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### The Eastern Border in Modern Italian History

#### 1. An important Periphery

The topic of this paper concerns an area on the periphery of the Habsburg Dual Monarchy, which was subject to repeated changes of sovereignty after 1918. It concerns, namely the so called coastal or littoral region (Küstenland) encompassing the Imperial Free City of Trieste, the counties Görz and Gradiska and the margraviate Istria. The port of Fiume (Rijeka), which became the major port of Hungary and experienced significant growth after 1867 is also included in this region. The area was characterised already in the Habsburg period by a) a strong institutional fragmentation that led to the result that the inhabitants could maintain their local identification. The region remained a sheer administrative unit; b) a multi-ethnic population, who spoke Italian, Croatian and Slovenian dialects. In the period of nationalism beginning in this region in the 1880s, national-oriented elites emerged who were quickly able to mobilise broad segments of society. The Social Democrats in Trieste and Fiume and the Catholics in Görz practiced a supranational discourse in that time. This remote periphery of the Dual Monarchy was home to important institutions with key functions for the whole state, namely the commercial ports of Trieste and Fiume and the military port of Pola (Pula). In 1857 a railway connection between Trieste and Vienna was opened.

Trieste and the surrounding area became an economic centre in the closing years of the multi-national empire. Only Lower Austria and some parts of Bohemia could keep pace with the Empire's "first port". This was, nevertheless an economic structure that could only thrive in the context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After 1918 these ports in the north-eastern Adriatic stagnated. After 1954, when the border between Italy and Yugoslavia was finally drawn, Trieste became dependent of the subsidies of the Italian state, similar to whole regions in the south of Italy.

As result, one can say that this coastal region was among the losers of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy. Different historians and intellectuals, beginning with the Patrician Domenico Rossetti, stressed the artificial character of Trieste, which owed its prosperity to the needs and the politico-economic decisions of Vienna. It may even be stated, that perhaps no other region of the Habsburg Monarchy experienced more frequent upheavals and changes, which lasted until the more recent time. After the collapse of Yugoslavia the independent Republics of Slovenia and Croatia on the other side of the Italian border were formed in 1991. Some weeks ago Slovenia entered the "Schengen area". As a consequence, the border between Italy and Slovenia almost disappeared, while some thirty kilometres further the border between Slovenia and Croatia separates the core region of the European Union from no-member countries.

The acute journalist Roberto Bazlen, a German Jew born in Trieste, said once that Trieste was a kind of "seismograph of the crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", i.e. a place, which was extremely susceptible to the change and turbulence of modernity, all the more since the city was (and is) not by any means able to take its future into its own hands. It is not coincidence that 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian literature includes prominent Triestine (and Görzer) Jews, such as Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, Giani Stuparich or Carlo

Michelstetter. Literary critics agree that Italian literature thanks its representatives from Trieste its place in European modernity.

## 2. Italy's Eastern Border

Trieste with its Habsburg legacy is nevertheless not the focus of my paper. Rather, I would like to suggest a change of perspective and describe the Italian relationship with its eastern border region. This perspective has hardly ever been taken by historians: on the one hand historiography produced in Trieste itself remains remarkably Trieste-centred; on the other, Italian historiography tends to exclude events on the eastern border from the national master narrative in order to preserve a comforting and self-assuring vision of national history. Would Italian historians insert the events at the eastern border in the comprehensive history of Modern Italy, they would have to deal with many an uncomfortable episode that have not found a place whether in the historical debate or in public consciousness. For example:

A) Italy suffered 600 000 war dead in the First World War, comparable with the losses of other European powers. Since Italy fought on the side of the Entente, it acquired a new eastern border that fully met the requirements of an appropriate "natural border."

B) After the Second World War Italy lost nearly all the territory it had gained in the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920. Only Görz remained Italian. Aided by the break between Tito and Stalin "the Free State of Trieste" was divided between Italy and Yugoslavia after the Korean War.

C) Part of the Italian population in this region, among them mainly orthodox communist, agitated actively for joining Yugoslavia. After the break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, these communists joined the autonomists in propagating Free city status as stipulated in the peace agreement.

D) The area lives, as previously mentioned, on government aid. The promised upswing after the fall of the Berlin Wall never materialised while the port city of Koper (Capodistria) on the Slovenian side of what was once the "Küstenland" has blossomed.

The massacres carried out by the Yugoslavian Army, Yugoslav partisans and organs of Slovenian and Croatian Communist Parties at the end of the Second World War with their 4000 to 5000 victims need also to be mentioned. I was astonished to discover recently that the region was defined as a "one time genocide area" in two historical sociological articles.

## 3. The Fourth "Risorgimento War"

According to the Italian anti-fascist Gaetano Salvemini, Italy could not forebear completing its national unification when the first convenient opportunity arose. This because "the new Italy emerged out of a belief in the rights of the nation. Only in this right did it see its moral basis. The Italian government could not have done without national claims, once and for all".

Italy entered an alliance with Austria and Germany in 1882, since this alliance protected the young kingdom better internationally than other combination. When the First World War broke out, the Italian government decided after a long phase of indecision and under the pressure of the nationalists to join in

the war. The completion of the Risorgimento was tied to ambitions of becoming a Great Power and included supremacy on the Adriatic – all in the expectation that the Dual Monarchy would continue to exist.

However, at the end of the war Italy was not sitting across the table from the Habsburg Empire but the new Kingdom the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, i.e. an expanded Serbian state that had from the very beginning been on the side of the Entente, and which had suffered devastating human losses in the war. Since this new constellation led to Italy not acquiring all the territory it had been promised it in the “London Agreement”, primarily Dalmatia, the war became a “mutilated victory”, to use D’Annunzio’s demagogical slogan, in the inflamed public opinion. Indeed, the fact that the “London Agreement” was ignored was a proof of Italy’s continuing diplomatic weakness.

More serious however was the difficulty with which Italy held the areas it had occupied immediately after the armistice. Several hundred thousand Slovenes and Croats lived in these regions who greeted the Italian army with proudly exhibited Yugoslav cockades and flags. The army felt itself in hostile territory, where danger lurked around each corner. The troops of fascist thugs which quickly emerged in the Julian March (Venezia Giulia) (the irredentist name for the region) found much support from the occupation power, underlining, in principle, the weakness of the Italian occupation troops who were not able to master the situation themselves.

#### 4. The State and the Elites on the Periphery

As I described in my book published recently on the Italian eastern border, a decades long conflict developed around the question of which part would gain ethnic supremacy in Trieste and the surrounding region. It was primarily a regional conflict between two local, ethnically-defined elite groups. Both elites availed themselves of existing or newly developed connections with their respective central powers. The Italian-speaking liberal elite looked to Italian protection primarily out of fear of their Slovenian adversary. It is nevertheless notable that after national supremacy was secured with unification with Italy, the liberals of the region argued for the maintenance of extensive autonomy rights and the Austrian legal regime. Fascism set such expectations an end with its radical centralisation programme. For the Slovenes, integration into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was also little more than a marriage of convenience. Yugoslavia was the only effective protection against Italian territorial demands after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. It is remarkable that “a Yugoslav committee” had just formed with seat in London on 30th April 1915 after rumours had circulated that Italy would enter the war on the side of the Entente. The Slovenes and Croats of the monarchy – at the time deputies in the Reichsrat – mandated the committee to resist “any territorial concessions of Yugoslav areas to Italy”.

Indeed, the nationalist Slovenian elite exercised throughout a stronger and more comprehensive control over its population than the Italian counterpart, which was crippled by a split between Italian nationalists and communist ones, the latter being considered to be lost for the patriotic cause. The vacuum in power, function and purpose that was left after the collapse of Austria-Hungary in the Littoral region led to a

radicalisation of political culture, where fascists, Slovenian nationalists and communists of both nationalities gave the tone (Pandora's box, Hannah Arendt).

After the seizure of power, fascism met the compact, well organised and numerically significant minorities with vigorous cultural assimilation policies marked by the brutal suppression of the network of national associations, of the education system and of the cultural manifestations of the respective minority (Slaves and Germans). This was certainly one of the most brutal minority policies of the time in Europe. Since a study comparing European minority policies of the interwar period has yet to be written, it is notwithstanding difficult to judge whether it was exceptional for the time.

Although the self-image of fascism was based on the strength of the state and on its quasi-religious character, the regime failed appallingly in controlling the eastern border; different irredentist Slovene and Croat terror organisations were active already in the 1920s, murdering Slovenes and Croats who cooperated with the Italian state or worked for the government. The *Corriere della Sera* reported in the 1930s that one had the feeling on the eastern border to be at war.

## 5. Fascism and the Illusion of "Power Politics"

Such a weakness of the Italian state in controlling its periphery could manifestly become apparent when Italy, as an ally of Nazi Germany annexed or occupied the "Provincia italiana di Lubiana," Dalmatia and other areas in Croatia, Montenegro and Albania. The published documents of the high command of the stationed troops (Supersloda) provide a picture of the bleak situation of soldiers, which were in their majority demoralised, combat-unwilling, combat-inoperative and at the obvious mercy of the partisans. General Robotti reported indignantly on 26th June 1943 that "to every eight Slovenes there is one Italian soldier here. We will have 70000 men shortly, i.e. one to five Slovenes. We should assume that these forces suffice; this is nevertheless not so".

The Italian military reacted to their increasingly uncertain position with repression, the burning of villages and the shooting of suspects. The Italian army deported the civilian population from those regions, where the partisan fighting raged particularly violently into concentration camps. The occupiers proved themselves to be ineffective in challenging the underground war, contradictory, unthinking and occasionally cruel. Italian soldiers managed even surrendered to unarmed partisans.

The situation in the annexed territories seemed almost to have foreshadowed the national disaster on 8th September 1943, when all theatres of war were left without orders and hundreds of thousands of soldiers were left to their own devices.

Stanley Payne was correct in his statement that in no other regime was the difference between claimed and real power as disparate as in Italian fascism.

## 6. The dissolution of the Army and the State

On 8th September 1943 the Italian state in the Julian March simply ceased to exist. The new German

occupier, who had formed a new operational zone “Adriatic Littoral” and Slovenian and Croatian partisan units began a bloody fight for the possession of the strategically important border region.

At the end of the war the situation was extremely confused. The Julian March was occupied by the Yugoslav 8th army, followed briefly thereafter by British and American forces. Trieste became the first point of friction between eastern and western allies in the immediate post-war period and the 8th army had to withdraw from Trieste and Pola. Historians speak of an anticipation of the “cold war”.

In those areas under provisional or permanent control of the Yugoslav authorities, four to five thousand people were liquidated, as mentioned above. They died in a variety of ways; they were condemned to death by provisional popular courts, died in jail or simply disappeared without trace. Some hundreds were thrown, in some cases still alive, into the ravines of the Karst. This kind of murder was emblazoned into the collective memory of the Italians of the Julian March and interpreted as a sign of the barbarity of their “Slavic” national opposites. Eighty to Ninety percent -some 250 000 to 300 000 members of the Italian-speaking and Italian-oriented population of the region that was given to Yugoslavia - left their homeland after the war. This massive abandonment of the land left many small towns of Istria completely depopulated.

## 7. The new definition of the border and the long stagnation

Only after lengthy international negotiations, namely in 1954, could a border be drawn between Italy and Yugoslavia in the direct environs of Trieste. Both states ratified the up to that point provisional border in 1975.

The fate of the eastern border mobilised Italian public opinion one last time in 1954. The return of Trieste to the motherland became a cause for patriotic demonstrations across the whole country. The diplomat Sergio Romano commented that Italy was celebrating its last Risorgimento in Trieste. But this was not, however, a new beginning, but the end of a historical process, the “Indian summer” of Italian patriotism.

After the city was saved for Italy, what was left of the Julian March developed as a highly subsidised region much like many regions in the south of the country. All the hopes, political calculations and ideals in whose name Italy had joined the war against Austria-Hungary and for which 600 000 soldiers had lost

their lives had been for naught. The region stagnated, the economies of Trieste and Görz reduced to a bit of Yugoslavian cross-border traffic and petty trade. The Italian-financed “*economia assistita*” (literally “supported economy”) served lastly to avoid the delicate border region becoming a social powder keg. After multi-national Yugoslavia collapsed, Trieste experienced ever more strongly the competition from the Slovenian port of Koper, which slowly began to claim the historical hinterland of the city for itself. The Austrian Marxist Angelo Vivante had replied prophetically in 1911 in a retort to the local irredentists that Austria could easily avail itself of another port, should it lose Trieste.

In conclusion, it can be said that Trieste can be counted to the losers of the wars of the European wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After losing its function as the main port of a European Great Power at the closing of the First World War, it lost its immediate hinterland with the end of the Second World War to become both a shelter for victims of ethnic policy on the other side of the border, as well as an anticommunist outpost in the Cold War. With the Yugoslav Wars and the collapse of communism also this role came to an end, leaving Trieste since 1991 with substantial difficulties in repositioning itself in the changed European context.