

CONFERENCE

THE SYSTEM OF CARE AND EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE ITALIAN AND GERMAN OCCUPATION SYSTEM IN SLOVENIA 1941–1945



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In the spirit of contemporary inclusion and respect for difference, a look into the past reminds us that people with special needs were not only an overlooked topic in historical narratives, but also a subject about which we still know little or almost nothing, despite the existence of systems of care and education. In the first Yugoslavia, Ljubljana had the only school for deaf children in Slovenia, as well as a school for blind children. There were two schools for children with learning disabilities in Slovenia, located in Ljubljana and Maribor. A system of care for adults with special needs was also established. With the outbreak of World War II and the occupation of Slovenia, this system of care was restructured, with significant differences between the Italian and German occupation systems. The very notion of “care” is paradoxical under occupation—both regimes committed war crimes on Slovene soil—yet a legal-administrative system of social and educational “care” for civilians was nonetheless put in place.

King Victor Emmanuel III’s order of 3 May 1941, annexing the Province of Ljubljana to the Kingdom of Italy, promised the region—given its small Slovene population—“an autonomous structure” attentive to local ethnic, geographic, and other particularities, such as special needs. However, this order was issued for propaganda purposes, intended to highlight the supposedly more tolerant attitude of the Italian occupiers towards the Slovenian nation compared to the German occupiers. In reality, this “tolerance” was merely superficial, as the true intention of the Italian occupiers was to integrate the territory as fully as possible into the Italian fascist system, a process for which the Italian occupation authorities



anticipated a prolonged period. The Ljubljana Province was headed by High Commissioner Emilio Grazioli, who, due to the unfavourable personnel situation in Italy, retained the officials of the former Ban's administration. He maintained the same organisational structure of the departments of the High Commissioner's Office as that of the Ban's administration. There were eight departments, and the High Commissioner appointed his own "expert", an Italian, to each. The fascist occupation regime and the wartime situation also required the establishment of new offices, which were led exclusively by Italians and which implemented fascism under the guise of care, assistance, and engagement in the social field. On 11 November 1942, the High Commissioner's order establishing the Provincial Association for the Protection of Mothers and Children in Ljubljana was published in the Official Gazette of the Ljubljana Province. This organisation served as an umbrella body for the professional social and health protection of children and mothers throughout the Ljubljana Province. At the same time, it was an instrument of fascism.

Its field of activity also included assistance and protection for deaf and blind children, children with physical and mental disabilities, and children with educational problems. These children received assistance in the form of clothing, footwear, and food. The association carried out its tasks with funds transferred each year by the National Institution for the Protection of Mothers and Children, as well as any income from property, elections, gifts, or any funds transferred by the High Commissariat. Persons of Jewish origin were excluded from the care system.

While Slovenian historiography has produced extensive research and writing on childcare and maternal care during the Italian occupation of the Ljubljana Province, this does not extend to the system of care for adults with special needs. The aforementioned conference provides an opportunity for such research.

The Nazi regime aimed to standardise the administration of the temporary provincial administrative units, both in content and form, with that of the neighbouring Austrian provinces. They intended to achieve this standardisation in form even before the planned formal and legal annexation of Lower Styria and Upper Styria to the German Reich, or to the provinces of Styria and Carinthia.



As the administrative areas there were districts rather than counties, they prepared to establish the same structure in the occupied Slovenian areas. The administration in the new districts was headed by political commissars, who were directly subordinate to the heads of the civil administration. Even before the formation of the districts, they held the same powers in the districts and in the cities of Maribor, Ptuj, and Celje as the heads of the civil administration for Lower Štajerska, Gorenjska, and the Meža Valley. They also led the general administration and self-government. Their offices had a different, temporary organisational structure. Their areas of responsibility also included social welfare, youth care, and health care. The organisation of public welfare was determined by two orders. The order of 2 July 1941 regulated public welfare for the areas of Gorenjska and Carinthia. In Lower Styria, the public welfare regulations that had been in force in the Reichsgau of Styria since 3 September 1938 came into effect on 1 April 1942. All agreements on the management of hospitals and surgical institutions concluded by the welfare offices of the Reichsgau of Styria with the administrations of hospitals and surgical institutions, as well as with the Association of German Health Insurance Funds (Kassenärztliche Vereinigung Deutschlands - KVD), also came into effect. The implementation of public welfare was the responsibility of the district and county welfare offices, except for tasks reserved for the provincial welfare offices. The head of the county welfare office in the city municipality of Maribor was the Oberbürgermeister, while in the provincial districts it was the provincial council. The Gau's guardianship office was responsible for the care, feeding, treatment, and nursing of mentally ill, "feeble-minded", disabled, deaf, blind, and otherwise handicapped persons in need, if their institutionalisation was necessary. This obligation was limited to minors and to persons who, due to the nature of their disability, had to be cared for in special institutions. Care was to include vocational training for blind, deaf, and physically handicapped adults and minors. For minors, education was also to be provided. Children in foster care for whom it was not possible to establish a primary residence as of 1 April 1942 were considered dependants of the Land.

In National Socialist social welfare, a broad distinction was made between so-called people's welfare, administered by the



Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV), and so-called public welfare (öffentliche Fürsorge). The NSV restricted its services to those without hereditary diseases. The assistance provided was supplementary and aimed to educate recipients towards self-help. Public welfare, by contrast, was theoretically available to all the poor, including people with hereditary diseases and others on the margins of society. This welfare aimed to make these individuals useful members of society, while still ensuring they were not denied the most basic necessities of life. In reality, there was no strict demarcation between the two, as discriminatory legislation was embedded at all levels of social welfare and prevented people who could theoretically receive public assistance from accessing it. The legislation also theoretically provided care for people with mental and other disabilities. In fact, the Nazis euthanised a large number of these individuals. More than 500 people, including minors from the area of present-day Slovenia, were murdered in Hartheim. More than 20 people, including minors, were murdered in Feldhof. The first to write about the Nazi operation T4 was Dr Tone Ferenc in his article "Nazi 'euthanasia' in Slovenia in 1941." The Institute for Contemporary History's project on victims of the Second World War listed the names and places of the murdered individuals among Slovenian victims of Nazism. The conference in Celje, with its established and new perspectives on the murder of people with special needs, will be an important contribution to Slovenian historiography.

Nazi social policy did not focus on supporting individuals in need, but on strengthening the population as a whole and creating a "healthy national body." This led to the targeting of "inferior, foreign races" as well as "sick and harmful elements" within their own population. The legal basis for this included the Hereditary Diseases Prevention Act of 1933. Nazi ideology was reflected in social welfare in that the welfare state became a central element, but also a racist and eugenic instrument.



We invite submissions that explore the care and education of persons with disabilities during the Italian and German occupation of Slovenia. The conference aims to connect research on institutional frameworks, social policy, and practice, including the relationships between ideology, law, and everyday life.

Thematic focus (among others):

- legal and administrative frameworks of care and education (Italy/Germany; districts, offices, decrees),
- institutions and practices: schools for the deaf and blind, education of children with learning difficulties, care for adults,
- social policy and ideology: NSV, public welfare (öffentliche Fürsorge), fascistization and propaganda,
- exclusion and discrimination (e.g. the Jewish population),
- violent policies (e.g. Aktion T4) and their impact in the Slovenian context,
- sources, methodologies, and new research perspectives.

Submission of abstracts: please send your abstract (maximum 1,000 characters without spaces) by 17 April 2026 to dunja.dobaja@inz.si

You are kindly invited!

