

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Istria's shifting shoals

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

Pula, CROATIA --

Navigating along a sandy coast is a tricky business. Winter storms move shoals from one year to the next and maps of the sea's floor quickly go out-of-date. So last September, when I rented a boat with some friends and set out down along Slovenia's shore, I was relieved to find we were skirting a rocky rim. After years of crossing disputed borders, I could finally stop worrying whether my map was right.



The land of the Istrian peninsula is so firm that medieval Venetian churches still stand secure just a few feet from the water's edge. Their square bell towers are better landmarks than harbor bouys. Leaving Koper and sailing east, all you have to do is count them, as you might bus stops on a familiar route. But the towers are also a testament to the strength of the lost Venetian Republic that built them. Only a great trading power could have kept routes open long enough to allow their slow rise from the shore.

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When the republic collapsed, its trade was sustained by the Habsburgs who inherited its lands. But when they then disappeared after the First World War, a way of life vanished too. How could you build up towns over time when great powers kept claiming the ground?

Over the past eighty years every ideology of the age -- nationalism, fascism, communism -- has, at least once, swept across Istria. And for all their supposed differences, each time the results were usually the same; factories seized, populations expelled, currencies printed and debased. For a while Yugoslavia offered some sort of sustenance to locals who could live on tourism, but wars and rumors of wars have kept the visitors away; new borders have hobbled what other industries remain. The democratic Italian, Slovene and Croat states that now all share the peninsula are slowly building up new links. But the bitterness that still grips the region's leaders shows the real lesson of life on Adriatic. It's not the sea's storms you have to fear; the harbors always survive. It's the political storms that shift borders inland that will finish you off in time.

Trieste: port without patrons

If you want the shabbiness that dominated Central Europe before 1989 -- the sense of energies spent, the lingering scent of a culture's death -- don't go to Prague or Budapest. Go to Trieste.

In Prague, American entrepreneurs have turned the *fin de siècle* Obecni Dom into a raging night club featuring grunge bands. Budapest's Rakoczi Street flickers with neon signs in English advertising striptease shows and 'non-stops,' 24-hour supermarkets. There's even a Dunkin' Donuts. Only Trieste still has that haggard ex-Habsburg feel of exhaustion. The Customs House that once served all of Central Europe now looks across the Riva Mandracchio to empty concrete quays. For a business district, the Piazza della Borsa is awfully sleepy. The city's young are mostly university students who later escape; the city's old are inescapable.



Theoretically, the end of Communism could have had the same reinvigorating effect on Trieste that it has had on its cousin cities to the north, since it too could again be a door to reopened eastern markets. Trieste first boomed when Habsburg emperor Charles VI granted it special trade privileges in 1713; even today, under Italian rule, it still has its old free trade zones. It also still enjoys an excellent rail link to Slovenia and Vienna that the Austrians built to relieve them of dependence on the Danube for access to the waterways.

Unfortunately, it finds itself on the wrong side of the border. While Prague is a magnet for ambitious Czechs and Budapest a boomtown for Hungarian businessmen, Trieste remains a port without a hinterland, a fortified outpost for Italian irredentists. Slavophiles have wished it had fallen to the Slovenes. "With the passage of time," the English historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote, "and the blurring of the distinction between historical and non-historic peoples, Trieste would, no doubt, have become Slovene, as Prague had become Czech and Budapest Magyar; the Slovene misfortune was to have arrived at consciousness too late in the day."¹

Whatever the state of the "national consciousness," Slovenia did not have a state to express it. Italy did. When Austro-Hungary's enemies in the first World War offered it (as well as Istria, Gorizia, South Tyrol and part of Dalmatia) as an enticement to switch sides, switch she did.

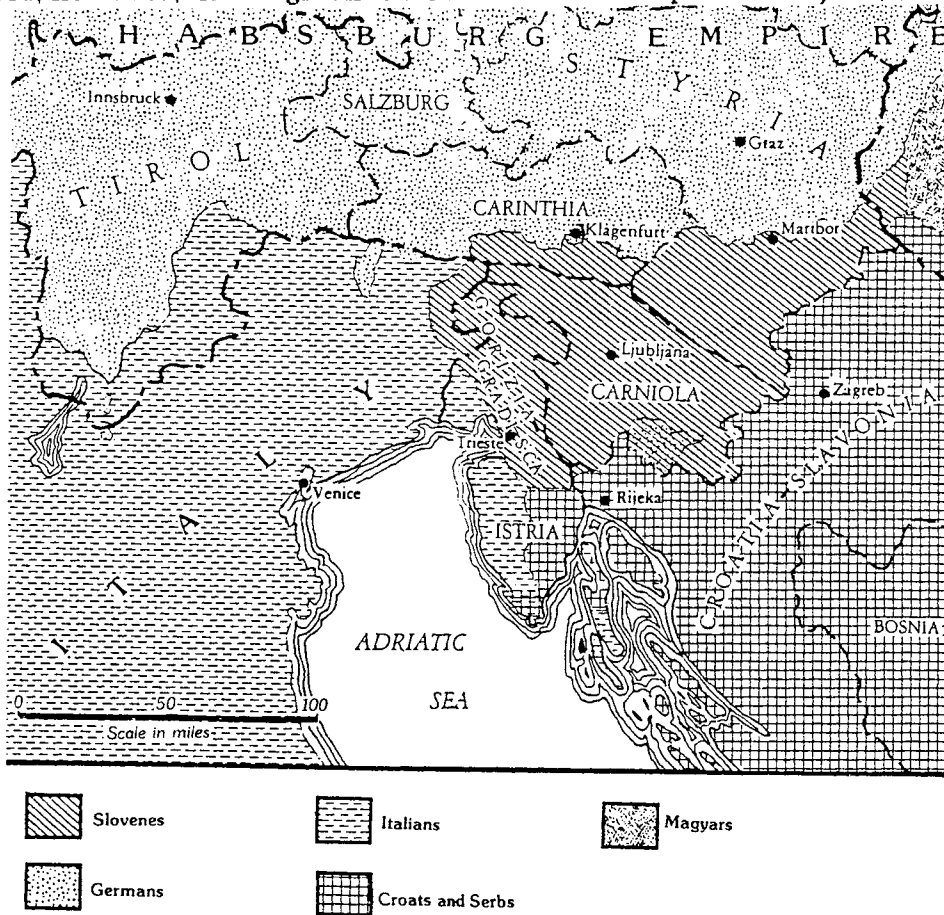
Receiving the news of Italy's betrayal on his way to the Eastern front, the fictional Habsburg patriot "the good soldier Svejk" was confident of victory over the nationalists. "Now we have a new war again," he tells his comrades-in-arms. "(N)ow that we have one enemy more, now that we have a new front again, we'll have to be economical with our munitions. The more children there are in the family, the more rods are used."²

The Empire's rulers seemed to be less self-assured. In early 1917, Austria attempted to sue for a separate peace with Rome, promising it some of Dalmatia but insisting on keeping Trieste. The Italians refused. Vienna decided Trieste was too valuable to sacrifice and fought on. In that it was supported by Slovene leaders still active in Austrian politics, who feared that Italian rule would prove far less benign than Austrian. Some, such as Monsignor Korosec, noted that Italy's deal with the Allies had also been approved by the Serbian leadership. Facing a future divided between Italy and a Yugoslavia led by Belgrade, Korosec even tried to breathe new life

into the so-called "Trialist" solution for Austria's South Slavs -- that is, the federalizing of the empire by granting to all Southern Slavs the political rights that the Magyars already enjoyed.³

But it was too late; the 'national' solution had the backing of the Allies. One of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points called for a new Italian border along national lines, a border destined to put Trieste, if one trusts the 1910 census, under Italian rule (119,000 of Trieste's residents called themselves Italian, 59,000 Slovene.)⁴

While neat on paper, the 'national' solution was actually Trieste's kiss of death. Cut off by a new border from its eastern markets, it went into economic decline. And even the national solution was riddled with contradictions. A strictly national map of the new borders in Istria would not have given the Italians, who were in a minority overall, control of the entire peninsula. Force of arms here prevailed over force of argument. It would, however, have given them the Croatian port of Rijeka, (Fiume),



Areas of national majority in Istria region at the end of Habsburg rule

which by 1910 had an Italian majority. Instead, the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo proclaimed it a free city. Following the precedent, force of arms was again to prevail where argument had failed.

In 1922 Gabriele D'Annunzio, an Italian poet and aviator, flew a private army of soldiers, garbed in cloaks and armed with daggers, to occupy the city. The comic-opera government collapsed after three months, but when Mussolini marched on Rome later that year, fortunes changed. The Italian dictator annexed the city in 1924. As the fascists were to show in other parts of Yugoslavia later, force of arms was the only argument.

Today Trieste does not have even the shallow curve of Istria and Gorizia behind it, since both were granted to Yugoslavia after the second world war. But the electoral success in Italy's March elections of the "National Alliance," one section of which (the Italian Social Movement) are direct heirs of Mussolini, has raised the question of whether they will seek to expand Italian lands as vigorously as their political ancestor did. Despite National Alliance leader Giofranco Fini's attempts to appear moderate, hardline pressure within his own party forced Fini to nominate Mirko Tremaglia, a former soldier in Mussolini's army, to be chairman of the parliament's foreign affairs committee. Tremaglia has said a treaty confirming Italy's borders with Slovenia and Croatia should be "ripped up" to allow Rome to once again pursue territorial claims.

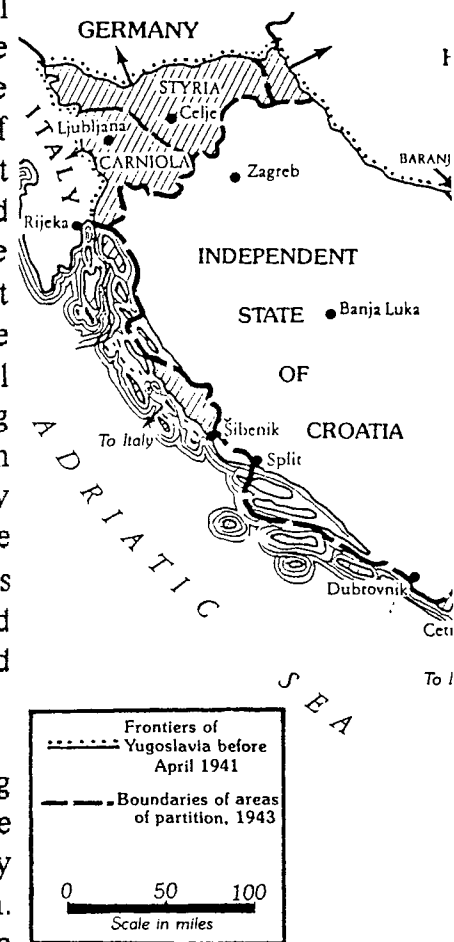
The Italian Social Movement (MSI) characters I spoke to in Trieste in December had inherited not only *il Duce's* ideas of borders but also his style. No one was more a comic-opera nationalist than Roberto Menia, a twentysomething national coordinator for MSI from Trieste. Surrounded by posters portraying the monuments of former Italian cities on the Yugoslav coast, Menia pondered the floor through his flowing black locks, played with his Hermes scarf and called for a "new irredentism."

Istria, Fiume (now Rijeka) and Dalmatia? "We have never renounced them," Menia said. "We have struggled for 50 years and now that we are stronger we will renegotiate everything, borders included. We want the territories we had before the war." Menia even suggested that the Italians and the Serbs might cooperate to divide Croatia between them. "Fini has already gone to Belgrade," he said. "We know that our own interests and the interests of the Serbs can fit together."

Today Slovenes and Croatians protest the presence of five "postfascists" in

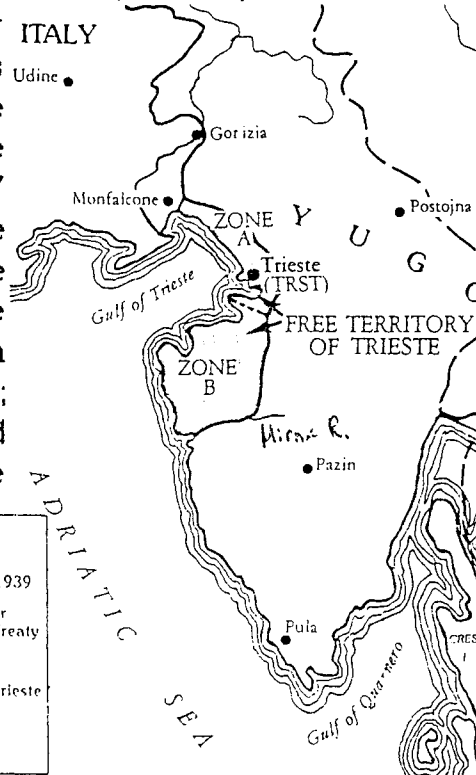
the Italian government not merely because Mussolini annexed Rijeka. As it turned out, he had many more deadly adventures in the Balkans up his sleeve.

In the early 1930s, as Croats grew more disaffected with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Mussolini's agents established links with their fascist movement, the *Ustashe*. When the Axis powers crushed the Belgrade regime in 1941, they helped to install *Ustashe* leader Ante Pavlevic as head of the nominally independent Croatian state. Worse still, Mussolini annexed two-thirds of Slovenia, most of the Dalmatian coast (previously only three percent Italian), and took control of the hinterland along the Adriatic.⁵ Croatian nationalists, royalist Yugoslav nostalgics and Communists alike went into opposition. When Fini, National Alliance head, is today reported as saying that Mussolini was the greatest Italian statesman of the century, even fiercely anti-Communist Croats and Slovenes are shocked.⁶ To them, Mussolini represents as well as any Communist the collectivism and oppression that has spilt so much blood and ruined so many lives.



But supporting a regime so unpopular among ordinary Croats, Mussolini played into the hands of the Partisan revolt, and indirectly seeding Istria's second storm -- communism. Partisan leader Josip Broz (or Tito) was able to bring under his umbrella anti-fascist units in Slovenia and Croatia that, despite later official myth, were not necessarily communist. At a 1943 meeting of his Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation in the Bosnian town of Jajce, Tito promised that a reunited Yugoslavia would annex in turn territories of Italy, such as Istria, Rijeka, Trieste and Gorizia, that were largely populated by Slovenes and Croats. Tito further promised that postwar Yugoslavia would be a federal, not unitary state.⁷

As Mussolini's government collapsed and German forces withdrew, Tito's large, ideologically-diverse force had little trouble sweeping in to fill the vacuum and making good on such promises on the ground by, for example, beating the allies to Trieste. Although they evacuated the city 45 days later, Tito's forces continued to occupy near all the lands his movement had sought. The Italian-Yugoslav peace treaty of 1947 confirmed all of the gains, except for some parts of eastern Friuli and the "Free Territory of Trieste," a zone along the Istrian coast. The area was declared an international free zone and was split; British and American troops administered the western region around Trieste (zone A); Yugoslavs controlled the rest (zone B). Trieste had lost what little hinterland it had.



If memories of Mussolini still haunt Istria's Slavs, the cruelty of Tito's regime between 1943 and 1947 still embitter the tens of thousands of the peninsula's Italians who fled. Their deep, genuine pain was brought home to me when I visited the offices of the Unione Delgi Istriani, Trieste's most ferociously irredentist organization. The Unione's offices are decorated with an enormous yellowing map of Italian Istria, the heraldry of its uprooted families and occupied by sweet old women who were in fact expelled under the rubric of "collective guilt." Here I found none of the adventurism of the MSI, only poignant reminders of a culture destroyed.

"We have had no apology from them (the Croats and Slovenes)," Denis Zigante, the Union's president said, "and yet they (the Partisans) killed people, they kept people in caves. And because we fled the Communists, they said we were fascists. But we fled because we were Italian."⁸

It is easy to hope that such complaints can be settled by a high-level commission of some sort or another that will add up property values and, like a judge in a civil suit, come up with damages to be paid. But the

damage done by something as brutal as the Partisans' campaign cannot be measured in currencies. Fortunately, the Slovene negotiators acknowledge the importance of discussing, as well as paying for, the past.

"Throughout our common history, there have been dark moments and bright but unfortunately there have been more dark ones than bright," Stefan Cigoj, a former Yugoslav diplomat in Rome and now Slovenia's chief negotiator, said. "There were a number of bloody events that burden Slovene/Italian relations and burden the consciences of the populations along the border." The Italian and Slovene foreign ministers have therefore established a special commission of 14 historians to review the history of the century.

The difficult question, of course, will be if the historians can find a common period within which to discuss their common ground. Here, as in so many other parts of Central Europe, national relations are not merely a matter of settling borders in space, but also establishing borders in time. The Italians, Cigoj complained, wanted to focus on two issues: the mass graves of Italians executed between 1943 and 1947, and the expulsion of other Italians. The Slovenes, on the other hand, also wanted to discuss fascist crimes and, perhaps, the treatment of Slavs under interwar Italian rule. "We are aware of these two historical events," Cigoj said, "but we want to go back further, not just to search for reasons but to make a comprehensive review and not just investigate two instances."

So, like fueding families searching the vaults for competing and ever earlier deeds to land, the commission may spend as much time setting the period in which injustices were done as discussing the injustices themselves. A similar problem plagues another commission charged with establishing whether Italian pension payments to residents in Zone B should be calibrated from 1947 or from 1954. A crucial issue, some Slovenes and Croats think, since they fear the Italians may be able to "buy" seven years' worth of "Italians" on statistical charts. Until Slovenes and Italians can find a common past foundation for their friendship, their future together, however amicable, will rest on sand.

Trieste on the defensive

Surrounded, embittered, Triestians grew even more defensive the more Yugoslavia was courted by the west. In the early 1950s Tito had broken with Stalin and set Yugoslavia on its own path to socialism and had begun to play the West off against the east. In 1953, he signed an

American-brokered Balkan Pact of nonaggression with Greece and Turkey. Although the treaty was soon a dead letter, it paved the way for the London Agreement of 1954, which allowed Yugoslavia to annex "zone B" the part of the Free Territory of Trieste that it had been administering. (Italy took over zone A.) As a further sweetener, the allies extended a loan to help Tito build up Koper as an alternative port.⁹

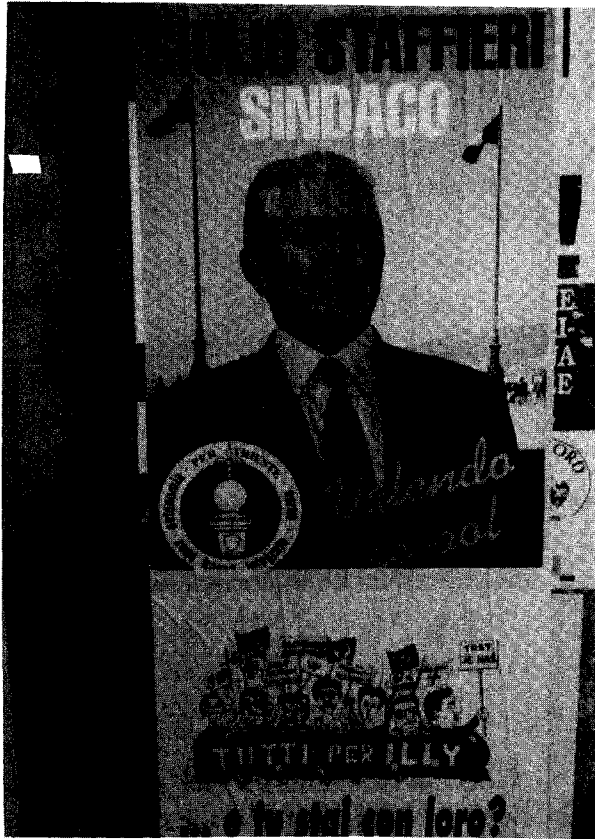
Trieste became home to Istrian-Italian refugees. Admittedly, many of them took small funds and offers of work from the Italian government to soften the blow. But that was of little consolation to those who were resigned to change of borders but not the change of property deeds. Surrounded on all sides by a Communist state and saddled with an aging population of refugees, Trieste became a paranoid political pressure cooker.

The cooker boiled over in 1975, when Italy signed the "Osimo Agreement" with Yugoslavia. Under the agreement, Italy agreed to forgo any claims to seized property, accepting instead that Belgrade would pay 110 million dollars over a period of 10 years starting in 1991. The agreement held in principle, although it was occasionally modified. Under the 1983 Rome Agreement, for example, Yugoslavia paid 17 million and returned 179 properties to their original Italian owners.

"Osimo" enraged Trieste's refugees from Istria. Not only was the compensation inadequate, some felt, but Tito seemed to the conspiratorially-minded to be plotting the seizure of Trieste after all. Osimo laid the legal foundations for the construction of "Novi Trst," a new city, and an industrial park, the Z.F.I.C. (Zona France Industriala Sul Carso) on the Yugoslav side of the border with Trieste. To anti-Communist activists such as Vedella Screan, it appeared that Tito was planning to import 300,000 Slavs from other regions, such as Montenegro and Bosnia, then press for the unification of Novi Trst and old Trieste. It was, she told me, an "occupying army" in preparation. "They always say, 'Trst je Nas,' ('Trieste is ours.')" she said.

To protest the Osimo agreement, Screan and others founded Italy's first regional political party, the "Lista Per Trieste." Benefitting from fear of Yugoslav expansion and anger with Rome's perceived pusillanimity, "Lista" candidates have been Trieste's mayors for 11 of the past 15 years. In December's mayoral elections, the Lista's posters showed the opposition as

a mob carrying placards that read "Tito," and "Osimo," "Slovenska Skupnost" (the Slovene Community, the political organization for Trieste's Slovene minority) and, of course, "Trst je Nas." The "Lista" then went on to become the core element of Fini's National Alliance.



With the collapse of Yugoslavia, Triestans apparently no longer fear losing their city to Belgrade. In December Giuliano Staffieri, the incumbent mayor and candidate for the "Lista," lost to the opposition candidate Franco Illy, who was openly supported by the Slovene minority. But some in Trieste still hope for a revision of the compensation agreements written into Osimo.

"If Communism doesn't exist, if Yugoslavia doesn't exist, we want them to give us our property back," Zigante said, "because it was stolen from us."

Someone in Rome is apparently listening. On May 27, Italy prevented Slovenia from joining a pact, membership of which is now a requirement for Eastern European states who would like to join the European Union. (Ironically, the pact is designed to diffuse historical grievances and border disputes.) The Italians did not call for the actual return of property but did say that Slovenia had not yet paid its share of compensation from Osimo.

A Slovene foreign ministry official disagreed. "We keep asking them for the number of the bank account into which we can deposit the money," he said. "But they never answer. They just complain that we are not paying."

"Italy wants property more than money," Cigoj said. A joint commission will discuss restitution but the Italians have little chance. Slovenia refuses to return any property seized by the Communists, even to its own citizens.

At the very least, former Italian residents of Istria and Gorizia want the

same rights to buy property that Slovenes now enjoy but which foreigners do not (although they may lease land for 99 years.) "They write new laws for themselves," Zigante said, "and expect us to hold to the old laws."

Slovenia promises to allow foreigners to buy land once has become a member of the European Union. In the meantime, it says, no foreign ownership, and certainly no special rights for Italians. "Slovenia is very sensitive as far as the ownership of property goes," Cigoj said. "Their purchasing power is so much greater in Italy, France, Germany. If we didn't have a law like this, it would mean the sale of Slovenia."

And then there are the minority issues; both sides complain about the fate of their conationals across the border. Italy was obstructing Slovenia's integration into the EU long before a right-wing government took power in Rome. In May 1993, Italy objected to Slovenian membership in the Council of Europe. In December, the Italian government said Slovenia should not be allowed to sign the "pact on stability," by which Central European state agree to make respect of the rights of the their minorities. Rome complained that Slovenia's TV Koper has cut Italian-language broadcasting from 12 to 11 hours a week. Italy has also used the EU ban on extending ties to "countries in conflict" to bar Slovenia. "No Slovenia without Croatia" has been their refrain.

Slovenia in turn is upset that its minority enjoys none of the rights granted to the German-speakers of Trentino. The 1954 London agreement, article 6 of the Italian constitution and article 8 of the Osimo treaty all lay the basis for laws to grant Italy's Slovene minority rights to schools, bilingual signs and television broadcasting, Cigoj said. "But 18 years have passed and Italy, except for a few attempts, hasn't done anything." A 1993 law allowing for Slovene television broadcasts in Gorizia and Trieste has not resulted in "a single minute on state TV," he said.

And Italy's new "first-past-the-post" electoral law makes it impossible for minorities spread over a wide area to elect candidates on a common party list. Under Staffieri, Trieste banned the use of Slovene in official contacts and cut back on bilingual signs.

But Slovene foreign ministry officials remain optimistic that relations will improve. Trieste's new mayor is a strong advocate of closer links, they say, and Italy will be restrained by the EU's other 12 members, especially by the country that has the biggest stake of foreign investment -- Germany.

Even the Greeks, one official said, do not think that Italian complaints with Slovenia are comparable to their own virulent dispute with Macedonia.

"They do not have a case against us on minority issues," one said. "We offer good protection of Italian language rights, and even reserve a seat in our (90-member) assembly for one Italian and one Hungarian candidate. As for property, we will allow all foreigners the right to buy once we are members of the EU."

A common future?

The lands Yugoslavia had annexed were more "Italian" than the territory Italy was given. Drive out of Trieste heading east and you might want to check twice at the Italian-Slovene border to make sure you are in fact leaving Italy, not entering it. The main square in Koper (Capodistria) is wrapped in the oddly irregular Byzantine facades of Venice. The effect is even more dramatic from the water. If you sail east from Koper, you can only pick out the other towns of Slovenia's short coast -- Izola, Piran, Potoroz -- by counting their square Venetian belltowers as you go.

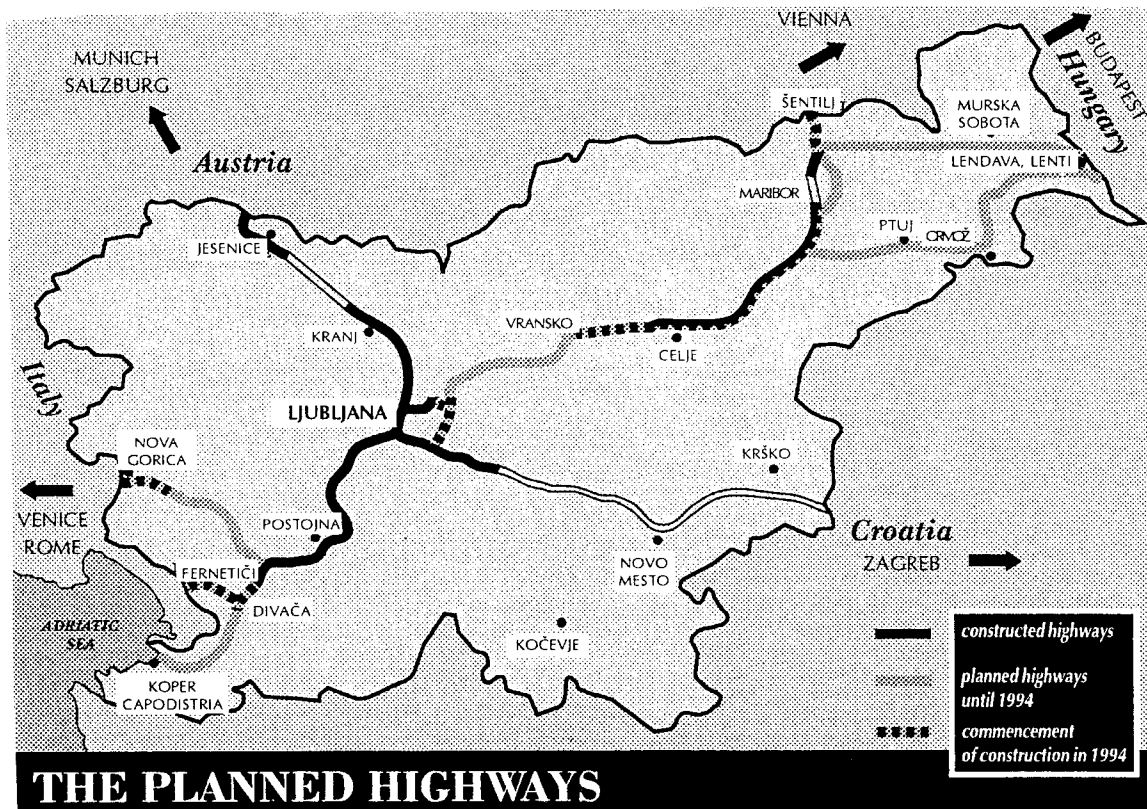
Koper's tourist attractions may remind you of its Italian past but try to find an open bar on a Friday night and you will quickly discover that it is not a tourist city. The port's few pleasure boats (mostly German- and Austrian-owned) are protected by a narrow jetty from the wakes of commercial ships steaming in and out of Slovenia's only port. For all their historical disputes, both the Slovene and Italian governments now hope to build a new future based on an old principle -- exploiting their ports' proximity to Central Europe. But will they become colleagues or competitors?

The port of Koper is one of Slovenia's pet economic projects. The government is expanding the port's yard from 600 to 1,000 hectares and plans to deepen the main channel to 17 meters, the minimum required for commercial shipping (the channel is now 12 meters deep.) Slavko Hanzel, state secretary at the Slovene Ministry of Transportation, hopes the port will serve Austrian, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and even Ukrainian shipping needs. Of the 5.5 million tons of good shipped through the port in 1990, 1.5 million came from Austria, .529 million from Hungary and .58 million from the Czech lands.

But Austrian Greens have forced such tight restrictions on trucking that Czech goods cannot go south (instead they go north, through Gdansk, adding as much as 7 days to travel time for goods heading to the Far East.) The

port's only hope is construction of a decent road connecting it to Hungary. But that road depends on EU funding, subject in part to Italian approval.

So far, the Italian government has supported Slovenia's bids for EU funds to improve its roads. A European Union plan to build a road from Barcelona to Kiev includes a stretch from Trieste to Ljubljana and on to Hungary; the plan earmarks 150 milion ECUs (1 ECU=1.17 USD) for the Trieste-Hungary link.¹⁰ (see map.) Of course, it is in Italian interest to build the road as well, since Austria also cuts Trieste off from the east.



But Italy may not be so keen to help Slovenia develop other aspects of a port that is essentially a competitor to its own. Central European governments (such as Italy, Austria, Hungary, Bavaria, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia) have set up a coordination committee, RP Adria, to plan the region's transport. But when it comes to access to the sea, it's every port for itself. "We collaborate," Hanzel said, "but it's quite clear that it is in everyone's own interest to gain as large a percentage of transport as possible."

New border, old problems

If you do sail east out of Koper and down the Istrian coast, remember to keep counting those *capellos*. Croatian seaside villages like Umag and Porec have the same Venetian belltowers that mark Koper and Potoroz, but the similarity ends there.

Slope down accidentally towards the Croatian part of the coast and you may find your boat raided by U.N. officials on the lookout for gun-runners. Once strung like pearls along Venice's trade route to the east, the ports of Western Istria are now divided by the new, rigorous Slovene-Croat border. And their common Yugoslav past is about as helpful in sorting out their problems as their shared Italian heritage is.



St. John's church, Umag

All of the accoutrements of independence -- the sovereignty of international fishing law, the cutting of regional ties and a continental shelf dividing the values of the two new currencies -- have played havoc with local life along what was once a soft border within a larger state. The remaining Italians, now not merely trapped in a Slav state but divided between two bickering ones, are the most aggrieved, and most nostalgic for the days when their *capellos* hung round the neck of a united Istria. But Slovenes and Croats are frustrated too. "These new states are often act like little babies," Alex Luttenberger, vice-president of an Istrian autonomy movement, said.

There are the inevitable border disputes. The Yugoslav authorities who drew the borders relied on medieval *kataster* maps that once marked the Catholic church's dioceses. "Unfortunately, they (the Croats) have their *kataster* maps and we have ours," a Slovene foreign ministry official said.

By sea, one passes the Slovene-Croat border just before rounding the Savudrijska peninsula. The position of the border has given rise to conspiracy theories among Slovenes that could have been scripted by a

Trieste Italian, circa 1975. Under international shipping law, Croatian control of the peninsula gives it a headlock on Slovene trade through Koper, some Slovenes say, since Croatia has the right to police waters twelve miles from its coast. Since the Croatian waters overlap with the Italian region, these Slovenes fear that Italians and Croatian could gang up or that, at the very least, one side could push the Slovenes onto the mercy of the other.

Fear of being at Croatia's mercy has led extreme Slovene nationalists to argue that the border should be much further south. Zone B, they argue, was divided under the assumption that two republics of one federation, not two independent states, would share the coast. Danijel Starman, a Slovene nationalist popular along the coast, claims to have *kataster* maps that show that the border should run along to the Mirna River. If taken seriously, that map would give Slovenia the whole of the old Zone B. Even a technocrat like Hanzel, the Slovene state secretary for transport, thought his government should negotiate for control of the peninsula.

There are border disputes inland too. The Croats, for example, believe that the Dragonia River marks the new international border all the way west to the Gulf of Trieste. The Slovenes claim that the border dips 200 yards south near the town of Secovlje. On May 24, Slovenes were infuriated to watch their neighbors start construction of a new customs post where their medieval maps said it should be.

The disputes would mean little if the new border did not also mark such a dramatic difference between the state of the two states. But it does. Slovenia is not at war, Croatia is. To Croats, the Slovenes have been too been too damn quick to bolt from the problems of ex-Yugoslavia and have been happy to use Croatia as a new "military frontier," a buffer state between them and deeper Balkan problems. The Croats, Slovenes argue, are extortionists, trying in vain to drag them back into conflicts which they have exacerbated (i.e. by waging a brief war against the Bosnian government.)

The Croats want one military favor from the Slovenes, according to a Slovene defense advisor who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Zagreb worries that it will not be able to get supplies from the north of the country down along the coast to Dalmatia, should war between Croatia and the Serb forces occupying Croatian land flare up again. The Croats would like to use Slovene roads, which they say Serb missiles based in occupied Croatian lands cannot reach. But the Slovenes say they have proof that

these "Krajan Serbs" have Orkan and Frog missiles which could easily reach southeastern Slovenia. Ljubljana has succeeded into portraying itself to foreign investors as "out of the war," they argue, and cannot risk its hard-won new look by taking hits from Serb guns.

Other economic problems come from the Slovene's economic success. In 1992, when the two republics launched their new currencies -- the Slovene tolar and the Croatian dinar -- they were pegged at one-to-one. Last year, the poor Croatian dinar was ravaged by wartime inflation of as much as 25 percent a month, while the tolar has coasted at the tolerable 15 to 20 percent a year. The last time I traded tolar for dinars I got 50 Croatian dinars for one Slovene tolar.

It has been a minor annoyance to me to watch my spare Croatian change melt away in between trips down to Zagreb. But imagine the effect along the Istrian coast, where Croats from Buje used to go to the emergency room in Piran's hospital, and where Croats and Slovenes alike used to work in the Slovene-owned brewery in Buzet. The local situation might improve now that Croatia has commemorated the stabilization of its economy by launching a new currency, the kuna (1,000 Croatian dinars to one kuna). But larger disputes remain unsolved.

Croats argue, for example, that Ljubljanska Banka, the former federation's most respected bank, now favors its Slovene clients; they also demand that the Slovene government repay 500 million USD in hard-currency savings that Croats held in the bank. (The Slovenes say the hard currency was actually held, like all hard currency, in Belgrade and was lost to Milosevic the moment the war started.)

Slovenes in turn complain that Croatia is irresponsibly managing its cross-border economic commitments. Croatia has defaulted, for example, on its obligation to help complete a nuclear power plant in the Slovene town of Krsko and has seized Slovene shares in a brewery in the Croatian town of Buzet. Croatia has also accommodated Bosnian refugees both in large holiday complexes owned by Slovene companies and in private Slovenes' weekend homes.

Croat vs. Croat

Continue a little further down into Istria, past the dusty gnarled hills and valleys, and you soon forget that you are in a country at war. True, in the monstrous concrete resorts like those Umag and Porec, Slovaks and

Hungarians have rented rooms that were once bargains only for Germans and Italians. If a local hears you speaking English he may let slip a few scathing remarks about the clientele he now has to serve (a bit awkward if you are with Slovak friends, as I was.) And, true, the only other visitors to the Roman amphitheatre in Pula are local kids who have climbed over the fence. But the only soliders to be seen are at the bus stations, waiting to return to service after a break at home. If Zagreb sniffs the wind for every scent of the war, Istria turns away from the fumes in disgust.

Cobbled together from five regions into a semicircle around Bosnia, Croatia would be difficult to hold together in the best of times. Spun in the chaos of a war that, for example, devastates easternmost Slavonia while leaving Istria intact, the regions seem to have nothing more in common than the flag that bears each of their shields. "We are destined to suffer from terrible centrifugal forces," Dusko Topalovic, a political geographer in Zagreb, said.

One of those forces is the Istrian Democratic Assembly (Istarski Demokratski Sabor, or IDS), the choice in the 1993 local elections of 73 percent of the peninsula's 700,000 residents. They voted in equally overwhelming numbers for autonomy. Often accused in Zagreb of being selfish separatists unwilling to help carry the burden of independence, the IDS campaigns for the federalization of Croatia, more local autonomy and an early end to the war. Croatia's ten-month war with Bosnia particularly infuriated the Istrians, who saw it as an unwarranted prolongation. They, it seems, were unwilling to fight for the scraggy hills of southwest Hercegovina that Croatia's defense minister called home.

Luttenberger, the IDS vice-president, has a day job that characterizes Istria. As mayor of the chic resort town of Opatija, he can measure every day of the war in lost tourist revenue. "We are the part of Croatia that is most westward-looking," he said. "The people are used to dealing with Westerners, because we had tourism here, shipping here."

And, of course, Italians. Although only about 15,000 now live in Croatia, the Italians, Luttenberger said, must be honored as an autochthonous element of Istria's identity, one spice required for its flavor. (Perhaps the most civilized statement I've heard any representative of a Central European country's majority make about a minority.) Croatian president Franjo Tudjman claims the IDS' close ties to the Italians proves they are tools of irredentists. Luttenberger denies it. "The borders of the state

cannot change," he said. "But if you look at the Croatian flag, you will see that Istria is one of the five regions of the state; its identity must be respected."

Instead Zagreb was doing all it could to undermine Croatia's historical regions, Luttenberger complained. The central government drew new administrative districts to prevent the peninsula from enjoying its past ties to Rijeka, the city where most of Croatia's Italians now live. Under Yugoslavia, local government had been left to around 100 "obcina," similar to county councils, who reported directly to Zagreb. Now the 100 have been subdivided and multiplied to around 400; these then answer to a new layer of 20 regional offices. Zagreb had consciously put Istria and Rijeka under different regional authorities, Luttenberger said, in order to weaken the peninsula's political power.

Zagreb has also hurt Istria's economy by slowing down and corrupting privatization, Luttenberger said. Potential investors in the region's hotels had been put off by a law similar to Slovenia's banning foreign ownership. Worse, he said, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) had held the hotel monopoly together as a cash cow for the party. Restitution of Italian property seized would be too complicated to manage, he argued; but sales to foreigners should be allowed. "But the ruling party does not want foreign investment in Croatia," Luttenberger said. "The HDZ political monopoly will not survive if there is foreign investment."

But perhaps oddest is Tudjman's approach to Istria's recent past. These days a spate of 50th anniversaries of Partisan battles has been a useful barometer of any politician's perception of the past. Tudjman, who fought with the Partisans, has been strangely reluctant to mark their victories. His refusal, for example, to attend celebrations in Istrian cities like Pazin went down badly even with Croat nationalists. After all, Tito's Partisans "liberated" Istria from nearly three decades of Italian rule.

Living with the past

It is ironic that Tudjman, leader of a ten-month war to grab land in Bosnia, should be so paranoid about Italian irredentism. It is stranger still that he, a former Partisan, should have led last year's campaign to build a "Greater Croatia" that, by including Bosnia, would have had the same borders as the fascist state he fought against as a young man. And why should he refuse to celebrate Partisan victories in Istria -- victories that established the Yugoslav (and later Croatian) sovereignty over the peninsula in the first place?

But, to be fair, he is no less consistent than the Italian "post-fascists," who want to seize Istria again also speak glowingly of the dictator who lost it. Both Italian and Croatian irredentists choose selectively from the past they supposedly admire. Both ought to read a little Vaclav Havel. What he has to say about an individual's failure to deal honestly with the past applies to states as well.

While serving in prison for opposing the Communist regime, Havel wrote a series of letters to his wife in which he tried to come to terms with mistakes he had made. Why should he torture himself over the past then when he had, by his own admission, denied responsibility for his errors already for five years? In order, he wrote, to become "sovereign" over himself once again, for only

"by assuming full responsibility . . . today for one's own yesterday . . . does the 'I' achieve continuity and thus identity with the self. This is the only possible way it can become something definite, limited and defined, related to its environment in a graspable way, not dissipated in it, not haplessly caught up in random processes."¹¹

If an individual can only become stable in the world around him by dealing honestly with past behind him, how much more true of nations and states. There is no point in nostalgically wishing for a "multinational" government -- Habsburg or Yugoslav -- to reappear. As sociologists like Ernest Gellner have shown, nationalism and democracy are too closely linked; it is impossible to feel comfortable voting in the same election with people who do not "speak your language," literally and metaphorically. But neither will the Istrian peninsula ever be stable and prosperous as long as one nation or another thinks it should have complete control of the lives of those who live and trade there. Only nations that allow their citizens to plot their own courses ever survive storms as a whole.

Nor will the states that seek complete "sovereignty" over Istria ever be "sovereign" over themselves, since all the historical claims rely on the kind of selective memory that erodes the soul. An honest assessment of damage done to Istria by totalitarianisms, both left and right, will help secure the futures of all its peoples. Until then peninsula's belltowers will stand waiting, fixed on firm ground but overlooking empty ports.

Yours,



Chandler

Notes

1. Taylor, A.J.P. *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918* Hamish Hamilton, (London). 1948, reprinted by Penguin Books, (London), 1990. p. 217. Taylor refers to the city's correct name as "Trst," the Slav name, and writes in the appendix that he finds its exclusion from postwar Yugoslavia "a crying case of national injustice." (p. 285.)

2. Hasek, Jaroslav. *The Good Soldier Svejk* Penguin Books, (London) 1974. p. 514.

3. Malcolm, Noel. *Bosnia: a Short History*. Macmillan, (London) 1993. p. 159. Korosec's "May Declaration" calling for a federated Austria with a South Slav parliament was the first of many such solutions he accepted. Croat leaders had been keener earlier. Bishop Josef Strossmayer, for example, had called in 1870 for a revival of the "Illyrian" idea. The Napoleonic 'Illyrian Provinces' had united Dalmatia, Istria and the largely-Slovene Carniola under a French Duke; Strossmayer proposed that southern Slavs of Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina be united within the empire. Hungarian leaders had compromised; they allowed the reunion of Croatia, Slavonia and the Serb-held Military Frontier, but denied Croatia control of Rijeka. (to which they then encouraged Italian immigration.)

4. Taylor, p. 286. He doesn't trust the census

5. Ramet, Sabrina. *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1965-1991*. 2nd edition Indiana UP, 1992. p. 7.

6. Fini argues quite credibly that he said Mussolini was the Italian statesman who had the greatest impact on Italy in this century. That's a different statement altogether.

7. Rusinow, Dennison. *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948-1974*. Royal Institute of International Affairs. (London) 1977. p. 3.

8. Again, Vaclav Havel shows the way. Shortly after the "Velvet Revolution," Havel officially apologized to the 2.5 million Sudeten and Carpathian Germans who were expelled from Czechoslovakia after World War Two. Although he insisted that they could not receive their property back, he did acknowledge that the expulsion was just the sort of "collective guilt" that had characterized totalitarian regimes on both the left and the right. This is quite a contrast to A.J.P. Taylor's rather flippant remark that the Germans were returned to the homeland for which they had clamored. Not all of them had.

9. Rusinow, p. 46.

10. A smaller joint Italian-Slovene project to improve roads from Trieste to Postojna and from Postojna to Gorizia has been entangled in the Italian corruption scandals; Adria, the joint-venture hired for the project, has been accused of bribery and misuse of public funds.

11. Havel, Vaclav. *Letters to Olga*. Faber and Faber, (London). 1990. p. 350.