

OPTING FOR IDENTITY: THE POLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL  
REFUGEE RELIEF IN VENEZIA GIULIA, 1948–1952*Pamela BALLINGER*Bowdoin College, Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines changing classifications of refugees from Venezia Giulia within the International Refugee Organization. Drawing on archival work with relevant documentation of UNRRA, IRO, and the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, the analysis reveals how IRO remained constrained by understandings of identity determined by states and their instruments of categorization (such as censuses). IRO personnel proved aware of the contradictions built into these classifications, particularly with the use of language as a marker of identity. At the same time, IRO officers often drew on equally problematic views of ethnic identity as rooted in "origins." IRO's reasons for conceptualizing identity in this manner, i.e. the mandate to offer assistance to refugees outside of their home country, nonetheless differed from that of the states who sought to map ethnic groups onto territory.*

*Key words: ethnic identity, refugees, option, Istria*

OPTARE PER UN'IDENTITÀ: LA POLITICA DELL'ASSISTENZA  
INTERNAZIONALE AI RIFUGIATI NELLA VENEZIA GIULIA, 1948–1952

## SINTESI

*L'articolo esamina le mutevoli classificazioni dei rifugiati della Venezia Giulia all'interno dell'Organizzazione Internazionale per i Rifugiati (International Refugee Organization – IRO). Basandosi sul lavoro d'archivio con rilevanti documenti dell'UNRRA, dell'IRO e del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, l'analisi rivela come l'IRO fu ostacolata dalle interpretazioni dell'identità determinate dagli stati e dai loro strumenti di categorizzazione (per esempio, i censimenti). Il personale dell'IRO si dimostrò consapevole delle contraddizioni insite in queste classificazioni, particolarmente riguardo all'uso della lingua come indicazione dell'identità. Allo stesso tempo, gli*

*ufficiali dell'IRO spesso s'imbattevano nel problema di determinare l'identità etnica in base alle "origini". La ragione per cui l'IRO concettualizzava l'identità in questo modo – e cioè, il suo incarico di offrire assistenza ai rifugiati fuori del loro paese di residenza – fu tuttavia diversa da quelle degli stati che cercavano effettuare una mappatura dei gruppi etnici sul territorio.*

*Parole chiave: identità etnica, rifugiati, opzione, Istria*

*"The development of the modern state [...] increasingly instilled a resolve among its elites to categorize populations, setting boundaries, so to speak, across pre-existing shifting identities. James Scott refers to this process as the 'state's attempt to make a society legible,' which he regards as a 'central problem of statecraft.' In order to grasp the complex social reality of the society over which they rule, leaders must devise a means of radically simplifying that reality through what Scott refers to as a 'series of typifications.' Once these are made, it is in the interest of state authorities that people be understandable through the categories in which they fall" (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 2).*

In their capacity to complicate and even resist the categorizing impulses of modern states, borderland communities have long interested scholars, particularly anthropologists, historians, and geographers focused on statecraft and the making of modern subjects through a "series of typifications." Despite a tendency by some scholars to romanticize the hybrid and "subversive" qualities of the inhabitants of such frontier areas, these borderlands have also emerged as productive sites from which to study the elaboration of defensive forms of identity that deny or downplay the "mixed" and fluid quality of border zones.<sup>1</sup> Students of the border area comprising Trieste, Gorizia, and Istria have documented the region's linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethno-national mixture together with the struggles in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to assert more exclusive forms of identity (specifically Italian and Yugoslav/Slovene/Croatian).<sup>2</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dilemmas created by exclusivist forms of identity (with a mapping of identity onto territory) in this historically mixed area proved most acute in the periods of state reconfiguration brought about by

1 For an extended discussion, see Ballinger, 2003; 2004.

2 Kalc (2004) argues, however, that for the case of Trieste, scholars have paid too much attention to the development of national identities within Trieste to the neglect of processes of "mutual amalgamation," including marriage across ethnic and religious lines.

World War I, World War II, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia (see Ballinger, 2003; also Pupo, Panjek, 2004, 346). In this article, I examine one of the most dramatic situations in which state authorities sought "that people be understandable through the categories in which they fall" (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 2): the option process laid out by Article 19 of the 1947 Peace Treaty, which awarded southern Istria (part of Italy from 1920 on) to Yugoslavia.

Applicable to the Dodecanese Islands, the Val d'Aosta, and Istria, all "Italians" resident in the respective territories on or before 10 June 1940 had the legal right (though by no means the obligation) to choose Italian citizenship. The principal requirements of Italian-ness in the case of the option were Italian as the *lingua d'uso* (language of use) and *domicilio* (domicile) in Italy on the determined date.<sup>3</sup> Yet determining Italian-ness on the ground proved no easy feat, nor did the Italian and Yugoslav governments behave identically or consistently in practice about who had the right to opt.

Some of the problems stemmed from the lack of definition of "customary language" in the 1947 Peace Treaty. A 1947 note from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Border Commission noted the attendant difficulties, suggesting that "*lingua d'uso*" would seem to imply "the language normally adopted by a person in familiar and most common contexts" (ACS, 1). Such language, however, remained a "question of fact and proof."<sup>4</sup> Aware of the widespread bilingualism in the border region, the Italian Ministry of the Interior counseled in a 1950 memo that in practice "*lingua d'uso*" really should mean "*lingua materna*," i.e. "the 'native language,' the 'language of the patria,' that is, the language of the nation to which one belongs" (MAE, 1).<sup>5</sup> The Italian government worried that ethnic Slavs were using the option's language clause (sometimes by making false statements about their *lingua d'uso*) to "infiltrate" the border area around Gorizia and Trieste (ACS, 1).<sup>6</sup> From the other side, the Yugoslav government frequently refused requests to opt, in part to prevent economic disaster should most of the region's workforce leave (Pupo, Panjek, 2004, 346–347).<sup>7</sup>

3 Article 20 of the Peace Treaty provided for Italian citizens, domiciled in Italy and whose customary language (*lingua usuale*) was one of the Yugoslav languages, to opt for Yugoslav citizenship. The number of such optants was relatively small compared to that for Italy (MAE, 2, 20 November 1951).

4 Letter from Perassi to the Segretaria Generale (Commiss. Confini) e la Direzione Generale Affari Politici, 15 September 1947 (ACS, 2).

5 See the letter of 4 August 1950 titled, "Oggetto: Ammissione Scuole Slovene figli di optanti per la cittadinanza italiana."

6 For details, the reader is referred to the letter from the CLN of Gorizia, 24 September 1947 (ACS, 2).

7 For extensive documentation on the option, from both the Italian and Yugoslav sides, consult MAE, 1. On IRO's awareness of the obstacles created by the Yugoslavs in regards to the option, see AN, 11; "Minutes of the Meeting of the Sub-Committee on 'White Slavs' held on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1948".

The contradictions built into the option's model of identity manifested themselves in the complicated internal debates within the International Refugee Organization (IRO). In operation from 1947 to 1951, IRO struggled over whether to offer aid to displaced persons (DPs) in Italy coming from those formerly Italian territories ceded to Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> In examining IRO debates over how to classify these DPS – for whom IRO created the blanket category of "Venezia Giulians" – I offer a reading of these contests over identity "from the outside" in a dual sense. First, I offer an analysis of debates over identity from the viewpoint of an American anthropologist who has carried out research in Trieste and Istria for over a decade. Secondly, in my analysis I unpack the attempts by members of the international community to grasp the complexity of the region and to render it manageable from the point of view of IRO's mandate: to provide aid and assistance to refugees. Inheriting categories and criteria of identity central to states' efforts to render society "legible," IRO staff struggled to cope with the frequent illegibility of identity on the ground in Venezia Giulia.

### The option process

The International Refugee Organization came into being during the same period in which residents of the areas of western Slovenia, Istria, Fiume/Rijeka, and Zara/Zadar ceded to Yugoslavia by the 1947 Peace Treaty faced the choice of whether to opt for Italian citizenship (if they possessed the "right" to do so, according to the criteria of Article 19) or become, through choice or inaction, Yugoslav citizens. The "Law on the Citizenship of Persons within the Territory annexed to the Federal Popular Republic of Yugoslavia on the basis of the Peace Treaty with Italy" restated the terms of Article 19:

*"[Persons] whose customary language is Italian, and who have reached their eighteenth birthday on the date the Peace Treaty with Italy became effective, and persons who within this date had not reached their eighteenth birthday but were married, have the right to opt for Italian citizenship within one year from the date the Peace Treaty became effective ... Option made by the father, or by the mother if the father is dead, automatically involves minor children under 18 who are not married. Option made by the husband does not pass on the [to] his wife" (AN, 9).*

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8 As of July 1, 1947, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) assumed responsibility from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) for certain refugees located in Italy; on UNRRA in Italy, consult Woodbridge (1950a, 257–294; 1950b, 422–423). The Italian Government pledged its assistance in a variety of sectors, including assuming the expenses for transport of eligible refugees and their property.

To an outsider, the stress laid on customary language as a key marker of identity may seem odd, given that twenty years of fascist Italianization policies in Venezia Giulia had further diffused fluency in Italian, long the commercial lingua franca of the region. Certainly, the issue of how to determine customary language became fraught once the option was put into practice. Employing the category of "customary language" as an indicator of identity, however, dated back to the Habsburg period and the institution of censuses designed to know and classify the peoples of the empire; censuses, in turn, drew upon the emerging science of statistics (for the Italian peninsula, see Patriarca, 1996).

In the debates held in the sessions of the International Statistical Congress during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, statisticians from Western and Eastern Europe had argued over how to measure "cultural nationality" (what would later be termed ethnicity). "A consensus emerged among Eastern census-makers that the question of cultural nationality should not be asked directly, but rather be derived from a question on language," write Kertzer and Arel (2002, 9). No consensus emerged, however, on how to determine language use – whether as language of daily use, native language (mother tongue), or language of the home. Any of these categories carries with it conceptual ambiguities. Mother tongue, for example, may be taken as the language of childhood or as language in which one thinks; the two need not prove synonymous (Arel, 2002, 99).

Despite the proposal made at the 1872 session of the International Statistical Congress (held in St. Petersburg) that "mother tongue" be adopted as language indicator by census makers, then, "that recommendation was not followed in multilingual Austria where *Umgangssprache* (language of use) was the criterion used in the four censuses administered between 1880 and 1910" (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 26). Determining this "language of use" proved no easy task. As D'Alessio rightly points out for Istria, "Theoretically it was not clear whether language of use meant language of interpersonal relationships, working relationships, or even the one used inside the family. These languages were often not the same. The high number of bilinguals could offer different data and possible interpretations" (D'Alessio, 2005, 7).

In the Habsburg Empire, as elsewhere, then, "The most acute pitched battles over the census take place in border areas" (Arel, 2002, 108). In Cisleithania, for instance, Czech nationalists contested the "language of use" category, arguing that it recognized linguistic assimilation (to German), rather than the "true" national provenance of subjects (Arel, 2002, 100; on Cisleithania, see Franzinetti, 2006). The Austrian censuses for the territories that became known as Venezia Giulia under Italy likewise occasioned much debate – both at the time and in their subsequent use as "snapshots" of the region's ethnic makeup.<sup>9</sup>

9 On issues with the Austrian and subsequent Italian and Yugoslav censuses, see Perselli, 1993; Pupo, Panjek, 2004, 353–359. For background on the development of censuses in Istria by the Habsburg

Many scholars have commented on the power of such state-imposed categories to constitute identities (see Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 31–35), though formal adherence to externally ascribed identity categories – such as those laid out in the censuses of the post-World War II option – does not always result in complete self-ascription (see Patriarca, 1996, 11–12). Sandi Volk has argued that despite the fascist regime's Italianization policies in Istria, at war's end there existed many individuals (at least in smaller centers like Grisignana/Groznjan) for whom "national identity was not yet definitely formed." In Volk's interpretation, the mass migration occasioned by the option marked the moment in which those leaving "definitively chose also their national identity [...] the exodus was thus also a key moment of denationalization in which an imprecise number (in any case a minority) of Slovenes and Croats in Istria made the passage to Italian-ness" (Volk, 2004, 32). It remains difficult, however, to prove that choosing Italian citizenship necessarily meant embracing and internalizing an Italian national identity – particularly for those who sought to emigrate abroad through the offices of IRO. As Pupo and Panjek contend, the option offered a kind of safety valve for general dissatisfaction with the Yugoslav regime in Istria, leading many of uncertain identity to declare themselves Italian. "More or less voluntarily, more or less uncertainly, many [optants] chose a nationality, others changed it, others yet declared one for the sake of convenience" (Pupo, Panjek, 2004, 352).

Into this complicated situation in Venezia Giulia came the staff at IRO, the successor to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), who labored to apply the criteria for eligibility laid out in the IRO constitution to real-life situations like those on the Italo-Yugoslav border. IRO recognized greater numbers of persons as eligible DPS than had UNRRA (Klemme, 1949, 283). Stated a June 1947 memo,

*"To qualify as a person of concern to the IRO, a refugee or displaced person, as defined, must satisfy one of two conditions set up in Section C, paragraph 1 [annex I of IRO constitution]. He must be either (1) a person who can be repatriated and requires the help of the Organization, or (2) a person who, in complete freedom and after receiving full knowledge of the facts, expresses 'valid objections' to returning to his country of nationality. The list of objections was intended to be exclusive. However, broad discretion rests with the IRO to determine what is a 'political objection'"* (AN, 7, 17 June 1947).

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authorities, refer to D'Alessio, 2005; 2006. Before the 1880 census instituted the "language of use" category, researchers at the Austrian Institute of Statistics had carried out ethnographic surveys in 1846 and 1857. D'Alessio observes that the censuses conducted from 1888 to 1910, as well as the Italian census of 1921, differ from these earlier ethnographic surveys. The former tended to examine language as used in the public sphere whereas the latter focused on the private sphere (D'Alessio, 2005, 5–6).

Valid political objections included persecution (or fear of) due to race, religion, nationality or political opinion. Excluded from eligibility were Spanish Republicans, individuals considered war criminals, quislings, or traitors, and refugees of German ethnic origin (the Volksdeutsche).

Given that those individuals opting for Italy were said to be "Italian," IRO considered these refugees ineligible for aid, since IRO's stated mission entailed aiding displaced persons outside of their home country. Previous citizens of Italian Venezia Giulia, these optants for Italy were considered as Italians who "remained" in Italy, despite the fact that Italy's border had moved and hence retaining Italian citizenship required "moving" with/to Italy. As a March 1949 "Memorandum on the question of Refugees from Venezia-Giulia" put it,

*"it was felt by the Eligibility staff of the Italian mission that these persons who are for the most part of Italian ethnic origin, whose language is Italian and who have been Italian citizens since 1918 could have no sound grounds for declining to reacquire Italian citizenship they were declared to be outside the mandate of the organization on the grounds that they are to all intents and purposes in their country of origin and cannot be considered to be bona fide Refugees according to the terms of the IRO Constitution"* (AN, 4).

IRO's Acting Director-General P. Jacobsen made explicit the questionable assumption that language proved a (fairly) reliable measure of "origins," i.e. ethno-national identity. Recognizing that Istria was home to many different groups, including persons of "Austrian" and "Hungarian" background, Jacobsen contended that most of these groups would not be of Italian customary language. In his opinion, the Italian government had responsibility for all Italian speakers from the ceded territories. "[T]he problem of Italian speaking persons in Italy who have been Italian citizens only recently," he wrote, "is at least as much a part of the Problem of the Italian population generally as the problem of the 'Volksdeutsche' is part of the problem of German populations" (AN, 6, 5 November 1948). In making such comments, Jacobsen ignored the opinions of Italy's IRO head, G.F. Mentz, who maintained in a letter to W. Hallam Tuck, Director-General of IRO, that comparison of the Venezia Giulia refugees to the Volksdeutsche was unwarranted, "as it is a very particular and negative exclusion based on racial terms, [thus] to extend it to groups other than German would be very clear violation both of the letter and of the spirit of the IRO Constitution" (AN, 6, 5 November 1948).

In contrast to these "Italian" optants, IRO considered within its mandate those refugees from Venezia Giulia "whose customary language was Slovene [or another Slavic language], and who had lived on Yugoslav territory" (AN, 1).<sup>10</sup> The Prepara-

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<sup>10</sup> These comments come from notes from an interview with R.L. Gesner, Chief Eligibility Officer, Italian Office, conducted by J. Mandel on 10 January 1952.

tory Commission for the IRO Eligibility Office in Rome, in fact, made a key distinction between "Persons of customary Yugoslav language (Slovene, Croat, or Serb)" and "Persons of customary Italian language," with the former eligible for IRO assistance and the latter excluded. At that time, IRO acted as if the option's language criterion adequately mapped onto ethno-national identity, for persons of customary Yugoslav language "are to be considered as Yugoslav and cannot opt for Italian citizenship" (AN, 6).<sup>11</sup> The Commission did recognize that some applicants were bilingual; in these cases, the criteria to determine "customary language" included "house language, parents' language, family name, parish church, cultural and political associations, etc." (AN, 6).<sup>12</sup> In practice, however, such bilingual applicants proved difficult to classify and one year later, in June 1949, IRO was reconsidering the applications of some 500 individuals – previously excluded from IRO's mandate – deemed bilingual or of Italian customary language. In May 1949 alone, IRO staff reported receiving 165 applications from refugees whose customary language was "Istrian dialect" or who were bilingual (AN, 6).<sup>13</sup>

The reconsideration of these applications points to the difficulties that IRO soon ran into with its exclusion of so-called "Italian" refugees from Venezia Giulia. Displaced persons from the ceded territories included individuals who had not opted for Italian citizenship and therefore were considered *de facto* Yugoslav citizens but whose "customary language" appeared to be Italian. Initially, IRO's policy had been to exclude any "Italian speakers," even if they had not opted, as they were seen to be the responsibility of the Italian Government. IRO personnel soon recognized the problems with this policy.

In a "Report on Operations of the Eligibility Division in Italy Covering the 3 months period September – October – November 1948," I. H. D. Whigham, Chief of the Eligibility Division, commented on the fact that many of these so-called Italians ruled ineligible were Italian only in terms of their language of daily use.

11 Letter from M. W. Royse, Eligibility Officer, to Chief of Mission, PCIRO, Italy, 27 May 1948.

12 See also the correspondence of 26 September 1949 for IRO interviewers in Trieste and Gorizia in which optants who "i) are of Slav ethnic origin, and ii) genuine political refugees because of persecution for political opinion (or religion) be given special consideration and declared (as a group) *prima facie* within the mandate of IRO." Michael Sedmak, Area Intake Supervisor, further questioned whether such refugees met the criteria of the option, adding, "Many of them are not only of Slav ethnic origin but of Slav customary language (or bilingual) and thus it is doubtful whether they had the right to opt or not" (AN, 12).

13 Correspondence of 9 June 1949 to Hallam Tuck from G. F. Mentz. IRO recognized bilingualism (at least to a certain degree), a complexity that state censuses often neglect. "Census makers, seeking discrete and exhaustive categories for their questions, have generally resisted categorizing hybrid cases. This has been true of racial and ethnic indicators as well, where the possibility of entering multiple identities is extremely recent" (Arel, 2002, 98).



*"One of the most pressing problems encountered by the Eligibility Division is that of refugees from Italian territory ceded to Yugoslavia as a result of the Peace Treaty, whose customary language is Italian but who have not opted from Italian citizenship within the time prescribed by the terms of the Treaty – i.e., before September 15, 1948. Many of these refugees are not racially Italian or of Italian ethnic origin but are more familiar with the Italian language than with other tongues owing to the extreme nationalist policy adopted in the now ceded territories by the Italian Government in the years between the wars (this policy included the enforced teaching of Italian in schools, etc.)"* (AN, 7).

Having contended that many of these DPs were not of Italian "ethnic origin," Whigham suggested that many likewise did not consider themselves Italian.

*"Some of these refugees have strong cultural affiliations with the Italian race, others have not. Many do not feel themselves in anyway Italian, and some have a strong hatred of Italy as a result of past persecution on racial grounds. Until September 15th some of them had been harbored in Italian Post War Assistance camps but have since been, or are about to be, ejected. Many of them, together with their families, are quite destitute, have no possibility of obtaining work and are regarded as undesirable foreigners by the Italian authorities. Some have already found their way into Italian Internment Camps for foreigners. Their disposal has been a matter of discussion between this Mission and the Italian Government and their eligibility status is at present under consideration at Geneva"* (AN, 7).

As a result of these discussions over eligibility, IRO changed its policies in early 1950 and began offering aid and assistance to this type of Venezia Giulian refugee, i.e. those who had not opted for Italian citizenship (and who were legally Yugoslav citizens), regardless of customary language.<sup>14</sup> Included as well in this decision were individuals who had opted but whose option the Yugoslav government had not accepted. Some such individuals had provisional passports issued in Zagreb that had permitted them to cross into Italy; these provisional passports would prove to be a source of enduring controversy within IRO.<sup>15</sup> IRO required these individuals to have "valid objections" against returning to Yugoslavia. In addition, they could not be "firmly established in Italy," the condition of which would negate the need for IRO

14 On this, see "Background notes on Trieste and the Venezia-Giulian Situation," 7 October 1951 (AN, 1). The staff at the Italian mission, particularly Chief of Mission G. F. Mentz, had pushed Geneva since 1948 to include all categories of refugees from Venezia Giulia. Consult G. F. Mentz's letter to George Warren, Department of State, December 16 1948 (AN, 6).

15 Noting the unwillingness of both the Italian and Yugoslav governments to provide IRO with lists of approved options, Mayer Cohen urged Mentz to consider the Provisional Passport as "establishing a presumption first that the holder opted to retain Italian citizenship, and secondly, that the appropriate Yugoslav authority had accepted the option" (AN, 6).

assistance to emigrate overseas (AN, 4).<sup>16</sup> In revising IRO eligibility policies, then, the legal criterion of citizenship technically prevailed over that of ethnicity, though IRO staff continued among themselves to distinguish "Italian" from "Slavic" refugees. For statistical reporting on such refugees in camps or IRO Intake Centers, Alva Simpson, Chief of the Department of Health, Care and Maintenance, ordered that the nationality of such refugees should be put down as "Undetermined Venezia Giulia" (AN, 8, 3 October 1949). Other IRO correspondence, however, reveals a system of symbols to indicate the ethnicity and customary language of such "undetermined" refugees (AN, 4).<sup>17</sup>

Within the IRO documentation, one finds a wide range of positions concerning the ethnic provenance of these "undetermined" refugees and the nature of the territory in question. On the one hand, there existed recognition of the "ethnically" mixed character of Venezia Giulia and of the noncoterminous nature of "customary language" and ethnic self-consciousness. In a November 1948 letter addressed to Sir Arthur Rucker, Deputy Director General of IRO, Chief of the IRO Italy Mission, G. F. Mentz, maintained, "Venezia Giulia is a very mixed area, where not only Italians and Slavs are present, but many persons of various origins who are ethnically not Italian even if their customary language is Italian." Mentz recommended, "Such persons, we feel, must be considered *prima facie* eligible for IRO assistance" (AN, 6). Here, then, some IRO members argued that language could neither serve as an adequate index of ethnic identity nor as a criterion for determining eligibility.

Perhaps some IRO staff had in mind the example of other border peoples of "indeterminate nationality" whose customary language did not map onto ethnic self-consciousness, like the Masurians or "Polish-speaking Germans" (Blanke, 2003, 281). In contrast to other "German" groups in Poland, including those in the territories incorporated into Poland in 1945 (the so-called "Recovered Lands"), the Masurians were not targeted for systematic removal but instead were redefined by the socialist Polish regime as Polish "autochthons" or "natives." Polish citizenship was granted to those who lived in the "Recovered Lands" before 1 January 1945, had been deemed of Polish nationality by a verification commission, and who signed a loyalty oath to Poland (Kulczycki, 2001, 111). Ultimately, the criteria for determining the identity of such "natives" "derived from the typically nationalistic assumption that one's national identity is an ascriptive attribute inherited at birth. Only those who had manifestedly [*sic*] betrayed their Polish identity were to be excluded. All others were to be recognized as members of the Polish nation and therefore to remain in their 'native' land, even against their will" (Kulczycki, 2001, 116). A critical labor

<sup>16</sup> This comes from an extract from *Circiut* [*sic*] Report of Mr. Temnomeroff, Italy, April/May 1950.

<sup>17</sup> A 1949 memo to Intake Centers and Registration Offices counseled, "Venezia Giulia refugees should always be reported as V. G. (Slav) or V. G. (Italian), as previously instructed" (AN, 12, 26 July 1949).

shortage motivated, in part, the Polish government's attempts to keep these "natives" in the country, a situation that has parallels to the Yugoslav authorities' frequent obstruction of option applications in Istria.

Ironically, most Masurians had left their home region even before the new Polish state had time to classify them as acceptable (Blanke, 2003, 286). For those who remained, "closer contact with 'real' Poles after 1945 only seemed to reinforce the view of many Masurians that they were fundamentally different" (Blanke, 2003, 290). Scholars have cited the Masurian case as a rare example of a borderland population whose sense of national identity ran counter to "customary" or "native" language (Blanke, 2003, 281; also Kulczycki, 2001). Examining the range of ethnic identifications among Venezia Giulia refugees of Italian "customary language," however, raises the question of just how unusual the Masurian case actually was.

At times, IRO debates about Venezia Giulia echoed the Polish government's take on Masurians as Germanized Poles and the implication that ethnic identity was something deeper than or beyond culture (at least its surface manifestations), perhaps almost of "racial" origin. The use of "race" here likely reflects a common usage, at least until World War II, of referring to ethnic nationalities in Europe as "races" in more of a cultural than biological sense (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 12). Kertzer and Arel note the slippage in Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between terms such as nationalities and races, "The common thread to this semantic jumble of nations, nationalities, and races – the term ethnicity was rarely used before World War II – was a notion that what these 'races' passed along through heredity was largely expressed through *cultural* traits. These included not only language and religion but also 'character,' denoted by work ethic, collective personality, and so forth" (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 12). In spite of this, census makers in pre-World War I Europe generally avoided the category of race (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 12) – hence the focus on language as a marker of identity – in contrast to census takers in European overseas colonies (Anderson, 1991, 164–170). The European trend changed, however, when Nazi Germany introduced Jewish lineage as a "racial" category into its censuses (Kertzer, Arel, 2002, 12).

In the aftermath of World War II and the horrors wrought in the name of racist thinking, IRO staff was conscious of the dangers of using the language of race. At the same time, older vocabularies and thinking in which race elided with ethnicity nonetheless persisted. A report on eligibility in Austria carried out in December of 1947, for example, made explicit how IRO used a term such as *Volksdeutsche*, which carried with it certain racial connotations. The report stated that *Volksdeutsche* indicated "German minorities or persons of German ethnic origin. It is officially a Nazi expression, but it is now used by the Allied Military Authorities as well as by the IRO in designating German minority groups" (AN, 10). The author continued, "As long as the term is clearly understood as referring to the German-speaking minorities,

and not confused with racist biological theories, there is no harm in its use. In practice, such theories lead to the absurdity of designating Americans of the eighth generation as Dutch, French, etc., because one of their ancestors came from Holland, France, etc., three centuries ago" (AN, 10). The author also recognized the difficulties with the concept of ethnicity:

*"The same misuse of the term 'ethnic origin' is equally wrong, if not intentionally misleading. As explained in the Appendix to this report, the term 'ethnic origin' refers to the psychological complex which, in our times, is called national consciousness. The factors which enter into this complex are varied and obscure. The mother language is commonly supposed to be a primary index; that even this is not true, can be seen in the case of Switzerland, France, Belgium and throughout the Americas. To use blood descent as the test of ethnic origin is to ignore most other factors, and to trace ethnic origin by family name is equally fallacious"* (AN, 10).

The author of this IRO report concluded, "In practice, what is meant by ethnic origin is a person's consciousness of belonging to a particular nationality group, or splinter group" (AN, 10). The report stated that this definition of ethnic origin or nationality derived from scholarly views of the day on national minorities. "The practical and scientifically correct approach in appraising the Volksdeutsche groups," the report decided, "is to recognize them for what they are, namely, German minority groups. As such, they may or may not be acceptable to IRO, but this does not alter their character" (AN, 10).

Refugee groups, however, often pushed for the sort of recognition of their ethno-national and religious specificity resisted by officials, workers, and scholars from the Western Allies, who viewed such classifications as leftovers of a way of thinking that had resulted in World War II and the Holocaust. Among the fiercest advocates of differentiation among DP groups were Jewish agency workers, who recoiled at early Allied policies that had rejected acknowledgement of "'Jews' as a separate national category" (Wyman, 1998, 134). As a result of this policy, in 1945 Jewish survivors originating from Axis countries had been labeled "enemy nationals" and at times even found themselves placed in DP camps alongside former Nazis (Wyman, 1998, 134). Pressure on U.S. President Truman by Jewish representatives and Earl G. Harrison, working for the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees, ultimately led to separate camps for Jewish DPs. Other DPs tended to group according to nationality and formed strong cultural communities within the camps, a reality reflected in the curriculum of the schools established within the camps (Wyman, 1998, 57, 101).

In light of this, then, at times in the Venezia Giulia debates a seemingly constructivist view of identity (in today's terms) appeared to operate that recognized not just the importance of cultural affiliation (and its mutability) but also of ethnic self-identification. Just below the surface of this culturalist view, however, often lay an essentialist view that assimilation could change a person's language or culture but not

the "ethnic" core of his being. A note on "Venezia Giulia" dating January 26 1949 and sent to George Warren at the U.S. Department of State, for example, offers a view of identity in Venezia Giulia as shaped but not determined by language or culture.

2. *Practically throughout the whole Yugoslav littoral there exist substantial quantities of people who while Italian in speech, culture and name have yet never regarded themselves as having any political sympathy with the Italian nation. The Istrians themselves only became Italian in 1919. Some of them even belong to groups who wished to retain Italian outwards forms but wanted political autonomy.*

3. *Many of the older ones might well have brought families up in the traditions of the old Austro-Hungarian empire* (AN, 6).

I. H. D. Whigham, Chief Eligibility Officer, concurred with this opinion in a letter sent in the same month (21 January 1949). Here, again, we find recourse to a discussion of both "racial origins" and cultural affinity, neither of which is synonymous with an ethnic self-awareness rooted in political identity.

*"I do not think it is correct to speak of the refugees in question as 'in general wholly Italian.' We have already explained, in previous correspondence with Geneva, that many people in Venezia Giulia who were of various racial origins, or mixed origin, came to speak Italian as their customary language owing to the history of the last thirty years, during which Italian was compulsorily taught in the schools, other languages and customs were suppressed, service in the Italian army was obligatory, etc. In the circumstances people may have acquired 'cultural affinity' with the Italians (as is mentioned in Para. 7), but they may have a very deep-rooted aversion to Italy, particularly in view of the savagery with which the Fascist regime conducted its policy of nationalization"* (AN, 6).

Whigham concluded, then, that "the director General, whilst recognizing that there may be people who, though of Italian customary language, are not necessarily of Italian origin, may be perhaps too exclusive when he accepts for I.R.O. only those who could demonstrate that they do not 'feel themselves to be, in any sense, Italian and who had maintained a basically non-Italian culture.' Culture can be acquired or assimilated and I think one should be careful not to place too much emphasis on it" (AN, 6). Critical of culture as manipulable by authoritarian regimes, Whigham's response nonetheless raised the question: If one had to be careful not to give culture or self-consciousness too much weight, what else constituted identity but presumed "racial origins" or "mixed origins"?

Other IRO personnel, such as Mentz, recognized the specificity of local and regional culture in Istria (autochthony perhaps standing in here for "racial origins"), even for those individuals who self-identified and were identified by outsiders as "Italians." Mentz maintained that some inhabitants of Istria were both Italian-speaking and "predominantly Italian from the ethnical point of view" and yet "have

never till now come out of Istria, and who, notwithstanding their relationship with the Italian race, have no connection in Italy and no possibility of resettlement in this country [Italy]" (AN, 6, 26 November 1948). With widespread unemployment in Italy and a pervasive view of Istrians as "foreigners", "it is quite unrealistic to accept as a principle that 'all Italian speaking persons who have been Italian citizens are more likely to be easily established in Italy than elsewhere'" (AN, 6, 26 November 1948). In making this argument, Mentz argued against Acting Director-General of IRO P. Jacobsen. In a letter dated 5 November 1948, Jacobsen had insisted, "persons of Italian culture should not be considered to be within the mandate merely because they are indigenous Venezia Giulians with no connections in present day Italy" (AN, 6).

Mentz further countered Jacobsen,

*An Italian speaking Istrian who left his country of origin because of the establishment of Tito's regime in the State of Yugoslavia to which Istria was transferred, but who did not opt for Italian citizenship because the only strong tie he formerly had with Italy was represented by the Istrian town where he was born, is a clear case of a refugee who is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection both of the Yugoslav and the Italian government, and so he is the concern of the Organization* (AN, 6, 5 November 1948). Eventually, Mentz's opinion would prevail and IRO would offer aid to such refugees.

Other IRO staff members working on the ground in Italy likewise noted a local/regional identity that made even the Istrians identified as "Italian" distinct from other Italians in peninsular Italy. Arguing against the 1948 decision to consider Italian-speaking non-optants ineligible (a policy that was later reversed), Alva A. Simpson, Chief of the Department of Health, Care and Maintenance, echoed Mentz in her assessment,

*"Venezia Giulia is sui generis in terms of IRO rules, as it is a closed cultural and political area, and which has changed hands a number of times in past centuries, and which came to Italy only after World [sic] War I. The people of this area, the indigenous population, are actually local people, with local loyalties, although having acquired Italian under the long dictatorial fascists [sic] regime or being of ancient Italian stock. ... they have lost their local regional home (now part of Yugoslavia) and in reality regard Italy as somewhat foreign to them, and many of course, are opposed to Italy.*

*In other words – these people have actually lost their region, in which their home and work etc. was prior to the peace settlement of 1947.*

*Mr. Kullman indicated that he considers Venezia Giulia simply a part of old Italy, and so any movement of inhabitants from that area is only a movement of Italians from one area to another area in Italy – an assumption which is wrong and unjust, in that people lived in this area for several generations"* (AN, 6, 15 December 1948).

Elsewhere, Simpson advised Intake Offices, "Equal consideration should be given to the feelings of local attachment, which inhabitants of Venezia Giulia undoubtedly possess, as to economic and other influences" (AN, 6, March 17 1949).

To some IRO observers, however, the uneasy fit of Istrians or Venezia Giulians into categories of national identity spoke of something negative, unstable, shifty and shifting, perhaps bordering on opportunism. The 1949 "Memorandum on the question of Refugees from Venezia-Giulia," for example, read the indeterminacy of Venezia Giulians as indicative of their nature as a "pathetic border people who are dissatisfied with both sides and desperately want to emigrate overseas" (AN, 4). The unknown author of this memo portrayed these border populations as shifting their loyalties to suit their interests, "The people of Venezia Giulia and Istria, after having requested to be annexed to Italy in 1920 as Italian irredentists, are dissatisfied with Italy. Many of them are also opposed to Yugoslav rule, so that they regret the old easy times when they were Austro-Hungarians" (AN, 4). Even those with more understanding of the complexity of border identities, such as Admiral Mentz, also worried about the possibility of opportunism on the part of refugees who lacked "valid" reasons for declining Italian citizenship offered by the option.

In his February 1949 memo detailing "Treatment of Refugees of Italian Customary Language now in Italy," Mentz exhorted field officers,

*"You should consider as excluded from our concern any persons from among those prima facie within the mandate who cannot be regarded as bona fide refugees. An applicant will not be regarded as a bona fide refugee if his reasons for not taking Italian citizenship are open to question, being based on the economic difficulties in Italy, the simple desire to emigrate, the wish not to miss an opportunity of transport at IRO expense or other similar causes including simple inadvertence or even a fear of approaching the appropriate Yugoslav authority, which would incline one to regard him as an emigrant or an exploiter of international assistance"* (AN, 6).

A case of a refugee from Venezia Giulia evaluated by the IRO Review Board in March 1949 demonstrates that IRO clearly used such presumed opportunism as a justification for declaring specific individuals ineligible for assistance.<sup>18</sup> The petitioner, deemed a "former Italian form [sic] Istria (province Pola, foemerly [sic] Zone B or Venetia Giulia) whose ethnic origin may be Slav but hose [sic] customary language is Italian," had not opted for Italy and thus became a de facto Yugoslav citizen. According to the IRO board, he had come to Trieste after the war and had obtained employment, together with an identity certificate and work permit (*libretto di lavoro*) from the Free Territory of Trieste. When questioned why he had not opted for Italy,

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18 On IRO's general policies against assisting emigration "for strictly economic reasons" see Wyman, 1998, 70.

"he answered that this was because he was awaiting the IRO decision on his eligibility. He went on to say that if [t]he had opted for Italy he could not have gone to America, and that he had heard that if a man is neither Italian nor Yugoslav, he may go to America at IRO expense." Having understood quite clearly that the refugee was by definition liminal, betwixt and between (neither Italian nor Yugoslav), this man lost his chances to emigrate as a result of his frank admission. IRO denied his request for assistance, classifying the petitioner as "not a genuine refugee but an emigrant who applies for IRO assistance for economical reasons" (AN, 6, 17 March 1949).

In evaluating individual cases for eligibility of Venezia Giulia refugees from 1950 on, IRO personnel also appear to have adopted Mentz's focus on local identity and autochthony as key markers of whether individuals were merely seeking to "exploit" IRO services or had legitimate reasons for not opting for Italy. One application noted that the petitioner, born in 1907 in Udine, had moved to Venezia Giulia in 1938 and remained there for only a year, though he formally maintained his residence there and opted in 1948, without receiving word from the Yugoslav authorities about the status of his option. IRO personnel R.L. Gesner and M.E. Wood determined that this petitioner remained outside the mandate of IRO. "Although petitioner has evidence of his residence in Venezia Giulia in 1940 [at the time prescribed for the option] he actually lived there for only one year; being ethnically Italian, within the country of his former habitual residence, he has a refugee status which is purely formal" (AN, 4, 25 April 1950). Another petitioner found his request for IRO aid denied on the grounds that he was not firmly rooted in the region. Born in Brindisi in 1882, this man had moved to Zara/Zadar in 1930, from which he had fled in 1944. At the time of the IRO review, his option remained pending. The reviewers of this case concluded, "Although Petitioner is technically a Yugoslav citizen because his option for Italy is still pending, the Board does not consider him a genuine refugee because in his country of birth and since he is Italian by ethnic origin and natural affinity" (AN, 4, 26 January 1950). IRO staff deemed the applicant a native of the "old provinces" who "does not show evidence of strong ties holding him to Venezia Giulia" (AN, 4, 26 January 1950).

As these case decisions show, then, IRO staff clearly distinguished between "indigenous" Venetian Giulians and newcomers. In a 1952 interview, R.L. Gesner, Chief Eligibility Officer for the Italian Office, made clear that IRO staff recognized "the native V.G. groups were those who had always lived there and their ancestors before them. These were different from the settlers in Italy before the war." Gesner expressed admiration for the autochthonous populations of Venezia Giulia, who he deemed "very industrious and ambitious" (AN, 1, 10 January 1952).<sup>19</sup>

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19 Some of the lobby groups representing the Venezia Giulian refugees to IRO maintained that these groups proved morally superior to other refugee populations. In August 1948, IRO in Rome received a letter from the Associazione Nazionale per la Venezia Giulia e Zara that claimed, "such refugees



IRO interviewers and personnel "on the ground" in Venezia Giulia thus acknowledged not just the legal formalities of the option/citizenship, as well as putative ethnicity, but also how "settled" individuals had been in Venezia Giulia. IRO staff charged with interviewing applicants for aid possessed considerable power in the actual decision-making process. A 1949 letter to the Director of the Fermo Camp in Italy noted the difficulties in classifying refugees from Venezia Giulia and the leeway accorded to interviewers in making the final determination. "This matter has been discussed with the Division of Eligibility as the problem of determining the proper origin of refugees should not be yours, but the interviewer's," admonished the letter writer. "The definitions 'Italian-speaking' or 'Slav-speaking' used in Administrative Order No. 121.4 were written by the Division of Eligibility and were intended to correspond with the instructions given to the interviewers, i.e. to show the refugees on the CM/1s [forms] according to 'customary language'" (AN, 6). Nonetheless, not all interviewers had apparently shown enough care in their judgments of the Venetian Giulian refugees. Joan Jamieson, in the Office of Statistics and Operational Records and author of the memo, regretted that "[n]ot all interviewers have taken care to classify Venezia Giulia refugees correctly, thereby creating considerable reporting difficulties." Having sent out more precise instructions to staff conducting interviews in intake centers, Jamieson urged, "In the meantime, for the doubtful cases you now have, the ethnic origin of the refugees should be considered, rather than the spoken language." In this instance, at least, a putatively knowable and classifiable "ethnicity" trumped customary language.

The power accorded to interviewers carried its own problems. Interviewers, chosen for their linguistic skills (among other qualities), could potentially alienate the applicants for assistance. In 1948, for example, IRO received a series of complaints about an interviewer, Mr. Todorovic, working on an IRO screening mission of Yugoslav refugees. A U.S. citizen of Serbian background, Todorovic was labeled by some Croatian exile groups as a "communist sympathizer," a charge that was forwarded not only to IRO but also to the Italian Ministry of the Interior (AN, 5, 17 December 1947). M.W. Royse, Eligibility Officer for the Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization (PCIRO), rejected these claims. "We have no Communist sympathizers in our screening group and this applies as well to Mr. To-

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["Italians" from Venezia Giulia], unlike others are used to a rather high standard of living and have, most of them, very deep moral and national feelings." In discussing the probable establishment of camps for these refugees, Alfonso Orlini, President of this refugee association, urged IRO to establish autonomous camps for the Venetian Giulians with personnel and chaplains from the region. Furthermore, he urged IRO to place the Venezia Giulians in camps "far away from Slav and especially Yugoslav refugee camps owing to the most deep and dangerous antagonism between both nationalities" (AN, 6).

dorovic. [...] Mr. Todorovic, by the way, is a straight American, of Serb parentage, who served during the war and was later sent back to Italy by the War Department as a Ware [sic] Department civilian." Ironically, noted Royse, Todorovic, "has been attached [sic] by the Croats as a Serb and by some Serb nationalist elements as a pro-Croat" (AN, 5, 19 January 1948). One of Todorovic's accusers, added Royse, had been associated with the Ustasha leader Pavelić during the war. The charges made against Todorovic reflected a widespread practice of denunciations within the DP camps, with accusations at time based on "revenge, envy, or retaliation" (Wyman, 1998, 185).

IRO staff working in Treviso encountered similar complaints made against an employee, Plamenac(h), an Intake Interviewer hired for his language abilities and knowledge of Venezia Giulia. The Association for Venezia Giulia and Zara waged a protest with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose Liaison Office then contacted IRO. In the communication sent by the Ministry to Mentz at IRO, Baron Malfatti reported "the spirit of bitterness towards the Giulians and Dalmatians" and cited in particular the attitude of "a certain Plamenach, Slav from Belgrade" who reportedly considered refugees now opting in Italy as Yugoslav citizens (AN, 6, 4 April 1950). Members of the Association for Venezia Giulia and Zara called upon IRO to award the classification of "indefinite citizenship" to those refugees whose options had not been approved and drop any pressure "for a declaration of Yugoslav citizenship as a condition for emigration to other countries" (AN, 6, 4 April 1950). Furthermore, the Association demanded the replacement of Plamenach with "someone more adaptable and tactful" (AN, 6, 4 April 1950). Plamenach "has been already observed for his nationalist and Slav attitude, contrary to the purely objective criteria by which the refugees should be screened" (AN, 6, 4 April 1950).

As an example of Plamenach's attitudes and the negative responses of refugees to him, the letter related an episode involving a female refugee from Zara/Zadar. "Plamenach repeatedly asked her whether she knew that the Chief of OZNA at Abbazia is an Italian. At her negative reply, Plamenach repeated the question, wandering [sic] how a person from that place did not know this" (AN, 6, 4 April 1950). As with Todorovic, IRO staff defended their choice of Plamenac(h), contending "He himself is a displaced person and therefore has a sympathetic understanding for the plight and for the needs of refugees." Writing in his capacity as Director of the Eligibility Division, R.L. Gesner concluded that Plamenac(h) had carried out his work with integrity and without prejudice (AN, 6, 29 April 1950).

Regardless of whether Todorovic or Plamenac(h)'s accusers had any credibility, these incidents underline not just the political and practical challenges that IRO faced but also the fact that refugees often proved fearful and suspicious. A belief that the international refugee assistance groups were helping Communist regimes, particularly in encouraging (sometimes forcible) repatriation back to the Soviet Union and

Yugoslavia, proved widespread among refugees dealing with UNRRA, IRO's predecessor (Wyman, 1998, 73). Refugees often did not know who to trust either among their fellow refugees or UNRRA/IRO staff. IRO staff in Opicina determining eligibility for the refugee camps run by the Allied Military Government in Trieste soon learned, for example, "The eligibility interviewers should have a location which will allow a free-flow of conversation between the interviewers and refugee to obtain the fullest possible information without fear of being overheard by refugees waiting to be interviewed" (AN, 12, 19 September 1951). DPs often resented or feared the screening process in which interviewers had the power to decide one's fate according to "[a] changed answer, a forgotten date, a charge of collaboration – any fact that nameless and faceless officials might seize upon became a nightmare for the DPs" (Wyman, 1998, 58).

IRO documents reveal internal critiques of the screening procedure, as in the case of a memo complaining about the treatment of Venezia Giulia refugees in "a very bureaucratic manner, making applications difficult to submit" (AN, 12, 6 August 1949).<sup>20</sup> Reflecting back on his work in the Rome Eligibility Division with M.W. Royse, Stephen Streeter concluded that IRO had adopted an overly legalistic approach.

*As an example Mr. Streeter instanced two Venezia Giulian families living in the same room; the head of one family having opted to retain Italian citizenship in Italy had not had his option approved and was accordingly found within the mandate; the head of the other family had opted in Yugoslavia to retain Italian citizenship and had come to Italy. His option having been approved he was found to be not within the mandate (AN, 1, 15 April 1952).<sup>21</sup>*

Added L.M. Hacking, IRO's Chief Historian and author of the interview with Streeter,

*"In Mr. Streeter's submission both families were equally refugees and in fact both families were treated identically by the authorities in Italy. The distinction between them, though it could be defended on logical grounds, made nonsense to the individuals" (AN, 1, 15 April 1952). While too legalistic on the one hand, Streeter found that IRO personnel frequently made eligibility decisions on "basically emotional and impulsive" grounds, on the other (AN, 1, 15 April 1952).*

<sup>20</sup> See also R. L. Gesner's discussion of the screening process generally in the notes on his interview with J. Mandel, 10 January 1952 (AN, 1).

<sup>21</sup> A similar criticism was made of UNRRA by Martin Klemme, who worked with DP Operations in Germany. Writing in 1949, he stated, "It is difficult to understand, however, why a Jewish refugee from a country like Poland should be welcomed into a D.P. camp, while at the same time a Slavic Pole fleeing from the same terror would be denied admittance" (Klemme, 1949, 284). Though he added, "I.R.O. has, I believe, taken steps at least partially to eliminate that injustice" (Klemme, 1949, 284), the case of Venezia Giulian refugees suggests that such dilemmas continued to plague IRO until its final days of operation.

Other members of the IRO staff, such as V.A. Temnomeroff of the Review Board, also admitted to errors in IRO's policies and practices in regards to the classification of Venezia Giulian refugees. In an earlier letter, Gesner had lamented that the IRO mission in Italy had previously accepted a number of Venezia Giulia refugees with provisional passports who the mission was now forced to exclude. Whereas Gesner sought to explain why the Italian Consular officials in Yugoslavia may have issued these passports, Temnomeroff adopted a much harder line.<sup>22</sup> Though acknowledging, *"It is to be regretted that IRO has admitted some refugees Within the mandate by mistake,"* Temnomeroff nonetheless maintained, *"it is difficult to justify establishment of a policy on the basis of mistakes"* (AN, 4, 4 October 1950). Temnomeroff thus pushed the legalistic approach criticized elsewhere by Streeter.

*"...persons who duly opted in Yugoslavia are to be considered as Italian citizens as soon as their options are approved by the Yugoslav authorities – in other words, before they are issued with Italian passports by the Italian Consul in Zagreb. Therefore the motives of the Italian consul in issuing these provisional passports are not relevant. Article 19 of the Peace Treaty is silent on the question as to whether or not approval of the option by the Italian government is required"* (AN, 4, 4 October 1950).

In addition, argued Temnomeroff,

*"The motives of the Yugoslav authorities in approving the option are also irrelevant. It is not up to the Organization to attempt to correct the determination of the customary language made by Yugoslav authorities, or to examine their motives in approving the options. As we cannot accept as Within the Mandate any person who is within the country of his nationality, Mr. Gesner's proposal [for more lenient inclusion policies] is unacceptable on Constitutional grounds ...It would not be consistent to adopt other than a formal attitude towards the problem in question..."* (AN, 4, 4 October 1950).

IRO's reversal of some of its policies and the hard line adopted by some staff, like Temnomeroff, prompted numerous letters of protest by Giulian refugees. With the reclassification as ineligible of certain refugees previously deemed within IRO's mandate, a group of Giulian refugees in the IRO camp at Carinaro d'Aversa sent a letter to IRO's Director-General.<sup>23</sup> They protested the change in policy as unfairly

22 In a 1952 interview, Gesner maintained, "From a humanitarian point of view there is no difference between a Venezia Giulian with a provisional passport or one without." Indeed, he added, stressing again the criterion of autochthony, "Refugees with provisional passports should be more eligible because they hold property, i.e. have always had homes in Venezia Giulia" (AN, 1). Gesner, making the argument that Temnomeroff had refuted, commented, "If the Yugoslav Government rejected the option for some reason the Italian consul was not supposed to give a provisional passport, but in many cases as a humanitarian gesture the Italian consul did give a provisional passport" (AN, 1).

23 The Italian government also protested this decision, one which occasioned internal debate within IRO, since many individuals in preparation for emigration had liquidated personal property and quit or turned down jobs in Italy (AN, 1, 10 January 1952).

penalizing the refugees who "are at present in a critical material and moral position, for the prolonged stay in the camp has exhausted all their material and financial resources, because of the inadequate assistance" (AN, 3, 31 October 1950). One Giulian refugee sent a protest letter to IRO's Geneva offices with the condemnation, "Your Organization lacks two things: COHERENCE and HUMAN FEELINGS, but it is full of useless and detrimental red tape" (AN, 3, 27 January 1951). Another woman used more conciliatory language in her appeal to Geneva. She begged that she and her family be reclassified as eligible, despite having opted in Fiume/Rijeka, "as that was the only way of escaping from that hell" (AN, 3, 30 July 1951). Applying to the IRO Office in Milan for assistance, the family was initially declared eligible. Later, however, "when we were waiting to be called to the camp, in September 1950, we were told that we would not be able to emigrate, because we had opted in Fiume" (AN, 3, 30 July 1951). The IRO files contain numerous such letters that testify to the disappointment and anger felt by many Giulian refugees whose hopes for overseas emigration, sometimes raised by an initially positive eligibility decision, were ultimately dashed. In these cases, both legal technicalities (the option/citizenship, provisional passports) and subjective evaluations (of whether they were "genuine" Venezia Giulians together with their presumed ethnicity and reasons for opting/not opting) played into the decisions.

### Conclusions

Such cases remind us of the human costs of the "series of typifications" entailed by bureaucratic efforts to render societies "legible." Staff at IRO did not, of course, determine the identity categories – "Italian," "Slav," "of customary language," and so on – within which residents of a linguistically and ethnically mixed border area like Venezia Giulia were required to opt and make clear choices (formally, at least) about what group (and, by extension, a territory) to which they belonged. IRO staff instead came into a field situation where states had long struggled to render the border region and its peoples legible. Working within the parameters of the option process laid out by the 1947 Peace Treaty, whose identity criteria drew on a practice of census use of language to demarcate identity, IRO staff worked to determine eligibility according to its own Constitution. In addition, IRO staff struggled with larger issues of how to conceptualize and understand identity in a post-war world in which Nazi racialism had been discredited even as its victims/survivors reaffirmed their ethnic, religious, and national identities. As this article has shown, opinions about how to classify the Venezia Giulia refugees frequently divided IRO staff. Officials at the top in Geneva often differed in their views about the Venezia Giulia group with field staff in Italy, who typically understood much better the contradictions of IRO's policies and the complexities of lived identity in the region.

The inconsistency of some of IRO's policies and practices points to an ad hoc approach as the Organization sought to fulfill its mission of aiding refugees. In this sense, IRO's motivations in creating a "series of typifications" proved different from those of states, whose "illegible" subjects often became IRO's "eligibles." Faced with the massive task of cleaning up the messes wrought by exclusive ethno-nationalisms and warfare, IRO nonetheless inadvertently reaffirmed the kind of categorizing impulses that had produced refugees in the first place. Elsewhere in post-war Europe, communist states espousing an internationalist orientation likewise re-inscribed the logics of ethno-national difference, ironically producing more of the refugees clamoring for the assistance of international organizations such as UNRRA, later IRO, and subsequently the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>24</sup> Though IRO did not produce the refugees, the use of categories of nationality to determine eligibility outside of "home country" often deepened the tragedies suffered by the displaced. The consequences for refugees, like those in Venezia Giulia, were far-reaching and impacted whether individuals and families could start life anew overseas.<sup>25</sup>

Reflecting back on his role as Chief Eligibility Officer for the Italian Office, R. L. Gesner was asked, "What was the most interesting group that you had to deal with?" He replied, "As a whole the Venezia Giulians, because of the constant change of policy, commencing in 1948 right through" (AN, 1, 10 January 1952). More than fifty years later, these "Venezia Giulians" and their borderland identities continue to interest observers from beyond the region.

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24 In the Masurian case, the new Polish communist regime endorsed a brand of internationalist nationalism. As Kulczycki notes, "The criteria chosen and their application to the inhabitants of the so-called 'Recovered Lands' reveals much about the extent to which the authorities accepted the assumptions of nationalist ideology and the priority that they attached to it – in other words, the extent to which they themselves and their policies can be characterized as nationalist" (Kulczycki, 2001, 107).

25 The IRO eligibility debates, for example, entered into the discussions about the eligibility of Venezia Giulia refugees for the United States Displaced Persons Act. On this, see AN, 2; AN, 4; AN, 9.

OPTIRANJE ZA IDENTITETO:  
POLITIKA MEDNARODNE POMOČI  
BEGUNCEM V JULIJSKI KRAJINI, 1948–1952

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**POVZETEK**

*Prispevek obravnava polemike znotraj Mednarodne organizacije za begunce (International Refugee Organization – IRO) glede upravičenosti prebivalcev Julijske krajine do pomoči IRO in ponovne naselitve po drugi svetovni vojni. Naziv "prebivalci Julijske krajine" se je nanašal na široko kategorijo ljudi, ki so prebivali v regiji, tako tistih, ki so jih uvrščali v etnično skupino Slovencev in Hrvatov, kot tudi Italijanov. V skladu s svojimi pooblastili je bila organizacija IRO dolžna pomagati beguncem, ki so se znašli izven svojih matičnih domovin (bodisi s prostovoljno repatriacijo ali ponovno naselitvijo), vendar pa je zapletena situacija v Julijski krajini po drugi svetovni vojni uradnikom IRO delo precej otežila, saj se zaradi nje niso mogli zanašati zgolj na kraj rojstva ali materni jezik kot na edine pokazatelje identitete. Celotni kriterij po zakonu priznanega državljanstva se je tu pokazal za problematičnega, saj je populacija beguncev z ozemelj, priključenih k Jugoslaviji po letu 1947, vključevala tudi posameznike, ki so se izrekli za Italijane v skladu z določbami 19. člena mirovne pogodbe iz leta 1947 in ki jih je IRO smatrala za pripadnike italijanske narodnostne skupine (ter kot take neupravičene do pomoči IRO, saj so bili Italijani v svoji "matični" domovini), tiste, ki so bili izbrali italijansko državljanstvo, a so jih uvrščali med Slovane, in tiste posameznike (bodisi Italijani ali Slovani), ki se niso odločili za italijansko državljanstvo, a so kljub temu zapustili Jugoslavijo.*

*Čeprav je IRO sčasoma razširila svoje kriterije upravičenosti, da je lahko zajela tudi številne begunce iz Julijske krajine, za katere je pred tem menila, da se nanje pooblastila IRO ne morejo nanašati, polemike znotraj IRO pričajo o težavah pri vzpostavljanju zunanjih birokratskih postopkov in kriterijev, po katerih naj bi te begunce in prosilce za pomoč IRO iz Julijske krajine razvrščali. Medtem ko so razprave znotraj IRO odsevale niz splošno razširjenih predpostavk glede narodnosti in jezikov, ki so bile skupne državam na tem območju, je bil odziv same organizacije velikokrat improviziran, saj se je le-ta spopadala z neodločljivimi vprašanji zdravja beguncev, oskrbe in vzdrževanja. Prispevek, ki temelji na študiji o omenjenih diskusijah, ponudi dvostrano razlago regionalne zgodovine 20. stoletja, videno "od zunaj": skozi interpretacijo ameriške antropologinje na eni strani ter*

*skozi oči upraviteljev IRO, ki so imeli nalogo določiti "pravo" identiteto beguncev iz Julijske krajine, na drugi strani.*

*Ključne besede: narodnostna identiteta, begunci, optiranje, Istra*

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