



Suicide and Society

WORKSHOP

14 June 2023

Institute of Contemporary
History

Ljubljana, Slovenia

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME
BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Workshop
Programme

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9.00 LECTURE

Matteo Perissinotto: Female Suicides in Post-War Transitions: The Case of Trieste (1918–1949)

Break

10.00–11.00

- **Dragica Čeč:** Social and Cultural Attitudes toward Suicide from the 17th to the First Half of the 19th Century
- **Irena Selišnik:** The Perception of Suicide in Autobiographical Sources in the 19th Century in Carniola and in the Interwar Period in Yugoslavia
- **Jelena Seferović:** Presentation of Suicides in the Newspaper "Sarajevski list" in the Second Half of the 19th Century

Discussion

Break

11.15–12.30

- **Urška Bratož:** Suicide in the Austrian Littoral at the Turn of the 20th century
- **Ana Cergol Paradiž:** Suicide as an Eugenic Act in Slovenia in the First Half of the 20th Century
- **Ivan Smiljanić:** Financial Bust among Slovenes as a Cause of Suicide from 1870s to Second World War
- **Julie V. Gottlieb:** The 'Crisis Suicides' in Britain and the War of Nerves, 1938–1940

Discussion

Break

13.30 LECTURE

Orel Beilinson: American Duels and Other Mysteries in the Habsburg History of Suicide

Break

14.30–15.30

- **Meta Remec:** Suicide and Attempted Suicide in a Socialist Society: the Case of 1960s Slovenia
- **Marko Zajc:** Intellectual Interpretations of Suicide in the 1980s: The Case of Slovenia
- **Nuša Zadavec Šedivy, Vanja Gomboc:** Shifting Attitudes and Reporting on Suicide in Slovenian Media: A Four-Decade Analysis

Discussion



KEYNOTE



LECTURES



Matteo PERISSINOTTO
University of Trieste

Female Suicides in Post-War Transitions: The Case of Trieste (1918–1949)

According to the latest research, the conditions in which the post-war transition phases take place affect the number of suicides. The hope of an improvement in one's condition after the terrible suffering endured during the war years should contain this phenomenon; otherwise, instead, we should see a wave of voluntary deaths.

But do these considerations have an equal impact on men and women? What other aspects influence the choice to take one's own life? Is there a role for the media and public opinion in addressing and managing this phenomenon? Does a moral judgment emerge from the pages of the newspapers? Are all suicides treated in the same way?

Starting from these considerations and questions, I want to analyze the phenomenon from a gender point of view in the two post-war periods in the city of Trieste. I want to analyze not only the quantitative data, but also examine how the contemporary press recounted the episodes, who intervened in the public debate, what considerations and interpretations of the phenomenon were given by and to the contemporaries.



Orel BEILINSON
Yale University

American Duels and Other Mysteries in the Habsburg History of Suicide

If you open any newspaper published in the Habsburg Empire, you will likely find brief reports about suicide. Historians usually look at them thematically: they filter by age or gender, examine a common thread, tie them to other historical developments, and let the other reports sit idle. My lecture focuses on the reports themselves. Why did newspapers print so many of them – thousands of reports, without juicy details or even names, coming from nearby or afar – throughout the nineteenth century? How do this volume and frequency compare to different European press cultures? Do these reports make history?

Answering this last question in the affirmative, the lecture will focus on a series of reports about "American duels" that began around 1862. Of course, the heyday of the American Duel passed not long after that. Still, reports about the American duels kept trickling until the very last year of the Empire. Why? Could this reporting have incited further cases of suicide? How does the "Werther effect" come about in practice? In other words, are newspapers responsible for turning fads into part of our social repertoire? This lecture raises many questions and offers preliminary answers toward a more comprehensive study of suicide reporting in nineteenth-century Europe.



WORKSHOP



ABSTRACTS



Dragica ČEČ

Science and Research Centre of Koper



Social and Cultural Attitudes toward Suicide from the 17th to the First Half of the 19th Century

The paper will first briefly review the cultural and conceptual (philosophical, political, theological, and legal) attitudes toward suicide in the early modern period, the changes during the Enlightenment, and the period leading up to the complete decriminalization (but not destigmatisation) of suicide in the mid-19th century. In doing so, the study will attempt to go beyond historiographical studies that often focus only on fundamental philosophical changes or try to classify the modern phenomenon of "high suicide rates," and look for historical elements of voluntary termination of life and euthanasia, issues related to an aging society, alongside the problem of the loss of the working age population, and the social, cultural, and economic challenges associated with it. The study takes into account the cultural, legal, economic, and social circumstances, as certain changes in attitudes toward suicide were the result of complex factors.

In the second part, some suicide cases from the years 1817 and 1818, a period when the administration and the legal system were fully restored and implemented but was nevertheless a time of extreme existential crises, will be presented and analysed. On the basis of rare documents on judicial practice on suicide from the end of the 18th century onwards, it will be analysed to which extent the studied area adapted to the political, cultural and legal changes into attitudes towards suicide.



Irena SELIŠNIK

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

The Perception of Suicide in Autobiographical Sources in the 19th Century in Carniola and in the Interwar Period in Yugoslavia

In my paper I will address how suicide is described in autobiographical sources (above all memoirs and letters) and how it is described as part of the emotional regime of the 19th century and in the interwar period. I will focus on the context or reason for the suicide (love, morality, bankruptcy, political ideals or other reasons), who the protagonists were and in what environment it took place (rural, urban). Then, I will analyze how suicide was present in the emotional culture at the turn of the 19th century, when melancholy combined with romantic longing was still an important emotion and if any (self)censorship regarding this topic took place, with which feelings it was connected. Was suicide something that was considered justifiable in certain situations, or always something immoral? In some respects, fiction and newspaper discourse (as public discussions) will be also considered.



Jelena SEFEROVIĆ

Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb / Institute
of Contemporary History, Ljubljana

Presentation of Suicides in the Newspaper "Sarajevski list" in the Second Half of the 19th Century

The author analyses the way in which the phenomenon of suicide was reported in the newspaper "Sarajevski list" from the second half of the 19th century. In the previous research it was proved that in the studied period the number of suicides of men was higher than that those of women. According to newspaper reports, the reasons for men's suicide were material poverty, the fact that they were unable to provide for their families, the inability to resist the repressive military regime when they were in the army, and the pressure of obligations during their school years. For women, the most common reason given was that they chose death by suicide because their parents prevented them from marrying the man they wanted to marry or because they were upset during a dispute with their partner or husband. In a number of cases, the reason for the decision to take their own life is not given, while in a number of cases it is stated that they were bored with life or were in a disturbed state of mind at the time.



Urška BRATOŽ

Science and Research Centre of Koper

Suicide in the Austrian Littoral at the Turn of the 20th Century

At the turn of the century, some scientific debates in the Austrian Littoral detected an increase in the number of suicides. Especially Trieste - as a heterogeneous urban environment full of social challenges - stood out in terms of suicide rates, even in the wider regional context. This has sparked some of the concurrent debates that sought to identify the causes of the rise in suicide, citing, among other things, correlations with alcoholism, anxiety disorders and altered lifestyles. In this preliminary study, we aim, on the one hand, to look at the available data on the number of suicides between the last quarter of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in two adjacent, but different urban areas - Trieste as a 'metropolis' and Koper as a smaller town with a semi urban-agrarian character, using statistics on the number of suicides (and suicide attempts) and available death registers. Where possible, data on suicides and methods of self-harm will also be observed through the dimensions of gender and age. At the same time the public discourse (through newspapers) and the image of suicide that was reproduced at the time will be observed.



Ana CERGOL PARADIŽ
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Suicide as an Eugenic Act in Slovenia in the First Half of the 20th Century

In the period between the two wars, eugenic ideas were present in the whole Central Europe, including Slovenia. The scientific discourse emphasized the importance of heredity in the treatment of presumed psychiatric diseases and conditions. In this paper, the extent to which these views were reflected in the treatment of suicide will be explored. Based on medical records of patients of the Ljubljana Psychiatric Hospital from before 1945, newspaper articles, and scientific contributions by psychiatrists who worked in the territory of present-day Slovenia in the first half of the 20th century, the author will try to determine whether suicide was more likely to be seen as hereditary or, on the contrary, as a consequence of unfavourable life circumstances.



Ivan SMILJANIĆ

Institute of contemporary History, Ljubljana

Financial Bust among Slovenes as a Cause of Suicide from 1870s to Second World War

Material security is one of the basic conditions of human existence. Its absence can cause many problems, and it is also accompanied by social stigma, which was stronger in the past than today. A difficult situation can lead to suicide. In Slovenia, suicides of merchants and entrepreneurs were already a well-known phenomenon in the 19th century, as were suicides of those who were living in poverty. Exact statistics on the number of Slovenian suicides due to economic reasons are not available, so the central source for research on this topic are the newspapers, which were inaccurate and sensationalist in reporting suicides and amateurish when describing the psychological nature of the deceased. Over time, the descriptions of suicides and injuries also became more graphic. During the period of Austria-Hungary and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as well as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, there were several economic scandals that also ended in suicide, which were widely reported in the press. Suicides due to economic reasons increased especially in times of unfavourable economic conditions, such as the deflation crisis in the mid-1920s and the Great Depression in the 1930s.



Julie V. GOTTLIEB
University of Sheffield

The 'Crisis Suicides' in Britain and the War of Nerves, 1938–1940

My (short) paper will outline my current project on the 'crisis suicides' in Britain from the height of the Munich Crisis to end of the so-called 'Phoney War' in spring 1940. In this period there was a spate of suicides that coroners, doctors, psychiatrists, journalists and politicians, and the family and friends of the deceased, understood to have been triggered by the international crisis and the fear of war. I propose that we read these suicides as casualties of the 'war of nerves', and confer meaning and dignity on the 185 people (although there are likely many more who cannot be traced) whose deaths of despair reveals a great deal about the internalizations of crisis in this period.



Meta REMEC

Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana

Suicide and Attempted Suicide in a Socialist Society: the Case of 1960s Slovenia

Using suicide as case study, the presentation will shed light on the social conditions in Slovenia in the 1960s and show what suicide and, in particular, youth suicide meant for a socialist society in which values such as responsibility, moral and spiritual strength, and sacrifice for the community were paramount and suicides were considered traitors to the country. Based on police and State Security Service reports on suicides, memoirs, newspaper articles, and other material collected by investigators such as suicide notes and testimonies, the different discourse of the authorities, the media, and experts in psychiatry, psychology, and criminology that have emerged will be analysed: the opinion that suicide is a senseless act of spoiled people and cowards, the opposite opinion that suicides, especially by young people, are rational and conscious decisions and as such represent a kind of criticism of the situation in society, and the opinion of socialist authorities, who in the rising suicide rates saw a threat to the social order and used this as a pretext to use various levers to control their citizens, and finally the discourse of the medical experts, who took advantage of the authorities' fears and led them to establish a center for suicide prevention.



Marko ZAJC

Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana

Intellectual Interpretations of Suicide in the 1980s: The Case of Slovenia

Slovenian intellectuals who criticized Yugoslav socialism in the 1980s used the topic of suicide to criticize self-management socialism. The fact that Slovenia at the time had one of the highest suicide rates in Europe was also interpreted as a consequence of the alienated and inhumane system of real communism. They recognized that suicide is a distinctly individual act that cannot be explained solely by social and historical reasons. Nevertheless, they saw as an important factor the tendency of the socialist system to suppress human individualism with the help of ideology at all social levels. A person in socialism feels unfulfilled and alienated from his own essence. The paper is based on the analysis of an extensive essay, which the important Slovenian critical intellectual and poet Niko Grafenauer wrote for the Contributions to the Slovenian National Program, in the 57th issue of Nova Revija. The publication is considered in Slovenian political history to be one of the key programming texts of the political transition from socialism to a multi-party system and as an important milestone on the way to an independent Slovenian state. The publication was banned by the authorities, which is why it gained the status of a dissident critical text in the public eye. Although communist intellectuals of the time criticized the publication, they did not mention the suicide text. The communist government was also concerned about the high level of suicide.



Nuša ZADRAVEC ŠEDIVY

Vanja GOMBOC

Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, UP IAM Andrej
Marušič Institute, University of Primorska

Shifting Attitudes and Reporting on Suicide in Slovenian Media: A Four-Decade Analysis

Suicide is a complex public health issue that requires a comprehensive approach to effectively address it. According to empirical studies, the way suicide is reported in the media can have a significant impact on copycat behaviour. Inappropriate and sensationalistic reporting can increase the risk of copycat behaviour, while responsible reporting that emphasizes prevention and sources of help can reduce this risk. However, changes in media reporting throughout history also reflect prevailing attitudes towards suicide and understanding of the phenomenon within specific cultural contexts.

In this study, we aimed to understand these historical shifts in Slovenian lay public attitudes towards suicide and reporting on suicide by analysing media articles published between 1959 and 1999 in *Delo*, one of the largest national daily newspapers in Slovenia. We examined the risk and protective factors associated with suicidal behaviour as well as provocative and preventive characteristics in the articles. We used a term suicide to search for the articles and first search identified a total of 7,478 hits. Excluding those that did not directly relate to suicide, we included 851 articles in our analysis.

Our analysis revealed that descriptions of risk factors were more predominant than protective factors across all historical periods. The most commonly described risk factors were individual factors such as gender, hopelessness, and mental illness, with interpersonal and socio-economic factors being mentioned more frequently in later decades. Protective factors were rarely mentioned in the 1960s, but community connectedness and social integration became the main protective factors mentioned in the 1970s.

Interpersonal protective factors such as quality family and friend relationships were also mentioned in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, societal-level protective factors such as professional help and preventive activities were highlighted. Our analysis shows important shifts in the understanding of suicide from a biomedical to a bio-psycho-social perspective, as well as increasing awareness of environmental and societal factors, and protective factors over the decades. Regarding the way suicide was reported, we found that all articles contained at least one provocative feature. Sensationalist titles were the most common and often contained the word "suicide," while inappropriate selection of visuals was the least common. Most articles did not include preventive aspects, but those that did generally avoided sensationalist language in the main text, did not present suicide as an acceptable solution to problems, and minimized highlighting and repetition of stories. Overall, our findings suggest that suicide coverage during the period studied contained mostly provocative information that may increase the risk of imitating suicidal behavior.

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