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Centenary (Slovenia)

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The National Committee for Commemorating the 100th Anniversaries of World War I (2014–2018) coordinated the centennial of the First World War in Slovenia. The many projects, exhibitions, events, commemorations, and conferences on both the local and national level reflect the manifold war experiences of the Slovenian population and Slovenian lands, an important focal point being the Isonzo Front. An active and efficient network of academia, museums, archives, heritage institutions and private societies has managed to spark public interest in the First World War.

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National Committee for Commemorating the 100th Anniversaries of World War I

The First World War had an immense impact on the Slovenian population and Slovenian lands, yet for decades, [memorialisation](#) and [commemoration](#) of the war did not reflect the Slovenes' overall, complex war experience. Only in the last three decades has there been an important shift towards

an open discussion of the First World War and its impact on Slovenes.

The “Slovenian” centenary of the First World War began in 2012 when the government of the Republic of Slovenia established the National Committee for Commemorating the 100th Anniversaries of World War I (2014–2018).^[1] The initiative for forming the committee came from the institutions and individuals who had been working on the topic of the First World War on different levels, from research to museums, archives, and even private societies. Even though the government founded the committee, it did not have any budget at its disposal. It has nevertheless managed to carry out some important projects and above all, its public presence has succeeded in popularizing the topic on different levels.

The attitude towards the legacy of the First World War in Slovenia was defined by historical circumstances, which had not always been favourable to researching, memorialising and remembering the First World War as a turning point in 20th-century Slovenian history. The [Kingdom of Yugoslavia](#) sought a unifying and victorious interpretation of the First World War, where the Slovenes, due to their participation in the Austro-Hungarian army (which lost the war and disintegrated afterwards), had not been in a position to play an active role – not even the Slovenian volunteers in Serbian/Yugoslav legions in 1912–1918. Although a number of memoirs were published during the interwar period, there was no public pity or commemoration of the Slovenian sacrifice during the war. Socialist Yugoslavia did not embrace the experience of the First World War as being worth researching or of political or any other public interest. Some topics such as military uprisings, volunteers, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and subsequent Yugoslav unification, as well as political persecutions were investigated, though also put into a new ideological perspective. Only the 1980s opened a more democratic interpretative arena for 20th-century Slovenian history; consequently the First World War has finally made it to the fore of academia and other forms of public interest.

Given the position of the First World War experience in Slovenian remembrance practices, the years 2014–2018 represented an opportunity to strengthen the collective awareness of World War One’s immense impact on the life of each and every Slovene and the community as a whole, not only in terms of political changes and consequences but above all, in terms of the diversified experiences that the war brought in its wake. The Slovenian National Committee has thus been primarily playing a coordination role. As such, it has managed to create an active and effective network of cultural and academic institutions, associations and institutions, which deal with the preservation and sustainable tourist presentation of the war heritage. The committee’s website offers an insight into the majority of events in Slovenia and those that were organised by Slovenian embassies abroad, regardless of the status or level of organization.^[2] Due to the economic crisis, the committee’s financial status did not allow for grand commemorations or big projects that could compete with some (West) European centenary achievements. Nevertheless it managed to (co)organise one central event each year of the centenary related to the major theme of that centenary year. In 2014, after convincing politicians that the first year of the war marked one of the war’s key experiences for Slovenes, the committee

managed to organise a central (and incidentally the first) state commemoration under the honorary patronage of President Borut Pahor. The commemoration honoured the fallen Slovenian soldiers and Slovenian victims of the war at the central cemetery of Ljubljana Žale, where in 1939 a charnel house was built to commemorate the Slovenian victims (among others) of the First World War.

Walk of Peace

2015 marked the centenary of the outbreak of war between Austria-Hungary and Italy and the opening of the Isonzo (Soča in Slovene) Front on Slovenian ethnic territory. The manifold experiences of the military and local population left traces incised in the nation's memory and its ground surface, which prevented its oblivion during a long and troubled hundred years. 2015 marked the finalization of INTERREG Italy-Slovenia's transboundary project "The Walk of Peace from the Alps to the Adriatic" (2012–2015) and the opening of the 320-km-long route that connects the heritage of the First World War along the former front in Slovenia and Italy.^[3] The "Walk of Peace Foundation" from Kobarid takes care of the route. Kobarid (It. Caporetto, Ger. Karfreit) is also the location of the first and only Slovenian First World War museum, founded in 1990. Kobarid is an important place of remembrance and commemoration of a contested history and memory. It is also becoming an important place of confronting a difficult past and dividing memories together with the challenges of the present and the future. In fact, in 2016, the Foundation and the National Committee managed to inscribe the "Walk of Peace from the Alps to the Adriatic – Heritage of the First World War in Slovenia" on the UNESCO Tentative list and are elaborating the final dossier to submit it to the UNESCO.^[4] The key message of the project is collaboration, cohabitation, mutual respect and peace education. It is grounded on the transnational, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious experience of the First World War on the Isonzo Front, which is clearly reflected in its diversified heritage. 2016 marked the commemoration of the Vršič orthodox chapel. The chapel was built in 1916 by Russian prisoners of war who had also built the mountainous road at the Vršič pass (1,611 meters). They commemorated their comrades who had died in the avalanche in March 1916. The chapel has been taken care of by the local population of Kranjska gora for decades and annual commemorations have taken place since 1996. Both presidents, Borut Pahor and Vladimir Putin, attended the centenary commemoration. The same year witnessed another important commemoration at the Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit in Javorca, an art nouveau piece of architecture by Viennese architect Remigius Geyling (1878–1974). The church commemorates fallen soldiers, mostly Czechs and Hungarians, on the nearby fronts. 1917 brought the Slovenian town of Kobarid – mostly known by its Italian name, Caporetto, and therefore rarely associated with Slovenian ethnic territory – to the attention of the belligerent states. The last Isonzo battle adopted the town name, which also became a synonym for great disaster in collective Italian memory and even in daily use. In 2017, the annual Day of the Kobarid, an event that takes place around 24 October, the Kobarid museum marked an anticipated extraordinary event in the town square on 9 July 2017. Military bands from Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Croatia, Germany and Hungary performed a concert that symbolically adopted the title of Ernest Hemingway's (1899–1961) war novel *A Farewell to Arms*,

which is strongly connected, though frequently wrongly linked, to the alleged writer's presence on the Isonzo Front in 1917. A new concert was planned for 2018, this time by the *European Spirit of Youth Orchestra*. It looked towards the future and encouraged younger generations to better grapple with the legacy of the past wars. Another museum from the Isonzo region, the Tolmin Museum, is very active in representing the important events and processes of the war and the rich heritage left behind the frontlines with exhibitions such as "The Bosnian Soldiers on the Isonzo Front" (2014), "The Man and the War" (2015) on both world wars, and "A Hundred Years of the Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit at Javorca" (2016) to remember the extraordinary architectural and commemorative endeavour of the soldiers on the frontline. This Memorial Church won the European Heritage Label in 2017.

The Media

The media has strongly supported the centenary. The state Radio-Television Slovenia (RTV) created a web portal *World War 1914–1918* and public reactions have been very positive. The call for collecting any kind of documents led many to publish personal stories and details of military and civilian experiences of the war online.^[5] A five-part RTV documentary series *Slovenes and the First World War 1914–1918* was presented in 2014 and focused on Slovenes' various military as well as civilian experiences. It also caused a shift in the Slovenian perception of the war that until then often identified the First World War with the Isonzo Front and disregarded other fronts and other experiences. Later, the series *V fokusu* (In Focus) focused on some key topics of the war from the Slovenian point of view, such as the background of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este's (1863–1914) death, Slovenian [women in the war](#), the Italian *Sacro egoismo*, Doberdob (one of the "sacred" Slovenian battlefields), and Svetozar Borojević von Bojna (1856–1920), the commander of the Isonzo Army. A network of institutions, individuals and media has been created and allowed for a very diversified and vivid public discourse without any ideological stance. The topic of the First World War is in fact free from ideological discourse and political attention; it does not represent a pre-election theme, in contrast with the Second World War, which is still a matter of ideological discussions. The commemorative projects of the last three decades and especially those of the centennial period have distanced themselves from Yugoslav themes; they have become more introspective on the one hand and sought wider European comparability on the other hand. They focus on the Slovenian experience of the First World War, on the cultural heritage and its transnational character and above all, the topics are viewed from the perspective of the war's cultural history.

The Exhibitions

The centennial produced a strong cooperation in exhibition projects, partly also due to the economic and financial crisis, but with original and successful results. The driving force was the National Museum of Contemporary History, which in 2014 opened the exhibition "We Have Never Imagined

Such a War”, focusing on personal accounts of the soldiers, civilians, [refugees](#), and home front and presenting some female figures whose presence marked the “Slovenian” war (a [war reporter](#), a [nurse](#), a teacher and an [artist](#)). The exhibition became a travelling one, with the stop at the Museum of Contemporary History in Celje, but with an important addition of local stories and objects from private collections. The Museum of Kobarid added some important soldier stories from the other side of the front to the core exhibition and thus completed the story of this unimaginable war. The Kobarid museum’s annual exhibitions strive to tell unbiased stories from participants of different nationalities that fought on the Isonzo Front (Italians, Austrians, Hungarians). 2015 marked not only the centennial of the opening of the Isonzo Front, but also the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Both wars represented a unique migration experience for the Slovenes and above all, an experience of different camps – [prisoner of war camps](#), refugee camps, concentrations camps – and a shared desire to return home, which was also the title of the central Slovenian (travelling) exhibition that told the stories of different returnees and discussed the concept of home, homeland, the nation and different loyalties, as the wars resulted in changing state borders and regimes. The “Slovenian” centennial has been marked with some surprising results, one of the most important being the “finding” that various institutions had stored a lot of precious and quite unknown material, on the bases of which a bottom-up version of the war could be best presented and a non-biased discourse could be set. Practically all Slovenian regional and local museums participated in the centennial project by focusing on the military aspects of the war and very diverse fronts, where the Slovenian soldier fought (Museum of Nova Gorica, 2014), the refugees from the Isonzo region (Museum of Nova Gorica, 2015), and the comparative exhibition on the experiences of both world wars – “Clouds Are Red” (National Liberation Museum Maribor, 2014). The National and University Library made an inventory of unexpectedly rich material from different library departments. The Ljubljana Historical Archive and its regional branches opened an exhibition in different locations on the life and struggle on the home front. The Department of History of the University of Ljubljana organised a series of four exhibitions on Slovenian women and the war, based on the results of a research project, one of only two research projects on the First World War financed by the state. The four-year project of the Slovenian State Archive resulted in a unique catalogue of the archival documents regarding the First World War in all Slovenian public and ecclesiastic archives.^[6] Academia participated by organising several national and international conferences; in time it has become a credible partner in some international networks (e.g. with UMR Sirice, Paris LabEx EHNE, Paris, Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, CREE, Paris, Istituto Storico Italo Germanico – FBK, Trento) that organised a series of international conferences in Paris, Padua and Ljubljana.

Isonzo Front

It is true that the centennial has been commemorated throughout Slovenia, but the Isonzo region remains the centre of Slovenian commemoration, with dozens of events, exhibitions and commemorations, guided tours and international events. The international attention is reflected in many initiatives conducted by foreign embassies to Slovenia, once again proving the transnational

character of the former front. The Hungarian embassy has in fact organised a trip for Hungarian citizens to the Isonzo region – the train *Isonzoexpress* brings about 500 Hungarians from Budapest to Nova Gorica every summer to commemorate thousands of dead Hungarian soldiers in the military cemeteries along the former front. The Italian embassy commemorates its soldiers at the Kobarid Charnel house, the German War Graves Commission organizes an annual event at the German charnel house near Tolmin, the Polish and Slovak embassies have erected monuments to honour their soldiers in the former Austro-Hungarian army, and a Ukrainian monument is being planned. Fallen Slovenian soldiers on the Isonzo Front have been commemorated by a monument in Doberdob, a memorial and mythological location (the first Slovenian war novel was entitled *Doberdob, the Slovenian Soldiers' Grave*,^[7] because a lot of Slovenian soldiers died in some of the most ferocious battles on the Karst plateau). Doberdob is located in Italy due to historical circumstances but populated by Slovenes.

The Last Centennial Year

The closing centennial year is marked by erecting monuments in commemoration of the Slovenian soldiers in Galicia, i.e. in [Poland](#) (Gorlice) and [Ukraine](#) (Lviv). After 100 years the Slovenian state is finally honouring Slovenes' sacrifice during the First World War.^[8] But the end 2018 also marks the centennial of the [disintegration of the Habsburg Empire](#) and the formation of the new Yugoslav state; this will be the topic of a conference and an exhibition project of many Slovenian museums once again. The committee's mandate is limited by the date of the end of the war. Post-war events, such as the fighting for the northern border and the role of General [Rudolf Maister \(1874–1934\)](#) in securing Maribor to the newly formed Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, will be the topic of conferences. The centenary of Maister's military achievements is celebrated by the state celebration on 22 November 2018. Since 2005, 23 November, i.e. Rudolf Maister Day, has been a state holiday and thus given commemorative importance in Slovenian collective memory. On 13 November 2018, the names of the fallen Slovenian soldiers between 1914 and 1918 will be put online as a result of a joint project of both Slovenian academic, cultural and archive institutions and also individuals, who have worked on diverse material for years to answer one basic question about the First World War: How many Slovenian soldiers lost their lives and where are their graves?^[9] The names of the fallen Slovenian soldiers are also part of the Canadian project *The World Remembers*, but are not publicly displayed due to financial limitations.^[10] The "*Slovenia remembers*" project might not give a precise answer, but the sacrifice of the Slovenian soldiers will be publicly acknowledged by a virtual monument to the (un)known soldier.

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Notes

1. † The members were appointed by the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Office of the President of the Republic, Slovenian Tourist Organization, the Government Communication Office, Slovenian research institutions (Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy and Arts, Institute for Contemporary History), National Archive, Museum of Contemporary History, Kobarid Museum and Walk of Peace in the Soča Region Foundation. Leadership was entrusted to the minister of defence.
2. † Issued by the Government Communication Office and the Slovenian National Committee, online: <http://www.100letprve.si/en/> (retrieved: 11 April 2018).
3. † The Walk of Peace from the Alps to the Adriatic. Heritage of the First World War, issued by UNESCO, online: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6077/> (retrieved: 11 April 2018).
4. † Ibid.
5. † Svetovna Vojna 1914–1918. Spletno Mesto ob 100. Obletnici Zacetka 1. SV [World War 1914 – 1918. The webpage dedicated to the Centenary of the First World War], online: <http://www.rtvsllo.si/1sv> (retrieved: 27 August 2018)
6. † Vodniki [Guides to the records of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia], issued by Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za Kulturo, online: http://www.arhiv.gov.si/si/delovna_podrocja/zalozba_arhiva_rs/vodniki/ (retrieved 27 August 2018).
7. † Pepernik, Amandus: Doberdob, slovenskih fantov grob [Doberdob, the Slovenian Soldiers' Grave], Celje 1936.
8. † The President of the Republic of Slovenia is the honorary sponsor of the events of the last centennial year.
9. † The names of the fallen soldiers will be published on a web portal of the Slovenian history "Sistory" of the Institute for Contemporary History, Ljubljana, online: <http://www.sistory.si/> (retrieved 30 August 2018).
10. † The World Remembers, online: <http://www.theworldremembers.org/> (retrieved: 11 April 2018).

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