

## The Burden of Transgenerational Memories and Silences on the Third Generation: The Case of the Slovenian-Italian Border

**Katja Hrobat Virloget**

Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, Slovenia

katja.hrobat@fhs.upr.si

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6393-7816>

**Martina Tonet**

Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, Slovenia

martina.tonet@fhs.upr.si

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7626-945X>

The article explores how the collective and individual memories of major traumatic events in the area of the Slovenian-Italian border have impacted the identities, memories, and the living of the third youngest generation of the Slovenian and Italian national minorities. The article discusses the fieldwork findings collected in the Slovenian-Italian border region during two focus groups. Today's generation wishes to break through a divisive legacy of the borderland past.

▪ **Keywords:** intergenerational memories, trauma, identity, Slovenian and Italian minorities, cross-border relations

Članek obravnava, kako osebni in kolektivni spomini na večje zgodovinske travme na območju slovensko-italijanske meje še vedno vplivajo na identitete, spominske prakse in vsakdanje življenje tretje najmlajše generacije pripadnikov slovenske in italijanske narodne manjšine. Na podlagi dveh fokusnih skupin v obmejni regiji raziskava analizira, kako današnja mladina razume in predeluje dediščino preteklosti. Današnja generacija želi preseči razdvajajočo zapuščino obmejne preteklosti.

▪ **Ključne besede:** medgeneracijski spomin, travma, identiteta, slovenska in italijanska manjšina, čezmejni odnosi

### Introduction: On traumatic memories of the Slovenian-Italian borderland

The article addresses conflicting, silenced, and traumatic intergenerational memories and the constructed identities in the case of today's Slovenian-Italian border region of Istria, Karst, and the area around Trieste/Trst<sup>1</sup> from both sides of the border. The events throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have left a difficult, contested legacy of memories here. The deepest wounds in the past decades in this multi-ethnic borderland society with constant border changes have been inflicted by the two decades of fascistic anti-Slavic racism and violence, which escalated in the Second World War, as well as the post-war mass migrations of (mostly) Italian-speaking inhabitants after the Second World War, the so-called Istrian exodus. Both past events have left strong marks on borderland collective identities, including the here discussed case of the younger generations aged between eighteen to thirty, members of the Slovenian and Italian national minorities.

<sup>1</sup> To avoid repeating the place names in Slovenian and Italian languages in these bilingual zones, they are used only when first mentioned.

With the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, the Slovenian community in Trieste has experienced persecution due to the rise of the Italian regime with its Nazi-fascist ideology. Intimidatory acts, the closure of Slovenian schools, and deportation of Slavic community members became an increasingly common practice, which intensified during WWII (Ballinger, 2003; Knittel, 2015).<sup>2</sup> The remanence of this violent past can still be found in present times, especially on the Karst Plateau where the Slovenian-speaking population lives, through acts of vandalism exerted on partisan monuments. These include the drawing of black Nazi swastikas over communist symbols such as the red star, and the erasing of the Slovenian name with black markers from bilingual road signs while leaving the Italian untouched. This violent past has shaped the identity of the Slovenian community whose members have fought against the annihilating and, at its core, racist power of the Italian fascist regime to protect and preserve a sense of ethnic belonging (Tonet, 2024).

An additional traumatic event occurred after the change of national borders and the merging of ethnically mixed Istria with Yugoslavia after the Second World War, when 90% of the predominantly Italian-speaking population emigrated to Italy, mainly from the urban areas – 200,000 to 350,000 people left Istria as a whole (Ballinger, 2003: 1, 275; Kalc, 2019; Hrobat Virloget, 2021). According to Slovenian authorities, 27,810 among them left from areas that fell under Slovenian jurisdiction between 1945 and 1958. The Yugoslavian authorities filled the void that remained after the Italians had left by stimulating the inflow of people from inland Slovenia and the rest of Yugoslavia. This eventually completely transformed the ethnic, social, and cultural face of Istria (Troha, 1997: 56–60; Volk, 2003; Gombač, 2005: 11; Hrobat Virloget, 2021). After the Second World War, based on the census of 1961, 44% of the resident population remained in the zones annexed to Yugoslavia (186,450), more than 55% left (232,994), and 144,505 persons arrived.<sup>3</sup> However, their ethnic identification has been recently discussed in the frame of “national indifference”, from hybridity, opportunism and fluidity to indeterminacy (Orlić, 2023: 167–168), which will be discussed further on.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See also Catalan (2015: 417–430); Catalan, Mezzoli (2018); Bajc, Klabjan (2021).

<sup>3</sup> In 1960, a few years after the final phases of the “exodus” took place, the proportion of native residents dropped to 49%, according to registry offices, reaching 65% in rural areas and 33% in urban settings. The difference between the rural and urban population accounts for the fact that the Italian population was concentrated in urban areas, while the adjacent rural population was largely Slovenian (Titl, 1961; Kalc, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The (mostly) Italian emigration from Istria after the Second World War is called the ‘Istrian exodus’ by Italians, while the Slovenians and Croats refer to those migrations as ‘opting’ due to the right to opt for Italian citizenship – with the consequent obligation to move to Italy – arising from two international treaties, the Paris Peace Treaty (1947) and the London Memorandum (1954). The Istrian exodus has been stirring conflict in political discourses between Italy on one side and Slovenia and Croatia on the other for more than six decades (Verginella, 2000; Ballinger, 2003: 42–45; Dota 2010; Hrobat Virloget, 2021). The consequence of these migrations was the ethnic homogenisation of contested lands in favour of the annexation to either Italy or Yugoslavia: Italian denationalisation of the Zone B of Free Territory of Trieste (FTT) and its “Yugoslavisation” with the immigration of Yugoslavians, and “Italianisation” of the Zone A of FTT with the immigration of the Istrian Italians and emigration of Slovenians (Volk, 2003: 289–301).

The article discusses the memories, silences and traumas of people living on both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border, who were marked by the two events mentioned. For the first time, an analysis of recently gathered cross-border experiences in relation to a traumatic historical past with its burdensome memories of young people is provided. During two focus groups entitled *Obmejna srečanja / Incontri di confine* [Border Encounters],<sup>5</sup> experiences of young participants (between eighteen and thirty years of age) from both the Slovenian (in Italy) and the Italian (in Slovenia) national minorities were collected. The main topics here considered are transgenerational memory and trauma transmission. Specifically, the article dwells on how memories linked to a burdening past have affected the identity formation of young generations belonging to the above national minorities, and on the impact a traumatic past has had on the relations between them and the national majorities.

### **Transgenerational trauma and the Slovenian-Italian borderland memorial framework**

The transgenerational transfer of traumatic memories is described in psychoanalysis as a form of a psychologically present past, which is inscribed into the body and behaviour. No matter how much time has passed from the traumatic event, the following generations become victims of a past that they have not personally experienced (Straub, 2010: 73, 102).

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are common. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms” (Pabst, 2023: 89). The term *historical trauma* has been used mainly in the field of psychology to explore a type of silent overbearing state of being that affects individuals and communities. It refers to cumulative and collective emotional psychological wounding across generations and over their life span (Brave Heart, 2004, 2005; Brave Heart et al., 2011: 282). In the field of humanities, most studies on trauma and silence, which can be a consequence of traumatic events, derive from research conducted on the Holocaust (Lapierre, 1989; Ankersmit, 2002: 4; Straub, Rüsen, 2010; Derrida, 2014). Carol Kidron’s (2009) study provides one of the most well-known anthropological analyses on historical trauma and silence as a reflection of the everyday experience of trauma survivors and their descendants. She researched how silent traces of “lived memory” transmit tacit knowledge of the past within the quotidian social milieu.

<sup>5</sup> The research has been conducted within the project *Ethnography of Silence(s)* (ARIS J6-50198), financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, from 1.10.2023 to 30.9.2026, lead by Katja Hrobat Virloget.

Anthropologists who deal with individual and collective silences and traumas have not yet managed to determine the term in line with anthropological research, where the individual is more interlinked to collective social experiences (Močnik et al., 2021; Pabst, 2023). The establishment of the diagnostic category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder<sup>6</sup> according to the anthropological definition represents “a suffering without borders, a suffering that knows no cultural barriers” (Fassin, Rechtman, 2009: 239; Robbins, 2013: 453), indicating the universality of trauma experienced as a consequence of certain cases of violence and deprivation (Robbins, 2013: 453).

In the studies on identity formations and transgenerational memory transmission, it is interesting to note the psychoanalytical concept of the “chosen trauma”, defined by Vamik D. Volkan (2001) as a key concept of the ethnonational victimhood narrations. The term refers to “a shared mental representation of a traumatic past event during which the large group suffered loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large group” (Volkan, 2001: 87). The “chosen trauma”, which forms the group’s (religious, ethnic, or national) identity, can be transmitted across many generations (as in the case of Serbs and the Kosovo Polje). It can lie dormant or be reactivated as a powerful psychological force with dramatic and destructive consequences (Volkan, 2001). There are similarities between the “chosen trauma” and the observations made by historians, anthropologists or memory studies researchers on the power of victimhood narratives in the reinforcement of the collective identity. In this case, the memory of the (collective) tragedy is maintained through constant remembrance and recognition of suffering (Wieviorka, 2004: 89; Candau, 2005: 82). According to Aleida Assmann, the European national memories after the Second World War have been characterized by competing discourses about who is the greater victim whereby one national trauma is placed into a privileged position, while the other is devalued, marginalised and classified as less important (Assmann, 2007: 20–21, 2010).

This is also the case of traumatic memories generated in the discussed contested multi-ethnic borderland region of the former Iron Curtain. The memories of the borderland social groups who experienced fascism and the Istrian exodus have been politically instrumentalized and today compete for their exclusive victimhood. Some memorial narrations have been silenced and negated in the dominant hegemonic discourses, while others have been un-silenced and mythized to construct national victimization discourses (Ballinger, 2004: 145–159; Focardi, 2020; Hrobat Virloget, 2025: 16–70).

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<sup>6</sup> “In Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (...) the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. (...) Yet what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but it precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Caruth, 1991: 417; Ankersmit, 2002: 6).

In Italy, the public silence surrounding the Istrian exodus ended at the beginning of the 1990s in the so-called Berlusconi Era, where the “victimizing” paradigm was put in place together with the myth of the “good Italians”. In this new Italian national narrative, Italians were perceived as victims of the Second World War, while the perpetrators were the “communist Slavs”. The responsibility for fascist crimes was overlooked, the roles of perpetrators and victims were reversed (Cogoy, 2009: 18–19; Corni, 2018: 74–78; Focardi, 2020: 214–258; Badurina, 2023: 84–87, 132–152; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a: 45, 152; Orlić, 2023: 192–205). In this respect, researchers note an “obsession with the past” in this Eastern Italian border (Orlić, 2023: 205) or an “overdose of remembrance” (Altin, 2024: 105), which fundamentally contrasts the individual silence of Istrian refugees from the period before the 90s (*ibid.*: 105). However, silence can still be found in individuals’ memories, which evoke pain and reflect narratives that diverge from the historical public ones (Pontiggia, 2013: 120, 123, 126, 153; Hrobat Virloget, 2025). The Istrian exodus was not voiced or talked about in the families of Istrian refugees as the first and second generations were both affected. Memories that were fuelling a sense of shame for being a refugee, out of place, marginalized, and displaced were erased (Altin, 2024: 104, 119). However, there is a difference of mnemonic constructions between the Istrian refugees who are members of the refugees’ associations and the ones who are not. In the latter case, the individual memories merge with the national collective memory of being the martyrs of the Homeland, the memory which reproduces the experience, even if not lived personally, of the emotional pain through the categories of genocide and victimization and the unique identity of the Istrian refugees or *esuli* (Pontiggia, 2013: 111, 122, 152). The entire community of Istrian refugees has been frozen in trauma (Altin, 2024: 105), which in merging with the national victimization discourse produced hatred towards the “other”, fomenting a “culture of fear” towards the Slavic, e.g. Slovenian and Croat neighbours (Badurina, 2023: 218–244; Altin, 2024: 105; Hrobat Virloget, 2025).

Italians who stayed behind in Yugoslavia, today’s national minority, have experienced a form of “double silence”, as they have been excluded from both Slovenian and Italian public memories. Their memories do not fit with the dominant Slovenian memory, which perceives the Istrian exodus as voluntary migration, nor with the dominant Italian discourse that understands the Istrian exodus as the outcome of the violence inflicted on Italians by the “barbaric” Slavs and their communist system. Conversely, they are in fact aware of the causal relationship between the exodus and the fascist violence against Slovenians and Croats, towards whom the dominant Italian official discourse turns a blind eye. Apart from this incongruence in memories and trauma, silence may also be ascribed to the isolation and the feeling of abandonment of the Italians in Istria, given that after the exodus, in a completely transformed social environment, they became foreigners, the “others”. They suddenly became a minority, at least in urban areas, they lost their social network and linguistic environment while

turning from superior to inferior inhabitants, collectively stigmatized as “fascists” (Hrobat Virloget, 2021: 255, 2023a).

On the other hand, the Slovenian national identity, especially in this borderland Primorska (Eng. Littoral) region has been based once again on the victimisation discourse, the Slovenian resistance to fascism and the struggle for national emancipation in the frame of the national liberation struggle during the Second World War (Fikfak, 2009: 359; Hrobat Virloget, 2021). The Slovenian national minority in Italy is hurt by the contemporary negationist politics of the dominant Italian narrative and the new social constructs of Italians being the victim and not the perpetrator of WWII (Badurina, 2023; Orlić, 2023).<sup>7</sup> As the psychoanalyst Paolo Fonda, part of the Slovenian minority in Italy, commented:

*We, members of the minority (and not only us), remain trapped in crystallized discourses about the narratives of our traumas. We obsessively celebrate them, yet we process them only very slowly. The Slovenian minority community abroad is thus suffocating, caught in marble monuments erected to itself as a victim, and in doing so, it becomes an obstacle not only to itself but also to its neighbours (Slovenes in the homeland and the Italian majority), instead of fulfilling its natural role as a bridge. (Personal written communication)*

As he observes, the Slovenian-Italian ethnically mixed borderland communities are an exemplary case of a paranoid-schizophrenic human condition where collective myths about the idealization of “us” and the projection of evil onto a collective enemy emerge. The creation of a collective enemy reinforces positive feelings of belonging to one’s own group and negative aggressive perceptions outwards. In this distorted image, the Other for centuries has been demonized and dehumanized, deprived of any positive trait, any resemblance, and any humanity (Fonda, 2009: 105–112).

In these discourses, competing for recognition of the genocide and suffering of one group, each side has its *lieux de mémoire*: the Italian migrants and politics have the *foibe*,<sup>8</sup> while Slovenian politics and the Slovenian minority in Italy have the Risiera

<sup>7</sup> Natka Badurina warns about the problem of the universalization of the holocaust or “holocaustisation” of memory, when this universal European memory can be used to deny and conceal specific local responsibilities, crimes, and violations of human rights, especially to other national minorities (Badurina, 2023: 132–186).

<sup>8</sup> In Italian discourse, the *foibe* are deep natural sinkholes, commonplace in the Karst and in Istria, which are said to contain the victims of killings committed by Yugoslav partisans, civilians, and military personnel in 1943 and again in 1945 during the “forty-day occupation of Trieste”. In the predominant Italian public discourse, they have acquired political and almost mythical connotations as they are in self-perception linked to ethnic cleansing because they are said to contain people who were killed simply “for being Italian”. On the other hand, Slovenian researchers claim that the *foibe* killings were motivated by ideology, as many of the people killed were members of the Slovenian anti-communist *domobranci* (home guard) and opponents of the new social system (Ballinger, 2003: 129–67; Cogoy, 2009: 16–17; Pirjevec, 2009; Verginella, 2009: 53–67; Dota, 2010; Orlić, 2012: 19).

(former Nazi concentration camp) (Ballinger, 2003: 129–167, 2004) and the monument to the first Slovenian anti-fascist heroes in Basovizza (Klabjan, 2012: 678). All these places of memory are contested spaces of dominant and negated national narratives. Such is the case of the memorial concentration camp in Trieste, the Risiera di San Sabba, where the memory of the Shoah in the Italian public narratives has overlapped and denied the memory of the extermination of Slovenians and partisans, who resisted against the Nazi-fascist totalitarian regimes (Badurina, 2023: 132–186).<sup>9</sup>

### **Methodology and observations of the focus groups with young Slovenian and Italian minority members**

The methodology employed in the process of data gathering and analysis is grounded in the qualitative triangulation method. Multiple sources of data include five interdisciplinary workshops (psychotherapy, anthropology) in the frame of the project “*Moja zgodba iz tišine*” (Eng. My Story from the Silence) from 2023 with 45 participants (Hrobat Virloget, 2023b; Švara, Hrobat Virloget, 2024), the two tape-recorded focus groups moderated by Martina Tonet, autoethnography (Tonet, 2024), as well as historical, ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation of the border’s sociocultural context (Hrobat Virloget, 2021, 2023a).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, psychology literature on transgenerational transfer of traumatic memories has been included into the analysis of the here presented topic. Multiple sources become the bases for data triangulation that helps enhance the content accuracy and validity of the topic in question (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1990; Olsen, 2004). While the interview method employed during the ethnographic fieldwork has gathered individuals’ views on the researched theme (see Hrobat Virloget, 2021), the focus group methodology has deepened the complexities of the here discussed topic, which brings depth to the analysis while generating novel knowledge (Gundumogula, 2020: 301).

The initiative for organising the two focus groups between the Slovenian and Italian minorities came from the Italian civil service from Koper/Capodistria (Slovenia) and the

<sup>9</sup> For this reason, Natka Badurina warns about the problem of the universalization of the holocaust or “holocaustisation” of memory, when this universal European memory can be used to deny and conceal specific local responsibilities, crimes, and violations of human rights, especially against other national minorities (Badurina, 2023: 132–186).

<sup>10</sup> In spring 2024 the anthropologists Katja Hrobat Virloget and Martina Tonet, together with the historian Petra Kavrečič, conducted fieldwork with students from the departments of Anthropology and History at UP-FHŠ Univeristy of Primorska (Koper, Slovenia) on relations between the Slovenian and Italian minorities in the Prosecco/Prosek village on the Karst Plateau in the Trieste region (Italy) (Hrobat Virloget, 2025). On this occasion, members of both groups were interviewed on the topic of memories and relations between the two communities in the past and present separately. The two focus groups moderated by Martina Tonet consequently became an opportunity where members of both communities were invited to meet in person, exchange thoughts and views about a burdensome historical past, and confront their transgenerational memories with one another.

Slovenian centre Zveza Slovenskih Kulturnih Društev (ZSKD)<sup>11</sup> in Trieste (Italy). The first focus group was held on 21 November 2024 in Koper at the Italian centre Unione Italiana (UI)<sup>12</sup> in Palazzo Gravisi. The second one took place in Trieste on 6 February 2025 at the Slovenian centre Zveza Slovenskih Kulturnih Društev (ZSKD; Eng. Association of Slovenian Cultural Societies). The purpose was to gather and have young members of both minorities confront themselves on the topic of cross-border relations. Furthermore, the encounters were organised to better comprehend how a conflictual past with opposing historical memories that have torn apart and divided the two communities through xenophobic political narratives, the fomentation of intolerance, closure, fear and distrust towards one another (Ballinger, 2004; Fonda, 2009; Badurina, 2023; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a: 36–70, 241–243, 2025), has shaped the younger generation's identity, their perceptions, and relations with members of the other minority group across the Italian-Slovenian border. As expected, it was not easy to find volunteers willing to meet and openly discuss the given topic due to its sensitiveness. People belonging to these two minority groups keep silent and prefer not to express and voice themselves in this regard (Hrobat Virloget, 2023a, 2025). The first focus group was organised with the intention to challenge the silence about the conflictual past.

The initiators of the event, the Italian and Slovenian cultural associations and the Italian Union, spread the word about the first focus group within their communities and found ten people willing to participate (male and female, between eighteen and thirty years old): five belonging to the Slovenian minority in Trieste, and five to the Italian one in Koper. Some of the young participants derived from ethnically mixed families, some of them with parents or grandparents who experienced both major collective traumas – exodus and fascism – that have generated conflicts and continue to divide the two borderland communities (Hrobat Virloget, 2025). Those who chose to partake in the focus group did so aware of the discomfort they might experience in being confronted with members of the other community. Precautionary measures were taken, as the moderator of both focus groups Martina Tonet applied restorative justice methods and principles in leading the encounters.<sup>13</sup> One of the main objectives of the restorative justice approach is to make sure that all the parties involved feel safe in voicing themselves when they are ready to do so, while the rest of the participants listen. The listening is then reciprocated, so that all participants can express their perspectives on the topic in question.

During the first focus group, the participants were invited to share their thoughts in relation to more general topics related to cross-border minority issues and their life experiences:

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<sup>11</sup> Federation of Slovenian Cultural Associations.

<sup>12</sup> Italian Union.

<sup>13</sup> In 2018 Martina Tonet received her certificate of completion in the restorative practices course from the Conflict Center in Denver, Colorado (USA) (<https://conflictcenter.org>).



*Identity:* How do you define your identity? How would you describe your sense of belonging to your community of origin? Do you feel strongly about your community of origin? Is your community accepted in the country where you live? How do you experience your identity in the country where you live? Do you differentiate yourself from the other, majoritarian community? What treatment do you receive from members of the majority? What are your experiences with the majority community?

*Language:*<sup>14</sup> What is your level of proficiency in Italian and Slovenian languages? In what contexts do you use one rather than the other language? In what language do you think? When you speak in one or the other language, do you notice any difference in your sense of identity? Do you feel respected when you use your ‘native language’?<sup>15</sup>

*Cross-border relations:* How often do you travel across the Italian-Slovenian border and for what purpose? Do you have any relationships with your compatriots in the neighbouring country? What is your cross-border living experience in general? Do you meet with members of the contrasting minority group (e.g. personal and social gatherings)? If yes, on what occasions? Are there opportunities for gatherings between both minority groups?

*Minority-majority relations:* How are you treated by the “majority”? Have you ever had unpleasant experiences? How familiar is the majority with the history of your community? What has been your experience as a member of a national minority like? How would you define it?

Those who partook in the focus groups were very grateful for the opportunity. Some of the participants found it therapeutic, as one male participant shared: “*To me it seems like psychotherapy!*” At the end of the first encounter, it was the participants who asked to organise a follow up as they felt that the “*Pandora’s box*” had just been opened. They found the urge to further confront the topic in question as they saw in it a way to “*contrast ignorance*” and to unveil the complexities of the past in the pursuit of a resolution.

Under the suggestion and with the consent of the same participants,<sup>16</sup> the second focus group provided a space to dive more in depth into the participants’ experiences

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<sup>14</sup> Language was chosen as one focus area because the organisers of both focus groups deemed it an important aspect for younger generations to confront themselves on, due to its important role in defining a sense of ethnic and cultural belonging to minority groups and reclaiming identities within national borders (Tonet, 2024). The powerful role of language in the process of self-identification and identity maintenance emerged during both focus groups, when all the participants preferred to speak and express themselves in their native language even though they were fluent in both Slovenian and Italian. On both occasions, the participants, who understand and speak both languages, were free to choose the language they felt more comfortable speaking.

<sup>15</sup> With the expression ‘native language’ or ‘mother tongue’, we refer to the language a person has been exposed to from birth and which they consider the primary language of use and expression.

<sup>16</sup> Two participants did not make it to the second focus group (one from the Slovenian and one from the Italian minority). In hearing about the event, two new participants from each minority group were interested to participate.

by sharing their family memories and narratives regarding a traumatic past of the Second World War and post-war period.<sup>17</sup> As expected, the second discussion was rather emotional, as it touched upon the sensitive sphere of collective memories and conflicting narratives that have burdened the border population for decades (Fonda, 2009: 105–112; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a). The participants came from families whose members experienced one of the above-mentioned historical traumatic events: the fascism and anti-Slavic racism or/and the Istrian exodus or, like in the case of one participant, both. In the latter example, the grandfather was Istrian who experienced persecution from the Yugoslav regime, whereas the grandmother was Slovenian who, as a child, experienced the deportation of her entire family by the Nazi-fascist army. In voicing her grandparents' past, the participant broke down in tears as she recalled how her grandmother had become an orphan.

During the second focus group, it became clearer that most of the participants' parents and grandparents do not talk about the historical period in question. As a female participant from the Slovenian minority pointed out, speaking about the past in her family environment is commonly taboo. Just recently she started asking questions to her father, because she is interested to learn more about her family past. Nevertheless, her grandfather never spoke or shared with her about his partisan experience during the war. It is common for silence to still cover up individuals' stories of traumatic past, as family members "*clearly tend not to talk about these things*" (female participant, Italian minority).

In terms of the reasons why silence prevails in the families, participants shared that this is due to painful memories and a deeply ingrained grudge and distrust carried and held onto by the individuals. A Slovenian participant expressed how she gets uneasy prior to every Italian Memorial Day on the Exodus and *foibe*, since each time the event renews conflicts between the Slovenian and Italian public memory (Hrobat Virloget, 2023a: 43–45; Orlić, 2023: 196–205). Another Slovenian participant mentioned how what he referred to as "*institutionalized distrust*" towards Italians present in public historical narratives burdens individuals to the point where they find it difficult to openly speak about the painful past. He was providing the example of his grandparents who did not trust Italians, because of "*things*" that they "*experienced as children during fascism*". Due to historical traumas, words such as *fascist*, *communist*, *esule* (meaning Istrian refugee), and *rimasto* (meaning the Italians who stayed behind in Yugoslavia) still trigger unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings. As a female participant from the Slovenian community mentioned, she feels unsure how to react when she hears or

<sup>17</sup> During the second focus group, the anthropologist Katja Hrobat Virloget conducted participant observation and took notes of the occurring event, which she analysed together with the moderator and anthropologist Martina Tonet who transcribed and analysed both type-recorded focus groups' encounters. Both focus groups were informal. However, the organisers deemed it important to let the broader public know about the events. On both occasions there were between ten to fifteen people who listened to the focus groups, including the organizers and the reporters of the local Italian and Slovenian radio, TV and newspapers (RTV Slo, La Voce – Capodistriano and Radio Capodistria from Koper; RAI and *Primorski Dnevnik* from Trieste).

mentions words like *partisan* or *foibe* in public, as she does not know who stands before her or what type of experience the individual or their family might have had in relation to history and these notions. Conversely, several other participants voiced the importance and the luck of not being raised with hatred or distrust towards the Other. Two most revealing examples were: the grandson of Istrian refugees, enrolled by his Italian parents in the Slovenian school in Trieste, having stated, “*today I feel Slovenian, even though my parents are not, but they accept my cultural richness, you could say, my double citizenship*”; and the female participant whose grandmother became an orphan due to Italian fascists. She taught her daughter and granddaughter the importance of not hating Italians despite the suffering and pain endured because of the Italians who supported the fascist political agenda.

### **Interpretation: The legacy and impact of transgenerational memory on the identity of the third generation**

All this highly conflictual and contested public memorial borderland legacy has shaped the memory transmission across generations and individual identity formation, including that of the young participants present in the focus groups. Research on trauma transmission has revealed (e.g. in the case of the Holocaust) it is the third generation that is particularly vulnerable to the influence of the violent experiences of their grandfathers (Močnik et al., 2021: 10).

Transgenerational silence is a trend that has been observed in the communities discussed herein (Hrobat Virloget, 2023a; Altin, 2024: 104, 119), which can be described as a “conspiracy of silence”, a phenomenon “whereby a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware” (Zerubavel, 2006: 2). A type of silent awareness grounded in common knowledge that is publicly left undiscussed; an uncomfortable “open secret” tightly connected to denial (ibid.: 3–4). By remaining silent, people avoid recalling memories that would trigger emotional pain, which can be seen as a form of protecting family members from suffering, fear, shame, embarrassment, and stigma (Jurić Pahor, 2004: 40, 52–53; Emrich, 2010: 63; Straub, 2010: 118). It would be erroneous to perceive the family silence experienced by the young members of the focus groups as the consequence of their ignorance, since their interest in the subject matter is attested by their willing participation in the focus groups. A more feasible interpretation of the silence arises in connection to Freudian ideas about repression – when individuals bury traumatic and painful memories in the subconscious (Zerubavel, 2006; Vinitzky-Seroussi, Teeger, 2010).

Kathrin Pabst has shown several cases of families across Europe where the repressed experiences of grandparents shaped and burdened the lives of the second and third generations. If the second generation did not come to terms with the traumatic

experiences of the first generation, this also affected the third generation. As she observes, it is through the voicing and sharing of a burdening past that individuals, families, and societies can heal from a traumatic history (Pabst, 2023: 100–101). The results of the two focus groups are in line with Pabst’s findings, as the third-generation participants expressed the will to break the family silence by *wanting to know* about the unconformable family memories. They repeatedly expressed the wish and an urge to organise a focus group joint with their grandparents to openly discuss the silent past. The observations from our focus group can confirm other researchers’ findings: it is the third generation who finds it less difficult to ask direct questions about past traumatic experiences to their grandfathers and break the overwhelming family transgenerational silence. The reason lies probably in the greater temporal distance from the painful past, changed social norms, and more publicly available information (Honneth, 2010; Pander, 2017: 35; Pabst, 2023: 95–96, 100). At the end of both encounters, the focus group participants and some individuals from the public suggested that these types of events should be repeated with older generations. It was possible to do so with the round table, which took place on 8 May 2025 at the University of Primorska (Koper) within the project RE4Healing: Crossborder Remembrance, Reconnection, Restoring, and Resilience (CERV-2024-CITIZENS-REM-HOLOCAUST). This time, the older generation (between sixty and ninety years of age) of the above mentioned groups – Istrian refugees (Italians), Slovenian and Italian minority, immigrants in Istria after the exodus – confronted itself with the same topic also in front of a public, which at the end of the round table was included into broader discussion (more information on: Re4Healing Workpackage4). However, only some few grandparents from the focus group voiced their interest to partake in the event.<sup>18</sup> The first and second generations still seem to be wrapped in silence as it was not easy to find participants willing to expose themselves publicly on such a sensitive topic.<sup>19</sup> Those who did, though, were extremely grateful for the opportunity, finding it necessary and even therapeutic.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It can be added from a chance conversation (18.3.2025) with a member of the second generation of the Italians who stayed in Yugoslavia, whose child participated in the focus groups, that it is next to impossible to get their parents to speak, not only publicly but also in the intimacy of the family. They do not wish to discourse the time of the exodus.

<sup>19</sup> It was especially challenging finding a participant from among the Italians who had stayed behind, who still nowadays have difficulties speaking about their experiences of becoming foreigners in their own homes (Hrobat Virloget, 2023b).

<sup>20</sup> What was also noted is that only one young person from the focus groups, from the Slovenian minority, accepted the invitation to speak in public as a representative of the third generation, while we couldn’t get anyone from the young Italian minority to partake in the roundtable. Only one person from the Italian minority accepted the invitation to attend the event, but on condition not to be an official speaker, she preferred to sit among the audience. We have received many positive comments for the event. For instance, as one participant, the daughter of an Istrian migrant, relayed the words of her mother: it was “*emotionally hard but enriching*”, and she felt that her mother, having attended the event in her birthplace (Koper), was reinvigorated by the experience (10.5.2025). An initiative has already been launched from the above-mentioned Slovenian organisation in Italy to organize another round table discussion, this time in Trieste.

It can be observed from the two focus groups that the young members of the two national minorities, by listening to one another's stories, came to realise how similar their family and life experiences of the past and present times have been, which enabled them to empathise with each other's pain. Members of both minorities learned that, in both communities, families have commonly not shared their burdensome historical past. It is precisely this silence that has been handed down through their family lineage, which has kept their relatives trapped in divisive memories filled with distrust, closed and at a distance from those who do not share their history. Therefore, while silence has burdened individuals' lives, nationalistic ideologies and political narratives continue to tear apart the social fabric and divide communities. As the psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan notes, psychological borders are even more essential than the physical ones for large group identities and relationships. Shared prejudices are used to form and protect large-group identities, which in turn maintain individual identities (Volkan, 2017: 100–101).

The interethnic marriages,<sup>21</sup> from where many of the young participants derived, and cases such as the above participant of Istrian migrants who attended Slovenian schools in Italy can be interpreted as individual acts of resistance against the political discourses which instil hatred among the two national borderland communities. On the one hand, the Italian mainstream public discourses produce the mythical fear and hatred towards the “barbaric communist” Slovenians and Croatians (Badurina, 2023), while on the other among Slovenians, especially in the borderland region, there is a historically rooted perception of Italians as fascists (Fonda, 2009: 105–112; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a: 6, 2025). Such acts of resistance “from below” against the mononational identities, creating heterogenic ethnic identities with hybrid and flexible senses of belonging, emerged already after the Second World War and the time of the “Istrian exodus” (Volk, 2003; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a, 2025: 193–194; Orlić, 2023; Altin, 2024: 157–162). Although both Italy and Yugoslavia then performed nation-building through state apparatuses by investing enormous efforts in constructing a “pure” national identity of the hybrid border population (Orlić, 2023: 119–131, 152–154, 179), research has shown many cases of “national indifference” where people rebelled against national identities and chose their nationality out of intimate convenience. By adopting the Italian nationality in the frame of the Istrian exodus which brought better opportunities for the migrants, an unclear number of Croats and Slovenes assimilated in the denationalizing process (ibid.; Volk, 2003; Ballinger, 2006; Hrobat Virloget, 2023a: 76, 2025). As it has been shown, many Istrian refugees were imposed a monolithic and “pure” Italian national identity in the univocal, nationalist interpretation of the “exodus”. Roberta Altin denotes this process as an act of imposition and violence, which has left no space for the complex heterogeneity of hybrid stories and fluid borderland identities

<sup>21</sup> Between the discussed national minorities and majorities.

(Altin, 2024: 157). As the psychoanalyst Paolo Fonda from Trieste observes, in this borderland paranoid-schizophrenic environment, individuals are compelled to identify with a single group identity and signal the “purity” of belonging, although this is especially difficult for persons from mixed families and members of national minorities being influenced by the majority and minority “cultural” traits (Fonda, 2009: 107). A similar observation can be made today from all the gathered ethnographic material. Borderland people feel the imposition of state national ideology or public narratives of a mononational identity as a form of violence, some of them with feelings of “loss” of part of their identity when reduced only to a single national identity.<sup>22</sup>

All the participants of the focus groups think that through the open voicing of difficult and painful feelings, as well as through the listening of the Other’s stories, one can process a painful past and free individuals from a burdensome weight.

In this respect, our findings confirm the observations made by Daniel Wutti, a psychotherapist researching transgenerational memory transmission in Carinthia in Austria – a similar environment with traumatic memories of oppression against the Slovenian minority living on this territory. In his study, based on interviews with three generations of Slovenian minority members, he observes that in the second generation, violence experienced by the first generation during Nazism is still very strong and partly also painful. The difference comes with the third generation, which has a more ambivalent relationship towards the family past. The fact that grandparents were victims of Nazism shapes the third generation’s identity in a specific way. While for the first and second generations, it was difficult to find peace and closure due to the traumatic proximity of the Second World War with its repercussions in their daily living, the third generation is attempting to live a “normal” life<sup>23</sup> by finding healing through reconciliation and peace-making (Wutti, 2013: 52–53).

## Conclusions

As it has been argued above, borderland people employ different strategies in their daily lives to resist the state’s monolithic national ideology, which reduces them to a single mononational identity that instigates animosity towards their neighbour. In times of major traumatic events, such as the experience of fascism or the “Istrian exodus”,

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<sup>22</sup> In the previous workshops, such was the case of the son of Istrian refugees of Slovenian and Italian origins being raised only in Italian and rediscovering their Slovenian roots by learning the language and getting in touch with Slovenian culture (Švara, Hrobat Virloget, 2024: 308–310), or people of one of the national identities being forbidden by parents to marry someone from “the other” side (experiences told at a psychotherapist workshop in Opicina/Opčine, *ibid.*).

<sup>23</sup> The wish to return to “normal life” by silencing or resolving memories has been shown in many cases after war conflicts, e.g. Emina Zoletić’s research on memories after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, presented at the SIEF conference, Aberdeen, 6.6.2025.

the identity of the borderland people can remain fluid, changeable and hybrid in opposition with the mainstream national narratives.

Political discourses and narratives continue to perpetuate ideological and social divides, which keep intergenerational traumatic memories alive. As it surfaced during our focus groups, the third generation is attempting to overcome and break through these categorisations that immobilise individuals and the collective sense of identity. Participants still sense the burden of overwhelming conflicting national public narratives, which continue to evoke painful memories, maintaining the burden of a contested past which makes the relations between the national majorities and minorities uncomfortable or difficult. The weight of fascism, communism, and the “Istrian exodus” still bears against the interethnic relations, as seen in the third generation’s avoidance of touching upon these sensitive contested interpretations of the past among members of different nationalities.

As it has also been shown in a similar minority environment in Austria (Wutti, 2013), transgenerational memories shape the sense of identity of the third generation, while at the same time burdening it; as evident from the strong emotions expressed during the focus groups. In many cases, the third generation wishes to break the family silence, overcome the dividing memories and start living “a normal life” of present-day identity (Wutti, 2013). The extent to which this may be realized is difficult to ascertain. The round table engaged with confronting the memories of the first and third generations did not fully succeed in this sense, while in the private sphere, more research should be done.

It is not known whether the two focus groups had some concrete effect in the family frame concerning the break of generational silence. However, during the events, several participants mentioned they found the focus groups therapeutic in a personal sense, stating there was a healing component to voicing and listening to each other’s stories about the traumatic past. The research has shown how the process of mutual listening can change the understanding of the Other, up until that moment perceived as an enemy, thus facilitating closeness among individuals belonging to opposite historical narratives that have kept them at a distance.

### **Research data statement**

The authors state that the article is based on ethnographic research data. All additional information concerning the ethnographic materials are available on reasonable request with the authors.

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### **Breme transgeneracijskih spominov in tišine tretjih generacij: primer slovensko-italijanske meje**

Prispevek obravnava konfliktne, utišane in travmatične medgeneracijske spomine ter z njimi povezane identitete na območju današnje slovensko-italijanske obmejne regije Istre, Krasa ter širšega območja Trsta, in sicer z obeh strani državne meje. Raziskava temelji na dveh fokusnih skupinah mlajše generacije z obeh strani meje, to je tretje generacije, ki sama ni neposredno izkusila ključnih zgodovinskih travmatičnih dogodkov, kot so fašizem, protislovanski rasizem in istrski eksodus – ali celo obojega.

Temeljno raziskovalno vprašanje se osredotoča na to, kako spomini, vezani na obremenjujočo preteklost, vplivajo na oblikovanje identitete mladih generacij, ki pripadajo narodnim manjšinam, ter kakšen vpliv ima travmatična preteklost na njihove medsebojne odnose in odnose z večinskim narodom.

Fokusni skupini sta razpravljali o čezmejnih odnosih z namenom globljega razumevanja konfliktne preteklosti, ki je razdelila obe manjšinski skupnosti. Pred analizo opazovanj medgeneracijskega prenosa spomina je predstavljen splošni spominski okvir različnih obmejnih skupin, ki ga zaznamujejo vseobsegajoči molki in tekmujoči diskurzi viktimizacije. Ta močno sporna in konfliktna javna spominska dediščina obmejnega prostora je oblikovala način prenosa spomina med generacijami ter vplivala na oblikovanje individualnih identitet. Udeleženci raziskave prihajajo iz družin, katerih člani so bili neposredno izpostavljeni enemu ali več omenjenim zgodovinskim travmatičnim dogodkom.

Obmejni prebivalci v vsakdanjem življenju uporabljajo različne strategije odpora proti državni monolitni nacionalni ideologiji, ki jih reducira na eno samo mononacionalno identiteto in spodbuja sovraštvo do soseda. Kot je bilo razvidno iz razprav fokusnih skupin, tretja generacija poskuša preseči in prelomiti tovrstne kategorizacije, ki ohromijo posameznike in kolektivni občutek pripadnosti. Udeleženci še vedno zaznavajo težo vseprisotnih konfliktnih nacionalnih javnih narativov, ki obujajo boleče spomine in hkrati ohranjajo breme sporne preteklosti. Prav tretja generacija izraža željo po preseganju medgeneracijskega spominskega bremena. Medtem ko jim ti spomini še vedno predstavljajo osnovo za oblikovanje lastne identitete, pa prav ta generacija izraža potrebo po ‚normalnem‘ življenju, ki vključuje iskanje ozdravitve skozi javne pravne in mirovne narative. Fokusni skupini ponujata primer, kako je to mogoče doseči preko odprte konfrontacije glede travmatične preteklosti. Glasna artikulacija boleče zgodovine lahko prispeva k zdravljenju posameznikov, saj s prekinitvijo razdiralnih političnih naracij, ki se hranijo z molkom, omogoča bolj vključujoče razumevanje Drugega.