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The Italians of Yugoslavia:

2. Life and Times of Another Minority

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

A community of somewhere around 50,000 Italians cannot be said to constitute an ethnic group of noteworthy size or importance in a multi-national Yugoslavia with a total population of more than 18 million. Of the twenty "national groups" and "national minorities" listed on the census report I have before me, the Italians rank seventeenth: there are fewer Czechs, Russians and Jews in this patchwork state, and about the same number of Ruthenians and Vlachs. None of these can compare, for example, with nearly a million Albanians, half a million Magyars or a quarter of a million Turks. Nor do the problems they pose have much in common with those generated by relations among the nations-of-state - Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians and Bosnians - each with a People's Republic of its own.

Nevertheless, the Italians provide as good a place as any to begin an examination of the new Yugoslavia's handling of the deadly old disease of Central Europe, nationalist rivalries and hatreds. The Titoist Regime has long boasted that it has solved the problem by granting absolute equality of opportunity and full cultural freedom to all ethnic groups, on the basis of Marxist-Leninist principles. This claim has been echoed by at least one influential scholar in the West. A.J.P. Taylor's history of the Habsburg Monarchy has a characteristically provocative epilogue in which he states bluntly that Tito is really the last of the Habsburgs, who has succeeded in Yugoslavia in resolving the nationalities question which destroyed the Empire of his predecessors. Certainly the problem is as important for Tito as it was for the Habsburgs: in today's Yugoslavia the two most numerous nations account for only 65% of the total population.

The Italians of Istria are the only minority newly acquired by Yugoslavia after the Second World War, by virtue of a transfer of territory. Like the Magyars of the Viovodina and the Albanians of the Kosovo-Motchijsa, they live near a

disputed frontier on the other side of which is a state inhabited by their kinsmen, who have not ceased to regard that frontier as unjust. Unlike the Magyars and Albanians, they have no obvious political or economic reason for considering life in Yugoslavia better than life with their co-nationals beyond the frontier. They have a sorry history of bad relations with their Slav neighbors. On the other hand, there are very few of them, they are scattered over a large area that is now predominantly Slav, and they are a remnant left behind after the departure of all who really preferred Italy without Istria to Istria without Italy.

These are the basic components of their situation, which I had in mind when I set out last month to go and see them. I quickly discovered that the very last of these is in a sense the most important, for it has determined the social structure and attitudes of the group. The post-war exodus removed certain classes completely: intellectuals and those in the free professions, middle and upper bureaucracy, large landowners and entrepreneurs, much landless peasant labor and most of the Italian industrial class. This means that those who remain are almost all peasants or fishermen, and that the peasants usually own their own land, but in small parcels, either because they always did or because they were given titles during the first post-1945 land reform to the soil they had tilled as tenants. These are the sorts of people who had too much of a stake in Istria - emotionally as well as materially - to want to leave, and who were too low on the social scale to be much infected with Italian nationalism.

There are, in addition, a few teachers and intellectuals who had cared enough about Communism to fight for it, and who therefore naturally preferred to live in a Communist Yugoslavia rather than a Christian-Democratic Italy, even though they are Italian. But there are very few of these: one of them told me that there were "less than ten" university graduates left in all of Italian Istria after the exodus. Their ranks were reinforced slightly by a handful of Italian Communists from Italy who came to Yugoslavia; one of the latter, from the Trentino, is President of the Union of Italians of Istria and Fiume (cultural roof organization of the community) and the minority's deputy to the Slovene Parliament in Ljubljana, while another, from the Mezzogiorno, is a deputy in the Croat Parliament in Zagreb.

This means that the Italian community is "sociologically incomplete" (the phrase of a Triestine who has written about them), totally lacking the classes that tend to be automatically anti-Communist. A happy circumstance for a Communist regime, and one that must be almost unique as well. But it also means a lowering of the cultural level, a dearth of leaders and teachers.

The "cultural autonomy" of which this Regime is so proud is there for all to see, a glowing contrast with Italian policy toward the Slavs in the same district before 1943. This must be understood, of course, within the context of the Yugoslav brand of socialism. There is no whisper of political autonomy in the sense of any formations, cultural or otherwise, outside the framework established by the Yugoslav Communist Party; if the minority did have any grievances as a minority, it would not be able to organize the expression of these grievances in the ways we are familiar with among, for example, the Slovenes of Austria or the Tyrolese of Italy. The Union of Italians here is an affiliated member of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia, the broad political front established by the League of Yugoslav Communists, and all the minority's other institutions - its Italian Clubs in each town, its libraries, etc. - are dependent on the Union.

Culturally, however, the total picture makes a highly positive impression on anyone familiar with the vicissitudes and problems of national minorities elsewhere in Europe. I have a collection of data on the membership and activities of the Italian Clubs, attendance and growth of Italian schools (and the genuineness of parental freedom to choose either a Slav or an Italian school for one's children), efforts to improve the quality of instruction and textbooks, subsidies granted to the Italian-language press of Rijeka, the conscientious bi-lingualism of ex-Zone B of the Free Territory and of a few towns of Croatian Istria, etc., etc. Most significant of all, perhaps, is the testimony of well-informed friends in Trieste, who follow Istrian developments carefully and competently and have no axe to grind for the Yugoslav Regime, and who admit that the ethnic group, as an ethnic group, has nothing to complain about.

A related phenomenon, of special interest as another symptom of the mutations in Yugoslav official attitudes toward non-Socialist Western Europe, is the very noticeable opening up of the frontier with Italy that has occurred over the past five or six years. This reflects a general improvement in Italo-Yugoslav relations that has paralleled the growth of Italy into Yugoslavia's most important trading partner, but the most immediate beneficiaries are the local populations of both nationalities.

The London Agreement called for the establishment of "small border traffic" in the area, and both Italians and Yugoslavs living within a specified number of miles of the frontier were equipped with laissez passer valid for a specified yearly number of border crossings without visas. Recently there has been evidence of increasing Yugoslav encouragement of this and other facilities. In 1962, for example, a new high in small border traffic was established with a total of

5,877,000 frontier crossings by persons armed with the laissez passer (2.25 million of them by Yugoslav citizens, 2.97 million by Italian citizens). There have been cultural exchanges and a growing interest in bringing theatrical companies and lecturers from Italy to make guest appearances at the Italian Clubs of Istria. The work of the Italian consulate-general at Koper has been facilitated. Last year Italians from Trieste were invited to attend a seminar at Rovinj for Istria's Italian teachers, and they were impressed with what they saw. These recent developments are particularly astounding for anyone who visited this area between 1945 and 1954, or who remembers the riots of October 1953, when Italian mobs howled that they would not give up Zone B and disciplined Yugoslav mobs attacked the USIS in Belgrade because America supported an Italian Trieste.

If all of these summary remarks about the status of the minority are taken as read - and I won't burden you with the detailed evidence - there are still a number of interesting observations to be made. The first is that even today a distinction must be made between ex-Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste and the rest of Istria, and within ex-Zone B a distinction between the north coast (the srez of Koper), which is part of the Republic of Slovenia, and the Buiese, which is part of Croatia.

It was certainly the case that the Italians of Zone B, precisely because the fate of the district was uncertain, continued until 1954 to suffer some pressure from the Yugoslavs, designed to persuade them that they were really Croat or Slovene, which their kinsmen in the rest of Istria had not known since the Peace Treaty was signed in 1947. When the London Memorandum of 1954 and an associated Italo-Yugoslav agreement at Udine were drafted, therefore, a number of clauses were inserted for the protection of these Italians. There was, for example, a list of centers in which the Yugoslavs were obligated to maintain Italian elementary schools, and it was specified that the existing secondary schools - a classical lycee at Koper, a scientific lycee at Prian and a two-year technical high school at Izola - should be kept going. Italian should continue to be a legal language, the equal in status of Slovene or Croat, in public offices, official notices, legal proceedings and street signs.

The Yugoslavs have ostentatiously stood by the letter of these provisions, although doing so has involved them in several anomalies. Even an Italian from Trieste has written that the bilingualism of Koper "seems almost forced". Developed as a port for Slovenia (with a tripartite Anglo-Franco-American loan also stipulated in the London Agreement), this little city has changed beyond recognition and except for the old Venetian town center is almost totally Slovene in population and appearance. While towns in southwest Istria with a substantial Italian minority are officially monolingual Croat communities in which all trace of Italian inscriptions has disappeared, every smallest alley in Slovene Koper, has its name in both Italian and Slav. Even more curious, because no international agreement says they must do it, the Yugoslavs have carefully preserved relics of the Italian past of Koper, including

commemorative plaques on the walls of buildings erected during the Fascist Era in honor of local Italian irredentists whose Slavophobia was often notorious. I have even heard a rumor that they may reconstruct the monument to Nazario Sauro - the most famous son of Koper who died fighting for Istria's union with Italy - which the Germans dismantled in 1944 because it was considered offensive to Slovene nationalism!

Of more practical importance is the inefficiency imposed on the Yugoslav school system by the London Agreement's list of obligatory schools. Several of them, because of the exodus of most of the Italians, are too small to be practical, and the minority would undoubtedly benefit from some combinations. The outstanding example is provided by the two lycees at Koper and Piran: in the 1960-61 school year the former had 15 students and the latter 10. The communities are only about five miles apart.

The differences between the Slovene and Croat parts of ex-Zone B sheds some interesting light on what appear to me to be differences in attitude between Ljubljana and Zagreb. The Croats have maintained the letter of the law in the Buiese (where many of the peasants speak local dialects of both Italian and a Slovene-Croat mixture with equal facility, so that even they don't know what they are), but there is less evidence of the positive encouragement given to the minority which I sensed in the "Slovene Littoral".

Slovenia, unlike the other Yugoslav republics, has in fact only two minorities: these Italians and a handful of Magyars up on the Hungarian border. At the same time, the Slovenes are particularly impressed with their own importance at the present time. Until the Second World War they were the classic example of an "unhistoric" nation in Europe. They had never had an independent state of their own, much less a medieval empire to remember, and they were gently despised by their German and Italian overlords. In pre-1941 Yugoslavia, although they had by far the highest standard of living, the most "western" level of culture, and much of the industry, it was the Serb-Croat quarrel that mattered and no one paid much attention to the Slovenes. Their renaissance and self-discovery came between 1941 and 1945, when their contribution to the Resistance began early and was formidable by any standards, and they have since played a sufficiently leading role in Titoist Yugoslavia to arouse grumbles elsewhere. There is no doubt that today for the first time they feel themselves to be a nation. Among their most important achievements, in their own view, has been their conquest of a seaport (they are bitter that in the end it did not include Trieste, their port) which is only ten miles long, but all their own. And having lost Trieste, they will have a Slovene port at Koper.

It seems to me that their attitude toward the Italians of their Littoral also reflects these emotions. To be a nation in Central Europe, one must have minorities. Therefore, the Slovenes wear their Italian minority like a recognition badge. They treat it well, they coddle it, they encourage it to grow. "Look at us," they seem to say, "for a thousand years we were everybody's minority, and we were treated badly, now we are a nation that knows how to treat citizens who speak other tongues." If their Italians all went away, or were assimilated, I think they would feel that they had lost an element of their nationhood.

Is this exaggerated? I don't think so. I put it to Mario Abram, a Trieste-born Italian who is program director of Radio Koper (both Slovene- and Italian-language sections) and ranked in Trieste as number one man in the minority, and he agreed.

Sensible Italians in Trieste, profoundly anti-nationalist but honestly convinced that Italian culture has made an important contribution to life on the other shore of the Adriatic and can continue to do so, are writing and talking about the need to take full advantage of today's relatively open frontier in order to extend a helping hand to the Italians of Yugoslavia. Not, they emphasize, in the hope of subverting the minority or preserving it as a reserve for a future irredentism, but in order that it may become a sort of bi-lingual Istrian elite, loyal citizens of Yugoslavia but culturally Italian and therefore able to maintain the Italian cultural element that has colored the life of Istria and Dalmatia for at least a millenium. Is this a vain, if honorable, hope?

There are two reasons, besides the liberal attitude of the Yugoslav Regime, to think that it is not. One is a growing admiration throughout Yugoslavia for things Italian, encouraged by the cordial inter-state relations of the past few years. (This is the real vindication of Count Sforza's policy, in 1920, of wooing Yugoslavia with friendship, trade and cultural exchanges, over Mussolini's policy of hounding the Yugoslavs into submission to Italian interests.) The vanguard of this Italian cultural offensive is provided, interestingly enough, by Italian state television. Many Italian programs are relayed by Yugoslav television all over the country, but the influence is especially strong in Istria and parts of Dalmatia, where Italian broadcasting is received direct and where the incompleteness of the Yugoslav transmitting network makes it impossible to receive Yugoslav television at all. In Istria a growing number of Yugoslavs, including recent immigrants from the Interior, are learning Italian this way, and there have been instances, now that the choice is genuinely free, of Croat parents sending their children to the local Italian school rather than to the Croat one.

(There is a potential political fall-out as well. One of the strengths of Italian television is its political coverage, including an impressive weekly program on which leading political

figures from all the parties are invited to debate current issues. One Croat acquaintance of mine, a staunchly patriotic Yugoslav who spends his evenings glued to the t.v., remarked that for the first time he understands the meaning of democracy in the western sense.)

The second factor tending to preserve the minority lies with its leadership. As I have already pointed out, these men are convinced Communists, frequently immigrants from Italy, who before 1954 offered abundant evidence of political anti-Italianism. They have not changed, they have no love for the Italian State, nor are they necessarily champions of Italian culture. But they have a vested interest in the Italian character of the minority: their personal positions, as delegates to a legislature, officers of the Union of Italians, etc., are as its representatives. If it ceases to exist, so do their positions of influence or even their jobs. They will therefore fight for its preservation, and will eagerly advertise or even exaggerate its strength to an itinerant foreigner.

Therefore, the prospects in the short run are bright. I think they are less so in the long run. Here the smallness of the community will work against its survival. The problem is precisely analogous to that of the Croat minority of 40,000 in Austria's Burgenland (DR-25). As long as these Italians stay on the farm or in the village, under a regime that is happy to give them schools and access to public offices in their own language, they can remain Italian forever. But as such they have absolutely no significance for Yugoslav society as a whole, and the Triestine idea that they will introduce a Latin leaven into Yugoslav culture is a pipedream. The moment, however, that one of the minority aspires to something bigger or better - to be an engineer, a doctor, an official above the communal level, or even a factory worker - he must move to a town or city, and there are no Italian cities or towns in Yugoslavia.

He must, therefore, either emigrate to Italy (1300 Istrians did so last year, although I am told that between 25% and 50% of them were Slavs, not Italians) or to a Yugoslav city. In the latter case his children, if not he himself, will in due course become Slovene or Croat. The cream of the minority will be skimmed away repeatedly in this way. None of the people I talked to wanted to admit this, but it must be so. There are 80 Istrian Italians studying at the universities of Ljubljana and Zagreb today; a few will undoubtedly return home to teach, or perhaps to practise law or medicine, but is there anything for the others to do there?

As a technical problem, the educational system recognizes this situation. Higher education in their own language, even technical secondary schools, is uneconomic for such a small community. "For this reason," according to the director of the Italian lycee at Rovinj, "a measure that is rational and democratic at the same time has been adopted, which assures the study of

general cultural subjects (mother tongue, history, geography, etc.) in the national language, alongside instruction in professional subjects in the state language."

It occurs to me that there is a postscript to this story: Is it not an historic irony that the Italian triumph in retrieving Trieste from the ruin of Italy's eastern frontier after 1945 may well have dealt an eventually fatal blow to the survival of the Italian nation beyond the new frontier? For none of the above considerations would have applied if Yugoslavia had possessed a major city of undeniable Italian character (and Trieste would have been the second or third largest city in Yugoslavia) to serve as a center of urban attraction for the Italians of Yugoslavia. There are other reasons for not regretting the nature of the final decision, but this, too, must be weighed in the balance in making an historian's judgment.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow

Dennison Rusinow

Received in New York
March 11, 1963.



Croat Istria:
Labin



Hill town of Pazin in winter.