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“We ourselves proudly chose death.” The Concept of Heroic Partisan Suicide in Slovenia in the Yugoslav Context**

IZVLEČEK

»SAMI PONOSNO SMO SI SMRT IZBRALI.«
KONCEPT PARTIZANSKEGA HEROJSKEGA SAMOMORA
V SLOVENIJI V JUGOSLOVANSKEM KONTEKSTU

Članek se osredotoča na koncept herojskega samomora med jugoslovanskimi in še posebej slovenskimi partizani med drugo svetovno vojno. Partizansko poveljstvo je pričakovalo, da borci v skrajnih okoliščinah naredijo samomor, da bi se izognili sramotnemu zajetju, mučenju in potencialni izdaji podatkov. Po vojni so partizanski samomori formalno obveljali za junaško dejanje najvišjega samožrtvovanja, vendar so hkrati predstavljali tudi sivo polje jugoslovanskega spomina na vojno, ker so odpirali zahtevna moralna vprašanja, kot je nesprejemljivost samomora z vidika marksistične etike. Mnenja, ki so se v jugoslovanski strokovni in laični javnosti pojavljala o partizanskih herojskih samomorih, so bila raznolika. Odnos do samomorov se je med različnimi deli države razlikoval, domnevno glede na tradicionalne percepcije smrti in samomora, ki so jih gojile regionalne ali lokalne skupnosti.

Ključne besede: samomor, herojski samomor, partizani, druga svetovna vojna, Jugoslavija

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the concept of heroic suicide among Yugoslav and especially Slovenian partisans during the Second World War. Partisan command expected fighters to commit suicide in extreme circumstances to avoid ignominious capture, torture and potential treason. After the war, partisan suicides were formally recognized as a heroic act of the highest self-sacrifice, but at the same time they also represented a grey area of Yugoslav memory of the war because they raised challenging moral questions, such as the inadmissibility of suicide from the point of view of Marxist ethics. Opinions expressed in the Yugoslav professional and lay public about the partisan heroic suicides were diverse. Attitudes towards suicide were different in different parts of the country, supposedly depending on the traditional perceptions of death and suicide held by regional or local communities.

Key words: suicide, heroic suicide, partisans, Second World War, Yugoslavia

Introduction

Suicide is generally regarded as an act that is criticised, condemned and rejected by society.¹ However, there are certain exceptions in which suicide is portrayed in a new light and takes on a much more positive connotation. In his classic study, Émile Durkheim categorised this type of suicide among altruistic suicides, i.e. those that are desired or even expected in society because the deliberate death brings a benefit to society, so that such suicides take on the character of heroism and martyrdom. On the other hand, they also demonstrate society's dominance over the human individual and impose demanding, extreme expectations on him.² It is a quid pro quo: if an individual sacrifices himself for the common good, he is celebrated posthumously, and so it is not surprising that this type of suicide is present mainly in military contexts.³ This relationship also gave rise to a concept that Durkheim only hinted at in passing,⁴ but which will be the focus of this article: heroic suicide.

One of the few people in Slovenia who dealt with the topic of heroic suicide was Dr Janko Kostnapfel, professor at the Department of Psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine in Ljubljana. In his opinion, a suicide, if committed consciously, "can show

1 I would like to thank Blaž Štangelj, Bojan Godeša and Nataša Henig Mišičič for help with suggestions and gathering literature, and Jan Hlade for help with collecting statistical data.

2 Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 178–81. Jeffrey W. Riemer, 'Durkheim's, 'Heroic Suicide' in Military Combat,' *Armed Forces & Society* 25, No. 1 (1998): 103–05.

3 Joseph A. Blake, 'Death by Hand Grenade: Altruistic Suicide in Combat,' *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 8, No. 1 (1978): 47–51.

4 Durkheim, *Suicide*, 199.

an obvious note of grandeur and heroism."⁵ According to Kostnapfel's definition, a heroic suicide is "the act in which an individual, a couple or a larger group of people take their own life with free will and in clear (lucid) consciousness, to convey a lofty, philanthropic message with their death or to sacrifice their lives for the destruction of a recognised, confirmed enemy and its weapons." Kostnapfel also believed that not endangering the lives of others is a key element in the definition of heroic suicide: "No one, not even an imaginary worldly or otherworldly god, can give permission to sacrifice the innocent."⁶

It is difficult to talk about the scientifically recognised definition of heroic suicide, as there is no consensus among experts as to whether this type of suicide exists at all. Undoubtedly, the concept contains inherent political and ideological components that distance it from a strictly scientific treatment and raise many dilemmas. Is suicide heroic even from the point of view of a military opponent (e.g. did kamikaze commit heroic suicides)? Is the heroic character of suicide determined by the suicide victim himself or by the society around him? Is such a death more heroic than death by the enemy through torture, shooting or hanging? Or is the term merely an oxymoron that cannot exist on its own? Either way, the idea of heroic suicide is a complex phenomenon that - if it exists at all - resides in a moral-psychological grey area. In the words of Kostnapfel: "The question of the existence of heroic suicide is not always easy to answer with a yes or no, because between these two answers lies a wide field of all kinds of psychological and also ethical entanglements and events."⁷

Heroic suicide is a category that is used in many ideological-political state systems, especially when they talk about their own military past. The tendency to portray "our" army and soldiers as fair, just and heroic, as opposed to every enemy, paints the past as a simple binary conflict between good and evil. Heroic suicide is one of the categories used to prove the heroism and self-sacrifice of one's own soldiers, who consciously gave their lives for the highest goals. Such an approach was also taken by socialist Yugoslavia, which largely based the legitimacy of its power on the anti-fascist partisan struggle during the Second World War, then called the National Liberation Struggle (NLS). A strong cult developed around the partisans who died heroic deaths. Nevertheless, the idea of heroic partisan suicide in Yugoslavia had a complex function that was not simply unequivocally positive. It was also a potentially problematic topic that raised uncomfortable questions not only about partisan warfare, but also about combatant morality, betrayal, cowardice, and other undesirable categories. The paper presents some key features of the concept of partisan heroic suicides in Slovenia, as they appeared in the Yugoslav framework.

5 Janko Kostnapfel, *Zakaj vojna* (Ljubljana: Unigraf, 2007), 111.

6 Janko Kostnapfel, 'Herojski samomor – da ali ne?' *Isis: glasilo Zdravniške zbornice Slovenije* 15, No. 3 (2006): 56.

7 *Ibidem*, 58.

An Attempt of Categorization of Partisan Suicides

Before discussing the perceptions of partisan suicides from the perspective of Slovenian socialist society, the concept of partisan suicide must be defined. The term refers to suicides committed by members of the Slovenian partisan movement under difficult military, existential or psychological circumstances during the military conflicts between April 1941 and May 1945. It is certain that there were more than a few such incidents, but at the same time it is difficult to document such cases, as the summarising list was never published. Serbian historian Dr Vladimir Dedijer, best known as the author of extensive monographs on various topics of recent Yugoslav history (including his most famous work, the comprehensive biography of Josip Broz - Tito), wrote that he had collected material on 872 suicides of Yugoslav partisans,⁸ but his list was not found. Based on his database of partisans killed by Slovenian members of the anti-communist groups (MVAC, Home Guards, Chetniks), researcher Silvo Grgič calculated that suicides in Slovenia accounted for around 2% of violent partisan deaths. At the same time, the author warns: “Of course, these are confirmed suicides, as there is no verified data on suicides from the many cases of violent deaths of partisans in offensives, of which we assume that there were many more than is known at the time.”⁹

Suicides characterised the entire war period. The attack by the occupying forces on Yugoslav territory, which began on 6 April 1941, caused extreme despair among many inhabitants of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, especially among the soldiers of the helpless Yugoslav army. The poet and later partisan Miran Jarc wrote that during the first battles on the Yugoslav-German border, he saw a Yugoslav soldier of Serbian origin who said he would rather go into the water than into German captivity, and he drowned in the river.¹⁰ After the soldiers, civilians also began to commit suicide. On 10 April, Andrej Kukec, the manager of the paper factory in Sladka Gora, jumped out of the production hall onto the concrete floor because German sympathisers threatened to hang him.¹¹

In the weeks and months following the military victory over the Yugoslav army and the dismemberment of Slovenian territory by the occupying forces, a Slovenian partisan movement emerged within the framework of the Liberation Front, which was made up of several groups, with members of the Communist Party of Slovenia playing a leading role. Military partisan formations were formed to fight against the occupying soldiers and the Slovenes of the counter-revolutionary camp. By May 1945, tens of thousands of people had died in the military conflicts in Slovenia, both soldiers from all warring parties and civilians. Many were killed in the fighting, others were shot as hostages, some died in the camps, and some were self-inflicted.

8 Vladimir J. Dedijer, ‘O partizanskom samožrtvovanju i herojskom samoubistvu,’ *Glas SANU: Odeljenje istorijskih nauka: knjiga 3*, No. 338 (1983): 258. A copy is available at SI AS 1979, Družina Dedijer, f. 72.

9 Silvo Grgič, *Zločini okupatorjevih sodelavcev: knjiga 1* (Ljubljana: Društvo piscev zgodovine NOB Slovenije, Novo mesto: Tiskarna Novo mesto, Dolenjska založba, 1995), 431.

10 Miran Jarc, ‘Odgnali so nas iz Maribora – april 1941,’ *Borec* 42, No. 8–9 (1990): 755.

11 Drago Novak, Ivo Orešnik and Herman Šticl, *Pomniki NOB v Slovenskih goricah in Prekmurju* (Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1985), 217.

Suicide under extreme circumstances, usually by shooting or exploding a bomb, was, according to the data collected so far, a particular speciality of the partisans, as it occurred relatively more frequently among them than among all other military formations in Yugoslavia.¹² Due to the insufficiently collected and organised data, it is currently not possible to present comparative statistics on partisan suicides on the territory of the individual Yugoslav republics. An interesting starting point, however, is Dedijer's suggestion that the number of suicides could depend on the environment in which they occurred and its traditional notions of death and suicide. He surmises that there were fewer partisan suicides in Bosnia and Montenegro because the society there valued the fight to the death more, and in the Catholic milieu, which strictly rejects any form of suicide.¹³ At this stage of research, it is still too early to draw generalised conclusions even for Slovenia; some credibility can be attributed to the claims that suicides increased during major offensives, such as the Italian Rog offensive in Slovenia in 1942,¹⁴ but at the same time it is necessary to point out the observation of some psychologists that under extreme circumstances a person invests all his mental and physical strength in survival, so that the number of suicides often decreases.¹⁵

For this article, a list of documented suicides by Slovenian partisans was compiled based on previously published material that has appeared since the war until today: monographs, anthologies and articles about the NLS, monographs of NLS memorials and articles in the magazine *Borec*, the newsletter of the Slovenian Association of Fighters. The result is around 250 documented suicides, although the number is far from completely reliable due to data deficiencies, often unreliable statements and contradictory claims from various sources. As the Croatian historian Dr Vjekoslav Perica points out: "It is not always easy to research the circumstances under which such cases occurred. Spectacular heroic suicides in front of crowds of witnesses are rare, and even in this case, each case is a potential rashomon and a victim of the later battles over memory and collective memory."¹⁶

The suicides were divided into eight groups, which represent an attempt to catalogue the most important types of partisan heroic suicides in Slovenia according to the specific circumstances in which they occurred. Only suicides of partisan fighters or other active participants in the partisan struggle were considered. Cases of suicides by partisan helpers (e.g. house owners who gave them shelter) and fighters of other anti-fascist formations are not included, nor are "false" suicides, i.e. cases in which fighters were wounded for one reason or another - a failed suicide attempt, a serious injury or involuntary self-harm - and were finished with a mercy shot by comrades or enemies.

12 Nemanja Dević, *Za partiju i Tita: partizanski pokret u Srbiji 1941–1944* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2021), 781.

13 Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita 2* (Rijeka: Liburnija, Zagreb: Mladost, 1981), 515.

14 Nataša Budna, Jože Dežman and Janez Lušina, *Gorenjski partizan: Gorenjski odred 1942–1945* (Kranj: Partizanski knjižni klub, 1992), 166.

15 Janko Kostnapfel, *Jutro poldan večer: izbrani spisi* (Ljubljana: Unigraf, 1997), 146, 147, 197.

16 Vjekoslav Perica, 'Kult narodnih heroja i patriotska mitologija titoizma,' in *Mitovi epohe socijalizma* (Novi Sad: Centar za istoriju, demokratiju i pomirenje, Sremska Kamenica: Fakultet za evropske pravno-političke studije, 2010), 114.

Also not taken into account are cases in which the enemy claimed that the combatant had committed suicide (usually in captivity), but the literature unanimously claims that this was a cover-up of the execution. In geographical terms, the list is limited to the Slovenian territory with the neighbouring border regions.

The first group of partisan suicides is represented by the most common circumstances for this act: a hopeless military situation in which a fighter was surrounded by the enemy and could not realistically expect a successful breakthrough, so he sought a solution in suicide. These circumstances were reflected in 53 suicides, of which 17 occurred in 1942, 9 in 1943, 16 in 1944 and 11 in 1945. Two representatives of this group were posthumously honoured with the title of National Hero of Yugoslavia. The first is Vinko Paderšič - Batreja, who, together with a group of partisans, took refuge in the Becele Cave near Zagrad during the Italian offensive in 1942. Due to betrayal, the cave was surrounded and everyone except Paderšič surrendered on the basis of (false) promises that they would not be punished. He fought alone against the Italian division for two more days until he ran out of ammunition and shot himself with his last bullet on 24 September 1942.¹⁷ The second is Ivan Kosovel, who was surrounded by Italian fascists in a house in Vrtovin near Ajdovščina on 7 March 1943. During the battle, he destroyed illegal documents and then killed himself.¹⁸

The second group could be considered a subgroup of the first, since it includes the same circumstances of suicide, only with the addition of a further aggravating circumstance: the wounding of the partisan, which further limited or completely stopped his mobility and speed. There are documented cases in which fighters committed suicide not only because of their own inability to flee from the enemy, but also out of an altruistic motive, so that comrades who tried to help them would not fall behind because of them. With 80 documented cases - 3 cases in 1941, 19 in 1942, 12 in 1943, 35 in 1944 and 11 in 1945 - this group is the most numerous of all. Accordingly, this group includes seven national heroes, all of whom were well-known and respected commanders or commissars of various partisan units. At the end of September 1941, after the destruction of the Rašica Company, Maks Pečar - Črne accompanied the wounded on their way home. They were attacked by the Germans in Selo near Vodice. Wounded Pečar fought to the end and shot himself with the last bullet.¹⁹ On 8 February 1942, Jakob Bernard was travelling with a companion when they were surrounded by a German ski patrol near Stirpnik. The companion was killed immediately and Bernard tried to escape, but was forced to commit suicide due to the heavy snow, the difficult terrain and his wounds.²⁰ Lojze Hohkraud was ambushed by the German police near

17 Ferdo Gestrin et al. (eds.), *Pomniki naše revolucije* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1961), 173, 174. Albert Jakopič (ed.), *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1978), 144, 145, 153. Petar Kačavenda and Dušan Živković (eds.), *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije: N-Ž* (Beograd: Partizanska knjiga, Narodna knjiga, Titograd: Pobjeda, 1982), 63. Miloš Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati: slovenski športniki v NOB* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1986), 196–98.

18 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 354. Petar Kačavenda and Dušan Živković (eds.), *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije: A-M* (Beograd: Partizanska knjiga, Narodna knjiga, Titograd: Pobjeda, 1982), 404, 405.

19 Jože Ravbar - Jošt, 'S prvoborci kamniškega bataljona,' *Borec* 22, No. 3 (1970): 248–54.

20 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 259. Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 71. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 344.

Cvetež on 31 May 1942. Wounded and leaving a trail of blood behind him, he buried the illegal documents and shot himself in the head.²¹ On 26 February 1943, Jože Slak and his comrades fell into an Italian ambush near Dolnja Straža. Slak was wounded during the conflict and in order not to fall into the hands of the enemy, he committed suicide by activating a bomb.²² On 18 March 1943, Vladimir Dolničar took part in the clashes with the Germans, Italians and Home Guards in the Belca Gorge. He was wounded while trying to break through enemy lines and took his own life due to the hopeless situation.²³ Marko Redelonghi was recovering from his injuries near Breginj. When German soldiers surrounded him on 5 May 1944, he fought against them until he was wounded and shot himself with the last bullet.²⁴ Alojz Kolman - Marok was in the village of Koprivnik on 4 November 1944 when the house he was staying in was surrounded by a Home Guard unit. During an attempt to break through, he was wounded in the knee and shot himself to avoid being captured.²⁵

The third group is also related to the first two in terms of the circumstances that the suicide occurred in the face of a hopeless military situation, but its differentia specifica is that the situation was caused by the suicide victim himself by assassinating a figure from the enemy camp. This specific category has only one representative, the 16-year-old student Dušan Turk, who, as a member of the Security Intelligence Service, together with a colleague, carried out the execution of the commander of the anti-communist Slovenian Legion, Ivan Peršuh, in the Vzajemna Insurance building in Ljubljana on 26 May 1942. When Peršuh was shot, they fled the scene, but on the street Turk missed the front door through which he was supposed to escape and fled into a neighbouring shop that had no other exit. He shot at his pursuers, was wounded in the leg and killed himself with the last bullet.²⁶

The fourth category includes suicides of persons in prison, during arrest or as a result of torture during interrogation. Such suicides and attempted suicides occurred from the first days of the occupation, when prisoners anxiously awaited interrogations or returned from them with broken spirits. They developed an apathy that could turn into depression, leading to a suicide attempt. Many prisoners were not only afraid of torture, but also of giving their names and information to their tormentors against their will.²⁷ Some prisoners tried to commit suicide out of guilt after the betrayal. Prison staff tried to prevent suicide - it being a form of escape from punishment - and therefore strictly controlled what items prisoners carried with them. However, prisoners were quite innovative in their choice of means - and unfortunately often successful.

21 Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 288. Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 505. Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 24, 25.

22 *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 143. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 383, 384. Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: N-Ž*, 199.

23 Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 192, 193. Grgič, *Zločini okupatorjevih sodelavcev: knjiga 1*, 234.

24 Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: N-Ž*, 166, 167.

25 Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 43, 177, 178. Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 120. Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 392, 393. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 360.

26 Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 60. Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 21.

27 Damijan Guštin, *Za zapahi: prebivalstvo Slovenije v okupatorjevih zaporih 1941-1945* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2006), 291-93.

The guards' reaction to such deaths was usually not compassionate, but violent, as Janez Gerčar reports about the unnamed prisoner who hanged himself in Begunje penitentiary and was found dead by a guard: "They brought him down, but instead of providing medical assistance, they threw him on the ground and beat him mercilessly with their fists and kicked him, but they could not revive him. Stripped to his bare feet, they threw him into a box made of rough boards, took him to the communal pit and buried him."²⁸ There are 27 suicides recorded in this category - 4 in 1941, 9 in 1942, 3 in 1943 and 5 each in 1944 and 1945, while for one man the time of death was not established. None of the people in this category received the title of national hero. A better-known example is the illegal Tine Majer, who jumped out of the second floor window of the Gestapo headquarters in Celje in the summer of 1942 during German interrogations and torture.²⁹

The fifth category is suicide due to psychological problems. Guerrilla warfare was often extremely arduous: the fighters battled their way through difficult terrain in bad weather, were often poorly equipped and clothed, and were hungry and thirsty. The difficult conditions combined with the constant expectation of an enemy attack caused or exacerbated psychological problems in many of the fighters, which in extreme cases could lead to a nervous breakdown and suicide. Partisan Ivan Može wrote that he seriously contemplated suicide during the difficult winter crossing over the mountains:

"I was convinced that this damned climb was already over. But when I came to my senses a little and looked around, I saw an almost vertical rock formation above us and Podbrdo below us. Full of fear, I asked an official who was walking alongside the convoy where we were going. He just raised his hand in the direction of the rocks and walked on ... I was so shaken that I thought about shooting myself. If I hadn't had a wounded and even more shattered fellow villager, Andrej, next to me, I probably would have done just that and my bones would be rotting in Gorenjska today ..."³⁰

Extremely traumatic news in connection with the violent death of a family member or partner could also cause partisans to commit suicide. Nine cases are documented in this category, of which the case of the Bizjak family from the village of Predmeja above Ajdovščina is the best known. Slavko Bizjak joined the partisans. When the fascists found out, they took revenge on his family. On the night of 24 to 25 February 1943, the fascists tortured and shot all the family members: Slavko's father, his mother, his brother, his pregnant wife and his two-year-old son. When they left the house, the fascists also set fire to it. When Slavko Bizjak learnt of the tragedy, he visited the scene, but the event shook him too much. He wrote the message "I could not do otherwise" on a cigarette wrapper and committed suicide.³¹

The sixth category is group suicide. 17 cases of mass suicides (with at least two partisans committing suicide at the same time) were documented, in which a total of

28 Janez Gerčar, *Begunje: priča narodovega trpljenja* (Ljubljana: Založba Borec, 1969), 68.

29 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 479.

30 Radoslav Isaković, *Kosovelova brigada* (Ljubljana: Odbor Kosovelove brigade, Partizanska knjiga, 1973), 695.

31 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 353.

around 56 people died. The sources in these cases are often unclear, so that the information on the number of suicides committed and the names of the suicide victims vary from source to source. The most famous of these events is the battle of the Okroglo Cave. In April 1942, part of the Kokra Company broke out of the German encirclement in the forest of Udin boršt. A group of 13 fighters hid in the cave in the rock face above the Sava River, next to the village of Okroglo near Kranj. Following a betrayal, German soldiers surrounded the cave and began firing at the narrow entrance. When this had no effect, they also tried mining, bringing prisoners from Begunje to persuade the partisans to surrender and burning straw in front of the cave entrance. The fighting continued on 21 and 22 April 1942, two partisans died and six committed suicide due to the hopeless situation. The remaining five fighters were stunned by the smoke and captured by the Germans, all but one of whom were later shot.³² There is only one national hero in this category, Franc Ravbar - Vitez, who was hiding with four comrades in a partisan shelter - a mud house - in the Poljane Valley on 13 January 1943. As the hiding place had been betrayed, the German police surrounded it in the morning and attacked it with hand grenades, causing the roof of the shelter to collapse. In the hopeless situation, most of the fighters were wounded and Ravbar and two partisans took their own lives.³³

The seventh category includes suicides in partisan hospitals. In order to treat wounded and sick partisans, an illegal medical network had to be set up, hidden in forests and mountains, where the constant danger of betrayal or exposure made these places particularly vulnerable. The psychological pressure on the patients was great, as such an event meant almost certain death for them. In some Yugoslav hospitals, weapons were therefore taken from the wounded, which was a kind of "secondary suicide prevention".³⁴ There was particular pressure on the doctors of the partisan patients, who also had to be prepared for suicide. One of them, Pavel Lunaček - Igor, stated: "When I was with the partisans, I always carried two hunting ampoules with hydrogen cyanide in my jacket pocket, because I had sworn to myself that I would never leave my immobile wounded, even if the enemy entered the hospital."³⁵ Four cases are documented in Slovenia, including the suicide of a wounded man, a doctor and a female doctor, and by far the most notorious case, mass death in the Ogenjca hospital near Loški Potok. During the Rog offensive, around 15 seriously ill patients from Ogenjca were transferred to a cave deeper in the forest, where they were cared for by 20-year-old nurse Marija Čepon - Mimica and treated by Dr Aleksander Gala - Peter. One of the patients left the hiding place, revealed the location to the Italian army and returned with the soldiers on 31 July 1942. The wounded had previously agreed that Čepon would shoot them if they were betrayed. When this happened, the nurse killed most of

32 Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 128, 129. Ivan Jan, *Okrogelska jama* (Ljubljana: ČZDO Komunist, TOZD Komunist, 1982).

33 Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 28. Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 13, 259. Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: N-Ž*, 166. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 287-91, 379, 380.

34 Kostnapfel, *Zakaj vojna*, 100.

35 Janko Kostnapfel, *Srečanja* (Radovljica: Didakta, 2010), 25.

the wounded and then herself, and some who survived the shooting killed themselves; who exactly was shot and who shot themselves is still quite unclear despite research, only 17-year-old Ciril Vidmar is proven to have shot himself.³⁶

The last, eighth category is specific, as it includes presumed suicides. As already emphasised, the documentation of suicides during the war is not an easy task, as it is often not clear from witness statements whether a person's death was a suicide or not. This category also includes cases of alleged suicides where the information from different, equally credible sources does not match, as well as cases where Yugoslav researchers have already admitted that it is impossible to determine from the available sources under what circumstances the death occurred. 19 cases are documented in this section, although it could undoubtedly be much more extensive, but there are still seven national heroes among them. In the case of Stane Kosec, it is not clear whether he committed suicide in the Begunje prisons on 3 October 1941 or whether the suicide was staged by the Germans,³⁷ and the same dilemma exists with Vida Janežič, except that she is said to have been poisoned on 5 October 1944.³⁸ On 21 May 1942, Jože Kovačič was wounded in clashes near the village of Tuji Grm. During the retreat, his comrades hid him in the woods near Vnajarje. Three days later, he was found by a boy whom Kovačič asked to tie a rope to his toe and the trigger of his gun, and when the boy did so and retreated, Kovačič shot himself with this improvised mechanism.³⁹ Other sources state that he was mowed down by a German machine gun and bled to death.⁴⁰ In the case of Janko Stariha, who according to most reports died on 7 November 1942 in a clash with the Germans in Dobrovlje (Tolsti vrh), a wound on his forehead, which was later found on his corpse, raises doubts.⁴¹ The main problem with the death of famous Gorenjska commander Jože Gregorčič - Gorenjc is that there were no reliable witnesses to it. Gregorčič was wounded in the leg during a clash with the Germans on Jelovica on 8 September 1942. His comrades hid him in the woods and covered him with branches and ferns. According to some reports, when they returned four days later, they found Gregorčič's body with a spliced head, from which they concluded that he had placed a bomb underneath to avoid being captured. According to other sources, the body was no longer there, only some coagulated blood.⁴² The situation is similar with Dušan Jereb - Štefan, who on 12 March 1943, on his way to Žužemberk with his group near the village of Veliki Lipovec, was ambushed by the Italians and the Home Guards and covered the breakthrough and retreat of his comrades with his pistol behind one of the buildings, while he himself died - it is not clear whether he was shot⁴³ or whether he shot himself.⁴⁴ For Ivan Turšič - Iztok, the published data do

36 Aleksander Gala, *Ogenjca: tragedija partizanskih ranjencev* (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1977).

37 Gestrin, *Pomniki naše revolucije*, 29. Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 403.

38 Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 312. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 146.

39 Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 421. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 363.

40 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 107.

41 Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: N-Ž*, 218. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 385.

42 Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 269, 270. Budna, Dežman and Lušina, *Gorenjski partizan*, 146.

43 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 146.

44 Kačavenda and Živkovič, *Narodni heroji: A-M*, 325.

not match: according to the most detailed study, he was ambushed by the Germans on the way to Lokev on 28 July 1944, was wounded in the legs and shot himself to escape capture,⁴⁵ but all other sources indicate that he died in battle.⁴⁶

Attitude Towards Partisan Suicide During the Second World War

During the war, the Yugoslav and Slovenian partisan leadership and the partisans themselves had a clearly defined, desirable moral image of an exemplary partisan. The basic qualities that should characterise such a fighter were heroism, perseverance and an unwavering belief in liberation. Any hint of cowardice was strictly rejected. The partisan writer and thinker Edvard Kocbek remarked during the war: "Pleasant times in the life of a person and in the life of collectives go hand in hand with the worst degradations of moral character. On the other hand, pain, suffering and fear prepare a new, higher, purer and firmer consciousness."⁴⁷ How does suicide fit into this binary model?

Partisan suicides were a continuation of the phenomenon of communist suicides in interwar monarchical Yugoslavia, which activists committed primarily to avoid torture during interrogations and revealing names or information. A communist was expected to bravely engage in a conflict if the police crossed his path, but if he happened to survive it, he was expected to show an unbending attitude towards the law enforcement authorities. Some activists could not bear the torture and committed suicide out of a guilty conscience after committing treason. In the pre-war period, however, there was not yet a complete consensus on suicide among the communist factions, so some revolutionaries categorically rejected it. Among them was the circle that organised and carried out the assassination of Interior Minister Milorad Drašković, the author of the anti-communist *Obznana*. They were of the opinion that the assassin must be "a fighter, a revolutionary who stood up against the violence of the bourgeoisie, not some desperado who first shoots the minister and then himself."⁴⁸

Even in the pre-war communist movement, suicide was therefore generally seen as an acceptable, if not desirable, act in the event of a direct clash with monarchical repression, serving as a safeguard against torture and betrayal. At the same time, there was no party policy in the pre-war period that required activists to commit suicide. The same applies to wartime. According to the broad consensus of researchers, nowhere in the partisan guidelines and documents was there an explicit instruction that a partisan must commit suicide if he finds himself in a hopeless situation.⁴⁹ This was also claimed by participants in the partisan struggle. Vladimir Dedijer collected the testimonies of

45 Franjo Bavec, *Bazoviška brigada* (Ljubljana: Odbor Bazoviške brigade, Partizanska knjiga, 1970), 313, 314.

46 Lado Ambrožič, 'Heroj Ivan Turšič: Iztok, komandant XXX divizije,' *Primorski dnevnik*, September 5, 1953, 4.

47 Edvard Kocbek, *Partizanski dnevnik: prva knjiga* (Ljubljana: Sanje, 2022), 195.

48 Devič, *Za partiju i Tita*, 782.

49 *Ibid.*, 781, 782. Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 522. Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 260. Grgič, *Zločini okupatorjevih sodelavcev: knjiga 1*, 431.

three Montenegrin officials and former partisans, who all happened to be called Veljko. The first of them, Veljko Milatović, wrote:

“Even before the war, great attention was paid to the behaviour of captured communists and sympathisers towards the class enemy. Before the war, there was a firm conviction that a communist must not betray anything, but in wartime this unwritten rule grew into the dictum that one must not surrender to the enemy alive, because surrender is tantamount to treason. This belief was particularly widespread among students and intellectuals - the party members. They adhered most strictly to this sacred rule.”⁵⁰

Veljko Mićunović claimed the same:

“During the war, there was no directive on the necessity of suicide in order not to fall into the hands of the enemy, but in practise this was also the case. When we were with the guerillas in the winter of 1942, 1943 and the courier left for just one day, we said goodbye to him as if we would never see each other again, that is, it was assumed that in the event of encirclement he would have to fight to the last bullet and save that bullet for himself so that he would not fall alive into the hands of the enemy.”⁵¹

The last Veljko, Veljko Kovačević, added: “The idea that a partisan must not fall alive into the hands of the enemy lived in every fighter as if it were an order from above. There was nothing more shameful than a partisan being captured. It is interesting that both party members and non-members thought this way. It just lived in us.”⁵²

Nevertheless, the claim that there was no guideline for partisan suicide is only true to a certain extent. While the search for a document that directly calls for suicide is indeed a fruitless endeavour, it is also clear from the testimonies that the command fully expected the fighters to commit suicide if necessary. This is most clearly seen in the instructions issued by the Serbian General Staff for the formation and training of partisan units in November 1942, which demanded:

“A partisan must not surrender to the enemy unless he no longer has the strength to kill himself, i.e. he is wounded in both hands and cannot commit suicide. If he is captured, he must not confess anything to the enemy, because even the slightest confession is treason. His behaviour must be heroic, without the slightest sign of fear for his life.”⁵³

Testimonies about the events of the war that were published in Yugoslavia in the decades after 1945 repeatedly show that the partisan fighters understood and generally followed the command's informal recommendation that it was better to commit suicide than to be captured, tortured and forced to reveal secret information. Serbian historian Ljubinka Škodrić expresses a similar view, quoting an extract from a memoir document in the Belgrade Historical Archives: “The directive was - the last bullet is yours.”⁵⁴ A similar conclusion can be drawn from the short novel *Hotel Park* by Aleksandar Vojinović (1958),

50 Dedijer, ‘O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,’ 260.

51 Ibid., 261.

52 Dedijer, *Novi prilozii*, 522.

53 *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda, tom I, knjiga 20: borbe u Srbiji 1941–1944* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1965), 278.

54 Ljubinka Škodrić, *Žena u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941–1944* (Beograd: Arhipelag, Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2020), 431.

which deals with a partisan bombing raid on the eponymous hotel in Niš, Serbia, in which several German officers were killed and wounded - and to which a certain degree of documentary authenticity can be attributed, as the author was also the perpetrator of this attack. Vojinović describes how he spoke to the older communist Mika while planning the attack and asked him whether he should kill himself or be captured if the escape failed. Mika explains to him that a communist must strive to demoralise and frighten the enemy with his own heroic death, so that the enemy almost admires him.⁵⁵ As for the dilemma of suicide or capture, Mika believes that every partisan must decide for himself when he truthfully answers the question of whether he can endure the torture without betraying his comrades: "If you are sure / ... / that you can endure all the torture without betraying anything, then spend all the revolver bullets on them. But if you are not, then save the last one for yourself. That's for you to judge." Mika personally believes that a person does not have the right to take his own life, adding that "suicide at a difficult moment is a kind of help to the enemy," because with suicide the story is irrevocably over, but a partisan who does not choose suicide can also use the last bullet to shoot at the enemy, and the unpredictability of fate can even bring him survival and freedom later.⁵⁶

Regarding the conclusion that the leading party members and the military leadership quietly expected all subordinate fighters to be prepared to take their own lives at a critical moment, it should be noted that this also applied to them, especially judging by Dedijer's statements. Dedijer wrote that Edvard Kardelj, during the Rog offensive in 1942, thought about committing suicide if the enemy surrounded him.⁵⁷ In autumn 1943, Dedijer also spoke to Boris Kidrič about the possibility of suicide, whereupon the latter allegedly tapped his revolver in response and said "I always keep the last bullet for myself."⁵⁸ The willingness to commit suicide is said to have reached the very top. As Josip Broz - Tito's nephew Branko Broz reported, the commander-in-chief was prepared for the worst in Drvar in 1944: "When Tito saw the gliders descending, he realised that they were paratroopers. He pulled out his rifle and put a round in the barrel. It was clear that the situation was extremely critical and that he would not get into the enemy's hands alive."⁵⁹

The partisans understood and internalised the partisan command's loose instructions to commit suicide and to a large extent put them into practise - even if they were probably thinking more about their own interests than about the expectations of the military command when they committed the act. In general, however, several allies and opponents of the partisans noted a great, almost excessive heroism bordering on suicide. German documents spoke of "suicidal heroism,"⁶⁰ and the Slovenian-American pilot Jurij Kraigher - Žore claimed: "I saw the partisans running down the

55 Aleksandar Vojinović, *Hotel Park* (Ljubljana: Zavod Borec, 1961), 58, 59.

56 *Ibid.*, 60.

57 Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 263.

58 *Ibid.*, 264.

59 Branko Broz, *Moj život uz Tita* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1982), 95.

60 Boško Brajović, 'Iz događaja u Beogradu i oko Čačka,' in Koča Popović et al. (eds.), *Ustanak naroda Jugoslavije 1941: zbornik: knjiga treća* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod JNA Vojno delo, 1964), 816.

hill and attacking the Germans in perfect formation. These partisans simply have a kind of suicidal conviction.”⁶¹ On the other hand, the partisan commanders repeatedly criticised the fighters for being overly heroic and unnecessarily endangering their own lives,⁶² and there was also a negative assessment of the excessive modesty, ascetic refusal of food, clothing, shoes, etc., as the solid psychophysical health of the fighters was essential.⁶³

There is no shortage of testimonies about suicides and attempted suicides from the Slovenian partisan struggle, which were published both in the form of documentary articles and fiction stories, mostly based on real events. The same motives appear again and again in these testimonies. A situation is often described in which a wounded fighter asks his comrades to kill him mercifully, but they are unable to do so: “Shoot me, comrades, say that I have fallen.’ But who would shoot a partisan - our brother, it’s hard for us, he shot himself.”⁶⁴ Other accounts focus on the consequences of the suicide, i.e. the emotional distress of the fighters who had to come to terms with this act, including Vid Jerič from the Gubec Brigade: “It broke my heart. Bitter thoughts came over me. I lost a comrade with whom we carried out countless daring actions. He was the kind of comrade I have rarely met in my life. I had the feeling of being left alone, of being an orphan. Completely alone in a hopeless situation.” But it was the extreme feeling of loneliness that gave Jerič the courage to keep fighting: “Should I take my own life before I fall into the hands of those disgusting Italian servants? No!” He began firing at the enemy and managed to escape. “How marvellously a man fights when there is no other way out!”⁶⁵

Some narratives reflect the extent to which the fighters internalised the informal instructions of the military leadership to commit suicide, such as the inner monologue of the partisan Janez, who is hiding from the Home Guards:

“Everyone would rather shoot themselves than surrender. / ... / No! They won’t get me. A partisan does not surrender. At least not a true partisan. Anyone who surrenders is a coward to me. / ... / That’s what I taught my comrades. I have to prove that I myself am of the same opinion. No! I’d rather shoot myself. I won’t give them that pleasure. They would show me through the streets of Ljubljana like a bear. Pious women would spit after me ... / ... / No, they won’t catch me like that, Janez concluded. I’d rather be eaten by foxes. I’d rather shoot myself. At least they’ll say I was consistent, or as they say, determined.”⁶⁶

Some witnesses go even further, for example the partisan who was part of a besieged group that could only escape by jumping into the depths: “And then we jumped into the abyss one by one. As I flew through the air, I remembered the verses of

61 Vladimir Dedijer, *Dnevnik 1941–1944: treća knjiga, od 10. novembra 1943 do 7. novembra 1944* (Rijeka: GRO Liburnija, 1981), 188.

62 Milan M. Miladinović, *Moralni lik članova Saveza komunističke omladine Jugoslavije u NOR-u i revoluciji* (Beograd: self-publishing, 1972), 68.

63 Ibid., 130, 131.

64 Duško Kukman, ‘Na Štajerskem je bila trda,’ *Borec* 1, No. 3 (1949): 28.

65 Vid Jerič, ‘Samo dva sva se prebila,’ *Borec* 18, No. 1 (1967): 44.

66 Mile Pavlin, ‘Zgodilo se je ...,’ *Borec* 6, No. 5–6 (1954): 214–16.

Prešeren: 'Less frightening is the night in the black earth ...'"⁶⁷ The partisan referenced France Prešeren's verses "Less frightening is the night in the black earth / Than days of slavery under the bright sun," which spoke of death being a better option than life in the shackles of slavery, often used as a striking slogan in partisan press and propaganda, and also reflected well the partisans' philosophy of preferring suicide to capture.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the motif of heroic perseverance in life and in battle also appears in the same stories, regardless of the difficult circumstances. In such stories, suicide takes on the character of a defeatist act and is no longer the act of a hero. A motif that is often emphasised is the thought of the family, for whom a partisan renounces death, for example in the case of Karel Kolovšek, when he is surrounded and finds himself facing the abyss: "Should I throw myself into the depths?' Karel thought. 'No, I have a family.' The image of his young wife and his five-week-old daughter, whom he had left at home, appeared before him. The thought of his two beloved beings held him back."⁶⁹ Another typical case is a demoralised partisan who wants to end his life due to injuries or heavy losses, but his comrades persuade him to do the opposite: "Janez's shattered heel hurt more and more. He began to despair. Suddenly he collapsed on the floor and said he wanted to shoot himself. He began to prepare the rifle. I knew he was serious, so I took the gun from him and sat down next to him. 'Are you a partisan or not? It's really not that bad to give up. I'll help you and we will go on and catch up.' He calmed down and we slowly walked on."⁷⁰ A similar situation is the suggestion of a group suicide, which comes from a demotivated team and is harshly rejected by the commander: "Are you insane? To kill ourselves now, after we have so luckily escaped through the fire of the rapid-fire rifles and machine guns - when we slipped past hundreds and hundreds of Germans? No, comrade, not now! We will keep to fight with the Germans! They will pay dearly for this wickedness! We will keep singing and dancing, boys!"⁷¹ In a story based on a true incident, the writer Karel Grabeljšek illustrated the clash between the two approaches - willingness to commit suicide and insistence on fighting - using the example of two fighters battling the Home Guards in a besieged house:

"Should we fall into their hands alive? No, not alive! You must save the last bullet for yourself! That was always close to our hearts when we talked about it. Will it ever be necessary? Now the fateful moment was approaching. / ... / 'Žan, I say aloud, 'I will shoot myself, but you do what you want.' Žan looks at me, more reproachful than astonished. 'Wait a minute,' he says, 'you still have a few rounds left, don't you?' 'One and a half rounds more,' I reply. 'Well, then why are you in such a hurry,' Žan says, as if we were talking about completely mundane things."⁷²

67 Andrej Pagon - Ogarev, 'Okupatorjev zločin v Brdi nad Gornjo Kanomljo,' *Borec* 22, No. 5 (1970): 441.

68 Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 342.

69 Ivanka Lebar, 'Časi so minili, ostali so spomini,' *Borec* 19, No. 4 (1968): 368.

70 Andrej Pagon-Ogarev, 'Ranjen,' *Borec* 20, No. 1 (1969): 61, 62.

71 Katja Špur, 'Ofenziva (iz zapiskov L. Grada-Kijca),' *Borec* 19, No. 2 (1968): 110.

72 Karel Grabeljšek, 'Dva sta ostala,' *Borec* 15, No. 3 (1964): 135.

The partisan suicide could also become the subject of legends, not only commemorative literature. Especially in the southern parts of Yugoslavia, songs, myths and legends about the death of important partisan fighters, including those who committed suicide, often emerged, based on a strong tradition of epic folk lore. In Slovenia, such a tradition is less pronounced, and the few documented cases show the tragedy of losing one's life rather than the glorification of a heroic deed. One example is the poem *Death of a Partisan* by an unknown author:

“Oh my dears, how I have loved you,
I lived and suffered for you.
But now that I've lost you
I will take my own life.
He supports his chin with a rifle,
the shot goes off in the middle of the night
and on the bones he collapses,
spraying with red blood.”⁷³

A similar work is *The Ballad from the Karst Cave* or *The Ballad of a Heroic Death*, which describes the mass death in the Ogenjca hospital and has been circulating in Notranjska since at least 1943. The lyrics of the 15-verse song are about the wounded partisans who hid in a cave while awaiting their own fate when they were betrayed. The nurse shoots the fighters, while the remaining wounded - unlike in reality - kill themselves with a bomb:

“The gun goes off, the nurse now
falls, crashes to the ground,
her blood merges with the brother's. / ... /
The bomb goes off. It's over now.
Twelve dead partisans
and among them nurse Zlata.
Thirteen of them died here
a heroic death for freedom.”⁷⁴

Despite the above-mentioned testimonies and poems, the discourse on suicides in the wartime partisan press was not so unambiguous in its positive evaluation of their heroism. It should be noted that the word “suicide” or any more precise definition of the manner of death did not appear in most newspaper reports and letters. Kocbek quotes a letter he received from Jože Brejc (Jože Javoršek) on 16 October 1942 about the death of Vinko Paderšič, in which a heroic narrative is used but no suicide is mentioned:

“I bring you the difficult news that the Italians got hold of Paderšič and Kos and killed them. They were found in a cave where they had taken refuge from a sudden Italian attack. The Italians bombed the cave. Paderšič continued to respond with a shout and a rifle for

73 Marija Stanonik, 'Poezija konteksta II: „Na tleh leže slovenstva stebri stari,' *Borec* 45, No. 8–10 (1993): 925.

74 Gala, *Ogenjca*, 129–31.

two days until he ran out of ammunition. Finally, he too was hit by a bomb. Both fell as true heroes fall. As I write this to you, my eyes are filling with tears, but I too would like to die such a death. May their memory live forever!"

In the letter, Brejc is also said to have hinted that Paderšič was probably shot by a Slovenian member of the Home Guard.⁷⁵

The question of how reliable the authors of such documents were about the deaths of their comrades is certainly relevant here, and given the chaotic situation it would not be surprising that the information was often incorrect, so that the deaths of combatants who committed suicide could quickly be presented as deaths in battle. However, a review of the published documents of the Slovenian and Yugoslav partisan leadership and the leadership of individual units shows that the word "suicide" was rarely used in the reports. Individual commanders of partisan detachments did announce the suicide of their fighters in their reports, but such statements were rare. They were less hesitant to talk about suicides when it came to the death of military opponents. The partisan suicide, though widely celebrated, retained a shadow of infamy.

Some historians suggest interpreting the partisans' complex attitude to suicide through (at least) two phases. In the first months of the fighting, the partisan press did not talk about suicides as deaths worthy of party members, but covered up such deaths by using general terms and saying that they had "fallen" without giving details. Suicide is thus supposed to be an escape from the torture that every decent communist must endure proudly and without betrayal. The longer the war lasted and the death toll rose, the more the stigma of suicide faded among the partisans and a heroic interpretation of the act prevailed, but only if the suicide occurred before capture and not afterwards, which continued to bear a sign of dishonour.⁷⁶ It is also reasonable to consider whether it is better to view the phases as chronologically separate entities or as two approaches that were intertwined throughout.

Behind the image of unwavering heroism of the partisan army, which was conveyed in newspapers, leaflets, speeches and other partisan material, were hidden human emotions and the difficult psychological state of the frightened, confused and insecure fighters, who were constantly accompanied by the thought of the possibility of imminent death. Even the higher authorities were not immune to such feelings. In his diary entry of 25 August 1942, Edvard Kocbek described how they could not sleep at night: "Then [the writer and literary critic Josip Vidmar] turned to me and suddenly asked: 'Pavle, have you ever thought about suicide?' I looked at him in surprise and said slowly: 'No.' He replied: 'I have many times.' He did not explain his question and answer. He only thoughtfully concluded: 'How strange is the fate of man!'"⁷⁷

The partisans believed that the harsh conditions of war made it possible "to prove bravery and maturity or charlatanry, confirm or deny a person, confirm their qualities

75 Edvard Kocbek, *Tovarišija* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1949), 219.

76 Dević, *Za partiju i Tita*, 787, 788.

77 Kocbek, *Partizanski dnevnik*, 342.

or expose their faults and incompetence.”⁷⁸ Consequently, the partisans greatly valued the fight to the end and heroic behaviour during interrogations, especially those who went to their deaths without betraying anyone or who symbolically protested with a gesture or a word just before being shot.⁷⁹ But what happened if the partisan did not do what was expected of him and missed the right moment to commit suicide? Postponing suicide out of indecision or fear of death, which led to being captured, was viewed just as negatively by the partisans as desertion, surrender and betrayal. In general, fearfulness, cowardice and panic were strongly criticised and attempts were made to restrict them in the partisan ranks, often through demotion, exclusion or boycott, i.e. collectively ignoring the perpetrator,⁸⁰ and in extreme cases through execution. At the first regional party conference, the communists of Bosanska Krajina were particularly direct: “We do not need cowards in our ranks. Should the vanguard of the proletariat be a coward?”⁸¹ Miloš Rutar wrote about the Slovenian partisan movement: “I think that there is no coward among us, because everyone would laugh at him and judge him.”⁸²

In 1979, Dedijer discussed the (in)ability of partisans committing suicide with the politician Ivan Maček - Matija, who claimed that “there was an unwritten rule in Slovenia that a partisan could not surrender alive”: “At that time, he pointed out, in difficult days, when the highest Slovenian command was hidden in the bunkers over which the Italian army was marching, there was a general conviction that one should fight to the last bullet and then shoot oneself with the last bullet in order not to surrender alive to the enemy.” Maček also spoke about the case in Belca Valley in 1943, when the partisans - even worse, the partisan commanders - did not abide by the unwritten rule:

“In the Dolomites near Ljubljana, the Italians surrounded a group of partisans. The fighters fought to the last bullet, and then many killed themselves to avoid falling into the hands of the enemy. At the same time, the commander and the commissar surrendered. The commander was later sentenced to death and shot, and the commissar somehow got away, but to this day many national heroes in Slovenia look at him with contempt because he broke this sacred partisan rule.”⁸³

An archival document with a brief summary of Maček’s thoughts contains an even harsher criticism of this incident: “Matija says that the partisan law ordered both the commander and the commissar not to surrender to the enemy alive, but they did. There is no excuse for that.”⁸⁴

78 Milan M. Miladinović, *Osnovne moralne vrednosti socijalističke revolucije u Jugoslaviji 1941–1945* (Leskovac: s.n., 1980), 101.

79 Milan M. Miladinović, *Osnovna moralna svojstva komunista* (Subotica: Radnički univerzitet, 1973), 107, 108, 110–12.

80 Ibid., 91, 106, 107. Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 523.

81 Miladinović, *Osnovna moralna svojstva*, 107.

82 Budna, Dežman and Lušina, *Gorenjski partizan*, 130.

83 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju*, 514. Dedijer, ‘O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,’ 257.

84 SI AS 1979, Družina Dedijer, f. 203, Herojsko samoubistvo Slovenija, Razgovor Dedijera sa Ivanom Mačekom Matijom 7. XII 1979. godine.

Theoretical Interpretations of Partisan Heroic Suicide

After the Second World War, a complex system of historical myths, rituals and institutions emerged in Yugoslavia that preserved the memory of the war, its victims and heroes. Their function was to legitimise the new political order, which based its rule on the anti-fascist partisan struggle. The concept of partisan suicide was also incorporated into this system, while retaining its wartime vagueness. Many theoretical texts on the nature of the Yugoslav socialist system of self-government point out that the revolution was an act whose main goal was not a political overthrow per se, but the moral improvement and ennoblement of man in order to liberate the masses and enable them to self-actualize in the form of free creation according to their own desires and abilities. The new socialist system with its humanistic orientation was to represent the antithesis to the oppressive and egoistic society of the capitalist-bourgeois system. In this context, suicide was regarded as a serious disorder and a crime that a person should not commit against himself. Nevertheless, partisan suicide was an exception - for many years, theorists tried to formulate why and how exactly.

The concept of heroic partisan suicide first emerged in the discussion in the 1970s, but only experienced a real upswing at the beginning of the 1980s. Some researchers attribute this to the personal reluctance of the state leadership to enter the moral grey areas of the heroic narrative of the NLS. Tito himself in particular is said to have been reluctant to deal with such issues - these topics have worried and depressed him, which is why he propagated the triumphant chapters from the war, but not the episodes of martyrdom.⁸⁵

The analysis of the role of partisan suicides, which also shows the process of their heroisation, will be presented on the basis of the work of two key researchers on the subject in Yugoslavia. The first is the Serbian professor Dr Milan M. Miladinović, author of a substantial book opus on ethics and morality among communists and partisans, who also published in the journal *Borec*. His works are written according to a similar pattern, because regardless of the group that Miladinović chose as the focus of his research, in the core of the text he listed the positive qualities that he recognised in their actions (honesty, modesty, heroism, humanity, loyalty to the party, self-initiative, solidarity...) and supported them with quotes from sources and literature.

Miladinović categorised the issue of partisan suicides as a subcategory of humanity and, within it, the attitude towards the value of life. One of his first discussions on suicides from 1973 illustrates in an interesting way the complex, contradictory attitude towards partisan suicides. On a theoretical level, Miladinović showed his criticism of suicide:

"Throughout its activity, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia developed a love for life and opposed all phenomena of premeditated suicide and death. The struggle for a new life could not be linked to the undervaluation of life, self-negation, etc., because Marxist ethics

85 Perica, 'Kult narodnih heroja,' 114, 122.

considers the self-negation of life to be an immoral act and an expression of cowardice. It assumes that man as a social being does not have the right to take his own life, because this also negates humanity in every respect.”⁸⁶

Notwithstanding the rather harsh criticism of suicides, a number of heroic partisan suicides are listed on the next pages of Miladinović’s discussion.⁸⁷ The result is a kind of non sequitur, a balancing act between the inadmissibility of suicides from the point of view of Marxist ethics and the unreflected, non-contextualised listing of heroic suicides.

In the following years, Miladinović elaborated his views on suicide in more detail and presented them in a more coherent manner. The Gordian knot he tried to untie was the discrepancy between Marxist ethics, which negatively judge suicide as an anti-human act and a cowardly escape, since a person does not have the right to take their own life and thus deny their own humanity (Miladinović instead of the term “suicide” preferred to use the term “self-negation”, perhaps as a form of euphemism or self-censorship), and Yugoslav revolutionary practise, which served up an abundance of heroic suicides. As he asserts, the conflict is only apparent. Suicides were committed by the fighters in the name of preserving the dignity of human life, it was

“a protest against the physical oppression, torture and sadism of the occupiers and counter-revolutionaries, which they used against the fighters of the revolution and the inhabitants. In this way, the moral struggle also continues. The revolutionary leads the struggle to the end, and only when he is convinced that there are no conditions to save his life, he refuses to surrender and commits suicide.”⁸⁸

According to Miladinović’s interpretation, partisan suicide is therefore the opposite of the attitude that the destructive occupation regimes had towards human life, denying any value of life, and instead approaching the idea of contempt for death mentioned by Lenin,⁸⁹ proving “how much a revolutionary loves his life, worthy of a human being.”⁹⁰ Such a way of dying reflected an understanding of the value of life and preserved human dignity, which the enemy would otherwise have trampled on, thereby achieving a moral victory.⁹¹ Due to the exceptional circumstances, partisan suicide is therefore an honourable exception to the Marxist ethic that deserves recognition.

Miladinović warned that partisan suicide can only be justified if there is no other way out of a difficult military situation.⁹² He repeatedly emphasised that the partisan movement was aware of the value of human life and was trying to protect it. Consequently, no one should join the ranks of the partisans with the intention of falling for freedom; such an aim would miss the real goal of warfare, i.e. the realisation of the ideals of achieving freedom and socialism by military means. A partisan must value his own life because he values the lives of others in the same way, so that any

86 Miladinović, *Osnovna moralna svojstva*, 114.

87 Ibid., 114, 115.

88 Miladinović, *Moralni lik*, 67.

89 Miladinović, *Osnovne moralne vrednosti*, 118–21.

90 Ibid., 122.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., 122, 123.

display of exaggerated heroism or agitation for death is judged negatively, as a form of fatalistic contempt and pessimistic rejection of life, which is more characteristic of representatives of religion who believe that by self-sacrifice they can save themselves and the world from sin.⁹³ In short, the partisans, in Tito's words, "did not go into battle and die because they hated life, but because they loved life."⁹⁴

Before Tito's death, Miladinović was almost the only theorist to deal with the partisan suicides in Yugoslavia, and even then only sporadically, in the context of more general topics. The debate on this topic was only revived after the Tito era, in the 1980s, and showed that the experts did not have a unified position on this issue. The division of experts is perfectly illustrated by the events at the Fourth Yugoslav Symposium on the Prevention of Suicides at the Hotel Riviera in Herceg Novi at the end of September 1980 - marked by the attempted suicide of a hotel guest - which was opened by the Serbian psychologist and penologist Jelena Špadijer-Džinić with the question of whether heroic suicides even exist. She argued that the particular circumstances of war are not the best framework for analysing this phenomenon, as this would mean that all captured, tortured and killed fighters are implicitly cowards. The discussion sparked a heated debate among the participants. One of the next speakers, Serbian psychiatrist Borislav Kapamadžija, referring to the fate of Sergej Mašera and Milan Spasić (which will be discussed later), defended the thesis that heroic suicide is a meaningful concept. The leading Slovenian suicidologist Dr Lev Milčinski warned that the boundaries of heroic suicide were problematic, as such a death in a military conflict was only considered heroic on one side. Due to the still heated discussions, one of the participants suggested that those present should decide on the existence of the concept of heroic suicide - by voting. The voting results did not produce a definitive outcome: one third voted in favour of its existence, one third against, and one third chose an intermediate solution, stating that such suicide is primarily the result of a natural fear of torture and pain.⁹⁵

In the following years, the vagueness of expert opinions on heroic suicide was overshadowed by the publication of the discussions of the aforementioned Vladimir Dedijer, a Serbian historian, publicist, activist and politician living in Slovenia, who was the main proponent of the concept of heroic partisan suicide as the crowning proof of the fighters' commitment to the anti-fascist struggle and the highest form of revolutionary self-sacrifice. Dedijer became interested in the suicides of the partisans in the mid-1970s when he gave a lecture on the Yugoslav revolution at the Institute for the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne in Paris and the question arose during the debate as to whether the suicides of the Yugoslav partisans could be compared with those of the participants in the French Revolution. The question appealed to Dedijer so much that he embarked on a research project on heroic suicide not only among the partisans, but practically on a global scale and began to collect data on the existence and status of such suicides in various societies and epochs, as he did not

93 Ibid., 116, 117, 123, 124, 215. Miladinović, *Moralni lik*, 9, 66. Miladinović, *Osnovna moralna svojstva*, 107.

94 Miladinović, *Moralni lik*, 75.

95 Vladimir Adamović, 'Samoubica kukavica ili heroj,' *NIN*, October 5, 1980, 32, 33.

want to fall into Eurocentrism and search not only in the traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity, Judaism and Christianity, but also in Islam and Eastern philosophies, for example.⁹⁶ As the archival material shows, Dedijer did indeed collect data from various sources, from Yugoslav and French newspapers to American and Slovenian research papers.⁹⁷ He also tried to collect statistical data on partisan suicides. Slovenian national heroine Andreana Družina - Olga helped him with data and sent him information on 23 suicides, and she also put together a group to continue collecting data in Slovenia.⁹⁸

Dedijer harbored the ambition to create a comprehensive scientific typology of partisan suicides on the basis of the collected material, but at the same time he was not sure whether he could fulfil this task. He wished for a greater temporal distance because many of the actors involved - including those who avoided suicide but should have done so according to the unwritten rule - were still alive (and often in influential positions) and because he himself was emotionally involved in the events of the war and could not offer an objective view. Nevertheless, Dedijer has already outlined three central fields of research: historical facts (testimonies about the circumstances of the suicides as well as myths and legends about them), sociological material (the relationship of the individual to society, possible orders to carry out suicides and the moral ideas of Yugoslav society about suicides) and psychological, psychopathological and psychoanalytical material (psychological profile of the partisan suicide victims).⁹⁹

On 8 November 1980, Dedijer gave a lecture at the Sorbonne on *Heroic Suicide in the Yugoslav Revolutionary War*, although he had already published his first articles on suicide in the Serbian press (*Politika*, *NIN*) at the end of the 1970s and had spoken about it on television programmes. He received many reactions from readers and viewers, some of them reportedly negative and protesting, but many praised him for addressing the topic and contributed additional information about their own relatives or friends who had committed suicide during the war. After a particularly high-profile televised appearance, the sculptor Dušan Džamonja called him and said: "I listened to you on television and believe me: the whole of Yugoslavia cried with you."¹⁰⁰ A pensioner from Bijeljina, for example, wrote to him:

"I read all your articles in ‚Politika‘, and when I came across the information you wrote in the inaugural lecture about our fighters who killed themselves so as not to fall alive into the hands of the enemy, I felt that I had to pass on the information about the suicide of two comrades, because I believe that you do not have this data. You must understand me, dear Vlado, how I still feel today when I remember these young people, because they selflessly sacrificed their young lives, which had only just begun. I am indebted to them and it would be the greatest happiness for me if this were written down somewhere. I believe you will do it for me."¹⁰¹

96 Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 223.

97 SI AS 1979, Družina Dedijer, f. 77, Herojsko samoubistvo.

98 SI AS 1979, Družina Dedijer, f. 100, Herojsko samoubistvo partizana, Pisma čitalaca.

99 Dedijer, *Novi prilozii*, 515, 516.

100 SI AS 1979, Družina Dedijer, f. 100, Herojsko samoubistvo partizana, Pisma čitalaca.

101 Ibid.

Dedijer summarises his findings on the self-sacrifice of partisans and heroic suicide in two contributions: the twelfth chapter of the second volume of *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita* (*New Addendum to the Biography of Josip Broz Tito*) from 1981, and his inaugural lecture on the occasion of his election as a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts on 24 March 1982. The text was published in the Academy's journal *Glas* the following year.

The two contributions confirm that Dedijer wanted to cover a rather broad spectrum of the concept of martyrdom, self-sacrifice and heroic suicide throughout history. Dedijer found their roots in the philosophical system of the ancient Greek Stoics, who regarded suicide as a virtue, but only when man comes to the realisation that he cannot remain true to himself in the world in which he lives. Dedijer cites several examples of mass suicides from ancient military history¹⁰² and continues his overview all the way to the French Revolution, the nationalist and class movements of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Jan Palach.¹⁰³ On the other hand, Dedijer points out that the suicides of tyrants cannot be heroic suicides, as they are an expression of an escape from responsibility and extreme egoism rather than noble ideals; he cites Hitler and Goebbels as examples.¹⁰⁴

For the Balkan region, Dedijer noted that due to its chequered military past, it also has a long history of the concept of heroic suicides, which goes back at least to the Middle Ages with the Battle of Kosovo, continued in the popular tradition and was expressed more strongly again with the anti-Turkish liberation movements at the beginning of the 19th century. He particularly emphasised the heroic suicide of the Serbian commander Stevan Sindelić, who took his own life in 1809 near Niš by exploding barrels of gunpowder, killing a large number of Turkish invaders in the process. Dedijer also attributed an important role to the suicide of the Bosnian Serb Bogdan Žerajić after the failed assassination attempt on the governor of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Marijan Varešanin, in 1910, which significantly inspired Gavrilo Princip and the Sarajevo assassination four years later.¹⁰⁵

In interpreting the partisan suicides, Dedijer orientated himself on the theoretical framework of the friend and historian of the French Revolution, Albert Soboul. Soboul developed a theory of revolutionary self-sacrifice and distinguished between two types of suicide: the heroic suicide (*suicide héroïque*), in which a revolutionary either commits suicide to avoid being captured by the enemy or realises that the revolution has failed and deliberately destroys his own life by suicide, and the supreme sacrifice (*sacrifice suprême*), which means that the revolutionary heroically exposes himself on the battlefield and fights to the death, i.e. without literally committing suicide. Dedijer adopted Soboul's model and translated *sacrifice suprême* as indirect heroic suicide, which means that *suicide héroïque* became direct heroic suicide.¹⁰⁶ A

102 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 511, 512.

103 *Ibid.*, 517.

104 *Ibid.*, 518.

105 *Ibid.*, 520.

106 *Ibid.*, 513. Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 219, 220.

new element of Dedijer that Soboul did not have and which, in Dedijer's estimation, represents an essential finding of his research is the psychological state of the suicide victims at the time of death. According to his hypothesis, the disillusioned revolutionaries of the French Revolution committed suicide in the pessimistic belief that the revolution had failed and that the struggle was pointless. The partisans, on the other hand, committed suicide in the optimistic belief that their comrades would continue the fight despite their physical death and one day achieve victory over the occupiers and freedom.¹⁰⁷

Dedijer's tendency to uncritically include unverifiable stories and anecdotes in his works could cause him to receive critical feedback, and that's just what happened with one of his case studies on heroic suicides. It was the double suicide of the Slovenian Sergej Mašera and the Serb Milan Spasić, the only non-partisan members who nevertheless became a widely known and propagated example of heroic behaviour in socialist Yugoslavia. Mašera, a 28-year-old naval officer of the Yugoslav Royal Army from Gorizia, and 31-year-old Lieutenant Spasić from Belgrade were stationed on the destroyer *Zagreb* in the bay of Boka Kotorska when the Italian army attacked Yugoslavia. To prevent the ship from falling into enemy hands, they blew it up on 17 April 1941 and sank with it. Spasić's body was soon found and solemnly buried, but only Mašera's head was found and secretly interred; it was not until 1987, when the story came to light, that his alleged skull was identified and buried with military honours at the Žale Cemetery in Ljubljana. Their story remained present in the collective consciousness of Yugoslavia, and although they belonged to the pre-war Yugoslav monarchical army, they became symbols of the heroic response to the occupation. In 1952, the first two memorials to them were unveiled in Tivat and near the site of the sinking, followed by monuments, busts and reliefs in Piran, Nova Gorica, Pula, Dobrota, Kotor, Belgrade and elsewhere, and wreaths were thrown into the sea on the anniversaries of their deaths. Numerous streets and facilities on the Yugoslav coast were named after them (among them the Sergej Mašera Maritime Museum in Piran), and in 1968 the film *Flammes sur l'Adriatique* was shot in a French-Yugoslav co-production. Their celebration reached its climax on 10 September 1973, when they were named national heroes at a ceremony on the warship *Galeb*, with which "these two heroes deservedly entered the ranks of the many giants of our Revolution,"¹⁰⁸ as Dedijer wrote.

Dedijer definitely agreed that the death of Mašera and Spasić was one of the purest examples of heroic suicide, even though they were not partisans. Accordingly, he devoted much attention to their death in his writings and painted it in epic strokes. Mašera and Spasić, who according to Dedijer had "connections to communist organisations," went to the stern, where they were seen by many people on the shore, tore off each other's epaulettes and threw them into the sea, looked for a few moments at Lovćen, "the sacred Montenegrin mountain, a symbol of self-sacrifice throughout

107 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 524. Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 266.

108 Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju,' 235.

the centuries," set off the dynamite and died in the sinking. "The people on the shore took off their headgear and fell to their knees." At the burial of Spasić's remains in the Savina monastery, the priest said: "Glory to you, the new Sindelić!"¹⁰⁹ This account was read by retired battleship captain Jože Pretnar from Ljubljana, who was stationed on the destroyer *Dubrovnik* and witnessed the events of that day. He wrote to Dedijer and problematised many elements of his interpretation of the events. According to Pretnar's claims, the dead officers had no links to communists, they did not tear off their epaulettes, there were no people crying on the shore, and there was no comparison between Spasić and Sindelić. Dedijer showed integrity when he later published the letter, but he also argued quite angrily with Pretnar, questioning the captain's motives and the credibility of his statement, saying that it "contains ideological and political motives"; above all, he accused Pretnar of (Slovene?) nationalism for allegedly wanting to erase the mention of Sindelić's name. In the conclusion, Dedijer also implicitly accused the captain of cowardice and asked why he did not follow the heroic example that day and commit suicide himself:

"He himself admits that he was boarded on the destroyer *Dubrovnik*. Why was not there someone there who, like Mašera and Spasić, would blow the ship up and not hand it over to the enemy? / ... / Joža Pretnar, / ... / shamed by this heroic deed (which he did not perform himself), had to destroy this epic tradition of ours, which was so magnificently revived by the heroic deed of Mašera and Spasić."¹¹⁰

Dedijer tried to look at the partisan suicides from the perspective of historical science, but with the axiom that these suicides were heroic, he too fell into the ideological evaluation of history. The aforementioned leading Slovenian suicidologist Lev Milčinski had a more objective opinion on this phenomenon, noting:

"It is important that when analysing such events we do not get caught up in the maelstrom of ideology and prefer not to use categories such as 'heroic suicide', because this can obscure our view of the complex mechanisms at work here on various levels, leading the final synthesis to a fatal end. Is any type of suicide heroic? Each of them is, after all, an escape. It is true that escape is often very human. But sometimes heroism consists of consciously accepting the inevitable in our existence and still remaining a normal human being."¹¹¹

Partisan Suicides in Slovenia Between Celebration, Indifference and Deconstruction

Referencing the victims of the Second World War was an essential part of the legitimisation mechanisms of the socialist regime. The new Yugoslavia was to be built on these sacrifices, which brought freedom and a new social order. The German

109 Dedijer, *Novi prilozii*, 521.

110 Dedijer, 'O partizanskom samožrtvovanju', 236–38.

111 SIAS 1979, *Družina Dedijer*, f. 77, Herojsko samoubistvo, Lev Milčinski: Kulturni faktori u etiologiji samoubistva, 14.

researcher on Yugoslav memory of the Second World War, Dr Heike Karge, pointed to the existence of a “Yugoslav hierarchy of memory” consisting of two main groups: the partisan fighters and - one level below them - the victims of fascist terror. Accordingly, the most celebrated participants in the Second World War were the partisans who actively fought against the enemy with rifle in hand. The victims of fascist terror included all those who died in any way at the hands of the occupiers or collaborators, from hostages and victims of concentration camps to those who died in air raids, without actively engaging in armed resistance.¹¹² The passivity of the victims was a characteristic that wasn't publicly criticised, but nevertheless influenced the hierarchical order within the symbolic imaginarium. A hero of armed resistance was accorded a higher degree of social recognition than a “mere” victim of fascism. Surviving former prisoners received little recognition, the public and the state often ignored them or didn't trust them.¹¹³ One of the camp survivors said:

“Being in the camp - that's not written or spoken anywhere - but it had an air of degradation. As in, this one was no good. If you had been brave, you wouldn't have come to Gonars in the first place. If you were an active partisan, that's another matter. If you were somehow excluded from the action, at least keep quiet. Experiences in Gonars and similar camps mean nothing. At least they didn't use to. / ... / Going to a prison or a camp meant a strong stain not only on your career, but also on your personality.”¹¹⁴

A closer look at the hierarchical strata of fighters and victims shows that there was also an internal hierarchisation within the strata. Among the partisan fighters, for example, prestige grew in direct proportion to the time they joined the partisans. Of course, those who had been in the partisan ranks from the very beginning, i.e. since 1941, received the most recognition.¹¹⁵ The question therefore arises as to which level within the group of fighters the partisan suicide victims belonged to, as this was a kind of blind spot in the Yugoslav memory of the war. Did they end up at the very top of the pyramid through noble self-sacrifice, or did they finish in the “lower upper” stratum due to the problematic nature of their act from the point of view of Marxist ethics, or something else? Is it even possible to answer this question with a single answer that would apply to the entire country?

Since, as already mentioned, communist suicides were already taking place in the interwar period, the celebratory attitude also developed in relation to them. The most important group in this context were the so-called seven SKOJ secretaries - the seven leaders of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia, who died between the ages of 24 and 29 in clashes with the police during the dictatorship of King Alexander. At least two of them are said to have committed suicide on the same occasion: Josip Kolumbo and Pero Popović - Aga got into a fight with the Zagreb police on 14 August

112 Hajke Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2013), 35, 36.

113 Ibid., 45.

114 Oto Luthar, Marta Verginella and Urška Strle, *Užaljeno maščevanje: spomin na italijanska fašistična taborišča* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2023), 304.

115 Karge, *Sećanje u kamenu*, 43, 44.

1930 and shot themselves to avoid arrest.¹¹⁶ After the Second World War, the seven secretaries achieved the status of martyrs due to their unwavering commitment to communist ideals and their violent deaths. Moša Pijade believed that the secretaries deserved to be celebrated "because when they died, they were not thinking of themselves, of cowardly saving their lives, but of the Party, of the revolution," so that they are an example of "how to fight and die in the struggle for peace, freedom, democracy and socialism."¹¹⁷

During the Second World War, the highest recognition a partisan could receive for his heroic behaviour was the title of national hero. National heroes were particularly meritorious fighters who had proven themselves through courage and sacrifice in the fight against the occupying forces and their helpers, and whose moral values were considered exemplary for all Yugoslav citizens. As the medals were awarded both to fighters who had died in the war and to those who survived and became active members of public life, the heroes preserved the memory of the heroic sacrifice for freedom on the one hand and established a direct continuity between the war and post-war period on the other. A cult of celebration developed around them, both for the dead and the living, which legitimised and strengthened state power.

The model for the Yugoslav Order of the National Hero was the title Hero of the Soviet Union, which was awarded for personal and group heroic deeds since its establishment in 1934 (it was also awarded to a number of fighters who had committed suicide, but it is interesting to note that they especially valued those who, together with their own death, caused the mass death of the enemy, e.g. by an explosion). The title of national hero appeared in the Yugoslav Partisan Army in February 1942 and was awarded to fighters who had particularly distinguished themselves in the fight against the enemy through their heroism and self-sacrifice, with membership of the Communist Party also being an almost necessary prerequisite. The Order of the National Hero was officially created in August 1943. By the end of the war, around 170 titles had been awarded, and the number only increased at the end of the 1940s, during the split between Tito and Stalin (1141 titles being awarded between 1949 and 1953), which was an attempt to reinforce the importance of the Yugoslav partisan struggle as proof that the Yugoslavs were liberated mainly by themselves and not with the help of the Red Army. A total of 1322 titles of national heroes were awarded, although some authors give a slightly higher or lower number. According to research, about 13% of the national heroes were Slovenians, however the Yugoslav authorities did not emphasise the national representation of the national heroes and instead claimed that all nations and nationalities are equally deserving of the liberation.¹¹⁸

116 Slobodan Petrović, *Sedam sekretara SKOJ-a* (Beograd: Izdavačka radna organizacija Rad, 1979), 395, 396, 453, 454.

117 Ibid., 7.

118 Vjekoslav Perica, 'Herojstvo, mučeništvo i karizma u civilnoj religiji titoizma: proturječja između Titovog kulta i kulta narodnih heroja Jugoslavije,' in Olga Manojlović Pintar, ed., *Tito – viđenja i tumačenja: zbornik radova* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2011), 590. Marjana Strmčnik, *Javne reprezentacije narodnih herojev Jugoslavije v Sloveniji: doktorska disertacija* (Ljubljana: self-publishing, 2018), 78. Dević, *Za partiju i Tita*, 666, 668, 683.

In many countries, dead heroes are used as useful political capital that shapes collective memory and legitimises state power. National heroes were at the centre of Yugoslav thanatopolitics. The characteristics that defined the heroes can be divided into several categories. Several authors refer to the role of heroes who proved themselves on the battlefield or in leadership through heroism, and to the role of heroes who died a martyr's death, which, in addition to those who died as a result of torture and execution, partisan suicide victims were a part of.¹¹⁹

How did the national heroes who committed suicide rank in the memorial system of socialist Yugoslavia? It is hard to deny that the "greatest of the greatest" were the fighters who lost their lives dramatically at the hands of the enemy, i.e. those who were shot or hanged but went to their deaths with anti-fascist slogans and calls for an uprising - Rade Končar said before his execution, when asked if he would ask for a pardon: "I would neither give it to you, nor am I asking for it from you."¹²⁰ - and with other symbolic gestures, such as defiantly tearing off the blindfold. Many examples of last words have become legends and have been reproduced in school textbooks, on monuments, in speeches and elsewhere. The most famous example is the death of Stjepan (Stevan) Filipović, who was hanged in Valjevo in 1942. The photo showing him shortly before his death with his hands raised high and shouting revolutionary slogans has become one of the most famous visual symbols of the Yugoslav partisan struggle.

National heroes who committed suicide may have been less prominent, but they did exist. There is no consensus among researchers as to how many national heroes actually committed suicide. According to official Yugoslav statistics, there were 55, i.e. 6% of all national heroes. Vjekoslav Perica counted at least 76 of them, and significantly more if the criteria are looser.¹²¹ According to the 1982 encyclopaedia *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*, at least 58 Yugoslav national heroes died in this way (if one excludes the 17 Slovenian heroes who undoubtedly or allegedly committed suicide), including 20 Serbs, 17 Montenegrins, 10 Croats, 7 Macedonians and 4 Bosnians; 53 were men and 5 women.

It seems that the Yugoslav authorities had no qualms about rewarding deceased fighters who committed suicide. Already on 25 November 1944, the legendary fighter Slaviša Vajner - Čiča received the title, followed by 3 national heroes-suicide victims in 1945 and 1946, 5 in 1949, 15 in 1951 and one in 1952. In 1953, when by far the most titles for national heroes were awarded, 28 partisans who committed suicide received the title. In 1973, Sergej Mašera and Milan Spasić were the last to do so. Of the Slovenian national heroes who certainly or allegedly committed suicide, all received the title in the early 1950s: Paderšič, Slak, Redelonghi, Kolman, Ravbar, Gregorčič, Stariha and Turšič in 1951, while Kosovel, Pečar, Bernard, Hohkraut, Dolničar, Kosec, Kovačič, Jereb and Janežič received the title in 1953.

119 Vjekoslav Perica, 'Kult narodnih heroja,' 111. Ivana Lučić-Todosić, 'Heroizam u likovima Narodnih heroja: potrošeni simbolički kapital naroda Jugoslavije?,' *Etnoantropološki problemi* 14, No. 4 (2019): 1238. Ivana Lučić-Todosić, 'Telo kao izvor značenja u kulturi sećanja: reputaciono preduzetništvo likova jugoslovenskih narodnih heroja,' *Etnoantropološki problemi* 15, No. 4 (2020): 1157.

120 Kačavenda and Živković, *Narodni heroji: A–M*, 398.

121 Perica, 'Herojstvo, mučeništvo i karizma,' 590, 591. Perica, 'Kult narodnih heroja,' 113.

What does a glance at the public monuments unveiled in memory of fallen fighters reveal about the heroic suicides of the partisans? It is known that thousands of NLS monuments were put up throughout Yugoslavia on the initiative of the authorities, associations and private individuals to commemorate fallen victims and important events of the war period. A number of monuments was put up in places associated with partisans who committed suicide. According to the data collected so far, at least 77 such monuments have been unveiled in Slovenia, 16 of them at the places of birth or residence of the partisans who committed suicide, 41 monuments were built at the places of death, and 16 were busts of the deceased, mainly national heroes. A further four memorial plaques were placed in other institutions, particularly primary schools. If the statistics of monuments to the partisans whose suicide is questionable are added, there are at least 22 more monuments (five at the birthplaces, four at the places of death, seven busts and six in institutions). It should be added that the partisan suicide victims also appear as concrete, albeit unnamed, figures in public artworks on the theme of the NLS, in particular by the artist Ive Šubic, who included some of them in his fresco in Poljane pri Škofji Loki and in the mosaic that is part of the memorial complex in Dražgoše.¹²²

The number of monuments to partisan suicide victims is therefore not small, but at the same time it is true that the word "suicide" is not engraved on any of them. Moreover, the monuments generally only very rarely mention that a fallen partisan committed suicide. In most cases, the information is obscured by the loose notion that the fighter "fell" or "sacrificed his life", and in rare cases the inscription even directly contradicts the references to suicide from the literature and claims that the partisan was shot. Of the almost one hundred monuments, there are only two that at least indirectly refer to the suicide. The older of these is the memorial plaque to the victims of the Okroglo Cave, which was ceremonially unveiled on 30 October 1949 on the initiative of the Central Committee of the People's Youth of Slovenia and on which the inscription is engraved: "When every exit was closed to the besieged / loyal to the end we did not surrender / we ourselves proudly chose death."¹²³ A few years later, on 15 February 1953, partisan veterans in Celje unveiled a memorial plaque for Tine Majer¹²⁴ with the inscription (albeit with the wrong name engraved on it): "Rather than betray any of his comrades during the interrogation, the illegal comrade Majer Jože jumped out of the window and killed himself."

What is the reason for the fact that the suicide of partisans was almost never mentioned on monuments? Did the planners of the monuments not want to be too explicit out of reverence for the deceased? This interpretation is complicated by the fact that in cases of particularly brutal executions of partisans, the instigators had no problem emphasising the bloodthirstiness of the enemy; an example of this is the monument in Idrijske Krnice, which directly mentions that the partisans who died there were

122 J. Košnjek, 'Umetnikovo doživetje dražgoške bitke,' *Glas*, February 13, 1976, S. Rutar, *Sodelovati in zmagati*, 209.

123 'Niso se predali ... ponosno so rajiši smrt izbrali!,' *Gorenjski glas*, November, 3, 1949, 3.

124 'Špominska plošča ilegalcem v Celju,' *Slovenski poročevalec*, February 16, 1953, 2.

tortured and beheaded. So is it a remnant of the belief in suicide as an inappropriate, semi-cowardly act, and stating that a partisan “fell” makes him a greater hero than saying he “committed suicide”?

On the other hand, it is clear that the manner of death was never an obstacle to the commemoration of the fallen partisans. There were no reservations about naming public institutions after national heroes who had committed suicide. In socialist Slovenia, many streets, primary schools, high schools, pioneer detachments, cultural and art associations, military barracks, sports competitions, memorial marches, choral societies, youth work brigades, neighbourhoods, even a pharmacy and other institutions were named after suicide heroes, sometimes in close connection with their manner of death (Batreja Cave Association), sometimes to the limits of good taste (Ivan Kosovel Shooting Association). Some local communities chose the date of their local holiday after the day of the suicide of this or that hero.

Whether or not the memory of the suicide partisan's manner of death would be present was largely determined by the local communities who shaped the commemoration policy in relation to the NLS events that took place in their surroundings. Newspaper articles show that while some communities celebrated national heroes who were born or committed suicide there, they did not emphasise the manner of their death, while other communities regularly highlighted the manner of their death as an integral part of the narrative of these partisans' heroism. For example, there was a strong local tradition regarding the death of Vinko Paderšič - Batreja, as the Becele Cave, the site of his death, was already a tourist destination in the 1950s, and the public paid special attention to the discovery of a historical artefact in 1965 - an alleged revolver with which Paderšič took his own life, which the cave explorers found in the cave together with other remains and handed over to the Dolenjska Museum.¹²⁵ In Primorska, there are several such examples where fallen national heroes were honoured as victims who contributed to the liberation of the region from fascism and the annexation of Yugoslavia after the war, e.g. when the remains of some national heroes were buried in local cemeteries, such as Ivan Turšič in 1946 and Ivan Kosovel a year later.

A textual analysis of the printed sources also reveals a somewhat unclear, ambivalent attitude of Slovenian society towards the heroic suicides of the partisans. When reading Slovenian historiographical contributions, collections of articles, newspaper articles and other literature on the subject of NLS, one gets the feeling that the term “suicide” is subject to a kind of rejection. If the authors did not completely bypass the information about the manner of death by merely saying that the fighter had “(heroically) fallen” (which was not so rare even in more extensive biographical newspaper articles), they preferred to use somewhat euphemistic terms, saying that the partisan had “taken his own life”, “ended his life” and “saved the last bullet for himself”. In some cases, however, the biographies were more explicit and mentioned the manner

125 Ivan Zoran, 'Prvi dokazi iz Beceletove jame,' *Dolenjski list*, May 13, 1965, 21. Slavko Dokl, 'Prizadevni novomeški jamarji,' *Delo*, January 30, 1981, 24.

of suicide, supplemented by comments such as: "He fell in honour."¹²⁶ Meanwhile, the term "suicide" appeared more often when describing the death of military opponents; as an example, the 1978 voluminous monograph *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh* (*Guide Along the Partisan Paths*), which contains an overview of the NLS monuments in Slovenia, the term "suicide" is only mentioned once in total, namely in the description of the death of the defeated Chetnik commander Danilo Koprivica in Grčarice.¹²⁷

It can be concluded from this that in the celebration of partisan heroism in Slovenia, suicide as the highest form of heroic death was rarely emphasised as a special virtue. The glorification of heroes in the press was based primarily on their heroic deeds and partly on their deaths, especially in cases where they were executed by the occupying forces and proved their heroism through an act of protest. Perhaps this lukewarm attitude towards suicides contains a culturally conditioned attitude that Dedijer wrote about; the Slovenian lands, as an area with a strong Catholic tradition, did not cultivate a benevolent attitude towards any kind of suicide, and this tradition could be passed on even in the post-war period despite the ideological-political rupture.

Just as there was no consensus among professional psychologists as to whether heroic suicide even existed, there were obviously also reservations about it among the Slovenian public. Their reactions can be shown through the affair in the early 1980s when the partisan suicide was portrayed through the lens of the camera. In 1981, Television Ljubljana filmed and broadcast a five-part television series *Manj strašna noč* (*Less Frightening is the Night*) about the tragedy in the Ogenjca hospital, the script of which was written by Dimitrij Rupel based on the book by Aleksander Gala.¹²⁸ The series was criticised in the mainstream press. According to the reviewer of *Delo*, the key scene of the mass murder-suicide was particularly weak, lacking in dramatic weight and presented in a drawn-out manner.¹²⁹ The audience's opinion was quite divided. From the beginning of 1982, there was a fairly heated debate in the media, which revolved not only around the formal weaknesses of the series, but also around the history that the series depicted. Commentators - both witnesses of the war, intellectuals and regular viewers of the series - asked questions in letters to the editor such as who had entrusted doctor Gala with the care of the seriously wounded, to what extent was (at the time already deceased) Gala responsible for the attack on the hideout and, most sensitively of all, whether the nurse Mimica had fundamentally violated her medical duty by executing the patients (which also made the fact that the Ljubljana Clinical Center took over the patronage of Ogenjca problematic); in other words, it was a matter of clarifying who was the coward and who was the hero in this story. A canonised event from the history of the NLS, when brought into the spotlight of public interest, proved to be quite controversial.

Even in Slovenian post-war literature, more and more texts appeared that demystified the image of heroic partisan suicide. Some authors trivialised suicide and were

126 'Na Cvetežu so odkrili spomenik kjer je padel 'Hohkraut Lojze' - revolucionarni borec revirjev,' *Zasavski udarnik*, May 13, 1949, 1.

127 Jakopič, *Vodnik po partizanskih poteh*, 163.

128 'Manj strašna noč,' *Delo*, August 12, 1981, 6.

129 Bojan Kavčič, 'Bolj strašna noč,' *Delo*, December 29, 1981, 7.

harshly criticised by the forum of the authorities, such as Janez Vipotnik by the reviewer of the magazine *Borec* for his work *Soncu naproti* (*Towards the Sun*), in which he mentions a wounded woman in a partisan hospital who shoots herself out of despair because she does not believe that she will get a groom after the war.¹³⁰ A particularly common approach of those authors who wanted to look behind the scenes of Yugoslav myths was the introduction of characters of former partisans who survived the war but are forgotten and lost in the new post-war conditions, become lonely and are also haunted by their sins and war crimes, which drives them to suicide. The motif appears in several works of Slovenian literature, most clearly in Karel Grabeljšek's 1973 novel *Bolečina* (*Pain*), which tells the life story of veteran France Korenčan, who decides to commit suicide in his old age. Before he shoots himself, he reflects on his life, his many disappointments and his scepticism towards the image of the ideal communist:

“How many communists are there among us, real communists? he asks himself. The kind we were taught that a communist should be. The figure of the communist! Morally impeccable, hard-working, self-sacrificing, he does not look out for himself, he only has the common good in mind, the rights of the working people, the fight against the occupiers and their accomplices, the construction of socialism ... he is modest, honest, enjoys respect among the people, a mass labourer. How many communists are there among us? Were we ever such ... such characters?”¹³¹

Korenčan's unhappy life, which can be attributed on the one hand to his character flaws and sins from the past, which are in no way worthy of a “real” communist, and on the other to a bureaucratised political system alienated from the people, ends with the suicide of a broken man in which there isn't any trace of partisan heroic suicide.

The literary figure of the partisan veteran, who waits in the post-war decades for the recognition and material benefits he deserves, only to experience disappointment and loss in the brave new socialist world, and who is also psychologically burdened by the war, was based on real-life cases. The war took a heavy psychological toll on the Yugoslavs, even though the subject was not discussed publicly for a long time. A rare exception was the Jewish doctor Hugo Klein from Vukovar, who in 1945 wrote the study *Ratna neuroza Jugoslovena* (*War Neurosis of the Yugoslavs*), in which he used a sample of 150 partisans to describe the neurosis from which many Yugoslav veterans were said to have suffered. The book was not published until a decade later, probably because it would have been too provocative to write about partisans as mentally ill immediately after the end of the war. In the book, Klein diagnosed a disorder that had been occurring among the partisans since the middle of the war: a militant neurosis in the form of a simulation of an attack on the enemy, during which the soldiers fell into a trance and remained in it for several hours, after which they could no longer remember anything.¹³² He did not look for the causes of the neurosis in the horrors of war, as it only appear quite late, at a time when victory was already more tangible

130 Milan Guček, 'Romansirana zgodovina – da ali ne?', *Borec* 37, No. 10–11 (1985): 577.

131 Karel Grabeljšek, *Bolečina* (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1973), 18.

132 Hugo Klajn, *Ratna neuroza Jugoslovena* (Beograd: Sanitetska uprava JNA, 1955), 23.

and mere survival could be replaced by self-centredness. Klein explains the neurosis as a consequence of difficult decisions that had to be made by the - often young and inexperienced - fighters and as a result of the desire for revenge and public recognition for their heroic deeds.¹³³ Klein's conclusion is that the Yugoslav partisans generally showed a high degree of willingness to fight to the death and a deep desire for recognition, which was not observed to the same extent in the other Allied soldiers, which consequently was also reflected in the specifically Yugoslav neurosis.

For the Slovenian territory, the most extensive studies on the psychological consequences of war for former combatants were carried out by aforementioned Janko Kostnapfel. Over a period of 35 years, from 1954 to 1988, he collected and published information on partisan veterans who were treated by him for psychological disorders. On the basis of comparisons between two groups of 60 members, one consisting of combatants and the other of random patients, he came to the conclusion that former partisans suffered more frequently from neuroses and alcoholism. The neuroses were the result of the tense war conditions, the physical exertion, the demanding external conditions and the stress with which the partisans had to contend, as well as alcoholism, which was an outlet for the nervousness and led to stomach ulcers and liver cirrhosis in many veterans. He found emotional instability and, in some cases, psychopathic and sadistic characteristics in alcoholic veterans. In addition, many partisans were wounded during the war, and a quarter of them killed at least one person during fighting. Older combatants reported feelings of disillusionment and disinterest in life, as well as inactivity due to various illnesses, including those resulting from war injuries and disabilities. Kostnapfel pointed out that partisan status could also have an impact on married life, as former female partisans were on average married for four years less than members of the control group, and on professional life, as veterans often came into conflict with their coworkers and wanted to retire to peace and solitude. He also found that veterans die on average two to three years earlier than patients in the control group and that they have an above-average fear of ageing, believing that they have wasted their lives.¹³⁴

Some veterans fought with suicidal thoughts. One former partisan considered hanging himself, which Kostnapfel linked to the possibility of feelings of shame and self-punishment, as hanging was considered a less honourable death than being shot.¹³⁵ Kostnapfel also documented at least one suicide of a hospitalised veteran who was clearly affected by his own ageing and the disintegration of Yugoslavia:

"He had already announced it beforehand, saying that there was no point in living any more, that he was too old / ... /. He spoke of the great disappointment that the socio-political upheaval had caused and emphasised how hard and honest he had worked in the state apparatus. One had the impression that it was a 'balance sheet' suicide."¹³⁶

133 Ibid., 42, 43, 48–51.

134 Janko Kostnapfel, *Z vojno po vojni* (Ljubljana: Društvo piscev zgodovine NOB Slovenije, 1994), 10–17, 29–38, 45–55, 59–92.

135 Kostnapfel, *Zakaj vojna*, 108, 109.

136 Kostnapfel, *Z vojno po vojni*, 65.

Conclusion

The heroic partisan suicide is a concept that at first glance appears to be one of the constitutive elements of the Yugoslav legitimisation narrative of the NLS, but in reality played a much more complex role. If one tries to outline the history of this concept, one constantly encounters contradictory opinions at all levels, from the partisan command or the later political leadership of Yugoslavia, to the experts in psychology and suicidology, to the intelligentsia and ordinary citizens. On the one hand, since the first months of the Second World War, there has been a noticeable tendency to present this kind of suicide as the ultimate example of self-sacrifice for freedom, which also has a pragmatic dimension: the avoidance of shameful surrender, torture and possible betrayal. On the other hand, there have always been sceptics who have not vociferously opposed such an interpretation, but have expressed doubts about the supposed inherent heroism of such an act. Nevertheless, the state authorities have shown little interest in defending their favourable stance on heroic suicides. It seems that the justification of suicide, even when carried out in such difficult circumstances, was a position that only a limited number of people could defend with fervour and full self-confidence. Dealing with the issue of partisan suicide meant leaving through the chapters of NLS history that deviated from the beaten path, the latter being stories of heroism in battles, partisan comradeship and resistance to the enemy, which were undeniably positive and universally promoted points of the partisan struggle. At the same time, partisan suicides could raise difficult and controversial questions related to martyrdom, escape from a difficult situation, defeatism and disregard for the postulates of Marxist ethics, and even - e.g. in the debate between Dedijer and Pretnar - nationalism. Is it possible that the partisans' suicide was characterised more by selfish fear than heroism? It seems that this question weighed heavily on all Yugoslavs who had to deal with it and that many answered it with a wise silence.

The second part of the answer to the question of Yugoslavia's attitude towards partisan suicides can be found in the attitude of local, regional and state communities towards suicide in general. Traditional beliefs that were formed over the centuries under the influence of the system of ethical beliefs, religion, folk tradition and other factors were probably also reflected in the interpretation of partisan suicides. So far, the data that could confirm this for the whole of Yugoslavia is still too modest, so that the hypothesis is still awaiting confirmation. For the Slovenian territory, it can be stated that - perhaps under Catholic influence - heroic partisan suicide is a category that was often not taken into account when honouring fallen fighters, although some local communities and families did so when honouring "their own" national heroes. A hero in Slovenia was not mainly made by a heroic suicide, but above all by heroic deeds.

Yugoslavia dissolved in blood at the beginning of the 1990s, but some of its institutions continued to exist for some time after that. One of these was the Order of the National Hero. The last such title was awarded by the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on 19 November 1991 to Milan Tepić, a major in the

Yugoslav People's Army, who had been surrounded by members of the Croatian military formation in Bjelovar a few weeks earlier and had detonated explosives in the barracks warehouse, killing himself and eight Croatian soldiers. Today, Tepić is a hero in Serbia, with streets named after him and several monuments dedicated to him, while in Croatia he is considered a criminal, if not a terrorist, who endangered many lives. As the last national hero who was already fighting in a new war, Tepić symbolically closed the chapter of Yugoslav heroic suicides with additional moral and ideological-political ambiguities.

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»SAMI PONOSNO SMO SI SMRT IZBRALI.« KONCEPT PARTIZANSKEGA HEROJSKEGA SAMOMORA V SLOVENIJI V JUGOSLOVANSKEM KONTEKSTU

POVZETEK

Jugoslovanski partizani so se med spopadi v drugi svetovni vojni večkrat znašli v brezizhodnih položajih, iz katerih so pobegnili s samomorom. Statistika teh samomorov še ni natančno zbrana, za slovenski prostor pa je dokumentiranih približno 250 partizanskih samomorov, čeprav pri marsikaterem primeru ni jasno, ali je res šlo za samomor ali je smrt povzročil kdo drug. Partizansko poveljstvo je, čeprav tega ni nikoli neposredno izrazilo v direktivah, od partizanov pričakovalo, da bodo v skrajnih situacijah zmožni storiti samomor in se tako izogniti sramotnemu zajetju, mučenju in potencialni izdaji imen in podatkov sovražniku. Partizani so ta neformalni napotek upoštevali, tako da je zajetje postalo eno izmed najsrmatnejših dejanj, ki so se lahko zgodila borcu. Kljub temu pa so vojni tisk in dokumenti le redko omenjali samomor, tako da se je junaški značaj tega dejanja začel poudarjati z zamikom. Na drugi strani je ves čas ostalo prisotno prepričanje, da je izogib samomoru, če so zanj bili

izpolnjeni pravi pogoji, dejanje strahopetca, ki si ne zasluži naziva partizan. Obravnava teme partizanskega herojskega samomora se je v socialistični Jugoslaviji odprla šele v sedemdesetih letih in se razživila v osemdesetih letih. Ker so takšni samomori odpirali teme partizanske morale, mučeništva in drugih zapletenih, potencialno neprijetnih tem, se državni vrh z njimi ni pogosto ukvarjal, pa tudi Josip Broz – Tito naj bi se jim izogibal. Tematiko je med prvimi načel srbski raziskovalec Milan Miladinović, ki je v partizanskih samomorih prepoznal kršenje načel marksistične etike, vendar jih je interpretiral kot izjemo, saj so partizani samomore delali v boju za človeka dostojno življenje. Ključni podpornik in promotor ideje herojskega samomora je bil srbski zgodovinar Vladimir Dedijer. Osnovna teza, ki jo je predstavil v svojih razpravah o partizanskih samomorih, je bila, da so partizani, v nasprotju s skoraj vsemi drugimi samomori vojakov po svetu, umirali z optimističnim prepričanjem o končni zmagi, tudi če je sami ne bodo dočakali. Jugoslovanska psihološka in suicidološka stroka je bila precej bolj razdeljena in ni dosegla niti konsenza o tem, ali herojski samomor sploh obstaja. Ta neodločnost glede obstoja in značaja take vrste samomora se je kazala tudi pri širši javnosti. Čeprav je jugoslovanska oblast podeljevala nazive narodnega heroja tudi partizanom, ki so storili samomor, in jim brez zadržkov postavljala spomenike, pa način njihove smrti, kot kaže primer Slovenije, pogosto ni bil posebej poudarjen kot ključni dokaz njihove heroičnosti in je bil večkrat tudi zabrisan, saj na slovenskih partizanskih spomenikih skoraj nikoli ni bil omenjen podatek, da je partizan storil samomor. Marsikaj je bilo odvisno od lokalnih skupnosti, ki so proslavljale narodne heroje in druge partizane, ki so se v njih rodili ali umrli. Čeprav je v nekaterih okoljih v Sloveniji samomor partizanov postal del narativa o njihovi junaškosti, pa so v večini skupnosti bolj poudarjali junaška dejanja padlih kot pa njihov herojski samomor. Teh ugotovitev ne gre posplošiti na celo državo. Kot je sugeriral Dedijer, so pri recepciji partizanskih samomorov pomembno vlogo igrala tradicionalna prepričanja pripadnikov različnih jugoslovanskih skupnosti o smrti in samomoru, kar bi pomenilo, da je slovenska javnost do slavljenja partizanskih samomorov ostala zadržana zaradi vpliva katoliške doktrine o nesprejemljivosti kakršnegakoli samomora. Partizanski samomor kot psihološki pojav in skrb za psihološko stanje partizanskih veteranov sta bila dolgo časa v ozadju, redke študije, ki so obravnavale to temo, pa so pokazale, da je vojna na preživelih pustila hude psihične posledice, ki niso redko pripeljale do samomora, vendar ga ni nihče več slavil kot herojskega.