

ITALIAN POLICY TOWARD THE SLOVENES FROM 1915 TO 1994

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In March 1915, Sir H.H. Asquith, the British prime minister, wrote to Venetia Stanley: "The Cabinet ... spent their time in discussing how cheaply we can purchase the immediate intervention of that most voracious, slippery, and perfidious Power — Italy. She opens her mouth very wide, particularly on the Dalmatian coast, and we must not allow her to block the Serbs' access to the sea. But short of that, she is worth purchasing: tho' I shall always think that on a great scene she has played the meanest and pettiest of parts".

In fact, as is well known, Italy was rewarded quite generously by the Entente for intervening on their side in the First World War, though not at the expense of the Serbs, but of the Slovenes and Croats. In November 1920, with the Treaty of Rapallo, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was able to keep control of nearly the whole Dalmatian coast but had to abandon its claims on Istria and the Slovene Littoral, including the Soča/Isonzo valley, which means that nearly 400,000 Slovenes passed under the sovereignty of the Savoy monarchy. It was a heavy blow for this small nation which had lived for centuries under the (not always benign) tutelage of the Habsburgs, and was now compelled to accept their defeat as its own.

For the Slovenes of the Littoral, of the Karst area that centers in the port of Trst/Trieste, and of the Isonzo valley, with as its main center the city of Gorica/Gorizia, the Italians were not foreigners, thanks to a phenomenon typical of Central Europe: city-dwellers spoke another language, had another culture and on occasion even professed a different religion than the dwellers of the surrounding countryside. For nearly a thousand years there had been a fairly peaceful coexistence between these different ethnic groups because of the rigid structure of society, marred only by the occasional peasant uprising, which had been however without any ethnic tinge.

This peaceful coexistence ceased with the end of feudalism. The greater social mobility typical of the second half of the 18th

and beginning of 19th centuries favored the formation of a bourgeois and intellectual class which was Slovene not only in origin but also by consciousness. For the Italian urban élite, who used to treat the country folk paternalistically as “good barbarians,” the realization that they were claiming the right to participate in the political process as equal partners came as a shock. When this happened in the revolution of 1848-49, they were not able to cope with the fact that a new political subject was coming of age, and preferred to shift their perception of Slovenes and Croats, from that of “good” barbarians to “bad” ones. This way of seeing the Slavs (who were pejoratively called *sc’avi*) originated in Dalmatia but spread very quickly along the coast up to Trieste and formed the backbone of irredentist ideology during subsequent decades until the fall of Austria. Although the Slovenes of Trieste and Gorizia continued to make progress culturally, politically and economically their Italian neighbors never regarded them as a nation, as Slovenes. Instead, they were (and often are still) referred to as *sc’avi*, as “Slavs,” as a potential threat to the established order based on the pre-eminence of everything Italian. The only acceptable Slovene is one who abandons his ethnic consciousness and language, and opts for the Italian nationality, in the name of the “higher culture.”

This mentality survived the First World War and was accepted uncritically by the new authorities who came to administer Venezia Giulia, as the Austrian Littoral was called in 1918. The Italian bureaucratic apparatus was culturally and psychologically unprepared to cope with the multi-ethnic reality of the new province, since it has been formed in an environment where nation and state coincided. According to Risorgimento ideology, pockets of “alloglots,” as they were called — such as those in the Slavia Veneta (whose Slovene population had come under Italian rule as early as 1866) — should be eradicated in the interests not only of the state but also of the local inhabitants. However, the Italian ruling class was not so naive as to think it would be possible to do this in Trieste and Gorizia overnight. Although there was no international agreement which bound Italy to protect its Slovene and Croat minorities, the leading figures of the Italian state assured the new subjects that Italy would treat them even better than Austria had done, in accordance with the cultural standards of its bimillennial civilization. In signing with Yugoslavia the Treaty of Rapallo in

November 1920, Count Sforza sought the best strategic boundaries for his country without considering the national factor. But he was still clever enough to realize that cooperation with the neighboring Kingdom would be important to Italy — both had the same potential enemy: the Austrian-Germans — and he was therefore confident that an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and respect between the two peoples would inevitably be imposed by life itself. He did not reckon with the Trieste Irredentists — who despite their reincorporation persisted with their violent brand of nationalism — and with the insurgent fascist movement.

The Slovenes of Trieste had the chance to experience just how explosive a combination of the two would be in July 1920, when their Cultural Center, an imposing building in the heart of the city, was set on fire by a fascist-led mob, while the police and military failed to intervene. This was the beginning of a period of violence which swept Venezia Giulia and did not settle down with the victory of Mussolini in 1922. On the contrary, under the new régime the persecution of the Slovene population became systematic, so that they would be assimilated as soon as possible. Schools, cultural and sports clubs, newspapers and political parties were forbidden, the flourishing economic infrastructure was destroyed, family names and place-names were changed by decree and it was forbidden to speak Slovene in public and later even in Church. At first, the Slovenes of Venezia Giulia responded by trying to find a *modus vivendi* with the authorities, but when this appeared impossible, they reacted with violence. The consequence was a crackdown on the terrorist group formed by the Slovene youth, and a spectacular trial, in September 1930, before the Special Court for the Defence of the State, which ended with four death sentences and other heavy penalties for the minor culprits. But this exemplary punishment did not deter the Slovenes: ten years later the Special Court had again to try and sentence yet another large group of rebels.

These events need to be seen in the larger framework of the stormy relations between Italy and Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s, which went from bad to worse because of Mussolini's "Napoleonic" foreign policy, aimed at the destruction of the neighboring Kingdom. In such a tense situation, the Slovenes, subject to Belgrade and represented by the People's party, thought it wise not to join the Croats in their violent opposition to

Serbian hegemony, considering it for the time being, a *minor malus* [lesser evil], as Father Anton Korošec, their most important contemporary politician, put it. But they still did not relinquish the idea of a united Slovenia, a political programme which characteristically enough was shared by catholics and communists alike. In fact, amid their general disagreement, they agreed at least on this: that the Slovenes would settle their accounts with Italy and recover the land they had lost.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, however, the two parties reacted to the Italian occupation in a different way. In April 1941, when Yugoslavia was attacked and destroyed by the Axis, Slovenia was divided into three parts. The smallest, Prekmurje, was given to Hungary; the northern and richest part was annexed to the Third Reich; and the southern part, with the capital Ljubljana, was occupied by the Italians and proclaimed as a new province of the Savoy Kingdom. The fascist authorities had to choose between two options regarding their policy in the newly acquired land. They could either listen to the Triestini, who wanted to use the same methods there as had been used to deal with the Slovene population in Venezia Giulia, or they could follow the advice of the foreign minister Ciano and his supporters, who cherished the idea of some cultural autonomy for the province of Ljubljana, so as to make it into a kind of magnet also for the Slovenes under Nazi rule. The naive hope was that Italy would be able to push further north at German expense when the latter started to lose control through the Russian war effort. Since this second proposal prevailed, the Italian régime in the province of Ljubljana in the first few months after occupation was much more tolerable than the German régime in Upper Carniola and in Styria. This tolerance provoked among the Slovenes a twofold reaction: the moderate groups (especially those near to the Church) thought it might be possible after all to find some common ground with Italians and survive until things improved. The radicals (communists, leftist liberals, Christian socialists, intellectual fellow-travelers), on the other hand, thought that the armed uprising they had in mind would be easier against the relatively inefficient Italian forces than against the German ones. This duly took place in the summer of 1941, provoking the typical outrage of the betrayed benefactor among the Italians, who had taken pleasure in congratulating themselves on their humanity, and giving rise to the

growing realization among their Slovene sympathizers, that between fascist (but nevertheless Catholic) Italy and bolshevik and atheist Russia (obviously the inspirator of the Liberation Front) Italy was again the *minor malus*. In reaction to the armed uprising, the Italian army carried out severe actions against the 'bandits' and their supporters, while civil war broke out among the Slovenes, who split into two camps, the 'white' *domobranci* (the home defenders) and the 'red' partisans. During the following years the Slovenes experienced a most miserable and bloody time, fighting each other and the Italians, who in retaliation killed hundreds of civilian hostages and deported thousands of men, women and children to their concentration camps.

When Italy collapsed in September 1943, the Slovenes inherited the civil war; this the Germans were all too eager to exploit, taking the *domobranci* under their wing. Although, when they occupied it, the Germans kept the Slovene ethnic territory divided, creating in the Venezia Giulia a new administrative entity (the *Adriatisches Küstenland*), they were unable to prevent the Liberation Front from spreading throughout the entire area and proclaiming the unification of the Littoral as part of Slovenia in October 1943. It was one of the first sovereign acts of the Slovene people in its entire history, accompanied however by awareness that it was necessary not only to win the war in order to implement this decision, but also to prepare the necessary intellectual tools to defend the claim of a new border with Italy at the Peace Conference. The Liberation Front leadership therefore decided to establish in the woods a special research institute, to collect all the necessary historical, geopolitical and economic data in favor of the Slovene thesis: that the border with Italy should encompass roughly the valley of the Isonzo and the Littoral (including the cities of Trieste and Gorizia). The partisans did not deny that those cities were populated mostly by Italians; but they argued that they had been the natural administrative and cultural center of their surrounding areas for centuries, and should therefore belong to Slovenia. At the same time, they promised, in the name of proletarian internationalism, to respect and protect in every way possible the Italian national minority.

As early as 1944, this territorial claim caused friction between the Italian and the Slovene resistance movements, and even more importantly, disagreement between Tito and his Western allies.

Under the terms of the armistice signed with the Rome government, American and British troops had the right to occupy the whole of Italy, including Venezia Giulia. But this clashed with the Yugoslav assertion that the majority of the province was not ethnically Italian and that its population had shown allegiance to Slovenia and Yugoslavia by collaborating with the Liberation Front. The problem of the demarcation line between the troops of Marshall Tito and those of Fieldmarshall Alexander was not settled either at the Yalta Conference or some weeks later when the two met in Belgrade. The result of this uncertainty was the famous "race for Trieste" by the two advancing armies, both the Yugoslavs and Anglo-Americans being of the opinion that the military occupation of the territory was the best starting-point for then claiming legal possession. The race was won on May 1st 1945 by the partisans, but just by the skin of their teeth, who still had to allow the Allied troops to reach Trieste and set up quarters there. The reason for this peculiar situation was Churchill's growing impression that Tito was a mere tool of Stalin and that his territorial ambitions were part of a larger strategy to spread communist influence throughout Western Europe. In order to preempt this move and show that the Allies were ready to fight to preserve their sphere of influence, Churchill and Truman asked Tito to withdraw from Trieste and from a part of the disputed territory. Tito tried to resist for forty days and organize a popular administration in the area; but he was then forced to withdraw his troops, having been abandoned by Stalin, who thought the problem was too marginal to be worth a serious quarrel with the Allies. However, Tito did not withdraw from the entire Venezia Giulia, or even from the entire disputed area, but just from its Western part, including Trieste and Gorizia.

The forty days of Yugoslav occupation in Trieste and Gorizia are central to an understanding of the history of relations between Italians and Slovenes. The arrival of the partisans was in itself a terrible shock for the Italian population, since it seemed that a nightmare had come true: the despised Slavs, and communists to boot, were in power! To make matters worse during the early days of their occupation, these Slavs behaved without much restraint, arresting hundreds of potential enemies, mostly members of the Italian military or paramilitary forces, deporting or killing them without a proper trial and throwing their bodies into deep holes

(locally called *foibe*). The phenomenon was limited in time and in the number of the victims, but in Italian eyes it has acquired the dimensions of genocide, which tended to be used in the ensuing quarrel with Yugoslavia over the "Trieste question."

In June 1945, the disputed territory was divided into two zones of military occupation: Zone A, assigned to the Anglo-Americans, and Zone B, assigned to the Yugoslavs, with the proposal of settling the question at the Peace Conference. In the meantime the outbreak of the Cold War made drawing the new frontier much more complicated, since it was destined to be not just a border between two states but between two hostile blocs. In the spring of 1946 French foreign minister Bidault suggested the idea of a Free Territory of Trieste [FTT], encompassing most of Zones A and B, as a buffer between Italy and Yugoslavia. Despite Italian and Yugoslav opposition this compromise was accepted as a viable solution by the Great Powers and included in the Peace Treaty, which Rome and Belgrade alike were forced to sign in February 1947. But the growing mistrust between East and West soon made it obvious that the FTT was a still-birth. In fact, by the summer of 1947 the Western Allies had already realized that implementing it and withdrawing their troops from Zone A would be tantamount to abandoning the entire area to Tito; so they decided to boycott the election of the Governor of the FTT and in March 1948 even proposed to the Soviet Union the return of the entire Territory to Italy. It was a bold move, since it posed the problem of revising the Peace Treaty for the first time, but it was justified by the overwhelming need to help Italian prime minister De Gasperi win the April 1948 elections. In the following months, however, the political situation in the Balkans changed dramatically because of the expulsion of the Yugoslav Communist Party from the Cominform and Tito's subsequent alignment with the West. Until June 1948, Trieste was the Western bastion against the Eastern bloc; after 1950, however, the whole of Yugoslavia became that bastion. This meant that the Western diplomacies could start to think of how to resolve the question without damaging either Italian or Yugoslav interests too much. The obvious solution was to give Zone A to Italy and Zone B to Yugoslavia; this was done (not without trouble) with an agreement signed in London on October 5th 1954 by the occupying Powers and Italy.

During this time the Italian attitude towards Yugoslavia and Slovenia was complex. Despite emerging from the war a defeated country, Italy was convinced that the armistice, the collaboration of the monarchist government with the Allies in the south, and the resistance against the Salò Republic in the north, entitled her to be treated as an allied power. An eloquent indication of this mentality was the idea, elaborated in the Foreign ministry in Rome, that the Rapallo Treaty of 1920 freely signed by the Belgrade government at the time was still in force and should therefore be implemented by the Allies. I was told recently that when a young under-secretary minuted a document in which this concept was proposed with the comment: "But we lost the war," he was quickly fired. The tendency of the Italian people to grant themselves a general pardon for the crimes committed by the fascists in Venezia Giulia in the 1920s and 1930s and by the Italian Army in Slovenia during the war (accompanied moreover by the old rhetoric about the Slav barbarians) provoked a hostile response among Slovenes on both sides of the border.

At the diplomatic level the Italian and the Yugoslav governments adopted a different approach in their fight over the borders. Even before the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, the Yugoslavs were not completely sure of Soviet support and therefore preferred a bilateral solution to the problem. This was obviously even more the case after their expulsion from the fold, when they clearly aimed at consolidating their presence in Zone B to make sure Slovenia had an outlet to the Adriatic. The Italians, on the other hand, preferred to send their Western allies to the front line, while asserting that a favorable solution of the Trieste question was of paramount importance to the survival of democracy in Italy. This attitude became particularly evident after the "tripartite note" of March 1948, stating that the entire FTT would be returned to them. Although people like Sforza (once again foreign minister) knew quite well that this had been an electoral promise lacking substance, Italy stuck to its guns even after the quarrel between Tito and Stalin, using its gradual integration into the Western anticommunist front (NATO, the European Community), as a lever to make the Allies keep their word and help them recover as much lost territory as possible. This policy was primarily dictated by the international situation (since Italy's position was an important asset in the Western defence system) but also by internal

reasons. After 1945 about 200,000 Italians fled from Istria, not wanting to live under Yugoslav and Communist rule, and settled in Trieste and in northern Italy. They built up an important electoral pressure group which no Italian government could ignore, not to mention the nationalistic, nostalgic and neo-fascist forces present throughout the Italian population. Because of this knot of different interests and attitudes the Trieste question remained unresolved. As we have seen, till October 1954, and even then the compromise reached was an ambiguous one. In fact, the London memorandum did not abolish the FTT, but just stated that Zone A would pass under Italian rule, and Zone B would remain under Yugoslav control. This *de iure* provisional solution, taken in order not to provoke the Soviet Union with the revision of the Peace treaty, was meant to be permanently *de facto*, since Washington and London declared in a secret letter that for them the settlement was final.

Italy exploited the ambiguous character of the Memorandum to the full. Diego de Castro himself, the most outstanding scholar of the Trieste question, has recently recognized that the Italian government purposely presented the solution to its public as a provisional one, maintaining the illusion of a possible recovery of Zone B. So, an irredentist mentality has been artificially sustained in the border areas, stressed by an unfriendly attitude of the authorities towards the local Slovene minority, in spite of the provisions in its favor included in the London Memorandum. But this instrument has never been ratified by the Italian parliament and has thus been considered by the local administration as meaningless a piece of paper. At the same time this attitude was accompanied by the opening of the borders and lively economic cooperation between the two countries: it helped Trieste and Gorizia to survive economically, but still remained only skin-deep, without influencing the mentality of the people.

When the American government applied pressure because it was concerned about leaving Tito's successors with as few problems as possible, Italy was compelled to settle the border question with Yugoslavia in 1975 once and for all. The Treaty of Osimo was interpreted by an unprepared public opinion in Trieste as a betrayal of Italian interests. Its consequence was the creation of a new political movement, the List for Trieste, which was able to find followers in all parties in the name of the old nationalistic values. This movement greatly influenced the political life of the

border area in the 1980s, playing an important role as a link between the extreme right and the socialist left. Of course, the negative attitude of the Socialist Foreign minister Gianni De Michelis in the late 1980s and early 1990s towards the Slovenes' struggle for emancipation from Yugoslavia is to be seen in a frame of a broader political evaluation of the Yugoslav crisis, shared by the majority of his western colleagues, but the influence of Triestine circles should not be underestimated. De Michelis was still declaring in May 1991 that the European community would not recognize the independence of Slovenia in fifty years. By the end of the year he had changed his mind completely and backed the German decision to recognize Slovenia and Croatia as soon as possible. This sudden conversion was not inspired by a change in attitude towards the two republics' struggle for independence, but by the conviction that an isolated move by Germany had to be prevented at all costs. The lack of a sincere and friendly long-term policy, so typical of the Italian attitude towards their eastern neighbor, has been evident in the behavior of De Michelis's successors, Andreatta and Martino. Both, but especially the latter, have tried to exploit the weakness of a small country so as to ensure Italian predominance in the area, using the three traditional tools: the irredentist and nationalistic feelings of the border population, the pressure on the Slovene minority in Italy and the help of Western friends — in this case the European Union. The Rome government is thus blocking the associated partnership of Slovenia with the Union, pending the settlement of some patrimonial issues of the Istrian exiles in the former Zone B. The problem would not be of great importance if the forces supporting this policy were not the same irredentist circles who still hope to regain what the London Pact of 1915 promised to Italy in Slovenia, Istria and Dalmatia. Due to such a policy, an area which could now be stable, in spite of its closeness to the Balkan war, is today in turmoil. In fact, the immediate result of the Italian attitude is not so much the growth of Slovene nationalism (which is not detrimental to anybody except to the Slovenes themselves) but rather a deterioration of the internal political situation in Slovenia, which threatens to jeopardize the delicate passage of the small Alpine republic from totalitarian socialism to democracy.

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POVZETEK**ITALIJANSKA POLITIKA DO SLOVENIJE (1915-1994)**

Referat skuša prikazati glavne smernice italijanske politike do Jugoslavije oziroma Slovenije, tako kakor so se oblikovale v zadnjih sedemdesetih letih. Izhodiščna točka je tajna pogodba, ki jo je Italija podpisala v Londonu leta 1915 in s katero se je obvezala, da stopi v vojno na strani Antante v zameno pa dobi vzhodno jadransko obalo in s tem nadoblast nad velikim delom balkansko-podonavskega prostora. Po razpadu Avstroogrske pa je postalo očitno, da svojih ciljev rimska vlada ne bo mogla povsem uresničiti, saj je na ruševinah habsburske monarhije zrastle nova državna enota, Kraljevina SHS, ki je v imenu narodnostnega principa zahtevala zase velik del ozemlja, obljubljenega Italiji. Te nove razmere so bile vzrok za oster spor, ki ga ni poravnala niti Rapalska pogodba, s katero sta beograjska in rimska vlada leta 1920 zakoličili medsebojno mejo. V letih med obema vojnama so italijansko-slovenske odnose močno pogojevale brutalna politika fasistичne Italije do slovenske in hrvaške manjšine v Istri in Julijski krajini pa tudi Mussolinijeve imperialistične ambicije, ki so dosegle svoj vrh z napadom na Jugoslavijo 6. aprila 1941 in s priključitvijo dela Slovenije k savojskemu kraljestvu. Po drugi svetovni vojni se je spor za meje znova vnel, pri čemer so znale italijanske oblasti spretno igrati na karto ideološkega razkola med socialističnim in kapitalističnim taborom, kakor se je udeležil v jadranskem prostoru. Čeprav je bila meja skoraj v celoti na novo izrisana v korist Slovencev, je v tržaško-istrskem prostoru prišlo do zapletov, ki so jih velike sile skušale najprej rešiti z oblikovanjem Svobodnega tržaškega ozemlja, pozneje pa z razdelitvijo spornega teritorija med Jugoslavijo in Italijo. Ti konflikti - premostili so jih sele Osimski sporazumi leta 1975 - pa tudi vprašanje slovenske in italijanske manjšine, ki sta ostali na eni in drugi strani meje, so v marsičem negativno vplivali na slovensko-italijanske odnose v letih po drugi svetovni vojni. Dejstvo, da se italijanska družba ni znala nikdar konstruktivno soočiti z etnično in državno identiteto svojih vzhodnih sosedov, je usodno pogojevalo njeno zunanjo politiko in vrglo tudi senco nesporazuma na odnose med Italijo in Slovenijo po njeni osamosvojitvi leta 1991.

