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“In a moment of supreme discomfort.” An Analysis of Female Suicides Through the Press in Trieste in the Post-war Transition (1918-1922)**

IZVLEČEK

»V TRENUTKU SKRAJNE STISKE.«
ANALIZA SAMOMOROV MED ŽENSKAMI NA PODLAGI
TRŽAŠKEGA TISKA V POVOJNEM OBDOBJU (1918–1922)

Cilj tega prispevka je z vidika spola raziskati pojav samomorov med ženskami v Trstu v prehodnem obdobju po prvi svetovni vojni (1918–1922) na podlagi člankov v lokalnem tisku. To je bilo obdobje nenadnih političnih, upravnih in gospodarskih sprememb. Poleg tega se je upanje na boljšo prihodnost prepletalo s tesnobo zaradi vse večje revščine in nebrzdanega nasilja, ki je pustošilo po mestu. Leta 1920 je v Trstu število samomorov med ženskami prvič preseglo število samomorov med moškimi. Na podlagi sodb v tisku so bile opredeljene tri makro kategorije, v katere lahko uvrstimo samomori: razumljivi (“comprese”) samomori ali poskusi samomorov, ki so veljali za družbeno sprejemljive ali vsaj upravičene, kadar so bili povezani z ekonomskimi razlogi, zdravjem ali žalovanjem za člani družine; samomori, ki so veljali za povezane z “lahkomiselnimi motivi” in jih je meščanska morala obsojala, ker so bili povezani z ljubezenskimi zadevami in družinskimi spori; in,

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nazadnje, samomori spolnih delavk (prostitutk), ki so jih odkrito kritizirali, saj so veljali za naravno in fiziološko posledico življenja v bordelih.

Ključne besede: Julijska krajina, Trst, prehodno obdobje, samomor, spol

ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to investigate from a gender perspective, through articles in the local press, the phenomenon of female suicides in Trieste during the transitional phase following WWI (1918-1922). This was due to a period of abrupt changes: political, administrative, and economic. In addition, hope for a better future and anxiety had been dashed with the increase in poverty and the rampant violence that swept through the city. In Trieste in 1920 for the first time the number of female suicides exceeded the number of male suicides. Based on the judgments made in the press, three macro categories have been identified into which we can place the suicides: the "comprese" (understood) that committed or attempted suicides were considered to be socially acceptable, or at least justified, in so far as that they related to economic reasons, health or familial grief; those considered to be linked to "frivolous motives" and condemned by bourgeois morality because they were connected to matters of romance and family conflict; and finally, those of sex workers (prostitute), about whom open criticisms were put forward, as they were seen as a natural and physiological consequence of life in the brothels.

Keywords: Julian March, Trieste, Transition, Suicide, Gender

Introduction

Scanning through the pages of *Il Piccolo*¹ – Trieste's irredentist-oriented and after 1921 pro-National Bloc main daily newspaper – one notes the constant reports regarding suicide in the city.² Such events became so common that already by the beginning

1 *Il Piccolo* was founded in 1881 by Teodoro Mayer, irredentist, freemason and senator of the Kingdom of Italy in 1920. Upon Italy's entry into the war against Austria-Hungary, the newspaper headquarters were destroyed by a portion of the Triestine population, which saw them as a symbol of Italianess. Publication resumed on 20 November 1919. The suicide reports were often published on page two, in the "Cronaca della città" (Chronicle of the city), and from 1920, with the intensification of the phenomenon, they were sometimes reported in special columns. – Silvana Monti Orel, *I giornali triestini dal 1863 al 1902. Società e cultura di Trieste attraverso 576 quotidiani e periodici analizzati e descritti nel loro contesto storico* (Trieste: LINT, 1976). Cesare Pagnini, *I giornali di Trieste dalle origini al 1959* (Milan: Centro Studi, 1959).

2 On the phase of post-war transition in the Julian March, see among others: Elio Apih, *Italia, Fascismo e Antifascismo nella Venezia Giulia (1918–1943). Ricerche storiche* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1966). Angelo Visintin, *L'Italia a Trieste. L'operato del governo militare italiano nella Venezia Giulia (1918–19)* (Gorizia: LEG, 2000). Marta Verginella,

of 1923, the statistician Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz³ published the article "Osservazioni statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste" (Statistical observations of the suicide phenomenon in the city of Trieste), which found that in the immediate post-war period, a rapid increase in suicides was being registered in the Julian city.⁴ In addition, he notes how in 1921 the number of female suicides surpassed those of men in absolute terms for the first time.⁵

This article analyses female suicides in post-war Trieste. The aim of this article is to analyse the interpretations of contemporary observers on the phenomenon, particularly in the local press. In reporting the news, journalists did not limit themselves to the description of the facts, but provided information on the alleged motivations that had driven people to suicide, often accompanied by moral and ethical judgments, to justify or condemn the act in the eyes of readers. The phenomenon attracted so much attention from contemporaries that newspapers devoted specific columns to it. For example, "Gli stanchi della vita" (The Weary of Life) appeared on the second page of the periodical – which was devoted to the city chronicle. Almost always, these articles had a very similar structure, providing a great deal of detail about the suicide and the motivations behind the act.

This article, thus, uses periodicals to examine the journalists' perception of the facts and their narration of the cases of deaths by suicide as well as suicide attempts. To this end, the article reconstructs the cultural climate of the era which was marked by post-war turmoil, economic depression, and widespread anxiety⁶. It also offers an opportunity to link political perspective, gender, and suicide from different cultural and political contexts which are shown through the various contemporary newspapers examined.⁷ The article teases out the medical discourse in particular, showing how it was employed to confirm old stereotypes on the nature and behaviour of women.⁸ A clear gendered view of the suicide phenomenon emerges from the press, in which femininity was perceived as the main cause of women's weakness in life.

Three categories of female suicides will, therefore, be examined. I have identified these categories according to the judgements made by the press at the time: the

"Political activism of Slovene women in Venezia Giulia after World War I and the rise of fascism: from autonomy to subordination," *Acta Histriae* 26, No. 4 (2018): 1041–62.

3 Livia Linda Rondini, "Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 66 (2006), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pierpaolo-luzzatto-fegiz_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pierpaolo-luzzatto-fegiz_(Dizionario-Biografico)), accessed 4 June 2024.

4 Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz, "Osservazioni Statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste," *Bollettino dell'Ufficio del Lavoro e della Statistica del Comune di Trieste* 42, No. 4 (February 1923): 7–11.

5 Matteo Perissinotto, "Perché le donne si uccidono? Analisi dei suicidi femminili a Trieste nel primo dopoguerra (1918–1922)," *DEP* 50 (2023): 1–26, https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/n50/02_Perissinotto.pdf, accessed 4 June 2024.

6 Maura Hametz, "Anxious »Italians«: Security and Welfare in the Upper Adriatic, 1918–1924," *Annales* 32, No. 4 (2022): 591–602.

7 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985).

8 Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 224. Maria Teresa Brancaccio, "'The Fatal Tendency of Civilized Society': Enrico Morselli's Suicide, Moral Statistics, and Postivism in Italy," *Journal of Social History* 46, No. 3 (2013): 700–15.

“*comprese*” (understood) committed or attempted suicides that were considered to be socially acceptable, or at least justified, in so far as that they related to economic reasons, health or familial grief; those considered to be linked to “frivolous motives” and condemned by bourgeois morality because they were connected to matters of romance and family conflict; and finally, those of sex workers (*prostitute*), about whom open criticisms were put forward, as they were seen as a natural and physiological consequence of life in the brothels.

Moreover, according to the commentators of the time, female suicides were attributed to the particular psychological and emotional condition of women who – having been perceived as weaker to men – manifested forms of “*nevastia*” and other degenerations of the nervous system, considered to be prodromes of suicide.⁹ This innate weakness, perceived to be intrinsic to the female sex, made them more vulnerable in moments of crisis and incapable of coping with life’s adversities. Such a narrative emerges particularly in the reports relating to suicide attempts, often by young women in love, in which it was often portrayed as a gesture to attract attention or to vindicate oneself against loved ones or a lover.

In Trieste, the increase in suicide cases lasted from the summer of 1920 through to the end of 1922.¹⁰ This period coincided with the beginning of an economic crisis in Trieste’s port and with the end of the first wave of subsidies given to local businesses.¹¹ Hopes for post-war prosperity and peace were dashed with the post-war crisis, which saw unemployment, rents and the cost of living rise, and a housing crisis emerge.

For Trieste, like in all the territories of the former Central Powers,¹² the post-war period was one of distinct tension and violence. The summer of 1920 was marked by the fire of Narodni Dom, an event seen at the time as the “baptism of fire of fascism”¹³: an act that, tied to other attacks against the Slovenian and Croatian minorities and the labour movement, and the destruction of the socialist headquarters and of the printing press of the periodical *Il Lavoratore* months later, represented just one of the first violent disturbances that marked life in Trieste during these fateful months. In addition to the *squadrista* operation, one must add the socialist and communist responses

9 Mary Gibson, *Born to crime. Cesare Lombroso and the Origin of Biological Criminology* (Wesport, CT: Praeger, 2002). Silvano Montaldo, *Donne delinquenti. Il genere e la nascita della criminologia* (Rome: Carrocci, 2019).

10 Florian Arendt, “The Press and Suicides in the 19th Century: Investigating Possible Imitative Effects in Five Territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,” *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 81, No. 3 (2020): 424–43. Hannes Leidinger, “Die Selbstmordepidemie: Zur Zunahme von Suizidfällen in der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in Wolfgang Kos (ed.), *Kampf um die Stadt: Politik, Kunst und Alltag um 1930* (Wien: Czernin, 2010), 215–19. Zdravka Jelaska, “Types and forms of violence in Split between the two World Wars,” *Acta Histriae* 10, No. 2 (2002): 391–410. Milan Radošević, “Tired of Life: Suicides in the Province of Istria during Italian Administration between the Two World Wars,” *Problemi sjevernog Jadrana* 16 (2017): 79–102.

11 Giulio Sapelli, *Trieste italiana. Mito e destino economico* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1990). Giulio Mellinato, “La decadenza del sistema industriale giuliano,” in Istituto regionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione nel Friuli-Venezia Giulia (ed.), *Friuli e Venezia Giulia. Storia del '900* (Gorizia: LEG, 1997), 273–84.

12 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

13 Apih, *Italia, fascismo e antifascismo nella Venezia Giulia*. Giulia Albanese, David Bidussa and Jacopo Perazzolli, *Siamo stati fascisti. Il laboratorio dell'antidemocrazia. Italia 1900–1922* (Milan: Fondazione Gian Giacomo Feltrinelli 2020). Borut Klabjan and Gorazd Bajc, *Battesimo di Fuoco. L'incendio del Narodni Dom di Trieste e l'Europa adriatica nel XX secolo. Storia e memoria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023). Marco Bresciani, “The Battle for Post-Habsburg Trieste: State Transition, Social Unrest and Political Radicalism (1918–1923),” *Austrian History Yearbook* (2021): 182–200.

with strikes and attacks on production sites, as well as clashes with the Italian authorities. Trieste was not only grappling with political and economic issues in the post-war period. Situated on the border, this war-torn city with strong migratory movements, refugees, returning veterans and the wounded, was a society deeply divided by nationalism and struck by a food and health crisis (i. e. Spanish flu). While the causes of each suicide cases are too complex and individual to explain merely by looking at the post-war crisis in Trieste, the historical context lurked in the background of many cases.¹⁴

Analyses of the post-war suicide phenomenon in Trieste must therefore take into account the complexity of the post-war period.¹⁵ As shown by Marzio Barbagli, years of economic depression and disorder, in which there was no prospect of improving one's actual conditions, were periods in which the phenomenon tends to intensify.¹⁶ Indeed, as noted by Luzzatto-Fegiz who analysed data from 1873 to 1922, a record amount of 118 suicides was reached in 1920 (5.4 suicides per 10,000 inhabitants).¹⁷ Significant increase in suicides took place also in 1891, corresponding to the closure of the free port and the start of the industrialization phase of the city, phenomena that had a considerable impact on the everyday life of the poorest strata of the population, while in the decade between 1891-1900, the frequency of female suicides also began to rise.¹⁸ During the war, as Émile Durkheim suggested, there was, instead, a net reduction in the phenomenon, due to "the rise of social integration", or the need on the part of individuals to react to a common danger and the opportunity to attribute the cause of one's malcontent to an external enemy.¹⁹ During the post-war period, the rates grew once again, until 1920 and 1921 when, for the first time in post-war Trieste, the number of female suicides surpassed that of men: 53 men and 56 women, the frequency was 4.57 suicides per 10,000 inhabitants (4.83 for men, 4.61 for women).²⁰ This figure drew attention from analysts, due to the fact that it was usually men who killed themselves more often than women. As noted by Luzzatto-Fegiz, if we compare the 1873-1875 average with the 1919-1922 average, we find that in half a century the frequency of suicides increased among males by 112% and among females by 475%.²¹

Having observed this, the Triestine data is quite distinct from the Austrian data. In 1921 in Trieste, more women took their lives, whereas Austrian men killed themselves 2.1 times more than women that year, and Italian men 2.8.²² In the Weimar Republic,

14 Motivations behind suicide are complex, and they depend on a great number of factors. According to the framework put forward by Barbagli, one can take their life "for or against people", meaning that they are either altruistic or selfish acts, and one can carry out the act to harm others or as a means of struggle. – Maurizio Barbagli, *Congedarsi dal mondo. Il suicidio in Occidente e in Oriente* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 383–85.

15 Ibidem, 188–98.

16 Ibid., 216, 217.

17 Luzzatto-Fegiz, "Osservazioni Statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste," 7, 8.

18 Ibid.

19 Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide. Étude de sociologie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1897).

20 Luzzatto-Fegiz, "Osservazioni Statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste," 7. According to the 1921 population census, there were about 238,000 inhabitants in Trieste and about 111 women for every 100 men. Cfr. "I risultati del censimento di Trieste," *Il Piccolo*, 8 June 1922.

21 Luzzatto-Fegiz, "Osservazioni Statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste."

22 Barbagli, *Congedarsi dal mondo*, 209. Norbert Ortmayr, "Selbstmord in Österreich 1819–1988," *Zeitgeschichte* 17, No. 5 (1989–1990): 209–25, 213.

which was also affected by a severe economic and political crisis, the rates of female suicides rose after the end of the war, yet the ratio women to men was 1 to 2.²³ The data presented here demonstrates how the Triestine tendency was entirely exceptional.

Representations and Interpretations of Suicide in the Triestine Press

The articles covering suicide cases often reported, in full, the given name, surname, age, profession, and also the address of the suicide victim. Even when only the initials were given, it was easy for acquaintances, friends and neighbours to identify them, thus exposing them to society's judgement and commentary. In the descriptions of cases which aroused greater interest by the public, strong and engaging terms were used, sensationalized and suggestive stories were constructed. Journalists even invented dialogues, often in dialect, between the suicide victim and their relatives or those who were present before committing the act, to lend more pathos to the report²⁴ – almost as if to simultaneously stoke and satisfy a morbid curiosity. An important role in the reconstruction of the lives of those in question was played by neighbours and relatives who often provided information to the press regarding the suicide victim's last days through the practice of gossip.²⁵ However, at other times, it was the authorities and doctors who provided information to the journalists. According to the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse of the World Health Organization, "media reporting of suicide cases can lead to subsequent, additional, suicidal behaviours."²⁶ Thus, the so-called "Werther effect" would exist – that is, the tendency to imitate suicidal behaviours and actions learned through the press, especially when they involve celebrities, or give vivid details and information including how and where. Although this conclusion is not unanimous in the scientific world and should also be studied in relation to other factors, it is evident that the press of the time applied criteria that are now considered inappropriate.²⁷

The use of details by the press were much more accurate when the cases came from working-class or impoverished neighbourhoods – that is, when they involved the poorest strata of the population. Meanwhile, details and often also moral commentary were absent if they concerned suicides of noted figures and members of the city's bourgeoisie. It could also be presumed that, considering the almost total absence of news relative to suicide attempts of young women from the middle and upper classes,

23 Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13–18.

24 Articles on suicides fall, at least partially, into the canon of "fait divers", cfr. Roland Barthes, "Struttura del fatto di cronaca," in *Saggi critici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), 230–38. "Fait divers, fait d'histoire," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 38, No. 4 (1983).

25 Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, "Neighbourhood Social Change in West European Cities: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," *International Review of Social History* 38, No. 1 (1993): 1–30.

26 World Health Organization & International Association for Suicide Prevention, *Preventing suicide: A resource for media professionals, 2017 update*, <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/258814>, accessed 4 June 2024.

27 David P. Phillips, "The influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974): 340–54.

that these remained confined within the familial sphere, or in any case that they were not published by the press.

A special case concerns the suicide attempts of servants – young, lonely women with little hope of finding another job, who often came from areas that became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and who suffered from displacement, as revealed from psychiatric sources.²⁸ These were women who, while belonging to the working class, worked for, and lived with, middle-and-upper-class families. Such was the case of Luigia M., age twenty, who, after being fired, turned on the gas in an attempt to kill herself from asphyxiation.²⁹ Her mistress declared that this was the third attempt that had been made in the one day. Commenting on the news, the journalist added: "it is not unlikely that the wretch wanted to die because she had been abandoned by a soldier with whom she was in love and who was the cause of her dismissal." Additionally, in this case we are faced with the difficulty of identifying the true cause of suicide which was probably due to a combination of economic, social and emotional reasons. The repeated tendency to trace the deaths of servants back to sorrows and situations outside the working environment was encouraged by the statements of the employers, who, on the one hand, wanted to protect their image, not wanting to appear as too demanding or strict, and on the other hand, were anxious to place the blame for the act on the employee, stressing her "moral corruption," particularly through the telling of her private life.³⁰ It is also interesting to note that in a climate of high political and national tensions, the nationality of those involved in suicides was never mentioned.

Unlike their female equivalent, reports on male suicide rarely included moral judgement. In April 1921, *Il Piccolo* asked what could be at the root of such a worrying phenomenon: "particular post-war conditions? Widespread neuroses, aggravated by the new conditions of living? A phenomenon that merely carries the numerical value of a simple percentage given the population density in Trieste?"³¹ Building from these questions, the commentator then sought to present reasons for the suicide cases that turned out to be only subjective approximations:

"To draw apodictic conclusions – as our magistrates say – from these findings? To say that today's humanity throws life away at the first obstacle? To affirm this, one would need to assume a general physiological integrity which unfortunately cannot be brought into play. So? Spring; exaltation of the brains; false concepts of life; little philosophy; sick nerves... The field of hypotheses is boundless."³²

28 Ana Cergol Paradiž and Petra Testen Koren, "The Excluded amongst the Excluded? Trst/Trieste and (Slovene) Servants after the First World War," *Acta Histriae* 29, No. 4 (2021): 887–920. Dagmar Wernitznig, "The Madwoman in the Cellar: Trauma and Gender After Both World Wars — A Field Study of Psychiatric Files," *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 11 (2021), http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2021/16173/pdf/On_Culture_11_Wernitznig.pdf, accessed 4 June 2024.

29 "Licenziata dai padroni tenta di morire," *Il Piccolo*, 7 January 1920.

30 "La confessione prima del suicidio," *Il Piccolo*, 13 March 1920. A.S. 17-year-old servant to the Engel family, head of Assicurazioni Generali. The girl attempted suicide by swallowing carbolic acid. A. recounted that she was upset because while she was beating the carpet it fell out of the window and was stolen. The journalist argues that this is an excuse because the real motivation was to be found in the "thwarted affections she was having with a soldier."

31 "Il fascino della morte. Un "record" lugubre," *Il Piccolo*, 13 April 1921.

32 Ibid.

The article then put forth an assessment of the legitimacy of the act, or the lack thereof – “two lone cases, out of six, could be justified by a relative balance between determinants and resolute intentions.”³³ It then underlined how often the suicide was caused by an erroneous and pessimistic view of reality, which should be seen with different eyes: “the world – it is said – is a comedy. Too many people insist on making it a tragedy!” Thus, there was some reflection on the link between the post-war situation with its radical social and economic changes, and the increase in suicides. However, this hypothesis was not investigated by the reporter, but was simplistically used to explain how “the tragedy” that people insisted on seeing in reality exacerbated what the medical profession of the time called the disturbances of the nervous system, the “morbid nervousness of the post-war period,” believed to be the root cause of the new wave of suicide.³⁴

The so-called “*nevrastenia*,” in fact appeared with a certain persistence in the reports on suicide deaths and attempts of young women. The article went on to also attempt a definition of the malady: “the word *nevrastenia* embraces a field so vast that any definition that seeks to set absolute terms would be a risk.” At the time, medicine identified *nevrastenia* on the basis of turmoil of the soul, so much so that the suicide reports published in the socialist periodical, *Il Lavoratore*, referred on numerous occasions to the “century of the *nevrastenici*.”³⁵ In an interview a few days before, a doctor stated that: “we live in the age of the *nevrastenici*. All of us, in a more or less acute form, are affected by this malady. After all, how can we escape, if this is the malady of our historical period?”³⁶ While “nervous diseases” were also considered a cause for male suicide, the press stressed its role in female suicides in particular and insisted, in accordance with common medical knowledge, that women were predisposed to such pathologies. The debate on hysteria developed in medical circles throughout the 19th century. There were those who saw female hysteria as related to the uterus and the frustration of sexual desire, and those who argued that it was related to the different conformation of the brain and social tasks, such as childcare, which increased the chances of women suffering from this type of disorder. All, however, agreed that it was a typically female disease that developed mainly in the poorer sections of the population because they were more prone to everyday difficulties.³⁷ Later studies have demonstrated how schizophrenia and bipolar disorders are distributed among the genders equally, while depression affects women two times more than men, and clinical depression four times more.³⁸ Despite the higher risk of suicide among people diagnosed with depression, women still end their lives less than men.³⁹ Medical knowl-

33 Ibid.

34 “La corsa alla morte continua...,” *Il Piccolo*, 7 June 1921.

35 “Il secolo dei *nevrastenici*. Tentato suicidio,” *Il Lavoratore*, 27 May 1920.

36 “Arrivati in buon punto,” *Il Lavoratore*, 24 November 1920.

37 Montaldo, *Donne delinquenti*, 90–95.

38 Barbagli, *Congedarsi dal mondo*, 208.

39 Durkheim had already negated a correlation between “*nevrastenia*” and suicide in his study *Le Suicide*, pointing out how there were more women than men in hospices for the mentally ill, but that men died of suicide four times more than women.

edge and prejudices rooted in the beginning of the twentieth century can explain why expressions such as "in a moment of supreme discomfort" or "she did not have the strength of spirit to overcome the situation" were used in reports on female suicides, when instead suicide is often the final outcome of a long and considered process.

The socialist press usually reported suicide cases much less frequently than *Il Piccolo*. Unlike *Il Piccolo*'s medical discourse, the socialist press interpreted suicides as the result of the population's economic and social struggles: "When a human being is brought to the limit of their pain threshold and no longer sees another way to soothe the atrocious torment; when in their torturous path there is an obstacle that they cannot avoid and they feel as though they lack the strength to try to overcome it: then, in their infinite fatigue they find a little bit of energy to surpass their pain and set off into the unknown."⁴⁰ The newspaper saw the phenomenon as a consequence of the capitalist system that exploited the proletariat to the point that it saw death as the only escape from the suffering of life.

Even *La Coda del Diavolo*, a local satirical periodical commenting on the abnormal increase in suicides in the city, stated "Men kill themselves out of misery, women out of love."⁴¹ According to the periodical, the two were connected since men, even if in love, could not afford a relationship, let alone a marriage, given the conditions in which they lived due to the economic crisis in the city and, especially, the commercial port.

The fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo di Trieste*, tended to mock the women who attempted suicide, titling the articles with quips of questionable taste, such as, for example: "Bagno al Molo Audace" (A dip at Audace pier), "Beata gioventù" (Blessed Youth) and "Voleva lavarsi le budella"⁴² (She wanted to wash her guts out), or calling Lysol, the poison most used in suicides, above all those attributed to emotional motives, "purgante dei dolori" (purgative of pain).⁴³ In addition, *Il Popolo* claimed that the "suicide epidemic" mostly affected the "gentler sex, or the weaker sex, call it what you will,"⁴⁴ thereby, attributing the reasons that led them to take their own lives to the alleged congenital weakness of women. In contrast, their coverage of male suicide endowed the act with an aura of nobility and attributed it to a profound feeling.

The "comprese": the sick, new mothers, the poor and widows

Women who attempted or died from suicide due to motives tied to the inability to take care of themselves or due to too much pain were treated with relative empathy in the pages of the local newspapers. Such women were mostly at an advanced age, widowed, mothers of dead soldiers, or afflicted with incurable diseases.

40 "Morire, dormire, forse sognare," *Il Lavoratore*, 21 February 1922.

41 Jean, "Trieste città dei suicide," *La Coda del Diavolo. Giornale Politico Satirico* 180, 15 March 1922.

42 *Il Popolo di Trieste* respectively: "Bagni al Molo Audace," 12 April 1921. "Come stanca la vita!," 3 June 1921. "Benedetta gioventù! ...," 11 June 1921. "Voleva lavarsi le budella," 24 August 1921.

43 "Il purgante dei dolori ...," *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 14 June 1921.

44 "...E la corsa riprende!," *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 11 August 1921.

Maria B., age fifty-eight, was separated and had no one who cared for her. For a month she had been “tormented by an illness [...]. Since then, she had a sad sensation that her existence was useless: alone, sick, without any attachment whatsoever, loveless...,” she decided to go to her loved ones’ tomb to kill herself with morphine.⁴⁵ In addition to illness, suicide resulting from a disability condition, and thus, from constant dependence on others, also evoked understanding in columnists.⁴⁶

Women who took their own lives postpartum received sympathy and compassion. According to a very widespread vulgate, childbirth could render women “excited” and out of control, incapable of having a rational view of reality.⁴⁷ This had been a deeply rooted view since the eighteenth century, even among doctors, who believed that among the possible consequences of childbirth was “puerperal mania,” an illness which affected the minds of women, provoking states of alienation which rendered them dangerous to both themselves and their children.⁴⁸

Public opinion deemed the suicide of widows and mothers who had lost their husbands or sons in the war as morally justified. The uncertainties of the post-war period and the painful news that arrived well after the conflict, together with the process of mourning that was confined to the domestic sphere, were often the cause of this type of suicide. In Trieste, almost everyone had fought with the Austro-Hungarian army, while celebrations and public memory were reserved for the “irredentists,” namely those who had deserted and enrolled as army volunteers for the Kingdom of Italy.⁴⁹ The emotional toll from such a loss was often accompanied by grave economic consequences. The survivors often had to rely on public welfare or war pensions.

Even if their husbands survived, such women could find themselves as the primary breadwinners and in squalid poverty. This was the case of Giustina P., age twenty-four, summarised as follows by *Il Piccolo*: “the terrible tragedy of the breadless was unfolding in the young woman’s soul with a haunting intensity,” so much so that it drove her to take her own life.⁵⁰ The lack of money and bread was exacerbated by rising housing costs, due to both rampant inflation and the constant increase in population. Teresa P., for example, had found herself working to provide for her children, but the money was not sufficient, and debts arose. Her landlord brought her to court to serve her with an eviction order. She had announced her intention to commit suicide if she was evicted, a proposition she carried out.⁵¹

45 “Si veste di nero e va avvelenarsi sopra una tomba,” *Il Piccolo*, 5 February 1922.

46 “Il drammatico suicidio di una giovane,” *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 19 November 1921.

47 “Tragico suicidio,” *Il Piccolo*, 9 April 1920.

48 Nadia Maria Filippini, *Generare, partorire, nascere. Una storia dall'antichità alla provetta* (Rome: Viella, 2017), 228–32. Cfr. “Il dramma di una sventurata. Vuol gettarsi con la sua creaturina sotto il treno,” *Il Piccolo*, 2 December 1922.

49 Borut Klabjan, “Hasburg Fantasies: Sites of Memory in Trieste/Trst/Triest from the Fin de Siècle to the Present,” in Borut Klabjan (ed.), *Borderlands of memory: Adriatic and Central European perspectives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 61–89.

50 “Drammi dell'esistenza,” *Il Piccolo*, 13 July 1921.

51 “Una povera donna s'impicca perché riceve l'ordine di sloggio,” *Il Piccolo*, 22 August 1922.

For futile motives: the "sorrows of the heart" and "family troubles"

Suicide attempts tied to romantic disappointments undoubtedly represent the most analysed matter in newspaper articles on the topic. The newspapers denounced them as the most foolish and naïve, and judged them as the folly of young Triestine women, who were ill-equipped to face the difficulties of life.

There were several cases which involved Italian soldiers who, after courting and promising to marry a woman, had returned to their regions of origin at the end of their military service where they no longer maintained contact or announced that they already had a family.⁵² What emerges from the newspapers is rather the concern of how this phenomenon affected the youngest in particular because – as *Il Piccolo* reminded – “at eighteen you can’t have any other serious worries on your mind.”⁵³ Likewise, the socialist periodical *Il Lavoratore* analysed the case as such:

“In the post-war era, young women are exhibiting very dangerous psychological characteristics. A study on the topic would be extremely interesting and instructive. The primary cause of this spiritual shift in girls is to be found mainly in the moral decline that afflicts all social classes today, whereas once it was the prerogative of the aristocracy alone. The suicides of sixteen-year-old girls are very common in these times. A naive love believed to be eternal that vanishes, is now a reason for fatal and tragic despair. The solution? Suicide.”⁵⁴

Here, too, reports of male and female suicides diverged. Women were presented as misguided youths unaware of the man’s true intentions, unable to protect themselves from any further relationships, or too young to understand the pains of love. Instead, when it was the man who took his own life, the female became the young seductress, a provocateur who had made herself too desirable. Various periodicals told of how these women, after reading the news of the suicide in the newspaper, went in tears to her beloved, regretting having left him.⁵⁵

An interesting and comprehensive analysis on the phenomenon of suicide “for reasons of love” can be found in the editorial of *Il Piccolo* of 22 May 1921, titled “Perché le donne si uccidono?” (Why Do Women Kill Themselves?), in which it was argued that the reason for the “inconstancy, restlessness and inconsistency” of women had only one origin: love.⁵⁶ While men could have had several valid reasons for taking their own lives, the journalist identified three fundamental reasons for the high rate of female suicides: sentimentality, reading and family upbringing.

The war, *Il Piccolo* explained, had lowered “the value attached to life,” and this had led to a “loss of all moral values, of inhibitory energies, from which comes a thirst for an intense life, for pleasure, for wantonness to forget and forget oneself.” Moreover, readers were given a possible explanation for this particular “spiritual restlessness” of

52 “I suicidi. La morte di una signora con acido fenico,” *Il Piccolo*, 8 March 1920.

53 “La corsa alla morte. Il gesto folle di quattro stanchi della vita,” *Il Piccolo*, 12 April 1921.

54 “Amori precoci,” *Il Lavoratore*, 9 October 1921.

55 “Per l’amore di Faustina,” *Il Lavoratore*, 31 October 1920.

56 “Perché le donne si uccidono?” *Il Piccolo*, 22 May 1921.

Triestine women: “beneath the gaiety of the Triestine woman is her apparent thoughtlessness, behind which lurks a great sensitivity, at times morbid, a sensitivity which was sharpened by the material pains to which she was subjected for more than four years of war, and from the overwhelming thrill that accompanies the consecration of victory and liberation.” That is, this sensitivity led her to experience deep love, and strong disillusionment when this love failed.

The finger was then pointed at the reading of youths: “our youths” – explained *Il Piccolo* – “read too much and read badly. The worst is when they begin excessively reading early, at twelve or thirteen”; further, they read books that are against the common morality, in particular romance books, this then collides with harsh reality, and in the end the weaker in the relationship – the young woman – kills herself. *Il Piccolo* argued that reading had devastating effects on women, accustoming them from the most tender age to a fantastical life divorced from reality. This idea precisely came from the representation of female suicide in literature. Represented as avid readers, as noted by Gabriele Scalessa: “a male-authorial approach to female suicide in the late nineteenth century rarely went separate from a cultural frame including a series of commonplaces.”⁵⁷ It was also a popular idea at the time that literature influenced behaviour, especially in “degenerate subjects.”⁵⁸

The third factor identified by the columnist in the Triestine daily related to family upbringing which, according to the periodical, left young people without supervision too early and thus, unprepared for the difficulties of life. If this was the interpretation provided by the main local daily, the fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo di Trieste*, often dealt with the subject, referring to “sorrows of the heart” as “petty motives,” highlighting the recklessness of those who “throw their lives away” for reasons considered so insubstantial.⁵⁹ According to the publication, among women “there is vanity,” often the desire for a little “attention” to attract a man’s focus and intimidate him.⁶⁰

Public opinion also condemned women who committed suicide due to “family troubles.” Suicide following “arguments” included marital squabbles, domestic violence and lobbying for control of the romantic relationships of daughters on the parts of fathers, as well as all the other motivations connected to the rupture of moral codes.

In the matters of marital life and family violence, little can be inferred from the suicide reports, but it is clear how the *jus corrigendi* of the husband and the father was considered a right and a duty, which was justified by the press but within certain limits – not, for example, in the case where the husband’s violence put the wife in hospital.⁶¹ If violence against one’s loved ones did not exceed these limits, it was then referred to as “violent bickering,” which, in any case, was considered legitimate and thus, was not

57 Gabriele Scalessa, “Representations of Suicide in Italian Narratives from the 1860s to the Early Twentieth Century,” in Paolo L. Bernardini and Anita Virga (eds.), *Voglio morire! Suicide in Italian Literature, Culture, and Society 1789–1919* (Newcastle upon Tyne; Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 161–65.

58 Ty Geltmaker, *Tired of Living: Suicide in Italy from National Unification to World War I, 1860–1915* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 65–67.

59 “Tentato suicidio,” *Il Popolo di Trieste*, June 25, 1921.

60 “Quattro assetate di acido fenico,” *Il Popolo di Trieste*, September 13, 1921.

61 Marco Cavina, *Il padre spodestato. L'autorità paterna dall'antichità ad oggi* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2007).

considered to be a trigger for suicide attempts. The motives were instead identified as family troubles or as the consequence of "a quarrel more serious than the others."⁶² While this "reductionist" perspective was fairly widespread in the liberal press, the socialist newspaper, *Il Lavoratore*, distanced itself from it, remaining faithful to the structuralist view of social problems, pointing out that male violence was a product of poverty and consequent alcohol abuse.⁶³

As young girls' arguments with their parents often addressed moral issues, readers read such suicide reports from an educational point of view. Anna Z., an 18-year-old seamstress that, as *Il Piccolo* reported, drank carbolic acid after yet another rebuke from her parents, who did not want the girl to be absent from home for too long.⁶⁴ She needed special attention from the family because she was, as defined by the press, "*belluccia*" (good-looking). Such control was not limited to the family, but society as well, so much so that seventeen-year-old Valeria F. was rescued after having thrown herself from a height of three metres because of "family matters due to rumours about her morality."⁶⁵ Other times, motives spurred by "decorum and honour" were mentioned in the articles, without ever specifying what they were precisely, but suggesting that they had to do with rumours about illegitimate love affairs, which affected the honour of the woman and therefore, that of the family, as the former was primarily responsible for the education of her daughters. In these cases, too, the periodical, *Il Popolo di Trieste*, tended to minimise, claiming that quarrels between family members always ended with reconciliation, making suicide unnecessary.⁶⁶

"Tired of the lives they led": the suicides of sex workers

For the press, the suicide of sex workers stemmed from their profession's nature and was the only way out of the lifestyle it engendered.⁶⁷ The descriptions of the motives that led sex workers to suicide often had a didactic intent, aimed at demonstrating how unavoidable it was to take one's own life or to resign oneself to not being able to escape from that underworld. Journalistic analyses maintained that the lives of these women could not be happy and full like that of other girls their age. This is the case of Vittoria D.:

"[...] disgraced, at 20 she descended to the lowest step on the social ladder. Even these kinds of women who, with fierce irony, are called cheerful, sometimes feel pain for the abjectness in which they have fallen and despair of themselves, of the future, of everything.

62 "Tentato suicidio," *Il Lavoratore*, September 25, 1920.

63 "La tormentata," *Il Lavoratore*, 30 December 1919.

64 "La disperazione di una sartina," *Il Piccolo*, 4 March 1920.

65 "Tentato suicidio," *Il Piccolo*, 15 May 1920.

66 "Piccole tragedie," *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 2 August 1921.

67 For the Triestine context at that time, see: Nancy M. Wingfield, "Venereal Disease, War, and Continuity in the Regulation of Prostitution: Late Imperial Adriatic Austria and Italy's New Provinces," *Acta Histriae* 21, No. 4 (2013): 773–90.

It was precisely in one of these moments of supreme despair that Vittoria D., while passing through via Felice Venezian, took out of her pocket a bottle containing Lysol and drank its contents.”⁶⁸

This system was also condemned in the columns of *Il Lavoratore* which, writing on the relationship between the madams of the “sarcastically called *pleasure houses*”, and the sex workers, demonstrated how some of the suicide cases were precisely attributable to economic problems derived from this dependent relationship, completely designed to impede the girls’ freedom to leave the brothel.⁶⁹ Alongside economic considerations, the press also dwelled on the false illusions created by men who promised to marry these women. According to the newspapers, the life of the brothel induced several sex workers to delude themselves into thinking that they had found a man who would save them from sex work, but the harsh reality that these men only wanted to take advantage of the woman and extract sexual favours was eventually revealed. When the sex workers became aware of this – the press maintained – disillusionment followed, along with the choice to take their own lives.

The socialist press condemned society for these women’s impossible redemption. In the columns of *Il Lavoratore*, this was how the story of Agnese L. was told: “She had already been that which she never should have been: a seller of pleasure. But at that age, no matter how corrupt a woman is, she always conserves something noble in the depth of her soul. And one fine day this something may even be called love.”⁷⁰ When she fell in love, she vowed to change her life, “[e]specially because she felt like a mother. And she dreamed of redeeming herself through motherhood and love.” However, two guards arrested her because she had torn up the compulsory health booklet for sex workers, thus, violating the law: “There the unfortunate woman understood that this barbaric... civilisation does not admit redemption of any kind, that all dreams and chimeras vanish and that life for those who are children of the road holds only pain.”

In some cases, there was no mention of the profession of the suicide victim, although it was clear to the reader through the article itself who was being talked about: Ermenegilda S., aged twenty-one, “followed the example of many others, who, having reached the dregs of suffering, find no other salvation than suicide.”⁷¹ Affected by a “severe celtic illness” (syphilis), she had locked herself in her room and had taken carbolic acid. After her cries, some friends rushed to the scene, but they could not save her. As this article excerpt showed, the press often referred to the solidarity among sex workers in brothels; the newspapers told how they were always the first to provide aid and call the doctors.

The report of the suicide of Giuseppina U., age twenty-six, from Descla/Deskle, a town in the Gorizia area who had moved there to work in a pastry shop, is interesting.⁷² The article in *Il Piccolo* wrote of the path that had led a “mature peasant girl” from

68 “Tentato suicidio,” *Il Lavoratore*, 7 March 1920.

69 “Tentato suicidio,” *Il Lavoratore*, 26 February 1920.

70 “L’irredenta. Tentato suicidio,” *Il Lavoratore*, 7 April 1920.

71 “La misera fine di una giovane donna,” *Il Piccolo*, 19 May 1920.

72 “Si toglie la vita gettandosi nell’Isonzo,” *Il Piccolo*, 4 January 1921.

honest work to prostitution with soldiers and patrons of the bar where she worked. The woman was described as "comely":

"easy-hearted she lent herself to the flattery of her suitors, she was not slow in giving herself to the cheerful and carefree life, passing from the caresses of one lover, to the tenderness of the other, with that gay light-heartedness which forms the hallmark of the woman accustomed to the hardness of family life, of a rustic and burdensome environment. Life suddenly became free and apparently better."⁷³

The theme of the risk of the moral perversion of women from the countryside coming into contact with the city is recurrent in the press consulted. The articles insisted, once again with a paternalistic tone, on the dangerous illusions felt by these country women in being able to live freely in the city. This consideration was probably due to the high rates of immigration from Venezia Giulia as well as from the Kingdom of Italy in Trieste in the early post-war period.⁷⁴

Conclusions

The period of administrative and state transition, together with the economic crisis and political violence, was the background against which to place this "suicide epidemic" in Trieste in the immediate post-war period. For the first and last time, there were more women committing suicide in the city than men.

According to public opinion, not all suicides were equal; there was no clear moral/religious judgement on the act, but its legitimacy varied from case to case and from subject to subject. For example, the *mater dolorosa* and the sick woman were represented antithetically to the young woman in love and the sex worker. Thus, not everyone received the same treatment and the same legitimacy regarding the decision to take their life. However, in every case, female suicide attempts and deaths received a more harsh and judgmental reception than male ones.

There was also a class difference. Most of the reports, especially on suicide attempts, were concentrated in the poorest and most deprived neighbourhoods of the city, where the news did not remain confined to the family sphere but travelled quickly from word of mouth among neighbours. This pervasiveness also made it difficult for those who had attempted suicide to return to their daily lives as serenely as possible: everyone knew everything about everyone, social control was very strong and made women feel judged on the legitimacy of their decisions, especially if poor and alone.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Apih, *Italia, Fascismo e Antifascismo nella Venezia Giulia*, 40.

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Matteo Perissinotto

»V TRENUTKU SKRAJNE STISKE.«
ANALIZA SAMOMOROV MED ŽENSKAMI NA PODLAGI
TRŽAŠKEGA TISKA V POVOJNEM OBDOBJU (1918–1922)

POVZETEK

V Trstu je bilo v prehodnem obdobju po koncu prve svetovne vojne prvič in edinkrat (odkar se sistematično zbirajo podatki) zabeleženo večje število samomorov med ženskami kot med moškimi. Podatki so bili tako presenetljivi, da je statistik Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz v začetku leta 1923 objavil članek *“Osservazioni statistiche sul fenomeno del suicidio nella città di Trieste”* (Statistično opazovanje pojava samomora v mestu Trst), v katerem je ugotovil, da je bilo v obdobju takoj po vojni v tem mestu zabeleženo strmo povečanje števila samomorov. Ta pojav je naredil tak vtis na sodobnike, da je bil vedno znova tema lokalnega tiska, ki ni poročal le o novicah in nekaterih statističnih podatkih, temveč je v uvodnikih in anketah tudi predlagal nekatere razlage. Ti članki vsebujejo pomembne informacije o mentaliteti, vplivu sodobnega medicinskega znanja in odzivih družbe na ta pojav. Zelo zanimive se zdijo tudi moralne sodbe posameznih primerov, ki nam, če jih umestimo v širši kontekst, ponujajo lestvico sodb in “sprejemljivosti” ali nesprijemljivosti samomorov na podlagi pripisanih motivov. Seveda ne moremo analizirati motivov za vsak samomor, saj je teh pogosto več in je nemogoče ugotoviti en sam vzrok, lahko pa ugotavljamo trende in analiziramo njihovo predstavitev v tisku. Prehodno obdobje v upravnem in državnem smislu, ki sta ga spremljala gospodarska kriza in politično nasilje, vsekakor predstavlja ozadje, v katerega je mogoče umestiti “epidemijo samomorov” v Trstu v obdobju takoj po vojni.

Na podlagi sodb v tisku so bile opredeljene tri makro kategorije, v katere lahko uvrstimo samomore: “razumljivi” samomori ali poskusi samomorov, ki so veljali za družbeno sprejemljive ali vsaj upravičene, kadar so bili povezani z ekonomskimi razlogi, zdravjem ali žalovanjem za člani družine; samomori, ki so veljali za povezane z “lahkomiselnimi motivi” in jih je meščanska morala obsojala, ker so bili povezani z ljubezenskimi zadevami in družinskimi spori; in, nazadnje, samomori spolnih delavk (prostitutk), ki so jih odkrito kritizirali, saj so veljali za naravno in fiziološko posledico življenja v bordelih.