
Forgotten exiles?

The Julian-Dalmatian exiles between political support and marginalisation

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Introduction

Between 1943 and 1956, the exodus of 250,000¹ individuals, mostly of Italian origin, profoundly impacted post-war Italy's social, economic and political fabric, with significant and sometimes unexpected repercussions up to current times. Despite having seemingly been “forgotten” for decades until the 1990s, the events of the exodus still appear to influence internal politics and international relations.

The questions guiding this brief research are why the issues related to the Julian-Dalmatian refugees in Italy were dismissed after having been the focus of political efforts for a decade, and why a socio-political recognition of the exodus was provided by national authorities only in recent times. With that in mind, the dynamics of the reception and integration of the Julian-Dalmatian exiles are analysed in the first section, while the reasons and consequences of the marginalisation of the debate around the exodus are retraced in the second part, with particular attention to the role played by national politics and international relations.

Refugees

The reception of the Julian-Dalmatian exiles from the territories annexed or controlled by Yugoslavia proved to be all but a linear process. Between 1943 and 1945, the first waves were assisted by the postwar Assistance Ministry, similarly to military repatriates, and experienced highly precarious conditions (Oliva, 2005). Only in 1946 specific measures started being taken by De Gasperi's centrist government, which, under the pressures of the several exiles' organizations born in the previous years, established the *Office for the Venezia Giulia* in order to ensure constant coordination and assistance to the newly arrived (Oliva, 2005). Nevertheless, the most relevant and effective organization was the *Opera per l'assistenza ai profughi giuliani e dalmati* (known as *Opera Profughi*), active since February 1947, under the honorary presidency of De Gasperi himself (Pupo, 2019). Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) demonstrated an explicit will to materially support the exiles and their organizations. However, it would be wrong to conceive that the government had somehow favoured the exodus as an instrument to discredit Tito's Communist regime, as classic Yugoslav historiography sustained (Pupo, 2019). On the contrary, De Gasperi adopted a cautious policy in trying both to convince Italians to remain in Trieste's zone B, as to benefit from their presence in subsequent territorial arrangements, and not to shake further what

¹ This number is based on the evaluations made by Colella, who estimates that the 201,000 verified refugees by the *Opera Profughi* should have constituted approximately 80% of the total number of exiles, that is supposed to be about 250,000 (Colella, 1958). Yet, even if for current historiography's calculations numbers between 250,000 and 280,000 seem sufficiently plausible, it is necessary to remember that all quantifications are largely approximated and depend on a variety of discriminating factors (Pupo, 2019).

was an internal collapsing economy (Pupo, 2019). However, especially after the increasing violence in zone B in 1950² and the *London Memorandum* of 1954, the flow of people proved uncontainable.

Some thousand exiles managed to continue their trip abroad in search of fortune, especially to the United States and Australia (Oliva, 2005), but most of them were accommodated as refugees and distributed in hundreds of reception camps (Campi di Raccolta Profughi, CRP) across the Italian territory. Also, a considerable number of approximately 60,000 exiles settled in Trieste's zone A (Capano, 2013) after winning Anglo-American concerns about the threat of creating pockets of frustration and irredentism in the area. In fact, in the 1950s, the provisions aimed at providing emergency housing to the exiles in the peripheries of Trieste and the coastal lands between Barcola and Duino played a strategic role in compensating for the presence of Slavic and communist-oriented inhabitants (Pupo, 2019). However, even if Trieste might have been considered the centre of the "Italianità Adriatica" and the "natural" haven for the exiles due to its strong cultural, linguistic and even economic connections with Istria, the integration process was frequently marked by intolerance and prejudice. That was especially true for less qualified workers, constituting the largest share of exiles, who struggled to obtain low-paid jobs along with the locals in the city's stagnating economy, where 23,000 individuals were unemployed out of a population of 100,000 in 1947 (Nemec, 2015).

In the years that followed, many legislative acts were adopted that went much further than mere emergency provisions. Starting from 1952, the foundations of entire autonomous villages for the Julian communities were implemented, such as the well-known Fertilia and the Julian-Dalmatian quarter in Rome (Pertot, 2020) in order to pursue the exiles' integration without disrupting their communities. Moreover, the *Ente Nazionale per le Tre Venezie* promoted settlement projects in areas with similar climate and environmental conditions to the lands of origin to expressly benefit fishermen and farmers (Nemec, 2015), as the Villaggio del Pescatore near Duino. The public fundings and private donations to the *Opera Profughi* proved crucial in order to anticipate the expenses to the many exiles who could not initially afford to pay for the accommodation (Pertot, 2020), although in some cases the most indigent refugees lived in the camps for more than ten years, and therefore the last CRP closed in 1963 (Pupo, 2019).

The experiences in the CRPs and the following social integration were not homogeneous processes, as they varied sharply according to the contingencies: as observed by Oliva, the communities most damaged by unemployment and poverty considered the exiles as competitors for the scarce resources (Oliva, 2005). Also, political diffidence often generated contrasts, by means of stigmatising the newly arrived as fascist-sympathisers or straight fascists (Audenino, 2016), deserters of the socialist values of Tito's Yugoslavia. These allegations, often coming from the socialist electorate, were emphasised by the ambiguous positions of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which, not willing to contrast Tito's policies, was incapable of elaborating a reasonable discourse on the exodus except for attacking the administrations for the attempt of "denationalise" the Slovenian communities in the nearby of Trieste with the newly established exiles' settlements³ (Columni *et al.*, 1980). Only after the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948 could the PCI fully liberate itself by the equation of exiles=fascists, as Tito lost Stalin's blessing (Columni *et al.*, 1980). Furthermore, Italian authorities and especially the Military Information Service were particularly concerned about potential Tito's infiltrators among the exiles, and in 1949 asked but did not obtain a total closure of the Easter border to refugees (Sanfilippo, 2016). This generalised atmosphere of

² In the occasion of local elections, with which the residents could express their preference for the annexation of zone B to Yugoslavia (Pupo, 2019).

³ This happened despite it was soon clear to wide fringes of the PCI that the exiles could not be considered as a uniform mass of fascists, also due to the evidence of wide proletarian crowds leaving Yugoslavia (Pupo, 2019); even more noticeable, the party never publicly confronted its past ambiguous attitude towards the exiles later, *de facto* removing it from the party's memory (Columni *et al.*, 1980).

scepticism towards the exiles together with the often promiscuous and appalling circumstances of the camps, which in most cases were old military barracks and ex concentration camps, made the living conditions extremely arduous and enhanced an underlying resentment of the refugees towards the state, which had provided insufficient attention to their sufferings (Audenino, 2016). The same phenomena contributed to strengthen the exiles' organisations in the late 1950s, some of which of irredentist nature, whose political activism found its epicentre in Trieste (Capano, 2013). Moreover, the exiles' perception of having been "forgotten" increased after the signing of the *London Memorandum of Understanding* which marked the beginning of a thriving political and economic partnership with Yugoslavia, and grew further with the ratification of the Treaty of Osimo, which, by officially acknowledging Yugoslav claims over zone B (L. 77/1973), sank any remaining hope of return to the abandoned lands.

Betrayal and reconciliation

The political tensions of the Cold war and the Trieste's question intertwined with the exodus in various ways. The isolation of Yugoslavia from the Soviet bloc after 1948 and the need to encourage its slow economic growth made the Western countries the only plausible economic partners, with the predominance of the United States as financial sponsors (Bucarelli, 2008). Moreover, Italy at the time was the second-largest trading partner for Yugoslavia and the diplomatic bridge with the European Economic Community (EEC) (Bucarelli *et al.*, 2016). The twist of the international order had consequences on the relations with Italy, which, after years of profound scepticism, opened to Tito for agreeing over a settlement for the Trieste's question. The negotiations resulted in the *London Memorandum of Understanding* in October 1954, after which the centrality of the Eastern border that had consumed both sides (and the Anglo American administration) underwent a sharp downsizing in internal and international politics (Pupo, 2019). Indeed, as the borders of the Cold war moved further East and the international community started losing interest in Trieste, it was a priority for both Italy and Yugoslavia to establish an *entente* that could allow them to concentrate their foreign policy's efforts elsewhere while counting on friendly bilateral relations (Pupo, 2013). In the years that followed, the DC and the leftist parties converged on the same position over the matter, provoking dissatisfaction in Istrian and Dalmatian communities, and especially in Trieste, where exiles' associationism concentrated.

According to a 1961 census, the exiles in Trieste were 25% of its entire population (Nemec, 2015), thus constituting a potential political mass. The main four exiles' organisations, Lega Nazionale (LN), Unione degli Istriani, Associazione Nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia (ANVGD) and Associazione Nazionale Italia Irredenta (ANII) found their political values reflected in the DC, whose local representatives had played a key role in mediating between the government and the organisations in the years of the Anglo-American administration (Capano, 2013). However, after the signing of the 1954 Memorandum, serious divergences started, primarily because of the temporary nature of the accord, which did not provide a definitive territorial settlement for zone B, thus leaving ambiguously unresolved the question of territorial sovereignty (Capano, 2013). The ANVGD and ANII's activism had a clear irredentist mould and explicitly promoted the return of zone B under Italian rule, but all the exiles' organizations were perceived as an obstacle⁴ to eradicate by Yugoslav authorities (Capano, 2013). In any case, the governmental support to the organizations started fading in the late 50s, and, following Moro's *Ostpolitik*, which opened to a closer collaboration with the left, the initially generous fundings started becoming scattered and less consistent, accentuating internal

⁴ In Yugoslav authorities' words: a "pain in the heel", which threatened to denationalise the Slavic communities in the Trieste's area (Capano, 2013)

divisions and factionalism that further weakened the organisation's political voice (Capano, 2013). Therefore, the relations between exiles' organisations and DC continued to deteriorate, whereas after the 1968 events of the Prague Spring the partnership with Yugoslavia, by then a crucial barrier to the Soviet expansion, invigorated more and more (Capano, 2013). Thus, the claims of the exiles to have their sufferings recognised and obtain compensation for the lost properties in Istria and Dalmatia remained unheard outside the local context of Trieste. Even historical research on the exodus and the tragic events linked to the "foibe" witnessed a cessation between the 1960s and the late 1980s (Pupo, 2016) to not touch upon unresolved matters that would have been perceived as a provocation by the Yugoslav counterpart.

However, silencing the exodus and "normalising" the Eastern border proved not to be an effective strategy. Despite the success in having removed the matter from the national mediatic spotlight and public opinion, the path of the DC towards Osimo delineated an unbridgeable fracture with the exiles and vast parts of Trieste's electorate, which in 1977 moved its support to the independent Lista per Trieste (D'Amelio, 2013). It stands to reason that the DC underestimated local protests and, most of all, the dissatisfaction of the exiles for the governmental indifference towards their grief, which proved to be still stinging. At a parliamentary level, all parties, including the PCI, supported the ratification of the Treaty, and the only ones protesting against the "betrayal" of Osimo were the exponents of the far-right Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), who opposed nationalist claims of "Italianness" in zone B and condemned the *détente* with Yugoslavia as a cynical move (D'Amelio, 2013). Even worse, the Treaty not only did recognise Yugoslav sovereignty over zone B as legitimate, but also promised unrealistic economic reparations for the lost properties, that indeed are yet to be paid⁵ (Bucarelli et al., 2016).

The public discussion and historical research over the exodus and the tragic events of the Eastern border opened again in the 1990s, within a radically changed international context. The fall of the iron curtain and later the dramatic disgregation of Yugoslavia paved the way for a series of local and bilateral initiatives⁶ that made it possible to open the debate again and raise awareness on the subject at a national and international level (Pupo, 2016). Nonetheless, the issue of the lost properties in the ex-zone B remained, and the Italian requests of restitution or, wherever possible, of a right of preemption, was hindered by the Slovenian and Croatian governments' fear of a "re-colonisation" attempt (Bucarelli, 2008). Remarkably, the lack of compliance of the Slovenian real estate market to the EU law, which forbade Italians to reacquire their properties, prevented European-Slovenian preparatory negotiations for entering the Union from taking place in 1994 due to Berlusconi's government veto (Bucarelli, 2008).

Indeed, until the establishment of Remembrance Day in 2004 in the date of February 10 (L. 92/2004), the events of the exodus was intentionally removed by the political and, more broadly, public scope, with the exception of some rather nationalist far-right political fringes which have tried to take advantage of the existing fractures while ideologically manipulating the narrative of the most dramatic events of the history of the Eastern border⁷. Also, despite the irreconcilable memories of the different international actors, significant steps forward have been made at the international level to acknowledge the struggle of the Italians of the Eastern border, aided by the European Union's

⁵ It is calculated that nowadays the reparation due by Croatia amounts to 35,369,233.00 dollars, but, as observed by Dukovski, the Italian government has not provided a bank account yet to make the execution of the payment possible (Bucarelli *et al.*, 2016).

⁶ Such as the Slovenian-Italian bilateral commission to analyse the events related to the "foibe", which proved successful (differently from the Croatian-Italian one, whose project sank soon after its beginning in 1993) (Pupo, 2016).

⁷ The very circumstances in which the Remembrance Day was proposed and chosen brought the spectre of nationalism intended as antagonism towards the ex-Yugoslav regime (Pupo, 2016).

expansion in the Balkans⁸. Up to now, the most remarkable and symbolic international recognition has been the recent visit of the Italian and Slovenian Presidents of the Republic to the memorials in Basovizza in July 2020, paying homage hand in hand to the respective memories of the tragedies that their borderlands have suffered in the past century⁹.

Conclusion

It is defensible that the moral and financial recognition that the Julian-Dalmatian exiles expected after the Second World War has been delayed and only partially obtained. After the initial broad support to the exiles, the Italian government took the path of dismissal, sacrificing the claims of the Julian-Dalmatian refugees, especially in Trieste, due to the delicate circumstances of the Cold war equilibrium. The DC's choices had significant repercussions on the exiles' communities, whose frustration was vehemently expressed by the organisations such as the Unione degli Istriani, eventually determining a guard change in Trieste's administration after years of total loyalty. Only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of relevance of Yugoslavia as a buffer state could it be conceived to confront that chapter of national history publicly. More recently, the exiles have benefitted from the institutional (symbolic and material) recognition of their struggles following the establishment of Remembrance Day in 2004. Indeed, despite the attempted appropriation of the commemoration by the Italian right, it appeared to be necessary to coin a provision to compensate for decades of silence. As far as international relations are concerned, much remains to do, not to unify the respective memories, but in order to integrate them out of ideological frames. In that spirit, more successful academic and cooperative projects such as the bilateral commissions inaugurated in 1993 can arise, providing a valid aid to create a more complete understanding of such a phenomenon.

⁸It is relevant to keep in mind that Slovenia entered the European Union in 2004 and Croatia in 2013.

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https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/07/13/news/mattarella_visita_storica_a_triESTE_visita_alla_foiba_di_basovizza_con_il_presidente_sloveno_pahor-261801270/ (accessed 02/05/2021)

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