Transnational memory from Bleiburg to London (via Buenos Aires and Grozny)

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Transnational memory from Bleiburg to London (via Buenos Aires and Grozny)

1. Introduction

The starting-point for this contribution is the summer 1945 in Carinthia, when the British Eighth Army handed over thousand of anti-communist, collaborationist and fascist soldiers to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Those affected included Cossacks who had been fighting against partisans in Yugoslavia and Italy, Croat Ustaša, regular soldiers of the Croat army, Slovene home guard (Domobranci), Serb Četniks, followers of the Serb fascist leader Dmitri Ljotić and many others. As well as these soldiers, who had fled northwards in the wake of the retreating German forces, many of the civilians accompanying them were also handed over. Although there are no reliable figures it seems likely the total number probably exceeded a hundred thousand. Many of them were sent to the Gulag while thousands of those handed over to Yugoslavia were massacred.

Clearly these events, including the British decisions which led to them, have been and still are, hotly debated. However the main point of this contribution is not to contribute directly to these controversies, but rather to explore how these events have been commemorated over the past sixty years. Without going further into the complex theoretical and methodological discussion around the “memory turn” two brief comments on the risks involved in this kind of shift to the “meta-level” seem in order here. The first risk is a weakening of the response to the moral issues posed so acutely in the age of genocide, and which in the best cases, have driven the empirical recovery of the recent past. If attention is centred on the logic of collective memory or narrativity, central issues of guilt and responsibility may easily become sidelined. To deflect or pre-empt the charge that the current article represents an example of precisely this kind of evasion let me repeat here the conclusion I drew twenty years ago (as part of a criticism of the work of Nikolai Tolstoy):

The hand-over of Cossacks and ‘dissident’ Yugoslavs from Southern Austria in May and June 1945 was a decision made at a time of crisis and pressure. The responsibility for going for a ‘convenient’ solution at a time of acute difficulty lay primarily with
the military commanders concerned.... The question of the morality of the hand-overs will doubtless continue to be discussed. Such discussion needs to address the question of how much those who made the decisions knew or could have reasonably been expected to know about the likely fate of those returned. Above all such discussion can only benefit from an open-minded and even-handed use of the evidence, neither of which is conspicuous in Tolstoy’s work. Few would question now that, especially insofar as they concerned innocent civilians, the hand-overs involved expediency, brutality and inhumanity. But… they need to be understood in the context of a war which had seen a massive escalation of all of these – an escalation to which many of those handed over had contributed their full share.3

Secondly, the danger of privileging the “constructivity” of the past over its empirical exploration can lead to the kind of questionable argument put forward recently by Klaus Leggewie. It effectively endorses the instrumentalisation of memory by the holders of power and implies – doubtless for the best of motives - that historians should enrol as construction workers on a grandiose EU memory-building project. This task arises from “our” supposed need for a shared European memory in order to underpin “our” European museum. Leggewie’s draft proposals for this memory consist of seven concentric circles of memory, of which the Holocaust, Gulag and Expulsions form the first three. It is not so much the particular choice which is the problem (Leggewie’s circles are as good or at least as debatable as any others) as the top-down assumption behind it.4 Surely historians should be more interested in the way social memory evades grand projects like this and thus defies the continuous attempts of power-holders to manipulate them. What emerges through the gaps between Leggewie’s circles may well be more interesting and even more powerful than what is officially inscribed within them.

The following article seeks to trace the unpredictable trajectory of several different collective memories of the 1945 hand-overs. It employs as a code and point of reference the small town of Bleiburg at the Austrian-Yugoslav border where most of the Yugoslavs were turned back. “Bleiburg” also stands here as a site of memory for other physical locations, including Viktring, near Klagenfurt, where over 10,000 Domobranci and their families were quartered, and Lienz, where the main part of the Cossack forces and their “camp followers” stayed before being handed over.
2. Heimat and Diaspora commemoration

In first two post-war decades two relevant strands of commemoration can be identified: the first, which can be labelled “diaspora commemoration”, was sustained by the bereaved relatives of those handed over and survivors themselves. It was articulated and led by a segment of the many Yugoslavs and East European Displaced Persons who, often after several years in camps, joined established diaspora communities in West Germany (especially Munich), North and South America and Australia. Some of their accounts were published soon after the war in Munich, New York, Buenos Aires, Cleveland and elsewhere. From around the mid-1950s survivors or their families also began to return to Bleiburg (or Lienz) and held memorial services there, often on the anniversary of the hand-overs. In their accounts Bleiburg is a site both of a colossal national tragedy and a monstrous Allied betrayal. To cite Miha Krek (former Chairman of the National Committee for Slovenia and Vice-Premier of the Royal Yugoslav Government), the dramatis personae of the Bleiburg atrocity were “the English – fallacious tricksters; the Titoists – criminal fiends and murderers; and the Slovenian Home Guardsmen, the Serbian Volunteers and the Montenegrin Chetniks – the victims.”

As Krek’s failure to mention Croats suggests, diaspora commemoration, like the Yugoslavia diaspora itself, was deeply divided along national lines. While Serb (Yugoslav royalist) commemoration was generally linked to Slovene commemoration, both remained aloof from or hostile to Croat exile groups. In the account by the Serb Bor Karapandžić, for example, Tito surpasses Hitler, Stalin and Genghis Khan in evil and Bleiburg is the site where an 8,000 Četnik force was disarmed and then forcefully returned to Tito’s Partisans “who murdered all these men in a most brutal fashion in the forests around Maribor in Slovenia.” The Croat Home Army (Domobran) is mentioned only once. Croat diaspora accounts on the other hand focussed on Bleiburg as the genocidal end of the Croat nation at the hands of their communist enemies. In Paul Hockenos’s assessment it “functioned as one of the psychological keystones for the émigrés’ self-understanding of their expatriation, their lives abroad, and their political work to rescue Croatia at all costs, and by all means necessary.” In the 1950s and 1960s the “history wars” waged in the diaspora occasionally spilled over into violence, kidnappings or
highjackings, directed against representatives of Tito’s Yugoslavia. One Croat group, active in the 1960s in West Germany, called itself the “the Avengers of Bleiburg.” The hand-over of Cossacks (and Vlasov soldiers from Germany) seems to have been less central to the Russian diaspora. One notable publication was the memoir of the Cossack leader Nikolai Krasnov, who survived ten years in the Gulag before emigrating to the USA.

Within Carinthia itself the predominant form of public commemoration of the summer of 1945 centred on the preservation of the Heimat against the South Slav threat. This “Heimat commemoration” had its roots in the ethno-national confrontations of the nineteenth century, in the course of which political mobilisation and collective identities became polarised around the issue of loyalty to the province. Carinthia was imagined here as a quasi-sacred community which was culturally (sometimes racially) German and under permanent threat. The threat came from within, those Slovenes who resisted assimilation and from outside, Carinthia’s supposedly predatory South Slav neighbours. Apart from this disruption Carinthia was at its core a harmonious community, in which the majority of Slavs (labelled “Windisch”) endorsed the superiority of Deutschum by being ready to assimilate, whether because of a collective character trait (loyalty) or a quasi-ethnic quality. The central reference point of this commemoration was the Abwehrkampf (defensive struggle) of 1918-19 and the pro-Austrian plebiscite vote of 10 October 1920. Bleiburg in this perspective was the front-line town which, after a long period under Yugoslav occupation, had confirmed both its German identity and its loyalty by voting 75% in favour of a future in Austria.

The commemoration of the defensive struggle and the values associated with it, particularly the military ones, were effectively deployed in the Greater German Reich and helped the Nazi regime and the war effort function almost until the end. After a brief self-critical interlude they continued to permeate post-war Carinthian political culture. The 10 October ceremonies, in parallel with the assertion of a narrowly majoritarian interpretation of self-determination, recalled the courage and the sacrifice of the earlier generation. The blood which had been shed by the Abwehrkämpfer in 1920 was enrolled into a lofty mission to “keep” Carinthia German, in effect to increase the pressure on the minority to assimilate. In 1960 the veteran German national activist Hans Steinacher laid down ex cathedra that “without the Carinthians’ struggle for freedom there would have been no plebiscite.” The Nazi war of annihilation and the invasion of Yugoslavia were decoupled from the Carinthian struggle or implicitly legitimated the defence of (western) European values against...
Bolshevism.\textsuperscript{13} (Karl Stuhlpfarrer and Hanns Haas were among the first historians to question this perspective).\textsuperscript{14}

The end of the war appeared here not just as a German defeat but, with the partisan occupation of Carinthia at the end of the war in pursuit of Yugoslavia’s claim to southern Carinthia, as a real and symbolic violation of the Heimat. One aspect became the particular focus of post-war part Carinthian enquiries, agitation and concern: the seizures in May of some 200 Carinthians by the Yugoslav secret police (OZNA), half of whom were then presumably killed.\textsuperscript{15} It is hard to understand the particular stress placed on the commemoration of these kidnap victims (\textit{Verschleppten}) purely in terms of the depth or extent of the trauma they aroused. There were after all plenty of other Carinthians who had suffered comparable bereavement, regardless of where they had fought. Rather the centrality of the “kidnapped” surely relates to the way they could sustain a narrative of Carinthian victimhood and Slav violation. In this narrative the end of the war moved centre stage and the preceding Nazi Germanisation and aggression receded. A narrative line could then be traced without much difficulty to the earlier “defensive struggle” (\textit{Abwehrkampf}). For a leading Carinthian Social Democrat the period since 1910 had been a story of “two world wars and \textit{above all} two Yugoslav invasions of Carinthia.”\textsuperscript{16} This elision of the victims of the \textit{Abwehrkampf}, the fallen soldiers of two world wars and the kidnap victims of May 1945 is inscribed in many Carinthian war memorials, including that in Bleiburg. Anti-fascist commemoration, centring on the partisans by contrast, although it was sporadically supported by the federal government, was a marginalised counter-memory. Its physical monuments often faced strong local opposition, defacement or destruction (generally followed by an ineffective pursuit of the culprits).\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Heimat} commemoration clearly shared some important ground with diaspora commemoration, in particular the self-perception as victims of communists. Yet at this time apart from some fleeting references in apologia for the \textit{Wehrmacht}\textsuperscript{18} the two strands seem to have had few points of contact. One reason may be the fact that refugees and surrendering soldiers, irrespective of their background, appeared to threaten scarce resources. In contrast to later romanticised accounts the \textit{Volkszeitung} looked back in 1960 on the appearance of the Cossacks (and their horses) as the moment when “40,000 Cossacks threatened Upper Carinthia.”\textsuperscript{19} A rare example of linking Cossack and Carinthian victimhood was Theodor Veiter’s 1970 work on minority rights. Veiter, who had an ambiguous position in the
catholic, anti-communist camp, discussed the kidnappings in connection with the introduction of compulsory bilingual primary education into Southern Carinthia later in the same year (October 1945). He implied that the school had only been accepted under duress because the population had been intimidated by British collusion in the hand-overs and murder of thousands of German Carinthians and anticomunist Slovenes. For good measure he added an anti-Semitic twist by commenting that British security forces had been mainly in the hand of “German-speaking emigrants” (“deutschsprachige Emigranten”).

3. British commemoration

As well as these two commemorative strands a third should also be discussed here, even though - or precisely because - Bleiburg was so marginal to it: the Allied celebration of the end of the war as Victory in Europe day on 7 May. In these ceremonies and the associated public discussion the hand-overs from Carinthia, perhaps unsurprisingly, played almost no part. Similarly all attempts to find out what happened, not just to Cossacks and Yugoslavs, but also to the (far more numerous) Vlasov soldiers handed over before and after the Yalta Agreement, were met in Britain, with official silence or stone-walling. There was also very little journalistic interest: a notable early exception was a 1946 article by George Orwell. It mentioned forced repatriations in the course of an extensive attack on those western communists or “fellow-travellers” who viewed the Soviet Union through rose-tinted glasses and denied the existence of Soviet “quislings” altogether. In fact, Orwell stated, a “small but not negligible portion of...Russian prisoners and displaced persons” had been forced to return against their will but “though known to many journalists on the spot, went almost unmentioned in the British press.” The official avoidance of the subject over the following Cold War decades, however, was presumably less a reflection of the pro-Soviet blindness castigated by Orwell than an acute embarrassment by politicians and officials at this compromise with the West’s partner in the “Grand Alliance”. Nevertheless, in an important sense the later discussion on the hand-overs was already visible in the 1950s and 1960s: under the broad heading of Yalta the topos of Western betrayal was becoming established. The alleged abandonment of Poland was the central plank of the indictment while those defenders of British policy who were not supporters of Stalin, adopted the “realist” defence
that the alliance and the Yalta agreement had been necessary to defeat Nazi Germany.22 The Yugoslav variant of the theme was the controversy about the British shift in support from Mihailović and the Četnik movement to Tito and the partisans. Fitzroy Maclean’s account of his 1943 discussion with Churchill (published in 1949) is probably the *locus classicus* of this kind of uneasy realism:

‘Do you intend,’ [Churchill] asked, ‘to make Yugoslavia your home after the war?’

‘No, Sir,’ I replied.

‘Neither do I,’ he said. ‘And that being so, the less you and I worry about the form of Government they set up, the better. That is for them to decide. What interests us is, which of them is doing most harm to the Germans?’23

However this famous exchange is judged (and Maclean is noticeably silent about the post-war massacres) the point here is that the broad anti-communist consensus of the following decades did not bring any fundamental rejection of its basic assumptions. Neither was there any real alignment between Western commemoration of the end of the war and that of the Yugoslav diasporas. The latter remained on the margins, fragmented, suspected (sometimes justifiably) of fascist sympathies, or at best tolerated. This went hand-in-hand with a partial rehabilitation of Tito in the West following the Cominform dispute which turned him into a semi-respectable figure with influential supporters in the West, (including Maclean himself). To Croat émigrés this compounded the earlier war-time betrayal of Bleiburg.24

This does not mean, of course, that those officials and soldiers who had witnessed the handovers or been involved in the decision-making had forgotten them, but their recollections took place outside the public sphere, transmitted orally as “communicative memory”, written in (as yet unpublished) diaries, or occasionally published to a limited audience, for example in regimental histories.25 It is clear from later accounts that some of them had been deeply troubled by what had happened and their own participation in it.26

One of the earliest published references, largely based on diaries, was in the memoirs of Harold Macmillan, published in 1967. As UK Political Advisor to General Alexander at Allied Forces Head Quarters (AFHQ) he had flown to Five Corps Headquarters in Klagenfurt at the height of the crisis on 13 May. In his diary (in connection with the presence in Austria of “Russians and Bulgar forces”) he refers to “about 40,000 Cossacks and ‘White’ Russians
with their wives and children.” Leaving aside the controversy about what he actually meant by “‘White’ Russians” - which played an important role in the later controversy – what is striking about the whole passage is surely the unflattering light it sheds on the author. Macmillan portrays the issue as a basic choice between humanity and expediency (as well as the political need to adhere to the Yalta agreement) and makes it clear that it was the latter which prevailed. It was decided to hand over the troops and civilians even though this meant “condemning them to slavery, torture and probably death.”

The inclusion of the passage in the memoir may be a tribute to Macmillan’s readiness to give an unvarnished picture of the truth or just a reflection of lack of any previous British discussion, which might have made him more cautious (presumably he was unaware of the publications in the diaspora communities). Perhaps this also explains why the passage apparently did not prompt any strong reactions, negative or positive. Although there was nothing in his memoirs about the Yugoslavs, probably because no decision was taken at Klagenfurt, in his diary Macmillan had referred to “thousands of so-called Ustashi or Chetniks, mostly with wives and children” who were “fleeing in panic into the area.” He went on to express suspicions that the labels covered not just clear-cut collaborators, but also those who “either because they are Roman Catholics or Conservative in politics, or for whatever cause are out of sympathy with revolutionary Communism and therefore labelled as Fascists or Nazis.” In the light of the killings Macmillan’s final comment – that the application of labels “is a very simple formula, which in a modified form is being tried, I observe in English politics” - may appear offensively flippant. But it can also be read as a British attempt to “domesticate” the exotic “otherness” of those troops the British were dealing with, and thus also a kind of Balkanisation of a conflict, which many British observers perceived as impenetrably confused.


At the risk of over-simplification, the changing patterns of “Bleiburg” commemoration after 1970 can be distilled into two main trends; firstly, the increasing possibilities of transnational communication, which began to undermine the East-West divide; secondly, shifts in western attitudes to the Soviet Union, which helped make détente possible but also brought growing criticism of it. Both brought the uniquely powerful voice of Alexander Solzhenitsyn into the centre of Western discussions. In the *Gulag Archipelago* (the first volume of which was smuggled out to the West and published in 1974) he discussed the treatment of the
“Vlasovites,” whom he had met in the camps, in order to understand what he called “a phenomenon totally unheard of in all world history”: “Several hundred thousand young men aged twenty to thirty took up arms against their Fatherland as allies of its most evil enemy.” Since their treason could not be explained biologically it had to have a “social cause.” After all “Well-fed horses don’t rampage...then picture to yourself a field in which starved, neglected, crazed horses are rampaging back and forth.”

Solzhenitsyn’s explanation lay, of course, in the extreme brutality of the Stalinist system, but he also launched a moral broadside against British and American leaders for supporting it by handing over its enemies to their destruction. In a BBC interview shortly afterwards Solzhenitsyn even compared this to the guilt of Nazi Germany or of European colonial powers, with the difference that the British guilt had yet to be expiated. Churchill’s decision was “an act of double-dealing consistent with the spirit of traditional English diplomacy.” But even as an act of duplicity the decision was baffling precisely since it appeared to run counter to western self-interest:

To us, in our Russian prison conversations their consistent short-sightedness and stupidity stood out as astonishingly obvious. How could they, in their decline from 1941 to 1945, fail to secure any guarantees whatever of the independence of Eastern Europe. . . . And what was the military or political sense in their surrendering to destruction at Stalin’s hands hundreds of thousands of armed Soviet citizens determined not to surrender...?

Several of Solzhenitsyn’s basic assumptions fed into further discussions; for example, the view if the hand-overs were not just as craven, but also irrational, which fostered later conspiracy theories; and the focus on the small group of émigré leaders who had fled Russia after the revolution and were not included in the terms of the Yalta agreement.

The force of Solzhenitsyn’s intervention was increased by the first historical accounts to make use of newly British archival resources, released under the terms of the 1967 Public Records Act. That lowered the time limit for the release of public files from fifty to thirty years (with some exceptions). Furthermore, from January 1972 documents relating to the Second World War, including the summer 1945 were also made accessible to researchers. The first work to exploit this liberalisation was The Last Secret by Nicholas Bethell (who had
translated Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* in 1971), which included graphic first-hand accounts both from survivors and the war diaries of the British units responsible for the hand-overs. Nevertheless Bethell was rather restrained in his criticism of British decision-makers, seeing them at worst as naive and (in a variant of the standard criticism of Yalta) mistaken in believing that failure to repatriate the Russians would encourage the Soviet government to break other clauses of the Yalta Agreement, which were “in political terms, far more important.” Bethell also argued that British decision had not been taken lightly and had followed a careful, painful weighing up of good and evil consequences. He thought that Solzhenitsyn would probably revise his own view in the light of the new evidence and concluded on a note of qualified optimism, and perhaps a reference to the arguments currently raging about détente, that later British governments might learn lessons about the importance of maintained Western values.

Nikolai Tolstoy’s *Victims of Yalta*, published shortly afterwards (1977), also drew heavily on the British archives as well as previously unpublished eye-witness accounts, but its engaged and polemical tone was closer to Solzhenitsyn than to Bethell. It was also closer to diaspora perceptions of the hand-overs; according to his own (later) account, Tolstoy’s grandfather had fought “alongside” the Cossacks in the Russian civil war and he might himself have been shared their fate if he and his sister had not escaped deportation in “war-time Austria.” He therefore felt a duty to expose those responsible for “the unauthorised deaths of his defenceless compatriots.” Unlike Bethell’s qualified optimism his closing question mark echoed Solzhenitsyn’s bafflement. Where he differed from Solzhenitsyn was that he saw the betrayal not as a collective national act, but the result of a conspiracy by a small group of senior British officers and politicians against the nation and its values. He concluded that they were continuing to cover up their criminal misdeeds.

Bethell and Tolstoy helped accelerate the debate in the British media and press. The domestic political context, following Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 election victory, may explain some of its intensity. Thatcher’s rhetoric implied a radical break with the consensual policies of her predecessors, known as “one nation conservatism” or derisively dismissed as “wet.” Abroad, Thatcher as “the iron lady,” stood for a hard line towards the Soviet Union and expressed the growing suspicion that détente had been a “one way street” to the benefit of the Soviet Union. This criticism allowed the British hand-overs to be seen, not just among conservatives, as part of a narrative of western pusillanimity. An indication of this was the unveiling of a
monument in 6 March 1982 to the victims of Yalta close to the Victoria and Albert Museum in central London (Bethell and Tolstoy also attended). According to inscription on the plinth the memorial

was placed here by members of all parties in both Houses of Parliament and by many other sympathisers in memory of the countless innocent men women and children from the Soviet Union and other East European States who were imprisoned and died at the hands of communist governments after being repatriated at the end of the Second World War. May they rest in peace.

Presumably in order to achieve as broad a consensus as possible) this wording left the question of agency open and made no reference at all to culpability. It also avoided stating clearly that all those handed over were in fact innocent and thus, arguably, avoided including members of the SS and other war criminals in its embrace. Similarly the sculpture by Angela Connor, which was installed (after the first memorial had been demolished by unknown actors), entitled “Twelve Responses to Tragedy,” consists of twelve figures, who might be vaguely identifiable as Eastern European or “Caucasian”, but do not appear to be soldiers.

The political edge may have been blunted in this inscription but it was clearly expressed elsewhere. For example John Joliffe, one of the supporters of the monument did not hesitate to accuse “the British government and their advisors of merciless inhumanity.” By this he meant “the hypocrisy and feebleness of progressive leftists who turned a blind eye to the communist enslavement of Eastern Europe.” This clearly did not include those senior Conservative figures like Churchill and Eden who had directed British foreign policy at the time. On the face of it this also excluded the more junior figure of Harold Macmillan who was now emerging as the “prime suspect” in the British discussion. Ennobled as Lord Stockton, Macmillan was the most senior figure still alive who had played some part in the decision-making of May 1945 (exactly what part was disputed). He also embodied the “wet” consensual brand of conservatism which was now under attack by Thatcherites. For his part, in a much publicised speech in November 1984, Macmillan compared the government’s privatisation policies to “selling off the family silver.” This may explain why direct attack on him by Tolstoy, first published in Encounter under the title “The Klagenfurt conspiracy” was now taken up on the “dry” fringes of the Conservative party. In 1986 the magazine of
the Federation of Young Conservatives published a cover page photograph of Macmillan (from 1945) with the superimposed question “Guilty of War Crimes?” In the course of the row which followed the party chairman Norman Tebbit ordered the magazine to be withdrawn.

5. Bleiburg returns to the Heimat

The swelling British controversy also had echoes in the German and Austrian media. The way Bleiburg was then (re)-imported can be seen as a “transnational moment” in which existing forms of commemoration and their associated values were changed but also validated. In some ways the often self-critical British debate endorsed the sense of righteous grievance expressed in diaspora commemoration. For example a Cossack veterans’ journal welcomed the London memorial as a recognition, however belated, of Cossack suffering, even though it emphasised that nothing could make them forget the “suffering and death of countless comrades in Siberia.” Karl-Gottfried Vierkorn, one of the most active Cossack spokesmen, urged his comrades to accept the British gesture as a fitting if belated memorial to “our cruelly killed German and Cossack comrades in the Siberian earth.” He also cited Jolliffe’s explanation that the project had been inspired by Brandt’s famous gesture of abnegation (Kniefall) at the Warsaw ghetto. Although he implied that the comparison might appear provocative to his fellow veterans Brandt’s acceptance of German guilt was evidently less objectionable to Vierkorn in this context than the implication that British had accepted their guilt for a crime which was comparable with that of Poland’s Jews. Vierkorn’s comment also points to the way that diaspora and Heimat commemoration were now becoming aligned. On the extreme right of the Heimat spectrum British action was now being established as an allied war crime, its criminal status confirmed by the British themselves; it featured alongside the bombing of Dresden and the Katyn massacre in an Allies “hall of infamy”. In the words of the Carinthian journalist Ingomar Pust it was “one of the biggest and hitherto unexpiated crimes of human history.” Andreas Mölzer wrote in a similar vein.

This perspective, albeit somewhat toned down, began to influence more mainstream accounts. In the relevant part of Hugo Portisch’s acclaimed series Österreich II, for example,
two strands are intertwined. One is the story of western weakness at Yalta, which is linked (rather tenuously) to Austrian neutrality and the question of repatriations payments. The other, as suggested by the chapter title “the overrun country” (“das überlaufene Land”), is the theme of a small country overwhelmed by three million foreigners. Admittedly Portisch concludes with the moderately liberal comment that the country had “survived” this experience (“Und das Land hat es ausgehalten” (359)), but what is striking is the absence of any Austrian actors. When it comes to the Cossacks, Portisch’s account comes tantalisingly close to the important but neglected point that the leadership of the Cossacks was in the hands of German and Austrian officers (“Rahmenpersonal”). But in the interview with one of those officers, the Carinthian landowner Leopold Goess, the focus is firmly on Cossack suffering and British duplicity. Goess’s explanation for the large number of Austrian officers takes readers (listeners) back to the well-known stereotype of Austrians as able to “deal with foreign peoples better than the Prussians.” Yet Goess would have been a valuable witness on the basic question which has rarely been posed in the Austrian discussion: what did the Cossacks do before they arrived in Carinthia? The widespread image of exotic soldiers, motivated only by a love of freedom and a hatred of communism, could hardly have survived even a brief look at the memoirs of Goess’s fellow officer Erwein zu Eltz, *Mit den Kosaken*. As well as detailing Cossack depredations in Croatia (Slavonia) these privately published diaries also point to the responsibility of the German and Austrian leaders of the Cossacks. The omission of this perspective is not an accident. Goess himself showed this when he helped integrate the Cossacks into Carinthian Heimat commemoration. As the sponsor of the Ulrichsberg commemoration site he lobbied for recognition of the Cossacks as “Slavs who were linked by fate” (“schicksalverbundenen Slawen”). In 1991 a memorial plaque to Helmuth von Pannwitz (the commander of the 15th Cossack Cavalry Corps was erected in the groove of honour/Ehrenhain.

By the 1980s diaspora commemoration of a different kind was also beginning influence the Yugoslav discussion. While the communist party establishment blocked any discussion one of the earliest and most trenchant interventions came in the memoirs of the veteran communist dissident Milovan Djilas. In it Djilas also raised the “puzzle” of British decision-making, though in a different form than Solzhenitsyn, when he commented that he and his fellow partisan leaders had not understood why the British had agreed to hand over their enemies since “the great majority of the people the British forced back from Austria
were simple peasants.”49 The steady erosion of Yugoslavia’s federal structures following Tito’s death shortly afterwards provided more space for survivor testimony, including that of the diaspora. Although open discussion of the post-war massacres and Croat victimhood had been silenced after the repression of the “Croat spring” in the early 1970s, subterranean links between Croatian revisionists continued. They expanded in the late 1980s when the former communist military historian and later Croatian president Franjo Tudjman visited Canada. He and émigré historians and activists like Antje Belo agreed that Bleiburg had been a genocide which fitted into a malign anti-Croat Greater Serb tradition.50 Meanwhile in Slovenia a first step towards discussion had been taken in 1975 when Edvard Kočbek published his indictment of the post-war massacres of the Domobranci in a Triest magazine.51 Kočbek’s criticism was taken up in the 1980s by among others the writer Drago Jančar and the editors of the journal Nova Revija, who called for a scrutiny of the post-war killings in the name of national (Slovene) reconciliation.52 The British discussion - both Nikolai Tolstoy and the attack by the British journalist, Nora Beloff on Tito’s “flawed legacy” - also had some impact on this developing Slovene discussion.53

At the end of the 1980s some of these strands came together in a London courtroom. Lord Aldington, who as Toby Low had been the second most senior British officer in Carinthia, sued Nikolai Tolstoy for libel. His action was triggered by a flyer which Tolstoy (and Nigel Watts) had distributed widely and which repeated many of the charges already contained in Tolstoy’s book The Minister and the Massacres. It implied that Aldington’s failure to respond to them meant he was unable to defend himself against the claim that he was “a major war criminal, whose activities merit comparison with those of the worst butchers of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia.”54 By taking legal action Aldington was perhaps accepting the logic of this last point, but his subsequent victory in court and the award of record 1.5 million pounds damages (with legal costs) hardly ended the controversy in the way he wanted. Although the six week trial did mean that for the first time members of the British military and political establishment rubbed shoulders with Serb, Croat and Slovene émigrés including survivors of the hand-overs (or their children and grandchildren), procedural and legal constraints meant that it never became anything like a truth and reconciliation commission. Many observers saw the verdict as proof of a corrupt judicial process, an establishment cover-up, collective national denial or an attempt to limit freedom of speech.55
6. Post-script

The discussions of the hand-overs in the twenty years since the Tolstoy-Aldington trial cannot easily be summarised. One reason it is hard to detect a pattern is the sheer volume of material which the internet has now made accessible. Googling “Bleiburg massacre”, for example, produces nearly 8,000 hits while “victims of Yalta” leads to over 60,000. It seems doubtful that this volume of opinion, in which every view spawns countless refutations and clones, has in sum produced more “open-minded and even-handed use of the evidence.” The greatest such contribution was surely the work of the unofficial “Cowgill Inquiry” though it, like the outcome of the Aldington-Tolstoy trial, has also been criticised as an establishment cover-up.

Nevertheless four tentative concluding comments can be offered here. Firstly, as diaspora Yugoslav perspectives “returned” to the disintegrating Yugoslav state they injected a further historical element into an increasingly hate-filled discussion. As Robert Hayden puts it, the post-war massacres emerged “from secret history to public knowledge.” Ante Beljo, for example, moved from Canada to Zagreb where the Croatian Information Centre provided him with an institutional base for organising symposia (including one at Bleiburg itself). Of course, the equation of Stalinist crimes with the Holocaust was not limited to Yugoslavia but it was only there that the competitive historical arithmetic of victimhood linked to actual revenge or retribution. While Milošević’s policies were seen by Tudjman and his supporters as the continuation of Bleiburg, the hand-overs of May 1945 were probably less central to a Serb narrative which glorified the Četnik resistance, equated modern Croatia with the Ustaša State and concluded that the break-up of Bosnia was both inevitable and necessary. In Slovenia a government commission was set up to investigate the massacres but public opinion was and continues to be deeply divided.

Secondly, the perception of the Cossacks as victims *tout court* seems now to be well established in mainstream Austrian (Carinthian) commemoration. Most accounts include, in various proportions, moral outrage, empathetic accounts of the horrors of the hand-overs and a residual bafflement about the reasons for the British decisions. Most of them also portray the Cossacks (and to a lesser extent the Yugoslavs) as passive victims, whose previous careers beyond their suffering under communism are of little interest. In some of the work of
Stefan Karner, for example, Cossack victimhood is conflated with that of other quite different groups like forced labourers from Eastern Europe. In an article he co-wrote with Susanne Hartl the “kidnapped” German Carinthians of May 1945 are also integrated into a narrative which in some respects echoes Ingmar Pust: here, too, there is a basic dichotomy between bestial partisans and their British helpers on their one hand, and their victims on the other.66 Austrians are also clearly included in the constructed community of victims when Karner lists the fate of the Cossacks along other Soviet misdeeds in Austria (dismantling, the USIA industries, plundering, rape). Unlike the Red Army they are not “alien” (“die landfremden Truppen”).67 This “austrianisation” of the Cossacks is also evident in some local histories of the places where the Cossacks were quartered, or handed over (like Judenburg or Lienz). The Heimat here is portrayed as intact and pristine before being suddenly violated by an arbitrary and cruel outside world.68 Although it would be unfair to charge Karner with altogether ignoring Nazi policy (such as the 1942 deportations of the Carinthian Slovenes), the relationship between them and the events of 1945 is not explored. What dominates Carinthia’s “real” history is Yugoslavia’s double attempt to incorporate Southern Carinthia.69 Austrians may appear as horrified observers but are also rarely agents, let alone perpetrators. Where there is Austrian agency it takes the form of humanitarian intervention on behalf of those threatened with return. Peter Ruggenthaler and Walter Iber even detect this in Austrian naturalisation policy. They suggest - in the face of much contrary evidence of the hostility of politicians and press towards Displaced Persons (of all kinds) - that one of its main aims was to keep Soviet refugees or displaced persons out of the clutches of the Soviet authorities.70

Thirdly, the hand-overs are also now embedded in some levels of western (British) “cultural memory” even if not in the form of the national expiation called for by Solzhenitsyn. In the James Bond film Goldeneye, for example, Lienz returns to haunt the British secret service in the form of a renegade agent Alec Trevelyan (played by Sean Bean). Trevelyan betrays Britain because Britain has betrayed his Cossacks parents at Lienz.71 Another less well-known example is Robin Chapman’s novel Wartimes: two stories of World War Two, (London 1995) which is described on the cover as a work “of the imagination rooted in fact.” The “facts” emerge through an encounter between Tonya, a Russian translator (of Cossack-Serb extraction) and the British Major Kemp. Tonya explains that the Cossacks fought with
the Germans “but not against the British or the Americans....They are too proud to be told what to do by anyone. And they have kept their faith in God” (p. 152). Kemp becomes sympathetic to the Cossacks as events move to what the cover calls “the purest of tragedies in which all were innocent except the powers above them.” This pitting of the humane middle-ranking officer against the ruthlessness of the high-ups can be seen as a variant of Tolstoy’s juxtaposition of the ordinary horrified soldier and officer and the more senior conspirators. It is also evident in a more recent fictional depiction of forced repatriation broadcast in a recent episode of the BBC detective series Foyle’s War. In this case the attempt to repatriate an émigré Cossack from a prisoner-of-war camp triggers a murder investigation. Thesetting, the British coastal resort of Hastings, is far from Bleiburg, but the narrative is not so distant from the topos of the sullied Heimat and here too the Cossacks appear unambiguously as victims. According to the summary in the Guardian, although the war is over, Inspector Foyle “is still attempting to keep the streets of Hastings clean.” And in the end his detective work and stubbornness mean that the values of humanitarianism prevail.

Fourthly, the unpredictability or arbitrariness of commemoration in the internet age, creates a link from Bleiburg to Grozny and the Chechen war. In 2006 the London memorial to the victims of Yalta became the focal point of World Chechen Day, commemorating Stalin’s deportation of the Chechens to Central Asia in 1944 which resulted in the thousands of deaths. There were speakers from all religious groups (Christian, Jewish, Islamic) and celebrities like Vanessa Redgrave, who told the meeting that “the Kremlin’s Genocide of Chechen people has been accepted by Europeans leaders [sic] to the shame of us all, citizens of Europe.” This might suggest a pattern of ecumenical humanitarianism pitted against tyranny but the associated blogs and links undermine any such neatness. In one of them the Chechen leader Shamil Basayev recalls not just the mass deportations of 1944 but also the struggles against the Tsar by “his legendary namesake, Shamil.” Here the Cossacks reappear at least by implication, but as enforcers of Tsarist rule rather than victims of Stalin.

Overall the post-war trajectory of Bleiburg commemorations suggests that while different commemorations (Heimat, diaspora, western establishment) did increasingly cross national borders, it was the national context which predominated throughout. Nations, real, imagined or hoped for, were implicated, not necessarily deliberately in a competition of victimhood in which Nazi and Ustaša crimes functioned sometimes as a bench-mark, sometimes as a competitive irritant. The other point of reference for victimhood, the Yalta conference, was
applied increasingly promiscuously so that groups who were either not discussed at the Yalta conference at all or were actively engaged in fighting against the states represented there were labelled “victims of Yalta.” The motif of western treachery, originally applied to Poland became extended so that it covered a multitude of sins, including the tricks used by the British Army to implement the hand-overs. In the process British decision-making, which the evidence suggests was if anything over-determined rather than mysterious, became the subject of a variety of conspiracy theories. Last but not least, mythical Cossacks were privileged over actual Cossacks; the war-time career of those handed over (and their German and Austrian officers) was neglected and the far larger number of Cossacks who fought and died in the Red Army in order to defeat Nazi Germany were almost completely ignored.

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8 Hockenos, Homeland, 28, 62 (note 5).


12 Volkszeitung, 12. 10. 1960 (An der Grenze nicht Bunker, sondern Kultur!) (“dass es ohne den Freiheitskampf der Kärntner keine Volksabstimmung gegeben hätte.”)


78. According to table 1 out of a total of 263 arrested 96 were not seen again, out of the 180 who were arrested in the Bleiburg area, 64 never returned.

16Karl Newole (Landesamtsdirektor) to Marcus Leitmaier (BKA AA), 13.8.1949, covering Gutachten über das Memorandum des jugoslawischen Aussenministeriums etc ÖStA, AdR, BKA/AA, II-pol (Staatsvertrag 2c), Zl. 86.397, (GZl. 80.797-pol/49) (emphasis added). Newole was strongly resisting a Yugoslav call for an extensive Slovene autonomy based on the 1910 census results.


19_Volkszeitung_, 30.4.1960 (40,000 Kosaken bedrohten Oberkärnten).

20 Theodor Veiter, _Das Recht der Volksgruppen und Sprachminderheiten in Österreich_ Vienna 1970, 703.


22 Donald Cameron Watt, Britain and the Historiography of the Yalta Conference and the Cold War,’ in: _Diplomatic History_ 13 (1989) 1, 77-81.


24 Hockenos, _Homeland_, (note 5) 62.


33 Scammell (note 31, 899), implies that Solzhenitsyn thought almost the entire émigré population of one and a half million or two million had been repatriated.


41 Kosaken-Schatten über England in: Nachrichten der Kameradschaft des XV. Kossaken-Kavalerie Korps, 34, 6 ("das späte Einsehen in der britischen Öffentlichkeit ist durchaus beifallswürdig und achtbar – vergessen lassen sich die Leiden und der Tod ungezählter Kameraden in Siberien dadurch aber nicht.")


43 Ingomar Pust, Titostern über Kärnten 1942-1945: Todgeschwiegene Tragödien, Klagenfurt 1984, 212. ("eines der grossen und bisher ungesühnten Verbrechen der Menschheitsgeschichte.")


44 Andreas Mölzer, Kärntner Freiheit, Ein österreichischer Sonderfall, Vienna/Munich 1990, 183-188.


50 Ante Beljo, Yugoslavia Genocide: a documented Analysis, Sudbury 1985; David Bruce Macdonald, Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the


54 Four page flyer, War crimes and the Wardenship of Winchester College n.d. [1989] in possession of author. The flyer also saw a disparity between the British Ministry of Defence enquiry into allegations that Kurt Waldheim had been involved in the deaths of two British soldiers and the failure to act against “the man proved beyond any doubt to have played a decisive and unrepentant role in the massacre of 70,000 men, women and children.”


56 As of 21 December 2010.


58 Mitchell, Price (note 55).


*Die Presse* 24. 2. 2001 (Stefan Karner über Vorgespräche mit den Russischen Partnern).

Stefan Karner, Zur Auslieferung der Kosaken an die Sowjets 1945 in: Johann Andritsch (ed.), *Judenburg 1945 in Augenzeugenberichten*, Judenburg 2004, 243-259; in his introduction Andritsch lists the Cossacks handed over, alongside the first refugee camp set up by the British for *Ost-Juden*, the mass rapes, and the transition to democracy by the end of the year.


On the other hand Claudio Magris’s fictional story of the Cossack leader Peter Krasnov (*Mutmaßungen über einen Säbel*, Vienna 1986) often appears closer to the “real Cossacks” than some historical writing and journalism.