

### **Bleiburg & Beyond. Transnational Approaches Towards Memory Politics and Commemorative Practices**

**Veranstalter:** Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz; Department of Cultural Studies, University of Rijeka

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The workshop „Bleiburg & Beyond“ was the first academic output of a new two-year research project jointly undertaken by the Centre for Southeast European Studies at University of Graz and the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Rijeka devoted to examining transnational cultures of Bleiburg remembrance in Austria and Croatia. The commemoration of war crimes committed by Yugoslav Partisans on retreating Ustaša soldiers and accompanying civilians in May 1945 continues to be one of the most controversial points of debate in Croatia regarding the World War II. In a brief introduction, DARIO BRENTIN (Graz) and VJERAN PAVLAKOVIĆ (Rijeka) pointed out the need for exploring the Bleiburg commemoration which continues to be a powerful political ritual, as well as, to subsequently offer new methodological and theoretical approaches in understanding collective remembrance practices such as this one.

The first panel was opened by VJERAN PAVLAKOVIĆ (Rijeka) and RENATO STANKOVIĆ (Rijeka) who outlined their current research project „Framnat – Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia“, which deals with political rituals and the culture of memory of 20th century traumas, including Bleiburg. Focusing on their methodological approaches and general strategies in memory studies, both speakers stressed the need for a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach. In order to give us a more complete picture about why Bleiburg remains such an important *lieux de memoire*, these approaches should include discourse analysis of political speeches, interviews with local politicians and memory actors, a detailed examination of newly available documents of the Yugoslav State Security

Services (UDBA) prior to 1990, gender aspects of commemorative practices as well as a systematic mapping of media coverage (both in Croatia and internationally). Following the introductory, methodological presentation, CHRISTIAN AXBOE NIELSEN (Aarhus), a specialist for (post-)Yugoslav archives, spoke about the activities of the UDBA in monitoring the activities of Yugoslav émigré communities and in particular the Bleiburg commemoration. Croat émigrés received the most attention by the UDBA as they were believed to be the most negatively predisposed to Yugoslavia, which is why the infiltration and surveillance of the annual Bleiburg commemorations was considered a necessary component of their work. Exploiting a very detailed and expansive documentation produced by UDBA, Nielsen illustrated how only very few aspects of the annual commemorations were not completely known to them. In general, the commemorations served a very useful function for the Yugoslav authorities, as Bleiburg provided a guaranteed annual gathering point for a significant portion of the Croat emigres. Similarly, DAVOR PAUKOVIĆ (Dubrovnik) also stressed the importance of Bleiburg in the context of how Communism is remembered and debated in contemporary Croatia. He pointed out that the Bleiburg commemoration has become a central symbol of Partisan and Communist end-of-war and post-World War II crimes. Besides that, it became a powerful political symbol ostensibly illustrating the criminal nature of the 45-year long Communist regime in Yugoslavia and was used as such in the process of its de-legitimation. By exploring memory agents and framing the main narratives of those who support the commemoration and those who are against it, Pauković concluded that political actors of different ideological predispositions use the Bleiburg commemoration to politicise the past, legitimise their own position or delegitimise political competitors.

The second panel introduced a transnational perspective onto commemorative practices in relation to Bleiburg. JOVANA MIHAJLOVIĆ TRBOVC (Ljubljana) examined the peculiar question of why Bleiburg is not a place of memory for Slovenians, despite the

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fact that the narrative about the post-war mass killings is one of the two dominant narratives about the World War II in Slovenia. She argued that the Slovene memory-scape about post-World War II killings pays no significant attention to Bleiburg because it instead focuses on other geographical spots where Slovene anti-communist units (and some refugees) gathered. This narrow focus is illustrated by the results of the official investigations into the mass graves scattered throughout Slovenia which provide detailed information on what are considered to be Slovene victims, but very little on casualties of other ethnicities, including Croats who were largest group transferred from Bleiburg to Yugoslavia. Another reason why the Bleiburg commemoration is not attended in significant numbers by Slovenes is its connection to the post-World War I drawing of the borders which left a significant Slovene speaking population on the Austrian side. Mihajlović Trbovc offered the hypothesis that the issues of Slovenian minority (bilingualism, minority rights, etc.) overshadow other cultural themes, such as surrender and post-war killings of the opponents to Partisans, in the public imagination of this particular area. Shifting the focus back to Croatia, ANA LJUBOJEVIĆ (Zagreb) examined official speeches delivered during the Bleiburg commemorations since 2010 and analysed their role in the creation of narratives of World War II remembrance in Croatia. Despite this relatively short time frame, Ljubojević remained adamant that it is possible to trace changes in discourse which occurred as a result of the Croatian Parliament sponsorship policies towards this site of memory. Introducing another perspective, VALENTIN SIMA (Klagenfurt) raised the issue of the Austrian cultural memory context, both at the national level (i.e., how has Austria dealt with the World War II in the last 70 years) and the local/regional Carinthian level. To understand the nature of the commemorative practices related to the Bleiburg events he pointed out that they must be placed within Carinthia's complex memory scape, which deals with events from the 1920 Carinthian plebiscite to the events of spring 1945, including ethnic, ideological, and geopolitical divisions shaped

by the Cold War and the fall of Communism. The memorialisation of Bleiburg and its significance for Croatia can be compared to other memory practices in Carinthia which are sometimes of only local significance (Leše, Viktring), while others (Lienz) draw international participants.

The third and final panel further deepened the transnational approach of the workshop. NIKOLINA ŽIDEK (Madrid) explored historical memory practices of Bleiburg events in Croatian emigration in Argentina and its transmission through three generations: the survivors – the first generation, the children and the grandchildren. Since during the Communist regime in Yugoslavia Bleiburg was practically a taboo, the first efforts in writing about the events on Bleiburg were carried out by Croatian post-World War II emigration in Argentina. Židek argued that, while preserving the memory of the collective trauma of their fathers and grandfathers, the new generations who have no personal memories of the hand reorganised the memory itself, but also downloaded practices from Argentinean society's historical memory of the Dirty War as well as other diaspora communities settled in Argentina, such as the Armenian diaspora, and incorporated them into commemorative practices of Bleiburg. TAMARA BANJEGLAV's (Rijeka) presentation looked at Bleiburg commemorations from the time when the first commemoration was held in 1952 until today. The presentation followed the organisation and transformation of the commemoration from the time when the only participants who gathered at Bleiburg were members of the Croatian émigré community until today when the Bleiburg commemoration is attended by the entire Croatian political leadership. Banjeglav analysed how each of the Croatian governments from 1990 until today positioned itself towards the commemoration and followed the (non-)attendance of the country's political leadership at the commemoration each year as an indicator of the political atmosphere in Croatia itself. Closing the workshop, JELENA ĐUREINOVIĆ (Giessen) offered a Serbian perspective on contemporary Serbian memory politics and discourses on the victims of Communism. Focusing less on Bleiburg, but pointing out as to

why other memory narratives mattered more although there had been Serbian victims in Bleiburg too, Đureinović examined the different layers of the culture of remembrance of World War II and the post-war period in contemporary Serbia. She focused on the discourses about the people killed in 1944 and 1945 as the Yugoslav Partisans were settling accounts with the opposing sides from the war. Discussing the mechanisms of the state-sanctioned memory politics directed to the victims of the executions and post-war trials in Yugoslavia the presentation focused on the framing of the narrative of the innocent victims of the communist regime and the nationalisation of the victims in the public discourses.

Over the course of one afternoon and three panels, the workshop brought together a group of interdisciplinary scholars, who are all well-grounded in historiography of Southeast Europe and memory studies, to analyse the transnational aspects of the Bleiburg commemoration, discuss the latest contributions to the historiography of the events of 1945, share information on historical resources (such as the UDBA archives, materials from Croatian émigré communities, video footage and photographs and articles from the Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian and Austrian media). It therefore represented an important step towards a non-nationalist, all-encompassing and multi-dimensional approach towards the study of „Bleiburg“. However, as all participants agreed, this workshop could only be seen as the starting point for future scholarship.

#### **Conference overview:**

Conference Opening; Introduction

Dario Brentin (Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, Austria) & Vjeran Pavlaković (University of Rijeka, Croatia)

*Panel 1: State of the Art: Historiography and Recent Research*

Vjeran Pavlaković (University of Rijeka, Croatia) and Renato Stanković (University of Rijeka, Croatia) - Researching the Bleiburg Commemoration: Methodologies, Sources, Controversies

Christian Axboe Nielsen (Aarhus University,

Denmark) - The Surveillance and Infiltration of the Bleiburg Commemorations by the Yugoslav State Security Service

Davor Pauković (University of Dubrovnik, Croatia) - Bleiburg in the Context of Memory of Communism in Croatia

*Panel 2: Commemorative Practices and the Politics of the Past*

Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc (Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Slovenia) - Lack of Pliberk/Bleiburg in Slovene Memoryscape

Ana Ljubojević (University of Zagreb, Croatia) - Contested Narratives of Bleiburg in the Context of WWII Remembrance in Croatia

Valentin Sima (University of Klagenfurt, Austria) - Does „Bleiburg“ Belong to a Carinthian Culture of Memory? An Approach Towards a Blurry Relationship

*Panel 3: Transnational Approaches to Collective Memory*

Nikolina Židek (IE University, Madrid, Spain) - Historical Memory Practices and Links between Croatia, Spain and Argentina

Tamara Banjeglav (University of Rijeka, Croatia) - The Bleiburg Commemoration in Croatian Parliamentary Decisions

Jelena Đureinović (University of Giessen, Germany) - Remembering 1944/1945 in Contemporary Serbia: Memory Politics and Discourses on the Victims of Communism

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