

Urška Bratož*

Suicide in the Austrian Littoral at the Turn of the 20th Century**

IZVLEČEK

SAMOMOR V AVSTRIJSKEM PRIMORJU NA PRELOMU 19. IN 20. STOLETJA

Prispevek skuša razbrati družbeno podobo samomora ob koncu 19. in na začetku 20. stoletja, predvsem na primeru Trsta kot velikega avstrijskega urbanega centra, kjer je bil trend naraščanja samomorilnosti opazneje viden vsaj od sedemdesetih let 19. stoletja. Ob zaznavanju naraščajoče prisotnosti samomora v družbi je bilo mogoče opazovati, kaj so z različnih koncev Evrope prinašala razmišljanja o samomoru iz zadnje četrtine 19. stoletja, od Morsellijeve študije preko Masaryka do Durkheima, obenem pa, kako so diskurzi okrog samomora odstirali nekoliko širšo sliko družbe, skupaj z njenimi strahovi (pred družbenimi problemi in spremembami, ne nazadnje pa pred potencialno grožnjo imitativnega efekta, ki naj bi ga s poročanjem o samomorih ustvarjal dnevni tisk).

Časopisni diskurz je običajno sledil znanstvenim objavam svojega časa, sočasna opažanja o množičnosti samomorov so se potrjevala skozi statistične analize in medicinske, sociološke, filozofske ter druge razprave, obenem pa so odpirala tudi mnoge druge družbene problematike, s katerimi je bilo samomor v urbanem prostoru mogoče povezati (alkoholizem, rast proletariata, revščina, spreminjanje vrednot idr.). Vse to je sooblikovalo javno razpravo o samomoru kot problemu moderne družbe, s poudarkom na (velikih) mestih, saj je bila problematika samomorov tam veliko bolj izrazita kot v manjših neindustrijskih mestih ali na podeželnju Avstrijskega primorja.

Ključne besede: samomor, mesta, Trst, Koper, modernizacija, 1870–1910, Avstro-Ogrska

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to examine the social image of suicide at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, focusing on the case of Trieste as a major Austrian urban centre, where the suicide rates were visibly increasing from at least the 1870s onwards. The perception of the growing presence of suicide in society made it possible to observe the reflections on suicide from the last quarter of the 19th century, originating from different parts of Europe (Morselli, Masaryk, Durkheim), and at the same time how the discourses around suicide shed light on a somewhat broader picture of society, including its fears (of social problems and change, not least the potential threat of the imitative effect that the daily press was believed to create by reporting on suicides).

The newspaper discourse usually followed the scientific publications of the time, and the contemporaneous observations on the mass of suicides were confirmed through statistical analyses and medical, sociological, philosophical, and other debates, while raising many other social issues with which suicide in urban areas could be linked (alcoholism, the growth of the proletariat, poverty, changing values, etc.). All these factors shaped the public debate on suicide as a problem of modern society, with an emphasis on (big) cities, where the problem of suicide was much more pronounced than in smaller, non-industrial towns, or in the countryside of the Austrian Littoral.

Key words: suicide, cities, Trieste, Koper, modernisation, 1870-1910, Austria-Hungary

Introduction

During the late decades of the 19th century, as suicide rates in Trieste rose, controversy surrounding this topic appeared to intensify, with statistical and scientific discussions seeking to frame the phenomenon within parameters that could explain the observed increase in the city. These reflections were reported in the daily press, allowing the broader public to follow the scholarly debates that developed particularly from the last quarter of the 19th century onwards. The eye-catching headlines read “L’epidemia suicida”¹ and “La mania suicida”;² notably eloquent was a comment in

1 *L’Indipendente*, June 26, 1912. See also Remec, who observed that this was the terminology used to refer to the large number of suicides particularly in the first post-war period and likely motivated by the Spanish flu epidemics of the time (Meta Remec, “Epidemija samomorov?: odmevi na naraščanje stopnje samomorilnosti na Slovenskem v 19. in 20. stoletju,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 8-41). Long before that, Neumann-Spallart had mentioned the “very appropriate and frequently used expression suicide epidemics”, stating that it graphically illustrated how elements of a miasmatic infection float around like spores and fungi in the air in societies affected by suicidal tendencies. At a certain point, these societies are gripped by this infection and individuals fall acutely ill, i.e., commit suicide (F. X. Neumann-Spallart, “Ueber den Selbstmord,” *Statistische Monatsschrift* VII (1881): 314).

2 *L’Indipendente*, June 12, 1893. *L’Indipendente* was an irredentist newspaper published in Trieste between 1877 and 1923, primarily targeting the intelligentsia and the social elite. – *L’Indipendente*, <http://www.atlantegrandeguerra.it/portfolio/lindipendente/>.

Edinost: “Yesterday we reported three suicides, today we report two. Few issues of our newspaper are free from the sad headline ‘Suicide’ or ‘Attempted suicide’; however, having to record five suicides in two days - that has never happened to us before.”³ For at least a decade now, it had been impossible to open a newspaper, of any nation, without encountering a mention of suicide somewhere,⁴ and with the topic constantly filling newspaper pages, the impression was that it had become a common and completely normal occurrence.

Statistics for the municipality of Trieste provided by Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz show that suicide rates increased markedly during the period from the last decade of the 19th century to the early years of the 20th century, particularly among the male population. Between 1875 and 1922, the suicide rate in Trieste doubled for men and increased nearly fivefold for women, with the numbers among the male population reaching their peak in 1911, and among females in 1920⁵ (see Chart 1). According to certain data,⁶ the general trends in the Austrian Littoral in the first three years of the 20th century⁷ showed a particularly high suicide rate in the municipality of Trieste, with 32-45 suicide cases per 100,000 inhabitants, while the figures were much lower in Istria (7-9) and Gorizia, and the lowest in Dalmatia (see Chart 2).

A brief comparison of the city of Trieste as an urban area, the town of Koper as “semi-urban”, and the Koper countryside (Bertoki) as a rural environment shows that smaller urban centres and rural areas never reached the massive suicide rates observed in the cities. In the late 19th century, the incidence of suicide in the municipality of Koper (which encompassed the town and its suburban rural strip) was sporadic (a maximum of 3 cases per year in a population of around 8,000), as can be gleaned from several official statistical sources documenting causes of death (cumulative data gathered from the annual health reports produced by the municipal administration⁸).

3 *Edinost*, May 27, 1904.

4 *L'Indipendente*, August 16, 1892.

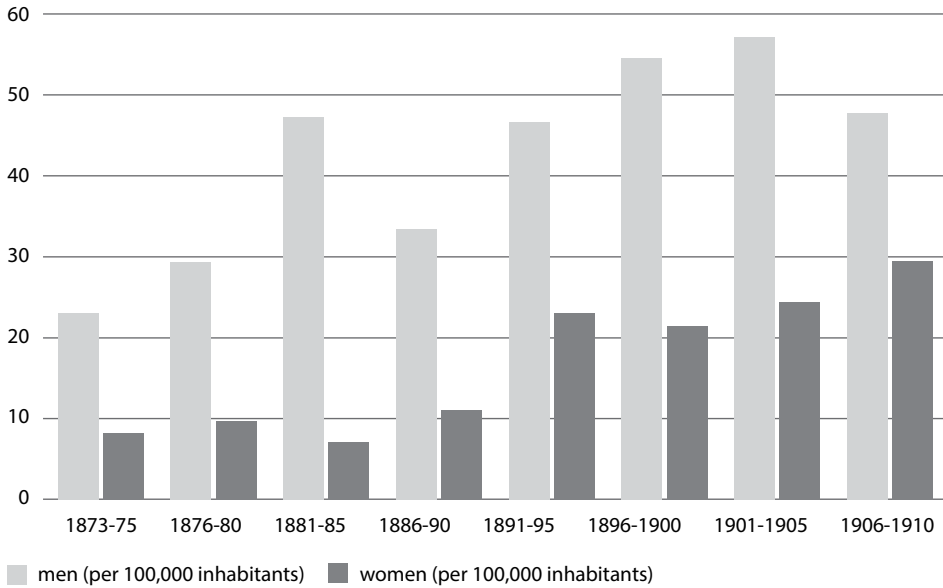
5 Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz, *La popolazione di Trieste (1875-1928)* (Trieste: La editoriale libraria, 1929), 71. This fact sparked new debates around the issue of female suicide, its causes, and gender-based perceptions in the first post-war period, which were elaborated in detail by Matteo Perissinotto, “Perché le donne si uccidono? Analisi dei suicidi femminili a Trieste nel primo dopoguerra (1918-1922),” *DEP*, 50 (2023): 1-26.

6 Guido Timeus, “Contributo allo studio sulla diffusione dell'alcoolismo nella città di Trieste,” *Bollettino della Società adriatica di scienze naturali in Trieste* 24 (1908): 76.

7 Data for the 1870s show a somewhat different picture, with 11-17 cases per 100,000 inhabitants for Trieste and environs, and 2-7 cases per 100,000 inhabitants for Istria (Eduard Bratassević, “Die Selbstmorde in Oesterreich 1873-1877 in Vergleichung zu jenen in Preussen, England, Frankreich, Russland und Italien,” *Statistische Monatsschrift* 4 (1878): 429-33. Remec, “Epidemija samomorov?”). For data related to the 1819-1872 period, see Platter, Ueber den Selbstmord.

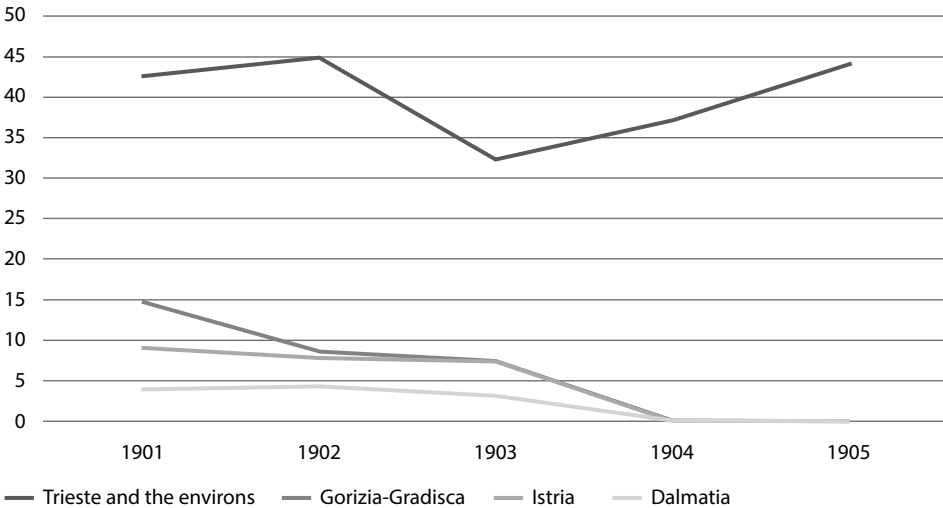
8 See for example SI PAK 6, Box 233, f. 793/XIV (1889); Box 241, f. 580/XIV (1891); Box 249, f. 1070/XIV (1893), Box 253, f. 539/XIV (1894); Box 274, f. 63/XIV (1899). Municipal data for the beginning of the 20th century are incomplete or missing, with civil registers recording 11 cases of suicide between 1900 and 1906, only one of them being female. Parish death registers, which represent in fact the only source for determining the suicide rate in rural areas, clearly indicated the - extremely rare - cases of suicide (most often as “suicidium” or “autochiria”), but it is impossible to know whether in certain cases they could have been covered up and recorded, for example, as accidents.

Chart 1: Suicide rates for the municipality of Trieste



Source: Luzzatto-Fegiz, *La popolazione di Trieste*

Chart 2: Suicide rates (per 100,000 inhabitants)



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Further on, the data that animated the scientific, statistical, and newspaper debates will be presented in detail and, of course, in the knowledge that statistics were not merely neutral collections of data (which has existed at least since Douglas questioned the reliability of official suicide statistics given the subjectivity of the reporters, the tendency to conceal suicides primarily within the family and the local community, and the limitation to mostly urban environments⁹). At the same time, contemporary discourses and ideas about suicide will be observed, and largely linked to perceptions of the developing world at the turn of the 20th century, as is evident in the case of Trieste.¹⁰

The city of Trieste is an interesting place to analyse. By the 19th century it had grown to become a large urban centre, the maritime capital of the Austrian Littoral, and an industrial hub attracting masses of foreign workers; but towards the end of the century, it was already experiencing crises (e.g., in 1873), and the imperial era of the city gradually came to an end after 1891, when customs duties were abolished. The Austrian government introduced this measure as part of its plan for economic rehabilitation and promotion of industrial development, a project which involved Trieste, since the borders of the customs area also encompassed the territory of its municipality. The local industry related to port and shipbuilding activities increased, generating greater needs for labour from traditional workforce pools (Friuli, Istria, the Gorizia region, and Carniola). This, naturally, resulted in a substantial increase in population through immigration; from 155,471 inhabitants in 1890, the Trieste population rose to 247,471 inhabitants in 1913.¹¹ As the proletariat grew, so did the issue of pauperisation.¹² Trieste made efforts to tackle the “challenges of modernisation” in various ways, but frequently struggled to provide adequate living conditions, health care facilities, and other essential services to meet the needs of its increasing population.

Urbanisation, Modernisation, Dissolution of Traditional Values, and Suicide

In 1879, Enrico A. Morselli (1852-1929), an Italian psychiatrist and anthropologist, published a baseline study on suicide (as a social phenomenon) relying on comparative statistics (*Il suicidio: saggio di statistica morale comparata*, 1879), in which he stated that suicide is particularly prevalent in areas “where people live agglomerated, [where] life’s difficulties, competition, poverty, and emigration are on the increase, and deeper and

9 See Remec, “Epidemija samomorov?,” 10. Jack Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

10 A comparison of data for Trieste with those for various cities of the Kingdom of Italy in 1904 shows Trieste registering the highest suicide rate with 14.3 per 1,000 deaths, higher than Venice (6.7), Milan (8.9), and Bologna (13.4). – Timeus, “Contributo allo studio,” 77.

11 Lucio Fabi, *La carità dei ricchi: povertà e assistenza nella Trieste laica e asburgica del XIX secolo* (Milano: F. Angeli, 1984), 195, 196. See also Luzzatto-Fegiz, *La popolazione di Trieste*, 17, 18.

12 See, for example, Fabi, *La carità dei ricchi*. Marina Cattaruzza, *La formazione del proletariato urbano: Immigrati, operai di mestiere, donne a Trieste dalla metà del secolo XIX alla prima guerra mondiale* (Torino: Tommaso Musolini, 1979).

more harmful are the effects of economic disruptions.”¹³ He identified several factors with lesser or greater potential to influence suicide rates: in addition to cosmic and natural influences, he maintained that there were ethno-demographic factors, social factors (e.g., religion, culture, ethics, economic position, life in an urban environment), as well as biological conditions, social circumstances (e.g., age, sex, occupation, marital and social status), and psychological factors that could lead to suicide.

His work was influenced by the political and social contexts of post-unification Italy, where stressing the homogeneity of the Italian states¹⁴ was particularly important - namely, in the newly consolidated Kingdom of Italy, suicide rates (along with statistics related to crime and illiteracy) were interpreted as symptoms of a crisis of civilisation in the country.¹⁵

Morselli's work on suicide, which earned him the position of assistant professor at the psychiatric clinic in Pavia, was an immediate success and even drew the attention of Émile Durkheim, who used part of Morselli's statistical analyses as the empirical foundation for his well-known sociological study on suicide published in 1897. Durkheim's main argument was that suicide is not only an individual act, but also a socially conditioned act, dependent “on forces outside the individual.”¹⁶ This idea was not entirely new. Six years before Durkheim's book, Neumann-Spallart, who had compiled previous writings on suicide, summarised in the *Statistische Monatsschrift* journal the concept that suicide is one of those mass social phenomena shaped by general socio-physical influences experienced by an entire population, yet at the same time dependent on the free will and psychological state of each its individual.¹⁷

In the final decades of the 19th century, many scholars, inspired as much by Morselli's study (1879) as by the works of the Czech politician, sociologist, and philosopher Tomáš G. Masaryk (*Der Selbstmord als Sociale Massenerscheinung der Modernen Civilisation*, 1881), stressed the strong connection between the modern era and the increasing incidence of suicide (which they attempted to demonstrate through statistics and argued using medical rhetoric).

One of the key points in Morselli's work as well as in the writings of other contemporary authors with different theoretical backgrounds was that suicide, even at the turn of the 20th century, was a consequence of modernisation and an altered way of life, of an excess of sensory stimuli, of “a hectic urban life, fast means of transportation and communication, increased brainwork, women's growing intellectual activity, and the heightened pace of work.”¹⁸ It was believed that urban suicide rates were higher because there was “more misery and more despondency, with less encouragement of

13 Enrico Morselli, *Il suicidio: saggio di statistica morale comparata* (Milano, 1879), 261.

14 Morselli always paid particular attention to alleged ethnic-based variations in suicide tendencies.

15 Maria Teresa Brancaccio, “The Fatal Tendency of Civilized Society’: Enrico Morselli's Suicide, Moral Statistics, and Positivism in Italy,” *Journal of Social History* 46, No. 3 (Spring 2013): 702. For more about Morselli's and some other Italian studies from that time, see also Ty Geltmaker, *Tired of living: Suicide in Italy from National Unification to World War I, 1860–1915* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 27 ff.

16 Émile Durkheim, *Samomor. Prepoved incesta in njeni izviri* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 1992), 22.

17 Neumann-Spallart, “Ueber den Selbstmord,” 314.

18 Jessica Slijkhuis and Harry Oosterhuis, “Paralysed with fears and worries’: neurasthenia as a gender-specific disease of civilization,” *History of Psychiatry* 24, No. 1 (2013): 81.

restraint” in urban environments. Morselli further argued that the incidence of suicide (which he referred to as the “deadly disease of civilised peoples”) was higher in cities because the struggle for survival there was more intense.¹⁹

French statistician Alfred Legoyt (1881) also wondered why suicide rates tended to be higher in cities, and argued that in urban areas, news of suicide travelled fast, while in the countryside, where the settlements were more dispersed, it was easier to conceal the cause of deaths or more difficult to verify them. Legoyt also contended that cities exhibited a culture of excess, such as alcohol abuse (which played a significant role in suicide), were inhabited by more people of more open and liberal views (who accounted for a large part of suicides), had higher rates of unemployment and homelessness, and a greater prevalence of various “moral infections”. Among the more general motives for suicide was, in his opinion, particularly indifference in religious matters.²⁰

As we can read in a newspaper comment from that period, growing up in a world affected by the processes of modernisation was believed to afflict people even as children:

“This modern child, born of restless and anxious people, often brought up in an environment of irritating nervousness and languid melancholy, who sees too much, this child has now acquired a precocious simplicity, a premature intuition (...) The modern child reads too many picture books and has hands on too many newspapers. When his father stolidly speaks about suicide, when his uncle mocks religion, he pricks his ears. This is why the modern child can grow miserable more easily.”²¹

Even in the decades afterwards, many observations led to similar conclusions, that the number of suicides was gradually rising presumably because of increasing individualism, particularly in urban environments; add to that

“the hectic pace of life in modern cities, which are indeed great centres of culture, but they deprive man of any intimate contact with divine nature (...) that haste to live, that prevailing eagerness for pleasure in big, noisy, tumultuous, stifling cities that make us forgetful of ourselves and of higher purposes, transforming - as Lombardo Radice would say - us people into ‘individuals.’”²²

It was claimed that suicide had become an ordinary, common thing

“encompassing all, from the callow youth who takes his own life because of a silly frivolity, to the decrepit old man who accelerates his [natural] death because he can no longer enjoy himself (...) Suicide is now a necessity. This generation, intelligent yet floundering, sceptical, epileptic, full of crazy aspirations, and pervaded by an incessant fever of pleasure, smiles to suicide just as peacefully as a sick man does to the elixir that should give him relief and restore his strength.”²³

19 Howard I. Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” in John Weaver and David Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide. International Perspectives on Self-destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 25, 26. Cf. Morselli, *Il suicidio*. For Masaryk’s and Durkheim’s arguments related to this topic, see also Remec, “Epidemija samomorov?”

20 Alfred Legoyt, *Le suicide ancien et moderne. Étude historique, philosophique et statistique* (Paris: Drouin, 1881), 198, 199.

21 Matilde Serao, “I bimbi,” *Il Piccolo*, November 27, 1885.

22 *L’Indipendente*, June 26, 1912.

23 *L’Indipendente*, February 7, 1891.

Like Morselli, T. G. Masaryk argued that the suicide rate is directly proportional to social complexity: he maintained that the decline in religiosity resulting from the dismantling of the traditional social system is the root cause of modern “suicide epidemics”. In Masaryk’s view, suicide was “the fruit of progress, of education, of civilisation”²⁴ or at least a consequence of the disintegration of a unified worldview.²⁵ Durkheim, for example, associated higher suicide rates with too strong (or too feeble) social integration, and his typification of suicide included “anomic” and “egoistic” suicides, which he believed were most characteristic of modern society.²⁶

These and similar ideas partly reverberated in Slovene lands. Aleš Ušeničnik, one of the most important Slovene theologians and philosophers and the leading philosophical ideologist of Slovene clericalism in the first half of the 20th century, spoke out against so-called liberalism, particularly because of its atheist nature and its demands for the separation of Church and State, which would weaken the influence of religion in society. He devoted an article to suicide in the newspaper *Čas* (1908), in which he summarised the prevalent conservative ideas of the time, such as the claim that suicides were more common in cities as these were particularly dangerous from a moral point of view: “Unbridled sexual drive, in particular, with its delusions and diseases is responsible for many, many suicides. In cities, the highest share of female suicides is represented by young women living outside the family setting and succumbing to the temptations of big city life. And the number of suicides among the divorcees is even higher.”²⁷ The desire was, manifestly, to preserve traditional values, family life, marriage, for the “primary causes of suicide” were said to be “alcoholism, sexual excesses and, particularly, the overwhelming hunger for enjoyment and the resulting feeling of surfeit, the disgust and revulsion toward life. “But the ultimate reason must be that which, besides modern hyperculture, greatly intensified this hunger, and that is faithlessness” or atheism as the absence of belief in the afterlife.²⁸ The modern man was thus said to be losing his footing, for scepticism had “shaken the foundations of the Christian worldview - and, again, the numbers of suicide are rising; now more than ever, suicide is turning into big social epidemics.”²⁹

It is in this same context that we can interpret 19th-century ideas promoting traditional family values as the best protection against self-destruction.³⁰ Women, being more engaged in traditional roles, were considered more “resistant” to suicide. Potentially more problematic were those who started moving to areas outside the private sphere,

24 Howard I. Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought,” *Journal of Social History* 26, No. 3 (Spring, 1993): 466, 467.

25 Neumann-Spallart, “Ueber den Selbstmord.”

26 Cf. Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act. Suicide Across Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 17.

27 Aleš Ušeničnik, “Samomor,” *Čas* 2, No. 6 (1908): 295. Similar thoughts appeared elsewhere in the Slovene press, for example, in the *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* of 23 June 1875 (“The present time of liberalism is full of suicides every day ...”), or the *Slovenec* of 4 June 1874 (“modern democratisation” as the cause of numerous crimes, including suicides), etc. At times, we can also find more radical “criminalisation” of suicides in the Catholic press (except for those resulting from, say, mental illness), for example: “Suicide is one of the most terrible vices and evils with which man closes the door to his own penance. It is also the ugliest, most disgusting savagery by which the suicide defiles and brings indelible shame upon themselves and undying grief upon their close ones.” - *Zgodnja Danica*, August 11, 1876.

28 Ušeničnik, “Samomor,” 297.

29 Ibidem.

30 Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 27.

including working women, who had to earn their own living. It was believed that these circumstances could lead them to mental conditions, such as nervousness, which in some cases ended in suicide. We can read about it in a section of a longer treatise about “nervousness” authored by Edvard Šavnik (1852-1931), a Slovene physician from Kranj:

“Female labour is largely in a most unfavourable relationship to female physical strength and health. In addition to dangers to life and health to which female factory workers are exposed there is also the risk that the overtaxing and gruelling factory labour, so unsuited to their anatomy, may drive them to nervous strain, which is often the initiator of physical and mental illnesses.”³¹

It was claimed women could avoid these anxious feelings by remaining in the circle of their traditional vocation, within the realm of family.

Reportedly, some 6% to 7% of attempted or completed suicides recorded in Trieste between 1903 and 1905 - among women as well as men - were associated with mental illness, but it would be more accurate to add to these the suicide attempts or cases caused by sadness (which in some instances, hypothetically, could have been induced by depression). These ranged between 11% and 20% in men, and 16% and 23% in women, in the same period.³² As can be observed in the crime and accident sections of Trieste newspapers, the vocabulary used in relation to suicide cases or attempts was frequently linked to mental pathology:³³ “They say that a person who tries to kill themselves or kills themselves is not of sane mind,” was one of such commentaries.³⁴ Individual cases of suicide were linked, for example, to “nervousness” or neurasthenia,³⁵ hypochondria,³⁶ even “postpartum fever”, which could nowadays be understood as postpartum depression,³⁷ and other psychopathological conditions.

Neurasthenia,³⁸ in particular, as a “terrible manifestation of modern life”³⁹ carried a special connotation, and the discourse on the subject became even more intense during the interwar period.⁴⁰ P. Drinot, who examined this issue in a non-European environment, observed that the term neurasthenia often appeared in the sense of “incapacity to deal with a modern and fast-changing world.”⁴¹ This inability to cope with the burdens of a dynamic world was said to be typical of certain age brackets in both sexes.

31 Slovenski narod, September 1, 1877, O nervoznosti.

32 Timeus, “Contributo allo studio.”

33 Terms such as “feeble minded”, “the poor man’s head is spinning”, “crazy attempt”, “signs of madness”, etc. were used.

34 Edinost, January 5, 1904.

35 E.g., Edinost, October 19, 1905; May 27, 1904, etc.

36 E.g., Edinost, May 13, 1905.

37 E.g., Edinost, March 3, 1904.

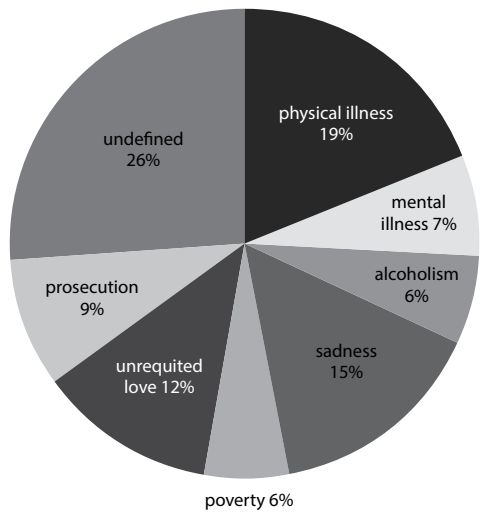
38 See on this, for example, George Beard, “Neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion) as a cause of inebriety.” *Quarterly Journal of Inebriety*, September 1879 (defined as a consequence of an impaired functionality of the nervous system, characterised, for one, by bouts of depression, and potentially leading to inebriety or even insanity), and contemporary treatises in the edited volume of conference proceedings *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*. - Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War* (Amsterdam, New York, 2001).

39 Timeus, “Contributo allo studio,” 75.

40 See Matteo Perissinotto, “‘In a moment of supreme discomfort.’ An analysis of female suicides through the press in Trieste in the post-war transition (1918-1922)” [in press], 2024.

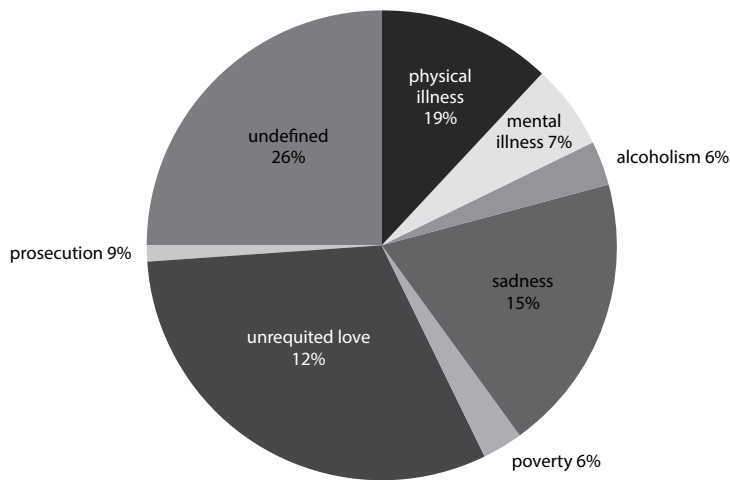
41 Paulo Drinot, “Madness, Neurasthenia, and ‘Modernity’: Medico-legal and Popular Interpretations of Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Lima,” *Latin American Research Review* 39, No. 2 (June 2004): 95.

Chart 3: Motives for attempted/completed suicides (men): Trieste, 1903-1905



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Chart 4: Motives for attempted/completed suicides (women): Trieste, 1903-1905



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Šavnik wrote of this: “Between the ages of 20 and 40, man fights for income, property, name and fortune, he also has to endure the greater share of unpleasant influences from the outside world and survive many mental struggles, all the while being at risk of losing balance between the body and soul; between the ages of 40 and 50, the woman undergoes the climacteric phase and often experiences widowhood, too, which forces her to be more involved with the world than is appropriate to her nature; in these periods, characterised by particular tendency to nervousness, both sexes should be even more careful not to let their nerves begin to ail.”⁴² Morselli, too, believed that women were more likely to commit suicide because of “physical” causes (illnesses, including mental), and men because of the difficulties in facing life problems.⁴³ Although gender difference is classified as “biologically” conditioned in his work, his opinion also reflects social normative influences, such as a clear division of gender roles, positing the afflicted women in the private sphere and imposing certain expectations on the role of men in society.

Suicide in Trieste at the Beginning of the 20th Century

A Trieste-born chemist and dietitian, Guido Timeus,⁴⁴ who was familiar with Morselli’s work, addressed the incidence of suicide within a larger treatise on the issue of alcoholism, which he examined from several points of view (analysing the consumption of alcohol in Trieste, the correlations between alcohol and mortality and those between alcohol and suicide⁴⁵). His findings were disseminated among the broader public through lectures, such as one held in 1907 by Dr. Guglielmo de Pastrovich⁴⁶ at the seat of the Medical Association (Associazione medica).⁴⁷ De Pastrovich had spoken on the topic already in 1903, in what was described as “one of the liveliest debates” in the series of public discussions organised by the Minerva Society from Trieste.⁴⁸

Timeus’s analysis of suicide incidence in Trieste was based on official data and the suicide records published in the newspaper *Il Piccolo* (which he claimed were in

42 *Slovenski narod*, August 30, 1877, O nervoznosti.

43 Morselli, *Il suicidio*, 299.

44 Timeus (1869-1953) was employed at the Trieste Public Health/Hygiene Office (Civico Fiscato) from the end of the 19th century onwards. He was in charge of food control, particularly of imported goods transported by sea, and of public health in the field of nutrition (*Guido Timeus*, <https://www.boegan.it/2015/03/guido-timeus/>). In this context, he also published studies dealing with the problem of alcoholism in Trieste of that time.

45 According to his data, about 6% of male suicides and 3% of female suicides recorded between 1903 and 1905 were related to alcohol abuse. The occupational groups with the highest rate of alcohol-related suicides were manual labourers and porters (Timeus, “Contributo allo studio”).

46 De Pastrovich (1876-1927) was a psychiatrist from Trieste and later the director of the Trieste psychiatric hospital (*Guglielmo, De Pastrovich*, <https://www.aspi.unimib.it/collections/entity/detail/292/>). He personally conducted clinical observations in the hospital (from 1900 through 1906), studying patients admitted with mental health issues, including those who had attempted suicide. He reported 70 cases of (mostly male) individuals trying to take their own lives merely due to inebriety and “a blind self-destructive impulse” triggered by alcohol (*L’Indipendente*, October 16 and 17, 1907).

47 *L’Indipendente*, October 16 and 17, 1907.

48 *L’Indipendente*, April 21, 1903.

complete agreement with the official data) for the period 1903-1905, when 201 cases of completed and 188 cases of attempted suicide were registered.⁴⁹ His study is interesting because it is not merely a count of suicide cases, but a qualitative analysis of them (conducted at the narrow level of the city) according to cause, method, sex, age, occupation, and time of occurrence (month). Despite the study being methodologically flawed, as it is not entirely clear whether it presents a credible picture or merely reflects the contemporary newspaper coverage,⁵⁰ some of the highlights are nevertheless telling.

Timeus's findings lead to the main motives for suicide (with around a quarter of them undefinable); the principal causes in men were physical illness and sadness (with alcoholism and prosecution also registering slightly elevated shares); in women, they were sadness and unreciprocated love (Charts 3 and 4). In terms of suicide method, poisoning (with carbolic acid/phenol standing out as the prevalent means used)⁵¹ accounted for the greatest share in both sexes; firearms registered a significant share in men (likely in connection to military service), and all other methods were also more prominently featured in men than in women (Charts 5 and 6).

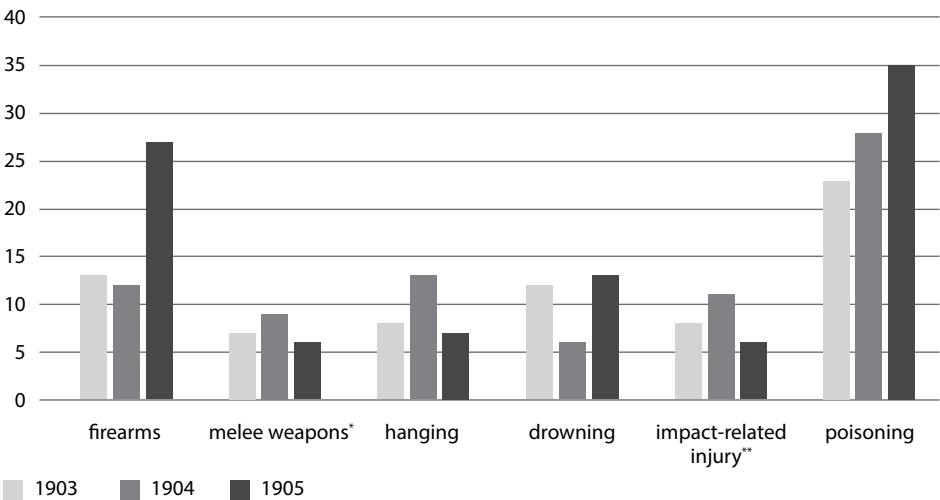
Correlations between motives for suicide and age indicate that individuals under the age of 30 or even under 20, most commonly committed suicide because of sadness, unrequited love, mental illness, as well as prosecution by authorities or fear of it. In the age group of 20 to 40 years, the prevalent reason was sadness, but also physical illness; the latter was even more pronounced in the age group of 50 to 60 years, when it was frequently accompanied by mental illness. While between 1903 and 1905, most deaths by suicide or suicidal attempts were registered in the 20-30 age group in both men and women (31% and 39%, respectively), the share of female population under 20 years of age was conspicuous as well (20%). The percentages for the age groups of 30 to 50 years were also similar for both sexes, with men displaying a more prominent share of individuals over 50 (Charts 7 and 8). It should be noted that the number of suicides recorded for the city could be misleading, for (at least according to newspaper reports) there were several cases of people who chose Trieste as the setting for their fatal act and journeyed in from elsewhere.

49 Timeus, "Contributo allo studio," 63. Although these data are aggregated, it is interesting to note the relationship between failed and fatal suicide attempts varying by gender: suicide attempts were fatal in 49-59% of cases among men, and in 37-53% of cases among women, with an upward trend exhibited in both groups.

50 Timeus originally listed the completed and attempted suicides as separate categories, but the data were later merged. Of course, these data are never entirely consistent with the actual situation, given that cases of completed suicide can frequently go unrecorded and that attempted suicides are registered even more sparingly, as they often remain concealed within an individual's private sphere.

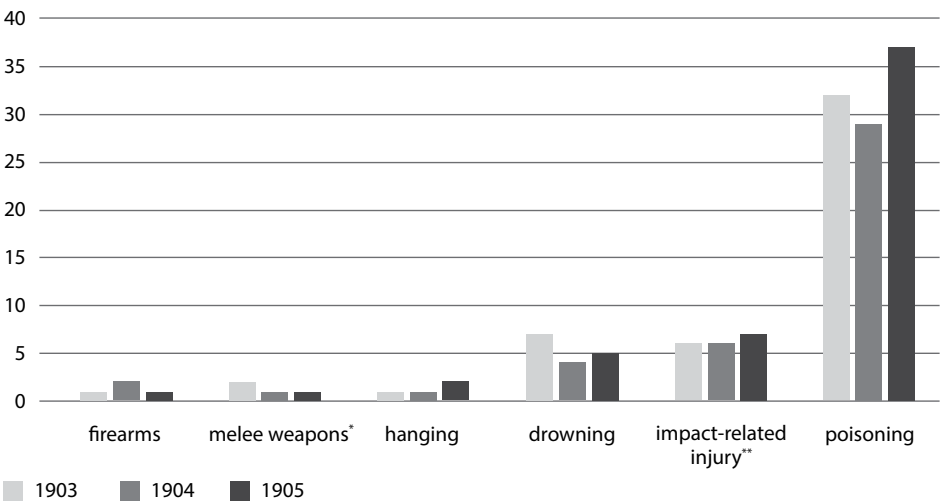
51 From the second third of the 19th century onwards, chemical substances were increasingly used as disinfectants in the event of infectious diseases, particularly cholera, but also smallpox and measles. They were easily accessible, which undoubtedly contributed to their use in suicides. Carbolic acid, for example, was employed for medical and veterinary purposes, as well as in agriculture.

Chart 5: Suicide (attempt) method – men



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Chart 6: Suicide (attempt) method – women

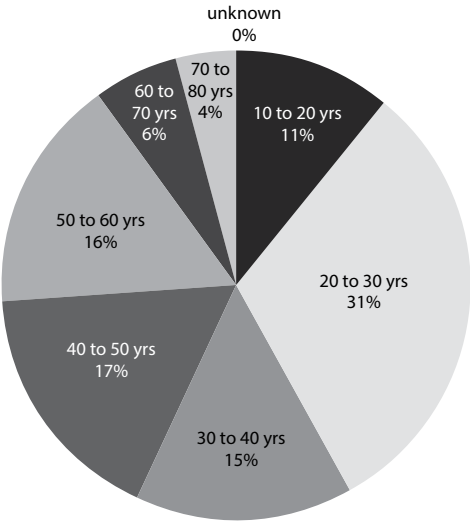


Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

* Blade and blunt hand-weapons.

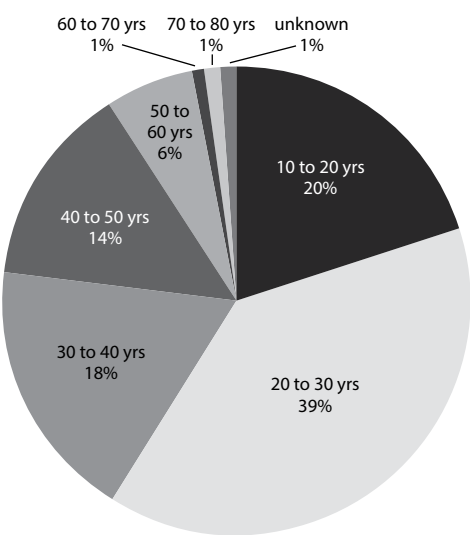
** Following collision with a vehicle, jumping from height.

Chart 7: Male suicide (attempts) by age between 1903 and 1905



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Chart 8: Female suicide (attempts) by age between 1903 and 1905



Source: Timeus, "Contributo allo studio"

Newspaper reports of individuals driven to suicide by poverty or incurable disease sounded more forgiving than of those who took their lives because of “unreciprocated love”, as M. Perissinotto showed for the interwar period.⁵² The rhetoric that proffered suffering among the reasons for suicide was reflected in phrases such as “unfortunate man”, “poor man/woman”, “pitiful girl”, “poor wretch”, “suffering has imposed on him”, “he/she is suffering from an incurable disease”, “poor soul” and the like, and there are several cases when misery⁵³ or poverty⁵⁴ were suggested as explicit causes for the suicide. Also, when the person taking their own life left behind a family, the impression is sometimes that the understanding or justification of the suicidal act was greater if the person in this difficult, “unbearable” situation was a man. A case in point was that of a 49-year-old man afflicted by illness who decided to end his life by hanging himself, leaving behind a wife and three children; the newspaper, in addition to reporting his death, published the deceased’s alleged suicide note, in which he begged his wife’s forgiveness, and which evoked compassion among the readers.⁵⁵ In another instance, it reported of a 52-year-old man from Friuli who committed suicide by gas suffocation, because in Trieste, where he had moved for work, he could not find a job, and the paper wrote that “misery pushed him into death,” although through this act the deceased widowed his wife and orphaned his children who lived in his home town.⁵⁶ In contrast, when reporting deaths of women who took their lives and left behind a family, the tendency was to suggest they should feel guilty for doing that: “... she committed suicide with no regard for the pain she would be inflicting on her husband and children,”⁵⁷ was said about a 41-year-old woman from the Trieste quarter of Rojan, who ended her life by ingesting carbolic acid after accompanying her terminally ill husband to hospital.

The link between poverty and suicide was also stressed by Timeus,⁵⁸ who noticed the number of suicides rise at the beginning or end of month, which he associated with the salary that the workers would receive. He established that 1%-8% suicides in men were brought on by poverty and 2%-5% in women (in the period between 1903 and 1905); nevertheless, he failed to take into account one key element: the civil status of the suicides. In fact, it was clear from newspaper reports that these voluntary deaths were also importantly linked to marital status (widowhood, unmarried), as such circumstances had an impact on an individual’s economic situation, increasing their existential hardship,⁵⁹ which could in part explain the slightly

52 See Perissinotto, “In a moment of supreme discomfort.”

53 E.g., *Edinost*, April 2, 1905.

54 E.g., *Edinost*, April 25, 1905.

55 *Edinost*, September 27, 1905.

56 *Edinost*, January 30, 1904.

57 *Edinost*, February 8, 1905.

58 Timeus, “Contributo allo studio,” 75.

59 For these issues, see Dragica Čeč (“Podobe starosti v začetku 19. stoletja,” in Mojca Šorn (ed.), *Starost - izzivi zgodovinskega raziskovanja* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2017), 11–33), who shows, in regard to the example of early 19th century Ljubljana, that widowed and unmarried persons represented the majority of welfare recipients, with women as the prevalent group by gender (also because of reservations in demonstrating sympathy and solidarity for men, Čeč, “Podobe starosti,” 12ff).

elevated suicide rate among elderly men.⁶⁰ At the same time, one cannot ignore the general economic crisis in Trieste at the time; an analysis of the cost of living in Trieste, for example, confirms its marked increase in the very first years of the 20th century.⁶¹ Among occupations presumed to be more prone to suicide in Timeus's study were self-employed persons, day labourers, and servants in women, and workers and field hand in men.⁶²

The Press and Alleged Incitement to Suicide

Some recent studies⁶³ cite the daily press as one of the possible factors motivating suicide (in the sense of the Werther effect, when a certain type of reporting can give rise to imitation⁶⁴). I. Smiljanić, who analysed the press coverage of suicides in connection with economic deprivation, noted that the Slovene liberal and conservative (Catholic) press covered the topic of suicides in different ways. While liberal newspapers reported suicide news frequently and sometimes cynically, Catholic newspapers featured it more sparingly (to avoid its potentially detrimental effect on the readership), but a lack of respect for the deceased and even mockery of people who committed (or attempted) suicide could often be observed. In short, both liberal and Catholic press treated this act in markedly negative and judgmental tones.⁶⁵

Daily press engaged in sensationalistic journalism (an overview of the newspapers *Edinost*⁶⁶ and *Il Piccolo*⁶⁷ in the 1903-1905 period can confirm that; see also Perissinotto, who examined the Italian press in Trieste during the interwar period⁶⁸),

60 There were several cases of suicide recorded in Koper between 1900 and 1906 involving widowers and unmarried men aged 50 or older (KDA, Koper Death Register, 1900-1912).

61 Mario Alberti, *Il costo della vita, i salari e le paghe a Trieste nell'ultimo quarto di secolo* (Trieste: E. Vram, 1911).

62 Timeus, "Contributo allo studio," 65, 66, 69, 74.

63 E.g., Manina Mestas, Florian Arendt, "Suicide Reporting in the Nineteenth Century. Large-Scale Descriptive Content Analysis of Austrian Newspapers," *Media History* 29, No. 3 (2022): 305–20. 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 (2018): 424–35.

64 The Catholic newspaper *Čas* wrote about the impact of sensationalist reporting in 1907, for example, when it drew attention to the findings of sociologist Eugène Rostand that detailed descriptions of crimes can lead to imitation ("Časopisje in zločini," *Čas*, October 1, 1907, 480). A special treatise about the negative impact of the press on suicide rates was written by Bozzini as early as 1894 (Generoso Bozzini, *Contagio morale: il suicidio e la stampa*. Cerignola, 1894).

65 Ivan Smiljanić, "Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje: 'gospodarski polom kot vzrok za samomor na Slovenskem pod Avstro-Ogrsko in prvo Jugoslavijo,'" *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 50. See also M. Kristan, who analysed the coverage by the newspapers *Slovenec* and *Slovenski narod* between 1883 and 1885. Maja Kristan, "Samomori, pogrešani, umrli," in Katja Vodopivec (ed.), *Devijacije na Slovenskem pred sto leti* (Ljubljana: RSS, 1987), 283-95.

66 It was published as a political journal of Slovenes in Trieste between 1876 and 1928, and as a daily newspaper in the period under analysis.

67 *Il Piccolo* was published between 1881 and 1919. Although seeking to be apolitical, it was pro-Italian and supported liberal-national views, but focussed primarily on reporting news from the city, the neighbouring towns, and the international arena for a broad and diverse readership. – *Il Piccolo* <https://www.atlantegrandeguerra.it/portfolio/il-piccolo/>.

68 Perissinotto, "In a moment of supreme discomfort."

citing the suicide method, personal details of the deceased, including name, sex, age, occupation or residence (street), and often even the presumed cause for the suicide.

Although the news items about suicides were typically brief (and did not contain photographs), reports of suicides in the last decades of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries graphically described the circumstances of the act and contained a series of personal data/elements that enabled identification and compromised the privacy of the victims or their families. In truth, the press mostly reported of ordinary people or well-known individuals from outside the local area, and less frequently of representatives of the upper classes.⁶⁹ It should be noted that much of the information featured in sensationalistic press was inaccurate, deficient, or downright false,⁷⁰ as the papers themselves would sometimes admit, printing corrections to previous news⁷¹ and laying the blame for the mistakes on private sources.⁷²

But the problem of sensationalist reporting of suicides was acknowledged even before the turn of the 20th century; several papers devoted their editorials to this issue, cautioning against a glorification of suicide through long and detailed daily reports that explored every aspect of it and could give the suicidal act the false impression of facility or effortlessness.⁷³ The criticism was frequently directed at the press itself.

We can thus read: "Not only is the suicide described as if the journalist had been present at the act and inhumanly allowed it to happen before their very eyes, which, luckily, is untrue, but the sad hero is stripped down to his shirt before the public, while a crude psychology attempts to lay bare his soul as well, and sordid sentimentalism runs riot in reproducing the sorrowful exclamations of the relatives, the regrets, the comments, with such contradiction between one newspaper and another that their comparison reveals it is all fruit of imagination. And as if it hadn't been enough talking about it one day, the papers revisit it the next day with even more detailed and more intimate news; anticipating the funeral arrangements, so that in people's curiosity the notion may grow into a small event and they can write about it at even more length"⁷⁴ Legoyt, too, believed that much of the blame for suicides lay with the press "thoughtlessly advertising natural facts to feed unhealthy curiosity."⁷⁵

In a debate on this very topic, Generoso Bozzini warned against the dangerous effects of imitation and argued that eliminating suicide news from their death notices section would be an honourable thing for the papers to do. He believed that journalism had an important mission and should not be reduced to "an accurate - too accurate - photograph of everyday life with all its torments, mistakes, and misery; rather, it should be a training ground for noble ideas and even nobler sentiments, and never a reckless school of perversion and aberration."⁷⁶ A year before that, an anonymous

69 Cf. *ibid.*

70 Cf. Smiljanić, "Konkurzi, samomor," 49.

71 E.g., *Edinost*, May 27, 1904.

72 E.g., *Edinost*, May 31, 1904.

73 *L'Indipendente*, August 3, 1898.

74 *Ibid.*

75 Legoyt, *Le suicide ancien et moderne*, 199.

76 Bozzini, *Contagio morale*, 9 and 12.

physician had written to *L'Indipendente* with similar ideas, suggesting that the newspaper desks should deliberately turn down stories about suicides.⁷⁷

Bozzini further believed that “among certain social classes, such as prisoners and soldiers, the imitative instinct is creating veritable epidemics”⁷⁸ that often spread due to wild publicity triggered by the irresponsible advertising of ‘suicide.’⁷⁹ Moreover, he felt that the effect of imitation was perilous for those who, “caught up in the fever of fame, which they believe they can achieve in this way and which would otherwise elude them, derive pleasure in the thought that their name, their letters, the story of their life so rapidly divulged will rescue them, for an hour, a day, from the obscurity in which they would have otherwise remained forever.”⁸⁰ But no such debates, of course, managed to persuade the newspapers to stop reporting on suicides, and the practice continued for several decades.⁸¹

Conclusion

The case of Trieste as a large Austrian urban centre, one of the largest in the country, shows the suicide rate rising sharply even before the First World War, with an upward trend evident (at least according to the records) from the 1870s onwards. Over the next three decades, the number of suicides in the municipality of Trieste more than doubled for both men and women,⁸² which strongly affected the average registered in the Austrian Littoral compared to other crown lands. Following the increasing occurrence of suicides in society in the last quarter of the 19th century, it is possible to observe the results generated by reflections on suicide from all across Europe, from Morselli's study to those of Masaryk and Durkheim, to mention only the most prominent. While all those studies saw suicide as a phenomenon affected by social factors, and thus tried to explain it as scientifically as possible, using statistical analyses, the more modern approaches to studying the history of suicide seek to reformulate the classical positivist approach so as to include structural factors, but also the ways social factors are reflected within the realm of individual experience and meanings that social actors attach to events (this criticism sees suicide as a product of official categorisations and argues that the latter are also affected by the cultural interpretations or per-

77 *L'Indipendente*, June 12, 1893.

78 For suicide among the military, see in particular Filip Čuček, “Vojaški samomori v Avstriji od srede 19. stoletja do prve svetovne vojne (z nekaj slovenskimi primeri),” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, 3 (2023): 117–34. The *Edinost* (20 February 1903) reported on a session of the National Assembly that discussed the alarming numbers of suicide in the Austrian army, attributing them to the inappropriate way the soldiers were treated. The civil registers of Koper from before the end of the 19th century contain several records of soldiers under the age of 30 committing suicide by firearm (KDA, Koper Death Register, 1875–1899), and more than a few cases of suicide in the early 20th century, among prisoners and prison guards; imitative suicide cannot be ruled out in the case of two prison guards taking their own lives in May 1901 (KDA, Koper Death Register, 1900–1912).

79 Bozzini, *Contagio morale*, 7. Similarly Morselli, *Il suicidio*, 433.

80 Bozzini, *Contagio morale*, 11.

81 As shown by Perissinotto (“In a moment of supreme discomfort”) for the first post-war period.

82 Luzzatto-Fegiz, *La popolazione di Trieste*, with Timeus, “Contributo allo studio,” making similar findings.

ceptions of the actors).⁸³ Although self-perceptions are much more difficult to trace in the case of suicide, the data on Trieste adumbrate the socio-cultural meanings that were ascribed to suicide in a certain era and allow us to observe how the discourses around suicide reveal a somewhat broader picture of society, including its fears (of societal problems, of change, encroachment of new/different values, etc.).

The media discourse usually followed the scientific publications of its time, the simultaneous observations about the multitude of suicides were confirmed by statistical analyses as well as medical, sociological, philosophical and other treatises, while at the same time raising numerous other social issues to which suicide in urban areas could be linked (alcoholism, growth of the proletariat, poverty, changing values or potential threats to the traditional value system, and the like). All this informed the public debate on suicide as a problem of modern society – particularly as manifest in large cities, where suicide represented a much more burning issue than in smaller non-industrial towns or in the country (as demonstrated by the case of Koper).

A few examples have been used to illustrate the image of suicide as reflected in both Slovene and Italian presses, which were influenced by similar ideologies. On the one side, the phenomenon was portrayed as an inevitable result of unfavourable economic conditions or economic hardship in which (usually) representatives of the proletariat would find themselves, or of a dead-end situation brought on by a severe or incurable illness. Suicide could also be medicalised, considered a neurological consequence of certain mental illnesses or conditions. On the other hand, it was perceived to be a result of the corruptive effects of modern lifestyle and values (e.g., individualism, hedonism, materialism, atheism, etc.) that were supplanting the safety of the traditional embrace of family and social life – and it was in this view that it was most severely condemned. Not least, the ways in which society could attempt to alleviate the problem and prevent suicides included addressing the potential imitative effect that daily newspapers allegedly had with their death notices. Our aim, however, was not to determine the actual impact of the press on suicide, of course, but rather to observe the discourse that developed in popular science and media and other circles around the influence of daily press on suicide incidence. In these cases, it seems, the criticism was directed at the social factors fuelling the rising suicide rate, suggesting – in line with the sociological doctrines of the time – that rather than the individual committing suicide, society as a whole was in need of an intervention.

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⁸³ See Bailey, *This Rash Act*, 15, 16.

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Urška Bratož

SAMOMOR V AVSTRIJSKEM PRIMORJU NA PRELOMU 19. IN 20. STOLETJA

POVZETEK

Prispevek opazuje družbeno podobo samomora ob koncu 19. in na začetku 20. stoletja, predvsem na primeru Trsta kot velikega mestnega središča, kjer je bil trend naraščanja samomorilnosti opazneje viden vsaj od sedemdesetih let 19. stoletja. Ob zaznavanju naraščajoče prisotnosti samomora v družbi so tudi v ta prostor prihajale razne evropske razprave o samomoru, od Morsellijeve in Masarykove do Durkheimove študije, diskurzi okrog samomora pa so hkrati odstirali nekoliko širšo sliko družbe, vključno z njenimi strahovi pred družbenimi problemi in spremembami.

Časopisni diskurz je običajno sledil znanstvenim objavam svojega časa, opažanja o množičnosti samomorov so se potrjevala skozi statistične analize in medicinske, sociološke, filozofske ter druge razprave, obenem pa so odpirala tudi mnoge druge družbene problematike, s katerimi je bilo samomor v urbanem prostoru mogoče povezati (alkoholizem, rast proletariata, revščina, preoblikovanje vrednot idr.). Vse to je sooblikovalo javno razpravo o samomoru kot problemu moderne družbe, posebej večjih mest, saj je bila samomorilnost tam veliko bolj izrazita kot v manjših neindustrijskih mestih ali na podeželju Avstrijskega primorja.

Primeri iz dnevnega tiska in poljudnoznanstvenih razprav razkrivajo raznolike podobe samomora. Na eni strani je bil prikazan kot neizogibna posledica neugodnih ekonomskih razmer oziroma finančne stiske, v kateri se je znašel (običajno) predstavnik proletariata, ali pa brezizhodnega položaja posameznika zaradi hude in neozdravljive bolezni. Samomor je lahko bil tudi medikaliziran kot nevrolška posledica določene psihične bolezni ali stanja. Na drugi strani pa je bil dojet kot posledica kvarnega učinka moderne življenja in vrednot (na primer individualizma, hedonizma, materializma, ateizma ipd.), ki so izpodrivale varnost tradicionalnega objema družinskega in družbenega življenja, in v taki obliki je bil tudi najbolj obsojan. Med načini, kako bi bilo to problematiko (ki je bila razumljena kot družbeno pogojena) mogoče zmanjšati ali preprečiti, je bilo tudi vprašanje potencialnega imitativnega efekta, ki naj bi ga na pojavljanje samomorov imel zlasti dnevni tisk s črno kroniko.