

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-41

The Italians of Yugoslavia:
1. Istria and How It Got That Way

Belgrade, Yugoslavia
25 February 1963

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Normally, one goes to Istria for a holiday. Habsburg nobility, before 1914, favored Abbazia (now Opatija), Austria's own fragment of Riviera, and their presentday countrymen maintain the tradition under democratic and socialist auspices that have made an Atlantic City of this onetime Newport, R.I. Between the wars the island of Brioni was fashionable, which may be one reason why President Tito subsequently fenced it off as his own private seacoast retreat, leaving the rest of the dozens of large and small towns of the west coast and Liburnia to become summer resorts for tens of thousands of Germans, Austrians, and other western Europeans.

I don't think, however, that my own latest visit, in Midwinter 1963, can be accused of smelling like boondoggle. Opatija was deep in snow, which had descended even on the Quarnero island of Losinj for the first time in living memory, and interior roads were impassable. But I had seen Istria in the dry heat of summer, and now I wanted to see it in winter. Istria fascinates me, you see, not as a country of coast resorts, but for its history and especially for the curiously exaggerated importance of its role in international relations of the past fifty years.

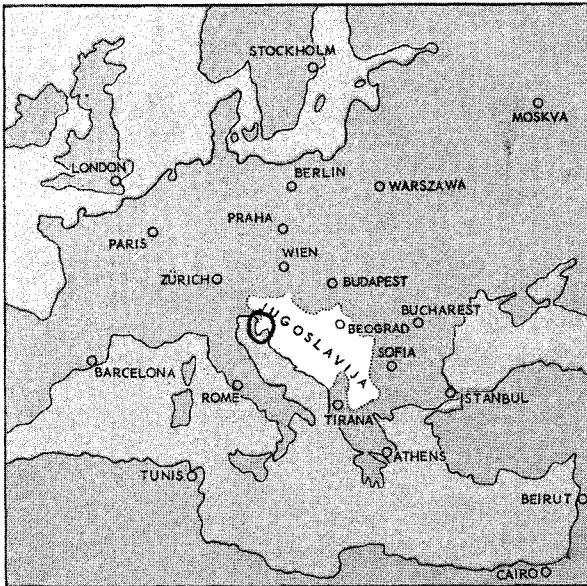
The Istrian peninsula is a heart-shaped wedge thrusting southward and westward at the very top of the Adriatic Sea, where Slav, Latin and German worlds meet. It is a modest triangle encompassed by the port cities of Trieste, Rijeka (ex-Fiume) and Pula (ex-Pola). For nearly two thousand years this minuscule land and its people have suffered the consequences of their position astride the dividing line between Western and Eastern Europe, an ethnic fault-line along which political earthquakes are frequent and severe. Twice in our century the problem of drawing an international boundary here has dominated a peace conference after a world war in a manner totally out of proportion to the size and significance of the area, dividing former allies and laying the basis for future conflicts. The dispute over Fiume and D'Annunzio's adventures there in 1919-20 played an important role in the growth and triumph of Italian Fascism, and the

dispute over Trieste after 1945 was in a sense the first battle of the Cold War. Certainly it was the first time the military forces of the Soviet and Anglo-American worlds nearly came to blows, and President Truman and others suffered moments of alarm that the Third World War might begin here less than a year after the end of the Second.

I have found other occasions (DR-26-27) for writing to you about the "Trieste problem" and for suggesting that, on economic grounds, it is today merely dormant and not resolved. In Istria itself, on the other hand, it seems clear that the most recent period of international and domestic struggle for control of this strategic peninsula is now at an end. It began, if you like, with the destruction of the Venetian Republic in 1797, and it closed with the signing (by the United States, Britain, Italy and Yugoslavia) of the London Memorandum of October 1954. This is a statement that needs to be supported, because the solution of the Istrian question is as remarkable as its earlier importance to the Great Powers. Why, if no peace treaty or policy from the Peace of Campoformio (1797) to the Treaty of Paris (1947) was able to find or impose a lasting solution, can one now invite the foreign chancelleries of the world to put their files marked "Istria" into cold storage?

The key lies in a fundamental change in ethnic structure, which has since 1943 converted this peninsula from a land half Italian and half Yugoslav, in which each people had strong and tragic historical reasons for fearing the other, into a land indisputably Yugoslav in population, character...and future.

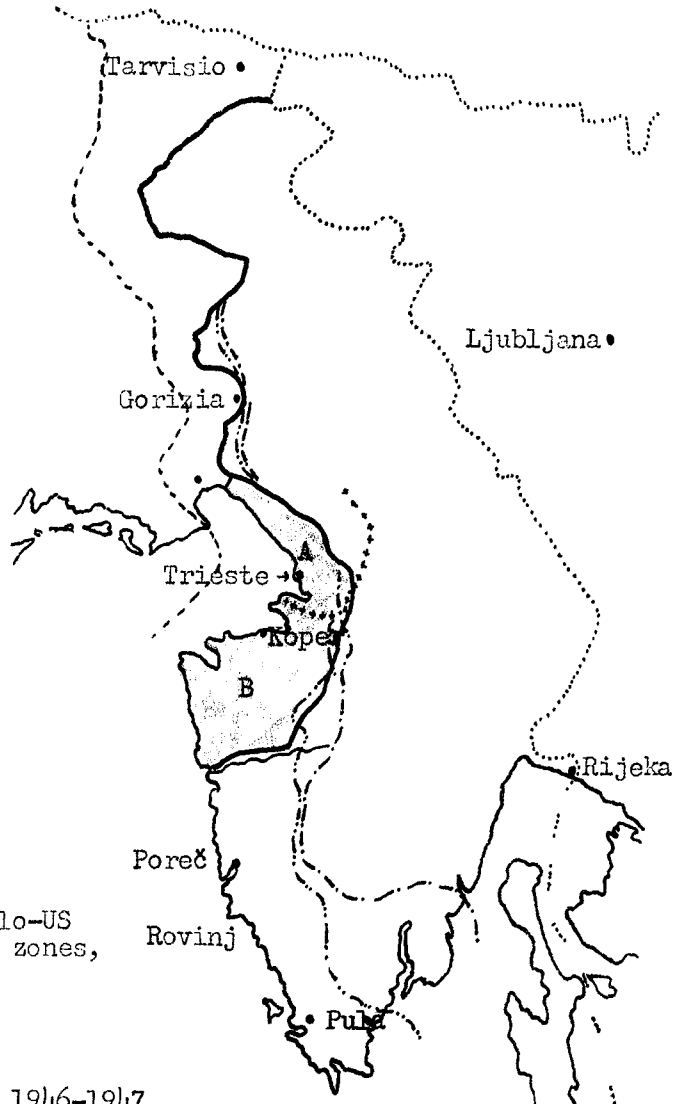
For anyone sharing my taste in landscapes, the Istrian Countryside is worthy of its dramatic history. It is a place of contrasts and sudden changes. Even the climate participates, for the northeast Adriatic is the unhappy location of "one of the most abrupt meteorologic frontiers in the world": the coast belongs to the Mediterranean, but ten miles inland conditions are continental, with torrid summers and icy winters. The physical backbone of Istria is a long antilinal mountain ridge that begins behind Trieste and runs southeastward to finish abruptly at the sea just above Opatija, overlooking Rijeka. Unbroken from the Gulf of Trieste to the Gulf of Quarnero, it makes the peninsula into something like an island and accounts for its historic isolation. Southwest of this ridge the mountains flatten gradually into an Istrian Piedmont, a relatively high, rolling plateau which descends precipitously to the sea on the east coast in a wild jumble of cliffs and spectacular barren fjords. On the west coast the approach is more gradual and there is an inviting chain of islands and small bays. Much of the land is karstic - massive, porous fissured limestone, which will not hold groundwater and therefore is characterized by underground streams, caverns, and an inability to support much more than



- Free Territory Trieste
- French Line (accepted)
- American Line
- British Line
- Soviet Line
- Morgan Line (dividing Anglo-US and Yugoslav occupation zones, June 1945)
- Pre-war frontiers

ISTRIA, 1946-1947

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scrub growth. (In appearance the interior reminds me of the back country of Central Florida where I grew up - also a porous limestone district of rolling hills and flats, underground rivers and a poor, parched cover of scrub oak, palmetto and pine.)

Human settlement has followed the dictates of this geography. On the west coast, with its mild, Mediterranean climate and numerous pleasant bays facing nearby Venice, there has existed from Roman and Byzantine days a string of little ports which in language and character were Roman, and then Venetian, but which had neither the interest nor the demographic vitality to do anything with their poor, parched hinterland. Into this interior, from at least the ninth century,

came the South Slavs - Slovenes to the north and Croats to the south - driven westward by a succession of Avar, Magyar and Turkish enemies and invited to settle by the Venetian and German lords of Istria, who wanted someone to till the poor soil and defend the roads to the west and north.

This is not the place to attempt another ethnic history of Istria, a fascinating and exciting story to which a formidable succession of Slav, Italian and German scholars have dedicated themselves, usually with political axes to grind. It is enough to note that the country quickly became what it remained until 1945, an ethnically mixed society which was culturally Italian along the populous west coast and predominantly Slav in the thinly inhabited interior.

It was also important that from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century the peninsula was partitioned by a stable political frontier. The west and south, including all the Italian ports from Muggia (on the doorstep of Trieste) to Pola and much of the Slav interior, belonged to Venice; the center and east coast were Habsburg. Then, after the Napoleonic wars, all of Venetia came under Habsburg rule, and when mainland Venetia was united with Italy in 1866 Venetian Istria remained Austrian, separated politically from an Italian state for the first time in over five hundred years.

The little cities of the west coast, including now an explosively expanding Trieste, continued to serve as centers of urban attraction for the peasantry of the interior. But because the cities were Italian and the Slav peasants were primitive folk until they moved there, the new arrivals of Slav origin tended to "become" Italian in language and sentiment as they became urbanized. Until the "Slav awakening" of the nineteenth century - which reached isolated Istria only after 1880 - they regarded the Italians, as the Italians regarded themselves, as representatives of a superior culture.

Slav nationalism altered this attitude, at the same time that the economic opening up of the district allowed the growth of a modest Slav middle and professional class even in the market towns of the interior. A conflict between the nationalities followed, which was also a class war, because landowners, entrepreneurs and bureaucracy were Italian, peasants and workers were usually Slav. (Exceptions, important for what has happened since 1945, were found in the northwest around Buje and in the southwest around Pula, where there were many Italian peasants and workers as well.) This conflict assumed a bitterness that no one from outside Central Europe can understand, emotionally, without emerging himself in the literature of the period.

After the first World War this Istria, approximately half Italian and half Slav (any statistics I could offer would be hotly contested by one party or the other), passed to the Italian Kingdom, despite the dramatic efforts of Woodrow Wilson to preserve eastern Istria (Liburnia) and Fiume for Yugoslavia

at the peace conference. Then the Fascist Regime, when it came to power in Italy, adopted a policy of suppressing the Slavs as an ethnic group, of trying to make them into Italians in one generation, which was exceptionally vicious by the standards of a pre-Nazi era. This only exasperated the Slavs and increased the determination of their co-nationals in Slovenia and Croatia to liberate them someday. At the same time, however, Fascist propaganda had a considerable success in persuading most educated Istrian Italians - already passionate nationalists - that the Slavs represented both a national and a social threat, pan-Slav and Communist agents. There was thus less room for an anti-Fascist Italian sentiment in Istria than anywhere else in Italy; Italian anti-fascism here was a phenomenon of the masses, without leadership except for a few lawyers of Mazzinian traditions.

The collapse of Fascist Italy in 1943 precipitated a hideous civil war in this tortured land, in which the Yugoslav participants quickly came to represent Tito's Communist-dominated Partisan movement. Italian anti-Fascists existed, but because the organized Resistance was Yugoslav (and Communist), these found, with relatively few exceptions, that they could fight Fascism only by enrolling or being absorbed in Yugoslav Partisan formations. Thus, ironically, the Fascist Regime's dictum that in Istria Italy meant Fascism and Slav meant Communism, with no room for a third force, became increasingly true.

The end of the war found all of Istria, including the cities of Fiume, Pola and Trieste, in Yugoslav Partisan hands. Firm intervention by the British and Americans, backed by a threat of force and the excuse that Trieste and Pola were essential to Allied military communications with Austria, dislodged them from the latter two cities, which became Anglo-American zones of Occupation - Trieste contiguous with Italy and Pola as an enclave. The rest was quickly incorporated de facto into the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

When the Allied Foreign Ministers met at Paris in 1946 to draft an Italian Peace Treaty the fate of this region once again dominated the discussions. A Four-Power commission was sent out to determine the facts. At this, Yugoslav forces in Istria redoubled their efforts to demonstrate that the peninsula was without doubt a Yugoslav land, in which all Italians except Fascists had also come to desire union with Socialist Yugoslavia where there was a regime dedicated to the defense of the ethnic character of all nationalities. To help them set the scene these Partisans had the advice and assistance of the Croat and Slovene nationalists - far from all of them Communist in sympathy - who had suffered or observed and learned from twenty years of Fascist national oppression. At this period, no doubt, the Italian community was subjected to pressures that alarmed its members. Italians who still preferred Italy to Yugoslavia were denounced as ipso facto Fascists and threatened with appropriate retribution.

Back in Paris the American, British and French experts each proposed a frontier which would partition Istria in such a way that an approximately equal number of each nationality would

be left in the wrong state (the American and British lines, which were very close, at many points approximated the pre-1797 Austro-Venetian frontier). The Russians, who had reasons of their own for not pressing the claims of their Yugoslav friends whenever they met with firm Western resistance, readily accepted the French line, which was more favorable to the Yugoslavs than the other two. But they insisted that Trieste and northwestern Istria, which the French line left to Italy, should instead be established as a Free Territory under United Nations protection, with a Governor appointed by the Security Council. The Western Allies reluctantly agreed. Tito's Government, incidentally, was to remember this Soviet disinterest in supporting what Yugoslavs considered their vital interests.

These decisions were incorporated in the Italian Peace Treaty, and with its signature all of Istria except the northwestern corner and Trieste became Yugoslav in law as well as in fact. The Anglo-American enclave at Pola was evacuated and transferred, to become Pula. The Yugoslavs, however, were highly dissatisfied with their failure to obtain Trieste (and Gorizia, farther to the north), and had to be bullied into signing the Treaty at all. Moreover, the corner of Istria which had been assigned to the Free Territory of Trieste - consisting of the "Slovene Littoral" from Capodistria to Portorose and the Italo-Croat district called the Buiese - was under Yugoslav occupation, and it was clear that only a war could dislodge Tito's forces. This situation was recognized by a "provisional" arrangement under which the part of the Free Territory already under Western occupation - Trieste, Muggia and the coastal strip connecting Trieste to Italy - should remain an Anglo-American zone until a governor and police forces could be established (this became Zone A of the Free Territory), while the Yugoslavs would continue to administer the remainder (Zone B) under the same conditions.

As it happened, the Soviet Union and the Western powers never agreed on a candidate for the governorship, and the "provisional" arrangement lasted until the London Agreement of October 1954 liquidated the fiction of the Free Territory by granting Zone A to Italy and recognizing Yugoslav sovereignty in Zone B. The Yugoslavs assigned the Littoral from Capodistria (now Koper) to Portorose (now Portorož) to the People's Republic of Slovenia and the Buiese to the People's Republic of Croatia, to which the rest of Istria already belonged.

I cannot agree with Mr. A.J.P. Taylor, with whom I recently discussed the matter, that the frontier defined in this process was the best possible. (Mr. Taylor, incidentally, was the Yugoslav's chief propagandist in the West in 1945-46, when he argued with characteristic eloquence for their claim to Trieste and Gorizia.) Economically, as I have suggested elsewhere, Trieste itself would have had a more prosperous future as a part of Yugoslavia. Ethnically, on the other hand, it was certainly no more just to give all of Istria to Yugoslavia in 1947-54 than it

had been to give all of it to Italy in 1919-20. Whatever the dispute about precise population figures, there was no doubting the Italian character of the coastal cities from Koper to Pula, or the genuinely mixed character of the relatively fertile and populous country districts of Zone B and around Pula. Why, then, has this solution proved to be definitive, solving once and for all the problem of Istria?

The reason is that the Italians went away. Frequently their places have been taken by Slovenes, Croats and even Serbs from the interior - displaced, like their ancestors a millenium before, by invasion and war - so that cities like Rijeka, Koper, Pula and Porec are today truly Yugoslav. Sometimes the departing Italians left behind ghost towns, like ex-Montone, or half-empty ones like Rovinj, the most charming of all the Venetian ports, which has declined to 7,000 from a pre-war population of 35,000. Some notion of the size of the exodus can be derived from a pair of statistics: the population of Istria and Fiume in 1940 was about 380,000, not a few of whom perished in the war; but between 1945 and 1962 some 200,000 Istrians emigrated to Italy - 160,000 of them from the territories transferred in 1947, and 40,000 of them from ex-Zone B after its definitive cession in 1954. A legal emigration, by the way, facilitated by the Yugoslav authorities under option clauses in both the 1947 and 1954 agreements.

Most interesting of all, this exodus took place at a time when the official policy of the Yugoslav regime was one of extreme liberalism toward ethnic minorities and when, as far as I have been able to determine, even isolated local instances of national persecution of Italians by their Slav neighbors had virtually ceased.

It is to explain this phenomenon that I have felt it necessary to summarize the complicated historical background to the post-1945 situation in the peninsula. More than a half century of exacerbated national struggle, reaching a climax in the Fascist policy of ethnic persecution and in two years of bitter civil war, had taken its toll. Even those Italians who may have been skeptical of Fascist propaganda regarding Slav barbarism had seen their worst fears apparently confirmed in September 1943, when Croat extremists in Istria massacred thousands of Italians and dumped their bodies into the potholes of their limestone countryside. The Yugoslav insistence during 1945-46, when the decision of the Peace Conference was in doubt, that any Italian who preferred Italy was a Fascist seemed a portent of future persecutions. The Istrian Italians' own leadership, moreover, their bureaucracy and intelligentsia, was not only Italian-nationalist by tradition and anti-Communist by class interest; it had also been Fascist more often than not, for reasons I tried to outline above, and therefore genuinely had something to fear. These classes departed en masse, decapitating the Italian community socially, and the leaderless people, infected with their fears, followed.

That this is the way in which the fever to emigrate took hold is demonstrated by its geographic distribution. In Poreč, for example, which had been considered the intellectual and cultural center of Istria and which had been, in addition, a favored watering place of the Fascist elite, the exodus was virtually complete, proletariat and all. Rovinj, on the other hand, a fishing port and market town almost devoid of native intelligentsia before the war, contains today the most important surviving nucleus of Italians in Istria and is the only town of any size that is 50% Italian in 1963. The same considerations seem to apply to the agricultural hinterland of Pula, where enough Italians stayed behind to make one village, Gallesano, the only place that has preserved an actual majority of Italians. (Pula itself, on the other hand, as an industrial town in which many Italian workers were Communist even before the war, requires a different explanation. Both Yugoslav and Triestine observers have suggested to me that the two years of Anglo-American occupation there, which permitted a free play of Italian propaganda not allowed in Yugoslav-occupied Istria, converted most of the Pula proletariat to the idea of emigration).

And so they left. Those who remained behind comprise a tiny Italian minority inside Yugoslavia - 35-40,000 according to official Yugoslav statistics, 57,000 according to the best Italian estimates made in Trieste. How they live, how they are treated, and what their future may be are subjects for another letter. But Istria, today, is as Yugoslav as Dalmatia, and Italian irredentism there is a dead horse which Italian neo-Fascists may flog to their heart's content without really alarming anyone.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow

Dennison Rusinow



Received in New York

March 11, 1963.

Rovinj: Venetian campanile rises from the harbor town.