

BOOK REVIEW

Kühnel, Ferdinand. *Ruhe in Frieden? Počivaj v miru? Vom Verschwinden des Slowenischen auf den Friedhöfen Kärntens/Koroška*

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Carinthia, the southern province of Austria bordering Slovenia and Italy, is bilingual. In addition to a German-speaking majority, there is a Slovenian-speaking population that, unlike the former, is bilingual throughout. During the Habsburg monarchy, according to the 1910 census, there were 82,000 Slovene speakers living in the southern areas of Carinthia. In the last census conducted in Austria in 2001, only 13,000 citizens reported using Slovene as a colloquial language, despite that the vast majority of the population living in southern Carinthia are descendants of the people who lived there around 1900. Central stages of this cultural decline were the plebiscite of 1920 after the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy, in which the majority of the population in the bilingual area voted for state affiliation with the Republic of Austria; the subsequent declassification of the Slovene language in the First Republic; the violent Germanization policy of the National Socialists; and a renewed discrimination in the Second Republic, which was or is based, among other things, on the disregard of the already weak protection of minorities in Article 7 of the State Treaty of Austria with the Allied Powers in 1955.

This politically affected destruction of linguistic ability and meaning has resulted in immense cultural loss, a fact film director Andrina Mračnikar evocatively demonstrates in her recent award-winning documentary *Verschwinden/Izginjanje* (2022) on the gradual Germanization of family names on gravestones in southern Carinthia. In Slovenian colloquial language, her family name, Mračnikar, means “the farmer who lived at the edge of the forest, where it dawned early and there were many bats.” In Slovenian, the name tells a story, but the Germanized version, “Mratschnigger,” she comments, “means nothing and tells nothing” (transl. by the reviewer).

What Andrina Mračnikar illuminates succinctly and essayistically in a film scene, the political scientist and historian Ferdinand Kühnel undertakes as the subject of a systematic study. Initiated in his dissertation project at the Institute for Eastern European History at the University of Vienna, Kühnel examines the change in language use in Carinthia since the end of World War I. Creatively, he turns to sepulchral culture, researching the use of language in inscriptions of commemorative signs of the dead in 211 cemeteries, their associated churches, and grave monuments to measure the spread of the Slovene language, or more precisely the visibility of Slovene writing in southern Carinthia. His approach may be surprising only at first glance: cemeteries are among the most important public places of remembrance in rural southern Carinthia—not only with regard to the commemorative signs for the dead of the First and Second World Wars and the border battles after World War I, but also those for the victims of the Nazi regime and for the fallen resistance fighters of the Slovene Carinthian partisans.

Recording and analyzing the stone artifacts with their inscriptions in a quantitative dimension represents an immense challenge. However, Kühnel did not limit himself to depicting the status quo. He also examines their linguistic shaping on a qualitative level; for example, the abandonment of the use of the Slovenian spelling of names in grave inscriptions in favor of a German spelling. For this purpose,

he systematically examined regional and local sources such as administrative acts and parish registers, going back as far as 1848. One of the fundamental results of the study is that the investigation of sepulchral culture can precisely trace the disappearance of Slovenian in the public sphere in space and time.

Kühnel additionally conducted twenty-eight conversations and interviews with priests, cemetery employees, visitors, and residents of the parishes to trace the causes not only of the linguistic homogenization of sepulchral culture toward German but also the resilience of the Slovene language in some parishes. The results are unsurprising. They confirm prior studies on the political causes of the disappearance of the Slovene language, such as Robert Knight's monograph *Slavs in Post-Nazi Austria* (London, 2017), in which the British historian analyzes the politics of assimilation using the example of the German nationalist struggle against bilingual education in the 1940s and 1950s. However, Kühnel provides an accurate picture of the pathways of language loss at the local and regional levels through the innovative methodological design of combining quantitative and qualitative data, meticulous collection and integrative interpretation, and careful and skillful visualization of his data in maps. After an introductory discussion of the international research literature and an exposition of his methodology, he examines developments in individual parishes structured by the ten deaneries of southern Carinthia. Each parish is referenced, each deanery summarized. In the conclusion, he brings together the data for all deaneries. Among the 211 cemeteries under study, there is no longer a single one in which the Slovene language is exclusively present. Four cemeteries contain primarily ("hauptsächlich," more than 80 percent) Slovenian-labeled graves, and in seventeen the language used is mainly ("überwiegend," 50–80 percent) Slovenian. This adds up to just 10 percent. In 41 cemeteries Kühnel registered primarily German inscriptions; in 112 mainly German was used; and in 37 only German could be found. Recent statements by young politicians of the Freedom Party in Carinthia that there is a threat of a "Sloveneization" of the country can hardly be surpassed in absurdity in view of this data. Rather, they are another example of the public devaluation of the Slovene language that has led to its loss.

Kühnel offers several explanations for both the shift from Slovene to German for grave inscriptions as well as for the resilience of Slovenian in some (few) cemeteries. The central finding is that the presence of Slovenian in the sepulchral culture and the acceptance of Slovenian by the public are mutually dependent. In those parishes where Slovenian has a positive status as an official language and is used in cultural life and on public inscriptions and topographical signs, citizens use their language(s) also in sepulchral culture. Contrary to the self-congratulatory praise that has been common for some time in politics about the 2011 settlement of the dispute on the installation of bilingual place-name signs and an alleged "culture of consensus," Kühnel soberly states that the compromise is "entirely in the tradition of Austrian and Carinthian policy toward the Slovene-speaking inhabitants of Carinthia/Koroška, which was (and still is) characterized by small-mindedness and guided by the maxim of giving only as much as was absolutely necessary." The agreement reached, he continues, "in no way resulted in giving the Slovene language a dignified place in the public sphere, nor did it even begin to represent the historical heritage of bilingualism in Southern Carinthia/Južna Koroška" (288, transl. by the reviewer).

Instead, he reminds us that the process of the disappearance of the Slovene language is ongoing. His intention through this study to make this process visible is remarkably successful and clearly communicated. Beyond its general value for scholars of memory, nationality, and ethnicity studies, the book is also an outstanding contribution to regional and local history of Kärnten/Koroška and offers itself as a reference for comparative studies with other multilingual regions.