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# Suicide as a Slovenian Metaphor: on the Intellectual History of Suicide as a Metaphor in Socialist Slovenia**


## IZVLEČEK

SAMOMOR KOT SLOVENSKA METAFORA:
K INTELEKTUALNI ZGODOVINI SAMOMORA KOT METAFORE
V SOCIALISTIČNI SLOVENIJI

*Od šestdesetih do osemdesetih let 20. stoletja je bil samomor pogosto obravnavan kot pomembno družbeno vprašanje v slovenski javnosti, kar je pripeljalo do oblikovanja ideje Slovencev kot »nacije samomorilcev«. V svoji knjigi Bolezen kot metafora Susan Sontag raziskuje, kako družba uporablja bolezen kot metaforo za moralne, psihološke in politične razmere, kar pogosto vodi v stigmatizacijo bolnikov. Ta pogled je dragocen za razumevanje predstav o samomoru v socialistični Sloveniji. Pričujoči članek analizira vpliv metafore »nacije samomorilcev« na politično misel in diskurz v socialistični Sloveniji. Preučuje, kako so intelektualci to idejo uporabili ali zavrnili v svojih razpravah in kako so prilagodili strokovne razprave in statistične podatke svojim političnim agendam. Koncept samomora kot »slovenskega problema« se je pojavil v poznih šestdesetih letih, podprt s statistiko in odmevnimi primeri samomorov med mladimi iz uglednih kulturnih in političnih družin.*


*Ključne besede: samomor, metafora, politična misel, socialistična Slovenija, intelektualci*

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## ABSTRACT

*Between the 1960s and 1980s, suicide was frequently discussed as a major social issue in the Slovenian public sphere, leading to the establishment of the idea of Slovenians as a "suicide nation". In her book "Illness as Metaphor", Susan Sontag examines how society uses illness as a metaphor for moral, psychological, and political conditions, often resulting in the stigmatisation of patients. This perspective is valuable for understanding the representations of suicide in socialist Slovenia. This paper analyses the influence of the metaphor of the "suicide nation" on political thought and discourse in socialist Slovenia. It explores how intellectuals used or rejected this idea in their debates and how they adapted expert discussions and statistics to their political agendas. The concept of suicide as a "Slovenian problem" emerged in the late 1960s, supported by statistics and high-profile cases of suicide among young people from prominent cultural and political families.*


*Keywords: suicide, metaphor, political thought, public, socialist Slovenia, intellectuals*

## Introduction

*"No one does anything in the face of this terrible truth or even dares to insistently inquire about the causes of this national disgrace. On the contrary! Everyone is anxiously looking for a way to cover our national disease from the gaze of the other Yugoslav nations as well as from the world."*[1]

Between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, the Slovenian cultural-political public repeatedly discussed suicide as a pressing problem in Slovenian society. The discussions involved both the topos of Slovenians as a suicidal nation and the idea of suicide as a collective disease (suicide epidemic). The Slovenian writer Jože Javoršek was not the only one to define suicide in Slovenia as a national disease during the socialist era, but he was certainly an intellectual who contributed significantly to the discussions about this issue in Slovenian society. His public interventions about suicide are not only interesting because of the literary-political and personal controversies they provoked but also due to his role in spreading the metaphor of Slovenian suicide. The intellectual, who was intimately affected by the issue of suicide, placed his personal loss in the context of the Slovenian cultural-political situation through his reflection on the Slovenian suicide syndrome.

The book *Illness as Metaphor (1978)*, written by the American cultural critic Susan Sontag, explores how society and culture deal with diseases, especially cancer and tuberculosis. Sontag argues that these illnesses are often loaded with metaphorical

1 Jože Javoršek, *Kako je mogoče* (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1978), 13.

meanings that transcend their medical reality. Illness is used as a metaphor for a moral, psychological, and political condition, often leading to the patients' stigmatisation. Sontag claims that these metaphors are harmful to patients because they impose an additional burden of shame and guilt and render it more difficult to understand and treat the illness objectively.[2] Ten years later, she published *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), analysing how fears, prejudices, and misconceptions about AIDS influenced the way the disease was perceived and treated. She pointed out that AIDS was often used as a metaphor for moral depravity, punishment, or death sentence, leading to the stigmatisation of patients and their social marginalisation.[3]

Susan Sontag's perspective on illness as a metaphor can represent a solid intellectual and methodological foundation for a better understanding of the representations of suicide in socialist Slovenia. The present contribution focuses on the perception of suicide as a typical Slovenian feature in the Slovenian political thought of the socialist period. It attempts to approach the issue of suicide through the intellectual history, the history of political thought, and also the history of crisis discourse. The basic question is how the metaphor of Slovenians as a "suicide nation" shaped political thought during that period. To what extent did public intellectuals use this idea in their discussions, and to what degree did they distance themselves from it or express scepticism towards it? Did they take treatises and statistics into account? How did they adapt them to serve their own political agendas? Did they use the trope of the "suicide nation" for the oppositional promotion of crisis discourse, or did they build their critique on the deconstruction of national-pathological concepts?

## An Emerging Epidemic

In the Slovenian public, the "suicide nation" trope can be traced to the very beginning of the 20th century. Given his literary orientation, it is not unusual that the Slovenian naturalist writer Fran Govekar used this idea. In his 1905 novel titled *Nad prepadom* (Above the Precipice), he put into the mouth of the fatalistic literary hero Dr Kolarič the words of a man who had given up on his own nation: "I have never seen Slovenians genuinely rejoice in even the slightest triumph of their countryman; I have never witnessed them unequivocally acknowledging anyone's true success, true merit, true honour! /.../ We are a nation of suicides, and most likely, our only real pleasure is to see our countryman on the ground, destroyed, killed, dead!"[4] Nevertheless, in the years after World War I, suicide was more frequently problematised in the Slovenian press. As Meta Remec observes, newspapers at the time often wrote about a "suicide epidemic" even though they lacked the empirical evidence for such theses. The increased number of suicides was attributed to the devastating consequences of the

2 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 3.
3 Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 5–16.
4 Fran Govekar, "Nad prepadom," *Slovan* 3, No. 2 (1905), 47.

recent world war. This phenomenon, however, was not perceived as an exclusively Slovenian feature and the "suicide epidemic" was portrayed as a European problem.[5] The feeling of post-war nihilism was expressed by the young Slovenian avant-garde poet Srečko Kosovel in his essay: "The European man, exhausted to death, is racing with electric speed towards development, scurrying with only a single desire left: to die." Srečko Kosovel, who was close to the Trieste communists,[6] could hardly be accused of nihilism. He contrasted the post-war despair and savage capitalism with the future uprising of the humiliated and insulted: "A new humanity is rising. So what if it comes from below?! It has been humiliated. So what if it comes from the bottom?! It has been defiled. So what if it comes with storm and lightning!"[7] Hence, only resistance can overcome suicide. Given the existing literature on the issue of suicide and the empirical research of digitised newspapers from the interwar period, it is possible to propose a conclusion that the idea of Slovenians as a suicidal nation was barely perceptible in the Slovenian (general and professional) public at the time.[8]

In socialist Yugoslavia, the situation was very different. Meta Remec establishes that the common consensus among the post-war suicide rate analyses was that after the initial post-war period, when the euphoria of liberation had still persisted, the number of suicides increased drastically. As suggested by the data from 1937 to 1939, apparently overlooked by the authors of these analyses, the increase in the suicide rate twenty years after the war had not been as significant as the analysts from the 1980s believed. Nevertheless, Slovenia's suicide rate stood out negatively in comparison with the other Yugoslav republics, and the optimistic expectations of the authorities and the medical profession that the number of suicides would decrease did not come true. On the contrary, the Slovenian suicide rate continued to rise, and the gap with the rest of Yugoslavia kept widening. As Meta Remec notes, an opinion emerged in the 1960s that the increased suicide rate in Slovenia was not caused by Yugoslav socialist reality but rather by the Slovenian particularities: an upbringing imbued with Catholic humility and a Central European (Habsburg) melancholic national character prone to despondency and self-destruction.[9] While the suicide rate in Slovenia (the number of suicides per 100,000 inhabitants) was 23.3 between 1955 and 1959, it rose to 26.2 in the first half of the 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, it had increased to 29.6 (1970). In the first half of the 1970s, the statistics show a slight decline, but in the second half of the 1970s, the suicide rate exceeded 30 (1976: 30.6; 1977: 31.7; 1978: 31.3; 1979: 32.4 and 1980: 34.0).[10] The suicide rate trend in Slovenia between 1965 and 2020 shows an inverted U: it rose gradually until 1997 and then started to decline. In the

5 Meta Remec, "Epidemija samomorov? Odmevi na naraščanje stopnje samomorilnosti na Slovenskem v 19. in 20. stoletju," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 8, https://doi.org/10.51663/pnz.63.1.01.

6 Vladimir Martelanc, *Članki in pisma* (Ravel Kodrič in Amelia Kraigher (eds.)) (Ljubljana: Založba *cf: 2023), 183–86.

7 Srečko Kosovel, *Izbrane pesmi*, ed. Matevž Kos (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1997), 103, 104.

8 An overview of the newspapers *Jutro* and *Slovenec* (1918–1941), carried out between May 5, 2024 and June 16, 2024 at the *dlib.si* portal.

9 Remec. "Epidemija samomorov," 26, 27.

10 Ibidem, 24.

1985–1994 period, the average suicide rate was 31/100,000. From 1997 to 2010, the average suicide rate was 26.2/100,000. The average suicide rate in the decade between 2009 and 2020 was 19.79/100,000. The changes in suicide rates may reflect both the societal changes over the years and the increase in suicide prevention activities.[11]

Based on the existing research, it can be inferred that the thesis of suicide as a "Slovenian problem" was established in the Slovenian public in the second half of the 1960s and persisted until the end of the Yugoslav period. Apart from being supported by the statistics – especially the apparent disparity between the Slovenian and Yugoslav reality – the media coverage of suicides among the youth between 1965 and 1971 probably also had an impact on the thesis. These suicides were notorious for several reasons: the young victims were the children of important cultural and political figures. In addition, these cases also received considerable attention due to the documentary film made by the director Mako Sajko (*Samomorivci, pozor!* / Suicides, Beware, 1967) and the sensationalist writing in the yellow press about a "suicide club" in Ljubljana. The Italian and German press also wrote about the "suicide club", further alarming the authorities in Slovenia. Suicide became a political problem. In 1968, the Slovenian police, in cooperation with the secret police, launched an investigation called "Hashish" (1968–1969), which focused in particular on the suicides of Aleš Kermauner (1946–1966), Borivoj Dedijer (1945–1966), and Svit Brejc (1947–1968), which had allegedly triggered the suicides that followed.[12] The fathers of the victims – Vladimir Dedijer (1914–1990), Dušan Kermauner (1903–1975), and Jože Javoršek (1920–1990) – were prominent public figures, who shared some common characteristics. They were intellectuals who had participated in the National Liberation Struggle and supported the socialist regime. However, due to their nonconformist views, they had been side-lined and had difficulty reintegrating into the cultural-political elite. The investigation did not confirm the existence of a "suicide club", although the victims belonged to the same avant-garde cultural circle and shared a common affinity for drug use.[13] Investigators concluded that these were isolated acts by lonely young people without any audience or higher truth. The thesis of lost, lonely adolescents certainly appealed to the authorities more than the interpretations identifying the alienated socialist system as the reason for the suicides – as suggested by the Western and emigrant press. While these suicides caused a lot of turmoil, the situation was quite different in 1971 when Borut Kardelj (1941–1971), the son of Edvard Kardelj (1910–1979), committed suicide. At that point, the Slovenian media did not report on the incident at all. The media silence can be explained by the fact that Kardelj was considered the second most influential man in Yugoslavia and that

11 Saška Roškar, Matej Vinko and Nuša Konec Juričič, "Samomorilno vedenje v populaciji – prikaz stanja, trendov in značilnosti po svetu in v Sloveniji," in Saška Roškar and Alja Videtič Paska (eds.), *Samomor v Sloveniji in po svetu. Opredelitev, raziskovanje, preprečevanje in obravnava* (Ljubljana: Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje, 2021), 69.

12 Meta Remec, "Traitors, cowards, martyrs, heroes: youth suicide as a socio-historical phenomenon in the 1960s Slovenia," *Studia Historica Slovenica* 23, No. 1 (2023): 203–38.

13 Ljuba Dornik Šubelj, "Aleš Kermavner, sin Dušana Kermavnerja v dokumentih Arhiva Republike Slovenije," in Jurij Perovšek and Aleksander Žižek (eds.), *Življenje in delo dr. Dušana Kermavnerja 1903–1975, Med politiko in zgodovino* (Ljubljana, ZZDS: 2005), 81–87.

this was the time when the era of "Party liberalism" was coming to an end, as the state's communist leadership was reasserting its control over society.[14]

As already mentioned, after 1967, Slovenian newspapers, especially the *Tedenska tribuna* (TT) weekly, also wrote about suicide as a typically Slovenian problem and Slovenians as a suicidal nation. "Are we a suicide nation?" this magazine wondered on the occasion of the Slovenian Cultural Holiday (8 February) in 1967. There was a lot of talk in Ljubljana about a youth suicide club. Slovenia had one of the world's top suicide rates, with more deaths resulting from suicide than from road accidents and tuberculosis.[15] In the days following Svit Brejc's suicide in May 1968, the journalist Feri Žerdin published a column on suicide in Slovenia. "Slovenians are on the top. This is a fact, and the numbers prove it," the concerned journalist began his column. Recently, a film by Mako Sajko about suicides among the youth in Slovenia was shown in cinemas, the journalist recalled, and yet a young boy's life was once again snuffed out on a rope. Of course, this provided no proof for the existence of a suicide club, yet there were no initiatives to investigate and strive to prevent the phenomenon, the journalist criticised. Unfortunately, there was no money for scientists to investigate why suicide was a Slovenian disease, which is also why it was impossible to prevent. There are ideas that an SOS helpline for suicidal people could be introduced, the journalist explained. However, in his opinion, such a hotline would not be successful in Slovenia. Even before the introduction of a hotline, the petty Slovenians would bicker about the funding, organisation, and supervision so that the whole thing would soon go down the drain, the journalist Feri Žerdin claimed resignedly.[16] On 19 June 1968, another journalist – Tone Fornezzi, a famous humourist – published an article in the same magazine with the bombastic title *Suicide Club – Yes or No?*. He did not answer the question but did emphasise that certain facts pointed in that direction. He mentioned the young poet AK, who wrote suicide poetry, and pointed out that the young suicides belonged to the same circle of friends.[17] In the relatively small Slovenian society, it was not difficult to establish that the initials AK referred to the deceased Aleš Kermavner, who was already an established artist despite his youth. Unsurprisingly, the subject was also picked up by the Yugoslav sensationalist press. In 1969, the Belgrade newspaper *Politika ekspres* published a six-part serial story titled *Suicide Club behind the Wall of Silence*.[18]

## Suicide and Slovenian Culture in the Post-war Period: the Nation and Suicide

These suicides are relevant for the assertion of the trope of Slovenians as a "suicide nation", also because of their connection to the major conflict in the Slovenian literary

14 Remec, "Traitors, cowards, martyrs, heroes," 228, 229.
15 Feri Žerdin, "Samomorilci so med nami," *TT*, February 8, 1967, 4.
16 Feri Žerdin, "Rentabilnost našega samomora," *TT*, May 29, 1968, 3.
17 Tone Fornezzi, "Klub samomorilcev, da ali ne," *TT*, June 19, 1968, 3.
18 Dornik Šubelj, "Aleš Kermavner," 86.

and cultural scene in the 1945–1991 period. Three personalities were at the centre of these discussions: the writers Vitomil Zupan (1914–1987) and Jože Javoršek (1920–1990), and the professor of comparative literature and philosopher Dušan Pirjevec (1921–1977). They all had joined the Partisans as committed young people and held important political and cultural positions during and immediately after the war. The oldest of them, Vitomil Zupan, had already established himself as a writer before the war. He was known for his adventurous and bohemian lifestyle, with a particular penchant for a demonstrative use of firearms. After the war, he was the editor of the cultural programme at Radio Ljubljana. He was also on good terms with Dušan Pirjevec, a visible member of the Communist Party Agitprop at the time. Zupan's friend from the Partisan years, Jože Brejc (later: Javoršek), who had studied literature in Paris immediately after the war and who also worked as an intelligence officer for the Yugoslav secret service, often socialised with them after his return from Paris. Zupan's behaviour became increasingly intolerable for the authorities: drinking sprees, endangerment with firearms, fistfights, scandalous sex life and, last but not least, ridiculing prominent politicians. After these friends indulged in a practical joke during the sensitive period of the conflict between Tito and Stalin in 1948 – they called an important cultural official and told him that Tito had resigned – the authorities decided to take action. They were convicted of "crimes against public morals", i.e. of engaging in unusual sexual practices, perversion, and distribution of pornographic literature. The court accused Zupan of being responsible for the suicide of his mistress during the war. The three men were also convicted of making jokes and smearing leading politicians and the National Liberation Struggle, as well as divulging secret information. Zupan was sentenced to twelve years, Brejc to seven years, and Pirjevec only to seven months in prison.[19]

Jože Brejc was released early, in 1952. At that point, he also assumed his mother's surname, Javoršek. Brejc had joined the Partisans as a member of the left-wing Catholic movement (the Christian Socialists), led by the poet, writer, and Brejc's mentor Edvard Kocbek.[20] Kocbek, who was a high-ranking functionary after the liberation, came into conflict with the political leadership in 1952 over the publication of his short story collection titled *Strah in pogum* (Fear and Courage), which dealt with the Partisan struggle in a critical and individualistic manner.[21] His collection was torn apart by the most influential cultural critic of the time, Josip Vidmar, which represented a prelude to the official anathema. Kocbek was forcibly retired, and his works were prevented from being published for more than ten years. Josip Vidmar accused Kocbek of not only "distorting the image of the liberation struggle" but also of spreading desperation and mystical nihilism.[22] After his release from prison in 1952, Javoršek

19 Aleš Gabrič, "Greh in kazen," in Nela Malečkar et al. (eds.), *Vitomil Zupan: Važno je priti na grič: življenje in delo Vitomila Zupana 1914–1987* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2014), 260–76. Alenka Puhar, "Kriminalna kariera Vitomila Zupana," in *Vitomil Zupan: Važno je priti na grič*, 235–57.

20 Andrej Inkret, "Jože Brejc - Franček alias Jože Javoršek ali spregledano poglavje iz Kocbekove biografije," *Sodobnost* 75, No. 12 (2011): 1598.

21 Aleš Gabrič, *V senci politike: opozicija komunistični oblasti v Sloveniji po letu 1945* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2019), 148.

22 Josip Vidmar, "Kritika – Edvard Kocbek: Strah in pogum," *Novi svet* 7, No. 1 (1952): 85.

resumed his friendship with Kocbek. However, Javoršek was allegedly already spying on Kocbek during this period and writing reports to the secret police.[23] Javoršek parted ways with Kocbek in 1963. He publicly assumed the opposing positions and joined the intellectual group gathered around Josip Vidmar. He worked as an expert associate at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and headed Vidmar's office.[24] According to the testimony of Stane Kavčič, President of the Executive Council of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia (SRS) between 1967 and 1972, Javoršek also secretly supervised his patron Josip Vidmar for the State Security Service (SDV).[25]

Jože Javoršek is also the intellectual who, in 1969, wrote the book without which it is impossible to understand the trajectory of Slovenians as a suicidal nation. Javoršek conceived the book titled *Kako je mogoče* (How It Is Possible) as a dialogue with his deceased son, who had committed suicide. In the book, Javoršek moves from intimate confessions and his inner experience of a profound loss through meditations on the past and on the pathologies of the Slovenian nation – of which he is extremely fond – to polemical accusations of those he holds responsible for his son's death and for the Slovenian "suicide cult", which, as he claims, "is unique in the world for its cunning, cultural perversity, and satanic activity."[26] In the book, Javoršek also blames his dead son for committing suicide because he regarded this as a distinctly anti-Slovenian act. The accusation refers to his son's oppositional political activities, as the deceased Svit Brejc organised a small group called the Slovenian National Party, which, according to the authorities, strived for the break-up of Yugoslavia and an independent Slovenia.[27] Javoršek reminded his son that the youth of a small nation should develop greater creative powers than the youth of large nations. Javoršek argues that all previous Slovenian generations were forced to fight for basic national and human rights, while the post-war Slovenian youth no longer have to waste precious energy fighting for the fundamental demands of their nation. The Slovenian youth finally have the opportunity to devote themselves exclusively to creativity. This privilege – and Javoršek is proud of it – was heroically won by his Partisan generation.[28] What are the reasons why the Slovenian youth are not reaching their potential? In Javoršek's opinion, the Slovenian national character, which is still meek, self-absorbed, subdued, uncreative, and servile, plays a vital role in this. Instead of rolling up their sleeves, Slovenians commit suicide or leave their homeland. "Slovenians are not only the first in the world in the number of youth suicides – we also have the greatest number of suicides in general," Javoršek points out.[29] However, Javoršek is not satisfied with a general criticism of society. He also draws attention to the "dark agents of suicide", who are particularly active on the

23 Alenka Puhar, "Kako se je tovarišija spremenila v črno sluzasto mavrico," *Pogledi*, October 15, 2014, https://pogledi.delo.si/mnenja/kako-se-je-tovarisija-spremenila-v-crno-sluzasto-mavrico.

24 Marjan Dolgan, "Ljubljana kot socialni in literarni prostor slovenskih književnikov," *Primerjalna književnost* 35, No. 3 (December 2012): 345.

25 Igor Omerza, *Edvard Kocbek, Osebni dosje št. 584* (Ljubljana: Karantanija, 2010), 167.

26 Javoršek, *Kako je mogoče*, 13.

27 Remec, "Traitors, Cowards, Martyrs," 226.

28 Javoršek, *Kako je mogoče*, 8.

29 Ibid., 12, 13.

Slovenian literary scene. The cult of misery and death dominates Slovenian contemporary literature, Javoršek claims, and the joy of life is considered worthless. The contempt for the National Liberation Struggle – which is the only miracle in Slovenian history that can give Slovenians hope for the future – has also started spreading. In addition, the Slovenian nation has a low birth rate: "Our women no longer like being mothers, our husbands no longer want to be fathers. /.../ They are afraid of life, and this fear has exactly the same roots as in the case of those who commit suicide."[30] In addition to the suicide cult, Javoršek also detected a cult of abortion and contraception. He is disgusted with the women sitting in the waiting rooms of Slovenian clinics "with a foetus under their heart and a murderous desire in their mind."After all, in socialism, unwed mothers enjoy all the moral and material protection, which is why abortion is, in his view, impermissible.[31] He believes that Slovenian intellectuals bear much of the blame for this situation, first and foremost his former friend and mentor Edvard Kocbek, to whom he dedicates much attention in the book. Javoršek declares him a lost, harmful man who successfully seduces people, even though everyone has always abandoned him. Kocbek was supposedly responsible for the spiritual decrepitude of his followers, the glorification of internal emigration, the confusion and despair in the Slovenian culture, and, indirectly, also for the suicide of Javoršek's son.[32]

Uncompromising and personal, the book obviously prompted various responses. The writer Taras Kermavner, brother of the poet Aleš Kermavner who had ended his young life voluntarily during the same wave of suicides as Javoršek's son, reacted to Javoršek's work. While Javoršek was not ashamed of his intimate resentments, Taras Kermavner consciously refused to take a personal position. He criticised Javoršek's work as a Slovenian intellectual and literary historian. Kermavner observes self-torture, rage, and similar bitter passions in Javoršek's sentences, which he considers to be an expression of a broader social complex of a particular generation or an expression of Slovenian traditional ideology. As Kermavner informs us, Javoršek builds upon the traditional idea of how Slovenian cultural workers see themselves as a group that has succeeded in creating and integrating the Slovenian nation. Javoršek cannot escape the traditional Slovenian ideology, which believes in the imminent end of the European civilisation and the necessary emergence of a new one. After the war, a new era of creativity should have dawned, but instead, according to Javoršek, Slovenian culture is dominated by nihilism and mindless imitation of Western models. Taras Kermavner disagrees with Javoršek's denigration of Slovenian history and culture. Instead, he claims Slovenian culture is in good shape and has never been more creative. Javoršek is extremely annoyed by the constant mockery of Slovenian history and culture, while Taras Kermavner notes that Javoršek himself is the one who actually mocks it the most. The greatest nihilist is the one who accuses the young avant-garde artists of nihilism.[33]

30 Ibid., 15.
31 Ibid., 16.
32 Ibid., 212.
33 Taras Kermauner, "Marsikako je mogoče," *Naši razgledi*, September 5, 1969, No. 17, 504, 505; September 19, 1969, No. 18, 536, 537.

Taras Kermavner clearly distinguishes his own conception of the Slovenian nation and culture from Javoršek's. This distinction is consistent with the division between the younger "critical generation" of writers who found refuge in the *Perspektive* magazine (1960–64) and the group of the established Partisan "patriarchs" (Josip Vidmar, Matej Bor, Jože Javoršek). The *Perspektive* magazine was openly supported by Javoršek's former comrade Dušan Pirjevec, who was ultimately expelled from the League of Communists in 1964 because of this.[34] The archival documents on the "Hashish" investigation reveal that Javoršek blamed the corrupting influence of Professor Dušan Pirjevec for his son's death.[35] In 1971, the poet and playwright Matej Bor, who belonged to the same cultural circle as Javoršek, wrote a play called *Šola noči* (The School of the Night), problematising the issue of suicide among the youth and associating it with the figure of a demonic professor. In 1972, Bor's play was filmed and broadcast on TV Ljubljana. The subject of the play is simple: the diabolical mentor Ahriman runs a secret "School of the Night". It is attended by young people with a death wish. The one whose name gets drawn must commit suicide within two months. Ahriman supplies the students with LSD, philosophises with them about death, and encourages them to commit suicide.[36] According to many contemporaries, the author was alluding to Dušan Pirjevec.[37] The poet and Pirjevec's friend Boris A. Novak is convinced that the entire Slovenian public recognised Dušan Pirjevec in the figure of Ahriman, who is constantly talking about nothingness. "Thus, his lectures on the nihilism of European metaphysics also became subjected to a terrible, literally nihilistic fabrication and abuse."[38]

According to Jure Ramšak, a historian of social criticism in socialist Slovenia, the Slovenian authorities resorted to Javoršek's judgmental writing several times in the 1970s to deal with the cultural opposition.[39] Javoršek touched upon the issue of suicide again in 1978 in his epistolary novel titled *Nevarna razmerja* (Dangerous Liaisons), which became a bestseller, partly due to its spicy details and bold accusations. This time, Javoršek set out to retaliate against Professor Dušan Pirjevec, who had already been deceased since 1977. He described the social situation in the 1960s as a "frantic seething" of the young generation: beatniks, hippies, and student movements – the entire uncontrolled youth revolution unleashed the previously unknown forces in society. In Slovenia, Javoršek argued, it had mainly unleashed the suicidal drive. He wrote that he should have talked to Pirjevec "about suicidal tendencies in Slovenia, especially their sociological foundations." The echo of the youth revolutions (and the misunderstood surrealism worshipped by young avant-garde artists) triggered a true national catastrophe in Slovenia. Javoršek revealed that less than a month before his

34 Andrej Inkret, "Ahac," in *Ahac, knjiga o Dušanu Pirjevcu*, ed. Andrej Koritnik (Ljubljana: Beletrina 2021), 238.

35 Dornik Šubelj, "Aleš Kermavner," 86.

36 Matej Bor, "Šola noči," *Sodobnost* 19, No. 12 (1971): 1169–96, http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:doc-W7W2Y1TE.

37 Peter Vodopivec, "Profesorjev dosje," in *Ahac, knjiga o Dušanu Pirjevcu*, 344.

38 Boris A. Novak, "Govorilne ure pri profesorju Pirjevcu," in *Ahac, knjiga o Dušanu Pirjevcu*, 377.

39 Jure Ramšak, *(Samo)upravljanje intelekta, Družbena kritika v poznosocialistični Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2019), 166.

son's suicide, Pirjevec had visited his home because of some new books by the French poet Michel Butor. Instead of discussing the French poet, Pirjevec mainly talked about the issue of death with Javoršek's son Svit.

> "The professor's assertion that suicide is the only real philosophical question /.../ and the only solution to the horrors of the Slovenian society – and that those who refuse to see this solution should be beaten over the head with a hammer until they die – must have certainly made an impact upon the young mind."[40]

Javoršek admitted that after his son's death, he had accused Pirjevec of being morally responsible for the suicide of his son and other young people without any evidence. He wondered what might have happened had they had an opportunity to discuss suicide. Javoršek believed that Pirjevec would certainly have intellectualised and discussed death as a general characteristic of humanity, while Javoršek would have tried to persuade him that the question of how to prevent death should have been the primary concern. Slovenian intellectuals should ask themselves where the blame lies for Slovenia's leading position in the shameful global suicide ranking. "Dear God, how I've come to hate him again," sighed Javoršek.[41]

On 27 October 1982, the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts organised an interdisciplinary consultation titled Suicide and Slovenians, chaired by the most eminent Slovenian expert on the subject, Lev Milčinski. The participants were recognised experts in various scientific fields, concerned in one way or another with the issue of suicidality, including the sociologists Jože Goričar and Marko Kerševan, literary historian Boris Paternu, philosopher Božidar Debenjak, and psychologist Anton Trstenjak. Lev Milčinski later wrote that they had decided to hold an interdisciplinary consultation also because suicidality in Slovenia had acquired the connotation of a relevant socio-pathological phenomenon, and therefore, they could not afford to examine it only in the context of medicine or psychiatry. It would also have been unacceptable for medical experts to intervene in the areas where they had no expertise.[42] The consultation attempted to bring together two very different perspectives on suicide: the medical-scientific, statistical perspective and the humanistic, cultural or literary perspective. The collection of papers from this consultation reveals that there was little communication between the two perspectives on suicide.

In the social sciences and humanities part of the collection, the contribution of the philosopher, theologian, and psychologist Anton Trstenjak (1906–1996) is of particular interest to our topic. Trstenjak had built his academic career already before the war, while after it, he lectured at the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana. Although he was a priest and had a lifelong attachment to the Catholic Church, he was highly respected in the academic sphere and in the society of socialist Slovenia. In addition to his psychological works, he was known for his books on integral philosophical anthropology, and he also deliberated at length on the Slovenian national character.

40 Jože Javoršek, *Nevarna razmerja* (Maribor: Založba Obzorja,1978), 378.
41 Ibid., 381.
42 Lev Milčinski, *Samomor in Slovenci* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1985), 5.

In his paper, presented at the Suicide and Slovenians consultation, Trstenjak develops the idea that suicide is not a symptom of the crisis of drives but an expression of the crisis of human culture. Suicide is a civilisational problem rather than a biological one. Suicide is unknown in the animal world. It is also evident, Trstenjak argues, that the suicide rate rises in proportion to the higher living standard. The higher the level of aspiration, the greater the risk of frustration – and suicide is a degenerative symptom of a developing civilisation. In this context, Trstenjak faces a narrower, specifically Slovenian dilemma: why is the suicide rate higher in Slovenia than in the rest of Yugoslavia? He sees the reasons either in the individual structure of Slovenians or in the historical circumstances that have shaped the Slovenian character. Slovenians resemble "model children" who live in constant fear of derailment and frustration, lest they disappoint the expectations of those around them, Trstenjak explains. Slovenians are one of the most disciplined nations. For a thousand years, they lived in the context of the Inner Austrian provinces and became accustomed to discipline. Slovenians always want to be perfectionists: meticulous at work, demanding in their family life, and conscientious in the economy – which is exactly why they are narrow-minded and timid, constantly afraid, unable to tolerate defeat, filled with a sense of inferiority, and sinking into depression. The Slovenians' fellow citizens from other parts of Yugoslavia, especially in the south, are completely opposite. Judging from the relevant statistics, they are more outwardly aggressive and more likely to lay a hand on others than on themselves. Slovenia has ten times the number of suicides than Kosovo, while Kosovo has the highest homicide rate in Yugoslavia.[43]

In the second and updated edition of *Suicide and Slovenians*, Lev Milčinski devotes the last chapter to the Slovenian national character. "These reflections are, in fact, quite risky, but they may represent a path to a better understanding of this Slovenian peculiarity," Milčinski is cautious. The notion of national character is problematic and, therefore, rejected by some, but we all use it tacitly in our daily lives. For Milčinski, national character is

> "that persistent basic mood which is common to most members of a nation and which (mainly through extra-conscious channels) influences (along with other more obvious factors) the formation of people's value system and thus also their world view, interpersonal relationships, etc. This mood is permanent, or rather, it changes very slowly, because it is partly related to the organismic (racial) characteristics of a large part of that population, while, to a large extent, this pattern is transmitted from generation to generation through stereotypes of childcare and upbringing."[44]

Milčinski quotes the philosopher Debenjak, who, as early as 1969, reflected on the fact that the centuries of repression that the Slovenian nation had endured had led its aggressive impulses to turn inward.[45] He also mentions the literary historian Paternu,

43 Anton Trstenjak, "Okvirne dileme v etiologiji samomora," in Lev Mičinski (ed.). *Samomor in Slovenci* (Ljubljana: SAZU, Univerzitetna psihiatrična klinika v Ljubljani, 1983), 251–58.

44 Milčinski, *Samomor in Slovenci*, 220.

45 Božidar Debenjak, "Nacionalnost in represija," *Anthropos* 1, No. 1–2 (1969): 115–18.

who writes about the dogmatic habitus of the Slovenians. Constantly threatened, Slovenians time and again sought salvation in elated, redemptive ideologies but were ultimately betrayed by both Rome and Moscow. Anton Slodnjak, who predominantly observed fatalism and Jansenist determinism in Slovenians, shared a similar opinion.[46] The sociologist Marko Kerševan explains the high suicide rate among Slovenians in terms of the social circumstances of small societies in modern times. Industrialisation severs the old connections and promises the possibility of progress but also brings downfalls for individuals. In a sizable socio-geographical space, one can always "start again", while in a small territory, this is very difficult – the possibilities of escape using alcohol or resorting to suicide come to the fore.[47]

In addition to the traits perceived as Slovenian, the characteristics that Slovenians adopt because of the modern way of life or their coexistence in the Yugoslav federal state can also be problematic. Milčinski quotes Javoršek's observations about the "customs coming from the south", for example imprecision and unreliability, or Slovenians adopting a culture of "dolce far niente balcanese". Apart from Balkanisation, consumerism is also a threat to Slovenia, as the accumulation of material wealth results in neuroticism, psychosomatic diseases, atomisation, and ethical cultural impoverishment. The principle of "relying on oneself", which often saved Slovenians when their nation was endangered, has become a petty bourgeois hustle for a higher standard in the relaxed atmosphere of the new state community. Such an orientation in the socialist self-governing community that Yugoslavia has chosen cannot serve as a productive foundation for forming the appropriate consciousness. The latter calls for individual responsibility and, simultaneously, an emotional connection with one's fellow citizens. "It is a consciousness that actually brings together the best values of the West and the East. The building of such consciousness is precisely what we can envision as the future cultural mission of Slovenia and Slovenians," Lev Milčinski reflected. "However, even in the future, they will have to endure the anxiety of a small nation." He believed that "the gloominess of this situation" was beautifully illustrated by the Slovenian poet Ervin Fritz:

*"… seen from America or Paris:*
*it is impossible to live in this country;*
*on the rosary of the centuries that God keeps heaping on them as penance,*
*not a decade goes by without being worthy of cursing;*
*their whole history some ancient, stifled peasant uprising,*
*all their culture a little bit of wistful sobbing poetry,*
*their entire present a great revolution that barely keeps glimmering,*
*everything else protracted drunkenness, despair, and gradual suicide… "*[48]

Was the poet expressing his experience of Durkheim's collective suicidal tendencies, Milčinski asked, or was it a projection of personal distress? The author concludes

46 Milčinski, *Samomor in Slovenci*, 222.
47 Ibid., 225.
48 Ibid., 230.

that it is most likely a combination of both. How to successfully prevent suicide in Slovenia? The efforts of the medical and social services are definitely important, but more attention should be paid to the prevention of alcoholism, which has a self-destructive basis. We should also support those sections of the peasant population that are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable to suicide. Prevention would ideally start by internalising the following thought: "Suicide is alien to those who can accept suffering and death as a common human condition, without this Sisyphean knowledge robbing them of their joy of life."[49]

## The Issue of Suicide as a Critique of Slovenian Socialist Society

In the 1980s, the issue of suicide preoccupied a group of Slovenian oppositional intellectuals from the circle of the *Nova revija* magazine (1982), defined by the communist authorities as the "bourgeois right wing".[50] This group of intellectuals used the presence of the crisis discourse in the Slovenian and Yugoslav publics to shape their oppositional political agenda. The group's core consisted of the intellectuals also known as the critical generation, who had contributed to two cultural magazines in the 1950s and 1960s: *Revija 57* and *Perspektive*. They highly valued the work and tradition of the frequently mentioned intellectual Dušan Pirjevec, whose charisma and original synthesis of phenomenology, Kardelj's version of Marxism, and original interpretation of the Slovenian literary canon provided the critical generation with an attractive alternative paradigm through which they could form a critical attitude towards the realities of self-management socialism.[51]

After the death of Dušan Pirjevec in 1977, his intellectual legacy was continued by the philosophers of the phenomenological tradition, Tine Hribar and Ivo Urbančič, as well as by the sociologist of culture and comparativist Dimitrij Rupel.[52] Ivo Urbančič analysed Pirjevec's theory of nations, endeavouring to develop it as a basis for alternative politics. On the other hand, Dimitrij Rupel refined Pirjevec's literary-historical thesis on the so-called "Prešeren structure". Pirjevec defined Slovenian literature as the only sphere of Slovenian self-assertion and legitimation until the 20th century. In the 19th century, Slovenians did not possess their own state and its institutions as a nation. Therefore, they were "mostly a movement", "blocked or inhibited" because of their political subordination. On this basis, Dimitrij Rupel developed the concept of

49 Ibid., 231.

50 Igor Omerza, *Veliki in dolgi pohod Nove revije* (Celovec: Mohorjeva, 2015), 18–110.

51 Balázs Trencsényi, Michal Kopeček, Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, Maria Falina, Monika Baar and Maciej Janowski, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe. Vol. 2, Negotiating Modernity in the Short Twentieth Century and Beyond. Pt. 1, 1918–1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 401.

52 Balázs Trencsényi, Michal Kopeček, Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, Maria Falina, Monika Baár, Maciej Janowski, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe. Vol. 2, Negotiating Modernity in the Short Twentieth Century and Beyond. Pt. 2, 1968–2018* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 112.

the "Slovenian cultural syndrome" (1976), according to which the Slovenian activities in the 19th century had manifested themselves mainly through literature. Thus, literature had not only been an art form, but also a substitute for politics.[53]

Unsurprisingly, Taras Kermavner joined the *Nova revija* magazine's circle. However, in 1987, he parted ways with his colleagues from that circle – partly because of their national political ambitions.[54] In his book of diary notes from 1982, he reflected on the aesthetically revolutionary spectacle that had asserted itself in the Slovenian art scene at the end of the 1960s with the interventions of the neo-avant-garde group OHO, in which his late brother Aleš Kermavner had also participated. Taras Kermavner wrote that his brother had wanted to set himself on fire in front of the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana already in 1965. The "suicide epidemic" supposedly radicalised aesthetic freedom. According to T. Kermavner, with their extreme gesture, these suicides marked the peak of dehumanisation as the truth of Stalinism and achieved existence in nothingness, in annihilation, with the only absolute act available to man. He therefore believed that all those who condemned these acts as criminal through the eyes of Catholic morality were wrong. Anyone who thought like that deprived these young people, who had chosen to die euphorically, of the implications of their decision and the meaning of their lives. Taras was convinced that his brother's suicide was "a conscious religious, philosophical act of immense power."[55]

The writer, sports activist, and essayist Marjan Rožanc, who was not known as a supporter of Yugoslav socialism, was also a member of the *Nova revija* magazine's intellectual circle. When Rožanc was confronted with the unexpected suicide of a friend from the theatre scene in 1984, he mainly contemplated existential questions in his diary entries and did not reflect on suicide in a metaphorical sense.[56] That changed in January 1985, when he presented a paper on the "beautiful death" at the symposium on the Slovenian nation and culture. It is not only Slovenians who are dying but the entire baroque Central European area from the Baltic to Trieste: Croats, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Poles, Rožanc claimed. They are dying not only because of their separation from the cradle of Western Europe and Soviet totalitarianism but also because of the Central European culture itself. Caught between the German and Russian pressure, these nations cling to solidarity instead of superiority, turn inwards instead of outwards, and devote themselves to culture instead of politics. In Rožanc's view, Central Europe's culture is predominantly cosmopolitan, and its spirit is alien to Eastern European totalitarianism, as it is alien to Western European Protestantism. The Party's strength is based on a lazy and lethargic people, a people defined by the Central European culture that wants only loyalty to itself and a beautiful death. Rožanc's pessimism reveals not only the symbolic geography of the Slovenian nationalist intellectuals

53 Marko Juvan, "Slovenski kulturni sindrom v nacionalni in primerjalni literarni vedi," *Slavistična revija* 56, No. 1 (2008): 1–17.

54 Aleš Čar and Mitja Čander, "Jaz sem kritik iz Beckettove in Rodetove kante," *dnevnik.si*, November 4, 2006, https://www.dnevnik.si/210090.

55 Taras Kermavner, *Med prijatelji, med sovražniki* (Murska sobota: Pomurska založba, 1986), 144.

56 Marjan Rožanc, *Svoboda in narod, dnevniški zapiski* (Maribor: Založba obzorja, 1986), 15.

who revered the notion of Central Europe[57] but also his awareness of the fatalistic and melancholic nature of the Central European spirit, which is original and beautiful, yet, according to Rožanc, also marked for certain death for the very same reason.[58]

The intellectuals from the *Nova Revija* magazine's circle maintained excellent relations with the Serbian nationalist intellectuals until they disagreed over their views on the Yugoslav state at a meeting in Ljubljana in November 1985.[59] In September 1986, a media scandal broke out over a draft memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which exposed the nationalist nature of the Serbian intellectual elite. In the spring of 1987, the *Nova Revija* circle entered the political arena by publishing the 57th issue of the *Nova Revija* magazine (Contributions for the Slovenian National Programme), where they demanded greater sovereignty for Slovenia, the abolition of the communist monopoly, and a free economy. In this publication, regarded by the Slovenian historiography as the canonical text of Slovenia's democratisation and emancipation, the *Nova Revija* intellectuals upgraded the oppositional crisis discourse into the Slovenian national programme.[60]

The poet, editor, and essayist Niko Grafenauer wrote a contribution for the 57th issue of *Nova revija*, titled *Oblike slovenskega samomora* (The Forms of Slovenian Suicide). Before writing this essay, Grafenauer took on an outstanding preparatory work – he studied philosophical texts, ancient literature, classical and Slovenian literary history, Slovenian statistics, and sociological and psychological analyses of suicide. In the first part of the essay, he reflects on the elemental sense of "alienation" or "loneliness" that overwhelms the future suicide victim. As a starting point for his reflection on the sense of "alienation", Grafenauer chose two literary examples: *The Death of Empedocles*, an unfinished play by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and *Tujci* (*Strangers)*, the first novel by Ivan Cankar (1876 –1918). Hölderlin's play focuses on the suicide of the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, who, according to legend, threw himself into the crater of the Mount Etna volcano. Cankar's novel describes the fate of Silvar, a Slovenian sculptor who finds no opportunities in his native land and seeks his fortune in Vienna. He endures a sense of alienation, although he even falls in love and gets married there. Slivar's work in Vienna, which is more artisanal than artistic, calls for a conformist adaptation of his aesthetic sense, which he refuses to give up. Consequently, he becomes completely alienated and eventually decides to commit suicide. Both Empedocles and Silvar are strangers in the world, although both enjoy social recognition. Society, however, is not the same as the world. The world, conceived in such a manner, is what saves people from alienation and loneliness. Such a world is only possible in the context of society and is based on

57 Marko Zajc, "Samoumeščanje slovenskih intelektualcev v simbolno geografijo Evrope v osemdesetih letih," *Annales. Series historia et sociologia* 27, No. 4 (2017): 769–76.

58 Marjan Rožanc, "Umreti lepo," in Tone Partljič (ed.), *Slovenski narod in kultura* (Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih pisateljev, 1985), 78–87.

59 Nick Miller, *The Nonconfomists, Culture, Politics and Nationalism in a Serbian Intellectual Circle, 1944–1991* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2007), 310, 311.

60 Aleš Gabrič, "Zaostrenost mednacionalnih odnosov," in Jasna Fischer et al. (eds.). *Slovenska novejša zgodovina 1848–1992* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino; Mladinska knjiga, 2005), 1171.

individuality and a homeland, which is not only a matter of birth but also of eroticism that functions as a binding force in all circumstances, either good or bad. If suicide requires alienation, then this alienation is also the predominant characteristic of the social world in which one decides to commit suicide, Grafenauer is convinced.[61]

Grafenauer summarises Lev Milčinski and other experts in suicidology and comes to the conclusion that Slovenian society harbours "an incredible degree of widespread alienation." In his view, in the case of socialist Slovenia, it is possible to speak about the absence of the world, as he defines it in the first part of his essay, referring to Cankar and Hölderlin. Slovenian people live in a social system rather than in a world that offers the possibility of fully exercising the individual way of being.[62] In a brief historical overview, Grafenauer examines the expert findings about the increasing number of suicides among Slovenians and acknowledges the impact of global trends associated with industrialisation and the disintegration of the old world. However, he pays more attention to the specific Slovenian causes. Referring to Dušan Pirjevec's theory of nation, Grafenauer believes that the position of Slovenians as a nation without a true historical retrospective and a vague national perspective negatively impacts the nation's self-confidence. The Slovenian public opinion proves, Grafenauer argues, that Slovenians do not work to achieve inner satisfaction but only to ensure their own and their children's survival. They have no particular interest in investing their property in the economy. The Yugoslav system of "associated labour" presupposes undefined individual labour, which is why it is not surprising that workers are indifferent to the reallocation of capital to cover economic losses. Slovenians vegetate at work and are pessimistic about the future.[63]

Niko Grafenauer is also concerned about the biological reproduction of the Slovenian nation, as he identifies an unstoppable birth rate decline, which he regards as a "decrease of social eroticism" that latently affects the suicide rate. Slovenians, the author notes, "are burdened with a kind of a permanent parasuicidal syndrome." Why is Slovenian society pathological? The first feature of the social pathology that Grafenauer identifies is full employment in Slovenia, with many people, especially women, also working outside regular hours. Thus, in his opinion, "children's individual family upbringing is significantly impaired" as society takes care of them. Slovenian children lack an individualistic and pluralistic education that considers personal differences, Grafenauer reflects. Half of Slovenian children attend religious instruction classes and are therefore exposed to the pressures of two mutually exclusive ideologies (the communist and the Catholic) from an early age. As the intermediate link between children and society, the family is not doing its job, which is why children face constant distortions in their experience of the world, affecting the mentality of young people.[64] Education, the author continues, is ideologically tailored to the ruling communist politics; the creative potential of the younger generation is suppressed in the service of

61 Niko Grafenauer, "Oblike slovenskega samomora," *Nova revija* 6, No. 57 (1987): 229–46.
62 Ibid., 233.
63 Ibid., 236.
64 Ibid., 238.

spiritual egalitarianism; the country is suffering a brain drain; and the level of academic knowledge is decreasing.[65] There is a blockage between the "living social currents" and the political system due to the political monopoly, while epistemological frustration and inhibition cripple the full social inclusion of individuals in the fabric of the nation. Slovenian social space is paternalistically dominated by the League of Communists and the Catholic Church. Both provide people with well-defined sacral roles: they place social meaning above the meaning of people's individual lives. When people, trapped in the demands of the social subject, become aware of the specificity of the individual life that differs from the ideological "life task", they experience their condition as their own betrayal. Many suicide victims are pensioners and housewives who experience a loss of meaning in life. True individualism is only possible if one is aware of the uniqueness of life, while people, accustomed to constant social indoctrination, do not know what to do with their existence. Egalitarianism, as Grafenauer makes clear, is fundamentally opposed to the diversity of individual life and "is accompanied by the stench of death."[66] Suppressing individual interests in the name of an egalitarian social interest does not allow society to establish itself as a homeland of individuals.[67]

Slovenians as a nation are defined by culture in the broadest sense – not as a nationalist ideology but as a dynamic structure of different interests. This means integration into the modern division of labour on the integrative basis of one's own culture, all of which is only possible through national sovereignty in one's own statehood. Post-modern society makes it possible to maintain differences while simultaneously integrating itself into the global society. Suicide is an individual act, but the disintegrative pressure of the social system is also decisive. For Slovenians, suicidality is linked to disintegration, based on the gap between social values and reality. As Grafenauer reflects, Slovenian society certainly cannot be defined as a "social brotherhood" that brings people together in the name of a particular idea, nor can it be defined as a modern post-industrial society. "Slovenian society is at a critical point when it is neither one nor the other," he notes, and adds: "This situation is ambivalent, exposed to crises on all sides, and therefore, in the absence of individualistic self-consciousness, threatening to both individuals and society as a whole."[68]

The publication of the 57th issue of the *Nova Revija* magazine was followed by a reaction from the Slovenian political leadership that decided to fight the critical voices on the ideological battlefield. It organised a discussion about the magazine with the regime intellectuals, who strongly attacked the oppositional theses published in the magazine. Interestingly, Grafenauer's deliberation on suicide was not commented upon.[69] It is not surprising, however, that suicide as a Slovenian metaphor was contemplated by the writers who belonged to the cultural elite of the time. The literary historian and professor Matjaž Kmecl counts among them. His book of essays titled

65 Ibid., 239.
66 Ibid., 343.
67 Ibid., 244.
68 Ibid., 246.
69 "Obravnava in zavrnitev nesprejemljivih stališč," *Delo*, March 5, 1987, 7–9.

*Slovenska postna premišljevanja* (Slovenian Lenten Meditations) from 1987 includes the essay *O slovenskem samoubijanju* (On Slovenian Self-Killing). In it, Kmecl interweaves his own experiences of the suicides committed by his loved ones with examples from Slovenian literary history. If self-killing becomes a national characteristic, Kmecl reflects, it results from a powerful inner life. In Slovenians, the Freudian libido has not manifested itself through military and aggressive actions – i.e. outwardly – but inwardly, through spirituality and art. The long line of Slovenian suicide victims horrifies Kmecl but also fills him with a sort of disturbed pride. These suicides are, in his view, a terrible testament to the inner strength of a small body. He recalls the suicide of the elderly former mayor of Ljubljana, Ivan Hribar, who threw himself into the river Ljubljanica during the Italian occupation in 1941, and the Partisans who chose voluntary death rather than suffering in captivity. That is why Kmecl is not ashamed of his friends who took this terrible step. He feels sad and guilty for not noticing their self-destructive drive and would do anything to bring them back.[70]

## Conclusion

In 1978, the same year that Javoršek published his book *Nevarna razmerja* (Dangerous Liaisons), Susan Sontag's global bestseller *Illness as Metaphor* also came out. Apart from the year of publication, the two books have more in common than it seems. Both Javoršek and Sontag used examples from the literary canon to argue their theses, thus ascribing them a broader social significance. While Sontag, who wrote about illness from her own experience, warned against using metaphors about illness, Jože Javoršek chose a different path. He tried to rationalise the terrible loss of his son to suicide by resorting to deeper national-political and philosophical reasons while simultaneously indulging in accusations against his former comrades. The creation of the Slovenian suicide metaphor was a collateral consequence of his efforts. As we can see from the introductory quotation, Javoršek, by writing about suicide as a specifically Slovenian issue, attempted to promote a sense of national shame. If Slovenians opened their eyes and accepted this shame, they might be able to change something. In Susan Sontag's perspective, shame is part of the problem, as it promotes stigmatisation and hinders solutions.

The various uses of the Slovenian suicide metaphor are also interesting from the perspective of political thought. Jože Javoršek was a supporter of Yugoslav socialism and also of the Slovenian socialist nationalism of the Partisan generation, proud to have created Slovenia as a state, albeit within the Yugoslav federation. In his opinion, suicides were just the tip of the iceberg of undesirable phenomena (together with phenomenological philosophy, neo-avant-garde art, petty bourgeoisie, Catholic and Habsburg traditions) that were spoiling the well-conceived socialist project, which – in accordance with Edvard Kardelj's theory – was crucial for the successful realisation

70 Matjaž Kmecl, *Slovenska postna premišljevanja* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1987), 138.

of the Slovenian nation.[71] While Javoršek tried to consolidate the socialist system by exposing Slovenian suicidal tendencies, Niko Grafenauer used the topos of Slovenians as a suicidal nation to criticise the socialist authorities. Like Javoršek (and Sontag), Grafenauer used literary examples to confront an unwanted reality. Although he was certainly well aware of Javoršek's theses on Slovenian suicide, Grafenauer did not quote them in his essay. The reasons for this were not only political, as Javoršek was also rejected as an artist and a man of dubious principles by the group around *Nova revija*, which worshipped Dušan Pirjevec. That is why Niko Grafenauer had to do his best to create his own Slovenian suicide metaphor. Grafenauer understood the pathological phenomenon of suicide in Slovenian society as a consequence of the tension between the cold and alienated society of real socialism and the "world" based on the individual's meaning of life. His message was clear: the socialist system and the leading role of the communists (together with the specific characteristics of the Slovenian nation) encourage suicidal behaviour. Grafenauer's writing can also be understood as a worship of individualism, which is important for the good functioning of society and economy as well as for a positive sense of belonging to a nation. In his view, individualism in Slovenia is threatened by two dominant organisations: the League of Communists and the Catholic Church.

The distance from the Catholic Church brings Grafenauer's critique of socialism interestingly close to Javoršek's theses on the corrupting influence of Catholicism on socialist Slovenian society. However, the two intellectuals' mutual dislike of the Catholic Church was not the only common point in their texts on Slovenian suicide. From the viewpoint of nationalism studies, which take into account the modernist and constructivist paradigms, both intellectuals could be defined as Slovenian nationalists, although they would undoubtedly disagree with this label. For example, in his dialogue with his dead son, Javoršek wrote: "My Slovenian pride and nobility derive from the terrible truth that, as a nation that has gone through all the tortures of history, we have nevertheless preserved ourselves as something distinct and alive. You know me: I am no nationalist, no separatist, but neither am I the kind of cosmopolitan who, for who knows what reasons, forgets or denies his essence."[72] In a documentary film on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the *Nova Revija* magazine, Ivo Urbančič (Grafenauer's close associate in the *Nova revija* circle) commented that while the magazine's editorial board feared that their writing would encourage nationalism, they also believed that "given the nationalist developments in other republics, especially in Belgrade, it was essential to activate people in this direction, although we were not like that in any way… As a philosopher, I cannot be a nationalist by conviction, as it is contradictory – it does not fit, I have never been nor will I ever be one."[73] The English theorist of nationalism and the state, John Breuilly, defined nationalism as a political doctrine built upon three basic assertions: (1) there exists a nation with an

71 Edvard Kardelj, *Razvoj slovenskega narodnega vprašanja* (Ljubljana: Državnazaložba Slovenije, 1957), XLVII.

72 Javoršek, *Kako je mogoče*, 140.

73 "Črno na belem – 25 let Nove revije, dokumentarna oddaja," *RTV 365*, https://365.rtvslo.si/arhiv/dokumentarni-filmi-in-oddaje-izobrazevalni-program/4708640, accessed on June 23, 2024.

explicit and peculiar character; (2) the interests and values of this nation take priority over other interests and values; (3) the nation must be as independent as possible.[74] Rogers Brubaker underlines that nationalism is, first and foremost, a perspective, a way of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world.[75] According to this logic, Javoršek and Grafenauer perceived and interpreted the phenomenon of suicide in nationalist terms and represented it as such, even though their doctrines differed and they did not consider themselves nationalists.

The most intriguing similarity between Javoršek's and Grafenauer's theories of Slovenian suicide is revealed by the gender perspective. All of the abovementioned intellectuals were men, and during the period in question, women discussed suicide as experts in more specific fields. Two women participated in the 1982 interdisciplinary consultation on suicide: the economic statistician Neva Maher and the ethnologist Marija Makarovič, an expert on rural life and folklore.[76] In their discussions on suicide, Javoršek and Grafenauer both problematised the low birth rate. While Javoršek vehemently attacked the established practice of contraception and abortion, Grafenauer pointed to the full employment of the Slovenian population, which, in his opinion, was responsible for the lack of family upbringing. It is possible to conclude with a high degree of certainty that Grafenauer was mainly bothered by the high employment rate of Slovenian women. Patriarchal outlooks can also be identified as a common point in Javoršek's and Grafenauer's reflections on suicide.

In the Slovenian socialist public, the notion of suicide evolved from a signifier of a horrific social phenomenon into a metaphor that can also be understood as an "empty vessel" for various cultural and socio-political agendas. At the moment when – often imperceptibly – the issue of suicide took on metaphorical dimensions, the negative consequences of this process, in Susan Sontag's sense, became relevant as well: the promotion of stigmatisation, shame, and guilt.[77]

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74 John Breuilly, *Nation and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 2.

75 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Harvard: Harvard University press, 2004), 81.

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# SAMOMOR KOT SLOVENSKA METAFORA: K INTELEKTUALNI ZGODOVINI SAMOMORA KOT METAFORE V SOCIALISTIČNI SLOVENIJI

## POVZETEK

Med šestdesetimi in osemdesetimi leti 20. stoletja se je o samomoru v slovenskem javnem prostoru pogosto govorilo kot o pomembnem družbenem vprašanju, kar je privedlo do uveljavitve ideje o Slovencih kot »samomorilskem narodu«. Susan Sontag v svoji knjigi *Bolezen kot metafora* preučuje, kako družba uporablja bolezen kot metaforo za moralna, psihološka in politična stanja, kar pogosto vodi v stigmatizacijo

bolnikov. Njena perspektiva je dragocena za razumevanje reprezentacij samomora v socialistični Sloveniji. Članek preučuje vpliv metafore »samomorilskega naroda« na politično misel in diskurz v socialistični Sloveniji. Analizira, kako so intelektualci v svojih razpravah uporabljali ali zavračali to idejo ter kako so strokovne razprave in statistične podatke prilagajali svoji politični agendi. Koncept samomora kot »slovenskega problema« se je pojavil konec šestdesetih let 20. stoletja in je bil podprt s statističnimi podatki in odmevnimi primeri samomorov med mladimi iz uglednih kulturnih in političnih družin. Med vidnimi intelektualci, ki so samomor obravnavali kot slovenski problem, sta bila Jože Javoršek in Niko Grafenauer. Javoršek, zagovornik jugoslovanskega socializma, je samomor obravnaval kot simptom družbenih patologij, ki ogrožajo socialistični projekt. Kritiziral je fenomenološko filozofijo, neoavantgardno umetnost, malomeščanske vrednote ter katoliško in habsburško tradicijo kot škodljive za socializem. Po drugi strani pa je Grafenauer s prispodobo slovenskega samomora kritiziral socialistično oblast in videl samomore kot posledico napetosti med socialistično družbo in cilji posameznika. Kritiziral je tako Zvezo komunistov kot Katoliško cerkev zaradi omejevanja individualizma. Zanimivo je, da je bil obema intelektualcema skupen patriarhalni pogled. Javoršek je obsojal kontracepcijo in splav, Grafenauer pa je kritiziral visoko stopnjo zaposlenosti žensk, ki je po njegovem mnenju povzročila pomanjkanje družinske vzgoje. Kljub različnim političnim pristopom sta si Javoršek in Grafenauer delila kritičen odnos do Katoliške cerkve in etnocentrično razlago pojava samomora.