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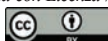
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VSEBINA / INDICE GENERALE / CONTENTS

**Janez Mlinar:** The Role of Ironmaking in a Premodern Rural Community. The Example of the Weissenfels Lordship ..... 117  
*Il ruolo della siderurgia nella comunità rurale di premoderna.*  
*L'esempio della signoria di Weissenfels*  
*Vloga železarstva v predmoderni ruralni skupnosti.*  
*Primer gospostva Weissenfels*

**Gašper Oitzl:** Migrations and Identities in Ironmaking in the Slovenian Territory during the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period ..... 133  
*Migrazioni e identità nella siderurgia*  
*in Slovenia tra tardo Medioevo e prima*  
*età moderna*  
*Migracije in identitete v železarstvu na Slovenskem*  
*v poznem srednjem in zgodnjem*  
*novem veku*

**Sabine Rutar:** Mining as Maritime History? The Coalmine in Sečovelje from Fascist Beginnings to the Early Cold War ..... 151  
*L'estrazione mineraria come storia marittima?*  
*La miniera di carbone di Sicciole (Sečovelje, Slovenia)*  
*dagli esordi del fascismo ai primi anni della guerra fredda*  
*Rudarstvo kot pomorska zgodovina?*  
*Premogovnik v Sečovljah od fašističnih začetkov do*  
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|                                                                                                                                                         |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Andrea Negro:</b> On the Side of Production Waste:<br>Doctors and Occupational Medicine in Support<br>of Sick Miners between Belgium and Italy ..... | 177 |
| <i>Dalla parte degli scarti di produzione.</i>                                                                                                          |     |
| <i>I medici e la medicina del lavoro a sostegno</i>                                                                                                     |     |
| <i>dei minatori malati tra il Belgio e l'Italia</i>                                                                                                     |     |
| <i>Na strani proizvodnih odpadkov.</i>                                                                                                                  |     |
| <i>Zdravniki in delovna medicina v podporo bolnim rudarjem</i>                                                                                          |     |
| <i>med Belgijo in Italijo</i>                                                                                                                           |     |

|                                                                                                                                                                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Resul Babaoğlu, Emin Alp Malkoç &amp; Feyza Kurnaz Şahin:</b><br>“A Coal Stain Is Hard to Remove”: Türkiye’s Mining Agenda f<br>rom the Perspective of the Humor Magazines ..... | 197 |
| <i>“La macchia di carbone è difficile da rimuovere”:</i>                                                                                                                            |     |
| <i>il programma minerario della Turchia dalla prospettiva</i>                                                                                                                       |     |
| <i>delle riviste umoristiche (1960–1980)</i>                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <i>»Madež od premoga je težko odstraniti«:</i>                                                                                                                                      |     |
| <i>turška rudarska agenda z vidika humorističnih revij</i>                                                                                                                          |     |
| <i>(1960–1980)</i>                                                                                                                                                                  |     |

|                                                                                                                                                                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Jan Babnik:</b> Visual Economy of Sameness:<br>Photography of Miners and of Mining Labor<br>in Slovenian Photoreportage of the Twentieth<br>and Early Twenty-First Centuries ..... | 241 |
| <i>Economia visiva dell’uniformità: la fotografia dei minatori</i>                                                                                                                    |     |
| <i>e del lavoro minerario nel fotoreportage sloveno del XX</i>                                                                                                                        |     |
| <i>e dei primi decenni del XXI secolo</i>                                                                                                                                             |     |
| <i>Vizualna ekonomija istosti: fotografija rudarjev</i>                                                                                                                               |     |
| <i>in rudarskega dela v slovenski fotoreportaži</i>                                                                                                                                   |     |
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## MINING AS MARITIME HISTORY? THE COALMINE IN SEČOVLJE FROM FASCIST BEGINNINGS TO THE EARLY COLD WAR

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### ABSTRACT

*The author traces the twentieth-century history of the coalmine in Sečovlje in northwestern Istria, with a focus on the early Cold War. Methodologically, she connects the Lefebvrian concept of place with the territory–place–scale–network (TPSN) framework proposed by Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones. During the scarce four decades of the mine's existence (late 1930s–early 1970s), its history was defined, on the one hand, by volatile political borders, while on the other hand, it was marked by the environmental border between the land and the sea, as the coal was extracted in the immediate vicinity of the saltpans that Sečovlje and Piran are famous for.*

*Keywords: Sečovlje, coal mine, Cold War, borders, Istria*

## L'ESTRAZIONE MINERARIA COME STORIA MARITTIMA? LA MINIERA DI CARBONE DI SEČOVLJE/SICCIOLE DAGLI ESORDI DEL FASCISMO AI PRIMI ANNI DELLA GUERRA FREDDA

### SINTESI

*L'autrice ricostruisce la storia novecentesca della miniera di carbone di Sečovlje/Sicciole, nell'Istria nordoccidentale, con particolare attenzione ai primi anni della Guerra Fredda. Dal punto di vista metodologico, l'autrice collega il concetto lefebvrino di luogo con il quadro teorico territorio–luogo–scala–rete (TPSN) proposto da Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner e Martin Jones. Nei circa quattro decenni di esistenza della miniera (dalla fine degli anni Trenta ai primi anni Settanta), la sua storia fu definita, da un lato, da confini politici instabili, mentre dall'altro fu segnata dal confine ambientale tra terra e mare, poiché il carbone veniva estratto nelle immediate vicinanze delle saline per cui Sicciole e Piran/Pirano sono famose.*

*Parole chiave: Sečovlje/Sicciole, miniera di carbone, Guerra Fredda, confini, Istria*

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In this study, I focus on the Lefebvrian concept of *place* in tracing the twentieth-century history of the coalmine in Sečovlje/Siccirole in northwestern Istria. Methodologically, I connect Henri Lefebvre's historically contingent 'interconnections, distortions, displacements, mutual interactions, and [...] links with the spatial practice' (Lefebvre, 1991) with the recent 'complexity shift' in border studies (Wille et al., 2024). The latter has, to my knowledge, not addressed any place characterized by such volatile borders as were present in the northeastern Adriatic in the course of the twentieth century. I borrow from Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones' theory of sociospatial relations, the so-called territory–place–scale–network (TPSN) framework (Jessop, Brenner & Jones, 2008), which recently has been fruitfully applied to the Polish–German–Czech energy borderland (Bembnista & Gailing, 2025).

The TPSN framework was proposed as a basis for complex inquiries into, among other matters, 'sociospatial organization such as capitalist economies' (Jessop, Brenner & Jones, 2008, 390). While the authors argued that their four sociospatial dimensions are 'the most salient in work on contemporary political-economic restructuring', they conceded that one additionally important focus may lie on the environment or nature (Jessop, Brenner & Jones, 2008, 392). In the following, I use the Lefebvrian concept of *place* that the coalmine of Sečovlje was to show that Jessop, Brenner, and Jones were correct in their assumption. The tiny coal mine on the Adriatic coast is a case where volatile political economies and a pivotal environmental factor were entangled. While I include the early history of the mine in the interwar period in my argument, as well as its legacies, my empirical focus lies on the early Cold War, including, as sources, regional and Yugoslav newspapers, regional institutional sources, the company files, and CIA reports. The result of this inquiry turned out to posit more questions than it can answer.

The coal mine in Sečovlje was a peculiar case of a small, short-lived industry in a place riddled by borders. During the scarce four decades of its existence between the 1930s and the 1970s, its history was defined, on the one hand, by *political* borders that changed more than once. On the other hand, it was marked by the *environmental* border between the land and the sea. Coal was extracted in the immediate neighbourhood of the salt extracting industry that Sečovlje and the area's main town, Piran/Pirano, have been famous for for centuries. Marine salt extraction and coal extraction literally overlapped, as one of the mine's tunnels reached under the sea.

1 The research for this study was done in the framework of the ERC 2021 Advanced Grant funding scheme / ERC Grant Agreement n. 101054963, *OPEN BORDERS: Cold War Europe Beyond Borders. A Transnational History of Cross-Border Practices in the Alps-Adriatic area from World War II to the present*. I sincerely thank Damir Gregorič from Sečovlje for generously sharing his private archive with me.

In global history, both salt and coal have played a central role. Both have been tagged as ‘gold’ and played pivotal roles in times of war. Salt, the ‘white gold’, was one of the earliest commodities to be traded and the first one over which states held a monopoly; salt taxes were used to finance wars. Coal, the ‘black gold’, obtained parallel features when it became the by far most important energy resource of the industrial age. Coal deposits were often exploited by state-owned companies. Coal too fuelled wars (Kurlansky, 2003; Brüggemeier, 2018). In Sečovlje, the two industries met in one place.

### A VERY LONG AND A VERY SHORT INDUSTRIAL HISTORY: SALT AND COAL IN SEČOVLJE

Sečovlje is located at the border between Slovenia and Croatia, south of Piran and Portorož/Portorose. The border is marked by the Dragonja River and has been a matter of dispute stemming from post-Second World War changes in the land registry districts as well as changes in fluvial morphology (Pipan, 2008; Zajc, 2018). When it comes to salt and coal, the contrast could hardly be larger: The saltpans today are an important, if jeopardized, part of the local identity, whereas the adjacent premises of the coalmine have decayed into what is habitually called a ‘lost place’.

Two historical postcards illustrate the moment, in between late imperial Habsburg times and the 1930s, when the coal industry arrived on the local scene. The older photograph, taken after 1902, shows a view of the saltpans and the sea, with the caption *Siccirole. Saline e Stazione Ferroviaria* (Saltpans and Railway Station, Fig. 1). The newer one, from after 1935, shows the same view, now centred on the coalmine. *Saluti da Siccirole* (Greetings from Siccirole), it says, and somebody added the word *miniera* (mine) by hand (Fig. 2). Whoever did this thought they needed to point it out – the mine, after all, was new. The railway station is visible in the second postcard as well, but had acquired a different function. The *Parenzana* or *Porečanka* railway, which had connected Trieste/Trst with Poreč/Parenzo in Istria between 1902 and 1935, had been dismantled, and the Sečovlje station had become the headquarters of the mine’s administration.

According to the legend, Piran was built on salt. For centuries, the sea salt from Istrian shores was a sought after luxury product in Europe. In the late thirteenth century, when the first salt works of Istria were established in Sečovlje, the Venetians held the salt monopoly in the Upper Adriatic. Under the Habsburgs, who declared the Piranese salt as their monopoly at the end of Napoleonic Wars, its market reach became even larger (Colombo, 2011). In the nineteenth century, the saltworks came to spread over 500 hectares, feeding about five hundred families. From the 1860s, a chemical industry based on salt extraction developed, producing ammonia, soap, and glas (Guštin, 2015). Portorož developed into a health and seaside resort. In 1910, Orazio Pupini, the head physician of the sanatorium, underlined the local salt’s exceptionally high quality.



Fig. 1: A view of the Sečovlje saltpans and the station of the Parenzana railway, before the First World War (courtesy of Damir Gregorič).

He declared 'Portorose as a saltwater spa' to be 'unique among the similar spas in the monarchy, and even on the continent' (Pupini, 1910, 16).

After the First World War and with Austria-Hungary's demise, Italy took over Trieste and Istria in 1918/20. The amount of extracted salt increased further, but there were signs that new times had arrived. According to a melancholic report in the *Archeografo Triestino* of 1930/31, salt now was harvested at the expense of nature and traditional craftsmanship, 'modern salt works, without houses and without life, where salt comes into existence when God wills it and is harvested only once a year' (Danielis, 1930–1931, 411).

While the Second World War all but halted salt extraction, it was revived after the war, when the region was gradually taken over by Yugoslavia (Šuligoj, 2015). This revival did not mean that the 'new times' would go away. The saltworks' ecological micro-arrangements with the Dragonja River had been altered by humans several times during their long history. Controlling the river was key, as it was the freshwater source for the salt production, and its sediments substantial constructing the saltpans. The Slovene government too intervened to further industrialize salt extraction. Also, in the 1960s at the latest, the direct connection between the healthy brine and the tourists visiting the Yugoslav seaside broke with the arrival of mass tourism. At the same time, it became harder for the marine salt from Sečovlje to assert itself economically. On the domestic market, the mineral salt from Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina had become a main competitor, while globally African salt arrived on European markets. When in 1968 a water protection wall broke

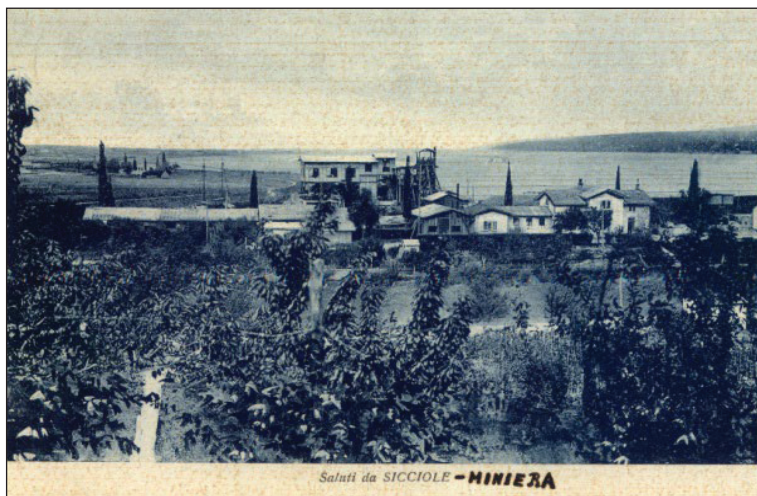


*Fig. 2: The view of the Sečovlje salt pans obstructed by the coalmine, probably second half of 1930s (courtesy of Damir Gregorič).*

in the southern part of the Sečovlje salt pans, this led to the termination of production in that part, roughly halving the area of salt extraction (Matušin, 2021; Bradašević, 2015).

In 1988, *Soline Pridelava soli d.o.o.* was founded, the company still in charge today. Subsequent efforts concerned the environment. In 1990, a landscape park was established and, in 1993, an area of 6.5 square kilometres with the salt pans at its centre was protected under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. In 1999, Slovenia recognized the saltworks as its national heritage site. After Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004, the landscape park became a part of the EU's Natura 2000 network of protected areas (Topole & Pipan, 2022).

Becoming a national heritage site, salt extraction was detached from market constraints and returned to traditional craftsmanship, which requires hard work, patience and modesty. Some of today's saltworkers practice their profession as part of a generations-spanning family tradition. They produce a niche product, so the profit is very modest. The rest of the salt pans, where salt harvesting was terminated at the end of the 1960s, has become a haven of biodiversity. Shimmering white in the summer months, rimmed by reed plants and halophytes, it is home to about ninety species of birds, with twice as many using the former salt pans as a resting place (Faganel & Trnavčević, 2012; Glavaš & Kovač 2015; Topole & Pipan, 2022; Slowenien, 2015; Muzej solinarstva, 2026).

The situation remains fragile. The protection of the Sv. Jernej/St. Bartolomeo canal, like of the premises of the coal mine, has been less successful. Sailing and motor boats use the canal as berths, often illegally. Visibly abandoned boats can also

be seen there. Sečovlje's maritime landscape is threatened by typically neoliberal privatisation schemes. The line of conflict runs between local actors and external investors. The latter have built houses that are bigger than the local drainage system can manage; they would like to deepen the canal in order to allow bigger ships to access and speak about larger fishing companies and of enlarging the nearby small airport, built in 1973 for private small aircraft and sightseeing flights. However, beyond such human interference into this delicate ecosystem, the saltworks are jeopardized much more fundamentally: by the rise of the sea level as a consequence of climate change (Janko Spreizer & Kolega, 2020; Pipan & Topole, 2021).

The decades under the fascist Italian and the socialist Yugoslav and Slovene governments were difficult periods in the salt pans' history in terms of both human and environmental tolls. Twentieth-century salt extraction in Istria does not lend itself much to positive identification. For the adjacent coal mine, this time span is *all* it has to offer. Coal extraction started in the late 1930s and was terminated at the beginning of the 1970s. The commodification of salt extraction heritage has focused on protecting both its Habsburg history since the nineteenth century, when salt-connected tourism started, and its delicate ecosystem. Such tourist-oriented commodification seems to be key for the local identity, and this promotion frame could be the reason why the coal mine has remained, as of yet, a 'lost place' (Fig. 3). In any case, the history of the 'short twentieth century' of these two core local industries remains largely unwritten, let alone in an entangled manner of sociospatial relations. This article is but a first attempt at thinking the two industries together.



Fig. 3: The Sečovlje coalmine in 2011: a 'lost place' (Wikimedia Commons).

## FASCISM, IMPERIALISM, AND WAR: ITALY'S NEW COAL MINE ON THE ADRIATIC COAST

After the First World War, the northeastern Adriatic became a part of the Italian state. It was here, specifically in Rijeka/Fiume, that fascism had one of its earliest manifestations, long before Benito Mussolini came to power in October 1922 (Klabjan & Bajc, 2021). Italy took a great interest in the Istrian coal as it had only few deposits at its disposal. In the nineteenth century, the coal from Labin/Albona in southeastern Istria had powered steamships going between the Istrian coastal towns as well as the steam engines industrializing Trieste. When this coal fell to Italy, it was pivotal to the Fascist regime's schemes, as its infrastructural initiatives in Istria testify; Italy not only built streets, waterpipes and electricity lines, but, between 1936 and 1942, also two model mining towns, Raša/Arsia and Podlabin/Pozzo Littorio (Canali, 2006).

After Italy invaded Abyssinia (today's Ethiopia) in October 1935, it began to strive for economic autarchy, which made the Istrian coal deposits even more important. The state-owned Italian Coal Company (*Azienda Carboni Italiani*), founded in July 1935 in Rome, acquired the monopoly over the Sardinian Coal Mining Company (*Società mineraria carbonifera sarda*), founded in 1933 to exploit the Sardinian deposits, and the Arsa Coal Joint Stock Company (*Società anonima carbonifera Arsa*), founded in Trieste in 1919, when Italy took over the Austrian management of the Istrian mines (Bišić-Martinčić, 2024). This was also the moment when soundings for the coal deposits in Sečovlje began.

If the melancholic observer of the salt pans in the 1930/31 *Archeografo Tries­tino* noted the disrespect for the environment and craftsmanship in salt extraction in the Fascist period, an analogous development occurred in the coal mines. In Labin, during Habsburg times, coal had been for decades extracted above the ground water level. Starting in 1924, the Italians dug much deeper tunnels, in the depths of 300 to 500 metres, risking water contamination. Ruthlessly enforced industrialization persisted, and in 1939, the close to 9,000 miners extracted more than one million tonnes of coal. The miners, who in Habsburg times certainly had not been treated fairly, paid a very high price: Safety precautions were neglected, the work rhythm was relentless, exhaustion led to errors, qualified personnel was missing, fatal accidents happened with increased frequency.<sup>2</sup> On 28 February 1940, disaster struck; a coal dust explosion claimed the lives of 185 men and injured another 146 – one of the most devastating accidents in Italian industrial history, considering lives lost (Millo & Vinci, 1981; 1985).

In Sečovlje, coal mining had never seen extraction at the level of Labin. Here, things *started* with schemes of enforced exploitation in the service of

2 On the dire working conditions in late Habsburg times, including child labour, in the mine in Labin, cf. Martinuzzi (2008).

Italian imperialism and plans for economic autarchy. In 1935, the *Società carbonifera* started field soundings and dug about five kilometres of tunnels. In depths between 100 and close to 600 metres coal seams were found that were between three centimetres and three metres thick, upon which mining engineers and miners were brought in from Italy. In 1936, they constructed the shaft, and in June 1937, coal extraction began. The longest tunnel reached 265 metres deep; by 1938, some 300 miners worked in three shifts (Pletikosić, 2006, 300).

Two sociospatial border-crossing entanglements are noteworthy here: with Italy's colonial history and with the sea. Italy started probing Sečovelje's coal deposits in the same year it invaded Abyssinia. In the same year, it also gave up the narrow gauge railway that had connected Trieste and Poreč since 1902 – Austria-Hungary's longest narrow gauge railway line. It is unclear whether Italians really transported the tracks to Abyssinia.<sup>3</sup> The African country did lack both roads and railways, and Italy did transport a lot of construction materials there (Mallet, 2015). The tracks of the *Parenzana* may well have been among these.

In any case, the railway station (Figs. 1–2) had just lost its function and now housed the administrative offices of the *Società anonima carbonifera di Arsa*. For more than three decades, the railway had transported both agricultural and industrial goods between Istria and Trieste. Much as the *Parenzana* had suffered from the loss of former Habsburg markets, the world economic crisis and the introduction of bus connections, its dismantling still meant a de-modernization for Istria, which saw an upsurge in poverty-related emigration after the train connection was lost. Had the railway still existed, it might have facilitated the transport of materials to and from the mine-to-be (Brate, 2007; Roselli, 1987).

Coal extraction started in 1937. Given the railway was defunct, the mine's choice most probably were the same boats that the saltworks used for their produce, pointing at a shared transport history for salt and coal (Bonifacio, 2019). When, after the war, the Yugoslav Communist Party newspaper *Borba* announced that the Sečovelje mine would be reopened, it too mentioned that 'coal is to be shipped by sea, for it will be possible to bring coal barges right up to the separator'.<sup>4</sup>

As in Labin, in Sečovelje too the recklessness with which the *Società carbonifera* acted took its toll. In terms of sociospatiality, here the border between the land and the sea was concerned. After only a few years of coal extraction, in the winter of 1940/41, thirteen saltpans suffered severe

3 In 1999, Slovenian director Karpo Godina made a short film about this alleged transport of the tracks to Abyssinia, titled *Abesinija* (Godina, 1999).

4 CIA, CIA-RDP80-00809A000700030607-3, 'Build Hydroelectric Power Plants; Resume Exploitation of Coal Mines', 4 January 1952.

damage. A tunnel had been dug right under them, connecting coal mining once more to maritime history. The mining company refused to conduct repairs to restore the saltpans, but ironically, the case was helped by the war. In 1942, the mine had to reduce its operation to two shifts only because many of its male workers were conscripted, and the tunnel reaching under the sea was closed. The dispute remained unresolved, however, and in November 1942 was brought before a Trieste court, where no decision had been reached by the time Italy capitulated in September 1943 (Pletikosić, 2006, 300; Ratkajec, 2012, 123–134).

*Political* borders did not disturb the first few years of coal extraction. The mine was in Italy, exploited by Italy, and the personnel, the skilled miners at least, had largely come from other parts of Italy. Opening this mine fit with fascist Italy's policies of economic autarchy; and given that Italy was poor in coal deposits, it made sense to dig for coal in Sečovlje. The mine was part of Italy's industrialization under fascist ideology and economic policy.

For the scarce two years of German occupation (1943–45) that followed Italy's capitulation, a labour camp of the Organisation Todt is documented in Sečovlje (Lavoro Forzato, 2026). Italy being largely dependent on German coal, the Germans sought to keep the Istrian mines running (Wedekind, 2003, 165). In Sečovlje, in August 1944, the Yugoslav Partisans destroyed much of the mining equipment with the help of the miners. They stole a quantity of explosives, with which they blew up several bridges in the vicinity. From then on, at the latest, the mine had problems with electric power supplies so that the water pumps could not operate sufficiently. The tunnels filled with water, and coal extraction became impossible (Pirih, 2015, 119).

## THE COAL MINE DURING THE EARLY COLD WAR

Environmental border issues had characterized the Sečovlje coal mine from the beginning. During the Cold War, however, borders of a fast changing political-economic nature also became salient. In February 1947, Italy and Yugoslavia signed a peace treaty, which assigned the districts of Koper/Capodistria and Buje/Buie to Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste (FTT), while Trieste and its surroundings made up Zone A (Fig. 3). The treaty was ratified in September 1947. Only in October 1954, by the London Memorandum, Zone B of the FTT became part of Yugoslavia and Zone A part of Italy, while the state border was finally ratified by the Treaty of Osimo in November 1975, that is after the coal mine ceased to operate (Pirjevec, Bajc & Klabjan, 2006; Zaccaria, 2018).



Fig. 4: The Free Territory of Trieste (FTT), 1947–54 (Wikimedia Commons). The red-dotted line was the border between Zones A and B of the FTT and is today's border between Slovenia and Italy. The black-dotted line was the border between the FTT and Yugoslavia. The white-dotted line was the border between the FTT and Yugoslavia and is today's border between Slovenia and Italy. The grey-dotted line was the border between the FTT and Italy. The border between the districts of Koper and Buje in Zone B corresponded roughly to the river Dragonja and is today's disputed border between Slovenia and Croatia.

In the aftermath of the war, the mining premises in Sečovlje remained inactive. Only when the signing of the peace treaty was imminent, which would assign the coalmines in Labin and Raša to Yugoslavia, there was some activity in Sečovlje too: The newly-founded *Istarski ugljenokopi Raša* that succeeded the *Società anonima carbonifera di Arsa*, dismantled Sečovlje's metal mining-tower and transported it to Raša (Orlović, 2019, doc. 23). Evidently, there was no plan to re-vitalize the small, partially destroyed and flooded mine on the Slovenian seashore, which now belonged to the Yugoslav-administered Zone B of the FTT, separating it from the larger coal mines in southeastern Istria, which took up coal extraction shortly thereafter.

The peace treaty attempted squaring the circle: It foresaw the FTT to be demilitarized and neutral, governed by an individual who was no citizen of either the FTT, Italy, or Yugoslavia. At the same, Italy and Yugoslavia were both obliged to keep infrastructures running as before. Provisions were formulated to 'provide arrangements which shall facilitate the movement across the frontiers between the Free Territory and the adjacent areas of Yugoslavia and Italy of foodstuffs and other categories of commodities which have customarily moved between those areas in local trade.'<sup>5</sup>

It may be this formulation that provided one good reason to re-start coal extraction in Sečovlje as part of the FTT. Many existing companies continued to operate, albeit changing their names, owners, workforce and structures, and were often unsuccessful in the longer run. The demographic and political changes were a huge challenge. Many factories and workshops were cut off from their headquarters in Trieste or in Italy – which was the case both of the Sečovlje saltpans and the defunct coal mine. Things were the same in the other Istrian mines, now in Yugoslavia. However, matters also remained volatile on another basic level, as the UN Security Council could not agree on a governor, and never would.<sup>6</sup>

In the first year of the FTT's existence, both the Italians and the Yugoslavs started withdrawing economic means – capital, industrial interests and material – from Zone A and Zone B respectively. From an American perspective, by the beginning of 1948, the effect of this on Zone B was more serious than on Zone A: 'Yugoslav action in damaging and removing industrial and agricultural equipment has greatly aggravated already deteriorating conditions. The United States Political Advisor in Trieste suggests that the Yugoslavs denuded their zone in the belief that they were creating problems for the future governor, not for themselves.'<sup>7</sup> However, by then the initial optimism that an FTT governor would be successfully appointed any time soon had all but evaporated.<sup>8</sup>

5 Treaty of Peace with Italy. Annex IX, Part C, 10 February 1947.

6 Intelligence Review, 59, 3. 4. 1947: The Security Council and Trieste, 17–24.

7 Intelligence Review, 102, 5. 2. 1948: Economic Problems in the Free Territory of Trieste, 14–15.

8 Intelligence Review, 104, 19. 2. 1948: The Situation in the Balkans, Trieste, Greece, and Turkey, 54, 57–59.

Shortly after, the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, known as the Tito-Stalin-split, in June 1948, changed Yugoslavia's position drastically (Jakovina & Previšić, 2020). For Zone B of the FTT this had repercussions both in terms of border surveillance and economic policy. By February 1949, the number of Yugoslav troops in Zone B, which had been reduced to 3,000, were brought back up to the maximum of 5,000 that the Peace Treaty allowed (Orlović, 2019, docs. 51, 70).

In parallel to heightened military alert prompted by the cessation of Soviet support, Yugoslavia began its rapprochement to the Allied administration of Zone A. It now paid attention not to give reason for complaints at the UN, and, quite opposite to its previous policy, sought to raise Zone B's economic level, in spite of the situation continuing to look volatile (Orlović, 2019, doc. 53). In March 1950, a customs union between Yugoslavia and Zone B was proclaimed, following recent relaxation of travel restrictions, which had given 'Yugoslavs relative freedom of movement between Yugoslavia and Zone B' (Orlović, 2019, doc. 132). Similar measures had already been applied between Italy and Zone A, so this was the moment when attempts at increased integration of the two Zones with their adjacent countries stopped ensuing retaliatory acts between the countries. Introducing this customs union, Yugoslavia initially increased the securitization of the border between Zone B and Zone A, anticipating Yugoslav citizens using Zone B as an escape route to Zone A (Orlović, 2019, doc. 132). Towards the end of 1950, however, this border regime was loosened again, when civilian custom guards replaced the military (Orlović, 2019, docs. 157, 160–161).

This was the context in which works began in Sečovlje that aimed to resume coal extraction. The company *Rudnik črnega premoga Sečovlje* was established on 7 November 1950 by a decree of the Slovenian government and had its headquarters in Sečovlje (PAK PI-193, 36, Pravila, čl. 1–2). The Zagreb-based Communist Party newspaper *Borba* announced on 9 October 1951:

*In 1950, work began on restoring the black-coal mine in Secovje [sic], on the Istrian peninsula, near the seacoast. Its coal is on a par with the coal in the Rasa [sic] mine. The Secovje mine was first opened by Italy when it occupied Istria, but was poorly operated, for scarcely anything was done to fill and make safe the places from which coal was extracted. This resulted in galleries and gangways becoming flooded. An auxiliary shaft to the upper gallery has been excavated to facilitate installation of a pumping station which is to be completed by mid-November [1951].<sup>9</sup>*

9 The excerpt from the newspaper is contained in a CIA report of a few months later. (CIA-RDP80-00809A000700030607-3, 'Build Hydroelectric Power Plants. Resume Exploitation of Coal Mines'. 4 January 1952).

More than one million cubic metres of water were drained from the mine tunnels.<sup>10</sup> The original plan to start coal extraction by September 1950 proved too ambitious,<sup>11</sup> as in November of that year the water had still not been pumped out successfully.<sup>12</sup> The hazardous entanglement with the sea re-started immediately. How to dig under the sea? How to manage the mine's water drainage, 'an immense amount [...], [of] freshwater, but usable only industrially'<sup>13</sup>? The Yugoslavs declared to do better than the Italians who 'did not protect the mine enough from the danger of the water, despite the fact that the Dragonja River runs above the mining and that it [a tunnel] is located almost beneath the sea.'<sup>14</sup> In May 1954, Slovenia's water management administration in Ljubljana would allow the mine to pump out the water into the old Dragonja riverbed and ultimately into the sea, mimicking Italy's practice between 1937 and 1945:

*The mine cannot operate unless the mine water is pumped out. This water will probably be so clean that no special measures will be necessary. Water may leak from the separation, which is not only excessively loaded with clay, but may also contain large quantities of coal in grains and powder. The lost coal represents economic damage and can also harm the surrounding area. Therefore, the necessary measures will be prescribed later, when it is clear what quantities of coal are involved and what damage the waste water is causing.*<sup>15</sup>

When this permission was issued, three years of struggle against the water in the mine had just been completed. When this endeavour was taken up in 1950, a water pump and other necessary equipment was brought in from the mines in Raša and Trbovlje. The rhetoric that accompanied the work was one of Yugoslavia helping Zone B towards prosperity. Importantly, in March 1951, the self-management system was introduced, which triggered strong protests from Italy. Maybe this was the strongest sign of how decidedly Yugoslavia had started to treat Zone B as if it was a part of the country (Fig. 5) (Orlović, 2019, doc. 255).

10 Istrski tednik, 14. 10. 1950: Borba z vodo za premog. Rudarji iz Sečjöl so s črpanjem vode iz rudnika že 430 m pod zemljo. In 1954, the amount of 10 million cubic metres is mentioned: Slovenski Jadran, 26. 11. 1954: V rudniku črnega diamanta.

11 La nostra lotta, 22. 4. 1950: Il piano economico nella sua realizzazione. Inizio dei lavori di ripristino alla maniera di antracite di Sicciole.

12 Istrski tednik, 4. 11. 1950: Zakaj nimajo sičoveljski rudarji boljše delovne pogoje.

13 Slovenski Jadran, 26. 11. 1954: V rudniku črnega diamanta.

14 Istrski tednik, 3. 3. 1951: O Sečoveljskem premogovniku. Ne bo nam manjkalo premoga.

15 PAK PI-193, 111, Uprava za vodno gospodarstvo LRS, Ljubljana, Rudnik črnega premoga Sičovelje – odpadna voda, 14. 5. 1954.



Fig. 5: The memorial plaque reads, in Slovene and Italian: 'Factories to the workers! On 25 March 1951, the workers' collective of the Sečovlje mine took the administration of the company into their own hands' (photo: courtesy of Damir Gregorič).

Things did not go smoothly. A report on the huge investments Yugoslavia had made in Zone B given at a Koper District Committee meeting at the end of October 1951 declared them as largely ineffective:

*The reactivation of the Sicole [sic] coal mines, which was to be completed by the end of 1951, will not be completed at the time despite the expenditure of 11,000,000 dinars on the project. On 31 July 1951, the production of salt has reached only 10,000 tonnes or 40 per cent of the 1951 plan. Because of a lack of machinery, no salt refining was done. Production of soap, lime and bricks did not meet the set quota. [...] Six million dinars were spent on electrification in Zone B and results have been even poorer since the experts from Ljubljana took over the project. (Orlović, 2019, doc. 189)*

In June 1952, the tone of an article in *La nostra lotta*, a regional Italian language weekly that began publication in 1948, is one of outright annoyance:

*For the time being, silence, in Siccirole, silence because of the lack of pumps. On the caressing fingers of the 'great mother', oh so worried about the fate of the brothers in Zone B, grow pointed nails behind a mask of hypocrisy. If she [Yugoslavia] were effectively worried about the brothers*



Fig. 6: March 1951: Workers posing in front of the improvised wooden mining tower on the occasion of the introduction of self-management. Coal extraction had not started yet (Source: courtesy of Damir Gregorič).

*in Zone B, she would send them the pump for their mine, for which an advance was paid already in July 1951 [...]. It is one thing to chatter about the homeland and about 'our hearts are breaking', and another to get down to business concretely.*<sup>16</sup>

As it transpires, the re-opening of the mine was stalled for the better part of a year due to the lack of machinery. The workers, not being able to continue the drainage, started building miners' houses instead.<sup>17</sup>

It is unclear what motivated the Yugoslav and Slovene governments. The odds were not really in the tiny mine's favour. A highly ideologized article in *Istrski tednik*, a weekly published in 1950 and 1951 by the Koper section of the National Liberation Movement, framed the mine's significance in very locally rooted terms. The re-starting of the coal extraction would be 'a new step towards our further progress, because we will provide our factories with large amounts of energy, which they are lacking.'<sup>18</sup> *La nostra lotta*, on the other hand, announced that the mine 'would not only provide for internal needs, but also

16 *La nostra lotta*, 23. 6. 1952: Siccirole. Mentre nella miniera regna il silenzio vede l'alba il villaggio operaio.

17 *La nostra lotta*, 23. 6. 1952: Siccirole. Mentre nella miniera regna il silenzio vede l'alba il villaggio operaio.

18 *Istrski tednik*, 28. 4. 1950: 300 ton premoga nam zagotavlja premogovnik v Sečovljah.

export will flourish, with excellent prospects for trade exchange.’<sup>19</sup> The moment the mine started extracting coal again, in October 1953, first with very small quantities, the same newspaper repeated: ‘Currently, the whole production is used up by companies in Zone B. When production will have reached normal quotas, important business with northern Italy is envisaged.’<sup>20</sup>

Business with northern Italy may have been not too far from the actually existing economic hopes. The split with Stalin had changed the qualities of the borders between Yugoslavia, Italy and the FTT, making them somewhat more porous. On the one hand, the split had cut standing economic relations, and on the other hand it had enforced others which previously had been ideologically less opportune. Until 1948, as part of Moscow’s scheme, Yugoslavia had sent copper, iron, pyrite, canvas, flax, corn, and coal to Czechoslovakia, where especially the ores were critical to heavy industry. In return, Czechoslovakia had shipped machinery and other material goods to Yugoslavia. After Yugoslavia’s exit from the Cominform, Czechoslovakia had stopped to deliver any mining equipment.<sup>21</sup>

The Americans observed that Italy was not interested in Trieste – it being one port city among many in the country – but Istria’s mineral resources:

*[A] great portion of Italy industrially is dependent on coal imported from Yugoslavia. [...] the real significance of the Trieste question lies in the minerals entombed in the surrounding territory, for the Port of Trieste has no practical value to Italy. Immediately after WWII, one of the chief sources of commodities for Yugoslavia was Italian industry. Purchases were made on a barter basis through which Yugoslavia exchanged her coal to Italy for finished products.*<sup>22</sup>

This was corroborated by the *Slovenski Jadran*, the weekly that replaced the *Istrski tednik* in 1952. It drew a direct line between prewar and postwar times:

*There is a great demand for this coal today, especially in Trieste and northern Italy, where they were the largest consumers even before the war, and where the furnaces and other devices are adapted to this type of coal. Therefore, under normal conditions, it is expected that the mine will export about three quarters of its total production, while the remainder will cover domestic needs. Export is also supported by the fact that we have cheap maritime connections, which is extremely important in such transports.*<sup>23</sup>

19 La nostra lotta, 3. 6. 1950: Procedono alacremente i lavori per il riattamento della miniera di Siccirole.

20 La nostra lotta, 3. 11. 1953: In lotta contro l’acqua per la conquista del calore.

21 CIA, CIA-RDP82-00457R000300760006-8, ‘Survey of the Coal Industry in Yugoslavia’, 28 July 1950; cf. CIA, CIA-RDP82-00047R000300690002-0, ‘The Trieste Question/Politics/Resistance/Status of Macedonia/Possible Solution to the Balkan Question’, 3 February 1954.

22 CIA, CIA-RDP82-00047R000300690002-0, ‘The Trieste Question/Politics/Resistance/Status of Macedonia/Possible Solution to the Balkan Question’, 3 February 1954.

23 Slovenski Jadran, 26. 11. 1954: V rudniku črnega diamanta.

Yugoslavia is said to have established a ‘barter basis’ with Italy right after the war’s end – and long before the split with Stalin – exchanging manufactured goods for coal. Northern Italy is said to have remained economically dependent on these deliveries. After the loss of the Soviet Union’s support, this exchange was to be strengthened. Possibly, this was the reason why the Yugoslavs thought it a good idea to invest in the small, defunct mine in Sečovelje. Before the signing of the peace treaty, Italy had made several attempts at territorial bargaining that support this argument. Istria contained what had been Italy’s major resources of bauxite and coal (Mellinato, 2013, 94–110). In 1946, Italian Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi attempted to secure the coal and bauxite deposits by offering the Yugoslavs the cities of Rijeka and Zadar/Zara as well as the Dalmatian coast. This did not satisfy Yugoslav Prime Minister Josip Broz Tito, who at the time was aiming also for Trieste and the whole of Venezia Giulia. And Tito too had the mineral resources in sight.<sup>24</sup> The border conflict thus was centrally about who would gain access to Istria’s coal and ore deposits, while the exchange of commodities across the borders never seems to have stopped.<sup>25</sup>

When it came to what internationalizing Trieste would mean, both countries argued with the city’s economic ties to the surrounding lands. The Yugoslavs felt confident enough to ask for a Yugoslav governor, for a customs and monetary union between the FTT and Yugoslavia, a common railway network managed by Yugoslavia, a Yugoslav free zone in the port of Trieste under sole Yugoslav jurisdiction, and a Yugoslav representation abroad for the Free Territory. The Italians, on their part, suggested the same kind of ties of the FTT with Italy, which meant that they suggested a post-fascist continuation of how things had been since 1918.<sup>26</sup>

Despite of all this, it remains questionable that the decision to re-open the Sečovelje mine was predominantly economically motivated, because another factor has to be considered: that of manpower. It was lacking in the Yugoslav mining industries – and in other industries as well. In Istria people and knowhow had gone missing – both had moved across the border to Trieste or to Italy – so that production generally was modest. The shortage in workers, especially skilled ones, was serious. Yugoslavia’s low level of mechanization both in industry and in agriculture meant that many hands were needed in both. As of 1949, the country’s coal mines operated with only sixty-five per cent of the required personnel, with postwar reconstruction still ongoing in many places. During the harvest seasons, those recruited into the mines deserted. For 1950, a CIA report mentioned how ‘production had fallen so steeply that the Yugoslav Communist Party, for the first time in its history, called upon

24 Intelligence Review, 3, 28. 2. 1946: Venezia Giulia: Area of Dispute, 30–36.

25 Intelligence Review, 1, 14. 2. 1946: Commission to Study Italo-Yugoslav Boundary Problem, 61–63.

26 Intelligence Review, 26, 8. 8. 1946: Yugoslav-Italian Border Settlement Complicated, 32–34.

Party members to leave their office and work in the mines.’ With this measure, ‘the mining industry succeeded in covering the basic coal requirements of the railroads.’ Still, ‘in Croatia alone [...] over 90,000 industrial workers and miners have to be found if the 1949 level of production is to be maintained.’ The Yugoslav government resorted to even stricter laws of obligatory labour that also involved political prisoners and German prisoners of war, in an attempt to force miners to stay at their workplaces in spite of the harsh conditions and poor food.<sup>27</sup>

Seasonal workplace desertion is documented also in Sečovlje. Before 1954, when the mine was in the Free Territory of Trieste, the majority of employees were recruited in the immediate vicinity of the village, among them many salt workers, who went back to the saltworks during spring and summer (Pletikosić, 2006, 309). This group of workers, engaged in extracting both the ‘white’ and the ‘black gold’, amounts to another piece of the saltworks’ and the mine’s common sociospatial industrial history.

Also the rest of the unskilled workforce at the beginning of the mine’s drainage lived in Zone B, most of them in the Koper district, and a few in the Buje district. The few skilled miners who knew how to operate the pump came from Raša and Trbovlje (Pletikosić, 2006, 305). When the start of coal extraction was finally in sight, in April 1953, *Slovenski Jadran* advertised positions for a mining engineer, various administrative workers, a mechanic with mining experience for leading the technical workshop, a wood turner, a mechanical locksmith with experience in pumps and compressors, and two electricians capable of working with high voltages. Ideally, all were to be proficient in both Slovene and Italian.<sup>28</sup>

A few days before the first wagon of coal would be extracted on 10 October 1953, there still was ‘a lot of talk in the mine about the staff. The base will be made up of old miners who once worked here. The less experienced ones will [...] learn from the older ones. [...] So far, they have already organized a course for how to use the water pumps, and they will soon organize a course for machinists.’<sup>29</sup> In addition to 110 men between eighteen and forty-five years of age there were ‘two engineers, five technicians, seven administrative employees and two student interns.’<sup>30</sup> A year later, this number had risen to 240.<sup>31</sup>

*La nostra lotta* published an almost bucolic account of the mine that ‘after eight years of sleep [...] wakes up under a sky full of good wishes’, making it clear how it had been the local men who had accomplished things here.

27 CIA, CIA-RDP82-00457R005300760006-8, ‘Survey of the Coal Industry in Yugoslavia’, 28 July 1950; Orlović, 2019, doc. 214.

28 Slovenski Jadran, 10. 4. 1953: Rudnik črnega premoga Sečovlje – Koper rabi za svoj obrat.

29 Slovenski Jadran, 2. 10. 1953: Črno zlato v borbi z vodo.

30 La nostra lotta, 3. 11. 1953: In lotta contro l’acqua per la conquista del calore.

31 Slovenski Jadran, 26. 11. 1954: V rudniku črnega diamanta.

It evoked the ‘saltworkers [...] who walked up the street [...] simple people who have made labour the goal of their lives’ and continued its impressionist description bringing the ‘black, almost stubby, form of the castle of the extraction well of the Siccirole mine’ into sight, to then eloquently praise the ‘incredible amount’ of labour that the men had invested there to reach their goal: to extract coal again.<sup>32</sup>

All this happened while the territorial confrontation between Rome and Belgrade over the Free Territory of Trieste threatened to escalate. Its de facto non-implementation due to the failure to appoint a governor by the autumn of 1953 risked military escalation (de Leonardis, 1992). As, with the signing of the London Memorandum in October 1954, Zone B became part of Yugoslavia, emigration from Zone B increased significantly. In subsequent years, a protracted immigration from other parts of Yugoslavia ensued – the situation remained precarious in many ways. Importantly, the struggle for enough workers was far from over. By the 1960s, the number of unskilled workers who had arrived from the southern parts of Yugoslavia to Istria exceeded the local ones (Pletikosić, 2006, 305), mirroring Yugoslavia’s trends in the south-north inner migration (Kržišnik Bukić, 2010). Unskilled workers now made up about half of all employees (Pletikosić, 2006, 307).

Shortly after the ratification of the London Memorandum, the Sečovlje mine bought a diesel locomotive from the German enterprise *Demag*, one of the world’s largest mining machinery construction firms. This speaks of great plans, for this was too expensive machinery to be thought of as a short-lived investment. In 1961, the mine ordered spare parts of various sorts from the same company. An engineer translated into Slovene the complex German instructions that had come with the delivery on how to operate the locomotive.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, a discussion was ongoing about what was needed to make profit in the long run: a thermoelectric plant that would guarantee stable energy supplies. It was to be fired by the mine’s carbon tailings that could not be used otherwise. In order to operate the pumps that kept the water out of the tunnels, the mine needed as much electricity per day as the rest of the entire Koper district. Arriving at a point where the mine would use its own tailings to secure its energy needs seemed to make much sense.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, while machinery was updated, a new separation was built and eventually also a new metal mining tower replaced the improvised wooden one, it never came to the building of a thermoelectric plant that would have secured

32 La nostra lotta, 3. 11. 1953: In lotta contro l’acqua per la conquista del calore.

33 PAK PI-193, 108, Demag – Aktiengesellschaft, Wetter (Ruhr), Demag Diesellok Nr. 3188, 31. 12. 1954; Navodilo za delo z jamsko dizel lokomotivo, prevedel ing. Čermelj; Anleitung für das Anlassen der Diesellok ML 20 in Grubenausführung; Hinweise für das Fahrpersonal der Diesellok L 20, die unbedingt zu beachten sind; Rezervni deli za Diesel lokomotivo LM 20 firme DEMAG, Duisburg, 18. 5. 1961; Ersatzteile zur Diesellokomotive MI 20, 5. 5. 1961.

34 Slovenski Jadran, 26. 11. 1954: V rudniku črnega diamanta.

the mine's energy needs. The mine continued to work in perpetuated precariousness when it came to keeping the water out. It took only a few years before, in 1957, unusually heavy April rains sufficed to spell disaster. The Karst landscape being porous, it seems that underground accumulation basins overflowed and merged with the waters that habitually threatened the mine's tunnels. The pumps did not manage, creating a panic among the miners, but luckily there were no casualties when the mine was flooded yet again. The almost 400 miners remained out of work. In a first moment of desperation, doubts were expressed whether it would be worth the effort to drain the mine once again.<sup>35</sup>

But then it took less than a year to re-start coal extraction.<sup>36</sup> In the following decade, Sečovlje saw its longest uninterrupted operational phase. In 1962, it reached its postwar peak of 26,000 tonnes of coal. However, the European era of coal was waning, as oil had begun to replace coal as the most important, and cheapest, carbon fossil. In Sečovlje, production stagnated and then decreased. Lower extraction meant a decreasing number of workers and a decreasing possibility for maintenance. In September 1972, water filled the mine again, and now it was too expensive to drain the mine once more. The ailing mine was abandoned for good (Pletikosić, 2006).

## CONCLUSION: TERRITORY, PLACE, SCALE, NETWORK – AND MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

This study gives insights into the local industrial history of coalmining in early Cold War Sečovlje. It also summarizes the early history of this mine during the interwar period, and the legacies of both coal mining and salt harvesting today. The study is an exploration of the TPSN framework, proposed by Jessop, Brenner, and Jones. It certainly raises more questions than it answers, thereby pointing to interesting prospects for further research into what an entangled microhistory of extractive industries on the northeastern Adriatic seashore is.

The maritime location of the tiny mine is as peculiar as its relative economic insignificance and seeming geopolitical cross-border economic entanglements, which await further research. The mine's overall history features several enigmatic decisions: Firstly, the Italians, who started extracting coal there in the second half of the 1930s, in 1935 dismantled the narrow gauge railway between Poreč and Trieste that could have been a useful vehicle for coal transport. Secondly, the Yugoslavs in 1947 dismantled the metal mining tower that could have been useful a few years later, when coal extraction began again. Thirdly, they closed the mine in 1972. A year later, with the oil

35 Slovenski Jadran, 29. 4. 1957: Epopeja požrtvovalnosti.

36 Slovenski Jadran, 7. 2. 1958: Poplačani napori rudarjev v Sečovljah.

crisis, coal was again in great demand, albeit short-lived, and Sečovlje could have profited from this development. While this history of ‘wrong decisions’ already speaks to the usefulness of the TSPN framework for studying the sociospatial dimensions of political-economic restructuring, also the further findings of this study illustrate how Sečovlje’s sociospatiality merits attention: a tiny (=scale) mine in a contested border region (=territory), characterized by everchanging demographic and political changes (=networks), and not least, situated adjacent to the sea (=place), which makes it a topic of maritime environmental and also infrastructural history.

The TPSN framework also helps in understanding how the Sečovlje mine has largely fallen through all epistemological trap doors. For the past thirty-five years, if not longer, Istria’s history has been divided up among Slovene and Croatian historians. Sečovlje being so small compared to the mines in Labin and Raša in Croatia, hardly any scholar has extended their interest in Istria’s mining history to include the industry on the Slovene coast. The study by Pletikosić (2006) is a two-decade-old notable exception; in most other studies, Sečovlje is mentioned in passing, if at all. In a similar manner, Istria’s mines have largely also fallen out of the sight of Italian scholars of fascism, colonialism, and war, let alone of later developments. To my knowledge, the postwar cross-border coal connection between Yugoslavia and northern Italy, inferred to by my sources, has received little to no historiographic attention. It is one of the key aspects of this history worth pursuing further in the archives, as it will help diversifying the Cold War history of the region, but also more generally.

The maritime location of the mine made (re-)opening it seem unreasonable to start with. At the same time, it is this peculiarity that makes the idea to further entangle the two extractive industries’ history very interesting. Coal and salt share a maritime transport history, and the salt pans and the coal mine literally stood in each other’s way, as is symbolized most forcefully by the tunnel dug under the sea and the questions connected to fresh water and the Dragonja River, vital for both industries.

Not least, they also share a history of labour: A short film with the telling title *Črno in belo*, (Black and White), directed by Jane Kavčič in 1967, gives a glimpse into the heroized worlds of labour of socialist Yugoslavia (Kavčič, 1967).<sup>37</sup> It has a musical soundscape, but no words are spoken apart from a leisure scene at the end. The focus is on the rhythmic parallel worlds of extracting salt from the sea and coal from the ground. The film was produced at the moment of the mine’s last peak and visually reaches a point where the difference between the extraction of the ‘black’ and ‘white gold’ seems as nothing but their colour. The new metal mining-tower, from which the camera catches a magnificent view of the sea and the salt pans,

37 The film is available on YouTube.

captures the vision of solid plans for a bright future, which did exist, but, as I showed, never came to fruition.

Reading this ‘maritime mine’s’ history simply as following the rhythm of the larger history of coal mining in Europe, or of the Cold War, or of socialist Yugoslavia, is possibly hiding more interesting questions. Among these are the Cold War cross-border practices this article could only so much hint at; the mine’s economic dependence on geopolitical shifts; and, not lastly, its entanglements and perpetuated struggles with its maritime environment, which may, in fact, turn out to be quite unique.

## RUDARSTVO KOT POMORSKA ZGODOVINA? PREMOGOVNIK V SEČOVLJAH OD FAŠISTIČNIH ZAČETKOV DO ZGODNJE HLADNE VOJNE

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### POVZETEK

*Članek rekonstruira zgodovino majhnega premogovnika v Sečovljah. Osredotoča se na zgodnje obdobje hladne vojne in na prepletanje političnih, gospodarskih in okoljskih meja v zgodovini rudnika. Metodološko združuje koncept prostora (place) Henrija Lefebvra z metodološkim okvirjem teritorij – prostor – merilo – omrežje (TPSN), ki so ga nedavno predstavili: Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner in Martin Jones. V Sečovljah se je pridobivanje premoga začelo pod fašistično Italijo leta 1937, v okviru njene avtarkične in imperialne gospodarske politike. Obalna lega rudnika je povzročala nenehne tehnične težave in konflikte s sosednjimi solinami zaradi kopanja predorov pod morjem in poplavljanja. Po vojnem uničenju in opustitvi rudnika so ga jugoslovanske oblasti od leta 1950 začele obnavljati in oživljati, saj so si, po sporu med Titom in Stalinom, prizadevale vse bolj vključiti Cono B Svobodnega tržaškega ozemlja v Jugoslavijo. Na ponovno odprtje rudnika niso vplivale le lokalne potrebe po fosilnih gorivih, temveč tudi očitna pričakovanja čezmejne trgovine s Trstom in severno Italijo. Članek zagovarja tezo, da navidezna obrobnost Sečovelj zakriva doslej neraziskano zgodovino nadnacionalnih gospodarskih povezav z Italijo v zgodnjih poveljnih letih porajajoče se hladne vojne.*

*Ključne besede: Sečovlje, premogovnik, hladna vojna, meje, Istra*

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