

REVENGE

As in many parts of Europe, the liberation was followed by acts of retribution against the defeated occupiers, domestic collaborators, and members of the German minority. Due to the revolutionary nature of the new Yugoslav regime, this was accompanied or followed by a purge of political opponents and the so-called class enemy.

After the end of World War II, several tens of thousands of prisoners of war of various nationalities – who had fought alongside the Germans against the Yugoslav and Slovenian partisans – were killed on Slovenian territory. These mass executions were ordered by the then Yugoslav authorities under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito and were carried out by the military and political police (OZNA) as well as by selected units of the Yugoslav Army, including Slovenian ones (KNOJ).

The Celje OZNA, which began its so-called "cleansing" in the city on the evening of 8th May 1945, detained prisoners primarily in the prison Stari Pisker and the former German pre-military training center in Teharje, near Celje, which had been repurposed into a concentration camp. At the end of May 1945, approximately 4.500 Slovenian Home Guard members, returned from Carinthia after being handed over to the Yugoslav Army by the British, were brought there. In the first days of June 1945, most of the prisoners were taken to execution sites, with the majority being sent to the mining shafts of Stari Hrastnik and the Huda Jama mine. These, along with other mass graves and post-war execution sites, remained concealed and silenced for decades, and the murdered were erased from public memory.

"Through the cracks, they guessed they were arriving at a larger station. Celje! Once again that familiar, ominous screeching of brakes, the hiss of released steam, the jolt of bodies thrown forward – they had stopped. And again, the rattling of wagon doors, shouting that swelled into roaring, mixed with groans and screams. Their turn had come; light gaped into the wagon, and during curses and beatings, they were forced to jump onto the platform.

They were herded in front of the station building, where a crowd of soldiers had gathered – no civilians in sight. Beaten wherever the blows landed – with sticks, belts, and rifle butts – they were driven onto the gravel path between the tracks. A sharp command: 'Straighten up! Come on, White Guards, move it! Right face! What's the delay, you Hitler's lackeys!' Partisan officers began parading past the long line along the tracks. A new command: 'On the ground, White Guards! White swine, kiss the Slovene soil you betrayed!' They lay face down, not daring to lift their heads. 'Shout: We are traitors to the Slovene nation!'"

(Marijan Tršar, Touch of Death {Dotik smrti}, Nova Revija, 2000, pp. 74–75)

In the Teharje concentration camp, several hundred civilians were also imprisoned, ranging from members of the German minority to the families of returned Home Guard members and Slovenians suspected of collaborating with the occupiers. While most of the adults were executed without trial, children under the age of fifteen were taken to a temporary children's shelter located in the former Petriček Inn or the estate above the Savinja River. They lived there in harsh conditions until October 1945, when they were moved to the Youth Home in the former Stieger Villa in Celje, and later to the district Youth Home in the Šenek Castle in Polzela. The majority of the so-called "children from Petriček" were left orphaned and continued to move through various homes, institutions, and facilities until they reached adulthood.

"We left the town and its streets and headed along a dusty road toward Teharje. The gloating escort was gone. We stopped at the last outskirts of Celje /.../ It seemed our guards were resting, while in the meantime, the enraged crowd was tormenting the civilian prisoners in the column. When the furious Celje townspeople were no longer there to support them, the partisans escalated the terror. Again, rifle butts and whips began to sing, beating us like cattle being led to the slaughterhouse."

(Ivan Ott, Children from Petriček: A Stolen Childhood { Otroci s Petrička: ukradeno otroštvo}, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 2008, p. 192)

As part of the collective punishment of the German minority, the vast majority of whom were more or less actively involved with the Nazi regime's governing, denationalizing, and repressive apparatus, its members experienced various fates. Most of the most prominent Celje Germans managed to escape just in time, while

others, such as Mayor Himmer, propagandist Paidasch, or industrialist Westen, were later tried by military courts. Approximately two hundred Germans or German-speaking residents of Celje were executed without trial in the first post-war days and weeks at various locations. Those who avoided the worst fate had their property confiscated, after which, with few exceptions, they were taken to the Strnišče collection camp near Ptuj and deported from there to Austria.

Max Adolf Westen (1913–1955), a prominent industrialist and leader of a family-owned conglomerate, had been actively involved in the Nazi movement and German intelligence even before World War II. During the occupation, he directly managed war production and commanded factory protection. In 1944, aware of Germany's impending defeat, he sent his wife and child to Austria while establishing contact with the resistance movement, providing material support. In May 1945, he played a significant role in ensuring the peaceful handover of power and in preventing extensive material damage when the German army withdrew through Celje. After the war, he was sentenced to 15 years of forced labour, and the authorities confiscated all of his property, which included not only industrial facilities but also villas, over thirty houses, and two hundred apartments. In November 1945, with the help of a group of former factory workers and most likely with the tacit approval of the authorities, he managed to escape from the Kočevje Penal Camp, fleeing to Austria. From there, he eventually relocated to Argentina.

After World War II, representatives of the prewar bourgeois elite – both Catholic and liberal – also became targets of the new authorities. Their Slovene national consciousness was never in question; on the contrary, many had dedicated their lives to the emancipation of Slovene identity. One such figure was lawyer **dr. Ernest Kalan** (1883–1956), a leading liberal politician in Celje. At the time of the 1918 political upheaval, he presided over the National Council in Celje and later served as a municipal councillor and board member of numerous economic institutions in the city. After the German occupation, Kalan and his son were among the first Celje residents to be arrested and imprisoned. His family was later expelled to Ljubljana, while Gestapo officers moved into their looted home. After the war, the new authorities – without solid evidence – accused him of being an ideological instigator and organizer of Mihailović's movement, the so-called "Blue Guard". Although his initial sentence of 14 years in prison was later reduced – partly in recognition of his wartime efforts to intervene on behalf of detained members of the Liberation Front – he was released sick, exhausted, and disillusioned. He spent the rest of his life unsuccessfully seeking rehabilitation, the return of confiscated property, and the restoration of his legal practice. He died in 1956 and was buried in the old Slovene cemetery of Golovec in Celje.

"One day, several thousand White Guards, who had fought against the partisans under the leadership of the Bishop of Ljubljana, were transferred from the camp near the railway station to the Teharje camp. At the head of the column were the officers, who had to throw themselves to the ground every 15–20 steps and kiss the earth, and all were forced to loudly repeat the phrase 'I have sinned' the entire time. One of these White Guards, a 17-year-old boy whom I later treated, told me that all of them were shot in the forests of Teharje. Only those who had not yet turned 18 were spared, however were soon conscripted into the army. Strong units of Ustaše, reportedly numbering between 30.000 and 40.000, who had tried to break through to Carinthia and offered to fight against Bolshevism, were returned across the border and, according to partisan accounts, all were executed."

"It took time for me to become aware again, after the storm of events that lasted almost a year. What I experienced in that final year was no small thing. Erich, Ilse, Daniel, and Willi were shot; almost all the Germans who remained in Celje were killed. I myself came close many times and was always on the verge of joining them. Then came the seizure of our house and all our belongings, which led to a kind of indifference that served as a self-defence mechanism. Nothing could shake me anymore."
(dr. Walter Neqri, *Chronicle* – excerpt from the typescript of a German physician from Celje, MnZC)

"The whole nation will reap, in tears and in humiliation, what individuals have sown."

(Alma M. Karlin, *My Lost Poplars {Moj zgubljeni topoli}*, MnZC, 2007, p. 77)