Between Rupture and Continuity: The System of Care and Education for Deaf Children in Slovenia between 1945 and 1950

The following contribution examines the development of the system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia in the early years after World War II and places the issue within the broader Yugoslav context. It ascertains that, at the level of the republics, certain ambiguities existed regarding the division of jurisdiction among the Ministries of Education, Social Welfare, and Health in relation to the education and schooling of children with special needs. Therefore, the Ministries in question highlighted numerous obstacles to the development of institutions for deaf children and other children with special needs. The Slovenian authorities attributed the problems to a lack of information from the federal Ministries. The latter, on the other hand, believed that issues with the post-war organisation of special education stemmed from inadequate organisation inherited from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Another problem was the shortage of professionally qualified teaching staff, which the authorities sought to address by establishing special education departments at teacher training colleges. The present contribution establishes that the vital foundations of the general system of care and education for deaf children and children with sensory impairments in Slovenia were already laid during the interwar period. Although the post-war communist regime emphasised a break with the pre-war arrangements and the construction of a new system, the development of special education between 1945 and 1950 was largely grounded in the continuity of institutions, personnel, and professional practices from the pre-war period.

Keywords: *Slovenia, Yugoslavia, education, deaf children, school for deaf children*

Introduction

To date, the system of care for children with sensory disabilities and their education in Slovenia has received little attention in historical research. This contribution is based on the research into the system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia during the interwar period (1919–1940), when the crucial institutional and professional foundations for its further development after 1945 were laid. The study's findings simultaneously shed light on the broader development of the system of care and education for children with sensory disabilities in Slovenia. Before and after World War II, Slovenia's development occurred within the framework of the Yugoslav state. The first Yugoslavia was a monarchy, whereas the second was a socialist state led by the Communist Party. In 2023, we undertook an interdisciplinary research project at the Institute of Contemporary History titled *Sistemi skrbi in izobraževanja senzorno oviranih otrok v prvi in drugi jugoslovanski državi* (*Care and Education Systems for Children with Sensory Impairments in the First and*

Second Yugoslav States, J6-50289), which examines the development of care and education systems for children with sensory impairments from 1919 to 1991. The project is funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS), and the research team comprises experts from Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. The project is scheduled for completion in September 2026.

The development of the system of care and education for deaf children in the first and second Yugoslavia has rarely been addressed in international historiography. Existing research generally focuses on Western European and North American cases or on broader social policy and disability issues in socialist countries, whereas the history of education for deaf children in the first and second Yugoslavia remains under-researched. At this point, we should mention Paul Stubbs, author of *Socialist Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism*, who notes that many post-war reforms in Yugoslavia were shaped by the intersection of the socialist state's ideological goals and the continuity of pre-war institutional structures (Stubbs, 2016).

This contribution focuses on the first five years after World War II in Slovenia, when the new authorities sought to reshape the school system on new ideological and organisational foundations and move it away from pre-war models. Nevertheless, numerous elements of continuity were retained during its transformation. During the first five years after the end of World War II, the education system generally stagnated relative to the pre-war period, owing to its subordination to the ideological and political views of the ruling Communist Party (Gabrič, 1991). As in other areas of society, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia sought to reduce disparities among the individual republics and to create as unified an educational system as possible. The goal of this policy was to standardise the organisation of the education system, curricula, ideological content, and educational standards, thereby contributing to the creation of a common Yugoslav socialist space. The goal was to bring the more developed and less developed parts of the country into line with common standards, which, however, were not based on the actual average of the existing systems but rather on a politically conceived vision of a unified Yugoslav society and its educational system. In the more developed parts of Yugoslavia, which included Slovenia, this policy led to setbacks in the development of the education system. For Slovenia, which had already implemented an eight-year elementary school system before the war, the introduction of compulsory seven-year schooling in 1946 represented a step backwards relative to the school system's previous level of development (Gabrič, 2009). In contrast, the 1950–51 school year – which, chronologically, falls outside the scope of this article – marked a significant turning point in the development of post-war education, with the introduction of compulsory eight-year schooling and the establishment of a comprehensive school system. Thus, it was possible to overcome numerous organisational problems and frequent policy shifts characteristic of the second half of the 1940s, during which the communist regime also restructured the education system for children with sensory disabilities. In this regard, the need to move away from the pre-war models was often emphasised, yet in practice, many pre-war

institutions, professional guidelines, and organisational solutions were retained after the war.

During the interwar period, segregated education and schooling enabled the provision of specialised educational services for children with sensory disabilities, tailored to their needs, thereby facilitating their integration into society by helping them learn a trade, find employment, and become financially independent. During the interwar period, this was the ultimate goal of the educational institutions for children with sensory disabilities, including those who were deaf. Such an attitude towards deaf children, as well as those with sensory impairments in general, persisted after World War II: the emphasis was on their integration into society. However, the development of a positive social attitude towards these children became increasingly pronounced, as the post-war government prioritised care for vulnerable individuals, including children with special needs. However, tendencies towards spatial segregation – i.e., relocating institutions for children with special needs to the periphery – persisted. The medical model for treating children with special needs remained dominant, while the treatment of people with special needs was medicalised. This meant that disability was viewed as a pathological condition requiring constant treatment, correction, or elimination (Rembis et al., 2018). The concept of disability emphasises that although physical, sensory, and intellectual impairments can limit individuals in their daily activities, actual barriers arise only when they encounter an exclusionary environment (Zaviršek, 2014).

During the interwar period, it was clear that institutions for the education of children with sensory disabilities were educational institutions. However, due to the circumstances (most students came from socially disadvantaged families), they had also informally become social institutions. Shortly after World War II, this was no longer self-evident. Because of their condition, children with sensory disabilities were automatically deemed to be in need of social assistance. On 25 June 1945, Vilma Kralj, a provisional delegate of the Institute for Blind Children, wrote to the Ministry of Education, objecting to such negative connotations and clearly stating that the Institute was first and foremost a genuine educational institution, not a shelter (AS 231, container 37, 1945).

Even after World War II, the oral method continued to dominate deaf children's education. Since this contribution does not address the history of methods in special education for the deaf, it does not analyse them in greater detail. However, it is worth noting that the oldest method of teaching the deaf was the use of sign language. Following the International Congress on Education of the Deaf, held in Milan in 1880, the oral method became the prevailing approach. The Congress adopted a resolution in favour of the oral method of teaching the deaf, on the grounds that the sign language method isolated the deaf from hearing society and turned them into a separate group. It took a long time for sign language to be officially recognised as the first and independent language of the deaf community. In the early 1980s, Sweden became the first country in the world to officially recognise sign language as the deaf community's primary and independent language. Other countries, including Slovenia, followed suit. In 1988, the administration of the Ljubljana Institute for

the Deaf and Hard of Hearing recognised the need for sign language and embraced the idea of incorporating Slovenian Sign Language into deaf education. It was not until 2010, at the 21st Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf, that all the resolutions of the Milan Congress were rejected and a public apology was issued for the ban on sign language in deaf education (Rezar, 2023).

Literature review

Research into disability (in Slovenia, the older term "invalidity" is no longer socially acceptable) as a historical, social, and cultural phenomenon intensified in the 1980s with the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of disability studies. This field of research shifted the concept of disability/handicaps from an exclusively medical framework to a broader social and cultural context, highlighting the impact of social structures, institutional practices, and power relations on the life experiences of people with disabilities. The fundamental premise of this approach was the distinction between physical or sensory impairment and disability, with the latter understood as a socially constructed category. In Slovenia, one of the most important authors in disability studies is Darja Zaviršek (2014), who emphasises the connections among physical differences, individuals' everyday experiences, the social environment, and power relations. Her work is based on the social model of disability, which underlines that disability is not merely the result of an individual's physical or sensory characteristics, but primarily the result of societal barriers and processes of exclusion.

Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen have made significant contributions to the international development of disability history. Their seminal work, *The Oxford Handbook* of *Disability History* (2018), is one of the most comprehensive overviews of the field's development. It treats disability as a key category for understanding identity, citizenship, community, and social norms. The authors point out that the history of disability cannot be confined solely to the history of institutions, treatment, or care for people with disabilities, but must be understood as the history of the life experiences of people with disabilities and of their position in society. Susan Burch, Michael Rembis, Paul K. Longmore, and Lauri Umansky have also made significant contributions to the development of disability history. In their work *The New Disability History* (2001), Longmore and Umansky laid the foundations for contemporary historical research on disability, while in the collection *Disability Histories* (2014), Burch and Rembis emphasised the importance of incorporating issues of gender, race, class, and cultural context into disability research. Kim E. Nielsen is also particularly important because she treats disability as an independent historical-analytical category. In her view, research on disability offers a better understanding of the processes of social exclusion, identity formation, and the workings of power mechanisms across different historical periods.

The issue of childhood disability is a significant area of research in contemporary anthropology and sociology. Hart and Boyden (2019) classify disability as one of the key factors in social differentiation, comparable to gender, social class, and ethnicity. Wickenden (2019) underlines that disability is not a direct consequence of physical or sensory differences, but rather the result of processes of social labelling, exclusion, and the construction of otherness. In psychological research, Susan Goldin-Meadow (2006) and Oliver Sacks (2006) are especially noteworthy. Goldin-Meadow has shown that deaf children spontaneously develop complex systems of understanding even without formal exposure to sign language. Sacks, on the other hand, in his research on blindness, highlighted the brain's plasticity and the vital role of the social environment in shaping individuals' perceptual experiences.

In the Slovenian context, the works of the Slavicist, pedagogue, and teacher of the deaf Bogo Jakopič, who systematically researched the history of deaf education in Slovenia, are fundamental. His most notable works include *Gluhonemnica v Ljubljani (1900–1945) / The Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute (1900–1945)* (1972); *Zgodovina učnih načrtov in programov šol za gluhe na Slovenskem / The History of Curricula and Programmes at Schools for the Deaf in Slovenia* (1979); *Pota do besede / Paths to Language* (1986); and *Oris zgodovine vzgoje in izobraževanja gluhih v svetu / An Outline of the History of Education for the Deaf Abroad* (1998). His works are a crucial source for understanding the development of special education for the deaf in Slovenia. Meanwhile, Minka Skaberne, a teacher of the blind, played a pivotal role in the history of education for the blind and the visually impaired. As early as 1919, she published *Skrb za slepce / Care for the Blind*; while in 1920, she wrote the article *Vzgoja slepcev / Education of the Blind*. Both works serve as fundamental sources for studying the beginnings of organised care for the blind in Slovenia. Her work is complemented by a publication by Marija Golob and her associates, *Pot k svetlobi / The Path to Light* (1989), marking the 80th anniversary of the Institute for Blind Children and Youth, and by the book *Zavod za slepo in slabovidno mladino: zgodovinski oris 1919–1989 / Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children: A Historical Overview, 1919–1989* (1989).

Literature from the interwar period and the post-World War II era – roughly up to the 1980s – offers insight into the educational process for children with sensory disabilities. It views segregated education as a means of support and a path to independent living, and thus to societal integration. The authors of these works are teachers of the deaf, special education teachers, social pedagogues, defectologists, and sociologists. Initially, historiography did not examine this issue, but this has changed somewhat in recent years. Children with special needs are the primary research focus of the historian Dunja Dobaja. She focuses primarily on the system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia during the interwar period and World War II. She published the results of her research in the scientific monograph *Za blagor mater in otrok. Zaščita mater in otrok v letih 1919–1941 / For the Good of Mothers and Children: The Protection of Mothers and Children between 1919 and 1941* (2018) and in the scientific monograph *Gluhi in svet: med odrinjenostjo in vključenostjo / The Deaf and the*

World: Between Marginalisation and Inclusion (2024), in which she highlighted the school for deaf children in Ljubljana – the so-called Institute for the Deaf-Mute – which served as the central Slovenian institution for the education and schooling of deaf children. It was founded in 1900, largely thanks to the legacy of Dean Ignacij Holzapfel, and enabled deaf children from Carniola to receive an education in the Slovenian language, which was very important, as children had previously been educated in Austrian institutions, in a foreign language and far from their home environment. Despite the legal framework that, after 1929, allowed for the schooling of children with special needs, only about 40% of deaf children in the Drava Banate attended special education classes, while the majority remained without any education. The Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute was the only institution of its kind in Slovenia, so, due to limited space, it could not admit all applicants. Attempts to expand it were made throughout the interwar period, but they failed because of insufficient funding. Most of the school's students came from socially disadvantaged families and became deaf later in life because of unhealthy living conditions and untreated illnesses. With the backing of the Support Association for Deaf and Mute Youth, the Institute provided material assistance, healthcare, training in manual trades, and education using the voice-and-speech method, which was considered the path to integrating deaf people into society at that time. Another important function of the Institute for the Deaf-Mute was to raise public awareness and reduce prejudice towards the deaf. The efforts relied on the participation of the teachers, the Support Association, and the Drava Banate's Deaf-Mute Society, which highlighted the abilities and social status of deaf people through public cultural events. After World War II, the new Yugoslav government also introduced compulsory elementary education for children with special needs, marking a significant step towards expanding access to education for deaf children.

The question of the educational and schooling process for the blind and visually impaired in Slovenia during the interwar period, World War II, and the post-war period is the research focus of the historian Mojca Šorn, who, together with Dunja Dobaja, presented research findings on the system of care and education for children with sensory disabilities in Slovenia in the paper *Institutional Education of Blind, Deaf, and Speech-Disabled Children in Slovenia until World War II. Wychowanie w Rodzinie* (2018).

In the Yugoslav context, the seminal work on the treatment of people with special needs in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia is Ljubomir Petrović's scientific monograph *Nevidljivi geto. Invalidi u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918–1941* / *The Invisible Ghetto*. *The Disabled in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918–1941* (2007). In the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the situation of people with disabilities was characterised by inadequate legislation, economic underdevelopment, and widespread social prejudice. The aftermath of World War I led to an increase in the number of disabled war veterans, who represented the primary focus of social welfare policy, while other groups of people with disabilities remained marginalised. Poor health and hygiene conditions, infectious diseases, and inadequate occupational safety measures contributed to the rise in the number of people with disabilities. Society's attitude towards disability was based primarily

on the perception of reduced work capacity, thereby reinforcing social exclusion and inequality. Although the state provided certain forms of material assistance, the social welfare system was highly bureaucratic, and access to benefits was often hindered by complex administrative procedures.

Dunja Dobaja has also conceived the aforementioned project, titled Care and Education Systems for Children with Sensory Impairments in the First and Second Yugoslav States, which is being carried out at the Institute of Contemporary History. Together with external collaborators, the project team members wrote several scientific articles that were published in the special issue of the journal *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* / *Contributions to Contemporary History 65/1* (2025), titled *Decoding the Historical Patterns*, and in the scientific monograph *Education and Employment of Individuals with Sensory Disabilities in the First and Second Yugoslavia (1919–1991)* (2026), which was published as part of the Institute of Contemporary History's *Vpogledi/Perspicacités* collection. The special issue focused mainly on the education and schooling systems for children with sensory impairments from the end of World War I to Slovenia's independence in 1991. The aim was to explore how the form and content of these systems changed over time; to establish how these changes were related to the elements of the broader environment and society; and to determine how the systems influenced the lives and social position of their beneficiaries after their schooling. The basic premise was to observe changes in care and education institutions, from the segregation of sensory-impaired children as the dominant paradigm in the interwar period to their integration, which eventually asserted itself after World War II. In this regard, two questions were at the forefront: how this paradigm shift related to social macrostructures and whether it was reflected in these children's life outcomes. Meanwhile, the scientific monograph raises important questions about the development of education, employment, and the broader social status of people with sensory disabilities in the former Yugoslavia. It shows that although some progress was made, it was uneven and often constrained by social norms, institutional practices, and persistent stereotypes. At the same time, it points out that the inclusion of people with sensory disabilities was not merely the result of legislative changes, but also part of broader social change and the efforts of individuals and institutions. By providing historical insight into these processes, the monograph encourages reflection on current practices and on future challenges regarding the inclusion of people with sensory disabilities in society.

The development of legislation and educational policies in Slovenia after World War II was analysed by the pedagogue and historian Staša Ivanec in her article *Otroci in mladostniki z motnjami v telesnem in duševnem razvoju v pravnih dokumentih v Sloveniji (1958–1980)* / *Children and Adolescents with Physical and Mental Disabilities in Slovene Legal Documents (1958–1980)* (2013). The author found that the Slovenian special education system was based on the idea of adapted education and vocational training for children with special needs. Subsequent integration processes in Slovenia were analysed by the pedagogue Majda Schmidt in her article *Zaznavanje integracije/inkluzije v osnovni šoli* / *Detection of Integration/Inclusion in Primary School* (2006); by

the special education teacher Angelca Žerovnik in the research report *Vzgoja in izobraževanje otrok z motnjami v telesnem in duševnem razvoju v procesu integracije* / *Education and Schooling of Children with Physical and Mental Disabilities in the Process of Integration* (1983); and by the pedagogue and psychologist Vinko Skalar in his article *Integracija in kurikularna prenova* / *Integration and Curricular Reform* (1997). In their works, these authors emphasised the importance of social integration as an essential prerequisite for the successful inclusion of children with special needs in the wider social environment.

A review of the literature shows that disability research has long focused primarily on the institutional histories of special education and social welfare, while the life experiences of people with sensory disabilities – and of people with special needs in general – have remained underexplored. Therefore, contemporary approaches to the histories of disability and childhood provide an important methodological starting point for exploring the relationship among social policies, educational practices, and individuals' subjective experiences across different historical periods.

Methodology

The study was based on a qualitative historical approach and on the analysis of primary archival sources, legislation, and scientific literature. In analysing the sources, the historical-critical method was used, which allows for an assessment of their authenticity, origin, purpose, and historical context. Special attention was paid to archival materials from the authorities of the Slovenian Republic and the Yugoslav Federation responsible for education, social welfare, and healthcare.

Qualitative content analysis was also used to analyse the material. This method helped identify key themes related to the organisation of the care and education system for deaf children, the division of responsibilities among ministries, the issue of professional staff, and the post-war authorities' attitude to pre-war practices in education for children with sensory disabilities.

The study was designed as a comparative analysis, situating the development of the system in Slovenia within the broader Yugoslav context and thereby enabling a comparison of federal policies with their implementation at the level of the republics. The period under analysis spans the first five years after World War II, during which the institutional, legislative, and professional frameworks of the post-war system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia were being established. The research was based on institutional and comparative-historical approaches.

Results

The post-war system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia between 1945 and 1950 did not entail a complete break with the pre-war period.

Instead, it was a process of ideological reinterpretation and organisational restructuring of existing institutions, personnel structures, and professional practices.

Discussion

Traces of the past in a new country

The end of World War II in 1945 marked a major step towards the emancipation of the Slovenian language and culture. In the new Yugoslav state, culture and education were the areas in which the federal units (republics) were granted the greatest autonomy (Gabrič, 2009). After assuming power at the end of World War II, the Communist Party of Slovenia, within the framework of the Yugoslav political system, gradually aligned the education system with its ideological and political goals. In the early post-war years, the new government focused primarily on the political and economic transformation of society, while it had not yet established a clearly defined long-term development strategy for culture and education. The early post-war period was therefore characterised primarily by efforts to resolve the immediate organisational and staffing challenges arising from the nationalisation of educational institutions, as well as by the gradual establishment of a new educational system. It was accompanied by numerous improvised measures and frequent reorganisations, while a comprehensive and systematic framework for individual areas of education was developed gradually.

In an article titled *Smernice sodobnega pedagoškega dela* / *Guidelines for Modern Pedagogical Work*, published in the first issue of the post-war teachers' journal *Popotnik* (Schmidt, 1945/46), Vlado Schmidt, a member of the School Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia, explained the new educational guidelines to the Slovenian pedagogical staff. The Ministry of Education asked the Slovenian teachers' councils to discuss the article at teachers' conferences and to report on it to their superiors. Before its publication, the article was reviewed by the School Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia at its meeting on 28 December 1945, thereby representing the official position of the new authorities (Gabrič, 1991). The article is relevant to research on special education and the education of deaf children primarily because it reveals the ideological framework underpinning the school reforms after 1945. It shows that the new communist regime rejected many pre-war educational practices as "reactionary" and sought to establish a unified socialist school system. In light of the above, attempts to reorganise education for children with sensory disabilities are understandable, even though many pre-war institutional and professional models remained unchanged in practice.

After World War II, the school for the deaf – known as the Institute for the Deaf-Mute – and the Institute for Blind Children in Ljubljana faced issues with jurisdiction and space. On 26 June 1945, the Head of the Minister's Office at the Ministry of Social Policy addressed a query to the Ministry of Education

regarding the jurisdiction over the Institute for the Deaf-Mute – specifically, whether it fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education as an educational institution or under the Ministry of Social Affairs as an institution for those "in need of social assistance". The relevant Ministries failed to resolve the question of whether schools for children with sensory disabilities were educational or social institutions (Dobaja, 2022). The Committee for Schools and Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia explained the lack of clarity over jurisdictions in Slovenia and other Yugoslav republics by pointing to shortcomings in the previous system, which had allegedly failed to clearly delineate the jurisdictions of the Ministries of Social Welfare, Health, and Education. To resolve the situation that had arisen, the Committee drew up a plan to divide responsibilities among the relevant ministries of the individual republics, according to which institutions for children with sensory disabilities fell under the Ministry of Education's jurisdiction. On the other hand, institutions for children and young people with physical disabilities who were unable to acquire vocational skills and enter the workforce, as well as those for children and youth with severe intellectual disabilities, fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health was responsible for all children's and youth institutions primarily intended for healthcare, treatment, and rehabilitation (AJ 315, container 21, 1946).

The lack of clarity regarding jurisdiction indicates that the post-war communist government had not yet developed a clearly defined approach to the care of children with sensory disabilities. Discussions about whether institutions for people with sensory disabilities should fall under the jurisdiction of educational, social, or health authorities reflect the interplay among pedagogical, social, and medical perspectives on disability. The final decision to place schools for children with sensory disabilities under the jurisdiction of the republics' Ministries of Education marked a significant step towards integrating them into the education system. At the same time, the debate revealed the organisational uncertainty of the early post-war years and the dependence of the republics' authorities on federal guidelines for shaping the special education system.

The division of responsibilities between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs was not merely administrative; it also reflected prevailing conceptions about the capabilities of specific groups of children with special needs. While deaf and blind children were considered capable of receiving education and vocational training and were therefore placed under the jurisdiction of educational authorities, children with more severe physical and intellectual disabilities were predominantly regarded as subjects of social welfare. This arrangement indicates that the right to education was largely tied to an individual's expected future capacity to work and participate in society, reflecting the continued dominance of the medical model of disability in the early post-war years.

The end of World War II did not mean that efforts to segregate deaf and blind children would end. The general hospital, located in the immediate vicinity of the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute, resumed its pre-war efforts to acquire

the Institute's premises. Marjan Ahčin, who was Slovenia's Minister of Health at the time, supported the general hospital's efforts and urged the Slovenian Ministry of Education to resolve the issue of relocating the Institute. He proposed relocating it to the outskirts of Ljubljana, away from the city centre (Dobaja, 2022). His proposal can be understood in the context of spatial segregation. The Institute for Blind Children was also subject to a trend towards spatial segregation, but its director, Bogomira Dobovšek, prevented this by appealing to Lidija Šentjurc, then Minister of Education and Culture of Slovenia (Dobaja, 2022). Ultimately, both Institutes remained in Ljubljana, attesting to the prevalence of constructive expert arguments based on the view that, for the successful education and schooling of children with sensory impairments, a physical presence in Slovenia's capital was essential, as all the major cultural and educational institutions were located there.

As noted at the beginning of this discussion, the individual federal units (republics) enjoyed a degree of independence from federal authorities in the field of education. This may also have been the reason for inadequate federal oversight of certain segments of the education system. This can be illustrated by the example of the general hospital in Ljubljana, which sought to expand at the expense of the nearby school for deaf children. In 1947, the Yugoslav Association of the Deaf informed the Committee for Social Welfare of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia of the Slovenian Ministry of Education's intention to demolish the Institute for the Deaf-Mute. This Committee informed the Committee for Schools and Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia about this matter, and the latter requested an explanation from the Slovenian Ministry of Education. Lora Kernc, Lidija Šentjurc's Deputy Minister of Education, gave a clear explanation. While it was true that the Ministry of Education had ceded part of the land belonging to the Institute for the Deaf-Mute to construct a new clinic for the Institute for Social Insurance, it simultaneously drew up plans to build a new school for deaf children with a capacity of 360, which was significantly more than the old school (which had a capacity of only about 50 children). She emphasised that, until the new facility was built, the children would remain in the old building (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). According to data from 1947, 144 pupils were enrolled at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute, far exceeding its actual capacity. In Slovenia, 300 of approximately 500 school-age deaf children were capable of attending school. For this reason, the Ministry of Education decided to build a larger new institution (AJ 315, container 21, 1947).

The case of the alleged demolition of the Institute for the Deaf-Mute reveals several features of the post-war development of the system of care and education for children with sensory disabilities. On the one hand, it points to limited information flow between the republics and the federal authorities, as well as to the republics' relative autonomy in regulating educational matters. On the other hand, it highlights the vital role of organisations of people with special needs, which were able to draw attention to the decisions of the republics' authorities through federal channels. At the same time, the example shows that the post-war authorities regarded the education of deaf children as a vital part of social and

educational policy, as evidenced by the plans to build a new institution with significantly greater capacity than the pre-war one. Therefore, the dispute did not signal a decline in the importance of education for deaf children, but rather reflected tensions between the post-war state's various development priorities and the organisational difficulties of implementing them.

Attitude towards deaf children in the new state

In addition to post-war reconstruction, one of the key tasks of the communist authorities was to care for vulnerable people. Among children and adolescents, the groups most at risk primarily included orphans, socially and morally endangered children,[1] the blind, the deaf, the physically disabled, and children with intellectual disabilities. During their formative years, everyone should have access to education and basic necessities (food, clothing, footwear, and healthcare). Foster parents or institutions cared for those whose parents were unable to fulfil this role (Vehar, 2018). This policy shift implied a strengthening of the state's role in social welfare and education, which had largely relied on a combination of state support and charitable initiatives during the interwar period. In its annual budgets, the pre-war central government allocated funds to various educational, social, and health institutions. Each received a share, but generally not enough to meet their needs. Financial resources were always insufficient, so the individual institutions under consideration, including the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute, relied on charitable organisations and on their own ability to manage the funds they had raised. Before the war, the Institute admitted far more children than it could accommodate because it sought to ensure that as many children and young people as possible received an education, learned a trade, and became financially independent. Theoretically, the 1930 Education Act (Official Gazette, 1930) allowed deaf children to attend school. However, not all deaf school-age children could attend because there was insufficient space at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute, the only school for the deaf in Slovenia during the pre-war period (for more information, see Dobaja, 2024). Mirko Dermelj, formerly the Institute's director, described the school's situation in the pre-war period as follows:

> *"It is understandable that, following the pivotal year of 1918, we were all delighted with the newly established Yugoslavia, which we expected to bring us freedom, progress, and a better life. However, those hopes did not come true for us. The capitalist leaders did not satisfy the masses, and they were unwilling to address even the most pressing social issues, such as the plight of the deaf. Our Institute was becoming increasingly crowded, yet we received no help from anywhere. On their own initiative, the teaching staff and administration strove to improve our pupils' education and the training of future teachers, while the authorities at the time showed no understanding for the Institute and offered neither the facility nor the students any support or protection beyond the mandatory maintenance. The*

[1]The term "morally endangered children" referred to children whose parents were alcoholics, prostitutes, violent individuals, criminals, or politically controversial figures (Vehar, 2018).

> *authorities did not address any issues affecting the deaf, such as education, let alone their employment and inclusion in the various workshops. The struggle to keep the Institute open was difficult, and the situation for the deaf after they finished school was dire as well."* (Dermelj, 1950)

The quote reflects a typical post-war interpretation of the interwar period, which portrayed the pre-war state as socially insensitive and uninterested in people with special needs. Therefore, the text should be read as a combination of an account of the Institute's actual problems and an ideologically coloured interpretation of the past. It highlights the significant structural problems faced by deaf people after completing their education, particularly the absence of a systematic approach to vocational training, employment, and social integration. At the same time, it shows that the administration of the Institute for the Deaf-Mute largely regarded the school's development as the result of its own professional initiative, which was an important factor in understanding the development of special education in Slovenia during the interwar period.

The goals of educational work at the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute in the new Yugoslav state were similar to those of the interwar period – namely, to provide basic education that would enable the deaf to participate in society and lead independent lives. In keeping with the spirit of the new era, the communist authorities also emphasised the importance of socio-political education, which aimed to familiarise children with the achievements of the liberation struggle and the ideological principles of socialist society. The authorities also expected social engagement even from pupils at the Institute. This means that younger students were active in the so-called Pioneer children's organisation, while older students took part in the youth organisation. The members of the youth organisation held weekly meetings and wrote articles for a youth newspaper titled "*Stenčas*",[2] which served as a relevant medium for cultural expression, information sharing, and student involvement in the school's community life. According to the authorities, their efforts were very successful, as the youth organisation at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute ranked second among all youth organisations in Ljubljana during the 1946–47 school year. Eight deaf students also participated in a volunteer work action during the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway line (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). On 20 May 1947, the Youth Work Brigade of the Deaf was formed, comprising 90 deaf people from across Yugoslavia. The brigade in question participated in the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railway line and was successful in its work. As part of this work action, the deaf learned about the importance of collective work and life. Despite difficult working conditions, a lack of resources, and adverse weather, they strove to fulfil their duties and prove that they were no less capable than their hearing peers (Vukotić, 1954).

[2]The term "*Stenčas*" is an abbreviation for "*stenski časopis*" ("wall newspaper"), a widely used means of disseminating information and conducting educational and ideological work in Yugoslav schools, youth organisations, and institutions. The students made use of it to publish various news items, articles, and reports on events, achievements, holidays, and more.

Railway construction was a central symbol of post-war reconstruction and the socialist mobilisation of youth. The inclusion of deaf people in such work projects reflected the authorities' efforts to integrate them into collective labour and to foster a sense of belonging to the broader Yugoslav community. In this regard, it was emphasised that, despite their sensory impairment, deaf people were able to participate on an equal footing in tasks integral to the construction of the new state. The post-war system retained the pre-war goal of integrating the deaf into society, but placed it within the new ideological framework of the socialist state. While vocational training and economic independence for the deaf were the primary focus in the pre-war period, after 1945, their integration into collective forms of work and sociopolitical education also became an important focus.

The post-war authorities also expected teachers at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute to be socially and politically active. Their role was not limited to teaching; it also included educating students in line with the values of the emerging socialist society. Most teachers came from the pre-war system. The available sources do not provide sufficient information about their attitude towards the new post-war authorities to draw reliable conclusions. The sources indicate only that, during World War II, both the teachers and the students at the Institute were victims of the occupying forces. Four teachers were interned in the occupiers' camps. Several former pupils of the Institute – three men and one woman – were killed during the armed struggle against the occupiers (Dermelj, 1950). Based on this limited information, we can only conclude that some teachers and pupils of the Institute participated in the resistance movement during World War II, which played a crucial role in shaping the new Yugoslav state after the war. However, we cannot draw conclusions about their ideological affiliations or their activities regarding the ideological education of students after the war.

Considering the education system in Yugoslavia as a whole, we find that the ideological orientation of a large portion of the teaching staff was not to the liking of the new communist authorities, since the existing teaching staff had, for the most part, been educated in the former states (Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the Kingdom of Italy). The new government saw the key to achieving more ideologically appropriate results in education in a different approach by the teaching staff to educational problems – namely, the ideological transformation of the existing staff and the training of new, politically reliable personnel (Gabrič, 1991).

Meanwhile, at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute, teachers familiarised students with the achievements of post-war reconstruction and modernisation through lectures, direct conversations, and organised tours of industrial facilities, which, in this context, symbolised economic progress and the successes of the communist system. Therefore, teachers played a vital role in shaping young people's social and political consciousness (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). One of the main goals of post-war education and training was to develop a workforce whose moral character, professional knowledge, and practical skills would meet the needs of socialist society and its economy. Particular emphasis was placed on vocational training and on the integration of youth into production processes.

Educational institutions were supposed to prepare young people for independent work and enable them to acquire the qualifications needed to pursue skilled, semi-skilled, or auxiliary occupations in the economy. In 1946, in this context, a secondary vocational school was established at the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute – a project championed primarily by the school's principal at the time, Mirko Dermelj. The Ministry of Industry approved the school's establishment, which, as noted in the report on the school's opening, "demonstrated the people's government's concern for the working class, which includes all deaf and mute people" (Dobaja, 2022).

The establishment of a secondary vocational school at the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute in 1946 reflected the post-war authorities' efforts to provide vocational training and to integrate the deaf into the workforce. The report from the school's opening ceremony indicates that the authorities regarded the deaf as part of the workforce, expecting them to contribute to the development of socialist society through the acquired vocational skills. The school thus represented a continuation of pre-war efforts to provide vocational training for the deaf, while also integrating them into the ideological framework of post-war society, in which work was regarded as one of the fundamental social values.

The shortage of qualified teachers

The shortage of professionally qualified teaching staff in special schools was not merely a post-war problem. As early as the interwar period, experts in special education had noted a shortage of qualified personnel (Dobaja, 2024). The post-war efforts to establish departments of defectology[3] at teacher training colleges represented a continuation of earlier efforts to address a problem that had already been identified. In 1947, Lidija Šentjurc, Minister of Education of the People's Republic of Slovenia, called on the Committee for Education and Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia to provide general guidelines for establishing a Defectology Department at the Ljubljana Teacher Training College, which had been founded that same year. In addition, she requested an outline of the special education programme's curriculum, sample guidelines, and a list of subjects required for the professional examination. To ensure the quality of education for future teachers, she proposed that the committees of the republics' Ministries of Education carefully review the defectology framework curriculum and submit their recommendations to the federal Ministry of Education. Based on the proposals collected, the Committee for Education and Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was tasked with developing a curriculum for defectology departments at teacher training colleges in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). The republics without teacher training colleges sent their candidates to study in those that had them. In this context, Lora Kernc, Deputy Minister of Education, called on the Committee for Education and

[3]The term from the period under consideration is used. The modern term is special and rehabilitation pedagogy.

Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia to remind the ministries of education of the other republics to submit their lists of candidates for study in Ljubljana by 15 September 1947. The appeal was prompted by unsatisfactory enrolment in the Defectology Department in Ljubljana, as by 1 September 1947, only part-time students had enrolled – that is, those who were employed and unable to attend regular classes because of professional or other obligations. According to estimates from the Ministry of Education, the number of enrolled students was too low. Nine candidates applied for the position of specialised teacher for the deaf, representing approximately 60% of the projected enrolment; eleven candidates applied for the position of teacher for children with intellectual disabilities; and only two candidates applied for the position of teacher of children with physical disabilities, with total enrolment reaching approximately 65% of the planned quota (AJ 315, container 21, 1947).

Archival records show that the shortage of professionally qualified staff was one of the crucial developmental issues in post-war special education. At the same time, it reveals the efforts of federal and republics' authorities to systematically regulate the training of special education teachers and to standardise professional standards throughout Yugoslavia. However, the modest enrolment in the newly established special education department in Ljubljana indicates a disconnect between post-war education policy plans and the system's actual staffing capacity. At the same time, this example confirms continuity with the pre-war period, as it addressed a problem that experts had already highlighted during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The shortage of professionally qualified staff was not only characteristic of Slovenia but also of the other Yugoslav republics. This is illustrated by the example of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, according to data from the republic's Ministry of Education, had 1,233 deaf children (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). Because of a teacher shortage, the school for deaf children in Sarajevo could admit only 42 children. It had a single specialist teacher and four student teachers on their teaching practicum, who had not yet met the requirements to teach independently. Because of staffing shortages, student teachers nevertheless taught independently. Therefore, the Assistant to the Minister of Education of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina requested that the Committee for Education and Science of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia assign an additional specialist teacher for the 1947–48 school year to support the professional training of student teachers, enabling them to teach independently. Professional assistance was provided by the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute, which assigned Zdravko Omerza (AJ 315, container 21, 1947), a specialist teacher, to the school for the deaf in Sarajevo. According to data from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Slovenia for 1947, in addition to the principal, the Institute employed 12 specialist teachers and 8 student teachers (AJ 315, container 21, 1947). In 1948, the number of specialist teaching staff gradually increased, reaching 24 by the end of that year (AS 231, container 98, 1948).

This example illustrates the vital role of cooperation among the republics in resolving staffing issues. The assignment of teacher Zdravko Omerza from the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute to the Sarajevo school shows that the post-war special education system developed as a Yugoslav forum for the exchange of professional knowledge and personnel. In this process, Slovenia played an important role in providing professional support to less developed republics, thanks to its long tradition of educating the deaf and its more developed institutional network. Some pre-war institutions, including the Ljubljana Institute for the Deaf-Mute, served as pillars of professional continuity after 1945. Thanks to their experience, they contributed to the establishment and professional development of special schools across other parts of Yugoslavia.

Conclusions

The study of the system of care and education for deaf children in Slovenia from 1945 to 1950 shows that post-war developments cannot be understood merely as a break with the pre-war period. Although the new communist government emphasised the need to establish a new social and educational system and took a critical view of the legacy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, it relied heavily on the existing institutions, professional staff, and pedagogical practices in organising special education. The analysis of archival sources has shown that the development of the system was hampered by numerous organisational problems, including ambiguities over the division of responsibilities among the Ministries of Education, Social Welfare, and Health, as well as a shortage of professionally qualified teaching staff. These issues were addressed through cooperation between the authorities of the individual republics and the Yugoslav federation – a process that revealed discrepancies between the post-war authorities' normative plans and the practical feasibility of implementing them. At the same time, the study confirms that the key foundations of the system for the care and education of deaf children in Slovenia were laid as early as the interwar period. The post-war system thus represented a combination of continuity and change – continuity at the levels of institutions, personnel, and expertise, while changes occurred at the level of the organisational structure of the system of care and education for deaf children and its ideological positioning within the framework of socialist society. It was precisely the interplay between these two processes, discontinuity and continuity, that had a profound impact on the system in Slovenia in the first years after World War II.

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