

Unearthing Memories: The Agency of Place and Material Remains in Mass Grave Exhumations and Commemorations in Slovenia

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DOI: 10.21104/CL.2026.1.06

Abstract

Since the 1990s, hundreds of mass graves from the Second World War have been documented in Slovenia; over 200 investigated, and more than 100 fully or partially exhumed. The process of uncovering and acknowledging these sites, concealed until the 1990s, has had a gradual but profound impact on the lives of those associated with the graves or the deceased, on the local communities where they have been uncovered, and it has redefined the broader field of memory politics. The article examines personal and embodied encounters with mass graves as sites of violence, memory, and death. It argues that the materiality of mass graves, human remains, and related objects not only evokes affective responses, but also mobilizes political and social action, thereby influencing commemorative practices and the broader politics of memory. Excavations thus not only recover human remains, but also facilitate the resurfacing of previously silenced memories and reshape the relationship with the dead.

Key words

Slovenia, mass graves, human remains, affect, materiality, memory, commemoration

Acknowledgment

The research was funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY: The Roles of the Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals in Contemporary Society, № 101095729). However, the views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

The research was also part of the research project The Weight of the past. Heritage of the Multicultural Area: Case Study of Gottschee (J6-4612) and the research program Ethnological Research of Cultural Knowledge, Practices, and Forms of Socialities (P6-0187), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency from the national budget.

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Jak citovat / How to cite

Repič, Jaka. 2026. Unearthing Memories: The Agency of Place and Material Remains in Mass Grave Exhumations and Commemorations in Slovenia. *Český lid* 113, 1: 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2026.1.06>

Introduction

Mass graves and the politics of memory in Slovenia

Since the 1990s, approximately 700 potential mass grave sites have been registered in Slovenia, of which 220 have been investigated and from which over 100 human remains and related objects have been excavated. Most of these mass graves date back to the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in Yugoslavia. In 1945, at the end of the war, tens of thousands of people – mostly foreign and domestic troops who had collaborated with the Nazi regime – were secretly executed. Political and civilian opponents of the newly established regime were also among the victims. Their bodies were concealed in natural karst caves and pits, abandoned mine shafts or purposely dug mass graves. Historians estimate that approximately 15,000 Slovenians were killed, along with around 85,000 others, including Germans and members of their collaborating forces of Croats, Montenegrins, and others (Dežman 2019; cf. Ferenc 2005, 2012). Following the establishment of communist rule, thousands more also fled Slovenia and emigrated to Canada, Australia, Argentina and various European countries (cf. Žigon 2001; Repič 2006).

The post-war executions in Yugoslavia in 1945 were conducted without trials or any form of due legal process. For decades, public memory of these executions was rigorously suppressed. Although initial reports began to emerge in the 1970s, it was not until the democratization period of the late 1980s and Slovenian independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 that the issue of mass graves became publicly discussed. Prior to independence, public discussion was rare and suppressed. The memory of mass executions was primarily preserved by the relatives of the deceased and among some expatriate communities, particularly within the Slovenian diaspora in Argentina and Canada (see Repič 2019, 2023). The first public commemorations of the victims of mass post-war executions were held in 1990, followed by initial investigations of hidden mass grave sites. Since the 1990s, investigations and exhumations have continued, producing multiple effects at personal, collective, and political levels.

While some mass graves from this period included the remains of only a few individuals, others held several thousand. For example, in 2022, the remains of over 3,400 people were exhumed from the mass grave at Mac-snova gorica in Kočevje. Terminologically, the article follows Erin Jessee and Mark Skinner, who define mass graves as sites where people did not receive “a culturally appropriate burial and a grave” (2005: 56). Moreover, Élisabeth Anstett emphasizes that clandestine mass graves are not only sites of the disposal of bodies, but also sites of violence, disappearances, crime,

research, exhumation, as well as controversies related to commemorations, reburial and the bureaucratic management of human remains (2018, 2022).

The body responsible for the investigation and exhumation of mass graves is the Commission of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for the Resolution of Concealed Mass Graves.¹ In October 1999, the National Assembly adopted a resolution mandating the compilation of a register of concealed execution sites and mass graves. This process was given a legal framework in 2003 with the adoption of the Act on War Graves, which established the obligation to register, maintain, and mark previously unacknowledged war graves, and mandated the investigation of concealed mass graves, including the exhumation and reburial of human remains. In 2015, the Act on Concealed War Gravesites and Burial of Victims was adopted, further mandating the systematic research and registration of war gravesites and providing for the “dignified burial of all victims of war and post-war violence in the territory of the Republic of Slovenia” (2015). Despite this legal framework, the investigations, exhumations, and reburials have proceeded slowly and have remained the subject of political and public contestation.

Since the opening of the mass graves and the accompanying resurfacing of memories of executions, the issue has been persistently politicized. The author acknowledges the difficult political dimension of such research, particularly as many victims were in some way connected to the Nazi regime. Various debates in the media, politics and scholarly discourse are often intertwined with broader efforts to reassess wartime and postwar histories, including attempts to equate diverse resistance movements with postwar violence or to rehabilitate collaboration. Public discussion of Second World War mass graves in Slovenia tends to be framed within a sharply polarized political discourse. A detailed engagement with these debates is beyond the scope and aim of this article. While acknowledging the historical significance of the political identities of those executed, it is also important to emphasize that they were far from uniform. The ethnographic research presented here is not concerned with historical events per se, but with the contemporary social processes and questions related to the excavations and exhumations of mass graves. Its aim is not to engage in any kind of historical or political revisionism. It simply acknowledges that the mass graves have profoundly affected many people, primarily, but not exclusively, the rela-

1 Since 1990, mass graves from the Second World War in Slovenia have been investigated by successive governmental commissions operating under various institutional designations. The current commission was formally established in 2015 by the Act on Concealed War Gravesites and Burial of the Victims and is the successor of the previous commissions.

tives of the victims. Therefore, the article addresses the political dimension of the mass executions only insofar as it provides the necessary context for its primary focus: an examination of affective encounters with the exhumed dead and the material potency of human remains – dimensions that operate beyond, and often unsettle, rigid political categorizations.

Research methods

The ethnographic research has been conducted since early 2024 in Slovenia and among Slovenes in Argentina, primarily through unstructured and semi-structured interviews with selected participants. The participants were drawn from various groups, including individuals involved in exhumations, relatives of the deceased (in Slovenia and Argentina), local residents near prominent mass graves, actors involved in the organization of commemorations, memory politics and heritage initiatives, as well as other individuals with significant personal connections to mass graves from the Second World War. Given that many of the victims had some connection to the anti-communist struggle during the war, one might presume a relatively uniform political stance among the interlocutors. This assumption, however, only applies to particular groups, mostly relatives of the deceased, particularly the one in Argentina. Other interlocutors represented a wide range of political persuasions and backgrounds. The research also included observations of commemorations, visits to mass graves, and observations of some exhumations of mass graves. Snowball sampling was used to reach individuals with personal or family ties to the dead in mass graves. Interviews were either recorded or, when recording was not possible or permitted due to the sensitivity of the topic for the research participants, detailed notes were taken.² The author also drew on data collected during his previous research among Slovenes in Argentina (see Repič 2006, 2016, 2019, 2023).

Agentive properties of mass graves and human remains

This article is the result of the ERC-funded research project *DEAGENCY*, whose main research question is whether, and how, the agency of the dead

2 The permitted recordings were transcribed and pseudonymized. Pseudonymized transcriptions will be available in open access form in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP, <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si>). All the research participants gave informed consent, although some did not permit the recording of the interview, only the taking of notes. In the text, excerpts of the interviews are marked with pseudonyms.

is manifested in the lives of individuals in contemporary society. Focusing on the investigation and excavation of mass graves in Slovenia, this article examines personal and embodied encounters with the materiality of human remains and grave sites, and their role in the politics of memory, commemorations, and the reconfiguration of relations with the dead. It explores how mass grave sites and unearthed objects and material remains of the dead may be understood as possessing agentic potential, not as intentional actors, but as material assemblages that generate affects through spatial, sensory, and corporeal encounters (e.g., Krmpotich – Fontein – Harries 2010; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Renshaw 2010, 2016; Crossland 2017). It examines these affective encounters in contexts of excavation, visits to grave sites and commemorations, and their role in the reconfiguration of memory and relationships with the dead.

Based on ethnographic research among professionals involved in investigation of concealed mass graves in Slovenia, relatives of the deceased and actors in the politics of memory, and on an analysis of specific commemorations, the article argues that the excavation of mass graves and the exhumation of human remains elicit powerful affective responses on individual and social levels that catalyze political and social action, prompt ritual practices and commemorative forms, and shape broader memory politics.

Within the broader theoretical re-engagement with materiality in anthropology and the ethnographic reorientation toward the study of things (cf. Miller 2005; Henare – Holbraad – Wastell 2007; Ingold 2007), there has been a proliferation of scholarship on the materialities of death and the agency of the dead in recent years. Across this body of work, several authors have highlighted the salience of dead bodies as powerful symbols in the reconfiguration of memories and national narratives (e.g., Verdery 1999; Ferrándiz 2022), while others have explored the ways in which the dead exert influence upon the living, whether through their material presence or as the entities they become over time in the continuing relationships between the living and the dead (e.g., Hallam – Hockey – Howarth 1999; Williams 2004; Wagner 2008; Harper 2010; Jarvis 2015; Crossland 2017; Rubin 2020). As Joost Fontein and John Harries succinctly point out:

“[a]fter years of leaving the mess of the human carcass (living or dead) to physical anthropologists and archaeologists, while we busied ourselves writing about culture and society ... anthropological attention has once again returned to the body not simply as the site of our phenomenal being in the world, but as material stuff” (2013: 118).

The contexts in which scholars theorize the agency of the materiality of the dead also vary considerably. For example, in his study of early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites, Howard Williams argues that the “materiality of dead bodies” affects memories and structures the “future social action” of the living (Williams 2004: 266). Drawing on Alfred Gell’s concept of the abduction of agency, Sheila Harper, in her research on mourners in the US and England, demonstrates that dead bodies become active social agents in death ritual (2010). Similarly, in her research on exhumation and reburial in post-socialist Eastern European countries, Katherine Verdery shows how bodies possess the capacity to influence multiple, and often competing, interpretations and re-imaginings of national histories, thereby exerting significant effects on social and political life (1999). She discusses the affective dimension of dead bodies and shows that “a body’s materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy ... a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places” (Verdery 1999: 27).

In studies of mass graves, material dimensions have often been explored in relation to the politics of memory and commemorations (e.g., Fontein 2010; Ferrándiz 2013, 2022) or in the contexts of exhumations and forensic analysis of human remains (e.g., Anstett – Dreyfus 2015; Crossland 2000; Ferrándiz – Robben 2015; Fontein 2014; Jugo – Wastell 2015; Renshaw 2016; Rosenblatt 2015; Rubin 2020; Wagner 2008). Some studies explicitly address the question of the agency of the dead in mass graves, their posthumous lives and their transformed roles in society. For example, Sarah Wagner emphasizes how the status of the human remains of the victims in Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, changed with the processes of exhumation and identification and influenced the reconfiguration of memories and relationships with the dead (2008). Admir Jugo and Sari Wastell (2015) show how forensic investigations of mass graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina not only enabled identification, but also generated broader social and political processes, such as reshaping social memory, stimulating the demand for political responsibility and justice, and facilitating the return and culturally appropriate reburial of victims. Similarly, Jonah Rubin observes how the excavation of mass graves and the exhumation of bodies from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Franco regime enabled the reconstitution of the victims into dead persons and their (re)integration into society (Rubin 2020; cf. Renshaw 2016). Layla Renshaw demonstrates that the bones of Republican civilians killed during the Spanish Civil War have been reconstructed as persons through their exhumation, identification and reconnection with relatives 70 years after their deaths (2010). She stresses that excavations reconstruct “affective

bonds between the living and the dead”, particularly among the descendants of the victims (Renshaw 2016: 32).

Joost Fontein’s research in postcolonial Zimbabwe addresses the capacity of the dead to demand and prompt action. The spirits of those killed in the liberation war demand that their bones, buried in mass graves, be returned home and reburied (2010). Exhumed human remains, although related to symbolic and contested representations of the past, also “relate to ‘emotive materiality’ as human substances, and their ‘affective presence’ as dead persons who continue to make demands upon society” (Fontein 2014: 128). In her research on the exhumation of victims of the dictatorship in Argentina, Zoë Crossland explored the agency of human remains that were turned into evidence through techniques of forensic analysis (2000, 2009; cf. Hallam 2010).

The analysis in this article follows Crossland’s (2017) notion of the “distributed” agency of the dead (cf. Enfield 2017). She employed this notion with regard to the management of bodies by forensic anthropology. Through exhumation and forensic analysis, the exhumed bodies are turned into objects of evidence and objects that “tell tales” (Maples – Browning 1994). They (metaphorically) “speak” within the relations of all actors involved and the evidential regime that transforms bodies into evidence: “The speaking corpse is a complex image that reveals a folk theory of agency at the heart of the assertively scientific fields of forensics” (Crossland 2017: 182). I have also argued elsewhere that the agency of the dead in mass graves is relational, operating across a network of actors, places, materials, and objects (Repič 2025: 46). Marc-Antoine Berthoud similarly posits that the affective properties of the dead always depend on the relational purpose of the living.

“This purpose may vary according to the circumstances of the death or the location of the remains: to make reparation for a death perceived as unjust or violent; to identify a deceased person in order to return them to their loved ones and organize a funeral that has been prevented for a shorter or longer period of time...” (Berthoud 2025: 22)

The agency of the dead (the capacity to affect and direct actions) is therefore always connected to the purpose of the relationship between the living and the dead, but also depends on the transformation of human remains. Joost Fontein argues that “exhumations are, in part, about remaking or reconstituting ‘the dead’ as particular kinds of ‘objects’ or ‘political subjects’, ‘afforded’ or enabled by the materials excavated from mass

graves” (Fontein 2014: 129; cf. Hallam 2010). The dead do not act upon the living on their own. What happens when they are unearthed from the mass graves in which they have been buried for decades? Zoë Crossland writes that “[t]he discovery of human remains immediately points to something disturbing that happened in the past, and in so doing demands a particular response” (2017: 187). When mass graves are opened and human remains are exhumed, they are transformed from inert objects into relevant actors in social and political life. The nameless collective dead take on new social roles as they are reconfigured into dead persons and also into evidence that affects memories and narratives.

The capacity of mass graves and human remains to affect the living and to demand social action – that is, their agency – is enacted, appropriated and directed by diverse actors involved in investigations, exhumations, visits to mass grave sites, commemorative practices, artistic interventions etc. (Repič 2025). This capacity is not inherent and invariant; rather, it depends on the actors’ affective engagements with the spatial and material reality of mass graves and on their relational purposes and regimes of encounter. For example, professionals engaged in excavation and exhumation understand the agency of human remains primarily as evidentiary, whereas relatives of the deceased or visitors to mass grave sites often establish affective relationships with the dead as subjects. Similarly, actors involved in the politics of memory may engage with human remains through processes of historical revision, heritage making, or political appropriation (e.g., emphasizing the ties of the dead to the Nazi regime or the concealment of mass graves as communist crimes). To account for these different manifestations and emic understandings of the agentic potential of the dead, the article examines encounters with mass graves alongside the role of rituals and commemorative practices.

Concealed mass graves: Places of violence, exhumation, and memories

Over the past three decades the unearthing of mass graves has become a global phenomenon (see Anstett 2018). Numerous concealed mass graves have been uncovered in Europe and across the world, exposing both recent victims of mass violence and those who disappeared or were executed and clandestinely buried decades ago. This global interest in the investigation of mass graves has been driven by human rights movements, the search for victims of mass violence, and demands for a reappraisal of wars and dictatorships. Another important factor has been the rapid advances in technical knowledge that facilitate not only historical but also forensic investigation and the identification of mass graves and human remains necessary for

possible legal proceedings. “Mass graves contain evidence that is essential to the realization of justice and accountability goals at multiple levels: for victims, affected communities, states in transition, and the international community” (Klinkner 2023: 203). As such, this makes them sites of interest for a wide range of actors, but also vulnerable to destruction.

In some cases, mass graves have been investigated relatively soon after the violence. For example, in Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda, investigations involving exhumations and the identification of victims began almost immediately after the conflicts (e.g., Crossland 2000; Robben 2005; Wagner 2008; Korman 2014; Klinkner – Smith 2023). Investigation of mass graves as sites of violence is important for rebuilding of war-torn societies (e.g., Jugo – Wastell 2015). However, such investigation often occurs decades after a conflict, which reveals how these sites remain emotionally charged and politically disruptive long after the violence has ended. The opening and exhumation of them can unearth memories, ignite struggles over memory and facilitate the transformation of relationships with the dead.

Unearthing mass graves and memories in Slovenia

In Slovenia, research on concealed mass graves began only gradually after the 1990s and eventually developed into a systematic effort involving a wide range of actors, including state institutions, municipalities, NGOs, heritage institutions, the Church, local and memory associations, and experts in disciplines such as history, archaeology, anthropology, geography, forensic science, and related fields.

Some interlocutors who have been involved in this work from the outset have described how early investigations were undertaken without specialized methodological knowledge of forensic exhumation, as professional standards had yet to be established (cf. Jamnik 2008: 174). Initially, the objectives focused on documenting the mass graves, cataloguing both Slovenian and other victims, and collecting testimonies and related documents.³

Excavations of mass graves not only recovered human remains but enabled a reconfiguration of relationships with the dead and the resurfacing of silenced memories. Martina, who was born in Argentina but has lived in

3 The Commission was only one of several bodies investigating mass graves. See the register of deaths during and immediately after the Second World War compiled by the Institute of Contemporary History: <https://www.sistory.si/ww2>, accessed September 2025. See also a similar register of deaths at the end of the war compiled by the NGO Nova Slovenska Zaveza: <https://www.zaveza.si/matica-mrtvih/>, accessed September 2025.

Slovenia for many years, has a family history that connects her to both the Slovenian diaspora in Argentina and some of the victims in post-war mass graves. Reflecting on the memory of these graves, she remarked: “*I think it is very important that this memory is not forgotten, because I believe that this is something closely connected to what Slovenia is like today.*” (Interlocutor JR010, 5. 12. 2024) The victims not only lost their lives but were completely erased from the national narrative and memory for decades⁴. The search for the deceased and the act of mourning were relegated to the private spheres of the families of the victims. Mirko, who was born in Slovenia after the Second World War and has relatives who perished in the mass graves, explained how, as a child, he learned not to talk about mass graves outside of his family: “*We only talked about that with relatives and those we trusted. My aunt often visited graveyards, where she sometimes met people with similar experiences. That’s how she often learned something new.*” (Interlocutor JR033, 6. 11. 2025) His mother described how she had persistently attempted to uncover details of the executions and learn about the fate of her relatives, although she only dared to speak of it privately. Consequently, she was very relieved when public discourse on the subject finally became possible. Several interlocutors told me how they had grown up knowing that some of their relatives had ended up in mass graves and spoke about the lingering fear and sense of social exclusion their families had experienced. Some local residents who lived close to hidden mass grave sites but not necessarily related to the people who had been executed were also aware of them and even marked them with crosses or lit candles, yet they did not speak publicly about them until the 1990s.

Others, however, only learned about the executions after 1990. One interlocutor, Jakob, did not have relatives in the mass graves but had a professional interest in the issue. He first learned of their existence around the time of Slovenian independence: “*It was a terrible shock for me when I found out about it, and when I asked my father ..., he said that, of course, we knew about it, but we didn’t talk about it.*” (Interlocutor JR026, 28. 7. 2025). Martina pointed out that the issue of mass graves was openly discussed in the diaspora, while in Slovenia it was silenced. She also reflected on how people in Slovenia dealt with silence and mourning: “*This silence is passed on, or obviously there was no space to talk about such matters.*” (Interlocutor JR010, 5. 12. 2024).

4 Not only was the memory of the victims silenced, many of whom, though not all, had collaborated with the Nazi regime, but the executions themselves were also shrouded in absolute secrecy for decades. Even local residents who witnessed the events did not dare speak about them openly.

Even in the Slovene diaspora in Argentina, where mass executions were widely discussed, some individuals with troubling personal experiences were reluctant to talk about them. In Argentina, I met Valentina, who grew up in the Slovenian community. She was eager to discuss both the collective memory and her personal experiences related to mass graves. She said: “*My father carried a terrible pain inside and never talked much about it.*” (Interlocutor JR020, 21. 4. 2025) However, many people in both the diaspora and Slovenia emphasized how they felt an obligation to keep this memory alive and preserve testimonies. Reflecting on growing up in the Slovenian community, Valentina continued: “*Our parents told us, don’t forget the deceased, don’t forget the deceased, don’t forget the deceased... Our duty is to preserve testimonies.*” (Interlocutor JR020, 21. 4. 2025)

Slovenian independence and the political transformations of 1991 enabled the resurfacing of silenced memories, together with renewed struggles over their interpretations, the opening of public debate, and political contestation. Yet political change alone did not prompt a reconfiguration of relations with those buried in the mass graves. Rather, it was the newly salient emotive materiality of mass grave sites, human remains and emerging memorials that facilitated the transformation of anonymous remains into socially acknowledged dead persons, thereby bringing them into the public arena of memory and political life.

On affect, agency and the aestheticization of places and human remains

Investigations of mass graves, their markings and commemorations facilitated personal encounters with the dead and opened up space for the broader struggle over memory. To illustrate these affective encounters with the spatial and material reality of mass graves, I briefly summarize the accounts of several individuals who reflected on their encounters with these sites. Some recounted their experiences of first visiting the mass graves in Kočevski rog⁵, and although their experiences varied, most were profoundly affected by the place.

Andrej was a young chaplain who had been initially unaware of the existence of the mass graves. He recounted his encounter with human remains on his first visit to one of the caves.

5 In the forest of Kočevski rog there are several mass graves with victims of massacres of pro-Nazi and anti-communist forces (both soldiers and civilians, Slovenes, Croats and others). The two largest known sites, Jama pod Krenom and Macesnova gorica have also become sites of visits and commemorations since their excavation in 2022.

“There was some talk that there were also crevices with human remains at the very edge of Kočevski rog. Someone came to the parish priest, who was also an enthusiastic speleologist, and said: ‘Look in that cave. They say that a man and a woman were thrown in there together.’ The parish priest decided that we, the parish priest and the chaplain, should go down into that pit alone. The forester took us there. We weren’t expecting anything, least of all me, because we had to climb over dead animals that had been thrown in there. But when we got to the bottom, it was shocking. Two skeletons, one of them was still sitting, and thus we confirmed [that it was a mass grave].”
(Interlocutor JR015, 31. 3. 2025)

Andrej would sometimes accompany speleologists who were exploring the caves in Kočevski rog:

“When we descended somewhere to a depth of around 90 meters, we had nowhere else to step but on bones. And that was a shock for a young priest, it really was a shock, wasn’t it? When you go down into a cave and have nowhere to step but on bones.” (Interlocutor JR015, 31. 3. 2025)

Valentina also shared her experience of her first visit to Slovenia and Kočevski rog in 1990. She described an unsettling sensation, an eerie sense of place, when she entered the forest of Kočevje and visited one of the most well-known mass grave sites, a cave called *Jama pod Krenom*:

“One of the things I really wanted to do was visit Kočevje, Kočevski rog. When I first went there, the impression was so strong and profound that I could never go into the forest again...”

JR: *“Into the forest?”*

“Yes, into the forest, any forest, even here [in Argentina]. For me, the forest is a place of sadness today. For me, the forest... it suffocates me. That place made such a deep impression on me that even today it is a place of sadness for me, a place of darkness, a place... I don’t like forests.”

“We entered the cave and descended right to the bottom... I had the sensation, on the one hand, tranquility, and on the other, horror... It sent a shiver down my spine.” (Interlocutor JR020, 21. 4. 2025)

Growing up in the Slovenian diaspora in Argentina, Valentina was very familiar with the broader historical narrative of the executions at the end

of the Second World War and the exile of thousands of Slovenians, many of whom ended up in Argentina. However, it was not until she visited one of the mass grave sites, entered the cave, saw human remains and even took some objects with her, that she experienced a visceral, bodily sensation of the place – a haunting sense of its memories and suffering. Other interlocutors also mentioned taking objects they had found, such as rosaries, bullets or rocks, as pieces of the site of violence. For Valentina, these sites were more than mere burial grounds; they held not only the remains of the dead, but also their pain and unspoken histories. She believed that these histories needed to be unearthed and reintegrated into the collective memory.

Marjan, an artist, was born in Slovenia, but was only a young child when his mother fled the country with him and his siblings. After spending a few years in a refugee camp in Austria, the family eventually migrated to Argentina. His father, who had been a soldier in the Home Guard (*Slovenska domobranska vojska*), was among those killed and buried in mass graves. He recounted his own encounter with mass graves upon his first return to Slovenia in 1994:

“Yes, I went to Kočevski rog. I thought my ‘viejo’ (father) was also there, and I went to have a look. I entered the cave – it was ‘interesante’ – you could still go inside back then. There were bones... and other things. Everything was mixed together: leaves, soil, branches, bones, stones...”

When visiting the Jama pod Krenom site, he also descended into the cave, which was filled with rocks, branches, and leaves, but he also saw some bones and objects. He knew that his father had died in such a place and imagined that he had found the grave.

“Back then, I still thought my father was there too. That’s why it was so difficult. It was hard. The forest felt ominous, dark from the trees – what are they, ‘pinos’? The soil was also dark. It was shadowed, but then some light filtered through... It was difficult. [...] Nearby, a choir was singing, slow and quiet. That made it even harder. Because they [the victims] were killed there, and tortured, and the bones were still there.” (Interlocutor JR021, 25. 4. 2025)

Several years later, in Argentina, Marjan created a series of art objects depicting post-war executions, including an installation that evoked the experience of being in a mass grave within a cave.

“In the room upstairs, you know, I made sculptures out of black plastic and draped the room in black. I put some black lights inside [UV lights]. I imagined the room as if you were in a cave. And then the lights came on, and it was like being in a cave and looking out from the inside. Outside, there was life and freedom; inside there was only death and suffering... When you’re in there, it’s not over – you see the outside, but you can’t reach it. You’re trapped in darkness, in blackness. At least, that’s how I imagined it. But it was a difficult thing, I didn’t show it to many people, it was too sinister.” (Interlocutor JR021, 25. 4. 2025)

This art installation was inspired by his bodily experiences of visiting mass graves and descending into the caves of Kočevski rog. His aim was to reproduce the sense of place that he imagined the victims must have felt – whether they were thrown into the pits alive or dead. One could argue that it was his own spatial and material experience of the mass grave that compelled him to confront the issue of death in his artistic production. In doing so, he created what we might term – drawing on Maruška Svašek’s (2007) concept – an *art-effect*: a work that not only represents a trauma, but actively mediates it, translating personal and collective memory into an immersive aesthetic experience that further affects the viewers. His artistic practices were shaped by several forces: his family history, the bodily and visceral experiences of visiting mass graves, and the materiality of these sites. In the installations in his art gallery, he transformed his own spatial encounter into a shared encounter, extending the affective reach of the mass grave.

On commemorations and the question of reburial

In Slovenia a key moment in reshaping the politics of memory of mass graves from the Second World War occurred on 8 July 1990, one year before Slovenian independence. The first major public commemoration was organized next to one of the largest and most well-known mass graves, Jama pod Krenom in Kočevski rog. Approximately 25,000 visitors attended the event. Until then, the site had been unofficially recognized and largely unmarked. After this commemoration, the place was transformed into a place of memory, with memorials, a *Via Crucis* and a chapel nearby. The commemorations were held there every year, but in 2025 they were moved to a nearby and recently excavated mass grave site at Jama pod Macesnovogorico. The association *Nova Slovenska Zaveza* documented the lead-up to the first commemoration:

“From our side, it all began one February evening in 1990 at the Faculty of Theology, after a lecture by the future editor of *Zaveza* on the topic of reconciliation. After the lecture, Anton Drobnič raised the idea—already present among us—that it was necessary to publicly bury the murdered. [...] Behind the scenes, there were also forces working to ensure that the state would be present at the ceremony.” (NA 2008)

The commemoration symbolically transformed the social status of the dead. They were publicly acknowledged for the first time and thus woven into the national collective memory. As Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar stated in his address:

“Today, we are publicly conducting a symbolic Christian funeral for the Home Guard soldiers who found their deaths here or elsewhere. In doing so, they are *entering into the public arena and into equality in the Slovenian communion of the dead and the living.*” (Spravna slovesnost 2020, added highlight by the author)

The dead entered public and political discourses after decades of silence, thus appearing almost contemporaneous, even though the mass graves date back to the Second World War. Katherine Verdery also observes that the material presence of bodies collapses temporal distance, making the past feel immediate and tangible (Verdery 1999). In Slovenia, this is evident in ongoing controversies and the politicization of previously silenced memory.

At the commemoration on 1 June 2024, at Kočevski rog, one of the speakers pointed out the obligations that Slovenian society still has towards the dead, particularly the need to enable proper burials at the Žale cemetery in the capital, Ljubljana. He emphasized that it was inappropriate to store bones excavated from the mass graves in Jama pod Macesnovo gorico at the municipal utility company. He added that “as long as we do not organize a proper burial, the dead will not have taken their rightful place in society and will continue to be a reminder of the continuing injustice”.

Many interlocutors expressed criticism of current public debates about mass graves and the question of reburial. Martina remarked: “*There is a lot of moralizing about whether or not these deaths were justified.*” (Interlocutor JR010, 5. 12. 2024) However, similar views were often expressed by people with no personal or political connection to the victims. Even many professionals involved in the research or exhumations expressed the burden of the ongoing politicization of mass graves and the issue of reburial. Some

suggested that exhumation should only be carried out when reburial has already been decided. While many of the executed victims were connected to the Nazi regime, there have been growing efforts to move beyond rigid political identification, including within the left-wing political spectrum. In June 2025, the President of Slovenia, Nataša Pirc Musar, in a speech commemorating Slovenia's Independence Day, also emphasized the importance of providing dignified burials for both the exhumed victims and those who remain buried in mass graves:

“A dignified burial should be our second Slovenian independence – an independence of the intimate from everyday politics and from the politicization of Slovenian interwar and postwar history. With a dignified burial as the fulfillment of our responsibility, we will have come of age as a country and as a community.” (24 June 2025)

The president's speech followed several years of political debates over the handling and reburial of human remains of individuals long considered as traitors or Nazi collaborators. These debates reveal the controversies regarding both the political identity of the dead and the extrajudicial executions. The debates intensified after the exhumations of approximately 3,450 individuals from the mass grave at Macesnova gorica in Kočevski rog in 2022 (see Košir – Rozman 2025).

The excavation of this particular site and the subsequent exhumation highlighted the storage and reburial of human remains as the central issue within the broader political struggle over memory. I spoke to Oliver, who lives in the town of Kočevje. He had no personal connection to the victims in mass graves, but had participated in the excavation in a professional capacity. He told me: “*When the exhumation started, there were no solutions as to what to do with the bodies.*” (Interlocutor JR009, 16. 10. 2024) Ultimately the exhumed remains were placed in large plastic bags and stored in the garage of the Kočevje Municipal Company.⁶ He continued:

“*In my opinion, it would have been better to have left them alone, build a monument, and not exhume them. The bones have been lying in the garage under the workplace for two years now. Can you imagine, that's 3,400 dead people, their bones, skulls, femur bones, teeth, golden teeth. [...] They should have been left where they were.*”

6 The company is responsible for construction work, roads, waste management, but also funeral and cemetery services.

Are they at peace here in these bags? [...] How would you feel if you knew that your bones had been dug up and left lying in bags, in transparent bags in a garage? [...] It troubles me, because I know that there are dead people there, the bones of 3,400 people, stored in transparent plastic bags. [...] How do you think the relatives feel, when their dead are lying in a garage in plastic bags? It troubles me a lot. [...] It would have been better to put up a memorial and leave them in peace. This only prolongs the agony for them and their relatives.” (Interlocutor JR009, 16. 10. 2024)⁷

In this conversation, there was a palpable unease surrounding the status of bones as objects versus bones as humans. For three years, the remains were stored in a garage beneath a workplace, prompting debate over the appropriate place to store them and the possibilities of reburial and commemorating them. More pressing still, however, was the affective force of their material presence on people, which implicitly demanded acknowledgement. Their existence was acknowledged both as “bones as things” and “bones as dead people”. Several interlocutors mentioned that the dead were still waiting to be buried. While most exhumed human remains from mass graves have been transferred to one of the official ossuaries, only in occasional cases of successful identification have they been reburied in family graves or local cemeteries.⁸

Several researchers working on mass graves similarly emphasized that the significance of research was not only in the excavation and documentation of the sites, but also in the eventual reburial of the human remains. Oliver offered his opinion: *“I think the exhumations should only be done when it has been decided where the remains will be buried. Until then, we should leave them alone. Now they are still waiting in plastic bags in containers.”* (Interlocutor JR009, 16. 10. 2024) Pavel is another professional involved in the research of mass graves, but with no personal connection to the victims. He is a historian who has been involved in a project revising the registry of mass graves. He emphasized the importance of burying the dead and marking burial grounds because *“these deaths must also be mourned”* (Interlocutor JR003, 23. 8. 2024). Matej is another interlocutor who has been involved in the investigation of mass graves professionally, but he has personal interest, as

⁷ The remains were eventually transferred to a state ossuary in 2025.

⁸ This points to the absence of a systematic identification of human remains. Until now, only right femurs have been separately catalogued and stored for possible identification later. DNA analysis is only performed in cases of individual requests and the strong possibility of identification (usually from mass graves with only a few bodies).

he has relatives among the victims. He stressed the importance of reburial for both the families and broader society: “[Reburial] *serves the community, brings people together, and helps them come to terms with these events and move on. I think that it is important for society, for health, and for basic needs.*” (Interlocutor JR005, 4. 9. 2024) Several interlocutors pointed out that we are not only a society of the living, but also of the dead, and that it is therefore “*our moral obligation*” to bury them properly and “*mark their graves with a cross*”. Valentina from Argentina conveyed it powerfully:

“These were people, they were individuals, they were wives, husbands, someone’s brother, someone’s sister, a neighbor... They aren’t bones, they were people. And to talk about bones and how we’re going to put them here or there now, or that we don’t want them [reburied] somewhere...” (Interlocutor JR020, 21. 4. 2025)

She also expressed her belief that, even after 80 years, the dead still have an active role: “*The dead still speak. They still speak, ‘do not forget us’. ‘Do not forget us, we are still here’... I think they haven’t fallen silent yet...*” She added that the dead would not be at peace until they were properly buried. Culturally appropriate reburial in marked graves operates as a symbolic counterpoint to the social erasure and dehumanization (the transformation of subjects to things) effected by secret mass executions and the disposal of bodies. Reburial is thus often understood as a prerequisite for continued relationships. Moreover, once mass graves are opened, an imperative towards exhumation and reburial – at least to some degree – tends to cut across rigid political categories and is shared by interlocutors with diverse roles and from different social backgrounds.

Conclusion

The article examines mass graves from the Second World War in Slovenia, their excavations and commemorations, and reveals how the material presence of the dead can influence social, moral, and political life in the present. Exhumations, visits to mass graves, and commemorations are addressed as affective and relational events, in which both human and non-human agents together generate new meanings and moral engagements. The excavation of mass graves has not only exposed long-silenced histories of executions, but also reconfigured relationships between the living and the dead, and between space, materiality, and collective memory. These processes of exhumation, commemoration, and reburial are deeply affective, and socially generative encounters, in which the mass graves, as sites of violence, death,

memory, and the material remains of the dead become agents of redefining memory and generating social transformation.

The analysis also highlights the affective role of the spatial and material realities of mass graves and human remains. The material exploration of the mass graves shifted the discourse from the dominant historical perspective to debates about how to exhume, identify, rebury, and commemorate the victims (see Anstett – Dreyfus 2015; cf. Ferrándiz 2013). From this new perspective and through complex regimes of exhumation, the unknown dead were transformed into dead persons and assumed active roles: their remains told stories, shaped understanding, and demanded social action (see Maples – Browning 1994; Crossland 2017; Rubin 2020; Repič 2025). The roles and influence the dead can exert on the living and on society are afforded by the materiality of exhumation sites and human remains.

However, mass graves and human remains are highly contested and carry enduring controversies. In her work on the exhumation of the disappeared in Argentina, Crossland emphasized that human remains are increasingly contested, serving as objects for “different and often irreconcilable constructions” (Crossland 2000: 146). This is also evident in the case of hidden mass graves in Slovenia: when they are unearthed, their material presence disrupts the apparent continuity of post-war narratives, raises important social, political, and ethical issues, and demands a renewed confrontation with the legacies of violence.

Exhumations and commemorations thus serve as arenas for negotiating these tensions. On the one hand, they function as acts of reparation, recognition, and mourning. On the other, they also become sites of political contestation and struggle over memory. At the same time, individual and communal encounters with mass graves reveal how deeply personal and embodied these processes are. The testimonies presented here show that encounters with the dead – whether through exhumation, visits, or artistic engagement – evoke affective responses. The dead, as several interlocutors poignantly expressed, continue to “speak” through their persistent materiality and the emotional and ethical responses they provoke among the living. This agency of the dead, as argued throughout this paper, is not inherent but relational: it is enacted in affective encounters, regimes of exhumation and commemoration, and other social practices.

Ultimately, the unearthing of mass graves illuminates the complex entanglement of affect, materiality, agency, and memory. The case of Slovenia demonstrates that the dead are not inert relics of past violence but continue to affect the living and shape social relations. Their agency, however, is not autonomous but distributed across a network of human and non-human actors, such as archaeologists, relatives, activists, priests, politicians, soil,

bones, objects, and sites of disposal. Through these assemblages, the dead in mass graves have been symbolically, socially, and materially reintegrated into society. Yet this reintegration remains deeply contested, particularly around questions of national and political identity, reburial, and public commemoration. The work of exhumation and memory is never solely about recovering the past; it is an ongoing process of ethical negotiation and social transformation through which the living continually redefine their relationship with the dead.

January 2026

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