoked different responses. According to the eyewitness testimony of Marija Starešinič from Preloka, Jože Pokorn, the local parish priest said to the girls:

“Girls, there are uniform-wearing foreigners in Preloka now. If any of you goes dancing with them or socializes with them, you will not be worthy of a single Slovene young man giving you the time of day after the war, you will not be worthy of the Slovene sun to shine upon you.”³

* Dr Božidar Flajšman, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Aškerčeva 2, bozidar.jozef.flajsman@ff.uni-lj.si, Dr Bojan Balkovec, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Aškerčeva 2, bojan.balkovec@ff.uni-lj.si

** This paper was produced in the scope of the national research project *Make This Land German ... Italian ... Hungarian ... Croatian! The Role of Occupation Borders in the Denationalization Policy and Lives of the Slovene Population* (J6-8248), which is financed by the Slovenian Research Agency. Additionally, it contributes to the national research programme Slovene History (P6-0235), which is financed by the Slovenian Research Agency as well.

1 The Italian Army marched through Metlika in a parade on 4 May 1941. Rus, *Kronika mesta Metlike II.*, 15.

2 *Krajevni leksikon Dravske banovine*, 129.

3 An interview with Marija Starešinič, Preloka, 23 September 2017. <https://youtu.be/xuVmLPmkVgw>

In May 1941, unhappy that Bela krajina became part of Italy, individuals began to collect signatures to integrate Bela krajina (the Črnomelj *srez*) into Germany. It is evident from a report written by the Gendarmerie Dolnji Suhor that signatures were collected by 20 people from the villages in the surroundings of Suhor. Along with the inhabitants of the Municipality of Gradac and the Municipality of Semič, they took them to the German headquarters in Brežice between 5 and 8 May 1941, asking the Germans to occupy Bela krajina as soon as possible. This did not happen, even though the Germans assured them that they would come on 10 May, as set out in the aforementioned report.⁴ Anton Stipanič from Bela krajina provided the following explanation as to why people wanted to live under the Germans:

“Everyone was afraid of the Italians because the majority of old people had participated in World War I, they were on the Italian front and did not like Italians. Frankly speaking, if we must be occupied, the German occupier is better than the Italian. Many people worked in Germany, making good money, sending money home, my father being one of them.”⁵

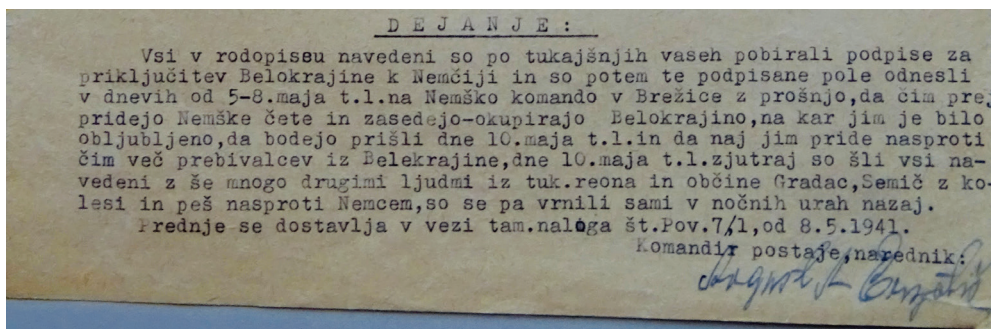


Fig. 1: Petitioning for the integration of Bela krajina into Germany. A detail of the report of the Gendarmerie Dolnji Suhor, no. 79, 12 May 1941, to the leadership of the Črnomelj *srez*.

There were some other complications on account of which the course of the border would differ from that outlined by the highest authorities. The Kotarska *oblast* in Jastrebarsko thus informed the municipality that the NDH Ministry of the Interior integrated it into the NDH (i.e. Independent State of Croatia) due to the wish of its inhabitants and that of the Žumberak Society from Zagreb (riješenje od 25. 4. 1941 br. 483 Pr. M.U.P. 1941)⁶

4 AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 4, Žandarmerijska stanica Dol. Suhor, Br. 79, 12 May 1941, Prijava sreskemu načelstvu Črnomelj.

5 An interview with Anton Stipanič, Ljubljana, 28 August 2017. From 3:15 to 3:53. https://youtu.be/dmSKMLqAF_s

6 SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2. Kotarska oblast u Jastrebarskom, Broj: 623, Pov. -1941. Jastrebarsko, 26 April 1941. Predmet: Radatovići općine pripojenje kotaru Jastrebarskom.

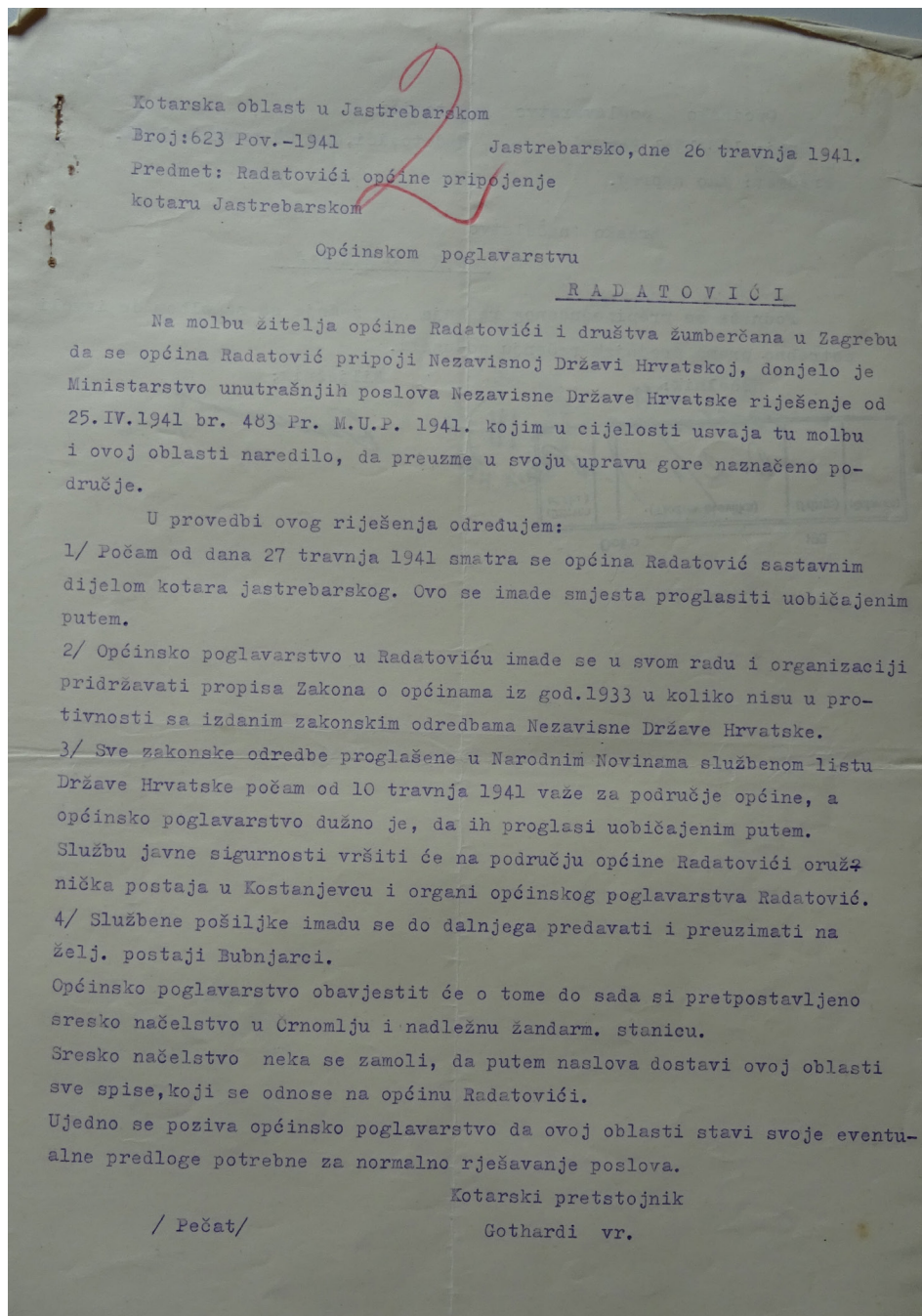


Fig. 2: A letter sent to the Municipality of Radatovići; the Kotarska oblast in Jastrebarsko informs the municipality that the NDH Ministry of the Interior integrated it into the NDH due to the wish of its inhabitants and that of the Žumberak Society from Zagreb.

However, there are no documents in the archives that would attest to this wish. Indeed, as can be seen in other documents and testimonies, the situation was quite the opposite. The Royal Civil Commissioner's Office for the occupied Slovene territory replied in writing to the district governor in Črnomelj on 3 May 1941, maintaining that the occupied territory was proclaimed to be an integral part of the Kingdom of Italy and constituted the Province of Ljubljana. Consequently, the entire Črnomelj *srez* was part of the afore-mentioned province.⁷ It appears that the matter was subsequently concluded, even though there were other complications with the delimitation commission that outlined the border between Italy and the NDH on site. A report produced by the Municipality of Radatovići on 5 November 1941 states that the NDH delimitation commission was in Radatovići on 21 October 1941 for mostly propaganda-related purposes, rather than activities associated with the topography or delimitation of the Kingdom of Italy and the NDH. We can read in the report that they were only interested in the people's frame of mind, such as to find out why a triumphal arch honouring of the High Commissioner in Ljubljana was erected in Radatovići, along with similar issues.⁸ The Croatian claims to Žumberak were also brought up by the Croatian foreign minister Mladen Lorković in his correspondence with the Italian ambassador in Zagreb. Lorković argued that Žumberak was part of Croatia and became part of Italy unjustifiably, with the integration of the occupied territories on 3 May 1941. These claims were refuted by Italian ambassador Raffaello Casertano in his first reply, which maintained that the delimitation line could be changed significantly.

Only small changes would be possible when placing boundary stones. Lorković's long reply contains a summary of Radatovići's historical development in the decades before 1941. He pointed out that in March 1941 arrangements had been made to remove the Municipality of Radatovići from the Črnomelj district and transfer it to that of Jastrebarsko, although this never happened due to the war. Lorković argued that the population of Radatovići were "of exclusively Croatian nationality". He claimed that the village was populated by 1,945 Croats and 36 Slovenes. Along with Radatovići, he mentioned Marindol as well, and on maps this is marked as being part of Italy, while before that it was part of Croatia.⁹ During the war, Marindol was part of occupied Slovenia.

7 SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2. Kr. Civilni komisariat za zasedeno slovensko ozemlje v Ljubljani, I. No.216/1, Ljubljana, 3 May 1941. Radatovići, občina v sestavi sreza Črnomelj. The High Commissariat integrated the Municipality of Radatovići to this province with Regulation No. 21 on 9 May 1941. Glej *Službeni list za Ljubljansko pokrajino*, No. 39, 14 May 1941. Ferenc, *Fašisti brez krinke, dokumenti 1941–42*, 315.

8 SI AS 1790, škatla 3, mapa 1. Občina Radatovići, Broj:1 kom. pov./1941, Radatovići, 5 November 1941. Predmet: referat o dolasku i bivanju u Radatovići hrvatskog povjerenišva iz Zagreba za razgraničenje između Nezavisne države Hrvatske i Kraljevine Italije.

9 The correspondence between Lorković and Casertano was published in *Međunarodni ugovori 1941*, undated, 115–122.

OPĆINA RADATOVIĆI.

BROJ: 1 kom. pov./1941. Radatovići, dne 5. novembra 1941.

Predmet: referat o dolasku i bivanju u Radatovići hrvatskog povjerenstva iz Zagreba za razgraničenje između nezavisne države Hrvatske i kraljevine Italije.

OKRAJNOM U GLAVARSTVU
/ na ruke g. civilnog komesara /

Š R N O M E L J.

Dana 21. oktobra 1941. došla je u ovu općinu komisija za razgraničenje između nezavisne države Hrvatske i kraljevine Italije, koja se sastojala od 12 ljudi. I ako je svrha komisije samo to, da razgleda topografski položaj kraja, ista se pokazala da je došla više radi propagande, nego radi komisije-og posla.

Vidi se iz sljedećeg:

1.) Kada je komisija stigla u Radatoviće, vidjeli su članovi komisije nalazeće se još neodstranjene ~~slavoluci~~ slavoluce, koji su bili postavljani za doček ~~brat~~ visokog komesara iz Ljubljane. Pitali su gđjicu Zoru Heras-ović: " Zašto su ti slavoluci ? ". Ona im je rekla, da je bio ovdje dne 12. oktobra 1941. ~~brat~~ visoki komesar iz Ljubljane, te da je to učinjeno njemu u čast. Zatim su je pitali: " Je li on došao samo radi vojske, i kao Italijani postupaju sa narodom ". Našto im je ona odgovorila, da nije došao samo radi vojske, nego i da se lično upozna sa narodom i potrebama naroda, - a postupak italijanskih okupacijskih vlasti prema narodu, da ne može biti bolji i da dobijemo sve što nam je potrebno, a naročito živežne namirnice kao; rižu, brašno, mast, sapun, ulje, šećer, macarone pa čak i slaninu. Bila im je čudna i nevjerovatna ta stvar, pa su rekli, da to ne dobivaju niti u Rimu, a odakle bi to davali ovom narodu, dodali su: " To vas Italijani sada samo mite, da vas predobiju za sebe, a kasnije ne samo, da vam neće ništa dati, nego će vam i sve oduzeti ". Pitali su je zatim: jeli ona učiteljica ovdje ? Ona im je odgovorila da nije, nego je činovnica / sestra pomoćnica/, prije učiteljica u

Fig. 3: The first page of the report produced by the Municipality of Radatovići about the visit of the NDH delimitation commission in Radatovići on 5 November 1941.

The former partisan Gabre Bogdanović told us the following about the atmosphere among the people in Radatovići at the time: “The fear that the Ustashe would arrive was present [...] they knew that Radatovići supported the National Liberation War, people from Žumberak were the enemies of the NDH”.¹⁰ Another partisan from Žumberak, Janko (Janta) Goleš, from Vukšiči near Radatovići said: “We benefited from the border a great deal. The NDH was not allowed here, they knew – as did we – that an uprising was in store here. We have Orthodox roots.”¹¹ Radatovići, a Slovene village with a Serbian population, was lucky during the war. If it had not been part of Italy, the village would have been faced an Ustashe pogrom.

It can be read in the Italian minutes of a meeting held on 8 April 1942 between the Commander of the XI Army Corps and the High Commissioner of the Province of Ljubljana that a blockade of the Slovene-Croatian border was on the table as well. The High Commissioner said that he had reduced the number of Carabinieri, members of the Royal Financial Guard and of the border police on the German border to improve the control of the Croatian border. Additionally, he had adopted different measures, such as clearing wooded areas along the delimitation line to a width ranging between 100 and 300 metres, added barbed-wire obstacles, ensured that the river Kolpa could not be crossed outside border crossings, and that all boats, including Croatian ones, would be confiscated if caught near the Italian bank.¹²

On the subject of the Italian troops’ arrival in Metlika, Martina (Tinčika) Jug said that at the very onset of the occupation the locals, particularly children, swam in Metlika’s bathing site on Kolpa along with the Italian soldiers and officers, but later they needed border passes to leave Metlika that was encircled with barbed wire.¹³ The map of Metlika surrounded by barbed wire in Fig. 4 was produced on the basis of a sketch made by the partisans.¹⁴ Making use of the Italian plans¹⁵ and remnants of Italian bunkers, the map also features a section of the defence line against the Independent State of Croatia (i.e. NDH). The Italian troops did not install barbed wire along the border river Kolpa, but did protect bridges and other structures along the river. Moreover, while their bunkers were fully encircled with barbed wire, the posts were only encircled in part. On 1 March 1942 the Italian army, Carabinieri, Financial Guard and police had posts in the following settlements in Bela krajina: Radatovići, Radovica, Krmačina, Božakovo, Rosalnice, Metlika, Bušinja Vas, Suhor, Jugorje, Semič, Primostek, Podzemelj, Gradac, Krasinec, Črnomelj, Griblje,

10 An interview with Gabre Bogdanović, Hrast pri Metliki, 29 June 2017. <https://youtu.be/jCP2TTePVvo>

11 An interview with Janko (Janta) Goleš, Vukšiči pod Radatovići, 5 July 2017. <https://youtu.be/B9ejRZckQQU>

12 Ferenc, *Fašisti brez krinke, dokumenti 1941–1942*, 316.

13 An interview with Martina (Tinčika) Jug, Metlika, 19 August 2017. https://youtu.be/szQsP0R_lrM

14 SI AS 1865 Komanda vojne oblasti in komande mest VII. Korpusa, t.e. 211.

15 SI AS 1773, t.e. 773, Poveljstvo 14. pehotne divizije ...

Pobrežje, Adlešiči, Miliči, Žuniči, Preloka, Zilje, Vinica, Dol. Suhor, Učakovci, Sinji Vrh, Damelj, Hrib, Kot, Stari Trg, Dol, Laze, and Predgrad.¹⁶ The majority of them stood along the NDH border. We can read in *Kronika mesta Metlike* that the Italians began to build the Bela krajina section of the border (fortified line) with Croatia in the spring of 1943.¹⁷ Lojze Jože Žabkar, the parish priest in Črnomelj, wrote in his diary on 3 August 1943:

“Metlika – nothing but bunkers, wire, trenches. The Italians are still stretching wire (Rosalnice–Slamna vas). What for, with their empire crumbling? I have fond memories of Metlika – I was a chaplain there six years ago and felt wonderful. However, nothing is the same today.”¹⁸

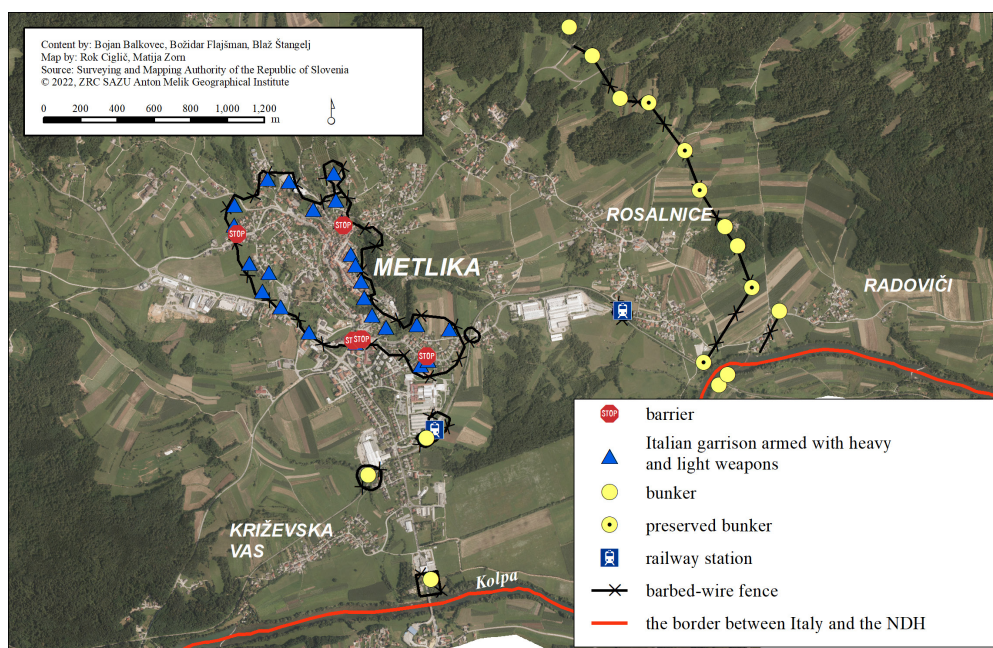


Fig. 4: A map showing the locations of the barbed-wire fence and fortifications in Metlika.

16 Ferenc, *Fašisti brez krinke, dokumenti 1941–1942*, 464.

17 Rus, *Kronika mesta Metlike II.*, 62.

18 Žabkar, *Izpovedi*, 89.



Fig. 5: The Italian Army converted a house next to a bridge across the river Kolpa near Metlika into a bunker. The back of the photograph has the date November 1942.

The border soon began to cause many problems, including economic ones. We can read in a communication dated 16 August 1941, which was produced by the Municipality of Metlika and addressed to the High Commissioner's Office for the Province of Ljubljana, that Croatian landowners who held land adjacent to Slovene-owned vineyards in Croatia made threats to Slovene winegrowers that they would not be allowed to transport their produce across the border. Additionally, they pointed out that many Croatian landowners exported hay, firewood, and so on from their land in Slovenia to the other side, and the local authorities did not cause them any problems. Therefore, they expected the same treatment from the Croatian authorities.¹⁹

The new border also caused smuggling. Ivan and Štefka Špehar from Breg, a hamlet situated between Damelj and Radenci in the Kolpa Valley, said that people smuggled mostly horses and food. Italians patrolled the border, and there was no barbed wire, while the Fascists in Špeharji issued day border passes. After Italy's capitulation, they transported Croatian civilians, holders of border passes issued by the partisans, to Slovenia. They used them to trade salt for maize.²⁰

19 SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2. II comune di Metlika okolica, Občina Metlika okolica, 18 August 1941. Visokemu komisarijatu za Ljubljansko pokrajino v Ljubljani. V tukajšnji občini je 15 posestnikov, ki imajo svoje vinograde prek meje.

20 An interview with Ivan and Štefka Špehar, Breg ob Kolpi, 2 December 2017. <https://youtu.be/XDRfAl2IPcU>

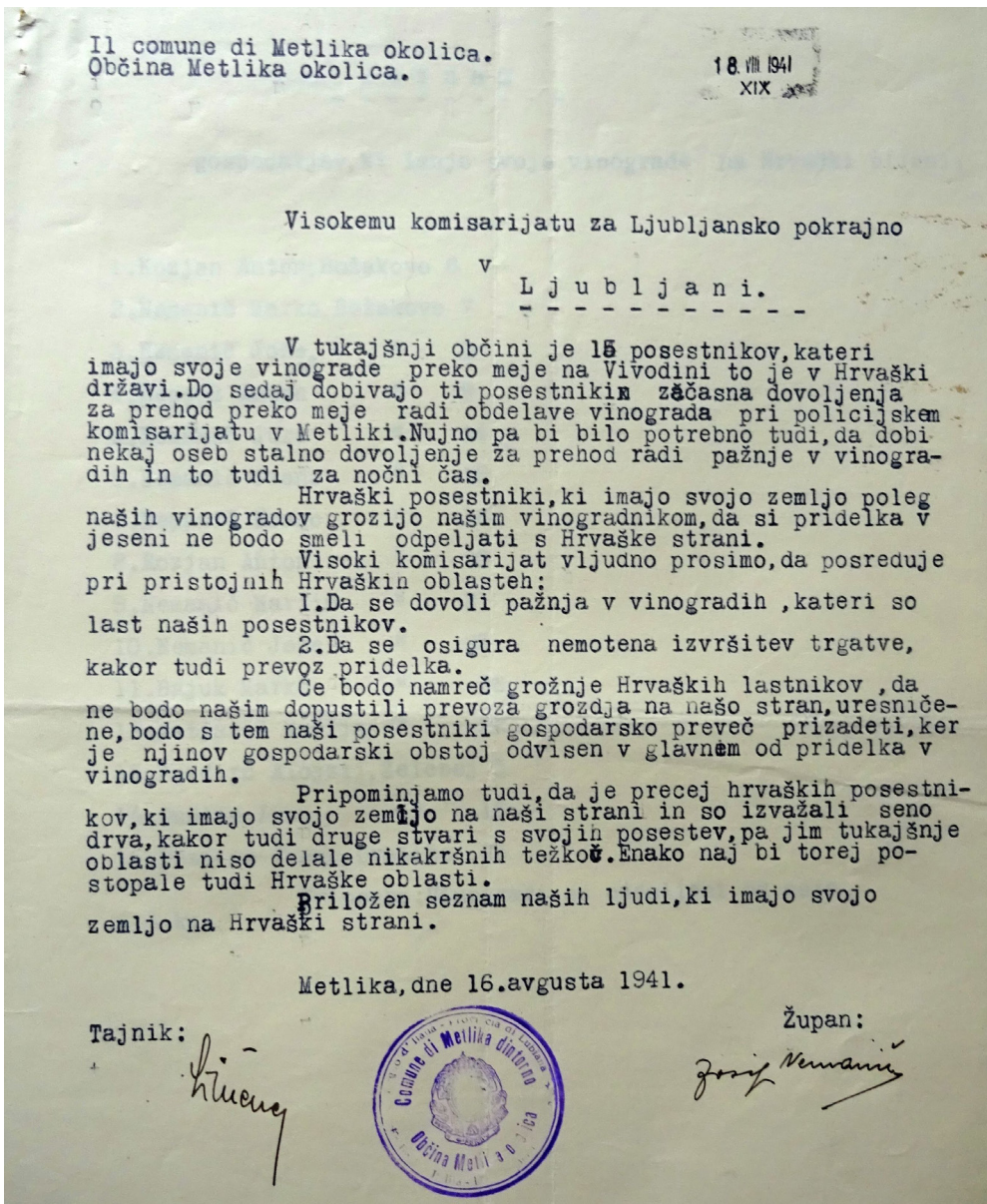


Fig. 6: A letter produced by the Municipality of Metlika describing difficulties that the border caused to winegrowers, dated 16 August 1941.

The following is the eyewitness testimony of Jožef Klepec from Krasinec:

“There were Italian soldiers on guard duty here. The Kolpa flows in a straight line for about a kilometre in both directions, making a slight turn near Griblje [...] A few Croatian citizens transported Jews across the river there. They were said to have been rich and people stole from them. People who took them across Kolpa stole from them. Once they reached the other bank they shouted ‘Italians, run, run’. The Jews jumped out of the boat, and they returned with boatloads of their things back to the Croatian side [...] The Jews had luggage on them, otherwise they had mostly money – gold and gold coins. I remember being in school and my father and mother going to Croatia to buy these gold coins and taking them to the dentist. It was high-quality gold, the entire valley used it to have their teeth done. Jews fled Croatia, I don’t know where they went”.²¹

In the Gorjanci hill range/Žumberak the Italians had a border post in Radatovići and Ostriž. Franc Kočever saw Fascists set Bojanja Vas ablaze on 7 August 1942 because partisans had cut the telephone cable connecting these two border posts.²² Giovanni Cuccu Ivo, an Italian soldier who subsequently joined the partisans, wrote in his memoirs that the post in Radatovići was considered to be a penal post. It had a small garrison and was located in a remote location on a hill, and thus deemed very dangerous. On 4 December 1942 the Italian garrison left Radatovići and five days later Ostriž.²³ Žumberak thus became liberated territory as early as in December 1942, almost a year before Italy’s capitulation. Consequently; this area saw the emergence of many joint Slovene–Croatian partisan field hospitals, and the road between Brezovica and Radatovići was named the Road of Partisan Hospitals, with a commemorative plaque in Brezovica bearing witness to this. Danica Car from Brezovica has an abiding memory of the period. She still keeps a 50 *Reichsmark* note, a present from a wounded German soldier who was a patient of the local partisan field hospitals.²⁴ Anton Stipanič, a partisan from Gradec in Bela krajina, told us the following about the border: “We, partisans, did not acknowledge the border. We did not fight for Slovenia or Croatia, we fought for both of them together, for Yugoslavia.”²⁵

21 An interview with Jožef Klepec, Krasinec, 3 September 2017. https://youtu.be/dio_y0OITPY

22 An interview with Franc Kočever, Bojanja Vas, 9 July 2017. <https://youtu.be/RkzrM-xplPc>

23 Cuccu, *Šestnajst mesecev med slovenskimi partizani*, 42, 54.

24 An interview with Danica Car, Brezovica, 3 August 2017. The recording is kept in the project’s archive.

25 An interview with Anton Stipanič, Ljubljana, 28 August 2017. <https://youtu.be/sRkD51Tf9KQ>

When the partisan movement gained more prominence, the Italians began to shoot hostages,²⁶ burn down villages²⁷ and deport people to concentration camps – first and foremost, to the island of Rab and to Gonars. Several Italian lists of internees are kept in the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia.

The name Darinka (Darka) Šimec (married name Čop) is on one of them, as are the names of women from her family.²⁸ Along with her mother and three sisters, Darka was sent to internment to the camp at Kampo, on the island of Rab, and then to Gonars. When talking about her internment, she told us about an instance when the parents died and the children were on their own, with their skin virtually being eaten away by lice.²⁹ Ivan Starešinič, a partisan and accordionist from Žuniči, said that not a single villager of Žuniče went to an Italian concentration camp. They were lucky – trucks came to the village to take them away, but the Italian commander in Žuniči prevented their deportation.³⁰ According to the eyewitness testimony of Marija Starešinič from Preloka, the same situation happened in Bojanci because of the love between the Italian commander and Zora, a young woman from Bojanci. The Italian commander thus prevented villagers from being taken to internment.³¹ Clearly, the situation varied in different villages.

After Italy's capitulation in September 1943, Bela krajina became liberated territory that began to see an important part of national history unfold. The Main Staff of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Slovenia was stationed here, as was the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front and many other institutions. Up to the end of the war Bela krajina saw only a few sporadic German and Ustashe incursions. The Ustashe and Germans attacked Metlika,³² Vinica³³ and Adlešiči,³⁴ while the Germans bombed Črnomelj³⁵ and Dragatuš.³⁶

26 An interview with Peter Rauh and Milka Mihelič, Predgrad, 24 July 2019. <https://youtu.be/N6g9-YqvzNA>

27 An interview with Franc Kočever, Bojanja Vas, 9 July 2017. <https://youtu.be/RkzrM-xplPc>

28 SI AS, 1790, 2. škatla, 1. mapa, Elenco degli internati dal comune di Črnomelj.

29 An interview with Darinka (Darka) Čop, Črnomelj, 10 March 2018. <https://youtu.be/qDTSr9tPiro>

30 An interview with Ivan Starešinič, Balkovci, 5 June 2018. <https://youtu.be/FlixifP3kYTc>

31 An interview with Marija Starešinič, Črnomelj, 14 August 2018. <https://youtu.be/D3vrenYJBFA>

32 Zveza borcev NOV: *Metlika v plamenih*, 1964.

33 Polič, Belokranjski odred, 557–562; An interview with Ivan and Štefka Špehar, Breg ob Kolpi, 2 December 2017. <https://youtu.be/XDRfAl2IPcU>

34 Dular, *Adlešiči v Beli krajini*, 25, 26.

35 Weiss, *Od daleč je videla kako so padale bombe na mesto. Memento ob 70-letnici bombardiranja Črnomlja 3. oktobra 1943.*

36 Weiss, *Ves Dragatuš trpi, krivi in nekrivi. Memento ob 70-letnici bombardiranja vasi Dragatuš 5. maja 1944.* An interview with Tončka Adam, Dragatuš, 10 September 2017. <https://youtu.be/hHbwTk2T9ZI>



Fig. 7: Adlešiči after the arson committed by the Ustashe.

The brutality of the Ustashe remains etched in the minds of the population living along the border, as seen in the accounts collected as part of this project. When describing the Italians our interviewees also had some good words for them, which is not the case with the Ustashe. Along with the previously mentioned residents of Žumberak, Gabre Bogdanović and Janko Goleša, Marija Koležnik provided eyewitness testimony about the Ustashe. The house where she was born still stands in the proximity of the border crossing in Metlika, immediately next to the main road. She said the following about the Ustashe:

“The Ustashe came to Slovene territory for the first time in November 1943, when it was already liberated. They set fire our and our neighbours’ auxiliary buildings. Ours was on fire, as were those belonging to the Štupar family, the Vrtačič family, the Milčinovič family and to the Milek family in Križevska Vas. They set ablaze only auxiliary buildings. The Ustashe came to our house, lined us against walls and because they were locals from Croatian villagers – my father and my mother knew them well – they demanded that we tell them the whereabouts of my brother because they knew that he had joined the partisans.

We stood against a wall, waiting to be shot. Yes, I remember it all, but I do not remember what my parents said, something about a German officer coming and shouting at the Ustashe to leave us alone. They took our pig, and it was quite well fed. Of course, we put out the fire.”³⁷



Fig. 8: Marija Koležnik on the bridge across the Kolpa near Metlika on 9 February 2019. The house where she was born stands less than 500 metres from this bridge, and near to the present-day border crossing. The house that Italians turned into a bunker during World War II stood at the site of the sign featuring the flag of the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union (see Fig. 5).

Katica Adlešič and Marija Kordež told us about the Ustashe looting and setting fire to Adlešiči.³⁸ Frančiška Tahija recounted how standing on the Croatian side of the river the Ustashe shot at children swimming in the Kolpa.³⁹ It was not on account of the Italian or, subsequently, German control that people did not dare to cross the border, but due to the Ustashe violence. Franc Zepuhar’s account of the situation is as follows: “There was a trader here at Suhor, he crossed the border to buy something. The Ustashe

37 An interview with Marija Koležnik, Metlika, 9 February 2019. https://youtu.be/1LFQUO_aY68

38 An interview with Katica Adlešič and Marija Kordež, Adlešiči, 28 October 2017. <https://youtu.be/07o0UM0hbbY>

39 An interview with Frančiška Tahija, Glavica in the Municipality of Bosiljevo, 5 June 2018. From 6:55 to 7:25. <https://youtu.be/yehSGt7Yvps>

got him and killed him on the spot. People did not dare to cross the border.”⁴⁰ The comparisons between the former occupation border and the modern-day barbed-wire fences on the border with the Republic of Croatia – set up to stop migrants crossing – are self-evident.⁴¹ As Franc Starešinič from Žuniči, a village in Bela krajina situated along the river Kolpa, whose house still features an Italian inscription *Vinceremo*,⁴² said: “The border is more closed now than it was then”.⁴³

Zilje — a case study

Zilje is a hamlet that in early 2019 was populated by 132 inhabitants.⁴⁴ In the 1931 census 241 people were recorded living in 45 houses. Italians arrived in the village at the beginning of World War II, and a house in Dolnje Zilje was turned into a fortified post. Initially, there were a few Fascists in the village, and later mostly members of the Financial Guard.⁴⁵

The post was used by border troops, because the river Kolpa was the border with the NDH. In the autumn of 1942 they were joined by privates.⁴⁶ The residents of a few other houses were forced to leave, and their properties fortified and connected with trenches to expand the post. A bunker was set up in front of it. The former residents had to be taken in by their neighbours.⁴⁷

In the first year of the occupation the Italians did not commit any hostile acts against the local population. Later on, with the growing partisan movement, different forms of reprisals followed. A new measure was introduced, namely the internment of the civilian population. The villagers of Zilje were also sent to camps as well.⁴⁸ The Italian soldiers took

40 An interview with France Zepuhar, Bušinja Vas, 1 August 2017. From 1:50 to 2:07. <https://youtu.be/q99ahOj7QJg>.

41 On a press conference held on 10 November 2015, Miro Cerar, Slovenia's Prime Minister, announced the government's decision that temporary barbed wire fences would be installed on the Schengen border with Croatia in the following days. http://www.vlada.si/medijsko_sredisce/sporocila_za_javnost/sporocilo_za_javnost/article/postavitev_tehnicnih_usmerjevalnih_ovir_na_schengenski_meji_nujen_in_zacasen_ukrep_56921/

42 Italian occupying troops wrote *VINCEREMO* (WE SHALL WIN) on the walls during World War II. According to Anton Stipanič's eyewitness testimony, anti-Fascists from Bela krajina added *VIDET ČEMO* (WE SHALL SEE). An interview with Anton Stipanič, Ljubljana, 28 August 2017. From 6:20 to 6:53. https://youtu.be/dmSKMLqAF_s

43 An interview with France Starešinič, Žuniči, 10 June 2019. <https://youtu.be/TOHwcuN8Fw>

44 The data on inhabitants is taken from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia's website: https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatDb/pxweb/sl/10_Dem_soc/10_Dem_soc_05_prebivalstvo_10_stevilo_preb_25_05C50_prebivalstvo_naselja/05C5004S.px/

45 Gradivo za topografijo NOB, Bela krajina, I. snopič, 52.

46 Gradivo za topografijo NOB, I Snopič, Bela krajina, Ljubljana 1958, 52.

47 Jože Starešinič, *Vola so obesili v naš vodnjak*, 0:34 – 8:21, <https://youtu.be/iJeHZ6OYbXk>.

48 Jože Čemas from Zilje maintained that the captured were taken away in August 1943. His father told him that they had been taken away when maize started making corncocks. An interview with Jože Čemas, Zilje, 19 June

men from Preloka, making them walk to Vinica via Zilje.⁴⁹ In Vinica, they were gathered in a sinkhole, in the location of what is today a medical centre. A few individuals managed to avoid being interned on account of luck, e.g. such as the relatives of Jože Starešinič. A local from Vinica told his grandmother that Italian actions would not end well.⁵⁰

The captured villagers of Zilje were taken to Rab. A few families saw several men taken to camps. Jože Pokorn, the parish priest in Preloka, wrote to the Archbishopric of Ljubljana about the unbearable conditions and problems of internees' families. In a rather strident tone, the parish priest demanded answers and solutions "before the last internee dies."⁵¹ In his letter, Pokorn mentioned twelve dead parishioners.

The episcopal see sent him a list of the deceased, whose data had to be entered into the register and whose relatives needed to be officially informed of their deaths. Pokorn read the names of the deceased during mass, which was heard by Frančiška Čadonič from Balkovci, who was familiarly known as Biričina. Eyewitnesses said that she fainted.⁵² According to the eyewitness testimony of Frančiška Tahija, the parish priest Pokorn read the names of the deceased on 17 January 1943 during the service in the Church of St Anton in Zilje.

"... our parish priest from Preloka announced the deaths of villagers on Rab during service, those were difficult moments, the whole church cried, everybody cried [...] such moments cannot be forgotten."⁵³

Franc Čemas and his son Ivan were interned on Rab. The son was 20 years old. The food was so bad that internees looked for something to eat in horse faeces because an odd undigested oat seed could be found in it.⁵⁴ "Franc died there, Ivan returned because Franc gave his food to his son Ivan, so he survived and came back."⁵⁵

In the autumn of 1942 the Italians expanded their post in Dolnje Zilje by forcing the residents to leave three houses. A bunker was set up next to a roadside house, and a barn had to be demolished to make room for it.⁵⁶

2019. The recording is kept in the project's archive. The parish priest Jože Pokorn mentioned in his letter to the bishopric's ordinariate that the internees were taken away on 4 August 1942. His letter is kept in the Archives of the Ljubljana Archbishopric, in the documents of the Preloka parish.

49 Jože Starešinič, Zilje, 21 February 2019, Po sreči so ostali živi, <https://youtu.be/eN8mwTa0j6Y>, 0:36–0:52.

50 Ibid.

51 A letter dated to 10 March 1943 and addressed to the bishopric's ordinariate in Ljubljana.

52 Angela Žugelj, Prišle so osmrtnice na Faro, <https://youtu.be/yZQx25MPTIU>. Angela Žugelj said: "The Biričini woman fainted." The oeconym of Frančiška Balkovec's family was Biričini.

53 An interview with Frančiška Tahija, Glavica, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

54 Jože Čemas from Zilje mentioned that he heard this from his uncle. An interview with Jože Čemas, Zilje, 19 June 2019. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

55 An interview with Frančiška Tahija, Glavica, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

56 Jože Starešinič, Vola so obesili v naš vodnjak, <https://youtu.be/iJeHZ6OYbxk>.

However, the villagers told us that the Italian soldiers did not pose a threat to them, as there was an unwritten understanding that the partisans would not attack this post, and so the Italians did not cause problems. They knew about the partisans, but the villagers pointed out that both armies carried guns and they were unarmed, and thus had to submit to both sides.⁵⁷ The absurdity of the war and the consequences caused by different circumstances is indicated by the eyewitness testimony of Jože Starešinič about his grandmother and mother harvesting wheat about 500 metres from their house. The partisans approached them, making enquiries about the Italian garrison they were about to attack. Both women begged them not to do that because the garrison was not unkind to the villagers. On top of that, they feared that in retribution the Italians could burn down houses in the village that were restored with the money that their husbands made in America. Moreover, the Italians did not kill anyone in the village. Consequently, the partisans did not attack the post.⁵⁸ However, things became more awkward when the new Italian commander, who was not aware of the situation, arrived in the village.⁵⁹ Still, the village did not see any armed conflicts, although on one occasion shots were heard when the Italian soldiers garrisoned in the post wanted to have chicken for lunch – they shot a resident's chicken, and then paid for it.⁶⁰

Figure 9a shows a sketch of the post and the back of the same document features a detailed description of it. This document must have been produced at some point after November 1942, probably in the spring or summer of 1943. Members of the partisan intelligence drew a sketch on two pages and included details about the garrison. The post was thought to have been manned by 80 fairly heavily armed members of the Financial Guard. If the number is correct, there was one Italian soldier for every three villagers.

The garrison was believed to have been armed with two or three heavy Breda machine guns, up to two light mortars and four light machine guns. There were no guns on this list because every soldier carried one. Measuring up to three metres in height, bunkers were set up next to the houses and barbed wire stretched around the fortified houses. To ensure safe movement between bunkers, a 1.6-metre-deep trench was dug.⁶¹ The number of soldiers was probably lower, or it may have varied. Jože Starešinič

57 An eyewitness testimony by Jože Grdun, Zilje, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

58 An eyewitness testimony by Jože Starešinič, Zilje, 21 January 2019. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

59 An interview with Franciška Tahija, Glavica, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

60 An eyewitness testimony by Jože Grdun, Zilje, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

61 SI AS 1851 Glavni štab narodnoosvobodilne vojske in partizanskih odredov Slovenije, 1941–1945, t.e. 59, p.e.1680. Obveščevalsko poročilo Dolne Zilje. This is a two-page intelligence report; one page features a sketch of the landscape with numerical marks and the other one a detailed description of buildings, the mode of fortification and weapons.



Dolne Zilje.
 Postojanka šteje cca 80 članov vojske.
 Oborožitev: 2-3 točke, Brede, do 2 lahke
 baraba, in do 4 lahke mitraljeze.
 Nastanjeni so v treh hišah 5, 6, 7.
 Vsaka hiša ima okna zaskodana in opremlje-
 na z strel. linami. Okoli hiš so kamniti
 bunkerji v višini 3 m, skori kamniti zid
 so line (strelne). Bunkerje pokrivaajo z deska-
 mi proti obrambi. Pokrili bodo tudi z zemljo.
 Hiše 1, 2, 3, 4 so pokrite s beto-
 nirani.
 Ste. 9 jarek v višini 160 m
 Črna voda potoča.
 Postojanka se vrti okoli.
 Jolood; moien od severne strani in
 voda in od Preloke.
 Nemogoč od spodnje strani ob Kolpi.
 Na hiši 8 in 11 osmatracišča z
 lahkim mitraljezem.

Figs. 9a and 9b: Two sketches of the post in Zilje produced by the partisans.

maintains that the post was manned by between 30 and 35 soldiers.⁶² The supplies for the garrison in Zilje were provided from Vinica or Črnomelj. They used locals for transport as well, mostly for transporting food.



Fig. 10: The demolition of the bunker in front of a house in Zilje along the road from Vinica to Preloka. The bunker was demolished immediately after Italy's capitulation. (The photograph is owned by Janez Uršič).

Up to the summer of 1942 the locals were able to co-exist with the Italians. They did not abuse the villagers, and – as noted above – are even said to have paid for hens when they felt like eating chicken.⁶³

Children attended school in Preloka and had to walk past the post in Dolnje Zilje. We cannot imagine how unpleasant it must have been for children having to walk past soldiers, bunkers and wire obstacles on a daily basis. The story told by Franciška Tahija (née Balkovec) might seem amusing,⁶⁴ but it is indicative of the pressure that children were faced with as they walked past the troops of different armies on their way to school.

At the end of the village they had to go past the Italians, while on a shortcut across the meadows and clearings they could run into the partisans. Their lives were disrupted

62 A conversation with Jože Starešinič, 21 February 2019. According to his grandmother's eyewitness testimony, there were about 20 men in their house and five or six in the other two houses, thus totalling upwards of 30 men.

63 An eyewitness testimony by Jože Grdun, Zilje, 5 June 2018. The recording is kept in the project's archive.

64 *Otroci meje/Children of the Border*, <https://youtu.be/0NZp3PfVdTQ>, Franciška Tahija, Buongiorno, 0:07-1:59.

by the war, and they faced many dangers and obstacles. Their education was also disrupted, although in terms of schooling the children in Preloka were lucky. The German troops simply walked through the village after Italy's capitulation, and from the late autumn of 1943 onwards this area was liberated territory.

Sources and bibliography

Sources

SI AS, 1773, t.e.773, Poveljstvo 14. pehotne divizije Isonzo.

SI AS, 1790, Okrajno glavarstvo Črnomelj.

SI AS 1851 Glavni štab, t. e. 59. p.e. 1680.

SI AS 1865 Komanda vojne oblasti in komande mest VII. Korpudsa, t.e.211.

NŠAL, RAZNO, fasc. 25 A, IX. OKUPACIJA IN REVOLUCIJA.

NŠAL, Župnija Preloka.

SI AS 1851 Glavni štab narodnoosvobodilne vojske in partizanskih odredov Slovenije, 1941–1945, t.e. 59, p.e.1680.

Gradivo za topografijo NOB, Bela krajina, I. snopič, <https://www.sistory.si/11686/26935>

Međunarodni ugovori 1941, Nezavisna država Hrvatska, Ministarstvo vanjskih poslova, Zagreb 1941, <https://www.sistory.si/11686/34898>

Bibliography

Cuccu, Giovanni, Ivo: *Šestnajst mesecev med slovenskimi partizani*. Ljubljana, Borec, 1979.

Dular, Jože: *Adlešiči v Beli krajini*. Ljubljana, Ljudska pravica, 1960.

Ferenc, Tone: *Fašisti brez krinke, dokumenti 1941–1942*. Ljubljana. Maribor, Obzorja, 1987.

Polič, Radko: *Belokranjski odred*. Ljubljana, Partizanska knjiga, 1975.

Rus, Zvonko: *Kronika mesta Metlike II. Metlika*, Belokranjsko muzejsko društvo, 2003.

Zveza borcev NOV: *Metlika v plamenih*, 1964.

Zveza za tujski promet za Slovenijo v Ljubljani: *Krajevni leksikon Dravske banovine*. Ljubljana,

Uprava krajevnega leksikona Dravske banovine v Ljubljani, 1937.

Žabkar, Lojze, Jože: *Izpovedi*. Ljubljana, Križniški priorat, 1991.

Weiss, Janez: *Od daleč je videla kako so padale bombe na mesto. Memento ob 70-letnici bombardiranja Črnomlja 3. oktobra 1943*. Črnomelj, Občina Črnomelj, 2013.

Weiss, Janez: *Ves Dragatuš trpi, krivi in nekrivi. Memento ob 70-letnici bombardiranja vasi Dragatuš 5. maja 1944*. Dragatuš, Krajevna skupnost, 2014.

Interviews kept in the project's archive and published interviews

Adam, Tončka, Dragatuš, 10 September 2017, Vrag ti materi, vstrelji že enkrat, <https://youtu.be/hHbwTk2T9ZI>

Adlešič, Katica, Kordež, Marija, Adlešiči, 28 October, Adlešiče so izropali in požgali, <https://youtu.be/07o0UM0hbbY>

Bogdanović, Gabre, Hrast pri Metliki, 29 June 2017, Še danes obžalujejo, <https://youtu.be/jCP2TTePVvo>

Car, Danica, Brezovica, 3 August 2017.

Čemas, Jože, 19 July 2019.

Goleš, (Janta) Janko, Vukšiči pod Radatoviči, 5 July 2017, Meja nam je koristila, <https://youtu.be/B9ejRZckQ0U>

Grdun, Jože, Zilje, 5 June 2018

Jug, (Tinčika) Martina, Metlika, 19 August 2017, Hrvati niso smeli priti sem, https://youtu.be/szQsP0R_lrM

Kočevar, Franc, Bojanja vas, 9 July 2017, <https://youtu.be/RkzrM-xplPc>

Klepec, Jožef, Krasinec, 3 September 2017, Žide so okradli na Kolpi, https://youtu.be/dio_y0OIPTY

Kordež, Marija, Adlešiči, 28 October 2017, Adlešiče so izropali in požgali, <https://youtu.be/07o0UM0hbbY>

Starešinič, Franc, Žuniči, 29 June 2019, Italijanska obmejna postojanka Žuniči, <https://youtu.be/TOHwcuN8Fw>

Starešinič, Marija, Črnomelj, 14 August 2018, Zora, <https://youtu.be/D3vrenYJBFA>

Starešinič, Ivan, Balkovci, 5 June 2018, Žuniči med italijansko okupacijo, <https://youtu.be/FlxifP3kYTc>

Starešinič, Jože, Zilje, 5 June 2018, Vola so obesili v naš vodnjak, <https://youtu.be/iJeHZ6OYbXk>, <https://youtu.be/eN8mwTa0j6Y>

Stipanič, Anton, Ljubljana, 28 August 2017, Partizani meje nismo priznali, <https://youtu.be/sRkD51Tf9KQ>

Špehar, Ivan in Štefka, Breg, 2 December 2017, Kristus je bil prvi komunist, <https://youtu.be/XDRfAl2IPcU>

Tahija, Franciška, Glavica (the Municipality of Bosiljevo), 3 June 2018, Župnik je objavil, koliko jih je umrlo na Rabu, <https://youtu.be/yehSGt7Yvps>

Žugelj, Angela, Zilje, 5 June 2018, Prišle so osmrtnice na Faro, <https://youtu.be/yZQx25MPTIU>

World wide web

http://www.vlada.si/medijsko_sredisce/sporocila_za_javnost/sporocilo_za_javnost/article/postavit-tev_tehnicnih_usmerjevalnih_ovir_na_schengenski_meji_nujen_in_zacasen_ukrep_56921/

Otroci meje/Childen of the Border, <https://youtu.be/0NZp3PfvdtQ>

https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatDb/pxweb/sl/10_Dem_soc/10_Dem_soc__05_prebivalstvo__10_stevilo_preb__25_05C50_prebivalstvo_naselja/05C5004S.px/

Sources and authors of figures

Fig. 1, SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 4.

Fig. 2, SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2.

Fig. 3, SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2.

Fig. 4, Archive of the project Make This Land German ... Italian ... Hungarian ... Croatian! The Role of Occupation Borders in the Denationalization Policy and Lives of the Slovene Population, map produced by Rok Ciglič, information on it by Bojan Balkovec, Božidar Flajšman and Blaž Štangelj.

Fig. 5, Božidar Flajšman's archive.

Fig. 6, SI AS 1790, škatla 5, mapa 2. II comune di Metlika okolica, Občina Metlika okolica, 18 August 1941. Visokemu komisarijatu za Ljubljansko pokrajino v Ljubljani. V tukajšnji občini je 15 posestnikov, ki imajo svoje vinograde prek meje.

Fig. 7, The Bela krajina Museum Metlika.

Fig. 8, Archive of the project Make This Land German ... Italian ... Hungarian ... Croatian! The Role of Occupation Borders in the Denationalization Policy and Lives of the Slovene Population, photographed by Božidar Flajšman.

Fig. 9, SI AS 1851 Glavni štab narodnoosvobodilne vojske in partizanskih odredov Slovenije, 1941–1945, t.e. 59, p.e. 1680.

Fig. 10, Janez Uršič's archive.

Summary

Božidar Flajšman, Bojan Balkovec

Occupation borders in Bela krajina 1941–1945

The occupation border between Fascist Italy and the Ustashe Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in Bela krajina ran along the border of the Črnomelj district, from Trdinov vrh along the Gorjanci ridge and Žumberk to the Kolpa River near Božakovo, moving along the Kolpa River up to Predgrad. To prevent the Slovenian and Croatian partisan brigades from crossing the border, the Italians intended to fortify the border at Gorjanci/Žumberk with a corridor of barbed wire and bunkers. No wire fence was conceived along the Kolpa River, only fortified bridges and other structures. Due to their capitulation in the spring of 1943, the Italians only managed to build five bunkers near Metlika. The border cut deep into people's daily lives, especially farmers who had land on both sides of it. People along the border also faced the issue of refugees coming from the NDH, especially the Jewish population. Residents of Žumberk with Orthodox roots believed the border was quite useful, since it prevented the Ustashe from coming to the Italian area. In May 1941, there were individual attempts to annex the municipality of Radatovići, which was part of Črnomelj district, to the NDH, and an attempt to annex the entire region of Bela krajina to Nazi Germany. A strong resistance movement evolved very quickly, forcing the Italians to leave smaller border outposts as early as December 1942. From then on, they stayed in larger towns only, surrounding them completely or partially with bunkers and barbed wire.

After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943, Bela krajina became a free territory where the headquarters of the National Liberation Army and the partisan detachments of Slovenia was set up in addition to the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front, and many other institutions. By the end of the war, only a few of individual invasions by the Germans and Ustashe had hit Bela krajina. Zilje is a small village on the banks of the Kolpa River. There was a crew of the Italian Guardia di Finanza, and the villagers had no problems with them. As in other places in Bela krajina, the Italian Army deported many men from Zilje to camps, where many of them died due to unbearable conditions.

Today, comparisons between the former occupation border and the current wired border with the Republic of Croatia are being made.