

*Oto Luthar, Marta Verginella & Urška Strle: UŽALJENO MAŠČEVANJE: SPOMIN  
NA ITALIJANSKA FAŠISTIČNA TABORIŠČA [OFFENDED RETALIATION:  
THE MEMORY OF THE ITALIAN FASCIST CAMPS]*

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The current issue of the scientific journal *Acta Histriae* is dedicated to oral history at the intersection between Slovenian and Italian historiography. The contributions are the result of widespread study and productive discussions on methodology and “good practices” in the Italian area compared to Slovene historiography, which is undoubtedly lagging behind with regards to oral history. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing, as this issue of the journal shows, that the positive impact of Italian oral history on Slovenian historiography is very evident – especially since the borderland region offers numerous laboratories for this type of research. And one of these laboratories is certainly fascist internment during the Second World War.

Although the issues of fascist camps and internment have been the subject of several studies in the past both by Slovenian and Italian historiography, we are presented with a work that certainly marks a new milestone in Slovenian and Slovene-Italian historiography. The study *Užaljeno maščevanje: spomin na italijanska fašistična taborišča* [*Offended Retaliation: The Memory of the Italian Fascist Camps*] was written by Oto Luthar, Marta Verginella and Urška Strle. As the authors highlight in the introduction, the overall fates of the fascist internees have remained virtually unexplored in historiography until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will not delve here into the reasons why this was the case, but it is precisely for this reason that this monograph should be particularly praised and highlighted as an important contribution. Namely, as the authors note, “there is still too little attention paid to Italian fascism in current European discussions on totalitarianisms of the 20th century,” while they are also disturbed by the fact that “a large part of the European professional and general public has not yet heard of the internees in the Italian fascist internment camps.” (p. 27)

The present book is the result of intensive research carried out between 2012 and 2015, which included the collection of memorial and archival sources and documentation and, above all, the collection and interpretation of oral testimonies. A number of archival institutions were visited, and 54 testimonies were collected, as well as a number of objects brought back from the camp or held on to by the former internees and their relatives (i.e. letters, photographs, diaries and some very special objects, such as a silver spoon). The authors also took special care to collect testimonies from both women and men, while the vast majority of the respondents were under the age of 12 at the time of internment – hence, they had experienced the camp as children.

The monograph is systematically and thoughtfully divided into 7 chapters which effectively narrate the story of the fascist internment from the beginning of the

occupation to present-day memories and interpretations. In so doing, the (military) history of the occupation and the plans of the fascist authorities since the first internments of the Slovene population – Ljudmila Rutar was the first political internee, coming from the region of Venezia Giulia, and the youngest internee ever to be interned on the island of Ponza in 1930 – are more than effectively intertwined with the social and intimate histories and memories of the former internees. The bulk of the monograph is based on the testimonies and stories of former internees and their children. Narratives about the reasons for arrest, how arrests were carried out and fascist raids, transport to the camps and life and conditions in the camps are continuously interwoven with a skilful and in-depth interpretation of the collected testimonies. In doing so, the authors draw on previously published studies which are the result of past research and are based mainly on archival sources.

But the main voices in the study are, of course, that of the witnesses. As the authors themselves emphasise, only some of the most representative or outstanding excerpts from the testimonies are published in the work, as the material collected was clearly far more abundant and thus impossible to include in its entirety. Through the words of the testimonies, we can understand the range of emotions that people experienced during internment; from the fear of an unknown fate during transport to the camps, to the humiliation of losing privacy on arrival at the camp when everyone, without exception, was stripped naked, inspected and their clothes were boiled. These memories were particularly traumatic for the women, since it is precisely “forced stripping [...] that is a theme in many women’s testimonies and memories” (p. 153). A significant part of the monograph is devoted to life and suffering in the camps. The testimonies are unanimous about the largely unbearable hygienic conditions that were responsible for most of the hardships that the male and female prisoners endured – from disease, epidemics and parasites (especially lice), to death. The lack of water – both for drinking and for basic hygiene – is probably the motive underlying every account – especially that of the internees on the island of Rab (today Croatia), where the summer heat was unbearable. Alongside this was the very poor and insufficient



food which drove the prisoners to the brink of despair, to previously unimaginable acts, including theft, while the scarcity and hunger, among other factors, drove many to death.

The violence and indifference of the guards were perhaps the cruellest indicators of the dehumanisation of the individual and of life, which had little value in the fascist camps. The deaths of children and the elderly are heart-breaking, as is the suffering of mothers and their helplessness – but also their courage and strength that, as the authors explain, not even many men could muster in those circumstances. In this context, the witnesses repeatedly blame the camp authorities for the fact that the conditions were often the result not only of cruelty, but above all of negligence and poor organisation. This led, among other things, to some of the deaths during the September 1942 storm in the camp on Rab, when a torrent passing through the camp engulfed some of the tents the internees were living in and practically carried them away. This storm, however, was only the precursor of the most severe period of deprivation and death during the winter between 1942 and 1943.

The narrative of the incomprehensible and the impossible to put into words is quite remarkable – it is read in a similar way as the narratives of Nazi concentration camps, although the authors repeatedly stress that they are not to be entirely equated. What is particularly striking for the reader is that most of the testimonies gathered here are also often stories of kindness, of small gestures and little things that, in the midst of everyday suffering, sometimes restored hope, at least for a moment; the (albeit rare) attempts of the locals to help, the kindness of the guards, the solidarity between people even in moments when this was not to be expected. Thus, in addition to the unbearable living conditions, the authors also focus on other aspects of captivity. We can, for instance, understand from the words of the prisoners how important it was for them to have a little social life – whether it was (hidden) singing, recreation or religious services and silent evening prayers.

We rarely encounter a study as methodologically and scientifically comprehensive as this one. Particularly noteworthy is the detailed and synthesised presentation of the methodology of the work and the way the interviews were conducted. In the light of the initial observations that there is certainly a lack of debate and dialogue around “good practices” in oral history in Slovenia, we can doubtlessly add that we finally have in front of us a work which is referential for every oral historian. The second chapter effectively presents the procedures and guidelines that each oral historian would like to and should read when taking his or her first steps in research.

However, it would be an injustice to emphasise “only” the great importance of the comprehensive scientific apparatus of the methodology of the work, collection, and interpretation of the different typologies of sources. Indeed, every chapter in the study is very well and carefully conceived; from the decision to give the witnesses the first word in the monograph (p. 12–13), to the decision to first highlight the positive aspects of captivity – i.e. the help and compassion of the guards and the locals (p. 83–92) – and, of course, numerous other, “small”,

thoughtful entries. The attentive reader has the impression, which is certainly not misleading, that nothing in the study is a coincidence. It is also worth highlighting the very fluid language, which draws the reader in and keeps them from putting the book down.

It is therefore no coincidence that the authors conclude with a self-critical examination of Slovenian historiography and the “mistakes” it has made, not only when it comes to the question of the historicization of the Italian fascist camps, but also when it comes to the understanding and interpretation of memories, and the generally (poorly) understood methodology of working with oral testimonies. Alongside this critical self-reflection, there is a critical look at the Italian context and, above all, at the politics of the past in Italy, which successfully avoided handing over war criminals and thus, at the same time, prevented a confrontation with Mussolini’s fascist regime. While referring to places of memory and understanding current events in Slovenian-Italian diplomacy, especially the symbolic “reconciliation” meeting between the former Slovenian President Borut Pahor and the Italian President Sergio Mattarella in July 2020 at the *foiba* memorial in Bazovica and the monument to the Slovenian victims of the First Trial of Trieste in the immediate vicinity, the authors conclude that a great deal of work remains to be done to break the myth of “Italians, good people” in Italy.

Among the many findings and conclusions of the present monograph, one should not overlook the perhaps marginal, but for historiography in the borderlands not so insignificant, conclusion that Slovenian historiography, precisely as far as the subject of fascist camps is concerned, was also the one that held up a mirror to Italian historiography in the 1990s. The authors observe that during that period the results of research by Slovenian and Croatian colleagues (e.g. Tonet Ferenc) stimulated research in the Italian community (e.g. the works of Teodoro Sala, Enzo Collotti, Marco Cuzza, and others that followed) (p. 72–73). Thus, as the present issue of *Acta Histriae* suggests, and as the International Slovenian-Italian Conference on *Learning from Mistakes*, held in Treviso and Venice in October 2022, has proven, only the exchange of opinions, points of view, experiences, research practices and the circulation of information and topics can stimulate the overcoming of barriers in research (and beyond) in the Slovene-Italian (borderland) region.

We have in front of us a work that is rich in content, detailed and precise, and that deepens our understanding of the fascist internment and its long-term consequences – both for individuals and for communities. It is, of course, another black mark on the Slovene-Italian past that has finally been given a place in a study that is so comprehensive that it can provide a model for many future studies. It gives us hope that a moment in history is finally coming when the Slovenian-Italian society and the borderland will finally be able to face and overcome its (traumatic) past, also with the help of such studies. I am already looking forward to the moment when the study will be available in Italian.

**Urška Lampe**