

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

In a League of their Own:

The Lega Nord of Northern Italy

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

BOLOGNA, Italy -- They stormed out of the mountains, bent on sacking Rome. Some wore heavy knit sweaters and flannel shirts, others blue suits and striped ties. All had a small emblem on their lapels or collars -- a crusader thrusting his sword into the air. Who were these odd Knights of the North?

Once a separatist party popular only in the Italian province of Lombardy, the *Lega Nord*, or "Northern League," has swept elections from the Dolomites to the Po River and is now the country's largest single political party. Like other former fringe movements, it has benefitted from a corruption scandal that has destroyed the parties, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, that dominated postwar Italian politics. The sheer scale of the scandal, known as *tangentopoli*, has made extremists such as the League more palatable. More and more northerners now endorse the League's belief that Italy's centralized state had made corruption on such a scale possible. That state, says the League, must be either turned into a federation or destroyed if honest Italian businesses are ever to flourish.

A spirit of rugged valor gives the League its populist edge and aggressive energy. Both were on display at a congress the League held in February to prepare for national elections at the end of March. The ragtag assembly transformed a faceless concrete auditorium on Bologna's Stalingrad Street

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into a medieval hall, complete with heraldic shields of northern cities. When a well-known entrepreneur was elected to the League's presiding council, delegates cheered him, howling his first name as if he were a football player. And when Bologna's communist mayor tried to persuade the invaders that his city showed socialism's achievements, the burly delegates howled "Buffoono!" and climbed down threateningly towards the stage. The mayor broke off his speech and hurried out.

The League, one could see, sprinkles yuppies in among its paleo-populists. All weekend the hall buzzed with sound of mobile phones ringing as young men in blue suits and gold-rimmed glasses conducted business from afar. Every delegate had his own market-led ideas for his region, be it to turn the port of Trieste into a free-trade zone or to cut off government subsidies to Turin's mammoth Fiat plant. Most ideas focussed on getting the central government out of the economy. "In a centralist state," party organizer Bruno Alessandro said, "the regions give money to Rome, which decides where it will go. A lot disappears along the way."

Since League members, yuppie and yobbo alike, link decentralization with honest government, they oppose all centralist parties, left and right. Their faith in the free market makes them obvious foes of the former Italian Communist Party, now called the Party of the Democratic Left, or PDS. But they oppose the neofascist Italian Social Movement, or MSI, with equal fervor. The MSI, League members believe, is dedicated to maintaining a strong central state with all its bureaucratic trappings. "They are necessarily opponents of federalism," Marco Formentini, League member and mayor of Milan, said.

A party of free-marketeers suspicious of a corrupt central government and the political parties that had dominated it throughout the Cold War -- this all sounds rather familiar. Is Italy going through the same convulsions that that had wracked Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia? The comparison becomes even more compelling when one looks at a map of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The areas in which the Northern League has done best -- Lombardy and the Veneto -- are those that were under Habsburg rule. Would they, like the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia, decide that culture, economics and geography oriented them towards a multinational Central Europe? And away from cousins of language but not ethics?

History does have a role to play in the League, most explicitly among those,

such as the Venetians, who remember their province's former glory. The others, disillusioned with the effect of Rome's mismanagement today, do not recall the splendor of the Habsburgs with nostalgia. But they do play up the principle of that empire -- that northern Italians have more in common with their neighbors in other states than with their cousins in the south.

So will Italy break-up, as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia did? The League's electoral success within the Italian state has made it reluctant to give up the levers it now controls. Heading into the March elections, the League planned to campaign nationwide in an anti-communist alliance. If brought into government, League members said, the party would rewrite the constitution to create a federation of three republics -- northern, central and southern. That, plus free-market economics, would give the north all the freedom it sought.

But what if the new moderation did not work and a strong leftist alliance won Rome? Secession, League members said, and the creation of "The Italian Republic of the North."

THE HOME FRONT: Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont and Trieste

The Northern League dominates politics north of the Po River. In the province of Lombardy and especially in its capital city, Milan, the League is invincible, holding the mayor's office and 76 seats in parliament. It is almost as strong just to the east, in the Veneto, a province surrounding Venice; there it has 27 parliamentarians. To the west, in Piedmont, it is less powerful but growing, as corruption scandals engulf the families that control the province's major industries. In the north's three autonomous regions, the irredentism of the neofascists has made the League seem nice and moderate.

Ironically, the party that threatens to divide Italy dominates the region in which the unification of Italy began. Between 1859 and 1870, the Kingdom of Sardinia, based in Piedmont, formed the first modern Italian nation-state. The decisive moments were two



Northern provinces of modern Italy

wars against the Habsburg Empire that brought Lombardy and the Veneto into the fold, decisive because both campaigns convinced nationalists in the other fiefdoms, such as Parma and Naples, that Piedmont would indeed be the rock on which the new state would be built. Later, it was the promise of capturing the last Italian territories from the Habsburgs -- the northern Veneto and the east coast of the Adriatic -- that convinced the Italian government to switch sides during World War I.

So the League has schizophrenic relationship to the region's past. On the one hand, the Lombards and Venetians openly question whether the Italian nation-state is a good idea. In Milan, members voice the same suspicions with which the city's nobility, as sketched in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, greeted Italian nationalists. Delegates from the Veneto lament the loss of Venice's 1,000-year-old identity as a free-trading city-state. But in Piedmont, once the heart of the unified Italy, the League has no purchase on the historical imagination; there it depends on disgust with contemporary corruption that, its members say, the centralized state has allowed. And in Trieste, a city filled with Italians driven from Yugoslavia after the Second World War, League members dismiss the neofascists' obsession with reclaiming historic lands. They promise instead to restore the port's prosperity by updating its Austro-Hungarian role -- a door to eastern Europe.

Lega Lombarda: the core

The Northern League began in Milan in 1982 as "the Lombard League," a protest movement dedicated to winning autonomy for the province of Lombardy. Its founder, the charismatic mathematician Umberto Bossi, called for citizens of the region to refuse to pay taxes until the province was allowed control of its own schools, hospitals and police forces. "We asked that all tax revenues be administered by the region," party activist and founding member Christian Monti said, "because the north was the richest region in Italy. We said that it wasn't fair that all the wealth we produced here was redistributed to the south and center."

It's a strange switch that the League should begin in Milan, with this issue, to tear at the fabric of united Italy. It was the high taxation of the Habsburg Empire that eventually persuaded the conservative Milanese businessmen to support the new pan-Italian state.

The Duchy of Milan had fallen under Habsburg rule in 1713, a minor spoil of the War of the Spanish Succession. Vienna lost control of Lombardy to

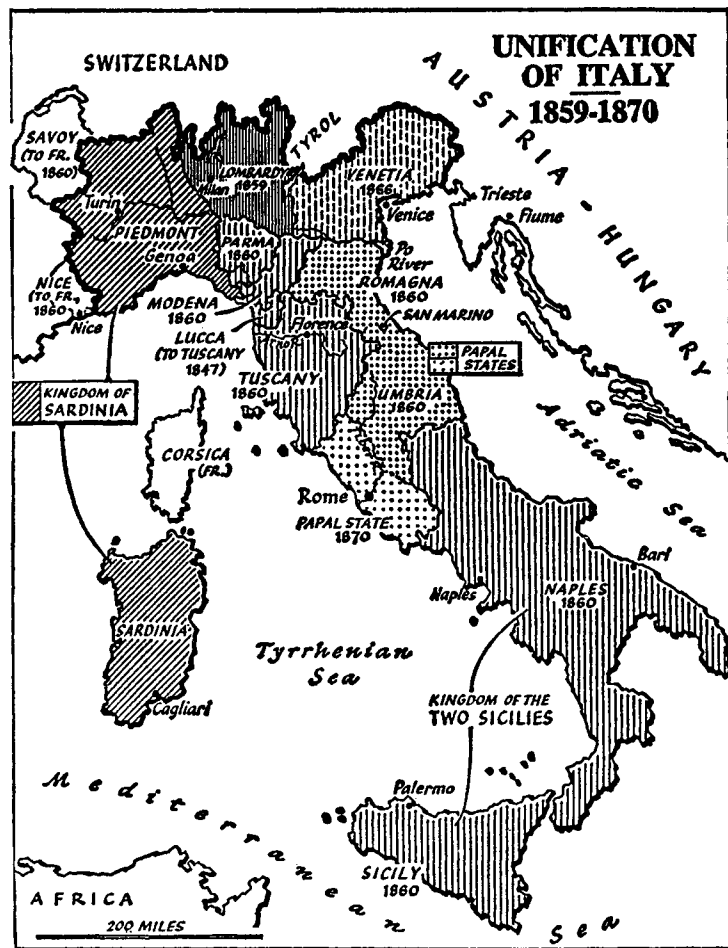
Napoleon for twenty years but recaptured it after Waterloo. Charles Albert, king of Sardinia and therefore ruler of Piedmont, began to draw smaller Italian states into his orbit shortly before 1848. But the Milanese were cautious; the businessmen in particular hoped for a peaceful settlement with Vienna. Joseph Mazzini, the Italian nationalist, was only able to rouse Lombardy once the Habsburgs were losing to revolutionaries in Hungary.

When the other nationalist causes in the empire stalled, the Habsburgs were able to turn their full attention to Lombardy, where the peasants, uninterested in Mazzini's political reforms, were unwilling to put up much resistance. When the Milanese merchant class grew suspicious of Piedmont's territorial ambitions, the revolution collapsed. On July 23, the Habsburg general Joseph Radetsky drove Piedmont troops from Milan. Charles Albert's dream of building a "Kingdom of Northern Italy" died in part due to Milanese indifference.

When Piedmont struck again, in 1859, it called all of the Italian states to arms. Piedmont's chief minister, di Cavour, enlisted support from as far south as Naples. The new, larger alliance proved too much for the slow-moving Habsburgs; they ceded Lombardy. The Milanese, for their part, merely hoped for lower taxes -- a hope that was to be quickly dashed.

Today the Milanese part of the Northern League still rails against high central taxation. But unlike in the early 1980s, it seems happy with the Italian state. "Now we want federalism and not autonomy," Monti said. "We thought about secession until a few years ago, but now we don't have that in our program. We want a federal union."

The moderation in Milan must in part be due to its success. The "Northern



League," which the Lombard League created in 1991 to run in elections outside of Lombardy, is now the master of the north. So the Milanese can look forward to winning practical gains through the state they first sought to destroy. And as the heaviest puncher within the broader northern alliance, Lombardy will dominate a republic within the federation that the Northern League now hopes to forge.

Rather than raise their own flag within Italy, the Milanese hope to use Italian institutions to lead a pan-European revolt of the regions. The Milan-based League, for example, has great hopes for the European Union, Monti said. The League has already contacted autonomous movements in Corsica, Belgium, Savoy, Breton, Sardinia, Catalan and the Südtirol and plans to organize their representatives in the European parliament. The goal -- to increase the power of the new EU Chamber of the Regions, created by the Maastricht Treaty.

"Our idea is written in the Maastricht treaty, because it has always been one of the aims of the EU to give more importance to the regions," Monti said. "If you read the treaty, you can see there is the potential to overcome the nation-states."

One could therefore say that, having cautiously left one multinational state, the Habsburg Empire, the Milanese, ever careful with their tax dollars, are pushing for the creation of a new one. What a sad irony it would be if the EU proved no more thrifty with Lombardy's earnings than either Rome or Vienna had been.

Cultural Revival: the Lega Nord of the Veneto

Just east of Lombardy lies the administrative district of the Veneto. Stretching from the southern edge of the Dolomite mountains to the Po River and the Adriatic Sea, it is the remains of the ancient Venetian Republic, a seapower for a thousand years. Within its boundaries lie cities such as Verona and Vicenza and, of course, Venice.

In the seventeenth century the Venetian Republic, like its ally Austria, expanded south at the expense of the retreating Ottomans. In 1699 the Treaty of Karlowitz gave the republic the Istrian peninsula, part of the Dalmatian coast, and the islands in between. There Venice built trading cities, such as Pola, Zara and Dubrovnik, to serve as steps down to Byzantium.

But Venice itself then fell into Habsburgs hands, where it melted. The republic lost its independence to Napoleon in 1798; when he in turn was defeated in 1815, the Habsburgs took both the mainland territories, the "Veneto," and the coastal possessions. The republic was dismembered within the empire, divided into separate administrative districts.

As Austria collapsed, most Venetian lands slipped, bit by bit, under the jurisdiction of united Italy. In 1866, Franz Josef, fearing war with Prussia, promised the mainland territory, the "Veneto," to France in exchange for her neutrality. After the war, Franz Josef honored his promise; Napoleon in turn gave the lands to the new Italian state. The coastal lands remained in Austrian hands until 1918, when they were divided between Italy and the newly-formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Here I must declare an interest. The Veneto might be my favorite corner of the earth. As a high school student I sang Monteverdi madrigals over the composer's grave in Venice. Over the past ten years, thanks to the hospitality of the Sartori family and its friends, I have skied as the setting sun turned Mount Civetta pink, attended Easter services in a village church above Santa Fosca and wandered around Vicenza, well past midnight, picking out Palladio's facades.

Although it is always faster to change trains at Mestre, the industrial park outside old Venice, I always miss the quicker connection and ride on. Venice, like Prague and Stockholm, holds in stone and peeling pastel paint my idea of a decent life. Unlike the cities I hate -- Paris, Berlin, Washington -- Venice has no pompous main thoroughfare along which one either wanders forlornly or marches with the triumphant mass. You have to get to know every alley and "Campio" if you are to find your way; in exchange, the churches you stumble upon let you up close to their skins of salty stone. If you interrupt a soccer game, you are welcome just to kick the ball back with a laugh and a wave.

So when the League's delegates from the Veneto dropped the economics early and heatedly argued that Italy's centralized state had steamrolled the region's identity, I couldn't help nodding quietly in approval. Their complaints of the facelessness of a central government sounded to me a lot like anti-communism of my hero, Czech president Vaclav Havel.

League president, the Venetian Franco Rochetta, took me by arm in between his meetings and led me off on a long stroll around the concrete

hall to look for a quiet corner. Up and down the bland, broad staircases, over the thin red carpet of landing after landing, each more awash in amplified sound than the last. When we finally found a quiet alcove, Rochetta let loose with a tirade of complaints, as if the frustrations of the past ten minutes had reminded him too much of what he thought Venice had endured for 113 years.

"The Fascist system never ended," he said. "The system that was trying scientifically to control every corner of the state, that project that almost reached its aim in Mussolini's time, was realized by the heirs of fascism -- the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Communists."

And to Rochetta, fascism shared some traits -- the nationalist agenda, the state-driven fury towards modernization -- that Piedmont had inflicted on other parts of contemporary Italy when it "bought or put into slavery various Italian peoples."

Modern Italy, Rochetta said, was a collection of several natural nations -- the Sicilians, the Venetians -- that had been misgoverned since the war by three states within it -- the three major parties. "Each one produced its own economic policy, each one its own foreign policy. We have never had a united foreign policy."

Was the solution now to break the Italian state into smaller, coherent nations? I wanted to ask. I didn't have the chance. Rochetta was called back to the platform to accept his reelection as League president. I was all the sorrier to see him go when I thought back on an earlier encounter with a member of parliament from the Veneto, one whose thoughts were not so much in rebellion against fascism as a local variant.

When Prof. Giovanni Meo Lilio first complained that the Italian state was trying to "flatten and unify everything, to suppress local identities," I was sympathetic, especially since I had heard the same complaint from my friends in the Veneto. The Venetian dialect, he said, was being crushed by state television.

"Our glorious language (he did not say dialect), the language of the great writer, Goldini, which he distributed and made famous all over the world -- even today this language is like a glue of the identity of the Venetian people, who for the most part speak this language, not only in the family, but in public life."

So far, so good. I remembered sitting under Goldoni's portrait on Christmas Eve in a cafe on Saint Marco Square and receiving a quick tongue-lashing from a local friend for not knowing any of the writer's plays.

And Venice, Lilio said, still clung dearly to traditions far older than the Italian state. Every first weekend in September, the city holds a crew regatta in memory of an annual rowboat ride the Venetian Doge used to take. The Doge would ride out into the harbor and throw in a ring, a reminder of the city's eternal union with the sea.

Lilio was a fount of such examples; adoring the Veneto as much as I do, I couldn't write them down fast enough. At some point, however, Lilio switched from the admiration I share, of local ties, to an insularity I despise. Suddenly, it was no longer certain festivals, it was "culture," no longer words from the street but statistics from the census. Suddenly, Lilio was no longer a foe of centralizers but just another bigot eager to bring their tools into his provincial paws. Now the problem was not that the state invaded life but that he did not have enough of a grip on its levers.

Was the problem that state television squashed local private initiatives? No, that it did not give the Venetian language equal time. That the state kept Venice from trading freely with its neighbors? No; rather that it allowed the "biological, social and human pollution of people coming from the south, who come from a different tradition from the local tradition and get everything all mixed up."

Half of Venice's charm comes from the days when its trade with the Ottomans "polluted" it with architectural oddities, such as Byzantine windows, days when it was an open port and far more "biologically polluted" than it is today. Lilio's transformation of genuine culture into the word "culture" on a political manifesto was something I had seen too often further east. One more politician with an appreciation of how a central bureaucracy had destroyed local ways but who could not resist the temptation to bring the state in on his side. The Havels of this world are just too rare.

Trieste and Piedmont: less history, please

Memories in Trieste have less to do with lands lost to a united Italy than lands, such as Istria and some cities on the Dalmatian coast, that Italy lost. These territories, remember, were Venetian from 1699 until the Habsburgs

the borders. "We have struggled for 50 years," he said, "and now that we are stronger we will renegotiate everything, borders included. We want the territories we had before the war." If necessary, the party would cooperate with the Serbs, Menia said, pointing out that his party's president had already visited Belgrade. "We know that our own interests and the interests of the Serbs can fit together."

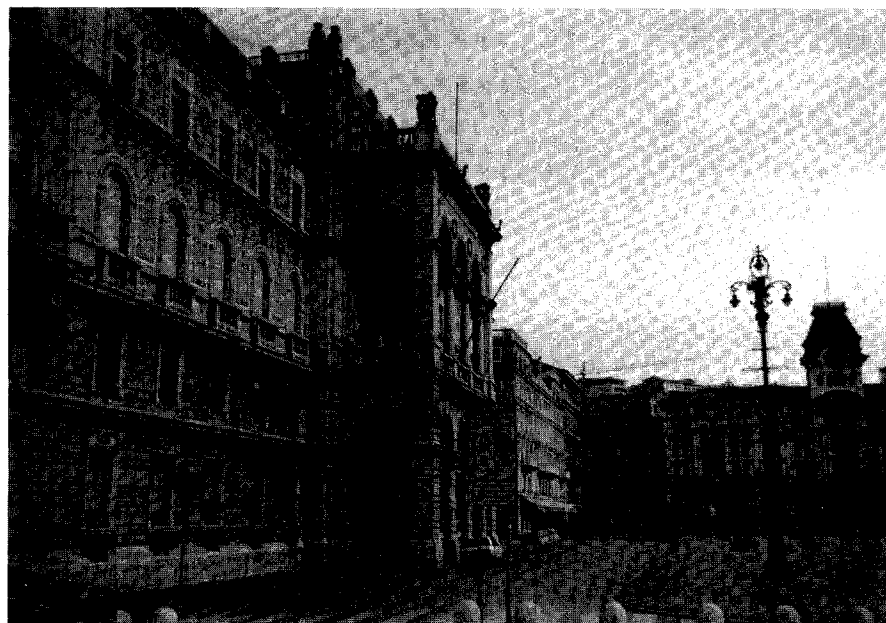
With that sort of memory in the air, the League in Trieste concentrates on the future. "They (the MSI) want to put our Italian flag on Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia again. I think that's a nineteenth century way to think," Fabrizio Belloni, head of the League's office in Trieste at the time of my visit, said. "If I were a soldier and I got back Istria for Italy there would not be one more ship in our gulf."

Instead, Belloni pointed to the future Trieste could have if it opened up to the east, as a free trade zone, rather than bickered with ex-communist countries about borders. "We want to give the city the legal status, financial power, economic power, and technology to be what history and geography made of Trieste -- an open gate between northern Italy and the Eastern peoples now freed from Communist slavery."

The only historical period to which Belloni harkened back was Trieste's period as an Austro-Hungarian port. "We feel that we are a component of

Mitteleuropa," he said. "Better Austria than the (discredited Italian) Christian Democrats, that's for sure."

And Belloni had no time for the politics of paranoia about the use of Slovene or Italian on television stations and road signs -- issues which the neofascists had played up. "I have a postcard of Trieste from just before the end of the Habsburg Empire," he



Trieste's Habsburg-era Customs House

said. "On the back, the word 'sender' appears in eight different languages."

Belloni leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Now *that* is civility."

Similarly, the League's agenda in Piedmont, the land around which the Italian state was first built, has little to do with historic grievances, more to do with contemporary complaints.

Piedmont deputies of the Northern League said that industrialists based in their capital, Turin, have cut dubious deals with Roman authorities at the province's expense. In particular, they condemned the Agnelli family's "fuedal" control of the Fiat auto works, maintained, they said, by heavy taxes levied on Turin's smaller businesses.

Stefano Aimone Prina, a League deputy from Turin, said the Agnelli family had bought protection from the Italian state. Fiat had, for example, purchased Alfa Romeo from the government in the early 1980s, despite a better bid from Ford. "Today, Fiat has only paid 30 percent of the price of Alfa Romeo," Prina complained. "We are against these deals, because they all work against smaller industry, which ends up paying the costs of the state."

The League's free-market approach was anathema to Italy's largest companies, Prina said. "We represent the little and medium industries and not the large industries that depend on control of the trade unions, contacts with the Ministry of Industry. For Fiat, Olivetti, we represent a break from the old way of doing things."

Italy's corruption scandals had discredited two of the political parties -- the Christian Democrats and the Socialists -- behind the corporatist corruption. But Prina said the former communists had been just as much a part of *tangentopoli*. Through their control of trade unions and special "cooperative rosse," or "red collectives," the former communists had received their share of kickbacks, especially in the construction industry.

League members said their challenge in Piedmont was to keep the former communists, now the "Party of the Democratic Left" (PDS), from merely taking over the corrupt structures intact. They worried that if the PDS could present itself as a clean party, it could win enough seats to keep eroding Piedmont's economic base.

Maurizio Urban, a political coordinator of the party in Turin, thought that Fiat could use the communists to facilitate the transfer of its production from the League-dominated north to the south. The company, Urban said, planned to shut down factories in the northern cities such as Mirafiore and Rivalta and, with the help of a \$4.6 million grant from the state, had opened a plant in the southern town of Melfi. If the centralized state survived under PDS control, he said, the game would go on.

THE LEAGUE'S AGENDA FOR ITALY NOW

The concerns the Piedmont delegates expressed about the communists have gripped the entire League. Adept at forming alliances, the PDS swept five major local elections (including Trieste's) in December and seemed poised to win national elections on March 27.

That put the League in an awkward corner. It could not hope to win anti-communist votes in those southern districts that it had so often accused of receiving ill-gotten gains. But it had vowed never to work with the rightist party, the neofascists, that was likely to do well there.

The fear of a left-wing victory has prompted the Northern League to give up its independence and, for the first time, fight an election in a coalition. At its conference, the League approved plans to form its own nationwide center-right alliance, this one with the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi and his party, "Forza Italia." Delegates said they hoped that the backing of Berlusconi's three television stations and two newspapers would strengthen their grip on the north while the businessman himself defanged the neofascists in the south. In exchange, Berlusconi will get a piece of the League's northern majority. Thanks to Italy's new "first-past-the-post" electoral law, that is the only guarantee of seats in parliament.

Some worried that the deal puts the League's squeaky-clean image at risk. Berlusconi built his media empire by courting those politicians, such as the discredited Socialist chief Bettino Craxi, whose heads the League proudly displays in its trophy case. In his final speech to the congress, Bossi pleaded for forgiveness of Berlusconi's past sins. "Even military revolutions," he said, "have built a new order in part by recycling pieces of the old."

In the hall, the deal was accepted reluctantly. Some delegates still traded in the intra-party currency, the Northern Italian Republic's "Legha," which

conspicuously lacks the zeroes of Italy's lira. But the talk was of federalism, not separatism. The party has even set up symbolic offices in the south. All accepted that, without Berlusconi, the League would lose the south to the neofascists.

Rochetta, the League's president, dismissed my enquiry as to how the League expected to unite the Italian right without the MSI. "Right and left are meaningless terms in Italy today," he said. "Those who in the Italian parliament call themselves leftist would be considered conservatives in Russia. We can't see any difference between them, those gathered around PDS, and those that call themselves rightist, around MSI. For both, the main target is the maintenance of the Italian state, a centralized state, in order to control from the center the entire illegal architecture, including the mafia."

Only Berlusconi could help the League pursue the federalism necessary to reduce the role of the state, Rochetta said.

"In Italy today, the active part of society is continually exhausted by such a high and dulling amount of taxation, without any parallel in Europe, for a reduced return in services. We have the worst services in Europe! The Lega Nord a fluid society, evidence that there is still just freedom enough for people to organize themselves, to defend themselves from the state, with all its Soviet aspects."

"Soviet aspects?" I asked.

"For fifteen years," he continued, "our main services have been nationalized and managed without any responsibility. A huge, enormous amount of lira has been spent on those employed in the production of electricity, the nationalized railways, the socialized hospitals. In so many branches of social life, so many useless and parasitical structures have been so enlarged that there is something like a feudal system, a system of the powers and the help."

Separatism merely on hold?

It is easy to see why one who dismisses modern Italy as "Soviet" would be willing to set aside a dream of a separate state in order to fight a party of former communists. But what if the communists won anyway? Wouldn't that make secession even more attractive?

The electoral pact will only give Berlusconi 20 percent of the League's Lombard base (30 percent in the Veneto and Piedmont), so it can still make good its lingering threat to secede. Bossi promised the delegates that they could still decamp to the north if the next parliament did not rewrite the constitution to create a federation of three republics.

So Italy may yet break up, as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia did. If it does, it will merely be the latest state to fall apart along its Habsburg lines. The provinces the League would most likely take with it -- Lombardy and the Veneto -- were, like Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech and Slovak republics, once ruled from Vienna.

But the few historical or cultural axes that League members grind play a much smaller role than similar ones did in the east. While each province of northern Italy has a rich history, only their relative wealth today gives them any united identity. Northern Italians do not make up a "nation" in the way that the Czechs (and maybe the Venetians) do. League members complain that the region's wealth disappears into corrupt government projects to "industrialize" the poorer south. But Italy will only dissolve if this grudge is enough.

"We in the north have a common identity of economic productivity, wealth and progress," Lilio, the League MP from the Veneto, said. "We are willing to share the fruits of that wealth in part with the other regions." And if the leftists were to win nationwide? "A Northern Republic without the Communists," Lilio said. "That would be better."

Yours,



Chandler

A NOTE TO READERS

My fellowship is over at the end of August and I am now thinking about what to do next. Ideas are welcome. That address again is:

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