

# Use of the caves as mass graveyards in Slovenia

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## Abstract

Paper gives the brief account on use of caves for mass graveyards in the time of war from years 1941–1945. People were killed at the entrances and thrown into the caves. After that several entrances were undermined and intentionally filled. This hiding of the evidence lasted in some cases tens of years after the events.

In the cave register of Speleological Association of Slovenia 86 caves with human remains are reported. In most caves are only few skeletons, but in some probably several thousand people were disposed. Exact number of the people killed from the remains in caves can not be established. Few identifications of the people were possible, small object found usually show their provenance only. People were mostly Slovene, but remains of people from Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Germany and Italy are there as well.

## Introduction

During the second world war and some months after in Slovenia a great number of shafts were used for mass-graveyards for military and political opponents and prisoners of war that were liquidated without any trial. The phenomenon is documented by rich memoir literature that was published by emigrants abroad, but in Slovenia the discussion about that was forbidden up to the beginning of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The phenomenon is still burdened by political content and by questions of responsibility and this makes studies of it very difficult.

To understand the phenomenon we must shortly introduce the events in Slovenia during the World war II between the years 1941 to 1945: the actual Slovene territory belonged to the Monarchy of Yugoslavia and its western part to Italy. In spring 1941 it was occupied by German and Italian army and some time later resistance against the aggressors started. At first heterogeneous political movements have taken part in it, but the communist party soon prevailed and started with the revolution at the same time.

Already in the year 1942 (BAJT, 1999, 480), the caves were chosen to conceal the liquidation of prisoners of war or civil opponents of the communist party. However, the massacres culminated at the end of the war and after it, between May and July 1945, when partisans took over the power and when thousands of refugees (TOLSTOY, 1986) were returned to Yugoslavia from the British occupation zone.

The exact number of people that were thrown into the caves is not known. Various authors give different numbers; KOVAČ (1968) gives number of 14.000 for the caves of Kočevski Rog mountain only. For other karst areas and caves in Slovenia there are not even approximate estimations. Similar events may be traced in other parts of former Yugoslavia, on the Dinaric karst of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro (BOŽIČEVIĆ, 1991; ŽANKO, 1990).

The regime that was established after the war have tried to keep this events and caves secret. Several caves were blasted or filled and all discussions about were forbidden. After the political change in 1991 and after the Slovene separation from the Yugoslavia there were some attempts to make a research of these caves, but because of the lack of the political will no official systematic research or even evidences have been done yet.

Visiting such a caves is not very pleasant, sometimes was also connected with troubles and the phenomenon had influence on the cave research in some karst areas. From speleological point of view we are mostly interested in a number of caves

used for this purpose, number of victims in them and how the traces of the massacres were disguised. The data presented in this paper are basing on the Cave Register of the Speleological association of Slovenia and my own observations in which I tried to check the information from the different sources.

## Caves with human remains

The first written information about throwing the people into the caves appeared already during the war time in some magazines and books. These information were at that time used as a political propaganda material against the communist guerrilla. Several caves mentioned and the first visit of such a cave, Krimska jama cave was described. In it several dead bodies were reported (ANONYMOUS, 1943).

In the karst areas above the city Trieste on the W side of Slovenia, in summer 1945 soldiers of British army researched several caves and abandoned mine shafts. From some of them bodies were extracted (KARAPANDZICH, 1980). In this areas the caves where people were thrown in, are in Italian literature known as foibas (PAPO, 1999), foiba is a local name used before for a shaft or deep doline.

In Slovenia, which was part of Yugoslavia people knew about mass executions and people being thrown into the caves but they were afraid to speak about openly. This is the reason why for several decades human remains in caves were not mentioned in Slovenia, but in the memorial literature of the political emigrants only (IŽANEC, 1970; KARAPANDZICH, 1980). These books were forbidden, but people smuggle them into the country. They described numerous caves, in some of them the bones may be seen still today, some shafts were later filled up by rubbish, and we can not check them, while many others cannot be identified due to either inaccurate locations or names.

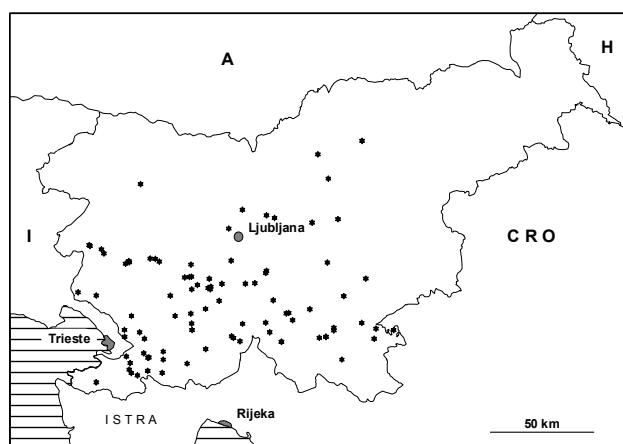
In Slovenia the first descriptions of the executions and caves appeared in newspapers, periodical magazines at the end of eighties, just before the separation from Yugoslavia in 1991. Most of the information were from journalistic and political point of view, but among them there were also testimonies of the few people, which survived or were involved in the cave executions.

In speleo literature little is written about the phenomena. The first overview based on the data from the Cave Register of the Slovene speleological society was published in 1995

(MIHEVC). Later some shorter observations were published in *Naše jame*, magazine of the Slovene speleological society (MIHEVC, 1995; 1999). A special book was devoted to the events in one karst area (ŽAJDELA, 1990) and patients from some hospitals which ended in the caves (ŠTURM, 2000).

## Data of the Cave register

Cave register contains data of more than 7500 caves. Human remains, usually bones are mentioned in the files from 86 caves. The data from the register are not absolutely reliable. In first years after the war, cavers didn't dare to make notices about them, or they mask them with remarks of double meaning. Many human bones were also overlooked or are hidden by debris.



**Fig 1: Position of the caves – mass graveyards in Slovenia.**  
Source: Cave register of the Speleological association of Slovenia and Archive of the Karst research institute.

In several cases in the cave register it is mentioned that the people were thrown into the cave, but now no bones are visible in it. In such cases the data may be wrong, maybe the bones are covered by deposits or even removed. Such caves we can consider as the graveyards only when the source is reliable enough, or when we have several different sources, or when there are traces at the caves indicating that unusual activities that have taken place.

Such case is for example Brezarjevo Brezno. The record about the visit mentions rubbish in the cave and traces of blasting at the entrance only. KOVAČ (1968, 70) quotes that about 1000 people were thrown into this cave after the war, the entrance was later blown up and covered by concrete plate. Because of pollution of the nearby karst spring, the dead bodies were shortly afterwards drawn out and transported elsewhere. Similar case is cave Šemonovo brezno: comparing the before and after-war cave plan type of the gravel below the entrance one may conclude that on the bottom of the shaft some 10 m<sup>3</sup> of allochthonous gravel was thrown in. In Dvojno brezno no bones can be seen, probably because of the gravel originating from blasting, traces of which are still visible at the shaft's entrance.

There are 7 reports about traces of the blasting at the entrance part of the caves. The blasting had dual purpose. The first one was to kill the survived people in the cave and the second one to camouflage the traces. At some cases, only one part of the entrance shows the traces of blasting; at Jama pod Krenom and at Jama pod Macsnovo gorico the entrances to the caves are completely destroyed and the caves are closed. At 9 caves there are beside the bones the remains of unexploded ammunition reported.

The number of skeletons seen in the caves is usually not precisely defined. In 15 cases it is cited that in the cave there are many bones, in a sense, that there were many people thrown in. Most uncovered bones are still visible in the cave Zalesnika.

More frequent are remarks of buried human remains. In some cases the process is natural, but in many instances the covering was deliberate. In 13 caves the bones are partially covered by rubbish. In most cases this is not just the "usual" pollution, typical of caves of easy access near the roads and villages but intentional covering of the human remains. Such examples are Socerbska jama za Vrhom and Brezno v Debliških livadah (MIHEVC, 1999). Both caves are located far from the nearest settlement source of waste and access to them is difficult.

Not only human remains but also parts of clothes or shoes are found in the caves and they provide partial identification. In several cases the persons were German soldiers. The identification is easier because of discernible cloth of German military uniform. From three caves the identification tags of German soldiers are reported.

## Some examples of the caves with human remains

Entrance to the cave Brezno v Mrzlih dolih lies in a remote beech forest, about 3 km distant from the nearest village. The cave is known to the few natives only but they do not know that people were thrown in it

During our visit we found shoes below 40 m deep entrance shaft. After examination we found among the leaves and rocks at the edge of talus cone and of the entrance chamber two skeletons. Nearby were some remainders of clothes and two rucksacks, with basic necessities of life: spoon, shaving and sewing outfits and rubber for mending the soles. Different clothes, shoes and rubber soles indicate that the two men were not soldiers of a regular army and not natives either.

Cave Brezno na Koševcu lies in the middle of a forest some 2 km from Logatec. The record from before war from the year 1934 does not mention any particularity. After the war the rumours appeared that several people were thrown into this cave. The first cavers after the war visited cave in the year 1962. They found out that the bottom of the entrance shaft was covered by skeletons. They notified the police.

Later nobody found the entrance to this cave; it was established that the entrance was covered by timbers and disguised. When the timber, years later, rotted the cover fell into the cave. Our visit evidenced that the skeletons on the bottom were covered by several cubic metres of allochthonous rocks, but the skeletons were still visible.

Jama pod Macsnovo Gorico lies in the middle of a forest, about 10 km from Kočevje. The shape and the depth of the shaft is not known as the entrance part was blown up and this changed the shaft into depression, 10 m in depth with vertical walls in some places. On them the traces of blasting are still visible. The bottom is entirely covered by under-mined material.

The location and the shape of the cave probably corresponds to the cave that is quoted in the memoirs of one of the three men that survived and saved himself out of the Slovene caves (IŽANEC, 1971, 191). The witness cites that the victims were transported by six lorries, each containing 50 people. He himself was shot but only wounded, and thrown into the cave on June 2. 1945. He escaped from the cave on June 5. 1945. Shooting and throwing the people, he witnessed lasted for two days and a half. In this time the edge of the entrance to the cave was blown up five times. When the blasting started the 16 survivors were hiding in a lateral passage. During the blasting a tree fell into the cave and by it the witness escaped. Today the cave is completely filled up and thus the passage where the

survivor was hidden is inaccessible; we may infer that the cave was undermined still later. If the quotations are accurate, 2250 people ended in this single cave only.

The witness quotes that the victims in front of the cave had to give away all the objects they had and take off the clothes. We have checked these information and in the nearby doline we excavated a test trench of one square metre. In 15 cm thick superficial layer we found numerous objects that confirm the witness's statement. We found parts of clothes, buttons, belt-buckles, parts of shoes and personal objects as are spoons, pocket-knives, pieces of pocket-mirrors and combs. Also we found pieces of rosaries, Italian, German and also Serbian, Croatian and Albanian coins evidencing that also people of other nations died in that cave.

The cave was known to the people and they used to visit it in secret. Since 1989 a wooden cross was erected and the cave can be visited openly.

## Conclusion

The data from the cave register, quotations in literature and field evidences indicate that the use of caves for mass-graveyards was very diffused in the time from 1941 to 1945. The caves were suitable, there are many, they are deep and it was relatively easy to hide the dead bodies in them.

Although this phenomenon is spread all over the Slovene karst there are some common properties. On the base of observations of how the burial was executed and number of victims and in particular in respect to traces the caves - mass-graveyards, may be divided into two types.

The caves where there are bones of some persons only, who were thrown dressed into a cave, probably became tombs during the revolution and guerrilla fighting. In these caves nobody disguised the traces later and the bones are found on the surface or they are covered by natural processes. These caves are usually less known and are located in remote woodlands.

The second type of the caves are places of mass executions. In them remains of great number of people are usually found. The executions were well organised and lasted longer time. This is why they could not be kept secret. The disguising of traces followed, blasting of entrances or filling up the entrance shafts, somewhere even tens of years after the war. Also the police was controlling the access to such caves and areas and people and cavers were avoiding them. The use of caves for such a purpose and in particular later camouflaging of the traces considerably changed the physiognomy of numerous entrance parts of the shafts. Some of them were completely filled up or even blown up and thus became inaccessible.

So far no larger projects of research, excavation and identification of the victims in these caves were undertaken. But many the most important caves became the places visited by relatives of people that disappeared during the war and several crosses or monuments were erected at the entrances. Most of the terror victims were thrown into about 10 entrances.

After estimations in memoir literature there would be more than 10.000 people thrown into the caves but we do not have any official data. The precise number will never be found out and in the caves there are people of other nations and countries like Serbs, Croats, Albanians, Germans and Italians present too.

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