

History of Border Deaths

Marijana Hameršak

There have always been deaths at borders and because of borders. According to one version of the legend about the founding of Rome, Romulus killed Remus because he leaped over a furrow that was meant to mark the boundaries of the future city. “So should perish anyone who leaps over my walls” (Zamarovský 1985: 296), declared Romulus when the walls were only simple traces in the earth. In addition to direct conflicts over territories — during conquests, battles, and wars — people have also died because of borders and at borders while fleeing. In the first half of the 20th century, crossing the border was the only safe option for many “enemies” of the Nazi regime: Jews, homosexuals, communists, and others. Some were caught by the police of the countries they were fleeing in their attempts to escape across the border, while others were stopped by the police of the countries where they had hoped for refuge while trying to cross the border. According to Lisa Fittko, who helped Walter Benjamin, among others, cross the French Pyrenees, Benjamin took his own life with morphine tablets after Spanish border guards refused him entry into their country based on yet another new and soon-to-be-repealed order “in that age of new orders” (Fittko 2021: 148). According to the findings of the coroner, Benjamin died from a stroke (Taussig 2006: 3), which is why the circumstances of his death remain murky to this day. However, there is no question that crossing the border was a matter of life and death for him. Crossing the border he was forbidden to cross was his only way to avoid hiding, imprisonment, deportation to a camp, and death.

European borders continued to claim lives even after World War II. Armed border guards, and of course, **fences, wires, and walls**, among which the Berlin Wall held a special place, along with people **killed** while attempting to cross it, were and remain the building blocks of the bipolar Cold War image of the world based on the antagonism between the liberal, open West and the communist, closed East. In practice, however, from the mid-1960s, just a few years after the construction of the Berlin Wall began, Western European countries actively started working on closing their borders and “shrinking” immigration options (Comte 2018: 76-109; Sciortino 2004: 26-28), a commitment they continue to pursue to this day. After France introduced additional conditions for crossing the border for citizens from its former colonies in 1972 due to labor market tensions (Comte 2018: 108), those who could not meet these conditions were left with only illegal routes. Some of these routes came through Yugoslavia, which, as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement during those years, liberalized border crossings through agreements and cooperation plans (economic, technological, cultural, scientific, etc.) with member states from the Movement. This also included the abolition of the visa regime for citizens of numerous African, Asian, and Latin American countries, such as Morocco in 1964, Tanganyika and Zanzibar (present-day Tanzania) in 1965, Algeria, Cuba, and Tunisia in 1966, Iran and Pakistan in 1970, India and Costa Rica in 1971, and Iraq in 1972 (*Službeni list SFRJ – Dodatak. MU*). After arriving in Yugoslavia by plane, some of them clandestinely continued further west, through Austria or Italy. This is how in 1973 near Trieste, just a few kilometers from the border with Italy, four young men from Mali and Mauritania **died** of hypothermia and exhaustion. They were **buried** in the presence of relatives and numerous locals at the cemetery in the village of Boršt / Sant'Antonio in Bosco, where their graves with the names Somil Dibya Mibaye (born 1948), Bakari Traore (born 1948), Seydou Dembele (born 1951), and Mamadou Niakhate (born 1954) still exist today.



Cemetery in Boršt / Sant' Antonio in Bosco, 24. 3. 2023. Photo: Marijana Hameršak

Given that the deaths near Trieste are directly related to limiting options for regular entry into France, they can also be considered the earliest deaths of the modern **European migration regime** and its associated **irregularization of migration**. However, activists and non-governmental organizations, followed by media and researchers in Europe and the United States, only began documenting (cf. the [List of Refugee Deaths](#), published by the [UNITED](#) for Intercultural Action network since 1993) and analyzing (cf. Cornelius 2001) **border deaths** from the 1990s onward. Initiated in response to increasingly restrictive migration policies that contradicted the proclaimed post-Cold War myth of a world without borders, these first academic, activist, and media responses were focused on the contemporary situation and needs. This has remained one of the fundamental characteristics of understanding deaths at the borders to this day. Even today, research and critiques of border deaths continue to focus on Western states and their immediate surroundings (Central America, North Africa, and, in Eurocentric terms, the Middle East). A historical perspective, if applied at all, often does not go further back than the 1990s, as seen in the [d@b Database](#) created as part of the University of Amsterdam's *Human Costs of Border Control* project or map [The Border Kills](#) (1993-2020), illustrating how the Mediterranean has become a **maritime cemetery** over several decades (cf. Ritaine 2015, according to Pécoud 2020: 380). Furthermore, documenting border deaths – due to the weak or unreliable engagement of states, international agencies, and organizations – still often relies on logistically and emotionally difficult connections with various actors and communities. It involves the intertwining of activist, artistic, commemorative, legislative, and research efforts.

10/6/2023

Literature

Comte, Emmanuel. 2018. *The History of the European Migration Regime. Germany's Strategic Hegemony*. Oxon: Routledge.

Cornelius, Wayne A. 2001. “Death at the Border. Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Control Policy.” *Population and Development Review* 27/4: 661-685.

De Genova, Nicholas. 2002. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life”. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419-447.

Fittko, Lisa. 2021. *Moj put preko Pireneja. Uspomene 1940–1941*. Zagreb: TIM Press. Prevela Nadežda Čačinić.

Pécoud, Antoine. 2020. „Death at the Border. Revisiting the Debate in Light of the Euro-Mediterranean Migration Crisis“. *American Behavioral Scientist* 64/4: 379-388.

Sciortino, Giuseppe. 2004. „Between Phantoms and Necessary Evils. Some Critical Points in the Study of Irregular Migrations to Western Europe“. *IMIS-Beiträge* 24:17-43.

Taussig, Michael T. 2006. *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago i London: University of Chicago Press.

Zamarovský, Vojtech. 1985. *Junaci antičkih mitova. Leksikon grčke i rimske mitologije*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga. Preveli Mirko i Predrag Jirsak.