

# ISTRIA: PAST AND PRESENT WITH A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to situate the Istrian peninsular of Croatia within a historical context though, because of the word limit, it concerns itself primarily with the twentieth century. That century has been marked by struggle for control of the peninsular between Italians and Slavs. Up until the Second World War Italy was the dominant force and Slavs, along with communists, were oppressed. Following the defeat of Italy the peninsular became part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: the vast majority of Italians fled at that time. Now the peninsular is divided between the independent states of Slovenia and Croatia. In this paper I look at some of the claims and counter claims put forward by the various contending parties. I also give a brief account of the reasons for the break-up of Yugoslavia and analyse the nature of the Tadjman government in Croatia. Finally I examine the very different vision of Croatia and the place of Istria within it put forward by the main political party in Istria.*

## **1) Introduction**

The idea for this dissertation came from a holiday last year in Rovigno (Rovinj) on the Istrian peninsular of Croatia. Although I was aware that there existed an Italian speaking population in Istria - in both Croatia and Slovenia - I was surprised to find that in Rovigno and other towns and villages street signs were in both Croatian and Italian; local government offices, banks etc also had bilingual signs; churches held services in both Croatian and Italian. I was particularly surprised because Croatian President Franjo Tadjman has a reputation as a hard-line Croatian nationalist who does not willingly tolerate dissent from his vision of independent Croatia. On May 29 (the day before Croatian National

<sup>1</sup> MA Dissertation - Mediterranean Studies

Day) my partner and I attended a Croatian opera which claimed that the advance of the Ottoman Turks under Suleiman II was defeated by a Croat. This nationalistic work, which ended with the waving of an enormous Croatian flag, had been preceded by various speeches - all made in both Croatian and Italian.

The following day Croatian and Italian flags flew side by side on public buildings. The main entertainment in Rovigno was provided by the folk group *Batana*: the name, clearly of Italian origin, refers to a type of fishing boat peculiar to the Istrian coast. *Batana* sang in a mixture of the Italian and Croatian dialects found throughout the peninsula.<sup>2</sup> This was an official part of the celebration of Croatian National Day, not an event put on for tourists. Nor were such displays of inter-ethnic unity confined to Rovigno: a few days later we saw Croatian and Italian flags flying together on official buildings in Pola (Pula).

Official tolerance of, even support for, bilingualism in Istria was in marked contrast to Tudjman's attitudes to the Serb minority of Croatia, most of whom had left the country. The promotion of bilingualism is in fact one of the ways in which the majority of the people of Istria - Italians, Croats and those who considered themselves Istrians - distance themselves from Tudjman and the HDZ.<sup>3</sup> Istria is the area of strongest opposition to the governing party, with the HDZ in a clear minority throughout the peninsula. The vision of Croatia offered in Istria is in marked contrast to that of the narrow, ethnically based nationalism, offered by Tudjman.

I was also aware that such tolerance was in marked contrast to the treatment the Italian community received at the end of the Second World War at the hands of the Partisans when large numbers, by no means all fascist supporters or collaborators, fled Yugoslavia. This paradox led me to research the history of Istria and its Italian community. It rapidly became clear, that there was virtually nothing about the history of Istria written in English including on the Internet.

<sup>2</sup> The Italian population largely speak the *istoveneto* dialect while Croats speak the *čakavski* dialect of what, until recently, was called Serbo-Croatian. Several other minority languages can be found in Istria: Istriot, an archaic romance language, now largely confined to Rovigno and Dignano (Vodnjan); Istro-Romanian, spoken in the north east Istrian Peninsula and a few villages to the south; Hungarian in parts of Slovenia. On the Croatian language question see: Ivo Banac: *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*: Cornell University Press; Ithaca and London; 1993; pp. 46-49, 76-81. Ivo Banac: 'Main Trends in the Croatian Language Question' in *Most/The Bridge: a Journal of Croatian Literature - Collection of Croatian Literature*; Vol. 1; Croatian Writers Association; Zagreb; 1990. On Istro-Romanian see the section on endangered languages at [www.istrianet.org/index.htm](http://www.istrianet.org/index.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* - Croatian Democratic Community (sometimes translated as Croatian Democratic Union).

Despite the vast amounts of literature about Yugoslavia, I have found only two English language histories of Croatia, plus one short piece on the history of Istria.<sup>4</sup> I originally pieced together a history of Istria by extrapolating from a number of sources in English: unfortunately, for reasons of space, several thousand words have had to be condensed into a few paragraphs in order to concentrate on events during the twentieth century.

## 2) A note on place names and spelling.

Towns in Istria - in Slovenia and Croatia - have two names: Croatian or Slovenian and Italian. (Some may also have a German name, a product of the Austrian heritage). In some cases the official name encompasses the two variants: Grad Rovinj-Città di Rovigno, for example, though this is not universally the case. Nor is it always easy to work out the Croatian or Italian equivalent: Pola = Pula, Istria = Istra are obvious, but Albona = Labin, Fiume = Rijeka are not (unless one knows that *fiume* and *rijeka* are Italian and Croatian, respectively, for 'river'). To avoid the frequent use of hyphenated names I have opted, except in quotations, for the Italian version since this paper is concerned, to a large extent, with the Italian population. This does not imply these are Italian towns or cities: they are within the Croatian or Slovenian state and consequently Croatian or Slovene. In the first use of a place name I have given the Croatian form in brackets. I have, however, used the English form *Venice* rather than *Venezia*, *Rome* rather than *Roma* and *Dalmatia* rather than *Dalmazia*. By way of exception I have used *Venezia Giulia* since 'the Julian Region' is purely a geographical term, lacking the political overtones of the Italian.

Some references to *Italy* or *Italians* are occasionally anachronistic. D'Azeglio's famous remark 'We have made Italy; now we must make Italians' was, after all, made after the *Risorgimento*. I am also aware of the strictures of Gaetano La Pena about not confusing Istria with Dalmatia or identifying the whole of *Venezia Giulia* with Trieste.<sup>5</sup> These places do have their own histories; nevertheless, they also have a shared history, often being part of the same administrative unit.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Grazi: *A History of Croatia*; Philosophical Society; New York; 1973. Marcus Tanner: *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War*; Yale University Press; New Haven and London; 1997. Jadranka Skopin-Kapov: *A Short Historical Overview of Istria, Especially Pula* at [www.croatia.net/pula.html/history.html](http://www.croatia.net/pula.html/history.html).

<sup>5</sup> Gaetano La Pena: *Pola, Istria, Fiume 1943-1945: L'agonia di un lembo d'Italia e la Tragedia delle Foibe*; Mursia; Milan; 1993; p. 5.

I have used standard diacritical marks for Croatian proper names, which occasionally results in a slight variation from the usual English spelling (e.g. *Ustaša* rather than Ustasha).

### **3) Economy, geography and a brief history**

Istria is the largest peninsular in Croatia, measuring roughly 1,100 square miles and having over 200,000 inhabitants. (There are also three Istrian communes in Slovenia). The main economic centre is the port of Pola (Pula), with 60,000 inhabitants, situated on its southwestern shore. Istria is mainly known as a tourist area. During the Austrian period the town of Rovigno and its islands were favourite holiday destinations for Habsburg Emperors. In the Tito era the trade unions built holiday camps for their members. Tourism is, however, largely confined to the western shore: the eastern part of the peninsular was more industrialised. Albona was, until recently, a major mining area. The central part suffers from a lack of infrastructure: most communication is north-south. As a result it is experiencing depopulation and an ageing population.<sup>6</sup>

Istria has a narrow coastal plain covered by *flysch* (marl and sandstone) which provides fertile soil for growing cereals and grazing of animals in a region where agricultural opportunities are limited. Crops include vines, figs and olives along with typical Mediterranean vegetation such as Aleppo pines and aromatic shrubs. The islands, of which there are a vast number, are crests of mountain ranges that foundered during tectonic disturbances: this process has also created a number of deep-water harbours plus fjords. The harbours are of limited value because of the problems of communicating inland across the Dinaric Alps, which are crossed by only a few rivers. Nevertheless the sea allows communication with Italy - Venice lies only three hours by hydrofoil from Parenzo (Poreč) - as well as the wider Mediterranean world and beyond. In the Middle Ages, when Venice ruled Istria, it was only a day and night's sail. Consequently the way of life is much closer to Italian than Slavic.

Istria was probably inhabited by an Illyrian people who, in 177 BC were conquered by Rome. It remained a Roman province until the fall of the western empire when it was briefly conquered by Ostrogoths. After the reconquest of Italy, Istria was part of the Byzantine empire until the time of Charlemagne, when it was incorporated into the Holy Roman Empire and, from that time, it

<sup>6</sup> *Il Quadro Economico della Contea Istriana* at [www.istrianet.org/index.htm](http://www.istrianet.org/index.htm).

has been part of the Catholic world. During the Byzantine period Slavs began to make their way into the region. From the thirteenth century onwards the dominant power in the region was Venice. While Slovene parts of the peninsular came under Habsburg rule the coast remained under Venetian dominance until the early eighteenth century, when it was incorporated into Napoleon's Illyrian Provinces. Following the defeat of Napoleon the whole of the peninsular came under Habsburg rule: Istria, along with Dalmatia, was ruled from Vienna while Fiume was part of the possessions of the Crown of Hungary. Istria was never part of the medieval Croatian empire. For over two millennia, except for the period of Byzantine rule, Istria was a part of central Europe - linked to Italy and Austria, rather than the Balkans.

The peninsular was largely spared the destruction suffered by other parts of Croatia during its independence struggle, though Pola was blockaded by the Yugoslav navy and the inhabitants of Adriatic islands were unable to fish.<sup>7</sup> In addition the army removed much medical and other equipment from the region's hospitals.<sup>8</sup> The economy was seriously affected by a significant decline in tourism, from which the region was only just recovering before being hit again as a result of the recent war in Kosova.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4) From the first to the second world war: italian domination**

Istria remained part of the Habsburg empire until 1918 when it was bitterly contested between Italy and the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Italian designs on Istria and Dalmatia played a decisive role in pushing the South Slavs of the Habsburg empire into seeking unity with Serbia. Italian nationalists had not always seen their interests as opposed to those of their Slav neighbours. Cavour, the guiding force of the *Risorgimento*, had argued:

'Any expression must be avoided from which it might be inferred that the new Italian Kingdom intends not only to conquer Venetia but Trieste with Austria [sic] and Dalmatia as well. I do not ignore the fact that in the cities along the coast the population is Italian both by race and aspiration. But in the countryside the people are all of Slavic race. It would be gratuitous to indicate to the Croats,

<sup>7</sup> Tanner: *Croatia* p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Information from Elspeth Pribičević, representative of Balkan Holidays in Parenzo.

<sup>9</sup> I prefer the Albanian spelling except in a clearly Serb context such as the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.

Serbs, Hungarians and all the Germanic populations that we want to take so large a slice of Central Europe with every outlet to the Mediterranean'.<sup>10</sup>

Not all Italian nationalists, however, were sympathetic to this view. As early as 1866 pamphlets were published claiming the whole of Venezia Giulia and Dalmatia for Italy. In the same year the Slovenes of Venetia were brought under the Italian monarchy.<sup>11</sup> It was this latter attitude that was to dominate Italian politics in the period leading up to the First World War and formed the basis for Italian demands in the secret Treaty of London signed on 26 April 1915. Under the terms of the Treaty Italy agreed to 'use her entire resources for the purpose of waging war jointly with France, Great Britain, and Russia against all their enemies'. In return it was promised that:

'Italy shall obtain the Trentino, Cisalpine Tyrol with its geographical and natural frontier, as well as Trieste, the counties of Gorizia and Gradisca, all Istria as far as the Quarnero and including Volosca and the Istrian islands of Cherso and Lussin, as well as the small islands of Plavnik, Unie, Canidole, Palazzuoli, San Pietro di Nembi, Asinello, Gruica, and the neighbouring islets.... Italy shall also be given the province of Dalmatia within its present administrative boundaries.... Italy shall receive full sovereignty over Valona, the island of Saseno and surrounding territory'.

In addition Italy was promised sovereignty over the Dodecanese islands and parts of Turkey in the case of the partition of the latter. She was also required to accept the establishment of 'a small autonomous neutralised State' in Albania while not opposing 'the division of Northern and Southern Albania between Montenegro, Serbia, and Greece'.<sup>12</sup>

There is a notable omission from these Italian claims: the port of Fiume. Yet Fiume was to be at the centre of the post-war conflict between Italy and the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.<sup>13</sup> This omission was not

<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Raditsa: 'Risorgimento and the Croatian Question: Tommaseo and Kvaternik' in *Journal of Croatian Studies*; Vol. V-VI; Croatian Academy of America, Inc; New York; 1964-65.(pp. 24-25). Niccolò Tommaseo was, along with Daniele Manin, a leader of the Venetian Republic of 1848; Kvaternik is, essentially, the father of modern Croatian nationalism. Novak claims that Cavour changed his mind on his death bed and declared that the task of future generations of Italians was to unite Istria with Italy. Bogdan C. Novak: *Trieste, 1941-1954: The Ethnic Political and Ideological Struggle*; University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London; 1970; p. 14, n.16.

<sup>11</sup> Raditsa: *Risorgimento*; p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *The Treaty of London*; (Extracts); at [www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1915/londontreaty.html](http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1915/londontreaty.html).

<sup>13</sup> For the conflicting Yugoslav and Italian claims see: Count L. Vonjovitch et al: *The Question of the Adriatic*; Paris; 1919. M.A. Miholjević *The Yugoslav Question with Special Regard to the Coasts of the Adriatic*; Hrvatski Štamparski Zavod; Zagreb; 1919. Ministro Degli Affari Esteri: *Documenti Diplomatici: Negoziati Diretti fra il Governo Italiano e il Governo Serbo-Croato-Sloveno per la Pace Adriatica*; Chamber of Deputies; Rome; 1921.

accidental. It reflects a belief held by all Allied forces in 1915 (as well as by the South Slavs, including the Serbs, of the Habsburg empire) that the war would end with the maintenance of the Austro-Hungarian empire, albeit in a reduced and weakened form. This is also reflected in the nature of Italy's war which, despite the promises to fight against all the enemies of Great Britain, France and Russia, was almost totally directed against Austria. Fiume was under the Hungarian monarchy and consequently of less concern than the much greater Italian inhabited regions ruled from Vienna. The Treaty of London certainly shows a complete disregard for the principle of national self-determination - but then none of the major allied powers believed in such a principle. In 1915 the United States was not at war: when it did enter President Wilson, who did largely agree with the principle, found himself at odds with his allies over the future of the multi-national European empires.

Wilson's opposition to the secret provisions of the Treaty of London required the Italian government to change tack. The importance of the principle of 'nationality' as a propaganda weapon for subverting the Austro-Hungarian army was at last recognised, even by Italian generals. The democratic, anti-annexationist school, which wanted Italy to cultivate friendship with the Slavs, made itself heard after having been almost silent during the first years of the war. However the Italian government was also faced with the need for national concord in a state bitterly divided by the war. Although Prime Minister Orlando recognised the advantage of encouraging Slav independence movements to weaken Austria, he lacked the confidence to replace Foreign Secretary, Sonnino, who wished to have nothing to do with them, preferring the continuation of Austria-Hungary. For Sonnino the new national movements patronised by Wilson were the most dangerous threat to the Treaty of London, the concrete expression of the *sacro egoismo* for which Italy had broken its previous alliance with Germany and the Habsburgs, entering the war on the side of the allies who offered far greater gains to Italy.<sup>14</sup> The Versailles Peace Conference, at which Wilson championed the new states emerging from the ruins of the Habsburg empire and refused to countenance Italian claims, was thus seen as a major rebuff to Italy's aspirations which, by now, included not only the terms of the Treaty of London but also Fiume. Orlando and Sonnino walked out, fuelling resentment in Italy at perceived hypocrisy by their more powerful allies. Thus was born the myth of Italy's 'mutilated victory', a term coined by Gabriele D'Annunzio but later taken

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Lyttleton: *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929*; Weidenfeld and Nicolson; London; 1987; p. 29.

up by Mussolini. In fact both Orlando, despite his previous willingness to make use of Slav national movements, and Sonnino had already decided to oppose the new Yugoslav state by 'all possible means', making use of the Italian army which was not only in occupation of the newly occupied territories of Dalmatia, Fiume and *Venezia Giulia* but had, after the Italian military disaster at Caporetto, become increasingly involved in politics. Military power was to count for rather more than Wilson's support for self-determination. The army, with the backing of the government, encouraged pro-Italian rallies and suppression of Slavs in the occupied territories.<sup>15</sup> This climate of hostility to the Slav population, strengthened by the notion of 'mutilated victory', gave increased resonance to the demands of the Italian National Association, ANI.

The ANI took it for granted that the claims of the urban Italian minority in Dalmatia were more important than those of the rural Slav majority. Hence the ANI led the opposition to the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo by the Italian government in November 1920. Under this treaty Italy kept Istria and Trieste, Zara and a few islands off the Dalmatian coast. Fiume became an independent state, until January 1924 when an agreement between Mussolini, who supported the Rapallo Treaty, and the Yugoslav government saw it annexed to Italy: the rest of the disputed territory went to Yugoslavia.<sup>16</sup> The ANI had not only envisaged, but actively worked for, the destruction of the Habsburg empire: hence the demand for Italian annexation of Fiume was central to their thought.<sup>17</sup> On 12 September 1919, following the reduction of the Italian military garrison, D'Annunzio entered Fiume with the support of two thousand mutinous troops. D'Annunzio had developed a cult of Venice as the heir of Rome, which was linked to naval expansion and Italian domination of the Adriatic. Not surprisingly, therefore, he was backed by the major *Trieste* shipping magnates Oscar Sinigaglia and the Cosulich family, who saw the development of Fiume, in Italian or Yugoslav hands, as a threat to their own interests.<sup>18</sup> His comic opera state continued in defiance of the Italian government until finally brought to an end by the navy at Christmas 1920, following the signing of the Rapallo Treaty between Italy and Yugoslavia

The Adriatic question became a rallying point for both nationalists and fascists, though Mussolini was careful to keep his distance from D'Annunzio and, in 1921, the corporate 'Charter of Carnaro' - drawn up by D'Annunzio for Fiume - became a

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*; p. 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander De Grand, *The Italian National Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy*; University of Nebraska Press; Lincoln and London; 1978; pp. 117-18.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*; p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*; p. 106, p. 134.



source of division within the Fascist Party.<sup>19</sup> Although D'Annunzio didn't succeed in keeping Italian control of Fiume he had important effects on Italian politics by undermining the authority of the state and reinforcing the mythology of the nationalist right. The Fiume adventure, alongside a growing fear of the Socialists, succeeded in creating a new technique for the evocation of irrational hatreds and loyalties. Such irrationality lies at the heart of much of the growth of the ANI and the linked Dante Alighieri Society in the key areas of Italian irredentism: Trentino, *Venezia Giulia*, and Dalmatia.<sup>20</sup> Its outlook was based on an appeal to history through the writings of the greatest Italian writer who, in *Inferno*, refers to the river Carnaro in Istria as the Italian border.<sup>21</sup> The use of Dante's writings to expound the just nature of Italian irredentism is certainly spurious. Dante undoubtedly believed in the divine mission of the Roman empire which he based, though within a Christian framework, on Virgil's *Aeneid*. He also believed that Virgil's account of the founding of Rome was historical fact. But his views are not those of an Italian nationalist; they are much subtler. He championed the claims to the Holy Roman empire of Henry of Luxemburg, an ethnic German. The only character in the *Divine Comedy* given an entire Canto to himself is Justinian. Certainly, under Justinian, the Roman empire reconquered large parts of Italy but, although Justinian considered himself 'Roman' he was ethnically Greek and his empire based on Byzantium. In any case Virgil makes clear that the 'Roman' nation was not purely Italian but based on a fusion of Latin elements and the Trojans accompanying Aeneas, although the 'Trojans will but sink down in the mass and be made one with them'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Denis Mack Smith: *Mussolini*; Weidenfeld and Nicolson; London; 1993; p. 37. Lyttleton: *Seizure*; p. 51, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> R.J.B. Bosworth: *Italy, the least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy Before the First World War* Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 1979; p. 49. Lyttleton: *Seizure of Power*; p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy*; 3 Volumes - *Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso*; (Italian text with translation and commentary by John D. Sinclair); Oxford University Press; New York; 1961; *Inferno*; Canto IX; lines 113-114; p. 127. Eric Hobsbawm argues that Dante's writings have an appeal to Italian nationalists because the fourteenth century language is relatively easily intelligible to a twentieth century Italian. By contrast fourteenth century French or English is virtually a foreign language to modern day speakers of those tongues. See *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*; Abacus; London; 1977; p. 106. This assertion must be qualified since Hobsbawm forgets, or is unaware, that a number of Dante's works were written in Latin and therefore not easily intelligible to a modern Italian audience. This is especially true for the work in which he justifies the use of the vernacular in poetry, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In order to prove his case Dante has to show that he is capable of writing eloquently in Latin.

<sup>22</sup> Dante Alighieri: *Monarchy*; (trans. Prue Shaw); Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 1996; Book II. *Paradiso*; Canto IV. Virgil: *Aeneid*; (trans. C. Day Lewis); Oxford University Press; Oxford; 1991; p. 396.

Moreover, appeals to medieval borders are not a very useful way of resolving complex problems of modern states in a multi-ethnic region. At the time of Dante, indeed over half a century later at the Battle of Kosovo, large parts of France were part of the Kingdom of England. Virtually no one today, however, would claim they should be restored to British rule. Italian reliance on Dante's writings at least prove that references to medieval history to justify modern claims (such as Serb claims to Kosova or Tudjman's notion of the 1,000 year dream of an independent Croatian state, which threatens the sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina) are clearly not the prerogative of Slav nationalists in this region.

Although repression of the Slavs under Italian rule is generally seen as the result of Fascism, much of it predates Mussolini's coming to power. For example, although the Italians had promised more schools than existed under Austrian rule, 540 (out of 541) Slav language schools were closed: the only one to survive was a private school run by the Serbian Orthodox church. Over 850 Slovene teachers left their employment, many driven out in the terror campaign of 1921.<sup>23</sup> These attacks were in direct contravention of a number of promises made to the Slavs by the Italian army, the King and the Prime Minister.<sup>24</sup>

The Italian Catholic church also colluded in attacks on the Slav population; again despite promises to respect language rights of the largely Catholic Slovenes and Croats. On December 19, 1918 the palace of Bishop Karlin of Trieste was sacked by Italian demonstrators. The leader of the demonstrators, a teacher called de Lucca, was tried and acquitted on the grounds of his patriotic conduct while the Pope advised Bishop Karlin to give up the See of Trieste. Boligni, the head of the Franciscan monastery of Pisano, proposed depriving Slav Catholics of the sacraments until they learned Italian. Lower clergy were transferred to Sardinia while religious instruction in the mother tongue was abolished in middle schools and reduced to a minimum in primary schools. In seminaries Italian was compulsory even for private conversations or letters. Even church bells were Italianised.<sup>25</sup>

Repression of Slavs by Liberal Italy aided the fascists. The first victory of *squadristo* was in *Venezia Giulia* and Trieste where fascism was able to make use of the national issue to disguise reaction. It is not surprising that this region was one of the strongholds of fascism. In Istria and Trieste national and social questions

<sup>23</sup> Fran Barbalić: 'The Yugoslavs of Italy' in *Slavonic (and East European) Review*; Vol.15; London; 1937; p. 180.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*; p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*; pp. 181-83.

were inextricably linked: the struggle against the Slavs was portrayed as a struggle against Bolshevism.<sup>26</sup> In Italy itself there were numerous strikes during the *biennio rosso* of 1919-1920, culminating in the occupation of factories throughout the engineering industry. For a time Bolshevik revolution appeared on the agenda.<sup>27</sup> Hence attacks on Slavs went alongside attacks on Socialists of whatever nationality. On May Day 1920 workers demonstrating in Pola clashed with police and four demonstrators were killed: a Croat, a Czech, an Austrian, and an Italian. In September of that year, in Trieste, the funeral of a worker killed by fascists was attacked. In response barricades were erected in the working class areas and were only broken when the local fascists were joined by the army.<sup>28</sup>

Repression of Slavs (and of Socialists) continued throughout the period of Fascist rule. The Fascists stepped up measures adopted by previous governments: Slovene and Croatian language schools were closed while many Slavs were forced to adopt Italian names. Large numbers emigrated. The entry of Italy into the Second World War fundamentally changed the situation and at the end of the war Istria became part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The transfer of sovereignty was accompanied, however, by a mass exodus of the Italian community. Today less than 20,000 remain. The reasons for this are still much debated.

## 5) The Italian exodus

The mass exodus of the Italian community remains a source of conflict in Istria and Italy. The exact numbers of exiles is much debated though most Italian accounts claim around 350,000 Italians left between 1943 and 1955. The transfer of population on such a scale was not surpassed in the Balkans until the exodus of Serbs from Croatia in 1991-1995. This makes the silence of most English language writers on former Yugoslavia even more astonishing.<sup>29</sup> Claims by

<sup>26</sup> Lyttleton: *Seizure*, pp.53-54.

<sup>27</sup> On the *biennio rosso* see: Gwyn A. Williams: *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy 1911-1921*; Pluto; London; 1975. Paolo Spriano: *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*; (trans. Gwyn A. Williams); Pluto; London; 1975.

<sup>28</sup> Novak: *Trieste*; pp. 40-41.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Thompson is the only writer in English who mentions in any detail the mass exodus. Mark Thompson: *A Paper House: The Ending of Yugoslavia*; Vintage; London; 1992; Ch. 2. Aleksa Djilas devotes one paragraph to the expulsion of Italians and Germans - most of the paragraph being about the latter. A. Djilas: *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution 1919-1953*; Harvard University Press; Cambridge; 1996; pp. 169-70. Lampe manages a single sentence. John R. Lampe: *Yugoslavia as History: Twice there was a Country*; Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 1997; p. 227

*esuli* that they have been ignored are not altogether true, though most Italian historiography has been done by the Left which has been embarrassed to admit the reality of the exodus because it raises question about whether all those 'justly' persecuted by Tito were fascists. However, in the post-war years there were heated debates over the Italian-Yugoslavia border, the status of Trieste and the problem of Italian refugees. Although many of the issues have since been largely forgotten, this is not the case in Trieste where many of the exiles settled and continue to long for a return to Istria. Moreover, with the break-up of Yugoslavia, the local debate over the causes and nature of the Istrian *esodo* has assumed international dimensions with the issue of Slovene-Italian negotiations over the *beni abbandonati* (lost properties) of Italian exiles. It informs attitudes towards Slovene entrance to the EU, the Istrian regional movement and the position of the remaining Italian minority in Istria.<sup>30</sup> Both the *Alleanza Nazionale*, the heirs of Mussolini's Fascist Party, and *Forza Italia* (the party of former Italian Prime Minister and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi) have raised the question of Italy's eastern frontiers, making claims to Istria and Dalmatia.<sup>31</sup>

One of the main exile organisations is the *Unione degli Istriani*. The *Udi* claims to be apolitical, presenting itself as a cultural organisation, dedicated to preserving Italian cultural traditions and maintaining the cohesion of *fameia* (Istrian dialect for *famiglie*, families) within the *esuli* communities. It has representatives from each *paese* (Capodistria, Pisano, Rovigno etc) and produces a variety of texts relating to the history of Istria. Despite its claims to being a purely cultural organisation the *Udi* works closely with the local *Lista per Trieste* as well as with the *Alleanza Nazionale*, and is at the forefront of renewed demands for the return of the *beni abbandonata*. The *Lista per Trieste* was formed in opposition to the 1975 Treaty of Osimo, which definitively settled the Italian-Yugoslav border.<sup>32</sup> Other *esuli* organisations include the *Comunità Istriana*; *Associazione dei Giuliani-Dalmati nel Mondo*, which also publishes papers, books and pamphlets and the *Istituto Regionale per la Cultura Istriani*. This serves as a centre for exile publications while seeking to become *the* schol-

<sup>30</sup> Pamela Ballinger: 'The Istrian *Esodo*: Silences and Presences in the Construction of Exodus' in: Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Maja Povržanović (eds): *War, Exile, Everyday Life: Cultural Perspectives*; Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research; Zagreb; 1996; p. 118. Ironically, one of the major concerns of the Italian population remaining in Istria (*rimasti*) is that they are treated as a national grouping, not a mere example of Folklore.

<sup>31</sup> *Il Fronte Orientale*: at [www.ecn.org/est/balcani/italia/italia01.htm](http://www.ecn.org/est/balcani/italia/italia01.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Ballinger: *Istrian Esodo*; pp. 118-19.

arly centre for the study of Istria and the exodus. It maintains contact with the *Università Popolare di Trieste*. The *Università Popolare* is one of the few points of contact between *esuli* and *rimasti* organisations as it also has relations with the *Centro di Ricerche Storiche* in Rovigno.<sup>33</sup>

The *esuli* tend to conflate Italian and Istrian culture, which leads them to see themselves as the only authentic *Istriani*. They question the ‘authenticity’ of Italians (and Slavs) in Istria and challenge the ‘authenticity’ of ‘Italian’ names. Thus they claim ‘one can’t say there is an Italian community in Istria’. Not surprisingly they view Istria as largely Italian, stressing that the roots of Italian tradition extend back to the era of Roman settlement. Slavs are portrayed as ‘pigs’ or ‘goats’ and under Slav rule there has been a decline of the land, a trend that has only now begun to be reversed ‘because of foreign, especially Italian, help’. This is accompanied by a religio-nationalist narrative of exile from paradise, with a stress on the peasants’ religiosity, to which they hope to return - an unconscious echo of President Tudjman’s notion of Croatia as Paradise. The Slavs carried out a ‘ruthless persecution’ of Italians who fought alongside the Partisans. Some *esuli* claim there was a deliberate policy of ‘ethnic cleansing’.<sup>34</sup> Others go further, claiming the Italian population was subjected to genocide. This is the view of the *esulo* Gaetano La Pena who refers to ‘the genocide of the Italians in the eastern border regions between September 1943 and May 1945’.<sup>35</sup> His work includes a list of ‘victims of the Slav occupation of Istria between September and October 1943’ whose bodies, sometimes unidentifiable, were found in the *foibe*.<sup>36</sup> He follows with a further list of approximately 6,500 Italians either killed or ‘disappeared’ in Istria, Fiume, Zara, Dalmatia, Gorizia and Trieste.<sup>37</sup> Some of these are clearly Italian military and police - e.g. members of the *vigili urbani* or *guardia forestale*, though others have no obvious military connection.

In La Pena’s view Italians are largely innocent victims, motivated by lofty moral concerns, whereas Slavs are narrow nationalists. This is not simply a matter of anti-Communism or a playing down of Fascist brutality. On the contrary, he stresses that while all anti-fascists, whatever their nationality, were

<sup>33</sup> The CRS offices in Rovigno are in the Piazza Matteotti, a square named after the Italian Socialist M.P. murdered by Mussolini.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*; pp. 119-29.

<sup>35</sup> La Pena: *Pola, Istria*; p. 357.

<sup>36</sup> *Foiba* (plural *foibe*) is a north-east Italian dialect word meaning abysses. It refers to the ravines (or possibly Karstic caves) in which the bodies of Italians were thrown during the struggle for control of Istria in the final years of WW2

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*; pp. 349-450.

repressed the main price was paid by the Communists, who had 'taken on the defence of the proletariat as a class and of the Slav population as a nationality'.<sup>38</sup> But he contrasts 'good' Italian Communists with 'bad' Slav ones. Hence he interprets the militant working class response in Albona to fascist attacks on the *Camera del Lavoro* on 28 February 1921 and on Giovanni Pippan, Secretary of the Federation of Istrian Miners, on the following day as an example of class struggle which was neither hostile to Italy, nor irredentist. The Slavs, according to La Pena, argue that these events were the first manifestation of a desire by working people to unify with Yugoslavia. Near the site of the *Camera del Lavoro* and the Italian section of the Federation of Miners in Albona the Communist Party of Yugoslavia erected a memorial claiming 'the mine is ours'.<sup>39</sup>

La Pena also claims that the PCI (Italian Communist Party) supported the right to self-determination of the Slavs, including the right to separation from the Italian state.<sup>40</sup> The PCI interprets the right to self-determination in a broad way, encompassing all nationalities, whereas the Slavs have a narrow, nationalist definition.<sup>41</sup> Thus, from the summer of 1943 the strategy of the CPY (Communist Party of Yugoslavia) in relation to Istria and Fiume was to direct its energies towards the towns and cities, with Italian majorities. The Italian Armistice led to the opening up of a vacuum, except in Trieste, Pola and Fiume, which were occupied by the Germans. There were virtually no *Ustaše* or *Četniks* in Istria after 8 September 1943. The opportunity was, therefore, seized by the CPY in September 1943 to declare Istria annexed to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Istria was submerged in those days under a sea of Croatian tricolours, with very few red flags; which bemused members of the PCI. Italian flags, which had originally been flown to greet the Partisans disappeared. Italian fishermen, workers, white-collar workers etc were arrested, along with fascist officials. However, the Slavs don't officially recognise the repression; they refer only to a few Italian elements. By contrast Italian communists, especially those of *Venezia Giulia*, have always tried to provide figures for the numbers of Italians killed.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*; pp. 99-100, p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*; pp. 98-99.

<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking the party was called the Partito Comunista d'Italia at its formation in 1921. The choice of name was deliberate: for Gramsci and other leaders of the PCdI it signified that the party was merely one section of a single, world party that happened to operate within the geographical entity called Italy. The PCdI changed its name to the Partito Comunista Italiano in 1943, a name which signals an increasingly nationalist conception and orientation. The significance of this is totally lost on La Pena. For convenience I have used PCI throughout.

<sup>41</sup> La Pena: *Pola, Istria*; p. 95.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*: pp. 153-197.

It would be easy to dismiss La Pena's arguments as the ravings of a disillusioned exile. Certainly he avoids giving examples of nationalism on the part of Italian communists, while taking every opportunity to accuse Slav communists of petty nationalism. Some of his claims, however, are supported by other writers. Eric Terzuolo argues that there was a prohibition on the display of Italian flags or red flags containing Italian tricolours. Terzuolo does, however, recognise that because of 20 years of fascist repression 'Italian' had become synonymous with 'oppressor' and 'exploiter'.<sup>43</sup> Equally there seems little doubt that sections of the Croatian Communist Party were nationalist. For example a Croatian Communist Party editorial criticised the Communist Party of Yugoslavia because 'many communists not only allowed various "ignorant fanatics to fly only red flags and to show leftist sectarian slogans, but did the same themselves, though our audience is the masses of the people and our allies [must be] national, militant and anti-fascist in character"'.<sup>44</sup> Tito opposed the 20 September 1943 proclamation by ZAVNOH of the annexation of Istria, claiming it should have been done by AVNOJ.<sup>45</sup> (It was in fact ratified by AVNOJ on 29 November 1943). He also criticised Croatian party leader Andrija Hebrang for never mentioning Yugoslavia, only the 'native land of Croatia'. While many of the attacks on Hebrang were part of a faction fight inside the Yugoslav Communist Party there is probably some truth in Tito's allegations.

It is important to recognise major differences in the situation in Croatia and Slovenia. It was much easier for the Slovenes to argue for a national liberation struggle against foreign invaders. In Croatia the existence of the *Ustaša* government made the situation very different. Consequently the Slovenes could organise their own movement in late 1941 whereas Croats could not do so until June 1943. The Communist Party was very weak among Croats in Istria and even PCI members were not keen on being part of a 'foreign', albeit communist, state. Hence when Croats began to lead a struggle in September 1943 the PCI leadership in Istria was still inactive.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Eric R. Terzuolo: *Red Adriatic: The Communist Parties of Italy and Yugoslavia*; Westview; Boulder and London; 1985; p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Ivo Banac: *With Stalin Against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism*; Cornell University Press; Ithaca and London; 1988; p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> Provincial Anti-fascist Council of National Liberation of Croatia; Anti-fascist National Liberation Council of Yugoslavia.

<sup>46</sup> Novak: *Trieste*; pp. 67-69.

There were, therefore, very different relationships between Italian and Slovene Communists and those between their counterparts in Croatia. The PCI had begun, by the second half of 1942, some armed resistance in collaboration with Slovene Partisan groups. Some groups and individuals had joined even earlier. The first regular PCI contacts with Slovene formations began in October 1942, leading to the formation of the Garibaldi Detachment in March 1943. Terzuolo contrast this with the situation further south where the Communist Party of Croatia had only a minimal presence in Istria prior to Italian capitulation.<sup>47</sup> Part of the blame for this lies with the attitude of the Communist International: it was only in the summer of 1942 that the Comintern supported, indirectly, the right of the Croatian CP to organise its own party in Istria.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless Terzuolo accepts there was hesitancy by Italian communists to follow the Yugoslav lead, which was because:

- a) Urban and rural society were completely divided along socio-economic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural lines
- b) Istria and *Venezia Giulia* had relatively high living standards even in war-time
- c) Fascist consensus among the Italians of these regions was considerable
- d) The PCI organisation was limited to the cities and therefore contact with Slav peasants was limited
- e) Local PCI leaders were sensitive to the heavily peasant character of the Yugoslav liberation movement. Even in the autumn of 1943 some PCI members expressed regret at collaboration with the Partisans because they feared the primacy of national over class demands.<sup>49</sup>

Despite these reservations, however, Italians in Istria did take up armed struggle and formed a number of battalions.<sup>50</sup> Some six thousand died in the course of the struggle.<sup>51</sup>

Terzuolo also suggests that it was the PCI that argued for putting off a settlement of the status of Trieste and *Venezia Giulia* till the end of the war, while the Slavs wanted to assert their control. Despite the Slav attitude sections of the PCI

<sup>47</sup> Terzuolo: *Red Adriatic*: p. 29

<sup>48</sup> Novak: *Trieste*; p. 67.

<sup>49</sup> Terzuolo: *Red Adriatic*; p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> For a full list of the Italian Partisan formations see: *A Fianco Dei Partigiani* at [www.citinv.it/pubblicazioni/AVVENIMENTIA/AVVE26/S014001.htm](http://www.citinv.it/pubblicazioni/AVVENIMENTIA/AVVE26/S014001.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Giorgio Cingolani: *Memoria/Italiani e Jugoslavi Cinquant'Anni fa Quegli Alpini con una Stella Rossa sul Berretto* at [www.citinv.it/pubblicazioni/AVVENIMENTIA/AVVE26/S014001.htm](http://www.citinv.it/pubblicazioni/AVVENIMENTIA/AVVE26/S014001.htm)



supported Yugoslav control of Trieste. After the war, between 1945-48, there was even an influx of Italians to Yugoslavia.<sup>52</sup>

The year 1948 is significant: it was the year of Stalin's break with Tito. Not surprisingly this rupture within the international communist movement had repercussions inside Istria, particularly for the Italian community. Although the total number of Italians arrested and convicted as 'Cominformists' was very small (87) this represented 0.53 percent of all those arrested and convicted whereas Italians only made up 0.24 percent of the population. Only Montenegrins and Bulgarians had a higher percentage of their numbers arrested. The District committee of Istria was almost totally for the Cominform Resolution condemning Tito, Cominformism being particularly strong in Fiume and Pola.<sup>53</sup> Repression of Croats, by contrast, was relatively low and mainly affected those associated with the Croatian national movement of the 1930s or strongly influenced by Hebrang.<sup>54</sup>

In Slovenia Cominformism was weak, primarily because Moscow accepted Austria's 1938 frontiers, thereby dooming Yugoslav acquisition of southern Carinthia and Stalin called for the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops from Austrian Carinthia and Zone A of Trieste.<sup>55</sup> (After the 1948 split history was rewritten and Tito was denounced for abandoning the Slav peoples of Carinthia and Trieste).<sup>56</sup> In Trieste there was a strong Cominformist faction dominated by the PCI, which openly campaigned against Yugoslav interests there. Under the leadership of Palmiro Togliatti the PCI developed an unmistakably irredentist position.<sup>57</sup> The situation in Trieste was complicated by the division of the region between the Yugoslavs and the western allies, an important source of conflict in the developing Cold War.<sup>58</sup> The Free Territory of Trieste had its own Communist Party (CP FTT) which was an extension of the Yugoslav party until the Cominform resolution, over which the CP FTT split. The majority, led by Vittorio Vidali, the General Secretary took a pro-Cominform stance. The minority was led by Branko Babić, a Slovene. Nevertheless this was not a clear split between Slavs

<sup>52</sup> Terzuolo: *Red Adriatic*; pp. 47-50, p. 113.

<sup>53</sup> Banac: *With Stalin*: p. 84.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*: p. 150, p. 184.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*: p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> James Klugman: *From Trotsky to Tito* Lawrence & Wishart; London; 1951; p. 193. This dreadful example of Stalinist falsification was written by the man who has been accused of deliberately misleading the wartime British government into abandoning support for the *Četniks* in favour of Tito's Partisans.

<sup>57</sup> Banac: *With Stalin*: p. 189.

<sup>58</sup> For a full account of the role of Trieste in the Cold War see Novak: *Trieste*.

and Italians. Only 16 out of 44 Trieste CP members had Italian passports, while 24 had obvious Slavic names. Although virtually all Trieste Titoists were Slovenes, nearly half the Slovene communists supported Vidali. Vidali was an old Comintern apparatchnik, Soviet intelligence operative, liquidator of 'Trotskyists' and involved in a plot to murder Trotsky. His loyalty to Moscow was beyond question. Indeed Vidali's position reflected that of the Soviet Union, which was to maintain the Free Territory and oppose divisions between Italy and Yugoslavia. This was to lead to Yugoslav allegations that the Cominformists were co-operating with fascists in an anti-Yugoslav campaign to prove the *italianità* of the whole of *Venezia Giulia*.

Whatever the truth of the conflicting allegations it is clear that the vast majority of the Italian population fled from Istria in the years 1945-1953. Some were, no doubt, victims of a deliberate policy carried out by the Communist Party of Croatia, possibly with tacit support from the CPY leadership. The vast majority fled, however, because a few real threats can easily lead to a situation in which one's very survival is, or is perceived to be, at risk - just as today the majority of Serbs are fleeing Kosova. Twenty years of fascist rule made the threat of Slav reprisals all too believable: the creation of such fears within the Italian community did not require a deliberate policy on the part of the Croatian, still less the Yugoslav, leadership. In fact the *rimasti* were able to form their own political and cultural organisations - within the limits allowed by Tito, naturally. Italian language schools were established at all levels and there were a number of Italian language courses at the University of Pola. There were also Italian language broadcasts, both radio and television, as well as a newspaper and journals.

## 6) Istria in independent Croatia

With the break-up of Yugoslavia Istria was divided between two newly independent states: a smaller part in Slovenia, most of the peninsular in Croatia. Its present situation is, therefore, shaped by and bound up with the causes of the disintegration of the Yugoslav state and the nature of the states that emerged in 1990-1991. Unfortunately a thorough analysis of the break-up must take into account a large number of factors: such an analysis would require far more words than available to me for this whole dissertation. I must, therefore, concentrate on a few issues.

Firstly, the major factors that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia were overwhelmingly internal, of which the most important was the rise of nationalism in Serbia, on the back of which Slobodan Milošević came to power. This had

reciprocal effects in the other Republics, leading to the growth of nationalism throughout the Yugoslav state. Attempts by the International Monetary Fund to impose economic restructuring exacerbated the crisis, but they didn't cause it. Indeed, the whole thrust of the various IMF proposals was towards maintaining a unified Yugoslav state, though one even more open to capitalist penetration than already existed. Similarly political decisions in the West may have exacerbated the crisis but, equally, they did not cause it.<sup>59</sup> Claims that the break-up of Yugoslavia was caused by German recognition of Croatian independence are totally at odds with the chronology of events.<sup>60</sup> Germany had certainly been urging recognition for several months but first openly declared its intention to recognise Croatia on December 15, 1991 - after the destruction of Vukovar and after Slobodan Milošević had called for United Nations troops to be sent to Croatia, where they would largely guarantee the military gains that had left one third of Croatia in Serb hands.<sup>61</sup> Certainly support for Zagreb from Germany was of considerably greater weight than that of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Ukraine - all of whom had recognised Croatian (and Slovene) independence before Germany.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless there is little evidence that the German government deliberately set out to destroy the Yugoslav state. Indeed the preoccupation with the role of Germany in recognising Croatia seems to me to betray a certain anti-German and anti-Croatian bias, based on a particular interpretation of the Second World war, particularly among sections of the British Left.<sup>63</sup> One could, after all argue that it was Germany's recognition of Slovenia that led to the break-up. Although this argument suffers the same chronological inaccuracies as that in relation to Croatia it does have the merit of being more in tune with the dynamics of the

<sup>59</sup> The argument that the west was largely responsible for the break-up of Yugoslavia is put forward by Susan Woodward *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War*; Brookings Institution; Washington; 1995 and, most recently by Peter Gowan: 'NATO's Balkan Tragedy' in *New Left Review*; no.234; March/April 1999.

<sup>60</sup> This claim is still put forward as fact by much of the British Left, most recently in the pamphlet published after the end of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia by Trade Union Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: *The War was Wrong, the Bombing Bad, the Policies a Failure. This Should Never be Allowed to Happen Again*; London; 1999; p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Laura Silber and Allan Little: *The Death of Yugoslavia*; BBC/Penguin; London; 1995; pp. 227-29.

<sup>62</sup> Tanner: *Croatia*; pp. 271-72.

<sup>63</sup> Anyone listening to Tony Benn's speeches opposing Nato's recent war in Yugoslavia would be left in no doubt of the extent of these sentiments. Benn's analysis, incidentally, also reflected a distinctly pro-Serb bias, which would have been rejected out of hand by the Partisans who made no distinctions between the pro-Nazi regimes in power in Zagreb and Belgrade. See: Vladimir Dedijer: *Tito Speaks: His Self Portrait and Struggle with Stalin*; Weidenfeld & Nicolson; London; 1955; p. 438.

break-up of the Yugoslav federation. For today it is perfectly clear that Slobodan Milošević had come to an agreement with Slovene President Milan Kučan to allow Slovenia to break away, though not all Yugoslav military leaders were aware of this. It is certainly difficult to understand how Milošević could resist Nato for eighty days whereas the then considerably stronger Yugoslav Peoples' Army was forced to withdraw from Slovenia in only ten days. The decisive role of Slovenia is also confirmed in other ways: it was Slovene determination to secede (with the agreement of Milošević) that dragged Croatian President Franjo Tuđman in their wake. But whereas the Slovenes took serious preparations for independence Tuđman simply used the demand as a bargaining point. As Vesna Pusić, associate professor of Sociology at the University of Zagreb and a critic of Tuđman puts it 'although almost all Croatian politicians like to claim otherwise, I can confidently assert that Croatia became independent of Yugoslavia in June 1991 more as a result of being pushed than because of any plan'.<sup>64</sup> A majority of Croatian voters concluded that it would take Croat-nationalist hard-liners to defend Croatia against Milošević and his Serb-nationalist hard-liners. Thus the first free, multiparty elections in the Yugoslav republic of Croatia, held in April and May 1990, produced a victory for the HDZ, which won 41.5 percent of the vote and 68 percent of the seats in parliament under the first-past-the-post electoral law that the Communists had passed not long before, expecting (erroneously) that they would be the beneficiaries. Support for Croatian independence, however, was to be found in all parties - including the former Communists, renamed as the Social Democratic Party (SDP). It was, therefore, the expression of the aspirations of the vast majority of the people of Croatia. It should have been accepted as such and recognition given immediately to Croatian (and Slovene) independence. It was not (belated) recognition of this right by the international community that caused the violent break-up but attempts to hold the state together against the clear wishes of the majority of the population of Croatia and Slovenia. Non-recognition constitutes 'interfering in the internal affairs of a state' as much as recognition.

Nevertheless, although the right of Croatia to independence should have been supported, that does not mean that no criticisms should be made of the actions of the Croatian government, both at the time of independence and subsequently. Tuđman,

<sup>64</sup> Vesna Pusić: *Journal of Democracy*; 9.1; 1998; pp. 111-124. The untitled text is based upon a talk that she presented at the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., on 24 March 1997, available at [www.Dalmatia.net/croatia/politics/v-pusic.htm](http://www.Dalmatia.net/croatia/politics/v-pusic.htm).

like Milošević, is a former communist turned nationalist. Despite his nationalism and a view of the Tito era as one in which the Croatian people were oppressed, Tudjman exhibits much of the 'cult of personality' (down to the white military uniforms) that surrounded Tito, even if he prefers to see himself as a Croatian George Washington. As another dissident Croatian writer, Dubravka Ugrešić, puts it 'Tito has suddenly come back to life in the shape of the new Croatian President'.<sup>65</sup>

Tudjman is typical of the new rulers in Eastern Europe who came to power proclaiming democracy and national rights: in practice democracy is decidedly subordinate to the claims of nationhood. Although Tudjman never tires of insisting that the HDZ is broad enough to accommodate all 'legitimate' and 'genuine' interests within the country it is the HDZ itself that decides what is and what isn't 'legitimate' or 'genuine'. People and organisations who question the regime and its actions are labelled anti-Croatian, traitors, international spies, enemies of their country and its independence, and, perhaps the most serious crime of all, being guilty of 'Yugo-nostalgia'. The party is increasingly identified with the state. Nevertheless, the current regime in Croatia is authoritarian rather than totalitarian: it tolerates limited political pluralism, religious freedom, and a degree of social and economic pluralism. However the government retains strong control of virtually all media and has frequently tried to close down opposition voices.<sup>66</sup> The HDZ has also launched several attempts to seize control of the judiciary. These efforts have mostly succeeded.<sup>67</sup>

Tudjman certainly has authoritarian tendencies, perhaps even tendencies towards megalomania. He has recently reappointed his son as head of Croatia's Secret Services. He is obsessed with all symbols of the Croatian state: hence he is reputed to have insisted on the Croatian national football team wearing red and white checked shirts and ordered a leading football team to change its name from the 'too communist' *Dinamo Zagreb* to *Croatia Zagreb* - the English word

<sup>65</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić: *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*; (trans. Celia Hawkesworth); Phoenix; London; 1999; p. 51, n.1; p. 260. The subtitle is ironic: Ugrešić went into exile in 1993 after receiving numerous threats and being denounced as a 'witch' in the Croatian media. Her major crime is to refuse to accept the notion that Croats were oppressed as a nation in the Titoist era, arguing that many of those now claiming to have suffered persecution are guilty of inventing their past.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Mark Thompson (ed): *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*; Article XIX; London; 1994; pp. 174-75.

<sup>67</sup> For further information on the state of human rights in Croatia see: *Constitution Watch* Vol.6, No. 2/3, 1997 and Vol.6, No.4, 1997; New York University Law School and Central European University at [www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol6num4/constitutionwatch/croatia/html](http://www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol6num4/constitutionwatch/croatia/html). and the Annual Reports (1996 & 1997) of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights at [www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/970300hfa\\_cr\\_ctog.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/970300hfa_cr_ctog.html).

*Croatia* not Croatian *Hrvatska* - despite massive opposition from Dinamo's fans, many of whom were enthusiastic volunteers for the war with Serbia.<sup>68</sup> There has also been a campaign for linguistic purity, with the expunging of 'Serb' words from the Croatian language. Thus, when officials from Tudjman's HDZ party visited Istria they complained that a restaurant was using the Serb word for tomatoes! The insistence on linguistic purity has led to the removal from libraries of Serb writers such as Ivo Andrić and Branko Ćopić, along with other undesirables including Oscar Wilde, Jack London, Mark Twain and Victor Hugo.

This latter aspect signifies a trend that is perhaps more worrying than the authoritarianism of the HDZ, though clearly bound up with it: Tudjman's archaic, simple, but potent vision of the Croatian state. He has played down the exceptionally brutal nature of the *Nezavista Država Hrvatska* (NDH), the 'Independent State of Croatia' led by Ante Pavelić and the *Ustaše* during the Second World War. Although the NDH is criticised for excesses it is portrayed as a legitimate part of the Croatian nation's supposed thousand-year struggle for statehood. Symbols associated with the NDH have been restored; symbols that were hardly designed to allay the fears of the Serbs of Croatia, even if at times some of the criticisms of Tudjman on this score are not totally justified. For example it has often been claimed that the *šahvonica* (the red and white checkerboard emblem) was an *Ustaša* symbol. Certainly it was used by Pavelić but it also has a long history in Croatian heraldry, pre-dating the *Ustaše* by many centuries and was also the symbol of the Socialist Republic of Croatia until the 1950s. Tudjman, who is fascinated by medieval heraldry, can claim, with some justification, that the *šahvonica* is a historic Croatian symbol and that Serb allegations of his refounding the *Ustaša* state were malicious attempts to whip up fear in order to justify armed insurrection designed to prevent Croatian independence. He has no historical justification, however, for his adoption of the *Kuna* as Croatia's currency - the *Kuna* only existed in the NDH.

Although the Croatian constitution recognises a number of nationalities within the state of Croatia, being a Croat is increasingly defined by blood. Boasts by Tudjman that he is glad that his wife is not a Serb or a Jew but a Croat are hardly designed to make national minorities feel at home in Croatia, even though legally Serbs or Jews could be citizens of Croatia. In practice it has become more and more difficult for those who cannot show pure Croat blood flows in their veins to be accepted as citizens.

<sup>68</sup> On Tudjman's manipulation of football in Croatia see: Simon Kuper: 'Where Secret Agents Tail the Referee' in the *Observer*, (Sports Section); London; 15 August 1999; p. 7. Vesna Pusić: *Untitled*: p. 121.

The largely right-wing Croat émigré community has experienced no such obstacles. Moreover, the most extreme nationalist wing, often from western Hercegovina in Bosnia, has been able to exert considerable influence on the HDZ's policies: most clearly in the war in Bosnia and the defiance by sections of the Bosnian Croat leadership of the Dayton accords - particularly in Mostar where the HDZ leadership resists reintegration of the city. Croat émigrés are able to vote in elections in Croatia, even if they do not live in the country and therefore do not have to accept the consequences of their vote. They have, so far, voted overwhelmingly for the HDZ.

The war in Bosnia in particular, and the policies of the HDZ more generally, have had important repercussions inside Croatia. The HDZ has suffered several splits, including the loss of Stipe Mesić, the last ever President of Yugoslavia and one of the original key figures in the formation of the HDZ. It has also lost control of most of the major cities of Croatia, including Zagreb and, if the opposition is able to unite, may well be defeated in the general election due at the end of this year. However, the most consistent opposition to the HDZ has come from Istria, where the statue of the *Bird of Croatia*, erected in Pola at the request of President Tudjman, was mysteriously blown up.

## 7) The istrian alternative to croat nationalism

The HDZ has not been able to gain a major base in Istria. In the elections in which the HDZ first came to power the former communists won a majority in Fiume. In Pola on February 14, 1990 a regionalist party, the *Istarski Demokratski Sabor - Dieta Democratica Istriana* (Istrian Democratic Parliament, IDS-DDI) was founded: as of April this year it had 4,100 members. It is now the dominant party in the Istrian Assembly (with 35 out of 40 seats) and in power in all 42 towns as well as all the municipalities in Istria (5 of those in a coalition). In Rovigno, for example, the IDS-DDI holds 15 out of 24 council seats, the HDZ 3, the ex-Communists and Liberals 2 each with the remaining two held by the NEZ.<sup>69</sup> The seats for Istria in the Croatian Chamber of Counties and the Chamber of Deputies are also all held by the IDS-DDI. The IDS-DDI is primarily active in those parts of Istria within the territory of the Republic of Croatia, but also in those parts of the Istrian peninsula which are under the sovereignty of

<sup>69</sup> I have been unable to ascertain the nature of the NEZ. I assume it is a small local party since it doesn't figure among the large number of political parties found at [www.istrianet.org.html](http://www.istrianet.org.html).

Slovenia and Italy. This essentially internationalist orientation, based on the historic particularities of Istria, clearly marks it off from the narrow Croat nationalism of the HDZ. This is also reflected in its programme, which advocates the formation of a Euro-region of Istria as a permanent form of co-operation between the different parts of Istria in Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. Such co-operation is an alternative to the current disputes between Slovenia and Croatia about sovereignty over a few villages (currently in Croatia) and the dividing line between the states in the Adriatic, as well as reducing the appeal of irredentist currents in Italy. Support for cross border co-operation goes alongside advocacy of development of regional structures throughout Croatia. (IDS-DDI has already participated in a coalition in Dalmatia, where opposition to HDZ authoritarianism is also strong, reflected in the pages of the Spalato (Split) based satirical, journal *Feral Tribune*). While the IDS-DDI supports a free market it also advocates that the effects of the market should be limited by the instruments of a welfare state. Although the IDS-DDI has overwhelming support amongst the Italian community of Istria it is clear that it also has majority support amongst the region's Croat population. Indeed it would be totally impossible for a party solely based on the Italian community to win support.

One of the reasons for continued support from the Italian minority has been the willingness of the IDS-DDI to support national rights for minorities. This has brought it into conflict with the Tudjman government. For example, on March 30, 1994 the IDS-DDI dominated Regional Assembly adopted a Regional Statute which declared that 'in the Region the Croatian and Italian languages have parity' and attempted to develop a policy for bilingualism. The decision of the Regional Assembly was abrogated by the Constitutional Court of Croatia in the following February on the rather narrow, legalistic grounds that only individual towns, not the Regional Assembly, had the right to decide on the equality of languages. The motivations given by the Constitutional Court for abrogating the Regional Statute give the impression that although it pays formal lip service to the equality of languages (and scripts) this is a huge concession on the part of the Croatian state in which 'real' Croats speak Croatian and write in the Latin script.<sup>70</sup> The *Unione Italiana*, which supports the IDS-DDI, was fined 9.7 million *Kune* for allegedly having illegally imported a rotary printing press, although the press had been a gift from the Italian government, imported with the agreement of the government of Croatia

<sup>70</sup> *Abrogazione Degli Articoli dello Statuto della Regione Istria* at [www.istrianet.org.html](http://www.istrianet.org.html).



The willingness of the IDS-DDI to champion national rights is a refreshing change in a region where ethnic nationalism has become such a dominant force. The attempt to develop unity across national frontiers and between different ethnic groups offers a more realistic attempt to resolving the complex national problems of this region. Mixed marriages, the dispersal of members of the same national or ethnic group throughout the region etc. make any solution on the basis of nationality totally impractical. Or rather, attempts to do so carry enormous dangers. As Vernon Bogdanov points out, 'nationalism, which was previously seen as a liberal force has now become a radical one, the most powerful radical force in Europe in the twentieth century'.<sup>71</sup> One could add that in the past nationalist movements largely aimed at gaining control over their own economy: in eastern Europe today they aim at attracting McDonalds! Late twentieth century nationalism is not only radical, it is also extremely intolerant: perhaps nowhere more so than in the states emerging from the wreckage of former Yugoslavia. Such intolerance, poses a number of problems:

- 1) If political cleavages are based on fundamental loyalties the ethnic minorities will be a permanent political minority, permanently out of power.
- 2) Where a minority in one country looks to a majority in another, that majority may regard itself as responsible for its brothers and sisters and make political claims on the country in which they live.<sup>72</sup>

If we are to avoid the twin dangers of oppression of national minorities and irredentism we must recognise that the question can only be solved by power sharing between countries, as well as within them.<sup>73</sup> That appears to be recognised by the Istrian autonomy movement.

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<sup>71</sup> Vernon Bogdanov: 'Overcoming the Twentieth Century: Democracy and Nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe' in *The Political Quarterly*; Vol. 66, No.1; 1995; pp. 85-86.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*: p. 87.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*: pp. 94-95.

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