

**CAVES AS MASS-GRAVEYARDS IN SLOVENIA**

**MNOŽIČNA GROBIŠČA V JAMAH V  
SLOVENIJI**

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**Izvleček**

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**Andrej Mihevc.: Množična grobišča v jamah v Sloveniji**

Gverilsko vojskovanje ter revolucija je na kraškem delu Slovenije v času od 1941 do 1945 spremenila v masovna grobišča za vojaške in politične nasprotnike večje število brezen. Po podatkih iz katastra jam so bili človeški ostanki opaženi v 71 jamah, dejansko število jam uporabljenih v ta namen pa verjetno presega število 100. Točno število oseb, ki so bili vržene v jame ni znano, verjetno pa preko 10 000. Večina žrtev likvidacij je bila vržena v okrog 10 brezen.

Uporaba brezen za masovna grobišča, predvsem pa še kasnejša zakrivanja sledov so v veliki meri spremenili fiziognomijo številnih vhodnih delov teh jam. Nekatera brezna so bila povsem zasuta ali razstreljena in so tako postala nedostopna.

Ključne besede: raba jam, brezno, človeški ostanki, masovno grobišče, likvidacija, 1945, zasipanje jam, dinarski kras, Slovenija

**Abstract**

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**Andrej Mihevc: Caves as Mass-graveyards in Slovenia**

From 1941 to 1945 the guerrilla fighting and revolution changed a considerable number of shafts in the karst areas of Slovenia to mass-graveyards for military and political opponents.

According to data from the Cave Register the human remains were registered in 71 caves, but the real number probably exceeds 100 caves. The exact number of people thrown into the shafts is not known, it may be more than 10.000 persons. Most of the terror victims were thrown into about 10 shafts.

The use of caves for such a purpose and in particular later camouflaging of the traces considerably changed the physiognomy of numerous entrance parts of the shafts. Some of them were completely filled up or even blown up and thus became inaccessible.

Key words: cave use, pothole, human remains, mass graveyard, liquidation, 1945, cave filling, Dinaric karst, Slovenia

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the consequences of the political changes in Slovenia is also the possibility to discuss since now forbidden subjects. One of such taboos in past 50 years was the use of shafts for mass-graveyards for military and political opponents that were liquidated without trial. The phenomenon is documented by rich memoirs of mostly emigrant literature, but there are no official sources or data. The phenomenon is burdened by political content and by question of responsibility and this makes studies difficult.

From speleological point of view we are mostly interested in number of caves used for this purpose, number of victims in them and how the traces of massacres were disguised.

The data presented in this paper are uncomplete and thus this report may be preliminary only. I was mostly based on the Cave Register and my own observations.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the phenomenon we must shortly introduce the events in Slovenia during 1941 to 1945. The actual Slovene territory belonged to the Monarchy of Yugoslavia and its western part to Italy. In spring 1941 it was occupied by Germany and Italy and on these areas the resistance against the aggressors started. At first heterogeneous political movements have taken part. The Communist Party prevailed, it started with revolution and at the end gained the victory.

In the first years of the war the caves were chosen to conceal the liquidation of war prisoners and civil opponents. However, the use culminated at the end of the war, between May and August 1945 when several ten thousands of refugees (Tolstoy 1986) were returned from the British occupation zone to Yugoslavia. A part of these people was liquidated and thrown into the caves of karst Kočevski Rog (Ižanec 1965; Kovač 1968).

Similar events may be traced in other parts of former Yugoslavia, on the Dinaric karst of Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and in Montenegro (Božičević 1991; Žanko & Šolić 1990).

## DATA ON CAVES-GRAVEYARDS

The first written information about throwing the people into the caves appeared already during the war. The book *In the Sign of the Liberation Front*, printed in Ljubljana in 1943 mentions several caves supposed to contain dead human bodies; the cave Krimska Jama (Cad. no. 293) where several dead bodies were seen during the visit is described also.

In the literature of the political emigrants numerous caves are cited. Ižanec (1965, 1970, 1971) mentions 17 shafts into which the people were thrown. In some of them, for example in Repičnikova Jama (Cad. no.3071), in Krimska Jama (Cad. no. 293), and in Koševniško Brezno (Cad. no. 589) the bones may be seen still today. Some shafts, for example Kozlovka and Brezarjevo Brezno are filled up by rubbish, the others cannot be identified due to either inaccurate location or name.

Several caves are named by Karapandzich (180), for example Kaserova Jama (Cad. no. 4264) and a cave near Skadanščina. In the first one the bones confirmed his statements, the second cave was not identified.

The exact number of people that died in the caves is not known. Various authors give different numbers; the book *Vetrinjska tragedija* (page 79) gives number 14.000 victims for the caves on Kočevski Rog. For other karst areas and caves in Slovenia there are not even approximative estimations.

In last few years this phenomenon was a frequent subject of writing in newspapers and periodical magazines.

## THE DATA FROM THE CAVE REGISTER

In reviewing the Cave Register that contains 6280 caves we found the mention of recent human bones in the records of 71 caves. The number of caves containing bones is probably much greater, as I have seen myself the bones in 6 caves that are registered, the bones are known, but there is no mention of them in the records. Each year new caves with bones are discovered.

At several caves there is in the Cave Register a suspicion mentioned that the cave is a "burial-ground" but the bones are not visible in them. In such cases the data may be wrong, maybe the bones are covered by deposits or even removed. Such caves we considered as the graveyards only when the source was reliable enough, or when we have several different sources, or when there are traces at the caves indicating unusual activities that have taken place.

Such case is for example Brezarjevo Brezno (Cad. no. 415). The record about the visit mentions rubbish in the cave and traces of blasting at the

entrance. Kovač (1968, 70) quotes that 1000 people were thrown into this cave, the entrance was later blown up and covered by concrete plate. Because of pollution of the nearby karst spring the dead bodies were shortly afterwards drawn out and transported elsewhere.

Similar cases are Šemonovo Brezno (Cad. no. 192) and Dvojno Brezno (Cad. no. 5668); regarding the first cave one may conclude, comparing the before and after-war records that on the bottom of the shaft some 10 m<sup>3</sup> of allochthonous gravel are accumulated. The bottom of the second shaft is covered by gravel due to blasting at the shaft's entrance.

In most cases the bones are found in shafts, but there are three examples that the bones are found in horizontal caves. In such a case the people were obviously hidden in the caves and died there. In one case the described human remains, according to the uniform remains, belong to an Italian soldier from the First World War.

The number of skeletons seen in the caves is usually not precisely defined in the records, usually there is written under "Remark" very generally "human bones". In some cases only one may conclude on the base of preserved characteristic parts of the skeletons which is the minimal number of persons that were thrown into the cave. Sometimes, when the number is small enough the number of victims can be absolutely precise. In 15 cases it is cited that in the cave there are many bones, in a sense, that there were many persons thrown in. Many uncovered bones are still visible in the cave Zalesnika (Cad. no. 3386) on Trnovski Gozd.

Not only human remains but also parts of clothes or shoes are found in the caves and they provide partial identification. In several cases the persons were German soldiers. The identification is easier because of quality and discernible cloth of German military uniform. In two caves the identification numbers of German soldiers were found, in Kaserova Jama the military plate 2/BAU. 11 B 563 and in Jama na Koševcu (Cad. no. 332) two plates labelled 1.J ERS BH 45 5278 0 and 1.Scstz.Ers.Komp Inf.ERS. Bfl.192 355 A.

Frequent are the reports about recent accumulations of various material over the bones, about rubbish in such caves and about traces of blasting at the entrances.

There are 7 reports about blasting at the entrance part of the caves in the Cave Register. The blasting had dual purpose. The first one was to kill the survived people in the cave and the second one to camouflage the traces. At 9 caves there are beside the bones the remains of unexploded ammunition. At some, at Koševniško Brezno for example, only one part of the entrance was blown up; at Jama pod Krenom (Cad. no. 6158) and at Jama pod Macesnovu Gorico (Cad. no. 6157) the entrances to the caves are completely destroyed and the cave is closed.

More frequent are remarks of buried human remains. In some cases the process is natural, steep debris cones settled, or, sometimes, the covering was

deliberate. The cave Jama v Rugarskih klancih (Cad. no. 6161) which is now only 2 m deep was surely filled up as at the wall of the shaft and at the border of the fill the bones and remainders of clothes are still seen.

In 13 caves the bones are partially covered by rubbish. It is hard to distinguish whether in these cases the covering of the remains was intentional or is it just the "usual" pollution, typical of caves of easy access near the roads and villages. Such examples are Socerbska Jama za Vrhom (Cad. no. 1005) and Jama ob Poti near Jama pod Krenom. Both caves are located far from the sources of dumping.

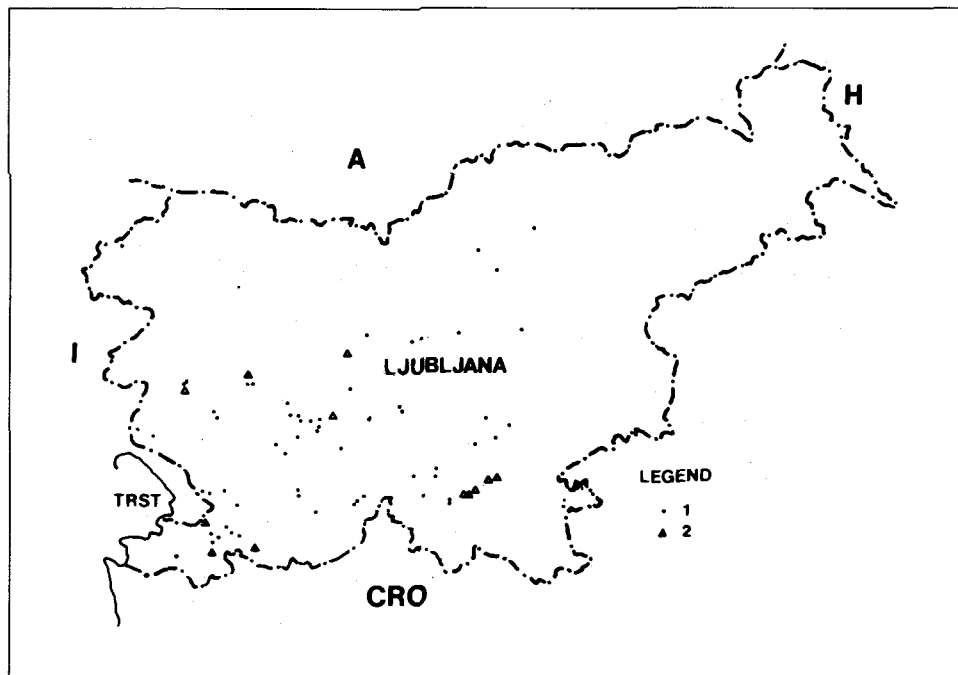


Fig. 1. Location of caves where human remains were found. According to Cave Register of Slovenia

Legend: 1. shafts, containing human remains 2. shafts, mass-graveyards

### SOME EXAMPLES OF SHAFTS

As this phenomenon is rather common and there is the possibility that in future the bones will be found in other caves or new cases of such cave-use may appear I quote some typical examples of the ossuaries in the caves.

Brezno v Mrzlih Dolih (Cad. no. 6460) lies in a large beech forest, about 3 km distant from the nearest village Račica. The cave is known to the natives only but they do not know that the bones are in it.

During our visit we found shoes below 40 m deep entrance shaft. After examination we found among the leaves and rocks at the contact of breakdown cone and the wall of the entrance chamber two skeletons. Nearby were some remainders of clothes and two rucksacks, with basic necessities of life: spoon, messtin, shaving and sewing outfits and rubber for mending the soles. Different clothes, shoes and rubber soles indicate that the two men were not soldiers of a regular army and not natives either.

Brezno na Koševcu (Cad. no. 332) lies in the middle of a forest some 2 km from Logatec. The entrance is 1,5 m<sup>2</sup> large. The record from before war, from 1934 does not mention any particularity. After the war the rumours appeared that several people were thrown into this cave. The first visitors found out that the bottom of the entrance shaft was covered by skeletons. They notified the police.

Later nobody found the entrance to this cave; it was established that the entrance was covered by timbers and disguised. When the timber rotted, the cover fall into the cave. Our visit evidenced that the skeletons on the bottom were covered by several cubic metres of allochthonous rocks and rubble, but the skeletons were still visible at the border. Some parts of clothes and remains of civilian shoes, and two identification plates of German soldiers were found.

According to bones at least 8 people were thrown into this cave. Using the identification of soldiers and the time of their disappearance we may find out when the cave was used.

Jama pod Macesnovo Gorico (Cad. no. 6157) lies in the middle of a forest, about 10 km from Kočevje. The shape and the depth of the shaft is not known as the entrance part was blown up and this changed the shaft into depression, 10 m in depth with vertical walls on some places. On them the traces of blasting are still visible. The bottom is entirely covered by undermined material, more than 10 m<sup>3</sup> in volume.

The location and the shape of the cave probably corresponds to the cave that is quoted in the memoirs of one of the three men that survived and saved himself out of this cave (Ižanec 1971, 191). The witness cites that the victims were transported by six lorries, each containing 50 people. He himself was wounded and thrown into the cave on June 2, 1945 and escaped from there on June 5, 1945. Shooting and throwing the people lasted for two days and a half. In this time the border of the entrance to the cave was blown up five times. When the blasting started the survivors hid themselves in a lateral passage. During the blasting a tree fall into the cave and by it the witness later escaped. Today the cave is completely filled up and thus the passage where the survivor was hidden is inaccessible; we may infer that the cave was undermined still later. If the quotations are accurate, and the lorries made only three drives per day to this cave, 2250 people ended there.

The witness quotes that the victims in front of the cave must cast away all the objects they had and later take off the clothes. I wanted to check these informations because I was certain that all the objects were not collected; in

the nearby doline we excavated a test trench of one square metre. In 15 cm thick superficial layer we found numerous objects that confirm the witness's statement. We found parts of clothes, buttons, belt-buckles, parts of shoes and personal objects as are spoons, pocket-knives, pieces of pocket-mirrors and combs. Also we found pieces of rosaries, occupation, Italian, German and also Serbian, Croatian and Albanian coins evidencing that people of other nations died in the cave also.

The cave was known to the people and they used to visit it in secret. Since 1989 the cave is indicated by road signs and protected by fence.

## CONCLUSION

The data from the Cave Register, quotations in literature and other evidences indicate that the use of caves for mass-graveyards was very diffused in the time from 1941 to 1945.

According to data in the Cave Register the human remains were found in 71 caves. The number of victims cannot be ascertained. According to the Cave Register there are 15 caves reported that a lot of people were thrown into.

After estimations in memoir literature there would be more than 10.000 people thrown into the caves but we do not have any official data. The precise number will never be found out as in the caves there are citizens of other nations and countries, for example Serbs, Croats, Albanians and Italians.

Although this phenomenon is spread all over the Slovene karst there are some common properties. On the base of number of victims and in particular in respect to interventions and traces how the "burial" was executed, the caves - mass-graveyards, may be divided into two types.

The caves where there are bones of some persons only, who were thrown dressed into a cave, probably became tombs during the guerilla fighting and revolution or, after the war, due to personal revenge. In these caves nobody disguised the traces later and the bones are found on the surface or they are covered by natural processes. These caves are usually less known and are located in remote woodlands.

The second type of the caves are places of mass execution. The remains of great number of people are usually found. The executions were organized and lasted longer time this is why they could not be kept secret. The disguising of traces followed, blasting of entrances or filling up the shafts, somewhere even ten years after the war.

Some caves that are known as mass-graveyards became in last time the places visited by relatives of people that disappeared during the war.

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## **MNOŽIČNA GROBIŠČA V JAMAH V SLOVENIJI**

### **Povzetek**

Iz podatkov katastra jam, navedb v literaturi ter drugih pričevanj je moč ugotoviti, da je bil pojav uporabe jam za masovna grobišča v času od 1941 - 1945 zelo razširjen.

Po podatkih katastra jam Slovenije so bili človeški ostanki najdeni v 71 jamah. Števila žrtev se v jamah ne da ugotoviti. Po podatkih katastra je pri 15 jamah navedeno, da je bilo vanje vrženo veliko ljudi.

Po ocenah memoarske literature naj bi bilo v jamah nad 10 000 ljudi, uradnih podatkov pa ni. Točnega števila ne bo moč ugotoviti, saj so v jamah tudi pripadniki drugih narodov in držav, na primer Srbi, Hrvati in Albanci in Italijani.

Kljub razprostranjenosti po praktično celem slovenskem krasu, je moč ugotoviti nekaj skupnih značilnosti tega pojava. Na osnovi števila žrtev, predvsem pa po drugih posegih in sledovih lahko po načinu "pokopa" ločimo jame grobišča na dva tipa.

Jame z ostanki kosti le nekaj oseb, ki so bile v jamo običajno vržene oblečene so postale grobnice verjetno v času gverilskega vojskovanja in revolucije ali povojnih osebnih obračunavanj. V teh jamah kasneje sledov ni nihče več zakrival, zato najdemo kosti na površju ali pa jih prekrivajo naravni procesi. Te jame so običajno manj znane in leže v odmaknjenih gozdnatih predelih.

Drugi tip jam pa so jame masovna morišča. V njih je so običajno ostanki večjega števila ljudi. Poboji pri njih so bili organizirani ter so trajali dlje časa zato jih ni bilo moč obdržati povsem v tajnosti. Sledilo je zakrivanje sledov, miniranje vhodov ali zasipavanje brezen, ponekod še več deset let po vojni.

Nekatere jame, ki so poznane kot masovna grobišča pa so postale v zadnjem času točke, ki jih obiskujejo svojci v vojnem času izginulih ljudi.