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## THE TEXTBOOK MYTH: SLOVENE PEASANTS AS HEROES OF THE GLORIOUS PAST

### Abstract

The present article describes how 16<sup>th</sup> century peasant uprisings became an essential part of the Slovene history curricula and analyzes their role in the present-day official understanding of Slovene national history. It argues that the established textbook narrations on peasant uprisings greatly contribute to the hegemonic representation of affirmative, unilinear and teleological historical development of the Slovene nation, which ultimately implies an “unavoidable” establishment of Slovenia as a nation state in 1991.

**Key words:** peasant uprisings; history textbooks; 20<sup>th</sup> century; Slovene nationalism; Slovenia

### MIT PODRĘCZNIKÓW SZKOLNYCH: CHŁOPI SŁOWEŃSCY JAKO BOHATEROWIE CHWALEBNEJ PRZESZŁOŚCI

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób zasadniczym elementem programów nauczania historii Słowenii stały się XVI-wieczne powstania chłopskie i analizuje ich rolę we współczesnym oficjalnym rozumieniu narodowej historii Słowenii. Autor dowodzi, że ustalone narracje podręcznikowe w znacznej mierze przyczyniają się do hegemonicznego przedstawienia afirmatywnego, unilinearne i teleologicznego historycznego rozwoju narodu słoweńskiego, co też ostatecznie implikuje „nieuchronne” ustanowienie Słowenii jako państwa narodowego w 1991 roku. [Transl. by Jacek Serwański]

**Słowa kluczowe:** powstania chłopskie; podręczniki do historii; XX wiek; nacjonalizm słoweński; Słowenia

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

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CITATION: Kosi, J. (2018). The Textbook Myth: Slovene Peasants as Heroes of the Glorious Past. *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa*, 2018(50).  
<https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.1642>

This work was supported  
by the Slovenian Research Agency  
(research core funding No. P6-0235).  
No competing interests have been declared.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, social conditions in the Slovene countryside (“na slovenskem podeželju”) severely deteriorated. The ever-increasing tax burdens caused extreme hardships that ravaged the villages all over the Slovene territory (“na Slovenskem”). In this period of time, around 80 percent of all peasants lived on the brink of starvation. Unsurprisingly, such poor living conditions triggered a series of violent responses of the subjected rural population. Impoverished peasants organized themselves in militias and began to rebel against the provincial nobility, demanding a reduction in the taxation and the restoration of the so-called “old rights” (“stara pravda”). The first among several major peasant uprisings occurred in Carinthia in 1478. It, however, was not long before the uprising was repressed. It turned out to be the first among many major or minor successfully crushed Slovene peasant uprisings. In the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the spark of rebellion spread across a much wider area of Inner Austria. Numerous peasants from the three central Slovene lands (Carniola, Carinthia and Styria) joined the rebellion, also known as the All-Slovene Peasant Uprising (“Vseslovenski kmečki upor,” 1515). Several years later, in 1573, peasants living in villages on both sides of the border between Styria and Provincial Croatia once more took up arms against the nobles. During the ensuing violent event known as the Croatian-Slovene Peasant Uprising (“Hrvaško-slovenski kmečki upor,” 1573), Slovene and Croatian peasants unsuccessfully endeavored to establish a peasant state under the rule of the Habsburgs. The wave of major peasant uprisings on the Slovene territory finally ended in 1713, when the Tolmin Peasant Uprising (“Tolminski kmečki upor,” 1713) was suppressed (Mlacović & Urankar, 2010, pp. 171–174).

The description of rural social combustibility that I briefly summarized in the previous paragraph forms part of the textbook *History 2* (“Zgodovina 2”), commonly used as a manual of instruction in the second-year history classes in Slovene gymnasium schools. The above condensed narrative can be found in a chapter titled “The development of historical lands and the Slovenes” (“Razvoj zgodovinskih dežel in Slovenci”). This chapter is devoted to the representation of political, social and cultural developments of communities living “on Slovene territory” in the period between the early medieval settlement of Slavs in the Eastern Alps and the late 18<sup>th</sup> century reforms introduced by Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II (Mlacović & Urankar, 2010, pp. 132–183). In 2010, the content of *History 2* was confirmed as appropriate by a board of experts from the Slovene Ministry of Education. It has since then been used as authorized teaching material in the state financed upper secondary schools, in Slovenian context known as gymnasiums (“gimnazije”), dedicated to preparing their pupils to enroll in universities. According to the official governmental data, in 2016-2017 school year about a third of all Slovenian pupils were enrolled in gymnasiums (Statistical Office, 2017).

Textbooks have always represented important carriers of outlooks that a particular authority strove to disseminate in a certain society. As a source of prescribed knowledge, they have been used in state schools—in institutions that are never established solely for the purposes of value-free and neutral transmission of knowledge (Apple, 1980). It is thus characteristic of history textbooks to contain a specific collection of information and interpretations. They contain a selection of data and allow a narrative framework that the authorities believe the pupils should know and master. Textbooks, therefore, reflect the results of earlier political, cultural, and economic transformations, conflicts, and compromises, which yielded a given shape of power relations in a certain state. In this sense, textbooks should be seen as tools for dissemination and consolidation of the dominant cultural patterns or those cultural models that the social power holders wish to spread (Foster & Crawford, 2006).

It is also a commonplace of nationalism studies to claim that state schools should not be understood exclusively as educational institutions. On the contrary, many scholars have convincingly contended that state schools play a vital role in promoting and instilling a selective, nationally centered set of values and representations. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, nation states have frequently used public educational systems as instruments for the construction and reproduction of pupils' identification with a particular nation. The relationship between the rhetoric of nationalism and institutionalized schooling is thus a discernable feature of nation states since their very emergence (Gellner, 1983). State schools operate as socializing agents and provide institutional framework for the dissemination of nationalized world views and collective memory (Smith, 1999). Moreover, they legitimize the existing geopolitical arrangements by presenting nation states as 'natural' entities (Kamusella, 2010) and mold 'citizens from pupils' (Weber, 1976). Schools disseminate the hegemonic belief in presumed common origins of all members of a particular nation and thus play a major role in the process of national community's continuous imagination. The use of history as an instrument for the construction and reproduction of collective national identifications is rather universal. And the representation of history disseminated by state schools teaches children "not to understand their society and how it changes, but to approve of it, to be proud of it, to be or become good citizens of the USA or Spain or Honduras or Iraq" (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 357). Moreover, by representing the officially sanctioned definition of national past, history textbooks contribute to the construction of the sense of collective belonging and to the establishment of supposed ethnic boundaries between "us," members of the nation, and "them," non-nationals or foreigners (Carretero, Asensio, & Rodríguez-Moneo, 2012).

Official documents that regulate history classes in Slovene state schools instantaneously bring to mind the above stated findings and conclusions. According to the history curriculum of Slovene gymnasiums, history classes have "an important role in the formation of Slovene national consciousness and national identity" (*Učni načrt*, 2008, p. 7). This general expectation of school history also refers to teaching the past of peasant uprisings. The reason why pupils should learn about this historical episode is stated without any ambiguity: early modern period peasant uprisings are defined as important incidents in the history of Slovenes in the Habsburg Monarchy. According to the document, the familiarization with the phenomenon should hence contribute to the understanding of the major ethnic, economic and social developments on the territory inhabited by the Slovenes (*Učni načrt*, 2008, p. 24).

In what follows, I will describe how 16<sup>th</sup> century peasant uprisings became an essential part of the Slovene history curricula and analyze their role in the present-day official understanding of Slovene national history. I argue that the established textbook narrations on peasant uprisings contribute to the hegemonic representation of affirmative, unilinear and teleological historical development of the Slovene nation, which ultimately implies an "unavoidable" establishment of Slovenia as a nation state in 1991.

### *IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND CHRONOLOGY OF PEASANT UPRISINGS' REPRESENTATIONS*

With the exception of the short period of German, Italian and Hungarian occupation of Yugoslavia in the time of World War II (1941–1945), descriptions, depictions, and interpre-

tations of peasant uprisings have been constantly present in Slovene-language history textbooks for more than a century. The story of peasant uprisings was included already in a 1911 textbook (Pirc & Komatar, 1911). In the years before 1918, however, the interpretation of peasant rebellions differed markedly from those from the subsequent period. The social and political reality of Imperial Austria expected the textbooks to encourage loyalty to the Emperor, the Roman Catholic Church, and the homeland (Crownland) (Almasy, 2017; Bruckmüller, 1999; Žigon, Almasy, & Lovšin, 2017). As a result, the arising Slovene interpretative framework was not very explicitly included in the Slovene-language textbook's narration on rebellions.

History textbooks were subjected to significant conceptual changes after the end of World War I. The need to teach history to foster pre-1918 Imperial Austrian loyalties ceased to exist with the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Adhering to the new political and ideological reality, the content of history textbooks thus re-focused in the period between 1918 and 1941. School history started to be fixed predominantly on the national, that is Slovene or Yugoslav, history, or on the Slovene history *within* the Yugoslav context. Textbooks no longer explained Slovene history or the history of Slovenes in the context of the history of the administrative and political units that constituted the territory under the rule of Habsburgs before 1918. Instead, textbooks' historical narratives were now evidently dominated by the Slovene national perspective and oriented to the supposedly Slovene territory in different historical eras. Following spatial delineations and territorial claims of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovene ethnolinguistic nationalists, who propagated the existence of discernible Slovene region within the Austrian Empire/Austria-Hungary densely populated by Slovenes (Kosi, 2018), the post-1918 textbooks mechanically projected the notion of "Slovene territory" onto the past with disregard for administrative and political entities that had existed in previous epochs.

In addition to the profound change in the spatial focus, post-1918 history textbooks also underwent a radical redefinition of the content that should be presented to pupils. Following the new nationally conditioned master narrative coined by Slovene professional historians, school history now became a history of the Slovene nation. Historians assumed Slovenes to be a Slovene-speaking population of Slavic origins that had for centuries 'struggled to survive under a foreign yoke' only to find its final salvation in the post-1918 era. Such a teleological understanding of the national development, which to a certain degree still defines the methodological choices of Slovene professional historiography (Kosi, 2010, in press; Kramberger, 2009), was built upon several assumptions that framed the chronological and territorial understanding of Slovene national history:

1. the Slovenes were of Slavic origins;
2. they established their first state long ago, in the Early Middle ages; only to lose their independence soon afterward;
3. then, they were for centuries subjugated to German nobility as peasants, victims of germanization and social oppression;
4. Slovenes continued to be ignorant peasants until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Slovene national activists began to "(re-)awaken" the 'somnolent' Slovene masses;
5. the Slovenes regained their independence only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though it is not entirely sure whether each of the three 'independencies'—1918, 1945 and 1991—was of equal value.

Since the nobility that lived on the presumably “Slovene territory” was understood to be of the German origins, the official history of Slovene nation came to be predominantly equated with the history of peasants—that is with various historical experiences and destinies of Slavophone or bilingual rural population that happened to live in a variety of polities and administrative units anachronistically overlapping with the imagined “Slovene territory”.

In 1918, however, the conception of the Slovene nation as a community of Slovene peasants was still of a fairly recent date. Similar to the notion of “Slovene territory,” the narrative on the struggle of oppressed Slovene rural population that had—stripped of its ‘national’ feudal elite—allegedly lived under foreign oppression for centuries was in fact formulated only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The idea was invented by Slovene national activists in the Imperial Austria who adopted the ideological motto of supposedly Slovene peasants in the role of a national-political driving force behind the rise of the Slovene nation and language (Štih, 2005, 2006). In the conflict between Slovene and German nationalists of the late Imperial Austrian period, the equation “a Slovene is a peasant” became a strong means of mobilisation, especially when “nobility as the class enemy of the peasants morphed into the Germans as the national opponent of the Slovenes” (Vilfan, 1993, pp. 231–232). After 1918, however, such an outlook on the social structure and position of Slovenes became dominant among professional historians when it came to interpreting and conceptualizing the national. With the stamp of national-cum-professional approval this kind of national master narrative was also introduced to Slovene-language history textbooks.

In the interwar period, the school curriculum imposed new ideological objectives on the teaching of history in Yugoslav state schools (Troch, 2015). History classes were now expected to encourage national and patriotic feelings and to familiarise pupils with the history of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Bernik Burja, 2006, p. 26). In state schools with Slovene language of instruction, textbooks were now evidently dominated by the Slovene national perspective, describing the history of Slovenes as a part of Yugoslav history and at the same time focusing on the “Slovene territory” in different historical eras. In such context, significant portions of textbooks’ content were dedicated to the history of peasant uprisings against “German nobles,” which “Slovenes” or “Slovene peasants,” living “in Slovenia” or “on the Slovene territory” had taken part in (Binter & Štrukelj, 1938, pp. 22–25; Melik & Orožen, 1929, pp. 15–21). The topos of Slovenes as rebellious peasants subjected to German nobles was not limited exclusively to history textbooks. It was also a common reference in celebratory speeches at patriotic school celebrations organized to commemorate the Unification Day (“Dan ujedinjenja”), 1 December 1918, when the new Yugoslav state was established. In December 1925, a teacher in one of Ljubljana’s suburban schools depicted the Unification day as the moment when Slovenes finally got the opportunity to breathe the air of freedom. After the centuries long domination of Germans who were striving to enslave and germanize Slovenes, in 1918 the time for Slovenes to rise has come. The teacher explained to the pupils that Germans were feudal lords while Slovenes were

creatures who according to the first did not have the right to live. To annihilate them, to crush Slovene language that was their goal. When the Turks were conquering our lands, Slovene peasant had to defend himself all on his own, what was a Slovene peasant to the Germans! What were the 16<sup>th</sup> century peasant uprisings, uprising against the serfdom to German lords, the fight for ‘old rights’. . . . A millennium long hard work yielded rich results to the Germans. Territorial property of Slovene nation shrank in half. (Snoj, 2017, p. 434)

In Slovene history textbooks, the outlook on the Slovene peasants and peasant uprisings did not change significantly after World War II. Nonetheless, one can detect an obvious difference between the pre-war and after-war period. After World War II, the nationally-focused outlook on the past was adapted to the new socialist reality and official state rhetoric, influenced by Marxism. According to the history curricula for the upper secondary schools in the academic year 1947/48, the goal of history teaching was to illustrate “the constant struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, from the period of enslaved serfs through peasant uprisings and the great liberation struggle to a free nation (cited in Bernik Burja, 2006, p. 27)”. It is thus not surprising that the textbooks from the communist period described the peasant uprisings not only as a result of a nationally-conditioned oppression (Metelko, 1962, p. 150), but also of a class-related conflict and a consequence of serfdom-style exploitation (Gobelnik, 1980, p. 104). In other words, in history textbooks from the socialist period Slovene peasants were not represented only as rebels against the German oppression. They were also often given a role of the exploited class that rebelled against the feudal order as such.

In the period after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the story of Slovene peasant uprisings remained an important chapter of Slovene history textbooks’ representations. One can, for example, read about rebellious Slovene peasants in a textbook for upper secondary schools published in 2000. This particular textbook describes all of the major ‘Slovene’ peasant uprisings that took place »in the Slovene territory« from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on (Hozjan & Potočnik, 2000). Another history textbook for primary schools, published in 2009, focuses on peasant uprisings “in Slovenia” in a very similar manner (Potočnik, Otič, & Sevcnikar Krasnik, 2009, pp. 51–52). With some slight modifications, the notion of rebellious Slovene peasants continues to be included in the official representations of the Slovene national past provided by state-funded schools at different levels up until now. In the chapter “Slovenes through time”—the very title suggests what will be discussed—the recently published primary school textbook depicts the peasant uprisings and the position of peasants in the following manner:

In the past, the majority of the Slovene population consisted of peasants. Their lives were not easy. ... They often suffered because of diseases (the plague), or due to the pillaging of the Turks. ... Due to severe oppression, peasants would rebel against their feudal lords more than once. ... Quite some uprisings took place in Slovenia, but all of them ended badly for the peasants. (Umek & Janša Zorn, 2015, pp. 94–95)

### *WHY PEASANT UPRISINGS?*

Looking from the perspective of the 20<sup>th</sup> century political history, the persistence of peasant uprisings in Slovene-language history textbooks is quite unusual. Since 1918, institutional settings on the present-day Slovene territory have been replaced every few decades. The establishment of new regimes in 1918, 1941, 1945 and 1991 would always be followed by a period when reasonably new rhetoric and practices of legitimising the authority would be introduced. Unsurprisingly, the content of what soon became a new official historical memory had been almost always deeply influenced by political and administrative reconfigurations as well. The outlook on the past would always have to be brought in line with the new state or political realities. As a result, the textbook understandings

of Slovene national history were also subjected to more or less systematic interpretative revisions. After the collapse of a former rule, many individuals, events, dynasties or states that filled the pages of Slovene-language history textbooks were no longer in fashion. Several of them were even not to be worth mentioning at all.

Why, then, would the story of what were essentially unsuccessful early modern peasant uprisings be continuously—with an obvious exception of World War II period—included in Slovene-language history textbooks? How come that the familiarisation with peasant uprisings evidently corresponded to the expectations that each of the consecutive governments had of history teaching in Slovenia in the context of the state educational system so thoroughly? And in what manner did the instruction on the Slovene peasant uprisings time and again contribute to the socialisation goals of state-approved school education in Slovenia in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

In many ways, Slovene national history taught in schools is deterministic national messianism through the lens of which the past *must* be observed (Kosi, 2005). As such, it is a result of deliberate and organized process of intellectual invention, which has always been supported by Slovene nationalists. Slovene cultural and political elite has on many occasions paid significant attention to historical research and school history teaching in their efforts to establish, maintain, and spread the sense of common adherence to the postulated Slovene nation. The codification and spreading of the message on the supposed 'Slovene' past has been an instrument to this end. The invented 'national' past supposedly united a nation and simultaneously separated it from all other nations, dating the beginning of the process of Slovene nation-building 'at least a millennium ago.' By teaching history in schools and referring to the allegedly common 'national' past it was possible to turn what had been a heterogeneous population or populations in terms of collective identifications into a reasonably uniform nation. In this sense, national history, as taught in schools with the Slovene language of instruction during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been a collage, constructed from numerous stories, events, and nationally-inflected interpretations of primary sources. Such a mixture of pre-selected elements has the sole goal to implement a sense of destiny in a nation's incoming generations. Put differently, 'our national' history, whatever that may be, during the last millennium unfolded in a way that *had* to produce the Slovene nation.

The story about 'rebellious Slovene peasants' has been an important element of the deterministic Slovene national master narrative. In this sense, it is an intellectual product of the epoch, when historians all over the Europe put themselves in the service of nationalist political projects. During the last two centuries or so, numerous central European saw their research endeavours as a national mission, a means of contributing to the construction and the cultural or political emancipation of their postulated nations (Baár, 2010; Berger & Lorenz, 2010; Van Hulle & Leerssen, 2008; Norton, 2007) While inventing glorious and ancient national histories, many 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century central European national movements and nation states were able to rely on, for instance, historical sources on medieval kings, military successes of barbarian 'tribes' against the Roman Empire, and various administrative and institutional legacies (Bak, Geary, & Klaniczay, 2015; Evans & Marchal, 2011; Geary 2002). Slovene nationalists and Slovene professional historians, however, did not have such rich material at their disposal. Yet they managed to compensate the lack of the nominally national dynastic tradition or continuous statehood with the notion of 'Slovene peasantry' who had for centuries inhabited present-day territory of Slovenia. Such a continuity has had the capacity to retroactively 'nationalise' the territory as well as its inhabitants into a Slovenia and a Slovene nation, respectively.

In addition, the fact that 'Slovenized' peasants in the early modern period rebelled against 'German' nobles could be used in order to see them as a sort of 'Slovene knights,' a national avantgarde, so to speak. Their uprisings were interpreted as a confirmation of the fact that the 'Slovene peasantry' possessed enough potential to sooner or later constitute itself as a political subject, or the Slovene nation. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socio-political resistance of early modern peasants has hence been described as a significant first step on the 'long and thorny path' towards the emancipation of the Slovenes. It seems that authors of Slovene history textbooks and curricula have always accepted this implication very well—like the author of the textbook published in 1939:

In the first three centuries of the modern period, the times were most difficult for our peasants. Despite everything, they did not give up but strived to attain freedom through bloody rebellions, even if at most times unsuccessfully. Nevertheless, they sacrificed themselves in order to prove that they did not want to be nobility's serfs, and therefore they ultimately saw better days. (Pečjak & Baukart, 1939, p. 60)

Unsurprisingly, the trope of such 'better days' was still in use decades later. Due to its adaptability to various political circumstances, the peasant myth proved to function extremely well on many occasions. In June 1991, for instance, on the day following the declaration of the independence of Slovenia, an influential Slovene newspaper described the decision with the following words: "After one thousand years of German rule and 73 years of life in Yugoslavia... the dream of many generations has been at last realized—Slovenia is independent!" ("Slovenija je samostojna!" 1991).

Until recently, such interpretations of Slovene national history stemmed from and relied heavily on studies conducted by a number of professional Slovene historians, who used their expertise and scientific authority to substantiate 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalists' assumptions (Kosi, in press). Yet in the last two decades or so, several Slovene historians have thoroughly revised the conceptual frameworks and assumptions that supported such interpretations. Consequently, the perception of Slovene history as a history of centuries long suffering of the 'peasant Slovene community' subjected to the cruel 'German' nobles is now prevaillingly seen only as a myth (Štih, 2006). More precisely, as a myth of nationally reinterpreted serfdom that surfaced primarily after 1945 as the official and thus dominant interpretation of Slovene history. In reality this myth does not have much to do with actual historical developments on the ground. What is more, new research on the creation and spreading of the modern national Slovene category of identification revealed that adherence to imagined Slovene national community emerged only several centuries after the peasant rebellions—that is, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached the masses with the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Almasy, 2014; Čuček, 2016; Hösler, 2006; Kosi, 2013; Kosi & Stergar, 2016; Stergar, 2012). The relatively recent character of the modern Slovene category of identification also reveals that the Slavophone peasants, self-evidently presented as 'Slovenes' in simplified historical interpretations, did not necessarily understand themselves as being 'Slovenes' at all. Moreover, in the era of feudalism, modern-time national identifications simply did not exist. Unlike what the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnolinguistic nationalists believed, in the eyes of the nobles inhabiting the present-day Slovene territory there could for that reason be no difference between 'Slovene' or 'German' speaking peasants. What was crucial was their labour and not the language they communicated in.



## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most remarkable 20<sup>th</sup> century Slovene historian, Bogo Grafenauer (1916–1995), who for many years managed to influence what Slovene historians researched and how they interpreted historical sources, defined Slovene peasant uprisings as the very first step to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovene “national awakening” (Grafenauer, 1968, p. 133). From the perspective of historical sources, however, such an understanding of rebellious ‘Slovene’ peasants is purely mythological. First of all, in the early modern period there had been no such political or administrative unit as “Slovene territory” or “Slovenia”. Secondly, the sources testify that peasants had not necessarily referred to themselves as ‘Slovenes,’ and if they in fact had, they certainly had not used this ethnonym to express their ascription to the modern Slovene nation as it was imagined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thirdly and consequentially, the early modern “Slovene peasant uprisings” were not nationally motivated rebellions against the German nobility. And, last but not least, Slovene national activists and professional historians only retrospectively connected peasant uprisings to one another and presented them as ‘ours,’ that is as ‘Slovene uprisings’.

Historically speaking, the textbook representations of Slovenes as rebellious peasants who fought for their national and social rights were invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century state schools effectively disseminated the idea among potential Slovenes increasingly shaping them into a unitary Slovene nation. As a result, the aforementioned myth became an ‘undisputable fact,’ repeated time and again, and in this rhetorical manner ‘implanted’ in the minds of successive generations of already minted Slovenes. School history lessons have decisively influenced the understanding of political and social reality of not only the past, but also today’s Slovenia and its inhabitants. Thus, the nationalist goals of the history curricula, as shaped by 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist activists, have been fully realized.

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