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Nation-Building in the Borderlands: Slovene Spatial Politics in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca

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Abstract

The article examines the Slovenization of public space in the Habsburg crownland of Gorizia and Gradisca from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War. As in other ethnically mixed regions of the empire, public space became a contested arena shaped by the rise of nationalism, with competing national groups seeking to inscribe their ideologies onto the urban landscape. The Slovene national movement aimed to assert its identity and political aspirations through symbolic spatial interventions. However, owing to the specific circumstances of the Slovene community in the region—characterized by a predominantly rural population and internal divisions between liberal and conservative currents—Slovene spatial politics exhibited distinctive features compared to other nationally driven spatial strategies. The article traces the gradual assertion of a Slovene presence in local public space, from the first nationally inspired monument erected in 1898 to the construction of the national hall in the center of the provincial capital, Gorizia.

Keywords: Habsburg empire; cultural history; ideology; politics; religion

Introduction

“There is hardly a country in Europe—one might even say none—of such limited size that offers such a variety of phenomena in every respect as this small land that, under the constitutional designation of the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, constitutes a small yet valuable part of the Austrian Empire. To summarize its predominant character, it is a land of contrasts.”¹

The Princely County of Gorizia and Gradisca was one of the crownlands of the Cisleithanian half of Austria-Hungary and formed part of the Austrian Littoral (*Österreichisches Küstenland*).² Despite its modest size, covering just over 2,925 km², the county displayed remarkable geographical diversity, stretching from the Adriatic coast in

¹ Carl von Czoernig, *Görz, Oesterreich's Nizza. Nebst einer Darstellung des Landes Görz und Gradisca* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1873), 4; the authors are responsible for this and all subsequent translations.

² For more on the administrative-political context and territorial characteristics of Gorizia and Gradisca, see Harald Krahwinkel, “Die Landtage von Görz-Gradisca und Istrien,” in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918: Band VII/2: Die regionalen Repräsentativkörperschaften*, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 1879–1903.

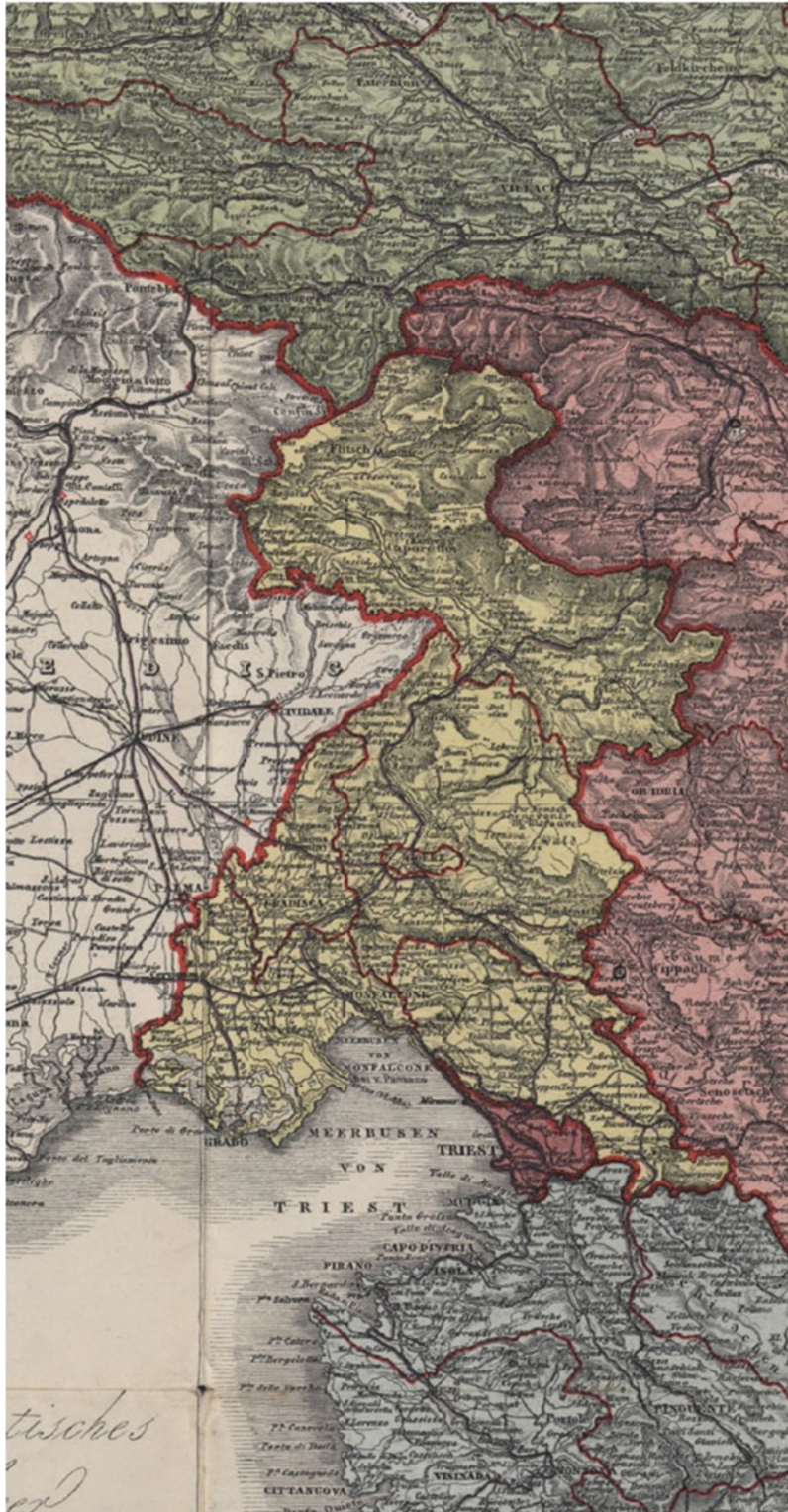


Figure 1. The territory of the Princely County of Gorizia and Gradisca, based on the 1915 map by Karl Peucker and R.A. Schulz. Source: Digital Library of Slovenia.

the south to the Alpine peaks in the north. Its defining natural feature was the Isonzo River, which cut through the territory from the Alps to the Adriatic (figure 1). The land was largely rural, with its largest settlement being the capital, Gorizia, which, from the perspective of the broader Habsburg realm, was considered a minor center and numbered approximately 30,000 inhabitants on the eve of the First World War.³ Other urban settlements were smaller and situated primarily in the southern lowlands, while the bulk of the population lived in dispersed rural villages and hamlets.⁴

In addition to its varied geography, the county was distinguished by its pronounced ethnic diversity, encompassing four major communities: Slovenes, Italians, Friulians, and Germans. According to the 1910 census, out of 260,749 inhabitants of Gorizia and Gradisca, 154,564 stated Slovene as their language of daily use, 90,146 Italian and Friulian, 4,480 German, 187 Serbo-Croatian, and 544 other languages. The linguistic and ethnic boundary within the county was relatively well defined. Italians and Friulians were concentrated in the southern lowlands, while Slovenes inhabited the hilly and mountainous areas to the north and east. A small German-speaking minority lived almost exclusively in the provincial capital.⁵ The coexistence of multiple ethnic groups, a key factor in shaping the region's cultural and later political landscape, increasingly gave rise to a volatile and often contentious internal political climate from the mid-nineteenth century onward, as nationalism emerged as a dominant political force. The rise of nationalism and the concomitant democratization of political and public life resulted in the emergence of increasingly cohesive national communities, which in turn led to nationally charged conflicts and struggles for political power.⁶ The progressive nationalization of political and public life was reflected not only in heated debates in the provincial diet and in newspaper controversies, but above all brought about far-reaching changes across many aspects of daily life, from educational practices to everyday social interactions.⁷

The Habsburg borderlands have recently attracted a surge of scholarly interest,⁸ reflecting a broader recognition of the importance of border regions throughout Europe in nation-building narratives.⁹ At the same time, the complexity of the Habsburg monarchy

³ On the development of Gorizia during the nineteenth century, see Lucio Fabi, *Storia di Gorizia* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 1991), 9–86.

⁴ Detailed geographic description of the land can be found in: Simon Rutar, *Poknežena grofija Goriška in Gradiščanska—Faksimile s spremno besedo* (Nova Gorica: Branko, Ljubljana: Jutro, 1997), 1–116.

⁵ *Spezialortstextrepertorium der Österreichischen Länder. Bearbeitet auf Grund der Volkszählung vom 31. Dezember 1910. VII. Österreichisch-illyrisches Küstenland* (Vienna: Verlag der K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1918), 29.

⁶ In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the contingent—rather than inherent—nature of these struggles. Nevertheless, the influence of nationalism on both public and private life is acknowledged even by revisionist studies, see Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁷ For Gorizia and Gradisca, see Robert Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole in delovanje ženskih podružnic Družbe svetega Cirila in Metoda na Goriškem in Gradiškem v obdobju pred prvo svetovno vojno,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 74, no. 3/4 (2020): 360–87; Robert Devetak, “Žensko dobrodelno delovanje v 19. stoletju: primer goriškega Gospejnega društva za podporo revežem,” *Res novae: revija za celovito znanost* 7, no. 1 (2022): 90–125.

⁸ Among a multitude of studies, see Hans-Christian Maner, ed., *Grenzregionen der Habsburgermonarchie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Bedeutung und Funktion aus der Perspektive Wiens* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005); Chris Hann and Paul Robert Magocsi, eds., *Galicia. A Multicultural Land* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Vanni D'Alessio, *Il cuore conteso. Il nazionalismo in una comunità multi-etnica. L'Istria asburgica* (Naples: Filema, 2004); Kurt Scharr, “Die Landschaft Bukowina.” *Das Werden einer Region an der Peripherie 1774–1918* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010); Norbert Spannberger and Szabolcs Varga, eds., *Ein Raum im Wandel. Die osmanisch-habsburgische Grenzregionen vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014); Mihai I. Spariosu, ed., *Intercultural conflict and Harmony in the Central European Borderlands. The Cases of Banat and Transylvania 1849–1939* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

⁹ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Borders and Memory,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Doris Wastl-Walter (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 63–84.

and the recognition of locally specific factors have led recent studies to move away from broad macro-discourses toward research focused on locally,¹⁰ socially,¹¹ or confessionally¹² specific topics, while also emphasizing the agency of local communities and individuals. However, the growing scholarly focus on nationalism in the Habsburg borderlands has only partly explored how national agendas shaped public space, visibly asserting themselves through monuments and architecture and creating a nationally inflected understanding of spatial features. The scholarly interest into spatial politics has remained focused mostly on major urban centers and/or central monumental endeavors,¹³ whereas much less attention has been paid to peripheral regions in general and rural areas in particular. Such is the case with the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, as spatial politics there has, until now, barely drawn any scholarly attention.¹⁴

Taking into account recent scholarly developments, this article examines the efforts of the Slovene national movement in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca to assert its presence in local public space from the onset of such initiatives in the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War. By focusing on a topic that has thus far received limited scholarly attention, the article offers a novel contribution to the historiography of the late Habsburg monarchy as well as to nationalism and borderland studies more broadly. The first part outlines the methodological framework and contextual background, while the second examines key case studies of spatial Slovenization. In addition to tracing the main trajectories of this process, the discussion examines the strategies employed by Slovene political elites to overcome the unfavorable conditions that limited Slovene visibility in public space, particularly the challenging political climate in larger urban settlements. At the same time, it underscores the complexities and internal contradictions that shaped the gradual construction of a Slovenized public space in the region, showing that this process was far from linear and, in fact, exposed deep ideological divisions within the Slovene camp. In this way, the discussion underscores the complex and contested nature of the rise of Slovene nationalism, illustrating how spatial politics operated not merely as an expression of these tensions but also as a factor that actively shaped and intensified them.

Given the underexplored state of the existing literature, the research draws primarily on primary sources, particularly Slovene newspapers from the County of Gorizia and Gradisca.

¹⁰ See, inter alia: Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Sabine Rutar, *Kultur—Nation—Milieu. Sozialdemokratie in Triest vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2004); Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism. Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1918. A Social History of Multilingual Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Keely Stauter-Halsted, *Nation in the Village. The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹² Andreas Gottsmann, *Rom und die nationalen Katholizismen in der Donaumonarchie. Römischer Universalismus, habsburgische Reichspolitik und nationale Identitäten 1878–1914* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010); Péter Techet, *Umkämpfte Kirche. Innerkatholische Konflikte im österreichisch-ungarischen Küstenland 1890–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

¹³ A selection of monographic studies: Robert Nemes, *The Once and Future Budapest* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space, and Politics in the Galician Capital, 1772–1914* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009); Bálint Varga, *The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary* (New York: Berghahn, 2016); Werner Telesko, ed., *Die Repräsentation der Habsburg-Lothringischen Dynastie in Musik, visuellen Medien und Architektur, ca. 1618–1918* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2017).

¹⁴ An exception is the case of the Slovene national hall in the provincial capital of Gorizia, which has already been the focus of some studies, see: Robert Devetak, “Razvoj slovenske prisotnosti v goriškem javnem prostoru pred prvo svetovno vojno,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 77, no. 3/4 (2023): 380–404; Marta Verginella, “Slovene Mapping of Urban Centres in the Austrian Littoral in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Borderlands of Memory: Adriatic and Central European Perspectives*, ed. Borut Klabjan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 33–57.

These newspapers are of critical importance not only because they offer detailed accounts of distinct building projects and the context in which they unfolded, but also because they played an interpretative role, framing these efforts and thus shaping public understanding of their significance. In this respect, the analysis focuses on the reporting of the province's major Slovene newspapers, representing both the liberal (e.g., *Edinost*, *Soča*) and Catholic (e.g., *Gorica*, *Slovenec*) political camps. Newspaper accounts are further supplemented by published memoirs, where available. The nature of both kinds of sources is clearly personal, often propagandistic, but the tendentious aspects offer valuable insight into the ideological underpinnings of specific buildings and serve as a valuable tool for reconstructing how their meaning and function were being actively shaped by various political actors within the province.

Public Space and (Slovene) Nation-Building

The role of spatial politics becomes intelligible through the multifaceted relationship between humans and space. Although space can be understood as an objective physical setting, this captures only part of its significance. Through daily practices, people invest their environments with emotional and symbolic value, thereby transforming space into *place*.¹⁵ In the cultural sense, space thus ceases to be a merely external physical framework and becomes a culturally constructed phenomenon, a result of social relations and practices, cultural hierarchies, political goals, and so forth. Especially since the 1980s, with the advent of the so-called spatial turn,¹⁶ this recognition has increasingly influenced a wide range of scholarly disciplines, primarily anthropology and cultural geography, but also other branches of the humanities and social sciences.¹⁷

On the most basic cultural level, spatial features imbued with meaning can be understood as signs, as they serve as elements in the process of communication. Since culture forms within communities, the symbolic meaning of spatial phenomena is “readable” for individual social (sub)groups for whom space has its own “language.” At the same time, according to J. M. Lotman, sign systems are never isolated or static, but are constantly in a creative tension that leads to cultural change. Tensions exist both within culture and in their contacts with other cultures (semiospheres), making their meanings subject to change in accordance with historical context.¹⁸

Accordingly, the attempts of the Slovene national movement in the County of Gorizia to inscribe public space with national meaning must be understood within their contemporary geographical and historical context, taking into account both the region's national composition and the emergence of nationalism as a central political ideology from the second half of the nineteenth century onward. As the emergence of nationalism grew into political domination, this gave rise to a new, nationally marked understanding of spatial features, landscapes, and territories, as nationalism was inseparably linked with territory—more precisely, with the idea that the territory inherently belongs to the nation and vice

¹⁵ On the dichotomy of space vs. place, see Simon Coleman and Peter Collins, eds., *Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

¹⁶ Doris Bachmann-Medick, “Spatial Turn,” in *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze—Personen—Grundbegriffe*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2013), 697–98.

¹⁷ A selection of studies: Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon, eds., *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996); Akhil Gupta and James Fergusson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Jurij Mihajlovič Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

versa.¹⁹ At the same time, the multinational character of the region in question made attempts to “mark” one’s own national presence and claims over the territory even more pressing. Ultimately, this led to forms of spatial politics with the goal of creating nationally marked public space, either for one’s own affirmation or for the domination and (symbolic) discrediting of the other.²⁰

Different spatial elements, such as outstanding natural phenomena,²¹ archaeological remains,²² or architecture, were layered with (nationally marked) meaning. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, such attempts at “appropriating” public space were increasingly translated into concrete interventions, whereby individual national groups sought to express their claims or to discredit those of their opponents. Monument building was a central aspect of this process, as semiotic landscapes of the European cities at that time were transformed by the appearance of countless nationally inflected monuments.²³ The functionality of monuments underwent a radical change following the French Revolution; whereas public monuments had previously expressed the power of a ruling dynasty or religious devotion, they increasingly began to express national ideology.²⁴

Beyond public monuments, other architectural projects also began to acquire a distinctly national connotation. In the nationally mixed regions of the Habsburg empire, the construction of so-called national halls became especially characteristic. These buildings functioned not only as centers of nationally segregated sociability but also as symbolic markers of a national community’s presence and its political and cultural aspirations.²⁵ At the same time, not only individual buildings but even entire architectural styles began to acquire increasingly explicit national connotations. As nationalism grew more pervasive, it also decisively shaped the ways in which architecture was interpreted and evaluated. The nationally strained conditions within the multinational Habsburg monarchy provided

¹⁹ John Etherington, “Nationalism, Territoriality and National Territorial Belonging,” *Revista de Sociologia* 95, no. 2 (2010): 323; Vanesa Matajic, “The Rhetorics of Space: Introduction,” *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 41 (2014), 3–4.

²⁰ Pieter M. Judson, “Marking National Space on the Habsburg Austrian Borderlands, 1880–1918,” in *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 122–35.

²¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

²² Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, eds., *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²³ A selection of relevant studies: Charlotte Tacke, *Denkmal im sozialen Raum. Nationale Symbole in Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1995); Winfried Speitkamp, ed., *Denkmalsturz. Zur Konfliktgeschichte politischer Symbolik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1997); Göran Therborn, “Monumental Europe: The National Years. On the Iconography of European Capital Cities,” *Housing, Theory and Society* 19, no. 1 (2002): 26–47.

²⁴ Günther Mai, “Denkmäler und politische Kultur im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Das Kyffhäuser-Denkmal, 1896–1996. Ein nationales Monument im europäischen Kontext*, ed. Gunther Mai (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 10–11. As monuments are foremost a reification of a (select) vision of the past in public space, they are one of the most important *lieux de mémoire* as conceptualized by French historian Pierre Nora. By referring to distinct (real or imaginary) historical events, monuments shape collective memory. From the point of nation-building processes, national monuments most commonly served this purpose by evoking the desired historical narrative or through the pedagogical cult of the “great men” of the nation. See Cornelia Siebeck, “Denkmale und Gedenkstätten,” in *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Christian Gudehus, Ariane Eichenberg, and Harald Welzer (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2010), 179.

²⁵ Jan Galeta, “National Houses in Moravia and Austrian Silesia before 1914: Architecture and Fine Arts as an Opportunity for the Manifestation of National Allegiance,” *Acta Historiae Artis Slovenica* 25, no. 2 (2020): 231–47; Monika Pemič, “Heime der Nation: die Vereinshäuser in Ljubljana und Maribor,” in *Im Dienst der Nation: Identitätsstiftungen und Identitätsbrüche in Werken der bildenden Kunst*, ed. Matthias Krüger and Isabella Woldt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 233–60.

particularly fertile ground for such developments, enabling national meanings to permeate architectural discourse and practice.²⁶

However, widespread as these developments were, their specific impacts differed according to regionally specific factors. In the case of the Slovene national movement, although the idea of national territorial belonging—along with a nationally colored perception of landscapes—was present among Slovene national elites at least since 1848,²⁷ its concrete impacts varied greatly across different crownlands. In fact, spatial politics—especially when it involved monuments with explicit national overtones—presupposed a certain degree of control over public space. Additional prerequisites included the existence of a developed national cultural canon and/or national historical narratives, as well as sufficient organizational and financial resources. For this reason, even in the Duchy of Carniola, where the Slovene political movement was by far the strongest,²⁸ the first public monument with unequivocal national connotations was not erected until 1889, when a monument to Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819) was unveiled in Ljubljana.²⁹ Its symbolic importance was later overshadowed by the monument to France Prešeren (1800–49), widely regarded as the foremost Slovene poet, which was erected in Ljubljana in 1905.³⁰

It is therefore not surprising that developments in the western borderlands lagged behind those in the center. This delay was primarily the result of the comparatively weaker position of the Slovene political camp in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca. Although the Slovene national movement had gained momentum since the 1860s and Slovene national identity was steadily consolidating,³¹ Slovenes remained a minority in most urban centers, which were strongholds of the Italian national-liberal middle classes.³² At the same time, internal differentiation further hindered Slovene efforts, as the consolidation of Slovene national identity was accompanied by growing tensions between emerging liberal and conservative/Catholic currents. These ideological fractures increasingly fragmented the Slovene camp from within.³³ The split within the Slovene political camp decisively hampered early efforts to erect nationally inflected public monuments, not only by complicating organizational matters but also by making it impossible to agree on a mutually acceptable set of commemorative figures. The first initiative, launched in the late 1870s

²⁶ On this topic, see Věra Vostřelová, “Architektura v procesu formování národní identity / Die Architektur im Prozess der Bildung der Nationalidentität,” in *Cizí dům? Architektura českých Němců 1848–1891 / Ein fremdes Haus? Die Architektur der Deutschböhmen 1848–1891*, ed. Vera Laštovičková (Prague: UMPRUM, 2015), 22–55; Daniel Veres, “Architecture as Nation-Building. The Search for National Styles in Habsburg Central Europe before and after World War I,” in *Empires, Nations and Private Lives. Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the Great War*, ed. Nari Shelepkayev et al (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 1–39.

²⁷ In that year, the Carinthian priest Matija Majar-Ziljski (1809–92) prepared the first Slovene national program, which set forth a demand for an autonomous Slovene political unit within the Habsburg empire.

²⁸ For an overview of the development of the Slovene political movement, see Neven Borak et al, *Slovenska novejša zgodovina, 1848–1991*. Vol. 1 (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2005).

²⁹ Some years earlier, a tombstone for the poet Simon Jenko was built in Kranj (Sonja Žitko, “Spomeniki 19. stoletja na Slovenskem,” *Kronika: časopis za slovensko krajevno zgodovino* 40, no. 1 (1992): 25.

³⁰ Marijan Dovič, “‘Every Monument Erected by a Nation to its Greats is Erected to the Nation Itself’: Vodnik, Prešeren, and the Nationalization of the Carniolan Capital’s Topography,” *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 41, no. 1 (2014): 27–28.

³¹ Robert Devetak, “Vzpostavljanje slovenske narodne identitete na primeru trga Kanal v 60. in 70. letih 19. stoletja,” in *Kolektivne identitete skozi prizmo zgodovine dolgega trajanja. Slovenski pogledi*, ed. Vanja Kočevar (Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, 2022), 491–515.

³² The curial voting system in place favored the more affluent Italian minority, so that the Slovene political camp never managed to obtain a majority in the provincial diet, see Vasilij Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem: 1861–1918* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1965), 11–20. For an overview of the Slovene political movement during the nineteenth century, see Branko Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine Slovencev na Goriškem, 1848–1899* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 2005).

³³ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 239–344; Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem*, 276–80.

and early 1880s, ultimately failed for precisely these reasons. The proposed honoree, the recently deceased leading regional Slovene politician and cultural worker Karel Lavrič (1818–76),³⁴ was unacceptable to the Catholic camp due to his liberal positions, his conversion to Protestantism, and the fact that he had taken his own life. As a result of these disputes and the accompanying lack of funding, only a tombstone was erected.³⁵

How, then, did the Slovene political movement manage to overcome the dual challenges of political marginalization in urban centers and internal divisions? A solution emerged in the 1890s, when the regional veterans' society initiated a campaign to erect a monument honoring the local army officer Andrej Čehovin. To understand how the campaign could serve the Slovene cause, it is necessary to consider his background, career, and public image.

Habsburg Patriotism or Slovene Nationalism?

Andrej Čehovin was born on August 26, 1810, in the hamlet of Dolanci near the village of Gornja Branica, located in the southeastern Slovene-inhabited part of the County of Gorizia and Gradisca. He came from a peasant family, but his parents were able to support his education, which he initially pursued in Postojna (1822–25), and later, between 1827 and 1831, at grammar schools in Gorizia, Novo Mesto, and Ljubljana. Although his mother wished for him to become a Catholic priest, Čehovin instead chose a military career. After completing his studies, he joined the artillery, where he steadily advanced through the ranks in the following years.³⁶ A turning point in his military career was the 1848 March Revolution, when uprisings broke out in several parts of the Habsburg empire, including northern Italy.³⁷ Čehovin took part in a series of battles against the Piedmont-Sardinian troops, Garibaldi's forces, and local insurgents. He distinguished himself with his expertise, initiative, and bravery—qualities that did not go unnoticed by higher military circles and authorities. For his military achievements, he received numerous decorations, the highest of which was the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa awarded for his valor in the Battle of Novara in 1849. He was invested with this prestigious honor, and on June 20, 1850, elevated to the rank of baron.³⁸ Čehovin died on September 10, 1855, in Baden near Vienna, where he had gone to seek treatment, most likely due to complications from cholera.³⁹

Owing to his distinguished service and numerous decorations, Čehovin became a prominent public figure frequently featured in the Slovene press, in large part because of his Slovene origins. By the end of the nineteenth century, his life had been documented in two monographic publications. In 1895, teacher Janko Leban published a booklet titled *Andreas Freiherr von Čehovin, k. k. Artillerie-Hauptmann. Ein österreichischer Held* ("Andreas Freiherr von Čehovin, Imperial and Royal Artillery Captain. An Austrian Hero"). A second biographical account, titled *Donesek k životopisu Andreja barona Čehovina* ("A Contribution to the Biography of Baron Andrej Čehovin"), was written in 1896 by Carniolan historian Franc Komatar and published in the journal *Izvestja Muzejskega društva za Kranjsko*. Unlike Leban's text, Komatar's work is a scholarly study based on primary sources.⁴⁰

³⁴ Karel Lavrič, a Slovene lawyer and politician, was one of the "founding fathers" of the Slovene national movement in the County of Gorizia. For a biography, see Branko Marušič, *Doktor Karel Lavrič (1818–1878) in njegova doba* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2016).

³⁵ Marušič, *Doktor Karel Lavrič*, 157–61.

³⁶ Rok Stergar, "Čehovin, Andrej, baron (1810–1855)," in *Novi Slovenski biografski leksikon*: 5. zv.: Č, ed. Barbara Šterbenc Svetina et al (Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, 2022), 74–75.

³⁷ Frank J. Coppa, *The Origins of the Italian Wars of Independence* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 41–58.

³⁸ Stergar, "Čehovin, Andrej," 74.

³⁹ Stergar, "Čehovin, Andrej," 75.

⁴⁰ Franc Komatar, "Donesek k životopisu Andreja barona Čehovina," *Izvestja Muzejskega društva za Kranjsko* 6 (1896): 1–19.

Inspired by Leban's work, the idea of erecting a monument to Čehovin in his native village emerged around the same time. The proposal, along with a public appeal for financial contributions, came from the Second Littoral Military Veterans' Association for Gorizia and Gradisca. This society was part of a broader veterans' organization that began developing within the Habsburg monarchy in the 1860s. Over the following decades, it grew into one of the largest civic associations in the empire, both in terms of the number of branches and overall membership.⁴¹ The organization operated on a supranational level, promoting Habsburg patriotism and loyalty to the imperial dynasty.⁴² Veteran societies frequently organized patriotic and charitable public events, often with the support of the authorities and the imperial family, who viewed such activities as a means of fostering loyalty to the state and consolidating their political legitimacy.⁴³ These ties and strategies—linking the organization and the state—were also evident in the erection of public monuments to military heroes, which the dynasty used as a tool to legitimize its rule.⁴⁴ A particularly notable example is Field Marshal Joseph Radetzky, whose legacy was commemorated through numerous monuments erected throughout the monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century,⁴⁵ including the one in Ljubljana.⁴⁶

In this context, the Gorizia society became particularly active in the late nineteenth century. Founded in 1880, it had already gathered 2,225 members by the following year.⁴⁷ In 1895, the society's president, teacher, and home guard captain Anton Jacobi, came across Leban's book, which inspired the idea of commemorating an important military figure from the Gorizia and Gradisca region. At a board meeting on December 20 of that year, the society decided to erect a monument to Baron Čehovin.⁴⁸ In February 1896, they publicly announced their plans, appealing to the general public for support to bring this ambitious project to fruition. The announcement, published in the press, briefly summarized Čehovin's achievements and concluded by highlighting the primary purpose of erecting the monument: "To ensure that the memory of this great hero, Čehovin, lives on forever in our land, the leadership of the Gorizia veterans' association has decided to erect a monument in his birthplace, Gorenja Branica, which should speak more powerfully to his peers and descendants than any written word. The monument will bear witness to Čehovin's immortal heroism for present and future generations!"⁴⁹ The construction of the monument was scheduled to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's

⁴¹ In 1890, there were already more than 1,700 associations operating in Cisleithania; by the eve of the First World War, this number had risen to 2,750. These associations brought together several hundred thousand members, primarily former soldiers and veterans of the various wars in which the Austrian empire had been involved, see Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128–29.

⁴² Cole, *Military Culture*, 249.

⁴³ Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 369–70.

⁴⁴ Cole, *Military Culture*, 56.

⁴⁵ Cole, *Military Culture*, 67–84.

⁴⁶ Janez Polajnar, "O življenju in smrti nekega spomenika: okoliščine postavitve in odstranitve spomenika avstrijskemu feldmaršalu Josefu Radetzkyu v Ljubljani," in *Feldmaršal Radetzky in Sloveni*, ed. Miha Preinfalk (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2017), 133–47.

⁴⁷ In the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, in addition to the central Gorizia society, fifteen other branches or independent associations were established in various market towns across the province, see Cole, *Military Culture*, 247–52.

⁴⁸ Pokrajinski arhiv v Novi Gorici (PANG), PANG 645, Zbirka fotokopij arhivskega gradiva, t. e. 2, a. e. 107, non-enumerated document.

⁴⁹ "Poziv," *Primorski list*, February 20, 1896.

reign, ensuring that the statue would be completed by 1898⁵⁰ and lending the project added significance through the involvement of state authorities.

Although the organizers clearly intended the monument to embody a supranational dynastic ideology, the project simultaneously opened a long-awaited opportunity for the Slovene side to secure visibility in the province's public space. While Čehovin, as an imperial officer, had no active role in the Slovene national movement, his ethnic background allowed the Slovene camp to present him as a Slovene national hero. As a result, the meaning of the monument shifted: Slovene actors actively engaged in the fundraising campaign and successfully recast both Čehovin and his monument as expressions of Slovene national identity, without overtly rejecting its imperial dimension. This was all the easier because the national framing of Čehovin already had a long tradition, reaching back to the way his exploits in Italy in 1848 and 1849 were interpreted by the Slovene press. Contemporary newspapers paid significant attention to his social rise from a peasant background to nobility,⁵¹ and from the very outset their reporting carried a distinctly national tone, consistently emphasizing Čehovin's Slovene origins. For example, the newspaper *Slovenija*, immediately after the military operations in northern Italy, reported: "Indeed, a certain joy fills the heart of a patriot when, among the generals and higher officers who earned their honors through bravery, one reads of the son of a free Slovene peasant!"⁵² It is also significant that the Slovene translation of Leban's booklet, which was published three years later, was titled *Andrej baron Čehovin, slavni junak slovenski* ("Andrej Baron Čehovin, the Famous Slovene Hero"); in the Slovene translation, "Austrian" was replaced by "Slovene," thereby further reinforcing Čehovin's identity as a Slovene.⁵³

In the 1890s, the fact that Čehovin had distinguished himself specifically in battles against Italian forces made his legacy all the more "useful" within the context of escalating Slovene-Italian tensions,⁵⁴ as elements of Čehovin's past heroism could be connected with the contemporary political realities. This convergence—amplified by the Slovene press—sparked considerable interest and enthusiasm for the project among the Slovene public.⁵⁵ The breadth of support within the Slovene community is reflected in the numerous donations for the monument, which arrived from across the province and even from beyond its borders, including a contribution from New York. In the preserved list, 399 individuals and institutions (including societies and municipalities) also indicated their place of origin. Altogether, donations were recorded from seventy-five different settlements. Of these donors, 48.4 percent came from urban areas (towns and market towns), predominantly from the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, while 51.6 percent originated from rural settlements.⁵⁶ In this way, the Slovene national elite managed to mobilize a broad public—urban and rural alike—to support the construction of the monument.

The Slovene national dimension that the monument soon appeared to acquire is also evident from the newspaper polemics concerning its authorship. The design was prepared by architect Maks Fabiani, while execution was entrusted to the Slovene stonemason Blaž

⁵⁰ Sonja Durjava Žitko, "Spomenik Andreja Čehovina," in *Andrej baron Čehovin: ob spominski svečanosti 140. obletnice njegove smrti, Dolanci, 10. september 1995*, ed. Vili Borjančič (Komen: Občina, 1995), 9.

⁵¹ "Razne novice," *Pravi Slovenec*, August 6, 1849.

⁵² "Iz Ipave," *Slovenija*, July 24, 1849.

⁵³ Janko Leban, *Andrej baron Čehovin, slavni junak slovenski* (Ljubljana: Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda, 1898), 21.

⁵⁴ Branko Marušič, *Sosed o sosedu: prispevki k zgodovini slovensko-italijanskega sožitja* (Trst: ZTT, 2012), 26–38.

⁵⁵ "II. primorsko vojaško veteransko društvo za Goriško in Gradiško," *Rodoljub*, March 7, 1896.

⁵⁶ The largest donation, 400 florins, was contributed by Emperor Franz Joseph. In addition to individuals from the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, numerous members of the military, clergy, and political circles also made donations, as did veterans' associations and local municipalities from various parts of Austria-Hungary. By June 10, 1898, according to the records, the Gorizia Veterans' Association had received 652 donations, totaling more than 4,100 florins (PANG, PANG 645, t. e. 2, a. e. 107, non-enumerated document).

Bitežnik and his son Anton, a sculptor who had studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. It was precisely his Italian artistic training that provoked objections from some members of the Slovene community. An anonymous correspondent for the Trieste newspaper *Edinost*, writing under the pseudonym “Radical,” accused Anton Bitežnik of being a national traitor and argued that selecting an artist trained in Venice contradicted the slogan “our own to our own,” which the Slovene national elite was vigorously promoting at the time.⁵⁷ He added that this was a Slovene project to be erected on Slovene soil and emphasized that among the donations, the Slovene contributions stood out significantly, while the Italian contributions were negligible.⁵⁸ The response to this criticism came from Čehovin’s nephew, Florjan Čehovin, who refuted the claim: “Mr. A. Bitežnik, who was entrusted with the sculptural work, is a fellow countryman from Grgar under the Sveta Gora hill. He is a devoted Slovene, a member of the Slovene support society in Gorizia, speaks and writes Slovene well, and was a soldier in the Imperial and Royal Navy. As such, he participated in the naval battle at Vis on July 20, 1866, against Italy.”⁵⁹ The Radical was not convinced by this defense, and in the next issue of the newspaper, he again pointed out the problematic nature of Bitežnik’s involvement in the project.⁶⁰ However, the debate ended at this point. Later, the Slovene press praised the workmanship of the monument and recommended both Bitežniks to anyone who might wish to carry out similar projects.⁶¹

The elder Bitežnik, the stonemason, was responsible for creating the base of the monument from Karst stone and Grgar marble. On the front side, the inscription was carved in German, while on the back side, there was also a Slovene translation. It was a dedication commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the emperor’s accession, a description of Čehovin’s decorations, and the places in Italy where the future baron had successfully fought. Čehovin’s statue was created by the younger Bitežnik, the sculptor, who used marble from the region where Čehovin had fought at the end of the 1840s.⁶² The transportation of the materials was carried out by the Slovene company Hvalič from Gorizia. From the initial idea to the monument’s erection, the entire process adhered to the Slovene economic principle of “our own to our own,” as all work was entrusted to Slovene contractors.⁶³

The foundation stone was laid on July 10, 1898, and the monument was unveiled just over a month later, on August 14. It stood at the entrance to the village, directly in front of Čehovin’s birthplace (figure 2).⁶⁴ The unveiling was a patriotic and partially nationalistic event, with a large turnout from various societal groups. The village was specially decorated for the occasion, and numerous Slovene and imperial flags were flown. Slovene newspapers published accounts of Čehovin’s life and, through their coverage, imbued the celebration with a distinctly nationalistic tone, emphasizing both his personality and his military achievements. This interpretive framing was further reinforced by the poem *Slavnemu junaku Andreju Čehovinu* (“To the Glorious Hero Andrej Čehovin”), printed alongside reports on the unveiling.⁶⁵ In addition to local villagers and numerous attendees who traveled from across the region, the event attracted prominent political representatives from Trieste and the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, as well as military personnel, veterans, and clergy. The main speakers were Jacobi, who spoke in German, and the local curate Marko Vales, who

⁵⁷ Božidar Jezernik, “‘Svoji k svojim!’: politične in družbene dimenzije slovenskega narodnega vprašanja,” *Etnolog* (2008): 67–69.

⁵⁸ “Še vedno stara pesem,” *Edinost*, June 24, 1897.

⁵⁹ “Popravek,” *Edinost*, June 29, 1897.

⁶⁰ “Popravek k ‘Popravku’ radi spomenika baronu Čehovinu,” *Edinost*, July 7, 1897.

⁶¹ “Čehovinov spomenik,” *Soča*, August 16, 1898.

⁶² Durjava Žitko, “Spomenik Andreja Čehovina,” 16.

⁶³ “Iz Branice,” *Primorski list*, August 10, 1898.

⁶⁴ Durjava Žitko, “Spomenik Andreja Čehovina,” 17.

⁶⁵ “Slavnemu junaku Andreju Čehovinu,” *Zgodna danica*, August 12, 1898.



Figure 2. Monument to Andrej Čehovin located in front of his birthplace. Source: Pokrajinski arhiv v Novi Gorici, PANG 667, Spodnja Branica 1379.

spoke in Slovene and also blessed the monument. This was followed by the unveiling of the monument, a cultural program, and a military demonstration with cannon salutes.⁶⁶

The imperial dimension of the solemnity raised some objections from the Slovene public: “The celebration took place on Slovene soil in honor of a hero-Slovene, but they gave the entire event a purely German character, except for the speech of the reverend curate. Even German newspapers reported on the celebration as if it had been held among Germans, not on Slovene Karst. We cannot and do not approve of this.”⁶⁷ It was also claimed that the event organizers did not allow the Slovene choir from Nabrežina/Aurisina to perform. The issue was said to have resulted from a technical misunderstanding, but the press raised doubts, speculating that the national identity of the performers was the main reason behind the decision.⁶⁸

These polemics clearly demonstrate how the meaning of Čehovin’s monument was actively contested. Although the initiative originated with the veterans’ association, which primarily promoted supranational dynastic loyalties, the Slovene national elite largely succeeded in integrating both the monument and Čehovin’s legacy into their own national narrative, as evidenced by the numerous donations from urban and rural areas alike. Public space thus became a medium through which debates over Čehovin’s legacy—and, by extension, local identity—were enacted. Even though the monument’s connotations were at first multifaceted, it ultimately acquired a distinctly national dimension, emerging as a powerful symbol of Slovene presence and aspirations in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca. Furthermore, the erection of Čehovin’s monument marked a breakthrough, paving the way for a series of subsequent initiatives, most notably the tomb monument to the poet Simon Gregorčič and the large figurative monument to the composer Andrej-Hrabroslav Volarič in

⁶⁶ “Odkritje Čehovinarega spomenika,” *Soča*, August 16, 1898.

⁶⁷ “Odkritje Čehovinarega spomenika,” *Primorski list*, August 20, 1898.

⁶⁸ “Odkritje spomenika Čehovinu,” *Edinost*, August 16, 1898.

Kobarid, in the upper Isonzo Valley. Yet, the circumstances surrounding these monuments also revealed deep internal divisions within the Slovene political camp.

Monuments in the Crosshairs of the Slovene *Kulturkampf*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Slovene national movement in the Gorizia region was marked by an increasingly apparent internal division between the liberal (National Progressive Party) and Catholic (Unity/Slovene People's Party) camps.⁶⁹ This rift played a crucial role in shaping the region's cultural and political landscape and significantly influenced Slovene spatial politics. The divisions were especially evident in the erection of the monument to Simon Gregorčič (1844–1906), a Catholic priest and nationally conscious poet. Gregorčič enjoyed “star” status within the Slovene community in the second half of the nineteenth century, as his poetry collection *Poezije* (“Poetries”) was widely read, and practically no public event was held without recitations of his poems. Although he served as a Catholic priest, his lyrical poetry was steeped in national themes, aligning seamlessly with the aspirations of the Slovene elites. Consequently, the idea of erecting a worthy monument arose on the very day of his funeral;⁷⁰ deliberations continued unabated until early December 1906, when a committee for the erection of a monument to Gregorčič was formed in Gorizia. The committee proposed the construction of a gravestone and a memorial plaque at his birthplace in the village of Vrsno in the Isonzo Valley while also considering the possibility of a figurative memorial.⁷¹

Although the committee addressed its appeal to all “Slovene patriots,” it had a Catholic majority and no visible representatives of the liberal National Progressive Party. In the months following Gregorčič's death, debates over his political stance resurfaced in the newspapers. Liberal papers highlighted that the harshest critic of his poetry was Anton Mahnič, the leading ideologue of the integralist wing of the Slovene Catholic movement, while noting that Gregorčič himself reportedly read the liberal newspaper *Slovenski narod* regularly until his death. Catholic-oriented publications, in contrast, emphasized his rejection of newer liberal politics, pointing out that he did not actively participate in political struggles and had reportedly voted for the Catholic party in municipal elections.⁷² The fundraising for the monument further exposed and deepened the existing tensions and divisions, culminating in a highly publicized controversy surrounding its construction. Just two days before the unveiling of the monument and memorial plaque, the liberal newspaper *Primorec* reported that Italian church singers from Gorizia would perform at the ceremony. It also reiterated allegations that the Catholic organizers had excluded liberals from the preparatory committee in order to redirect the funds to their own school in Gorizia. These claims were quickly echoed by *Soča*, the main liberal newspaper in Gorizia, which accused the “clerical” committee of displaying a lukewarm commitment to national issues. *Soča* further reported that a Slovene flag was displayed on a nearby tavern, while only the papal and provincial flags were flown on the church. “Many people from the surrounding area attended, but others preferred to stay home because they did not want to be part of the

⁶⁹ Branko Marušič, *Primorski čas pretekli: prispevki za zgodovino Primorske* (Koper: Lipa 1985), 155–64.

⁷⁰ Gregorčič was buried near the small church of St. Lawrence near the village of Libušnje in the upper Isonzo Valley. See the description of the monument in Špelca Čopič, *Javni spomeniki v slovenskem kiparstvu prve polovice 20. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2000), 252–53.

⁷¹ Damir Globočnik, “Nagrobni spomenik Simonu Gregorčiču,” *Kronika: časopis za slovensko krajevno zgodovino* 66, no. 1 (2018): 79–80.

⁷² Branko Marušič, “Posegi Simona Gregorčiča v politično življenje,” in *Pogledi na Simona Gregorčiča*, ed. Barbara Pregelj and Zoran Božič (Nova Gorica: Univerza, 2006), 18–24.

scandal: that the tombstone of such a soulful Slovene poet was being honored by Italian singers, and that there was no place for the Slovene flag on the church grounds.”⁷³

The Catholic press strongly opposed these accusations, and the central committee demanded that Soča retract the statements. According to reports, the choir consisted predominantly of Slovenes, with only one Italian singer—who was married to a Slovene. A three-meter-long Slovene tricolor was reportedly waving at the church of St. Lawrence. The Catholic newspaper *Gorica* wrote that it was leaving Soča, “this morally so immeasurably depraved sheet, to the contempt of the general public.”⁷⁴

Mutual accusations continued in subsequent issues, revealing the deep divisions between the liberal and Catholic political camps in the County of Gorizia. In this way, the Slovenization of public space became not only a visible expression of internal ideological tensions but, in some respects, also a catalyst for their further intensification. The Catholic side ultimately succeeded in “appropriating” Gregorčič, which likely prompted the liberal camp to plan a monument of its own. This context explains why the liberals chose this particular moment to commemorate Andrej-Hrabroslav Volarič (1863–95), a Slovene composer from Kobarid.

Andrej Volarič was born on November 14, 1863, in Kobarid into an artisanal family. After finishing primary education in his hometown, he studied at the teachers’ training college in Koper from 1878 to 1882. Afterwards, he worked as a teacher in various Slovene villages and market towns throughout the Austrian Littoral. He died on September 30, 1895, in Duino/Devín.⁷⁵ Volarič thus never formally studied music, although he received informal music lessons from several music teachers, especially during his studies in Koper.⁷⁶ Much of his music was created to meet the needs of local voluntary cultural associations in the towns and villages where he worked. His biographer Jože Sivec describes him as a composer defined by romantic lyricism, whose compositions are characterized by fresh, folk-influenced melodies.⁷⁷ The simplicity, harmony, and national pathos present in most of his works made them very popular, and they were widely performed by Slovene choirs and musicians in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷⁸

The aforementioned national pathos flowed naturally from his personal convictions, as Volarič was a fervent supporter of the Slovene national movement; this is reflected in his adoption of the Slavic version of his baptismal name, “Hrabroslav,” a practice common in the Slovene nationalist milieu of the late nineteenth century.⁷⁹ Volarič was also deeply engaged in the popularization of Slovene culture; throughout his teaching career, he served as choirmaster for several choirs that regularly performed at Slovene cultural and political events.⁸⁰ This engagement, combined with his tragic early death, made him an obvious candidate for incorporation into the emerging Slovene national cultural canon, even though he could hardly be ranked among the most prominent Slovene composers of the nineteenth

⁷³ “Odkritje spomenika in spominske plošče pesniku Simonu Gregorčiču,” *Soča*, September 5, 1908.

⁷⁴ “Odkritje nagrobnika in spominske plošče pesniku Simonu Gregorčiču,” *Gorica*, September 19, 1908.

⁷⁵ For a more detailed biography, see Jože Sivec, “Volarič, Hrabroslav (1863–1895),” in *Slovenski biografski leksikon*: 14. zv. *Vode—Zdešar*, ed. Jože Munda et al (Ljubljana: Znanstvenoraziskovalni center SAZU, 1986), 564.

⁷⁶ Janko Leban, “Hrabroslav Volarič, slovenski skladatelj,” *Dom in svet* 9, no. 7 (1895): 214.

⁷⁷ Sivec, “Volarič, Hrabroslav,” 564.

⁷⁸ Andrej Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. Narodne, kulturne, politične in gospodarske črtice. I. knjiga. Od leta 1830 do 1900* (Ljubljana: Self-published, 1932), 388.

⁷⁹ A majority of the first names in the Slovene lands of the nineteenth century were of non-Slavic origin, as parents were required to give children the names of Catholic saints, per decrees of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and most of saints’ names were of Latin and Greek origin. This began to change in the second half of the century, when nationalistically minded Slovenes began to use names from other Slavic languages, some even adopting Slavic equivalents of their own, see Janez Keber, *Leksikon imen: izvor imen na Slovenskem* (Celje: Mohorjeva družba, 1996), 29–31.

⁸⁰ Sivec, “Volarič, Hrabroslav,” 564.

century. The decision to place the monument in Kobarid was equally unsurprising. As the composer's birthplace, it was the natural location; moreover, Kobarid was, in the words of the local liberal politician and publisher Andrej Gabršček (1864–1938), "the most nationally conscious market town in Slovene lands."⁸¹ Politically, it was a stronghold of the National Progressive Party, which consistently won both provincial and municipal elections.⁸²

The solemn unveiling of the monument and memorial plaque took place on September 8, 1909. The event served as a powerful demonstration of the political and cultural strength of the liberal wing of the Slovene political movement. Delegations arrived from across the crownland, with particularly strong representation from provincial teachers' associations, which were among the key supporters of the liberal camp. A prominent role was also played by the delegation of the Sokol gymnastic society from Gorizia. In contrast, the relatively limited place Volarič held within the broader Slovene national consciousness at the time is reflected in the modest participation by other Slovene regions, which were represented only by the Sava association from Jesenice in Upper Carniola.⁸³ The solemn unveiling of the memorial plaque was accompanied by speeches and choral performances. The assembled visitors then formed a procession and moved to the town square, where the unveiling of the statue was again marked by speeches and singing. The keynote address was delivered by the local mayor. In the evening, the celebrations continued with a torchlight procession and a concert.⁸⁴

The life-size statue of the composer, produced by a Czech stonecutting workshop,⁸⁵ was placed on a high pedestal in the main town square of Kobarid. The newly erected monument was surrounded by a small public park, in which several linden trees—a symbol of the Slovene national movement—were planted. Stylized linden leaves were also sculpted on the pedestal (figure 3).⁸⁶ Dominating the central square, the monument served as an unmistakable expression of the Slovene character of Kobarid and the entire upper Isonzo Valley, a point emphasized by the main provincial liberal newspaper *Soča*, which observed: "The monument embellishes Kobarid and shows what the Slovene sons born along the Italian border are like."⁸⁷ The Catholic newspaper *Gorica*, on the other hand, remained silent, further underscoring that the monument was primarily a liberal project.

***Trgovski dom* and the Slovene Symbolic "Conquest" of Gorizia**

While earlier Slovene efforts had not produced lasting spatial landmarks, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed two major monuments whose national messages were unmistakable. These undertakings shared a common feature: all were located in predominantly rural areas or, in the case of Kobarid, a small market town. The political situation in the provincial capital of Gorizia, firmly dominated by the Italian middle classes, made the erection of an unequivocally national monument there unrealistic. Nevertheless, the advancing Slovenization of public space reached the provincial capital in a different form: the construction of a national hall.

⁸¹ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. I. knjiga*, 191.

⁸² For all the results of the provincial elections from 1861 to 1913 in Kobarid, see Melik, *Volitve na Slovenskem*, 372–73.

⁸³ Its presence can be explained by the fact that its choirmaster was the son of the late composer. See Andrej Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci: narodne, kulturne, politične in gospodarske črtice. II. knjiga. Od leta 1901 do 1924* (Ljubljana: Self-published, 1934), 319.

⁸⁴ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. II. knjiga*, 320; Alojzij Luznik, "Odkritje Volaričevega spomenika," *Soča*, September 9, 1909.

⁸⁵ "Odkritje Volaričevega spomenika," *Soča*, August 7, 1909.

⁸⁶ Čopič, *Javni spomeniki*, 260.

⁸⁷ "Andrej Volarič (k odkritju spomenika)," *Soča*, September 7, 1909.



Figure 3. Statue of Andrej Volarič in Kobarid. Source: Pokrajinski arhiv v Novi Gorici, PANG 667, Kobarid 2628.

Accordingly, the final part of the article turns to the *Trgovski dom* (Commercial Hall), the Slovene national hall in Gorizia. At the turn of the twentieth century, such buildings served as pivotal tools for nationalizing urban landscapes across the Habsburg borderlands. These multifunctional, architecturally representative community centers served specific national groups by consolidating their social, economic, and cultural presence within a multiethnic environment.⁸⁸ Beyond their symbolic function—expressing national presence and identity through architecture⁸⁹—national halls had practical roles as headquarters for organizations, economic entities, and cultural institutions, as well as venues for social gatherings. The construction of national halls was particularly widespread in border regions and multiethnic areas. National halls, which first emerged in Bohemian lands in the latter half of the nineteenth century, were later successfully embraced and adapted by the Slovene national elite.⁹⁰ In the Slovene-inhabited Habsburg lands, national halls of various national communities (including Slovenes, Germans, and Italians)⁹¹ could be found in all major urban centers where different national communities coexisted. During a period marked by intense interethnic tensions and conflicts⁹² Gorizia emerged as one of the key

⁸⁸ Galeta, "National Houses," 231.

⁸⁹ Galeta, "National Houses," 232–35.

⁹⁰ Monika Pemič, "Slovensko narodno gibanje in izvirna podoba Narodnega doma v Mariboru: Jan Vejrych, njegovi slovenski naročniki in odzivi tedanjega občinstva," *Zgodovinski časopis* (2019): 413; Galeta, "National Houses," 231–32.

⁹¹ Vlasta Stavbar, "Narodni dom v Mariboru," *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje* (2002): 80–81; Borut Klabjan and Gorazd Bajc, *Ogenj, ki je zajel Evropo: Narodni dom v Trstu 1920–2020* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2021), 19–81.

⁹² Pieter Judson, "'Not Another Square Foot!' German Liberalism and the Rhetoric of National Ownership in Nineteenth-Century Austria," *Austrian History Yearbook* (1995): 83–97.

arenas of Slovene–Italian rivalry.⁹³ The city’s administrative, economic, and political importance as the only true urban center of the province further accelerated the nationalization of local society.⁹⁴

Despite its size, which continued to grow throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,⁹⁵ the Slovene community in Gorizia lacked the national and linguistic rights to which it was constitutionally entitled.⁹⁶ The city administration remained firmly controlled by the Italian political elite, which consistently viewed Slovene demands with suspicion and resistance. Slovene calls for equality concerned public education, the use of Slovene language in administrative offices and courts, and broader questions of economic, political, social, and cultural power.⁹⁷ The Slovene national elite grounded its claims in demographic realities, emphasizing that Slovenes formed the majority at the provincial level⁹⁸ and arguing that the Slovene community deserved equal standing in Gorizia, as the surrounding Slovene countryside fundamentally shaped the city’s position and development.⁹⁹ The Italian elite, by contrast, justified its primacy by invoking historical precedence and economic superiority and refused to acknowledge the Slovene community in Gorizia as an equal partner in cultural, economic, or political life.¹⁰⁰ It took the Slovene political movement several decades to mount an organized and effective response to these pressures and to reach anything resembling a balance of power. Yet, in the final years before the outbreak of the First World War, it had succeeded in asserting itself to a notable degree, increasingly challenging Italian dominance in the city.

From the late 1880s onwards, the Slovene presence in Gorizia’s public space began to grow gradually, accelerating significantly after 1900. Building on the rich cultural and political activity that had been developing since the mid-nineteenth century,¹⁰¹ the Slovene community now intensified its efforts in the economic sphere. This expansion was achieved primarily through the establishment of commercial, craft, service, and other enterprises, as well as through the creation of an effective banking system capable of financing and supporting increasingly ambitious Slovene projects in the city. A particularly important milestone in this regard was the founding of *Trgovska in obrtna zadruga* (Trade and Craft Cooperative) in 1897.¹⁰² The teacher Hinko Klavora later recalled in his memoirs: “Already toward the end of the previous century, and especially at the beginning of this one, all the characteristics of our national awakening and renewal began to show—we advanced in leaps and bounds. [...] Trade and craft enterprises sprang up like mushrooms after rain—and not by chance, but in a planned manner and on a sound foundation. Our people shopped only at our reliable Slovene merchants and craftsmen, which is why the number of our businesses kept growing, while those on the Italian side declined.”¹⁰³ Following the consolidation of capital and the establishment of a Slovene economic network, the community sought to

⁹³ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 320–22.

⁹⁴ Verginella, “Slovene Mapping,” 33–34.

⁹⁵ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 46. According to census records, the proportion of Slovene-speaking residents in the city increased from 17.83 percent in 1880 to 36.83 percent in 1910.

⁹⁶ Peter Vodopivec, *Od Pohlinove slovnice do samostojne države: slovenska zgodovina od konca 18. stoletja do konca 20. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2006), 111–13.

⁹⁷ Devetak, “Boj za slovenske,” 363–66.

⁹⁸ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 45.

⁹⁹ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 322–34.

¹⁰⁰ The Italian elite asserted that the Romance-speaking community had inhabited the region longer than the Slovene community; Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 334.

¹⁰¹ Branko Marušič, “Pregled društvene dejavnosti v Avstrijskem primorju (1848–1918),” *Annales: Analiz Za Istrske in Mediteranske Študije* 9, no. 1 (1999): 179–81.

¹⁰² Marko Waltritsch, *Slovensko bančništvo in posojilništvo na Goriškem* (Gorica: Kmečka banka, 1982), 63–68.

¹⁰³ Hinko Klavora, “Čez drn in strn skozi življenje,” in *Goriški spomini: sodobniki o Gorici in Goriški v letih 1830–1918*, ed. Branko Marušič (Gorica: Goriška Mohorjeva družba; Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, 2002), 228.

strengthen its visibility and influence by acquiring and constructing prominent buildings in central urban locations.

The Italian community, particularly the municipal administration, viewed Slovene efforts to strengthen their presence in Gorizia's public space with overt hostility and actively sought to undermine them. Strategies to obstruct Slovene property acquisitions included deliberate delays, the denial of business licenses, and manipulations of property prices.¹⁰⁴ Concurrently, physical confrontations between members of the Slovene and Italian urban communities became increasingly frequent, often involving property damage and anti-Slovene graffiti targeting buildings owned by Slovenes.¹⁰⁵

Among the public buildings that the Slovene community acquired or constructed before the outbreak of the First World War, the Commercial Hall stood out as a central symbol of Slovene presence. The idea of establishing a national hall first emerged among the Slovene national elite in the late nineteenth century. According to Andrej Gabršček, the first concrete proposals for such a building in Gorizia were made in 1895.¹⁰⁶ However, the project did not materialize quickly, likely due to a lack of capital. This obstacle was eventually overcome just over a decade later, thanks to the development of the Slovene banking system. The location of the national hall was carefully chosen, as emphasized by politician Henrik Tuma in his memoirs: "First and foremost, we had to secure our own building for the institution. To this end, we bought the most beautiful plot in Gorizia, at the corner of *Ljudski vrt* (People's Gardens) in the city center."¹⁰⁷ The plot in the heart of the city was acquired by the Trade and Craft Cooperative from the Slovene merchant Anton Pečenko in March 1903 for 51,144 crowns, a sum he had previously paid as a private individual.¹⁰⁸ The purchase process was carried out through a mediator due to concerns about opposition from the municipal authorities.¹⁰⁹ In this respect, they followed the example set in Trieste, where the land for the local national hall had also been acquired discreetly to preempt potential interference from Italian authorities.¹¹⁰ Architect Maks Fabiani was commissioned to design the Gorizia project, while engineer Josip Costaperaria oversaw the construction. Both had previously held the same roles for the *Narodni dom* (National Hall) in Trieste, bringing valuable experience to the undertaking.¹¹¹

The construction of the Commercial Hall took place in 1903 and 1904. For the Slovene community, the building held great symbolic significance, as it became one of the most representative architectural structures in the city.¹¹² This was highlighted by the liberal newspaper *Soča*, which noted: "It is now clear that this will be the most beautiful palace in Gorizia. It has been built in such a way that even local architects and engineers come to admire it and learn from it."¹¹³ The symbolic importance of the building's construction was also evident in the fact that numerous local Slovene companies were involved, thus demonstrating their potential and success.¹¹⁴ Part of the building was dedicated to social events, comprising a gymnasium, a modern events hall, and a restaurant. The remaining

¹⁰⁴ Marušič, *Primorski čas pretekli*, 159.

¹⁰⁵ Marušič, *Pregled politične zgodovine*, 319.

¹⁰⁶ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. I. knjiga*, 373.

¹⁰⁷ Henrik Tuma, *Iz mojega življenja: spomini, misli in izpovedi* (Ljubljana: Tuma, 1997), 274.

¹⁰⁸ Boris Peric, "Zgodovina Trgovskega doma," in *Trgovski dom v Gorici: sto let prisotnosti*, ed. Igor Komel (Gorica: Slovenska konzulta pri občini, 2007), 15.

¹⁰⁹ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. II. knjiga*, 167.

¹¹⁰ Klabjan and Bajc, *Ogenj*, 32.

¹¹¹ Marko Korošič, "Fabianijeva slovenska domova v Trstu in Gorici," *Razpotja: revija humanistov Goriške* 6, no. 21 (2015): 63.

¹¹² Korošič, "Fabianijeva slovenska domova," 63.

¹¹³ "Trgovski dom," *Soča*, April 9, 1904.

¹¹⁴ Waltritsch, *Slovensko bančništvo*, 99.

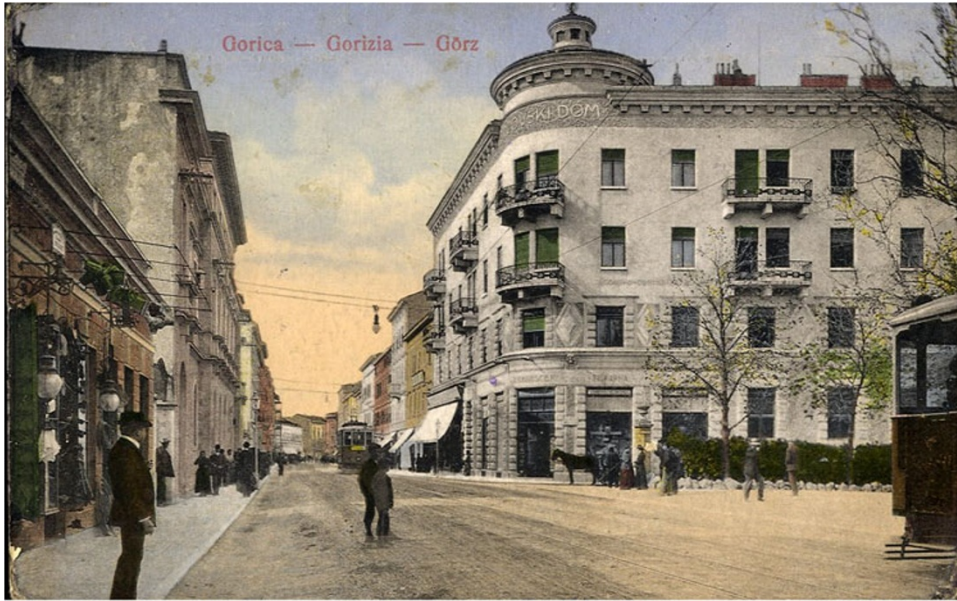


Figure 4. The Commercial Hall (Trgovski dom) in Gorizia before the First World War. Source: Goriška knjižnica Franceta Bevka, Domoznanski oddelek.

spaces were occupied by two large shops, the Trade and Craft Cooperative, a bookstore, as well as several apartments (figure 4).¹¹⁵

The Commercial Hall officially opened in June 1904 with a modest event organized by the Gorizia gymnastics society Sokol, following the low-key approach used in Trieste to avoid provocations.¹¹⁶ There was no grand formal ceremony, and local press coverage was limited. This approach likely mirrored the strategy used during the opening of the National Hall in Trieste, where members of the Slovene national elite deliberately opted for low-key events to avoid potential provocations or tensions with the Italian community.¹¹⁷ From the end of 1904 onward, other societies, individuals, and business entities began moving into the Commercial Hall. The Slovene community in Gorizia thus gained a new central hub, providing a permanent home for many of its major institutions. Societies now had spaces dedicated to their activities, fully owned by Slovene interests and free from potential restrictions imposed by the Italian community. In addition to established organizations such as the Sokol gymnastics society, the national reading room, and the choral and music society, a new society—*Narodna prosveta* (National Education)—also operated within the building. Its mission was “to promote national education in the Gorizia area, particularly through the establishment and maintenance of public libraries and reading rooms, organizing public lectures and national festivals, publishing brochures, and establishing a Slovene theatre in Gorizia.”¹¹⁸ The new facilities also fostered significant advancements in local Slovene culture, hosting political meetings, social gatherings, and a wide range of lectures.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Marko Pozzetto, *Maks Fabiani—vizije prostora* (Kranj: L.I.B.R.A., 1997), 158–59.

¹¹⁶ Andrej Hrausky and Janez Koželj, *Maks Fabiani: Dunaj, Ljubljana, Trst* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2010), 143.

¹¹⁷ Klabjan and Bajc, *Ogenj*, 40.

¹¹⁸ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. II. knjiga*, 174.

¹¹⁹ “Sobotno predavanje dr. Ivana Laha o kulturnem razvoju Slovencev,” *Soča*, October 8, 1912.

The Commercial Hall fulfilled the ambitions of the Slovene urban elite, serving as a pivotal center for public life, a political and economic hub, and a symbol of Slovene identity and agency in an Italian-dominated city. The hall thus represented the culmination of decades-long efforts to embed Slovene influence in the provincial capital, visibly asserting Slovene presence in Gorizia, as Andrej Gabršček emphasized: “With our national hall, a new and vibrant social and community life began in Gorizia, elevating the reputation of the Slovene name among non-Slovenes, raising national pride and awareness of our strength among the Gorizia Slovenes, and inspiring new courage for further progress.”¹²⁰

Conclusion

The rise of nationalism, which became a defining feature of the Habsburg empire after 1848, profoundly shaped not only political culture and social interactions but also the appearance and meaning of public space across the monarchy. Competing national communities sought to assert their presence and advance their political objectives through the (re)ordering of the built environment. This study examines the spatial strategies of the Slovene national movement in the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, highlighting its efforts to establish a symbolic foothold in the local landscape in order to nationally mark public space and articulate political power and ambitions. These initiatives—from the erection of public monuments to the construction of a Slovene national hall in the provincial capital—represent a regionally specific manifestation of broader processes of nationalization.

In contrast to most previous studies on spatial politics in the Habsburg empire, which have focused primarily on major urban centers, this article shifts attention to peripheral and rural areas. In the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, a borderland region, the Slovene political camp was at first able to ethnically mark predominantly rural spaces, as the principal urban centers remained under the control of Italian nationalists. These efforts were driven primarily by urban nationalist elites but also enjoyed considerable support from the rural population, which participated enthusiastically in these endeavors. Although the available sources do not allow a full reconstruction of the social background of all donors, the fact that a majority of contributions to the Čehovin monument came from rural areas, together with the large turnout at the unveiling ceremonies for all the monuments, strongly points in this direction. The case studies thus illustrate how ethnically charged spatial politics could mobilize broad swathes of the population, even in rural areas. By contrast, asserting Slovene presence in the provincial capital proved far more challenging and required sustained effort, culminating in the establishment of a national hall in 1904, while the erection of a Slovene public monument in the city remained unattainable.

Moreover, the study highlights the complexity of both the strategies employed and the internal contradictions that marked the emergence of Slovenized public space. Strategically, the erection of the first national monument was closely tied to the efforts of the local veterans’ organization. Although the initiative to commemorate Andrej Čehovin, a hero of the Italian campaign of 1848–49, was originally conceived within a Habsburg-patriotic framework—thereby securing considerable support from imperial structures—the Slovene press successfully reinterpreted it primarily in national terms. Despite tensions and objections from more radical nationalists, both layers of meaning ultimately coexisted, as each could be directed against Italian nationalism and irredentism.

Equally significant were internal conflicts, which demonstrate that the process cannot be understood as a straightforward or uncontested triumph of a single vision of Slovene nationalism. Slovene efforts faced opposition not only from the rival Italian camp but also from internal divisions between liberal and Catholic factions. These ideological rifts

¹²⁰ Gabršček, *Goriški Slovenci. II. knjiga*, 167.

complicated early attempts at spatial Slovenization and led to the erection of competing monuments to Simon Gregorčič and Andrej-Hrabroslav Volarič, as each faction sought to inscribe its own vision of Slovene nationalism onto the public landscape. In this way, spatial politics were not only an expression of these divisions but also a driving force behind them. The establishment of nationally marked public space in the region must therefore be understood as a nuanced and multifaceted process, shaped by competing ideo-political currents contesting both control over provincial public space and the very nature of Slovene national identity.

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