

BORDERS IN ARMS. POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE NORTH-EASTERN ADRIATIC AFTER THE GREAT WAR

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes forms of political violence in the area of the former Austrian Littoral in the first years after the Great War. This period was characterized by extreme political instability, economic insecurity and violence. The question of how different societies managed to interact despite volatile and hostile political conditions is of enormous importance to the history of the region. Based on archival research the essay will investigate questions related to ruptures and continuity of violence before and after 1918, forms of military and paramilitary violence and the role of the new Italian authorities in the management of violence until the beginning of the Fascist regime.

Keywords: political violence, North-Eastern Adriatic borderland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Great War, fascism

CONFINI IN ARMI. VIOLENZA POLITICA NELL'ADRIATICO NORD-ORIENTALE DOPO LA GRANDE GUERRA

SINTESI

Il presente articolo analizza diverse forme di violenza politica nell'area dell'ex Litorale Austriaco nei primi anni dopo la Grande guerra. Il periodo in questione fu caratterizzato da una costante instabilità politica, insicurezza economica e ondate di violenza. La questione di come diverse società interagirono nonostante condizioni politiche ostili e insicure è di fondamentale importanza per individuare ed esaminare i processi storici in atto in un periodo cruciale dell'area. Sulla base di materiale d'archivio il saggio si concentra su questioni relative a rotture e continuità nelle pratiche della violenza prima e dopo il 1918, su forme di violenza militare e paramilitare e sul ruolo delle nuove autorità italiane nella gestione della violenza fino agli inizi del regime fascista.

Parole chiave: violenza politica, Adriatico nord-orientale, confine, Italia, Jugoslavia, grande guerra, fascismo

INTRODUCTION¹

The Great War and the disappearance of the Habsburg Empire turned the northern Adriatic into a “shatter zone” (Bartov & Weitz, 2013), where the ambiguity of the situation created a space without a clear, defined state authority. The Austrian Littoral was replaced by the Italian Venezia Giulia, however this *sortie de guerre* was not linear. The transition lasted several years and has been characterized by extreme political instability, economic insecurity, the military and cultural demobilization of hearts and minds and it became a laboratory for new forms of military and paramilitary violence. This occurred in the vacuum left by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, however at the same time violence served as an adjunct to the new state power and its legitimization. Thus, waves of state violence occurred in different forms in the 1920s and 30s and gave rise to various forms of counterviolence. Although the period between the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Second World War is designated as the “interwar years”, which implicitly suggests a period of peace, this time was anything but peaceful. This essay aims to show how the violence of the First World War persisted into the postwar period and to research in what way it changed, modified, ideologized, systematized, legitimized, and adapted itself to the new reality, as well as what forms of counterviolence it provoked.

Both the context of violence as well as counterviolence reflect the thesis of Hannah Arendt (1970), which states that violence appears only where there is an absence of absolute power. However, state control has to be analyzed case by case and its relation towards violence represents an important and useful concept. As recently underlined by Sabine Rutar, public violence is useful both for studying the sociopolitical mechanisms that aim to subdue and contain violence and for examining the intentional exertion of violence to maintain or restore public order (Rutar, 2015, 205). In fact, throughout the past decade and a half, scholarship focused upon the study of political violence and terrorism has rapidly increased. Approaching the issues of postwar violence has also long been a question for historiography dealing with the northern Adriatic area. If in the last decades the period after the Second World War has been the subject of intense focus mainly due to the spectacular use of political purposes in the public sphere, the first years after the Great War and the 1920s in general were also the subject of careful investigation. However, these histories frequently put in focus particular national groups as agents or subjects of action. Homogeneous national categories were used to understand and describe violence, and narratives of the abuses of one group against another have often prevailed. This approach has made it easier to describe the twentieth century in the Adriatic as an itinerary through violence (Un percorso/Po poteh, 2006).

Furthermore, this vision was canalized by a unilateral approach to sources which have shaped the analytical framework according to top-down interpretations of the events.

1 This article is the result of research activities in the following research projects: *Adriatic Perspectives. Memory and Identity on a Transnational European Periphery*, financed by a Marie Skłodowska Curie grant at the European University Institute [REA Grant Agreement n. 655609], *Oborožena meja. Politično nasilje v severnem Jadranu, 1914–1941* n. J6-7152, and *Antifašizem v Julijski krajini v transnacionalni perspektivi, 1919–1954* n. J6-9356, financed by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS).

Thus, with the exclusive use of institutionally produced sources, researchers have often reused and reproduced these perceptions. Several studies have showed us the diplomatic confusion of the “peacemakers” (Macmillan, 2001), and territorial disputes were settled only in 1924, when Rijeka/Fiume was annexed to Italy (Pupo, 2014). Despite a political rapprochement having been reached on the diplomatic level however, political violence did not cease to be part of everyday practices on the ground. These practices were often overlooked because a bottom-up approach has only rarely been adopted. How diplomatic stagnation and institutional incapacity of the new states and their armies to control the new territories affected the life of the local population has not yet been properly studied. Moreover, existing international scholarship has concentrated mainly on national cases, while the regional and transnational perspectives often remain neglected. This study intends to re-direct the attention from the national to the regional level.

In the former Austrian Littoral, cultures of victory and cultures of defeat, to recall a book by Wolfgang Schivelbusch (2003), of two victorious allies overlapped, intertwined and clashed. If both the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes could claim to be on the victorious side, in both cases cultures of defeat developed. The mutilated victory in the Italian case, and resentment for the loss of parts of their ethnic territory among Slovenes and Croats characterized a postwar understanding. Moreover, the great majority of local soldiers fought in the defeated Habsburg army. Indeed, as stated by Schivelbusch, defeat should be seen not only in military aspects and political consequences, but also as a state of mind. However, this feeling of defeat, even if often described as *national* trauma, if studied on the transnational level and on the regional rather than the national scale, it enables us to see extremely entangled and complex situations. This is particularly true for European borderlands. Robert Gerwarth and John Horne affirm that “defeat was infinitely more real for those who lived in ethnically diverse border regions of the Central Powers than it was for those in Berlin, Budapest or Vienna [...]” (Gerwarth & Horne, 2012, 4) and the northern Adriatic after the collapse of Austria-Hungary is not an exception. It is rather a laboratory within which it is possible to test the complex relationship between new state orders in post-Habsburg Central Europe and local societies at the sub-national, regional level. Yet if in the past, from a nation-centered perspective, post-war violence in the northern Adriatic was considered a marginal phenomenon, recent studies have shown that the attitude of the Italian post-war elite towards its borderlands and ethnic minorities was central, both in internal and foreign policy (Pergher, 2017).

In my essay I will use the case of the former Austrian Littoral to first address the question of continuity and change in the level of violence before and after the Great War. I will next investigate aspects of the organization of violence and the role played by militaries and paramilitary groups, and, lastly, I will discuss the role of the state in the transition from so-called liberal Italy to a Fascist state.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: PRE- AND POSTWAR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

As Richard Bessel reminds us, “it would be a mistake to assume that violence began suddenly to feature in political life only after the First World War” (2015, 102). In the

northern Adriatic too, political and ethnic violence did not start in the post-war period: even before the war, the region often saw brawls between the police and protesters, socialists and nationalists, between Slovenes and Croats on the one side and Italians on the other. In Trieste, in February 1902 a gathering of the stokers of the Austrian Lloyd shipping company was followed by a strike. It ended with the massacre of fourteen people, which demonstrates how moments of intensified political activism, such as elections, but also everyday political discussions, such as language use or the school question often involved violence. For prewar nationalists, language and schools represented the real “cornerstone of the struggle”, as the Italian nationalist Ruggero Fauro Timeus urged in the days before the municipal elections in Trieste in 1913.² He emigrated to Florence and Rome and later died as volunteer in the Italian army. In his writings he explained with racist determinism the clash between a supposedly superior Italian civilization and the barbaric “Slavs” in the northern Adriatic (Verginella, 2011). His statements originated from nationalist struggles in the late-Habsburg era, when language represented a tool of political demands, which transformed schools in a ring of political and nationalist confrontation. In March 1913 bloody fights among the 71 students of the high school of commerce in Trieste broke out: Italian students on one side and Slovene and Croat on the other violently clashed because of language use. Nationalist newspapers such as *Il Piccolo*, *L'Indipendente* and *Edinost* instigated polemics, while the socialist press attacked them from its internationalist positions. Nor were brawls between nationalists and socialists an exception, either as the Mayday parade in 1914 was particularly violent: Italian nationalists opposed the Slovene workers marching in Trieste and the incident provoked long lasting reciprocal accusations.³

Even if further comparative studies are needed, it seems that violent political dynamics in the Austrian littoral were not a local peculiarity. They can be considered part of the political confrontation that broke out in many areas of the Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century (Judson, 2016). Unsurprisingly, it was during the war that violence escalated: already the assassination of the Habsburg crown prince Franz Ferdinand in June 1914 sparked a wave of violence against Serbs and “Yugoslavs” in several Austrian towns. In Trieste especially, the local Slovene population was the target of daily physical and verbal aggression at the hands of their fellow citizens. At the state level the Habsburg authorities, both military and civil, organized a strict system of control. The mass mobilization, the departure of soldiers, the starting of the war and the first news from the front had a negative impact on the local situation and aggravated social tensions. In the Austrian Littoral the local 97th Austrian regiment was sent to Galicia. It suffered heavy losses and more than half of its members died during the first battles in August and September of 1914. The war proved to be a crucial catalyst and had an enormous impact on the way the state regarded its own citizens. Furthermore, riots broke out in spring 1915 due to the lack of basic foodstuffs and violence escalated after Italy's declaration of war on its former ally on 23 May 1915, when offices of Italian organizations were vandalized.

2 L'Idea Nazionale, 5 June 1913, 3, Le elezioni a Trieste. Cfr. Fauro, 1929, 154.

3 Edinost, 2 May 1914, 1, Krvava proslava prvega majnika.

When in late spring of 1915 the Italian army attacked Austria-Hungary, the region was turned into a war front. This had terrible effects on the lives of the local population. The battles left the Isonzo valley and the Karst in ruins while the rear was reorganized to serve the army. If military operations have been relatively well examined, the social aspects of warfare and especially the interaction between military authorities and civilians have only recently become the focus of more careful investigation. The hundredth anniversary of the Great War saw a growing number of publications such as diaries, memories and life stories of local individuals which demonstrate how the experience of the war went well beyond the trenches. Official condolence letters and lists of those who had perished were published daily in local newspapers and reveal the omnipresence of death and sorrow. This demonstrates that a linear separation between front and home-front, both in time and space, is rather misleading: first, because war violence entered local households before the region was transformed into the frontline, and second, because it heavily influenced the lives of peoples in places left untouched by material destruction and far away from battle sites, as is the case of Istria and Trieste.

On the other side of the front, in the Friuli region initially conquered by the Italian army, the impact of the war was not less violent. Even if war propaganda depicted the conflict as the fourth war of independence for the unification of the “unredeemed brothers” and the fulfillment of the *Risorgimento*, the Italian army was not welcomed by cheering crowds and it imposed its military regime violently (Apollonio, 2001, 37–38). Both high command officials and lower officers were highly suspicious of the local population. Shortages of food and the general impossibility of movement as well as the executions of suspect civilians additionally worsened an already dramatic situation (Svoljšak, 2003; Chersovani, 2008). After the defeat at Caporetto in October 1917 and the retreat of the Italian army behind the river Piave, the area was left “to the mercy of the barbarians”, as the Italian priest Giovanni Battista Trombetta entitled his war diary published soon after the war (Trombetta, 1919). The image of the Austrian soldier as a barbarian, rapist and usurper, was particularly heavy in Italian war propaganda (Cornwall, 2000). It was based on a traditional anti-Austrian irredentist image and perpetuated by “war needs” after the area was conquered by the Central Powers. If the relocation of the front to the West resulted in a migration that accompanied the Italian army in its retreat, on the other side it made possible the return of several displaced persons previously moved to internal parts of Austria (Ceschin, 2006). After their return, however, many found their houses destroyed and their everyday existence precarious, which warns us that even if violence has not been a peculiarity of the war, it brought to the region different experiences of violence. In the northern Adriatic it was not only qualitatively and quantitatively different from its prewar dimensions because of the direct experience of local soldiers in European trenches, but because of the destruction of local communities, their social structures and the political framework that followed the conflict.

FROM WAR TO PEACE?

In October 1918 the Austrian administration was gradually losing control. Italian nationalist political forces in particular took advantage of this situation. In Trieste they

formed a *Comitato di salute pubblica* (Committee for public well-being) with the socialists and on October 31 they took the formal administration from the last Habsburg *Statthalter* Alfred von Fries-Skene. The Committee was soon joined by two Slovene socialists and two nationalists, members of the local Slovene National Council, a body established in every major town with its centers in Ljubljana and Zagreb. Even if politically under-represented, the Slovenes controlled what was left of the Austrian army and its naval force. In days when robberies, homicides, attacks on coffee houses, restaurants, shops and warehouses, and general vandalism were the main preoccupation of the population they played an important role in the administration of an undetermined, chaotic and unprecedented postwar period. The Committee could count on sixty German soldiers of the Viennese division and on “Yugoslav” and “Czechoslovak” units.⁴ They guarded streets and warehouses to prevent the escalation of violence, but the situation was deteriorating and the Committee asked the Allies and the Italian Army stationed in Venice for help.

On 3 November 1918 an armistice was signed, and it officially ended warfare between Italy and Austria-Hungary. On the same day the General Petitti di Roreto disembarked on the San Carlo pier in Trieste and took control over military and civil administration of the region that the Allies had promised to Italy in 1915 (Visintin, 2000, 27). However, the imposition of authority was far from immediate. On the Miramar castle, a magnificent Habsburg residence West of Trieste, a flag with Yugoslav national colors was waving for several days after Italian soldiers entered the city. Only on November 8 was it removed by a large contingent of the Italian military, which speaks of hesitation, ambiguity and overlapping power relations.⁵

The Slovene National Council in Trieste functioned until November 22 1918, when Petitti ordered its closure and in the following weeks Italian militaries expanded all over the region. With the exception of minor incidents, the occupation proceeded smoothly and relatively peacefully (Kacin Wohinz, 1972, 69–79). However, even if it was not contrasted with mass revolts, in the following months several brawls were reported, especially between Italian soldiers and the local population. The situation was rendered even more tense by daily reports of possible upheaval and by extended practices of internment adopted by military authorities. If in the first months after the war former Austro-Hungarian soldiers were the main targets of this policy, hereafter several other potential enemies and their families were physically removed from the region and sent to remote parts of Italy. Socialists, anarchists, republicans, priests and members of the People’s Party, “Austriacants” and “Slavophiles”, Slovenes and Croats, especially their middle class and intelligentsia (teachers, lawyers, doctors, politicians, mayors) were interned, while many non-Italian workers and public servants were removed and replaced with Italians (Bajc, 2012). It was the army that had the final say in the region until August 1919, yet even later, when the region was administered by a civil governor, the conflict did not stop. Chaos, disorganization, poverty, disillusion, resentment took many forms of vandalism and violence, which confirms recent historiographical considerations, that even if the

4 Il Lavoratore, 1 November 1918, 1.

5 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 8 November 1918.

war officially ended in November 1918, the violence resulting from its destructive nature did not stop overnight (Cabanes, 2014, 173).

Mixed in the region were masses of soldiers, thousands of displaced persons, prisoners of war, demobilized soldiers, civilians with an enormous number of weapons left on the ground by the Habsburg army and a tremendous lack of food. Even after the war ended it still looked like a zone behind the front (Mattiussi, 2002, 1). The collapse of Imperial institutions, the passage of the demised Austro-Hungarian Army and the arrival of the new Italian Army represented an additional challenge for the overall deprivation of the local population after four years of war. The simultaneous return of Italian prisoners released from Austrian camps provoked a chaotic situation. Many tried to find their way home outside institutionalized frameworks. The case of a large group of Italian POWs meandering in the Istrian countryside not far from Pula/Pola while directed south towards Naples show us a situation of confusion and uncertainty.⁶ However, the situation was particularly chaotic in Trieste. Soldiers wandered around the city and lived off the charity of the local people. The Governor had to admit that the conditions in Austrian captivity were better than what the Italian soldiers found in Trieste. Considering the political moment this was “assolutamente intollerabile”.⁷

Despite questions of public order, food release, the exchange rate with the Austrian *Krone*, the repatriation of POWs and displaced civilians, multi-ethnicity was one of the main problems of the new rulers. Despite an extended multilingualism the majority of the region was inhabited by non-Italians, against whom the new authorities acted with suspicion and often with overt hostility. Archival sources show us that restrictive practices were not the result of a lack of information (Kacin Wohinz & Pirjevec, 2000, 143). Both political and military bodies involved in the occupation were well acquainted with the multiethnic composition of the region. Their severe policy derived not from a supposed “lack of understanding” of a liminal space such as the Adriatic borderland, but from the conviction that the region must be annexed to the rest of Italy as soon as possible. Therefore, it should be politically controlled and ethnically homogenized to the rest of the nation. Postwar cultural and physical violence was not a peculiarity of the post-Ottoman southern Europe, but it was also central to the Italian policy at the margins of the Balkans (Newman, 2012, 150). Its systematic program of remaking the national composition was one of the guidelines of the Italian government in the “redeemed territories”. From the very beginning of the occupation, the Italian authorities operated with this aim. Already on November 19, the substitution of the Archbishop of Trieste Karlin, a “slavo”, with someone else “known for his italianità”, was requested of the Supreme Command of the Army, and similar measures were anticipated for the Archbishop of Gorizia Borgia

6 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 14 November 1918, Pratica prigionieri, allegato n. 23, Relazione. Ignoranza Soldati prigionieri italiani trovati a Pola diretti a sud verso Napoli.

7 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 14 November 1918, Pratica prigionieri, allegato n. 23, Relazione. Ignoranza Soldati prigionieri italiani trovati a Pola diretti a sud verso Napoli.

Sedej.⁸ Slovene representative bodies were disbanded and a few days later, Petitti ordered the exclusive use of the Italian language in administration and of Italian symbols in public spaces.⁹ His proclamation that Italy would grant even more national rights than Austria was in reality just smoke and mirrors. In fact, Italian policy was driven by ideas of ethnic engineering that took various guises and was supported by different forms of violence. As an immediate result of such occupational policy the Governor registered a “real exodus of Yugoslavs towards Zagreb and Ljubljana”. In his thoughts this was problematic not only in its own right but because it could also “favor the establishment of armed bands”.¹⁰

MILITARY VS. PARAMILITARY?

Diplomatic negotiations initiated in Paris in January 1919 proved to be anything but simple and lasted for months. On the local level this ambiguity supported uncertain visions of the future and narratives of the temporariness of the Italian occupation, invoked by Slovene and Croat representatives (Pirjevec, 2008, 93–101). On the other side doubts of a possible “mutilated” victory spread in the Italian public sphere. The Adriatic gained a central role in the imagination of Italians and the expression *vittoria mutilata* became an extremely powerful mobilizing password. On 24 October 1918, the nationalist poet Gabriele D’Annunzio published a poem with the following verses: “Vittoria nostra, non sarai mutilata” (Our Victory, you won’t be mutilated) in the most important Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* (Albanese, 2008). He introduced a notion that was to acquire mystical dimensions in the months to come. Italian nationalists worried that the Paris Peace Conference would not grant Italy all those territories that it had won in the war. On 15 January 1919, D’Annunzio reinforced his statements in the Letter to the Dalmatians (*Lettera ai Dalmati*). The piece was published in *Il Popolo d’Italia*, a newspaper founded by Benito Mussolini, in which D’Annunzio proclaimed Italy’s right to expansion towards Fiume and Dalmatia. Public meetings were organized in several Italian cities with a growing attendance of nationalists, *Arditi* (a special unit of the Italian army disbanded shortly after the end of war operations) and other demobilized soldiers, and members of the rising fascist movement. In many Italian towns (Milan, Turin, etc.), they got involved in bloody fights with their political adversaries, mostly socialists and anarchists (Millan, 2014).

In the former Austrian Littoral, a close interconnection between the army and nationalist organizations characterized postwar dynamics. Several civil organizations cooperated closely with military units in intelligence activity and propaganda. The most important soon became the *Associazione nazionale Trento e Trieste* (National Association for Trento and Trieste), whose office in Trieste opened at the end of 1918, and represented a hub for several members who, in the following months, joined paramilitary organizations such as the *Caval-*

8 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 19 November 1918.

9 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 23 November 1918. Petitti to the Comando of XIV Corpo d’Armata (P. C. C. Tenente Colonnello Sottocapo di S. M. Robotti), allegato 34.

10 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, 30 November 1918.

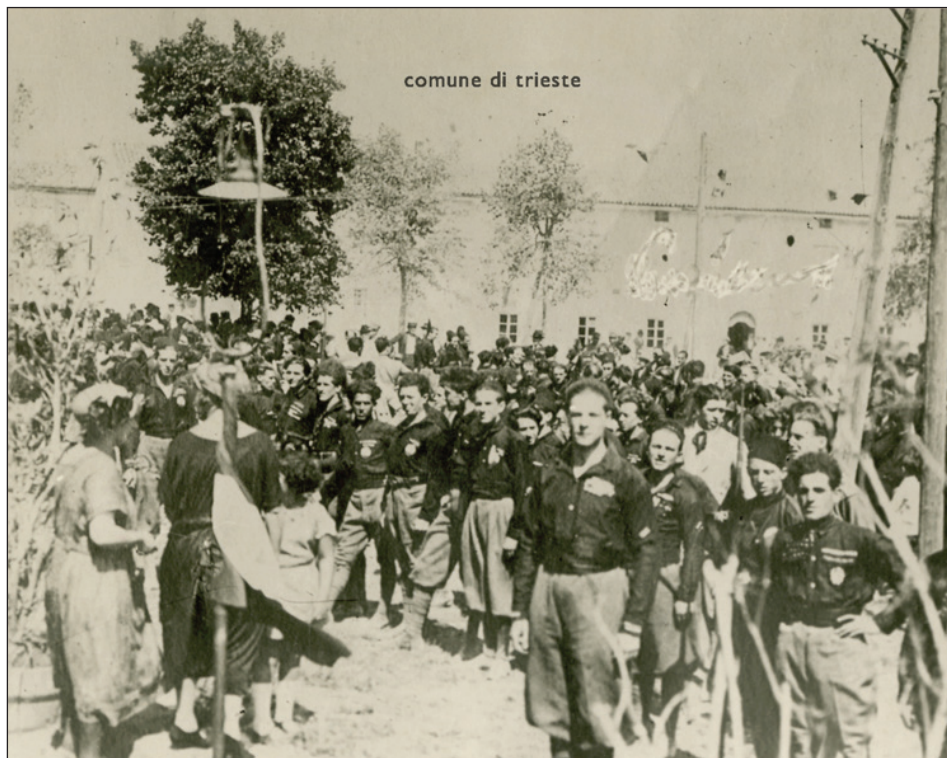


Fig. 1: Fascist meeting on the Karst in Aurisina/Nabrežina in September 1922 (FCMSA – 025354).

lieri della morte and the *Sursum Corda*. The *Cavallieri della morte* were a secret group founded in 1902 by the Triestine irredentist Giovanni Longhi, while the *Sursum Corda* was formed in Trieste in February 1919 and was soon joined by hundreds of members. They were followed in April of the same year by the *Comitato d'azione antibolscevico*. This organization attracted the most active local nationalists including Fulvio Suvich, the future Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Italian ambassador to the United States. Owing to the engagement of Bruno Coceancig – later on renamed Coceani (who was to become the *Prefetto* during the period of the Nazi *Adriatisches Küstenland* between 1943 and 1945), this organization was soon joined by the local *Fascio di combattimento* (Mondini, 2006, 35).

In the public sphere celebrations of the Great War often played a decisive role in showing the synergies among nationalists, Fascists and the Army. On 24 May 1920 many events were organized in Trieste to mark the fifth anniversary of the Italian entry into the war. The *Sursum Corda* and the *Giovane Italia* celebrated in the Rossetti theatre; Bruno Coceancig, Piero Jacchia and Francesco Giunta were among the speakers. After the meeting the crowd violently marched through the city center to the former barracks of

the Austrian army. Italian soldiers were now based there: together, the demonstrators and soldiers sang *l'Inno di Garibaldi*, a song popular in patriotic circles, and other nationalist songs.¹¹ As described by Francesco Giunta, the leader of the local Fascists, this event stimulated and gave flight to the local fascist movement (Giunta, 1935, 15–16).

This meeting point between nationalists, irredentists and militaries with the financial support of the local economic and financial circles gained a crucial role when D'Annunzio and his legionnaires organized a march on Rijeka/Fiume in September 1919. Many local nationalists followed D'Annunzio to Rijeka and many others approved his methods. Even if the D'Annunzio march was a new form of political activism, a certain continuity could be seen between pre-war irredentism and post-war extreme nationalism. Even if this was not always a linear process this attitude was reflected in life stories of some local *squadristi*'. Domenico Costantino, a *squadrista* from Opatija/Abbazia, a maritime town near Rijeka/Fiume, wrote in his memoirs that the vast majority of the first *squadristi* (*della prima ora*) in the Quarner region were former legionaries with D'Annunzio in Fiume (Costantino, 1930, 13–14). The leader of the *Fascio* in Opatija was Oscar (or Oscarre) Suban, an Italian nationalist activist during Habsburg rule. He was an active and violent nationalist supporter: on 20 September 1903, a day that Italian nationalists celebrated the unification of Italy after the Italian army entered Rome in 1870, he hung the Italian tricolor in the main square in Habsburg Trieste (Costantino, 1930, 13–14). Soon after, on December 7 of the same year, he participated in an attack on the German nationalist organization *Südmark*. German nationalists and many officers of the local k. u. k. garrison gathered at the Hotel Europa in what was the central Piazza della caserma. Brawls followed after a large group of Italian students entered the building and the police arrested dozens of youngsters.¹² This example shows how in the post-war period, pre-war nationalists took advantage of the new context and intensified their political claims, with violence as an inseparable part of their activity. More research should be done but if in many cases several violent, local young men did not spend a single day in the trenches, either because they were too young or because they were mostly members of information services branches of the army, the example of Suban shows continuity rather than change in the exercise of political violence.

As Costantino explains, even the *Fascio di combattimento* in Opatija was established in the seat of a local nationalist organization. This was often the case also in Trieste, where fascist squads were often formed among the members of the nationalist organization *Lega nazionale* and in some cases even in the same seats.¹³ Thus, owing to similar objectives and common enemies rather than on a common ideological platform, the fascist movement soon united various forms, aspects and movements of local nationalism, squadristism, “fiumanesimo”, irredentism and fascism. Despite their initial heterogeneity these groups represented the symbolic core of nationalist mobilization and they turned into one of the

11 Il Piccolo, 25 5 1920, 2. Similar events were frequent and both organizations organized a meeting supporting D'Annunzio on 22 September 1919 in the Fenice theatre. ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 19, Doc. n. 826/45, 23 September 1919.

12 ASTs, DP APr., b. 159, f. 3108.

13 ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 19, 2 January 1920.

most active fascist movements in the country (Cattaruzza, 2007, 168). In fact, in this borderland Fascist violence gained the image of the continuation of the patriotic war for the accomplishment of victory (Franzinelli, 2003, 32) and it shows how the direct support of military corps and of the police was crucial and transformed this struggle in a “continuation of the World conflict” (Mattiussi, 2002, 16).

A lack of a coherent, articulated ideology was compensated for largely by a common fascist habitus, with violence being an integral factor. Francesco Giunta, a Florentine lawyer who moved to Trieste in spring 1920 in order to guide an active but disorganized Fascist movement, turned the local *Fascio* into a proper paramilitary organization. Every *squadra* was given their own part of the city. They acted independently but were strictly interconnected with each other. They were quickly mobilized via trucks provided by local businessmen and the army. The direct support of the military corps and the ambiguity of the authorities were crucial for the fast growth of Fascist adherents (Mann, 2004, 105–107). As demonstrated by Jochen Böhrer “these violent clashes were the result of a complete lack of demobilization in the borderlands” (Böhrer, 2015, 74).

The targets of their violent attacks were national and political enemies. The list of homicides, arsons and aggressions is extremely long and variegated.¹⁴ In the larger cities such as Trieste and Pula or in Istria where Italian nationalists were most deeply rooted, they called for sterner measures to be introduced against the “anti-national” strikes of the labor movement and the disloyal attitude of Slovenes and Croats towards Italian occupation.

Initially, the victims of such violence responded with resignation or contempt, some even with a sort of civil disobedience, as described by Jože Vadnjal, in the twenties a member of an anti-fascist underground organization and a partisan during World War II. In his memoirs he described how they boycotted parties and dances organized by the Italian army. Similar acts are revealed also by Janez Penko, a Slovene from Postojna, victim of a fascist attack in 1922 who later joined the anti-fascist underground movement. He remembers that they responded to fascist measures with “our behavior, singing, flags”. [...] “Fascists would assault us [...] they would beat individuals, bully people [...] while we tried to pay them back for their violence as good as we could. At nights, we would lie in ambush [...] beat them and then disappear [...]. As a result, we witnessed mass arrests [...]” (Kacin Wohinz & Verginella, 2008, 18).¹⁵

The appeal of fascist ideas and practices, regardless of social and ethno-linguistic differences, deserves more attention: police reports of youngsters of Slavic origin among the perpetrators of anti-Slovene violence overlap with assassinations of Slovene adherents to the Fascist party by anti-Fascists. Slovene anti-Fascist activists considered them traitors and, in some cases, killed them, as was the case with Giuseppe Cerkenik, a martyr of the cause for the Fascists (Apih, 1966). This not only complicates a linear ethnic division, but also shows the agency of anti-fascist activists.

Socialists, communists and republicans often organized counterattacks on fascist individuals. In Trieste and Istrian towns, funerals for dead activists interchanged in the

¹⁴ I refer to Milica Kacin-Wohinz (1972) and (1990) for a detailed chronology of violent attacks.

¹⁵ Several episodes are described in the files of the *Commissariato*. See for example: ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 284.



Fig. 2: Funeral of a Fascist in San Giacomo/Sveti Jakob (Trieste/Trst) (FCMSA – 192983).

postwar years. However, with the support of state authorities and the local nationalist and conservative press the Fascists promoted a self-image of being victims of socialist violence and Slavic barbarism. Fascist funerals proved to be a successful showcase of self-victimization and stages for political promotion.

In the main cities, the fascists soon prevailed over socialists, anarchists and republicans, and suppressed the Slovene and Croatian resistance. The destruction of the *Narodni dom* in Trieste and Pula in July 1920 were among the most shocking and violent attacks that characterized the variegated landscape of post-war violence in the region. As stated by De Felice, the assault was the “real inauguration of organized squadristism” (De Felice, 1965, 624). However, the assault on the workers neighborhood of San Giacomo/Sveti Jakob in September of the same year even clearly demonstrates the close and explicit interconnection between state and non-state actors in their attitude towards real or supposed enemies of the nation. Local inhabitants raised barricades and attacked militaries; an urban guerrilla lasted for two days and left on the ground numerous victims among protesters. More than six hundred rioters were arrested. In this chaotic situation the Fascists presented themselves as the representatives of order and gathered growing support among the rest of the population. Here it becomes clear that the new context, in which the new Italian authorities wish to overcome the aversion to the new order, facilitated overt violence against the opposition. It was only in smaller centers that some forms of resistance were still possible. In localities such as Marezige, Prebeneg, Mačkolje, Osp inhabitants chased away the Fascists on their violent raids during the elections of May

1921. This resistance was short lived, however. In reprisal, Fascists burned down houses, a practice they often used against seats of Slovene associations in Trieste (September 3 in San Giovanni/Sveti Ivan, on September 8 in Roiano/Rojan and on December 12 in Barcola/Barkovlje) and in villages in Istria (Kacin Wohinz, 1972).

The majority of these attacks proved successful, and only rarely did the authorities stop the violence; on the contrary, and not infrequently, they even participated in it. This shows that a linear division between military and paramilitary violence is not only of little help to understand its consequences, but often simply impossible (Böhler, 2015, 63).

VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

On 12 November 1920, the Treaty of Rapallo was signed by the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Even if both countries could be presented as the winners of World War I, the border dispute provoked feelings of defeat in both societies. The nationalist stance on the Italian right to annex the entire eastern Adriatic was increasingly popular among the general public, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Carlo Sforza found it hard to oppose the nationalists who claimed that the Treaty of Rapallo had made concessions to Yugoslavia. The fascist used it as a successful political tool.¹⁶ Rijeka/Fiume and Dalmatia remained in the collective memory of many Italians as the symbol of diplomatic defeat of liberal Italy, while Slovenes and Croats developed an emotional attachment to the “lost parts” of the national body. If on one hand, victorious Italy developed a culture of defeat and perceived their victory as mutilated, on the other hand the Slovenes and the Croats considered Venezia Giulia to be their “Alsace and Lorraine” (Naša Alzacija-Lorena, 1920). These two attitudes provoked a long-term period of bilateral tension at the international level and several forms of violence and ideological and ethnic confrontations at the local level that went well beyond the diplomatic agreement of November 1920.

Much of the scholarly research assumes explicitly or implicitly that violence is a result of the vacuum of state power, of the collapse of state control over the monopoly of violence and of its inability to control a specific territory (Bessel, 2015, 103; Burt, 2007, 25–51; Gerwarth & Horne, 2010, 270; Böhler, 2015, 63–64, 72). However, the case of Venezia Giulia shows instead how the boundaries between the action of state and non-state actors are rather ambiguous. If post-war paramilitary violence had been gradually domesticated in the following years, it was not only because its goals were achieved, and a Fascist state was gradually modeled, but because totalitarian and highly militarized state structures took its part in several forms. As Charles Tilly demonstrated, forms of collective violence nearly always in the end involve governments (Tilly, 2003, 9). Indeed, from 1926 a *Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato* started to suppress forms of antifascism in a variety of

16 In his collection of early writings Francesco Giunta commented on 7 January 1921 in his *Il Popolo di Trieste*: “Abbiamo quasi perduto l’Adriatico, abbandonata la Dalmazia, compromesso forse l’esistenza stessa di Fiume. Ebbene, noi giovani, noi amanti del nostro paese, dobbiamo riparare agli errori dei governi, o ai colpi del fato: occhio a Fiume, occhio alla Dalmazia, occhio all’Adriatico. Penetrazione ed espansione con i nostri commerci, col nostro denaro, con i nostri prodotti, con la nostra intelligenza, con la nostra civiltà [...]” (Giunta, 1932, 30).

forms.¹⁷ In the years to come not (only) Fascist squads but the police engaged in extreme violence and torture, while the *Tribunale* and other State institutions suppressed anti-fascist activism. As demonstrated in this essay the (strong) presence of the state it is not a guarantee of stability and limited or non-violence. It rather shows how “state-sponsored violence” (Kershaw, 2005) mixed, overlapped and cooperated with paramilitary units and represented a factor of instability and unreliability in the eyes of large groups of local population (especially ethnic minorities and political opponents). Moreover, it shows that paramilitary violence is not only a phenomenon brought about by the collective shock over the military defeat. If the culture of defeat could be one of the reasons for the escalation of violence, it could not *di per se* provoke long-term and organized forms of violence. The myth of *vittoria mutilata* could generate violence because it was backed and supported by the state and especially by its various military forces. This had dangerous multilayered and long-term consequences: nationalist, irredentist and fascist statements not only constructed a myth around the notion of the Allied will to downplay Italy, but also served to legitimize the continuation of war conditions and psychosis after the official end of the war. The demonization of the enemy, not an invention of the war but heavily influenced by it, also caused long-term effects. Not only right-wing and nationalist mentalities were influenced by the war and postwar propaganda: the occupation of the northern Adriatic rather than being a “redemption” proved to be a civilizing mission to transform “savage Slavs” and reluctant Italians into proper, “buoni”, Italians.¹⁸ Such violence could only be committed from a position of power. It was at this point that the intertwining of nationalist forces and growing fascist squads proved to be successful, especially because it was not adequately opposed. It demonstrated the force of the fascists (and their supporters), as well as the unwillingness of the Italian government to react to fascist violence and its incapacity to defend the fundamental principles of its existence. The vacuum of power produced by the collapse of the state monopoly on violence after the war generated these groups. However, they would not have been able to proliferate and consolidate without the support of the state apparatus (militaries, police, governors, etc.). Giving examples from different cases in the twentieth century, Mark Mazower has carefully explained the political character of state-directed violence, both in times of weakness of the state as well as at the height of its power (Mazower, 2002). The fascists’ position of power, which they succeeded in attaining in influential circles of local society, and in Italy in general, and their ability to legitimize their principles and methods of “everyday violence” against ethnic and political enemies, were among the main factors that ensured the prevalence of fascist violence (Ebner, 2011). In particular, if studied from the perspective of the victim and not of the perpetrator, postwar violence reveals its disruptive and long-term impact on the local society and it seems that in this case, the state was part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

17 See the essay by Maura Hametz in this issue.

18 The Ufficio Informazioni Truppe Operanti or ITO used the term for a list of 200 people who should be interned or expelled from the region because of the “impossibilità che possano diventare buoni italiani in territorio redento” (ASTs, RCGC Gab., b. 72, Diario Storico-Militare, 3 novembre 1918–4 agosto 1919, Allegati. N. 501 di prot. 23 December 1918).

OBOROŽENA MEJA. POLITIČNO NASILJE V SEVERNO-VZHODNEM JADRANU PO PRVI SVETOVNI VOJNI

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POVZETEK

V članku so analizirane oblike političnega nasilja na območju nekdanjega Avstrijskega Primorja po prvi svetovni vojni, ko je odločilno vlogo odigral mejni spor med Kraljevino Italijo in Kraljevino Srbov, Hrvatov in Slovencev (Jugoslavija). Obravnavano obdobje so zaznamovali izjemna politična nestabilnost, gospodarska negotovost in nasilje. Vprašanje, kako so različne družbene skupine uspele ohraniti stike kljub nestabilnim in sovražnim političnim razmeram, je bistveno za zgodovino regije in Evrope na splošno. Na podlagi arhivskih dokumentov članek preučuje oblike vojaškega, paravojaškega ter javnega nasilja in s tem povezano vlogo državnih in nedržavnih akterjev (fašistični oddelki, nacionalistične organizacije, demobilizirani vojaki).

Obstoječe mednarodne raziskave so bile osredotočene predvsem na nacionalni vidik, medtem ko so regionalne in transnacionalne perspektive pogosto ostale zanemarjene. Študija zato namerava ponovno usmeriti pozornost z nacionalne na regionalno raven in analizirati primer nekdanjega Avstrijskega Primorja (preimenovanega v Venezia Giulia po letu 1918), kjer sta se »kulturi poraza« dveh zmagovitih zaveznikov prekrivali, prepletali in spopadali. Če je na eni strani zmagovita Italija razvila kulturo poraza utemeljeno na ideji o domnevno »pohabljeni zmagi« (vittoria mutilata), pa so Slovenci v novi Kraljevini Jugoslaviji obravnavali regijo kot svojo »Alzacijo in Loreno«. Ti dve nasprotujoči si stališči sta na mednarodni ravni vodili do dolgoročnih dvostranskih napetosti, na lokalni ravni pa do različnih oblik nasilja temelječih na ideološki in etnični konfrontaciji.

Ključne besede: politično nasilje, severno-vzhodna jadranska obmejna regija, Italija, Jugoslavija, Velika vojna, fašizem.

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