Chained corpses: warfare, politics and religion after the Habsburg Empire in the Julian March, 1930s–1970s

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In Trieste and the border region north of the Adriatic Sea, corpses played a very significant role in the construction of the public discourse about acts of violence in the era of the world wars. Human remains have been a concern for public memory, and for the collective entities connected to the local places of remembrance as well.¹

Italians, Slovenians, Croatians, Habsburg officials, Communists, Nazis, Fascists and the Jewish communities all left their mark in the history of this region; in addition, such categories often overlapped, making any distinction even more complicated. The corpses belonging to these groups were therefore at the centre of the civil and political religions that emerged in this territory during the twentieth century.

Bodies in an advanced state of decomposition were used in war propaganda, and their pictures continued to be exploited from the 1960s onwards. After 1945, corpses became a subject of contention among the groups fighting for control of the territory and later on were involved in the trials of Nazi war criminals.

The Julian March: wars and borders

The northern Adriatic region is named in numerous ways by its different residents. In Italian, it is known as Venezia Giulia (Julian Venice), to underline its ancient Roman heritage. In English, however, this name is usually translated as Julian March, which references

its role as a border. Slovenians and Croatians call it *Primorska* or *Primorje* (Littoral), a partial translation of what was termed *Österreichisches Küstenland* (Austrian Littoral) during the Austrian dominion; but the term *Juljska Krajina* (Julian Region) is also used.

During late modern history the region's borders have been modified numerous times.² For centuries, until the Napoleonic era, the border between Habsburg lands and the Republic of Venice had remained basically unchanged. French expansionism, however, upset this age-old balance and initiated a long era of instability. With the Vienna Congress, the territories dominated by the Austrian Empire expanded west into a large portion of northern Italy, but during the nineteenth century the Italian *Risorgimento* and the process of national unity progressively forced the border back east. With the First World War and the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Italy also conquered Trieste and infiltrated the Balkans, while the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes emerged. Fascism's strong nationalist policy violently repressed the Slavic minorities in the region. Between 1943 and 1945, the Second World War caused the territory to be annexed to the Reich and named *Adriatisches Küstenland* (Adriatic Littoral), with Trieste as its capital. A turbulent post-war period ensued. Until 1947 it was known as the Allied Military Government of *Venezia Giulia*, divided into Zone A, under British-American control, and Zone B under the Yugoslavian army. Subsequently, for seven years, the two fiduciary forces controlled the smaller Free Territory of Trieste (FTT); this was the failed project of a buffer state directly controlled by the United Nations, in view of a Roosevelt-inspired Federation of the World that never took off.³ With the London Memorandum in 1954, the Italian republic and Tito's Yugoslavia found a temporary agreement on the border, and absorbed the former FTT Zones A and B. The situation was ratified in 1976 with the *Osimo Accord*, a local application of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 on the stabilisation of European borders. Finally, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of Yugoslavia created a new border in the region between the two independent republics of Slovenia and Croatia.

The Redipuglia Sacrario: how corpses played out fascist myths

Based on these complex historical events, we can argue that the Adriatic borderland is a place where the Latin, Germanic and

Slavic worlds meet and clash. It was a battlefield in both the First and Second World Wars, producing in the second half of the twentieth century a multifaceted culture of memory and complex civil religions. These were informed by the cultural forms elaborated in the nineteenth century up to the belle époque, during the processes of nationalisation of the masses:⁴ symbols, anniversaries, rituals, places of remembrance, heroes and victims to be remembered varied depending on the political-cultural entities in the public sphere.⁵

The first of the endless series of funeral rites in the borderland during the twentieth century was the public display of the embalmed corpses of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his spouse, on the brink of the Great War in July 1914. The long procession started in Sarajevo. The bodies reached the Dalmatian coast, and from there they were brought to Trieste by sea. In the Julian capital, the celebration was repeated, and then again in Ljubljana, Vienna and at the Habsburg aristocrat's castle in Artstetten. A dedicated train was assigned to carry the corpses inland, and everywhere in the empire its transit was greeted with public displays of mourning by the local administrations and populations.⁶

Nevertheless, it was the power display of a declining state, still too close to the *Ancien Régime*, and very similar to the ceremonies for the funeral of Maximilian I of Mexico, forty-four years earlier. Conversely, the culture of commemoration in the northern Adriatic region, after the Great War, reflected the change in social and political relationships in European society: the new role of the masses, a greater acknowledgement of the individual dimension of life, the new concepts of citizenship and universal suffrage and other socio-cultural features typical of the new century.

The public ceremonies for the victims of the First World War became symbols of these epochal changes, and rooted the representation of the cult of the fallen soldier in pre-existing religious traditions.⁷

The link between the old world, its power displays and the new contemporary society marked by world war blood were the Unknown Soldier ceremonies. The power of this civil rite was such that these were held by all First World War victors in the years following the conflict. In Italy it was held in 1921.⁸

Similar to the celebrations for Franz Ferdinand, a special train crossed the country, carrying a corpse and triggering a process of collective mourning, and arrived in the capital to be honoured. But now, in the place of an aristocrat, the attention was centred on a

common soldier, who embodied all common citizens who had given their lives for their homeland.

In the region, the Italian state erected its most important memorial to the Great War, the Redipuglia Shrine. This is one of the largest First World War memorials in Europe, comparable only to the Douaumont Ossuary near Verdun, or to the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme.

The mausoleum is located near the Carso Front, on a hill that was highly contested during the conflict, and was erected in 1938 by the Fascist regime. An entire side of the hill was excavated to receive the corpses of 100,187 soldiers in twenty-two terraced steps. Only 39,857 of these soldiers are known. At the bottom of the steps are the tombs of the generals. The largest tomb contains the body of the Duke of Aosta, cousin of the king of Italy and commander of the Third Army, the main Italian military formation that fought in the region. Along the edging of each terrace is the inscription *Presente* ('present', said in answer to a roll-call): as if the soldiers were forever answering the generals' and the nation's call.

The Redipuglia Shrine was built on a former site erected in 1923, which hosted about 30,000 infantrymen but which Mussolini thought inadequate – it was not sufficiently grand to symbolise Italy's model of public memory, as the country was attempting to restore the splendour of the Roman Empire.⁹

Actually, Redipuglia is simply a final destination for the remains it contains, as they reached it only after one or more exhumations. In Italy,¹⁰ as well as in the rest of Europe, as argued by Winter,¹¹ the treatment of the fallen soldiers of the Great War went through three successive stages. Until 1918, shrines and graves were systematically built along the front. During the 1920s the temporary graves near the battlefields were dismantled, and corpses started to be placed in dedicated spaces: churches, public places and cemeteries across the country. Finally, between the late 1920s and before the Second World War, the large war cemeteries were built. The bodies at Redipuglia had first been laid in impromptu graves during the conflict, then placed in several minor shrines erected in the 1920s (such as the former 1923 mausoleum), and in 1938 they reached their final destination.

The contention here, however, is that the Redipuglia Sacrario had not been conceived as a simple war cemetery. It was designed by its two architects, Greppi and Castiglioni,¹² as a stage for some of the myths of the Fascist political religion. Fussell showed how

Figure 3.1 Northern Adriatic region, 1939. Italy accessed the Balkan region after the First World War, occupying vast Slovenian areas during the Second World War, before losing most of its territories in the post-war settlement. Istria is the peninsula at the south east of Trieste, west of Fiume (Rijeka in Croatian) (from Cecotti, 2011, reproduced by permission of Franco Cecotti)

the world wars revived the interest in myths in more developed societies.¹³ As a totalitarian regime, Fascism employed public myths and rites on a grand scale, producing its own symbolic apparatus with the aim of creating an increasingly broad and firm consensus. Among the myths represented at Redipuglia is the army of the dead, which emerges clearly from its very layout, with the soldiers' graves in front of the generals' tombs. It is a myth with extremely ancient roots, which had clearly emerged in the press and in the literature of the countries at war during the conflict.¹⁴ In the Fascist context, this myth was associated with the 'Harmonious Collective'.¹⁵ Fascist society had to move as one, each person with their specific role; through obedience and trust in the leader and in the regime, new goals and new victories would be reached. In turn, these would lead to achieving further Fascist myths, which were represented in the

memorial. One was the new Fascist man, embodied by the warrior who sacrificed everything for the nation (in turn embodied by the myth of the Unknown Soldier; in fact, the high number of nameless soldiers that rest within Redipuglia's white hill is one of the site's most distinctive features). Fascism's new men, who would become 'Modern Romans', united in the Harmonious Collective, would lead the nation to new and more daring heights; first and foremost, to one of the other great myths of the regime, 'the Italian Empire'.

With the opening of the memorial, Redipuglia's corpses were thus invested with strong symbolic power. It was not a coincidence that this happened the day before the official announcement of racial laws in Italy, which the dictator explained as a necessary step to fully achieve the empire.¹⁶ However, after the Sacrario was opened with a ceremony presided over by Mussolini, it was no longer used by the regime. The agreement with Nazi Germany deterred it from any public ceremony that could potentially be seen as anti-German. The place acquired some significance later, after 1945 and until the 1960s. The conflict with Yugoslavia for the border and the presence of many veterans from the Great War made it necessary to remember the sacrifice of the Italian soldiers who died in 1915–18 for the conquest of the eastern territories. The nearly 100,000 bodies at Redipuglia (a sixth of the total number of Italian First World War victims) increased the significance of the Great War anniversaries celebrated there in the national public discourse and in Italy's relationship with the neighbouring Balkan nation.¹⁷

Exploiting victims: political propaganda after the *foibe* of 1943

During the world wars, in the border region north of the Adriatic sea, the cult of heroes had focused on a few figures with whom various collective identities could somewhat identify. In some cases, the body of the hero had a special role in the construction of public memory, because its search and sacralisation had been politically very significant. These were the cases of Italian irredentist Oberdan (executed by Habsburg authorities in 1882 and celebrated after 1918), the four 'Heroes of Bazovica' (members of the anti-fascist and Slovenian secret organisation, '*Borba*'¹⁸), and the Slovenian communists whom the regime sentenced to death in 1941, whose most representative figure was Pinko Tomažič.

Two case studies are examined here: the war propaganda concerning the *foibe* (Italian plural, the singular is *foiba*) killings of 1943, and the fate that befell the remains of the victims of the Risiera di San Sabba concentration camp after the war.

Foibe are natural sinkholes caused by water erosion, which can reach depths of hundreds of metres and a diameter of around ten. They are very common in karst areas, such as the region inland of the north-eastern Adriatic coast – geographically known as Carso, *Kras* in Slovenian.

On 8 September 1943, Italy announced the armistice with the Allies. Italian authorities lost all control over the borderland, and especially in Istria, the peninsula on the eastern part of the region. For almost a month, most of the region was under the administration of the Yugoslavian National Liberation Front, until German and collaborationist forces managed to drive the partisans, led by Tito, back into more alpine and inaccessible areas. During this transition stage, the partisans killed no fewer than five hundred Italians, throwing their bodies in the *foibe*. Many were thrown in alive. Then, in May 1945, immediately after the cessation of hostilities with the Axis forces, the Yugoslavian army (which until 12 June would occupy the western part of the Julian March) killed another few hundred Italian soldiers and civilians in similar ways, and sent a few thousand to prison camps in Slovenia. The exact numbers of victims are still a matter of debate, but latest estimates suggest that the total number of victims between *foibe* and concentration camps was 5,000, while the number of people imprisoned was around 20,000. After both rounds of *infoibamenti* (the throwing of bodies into the *foibe*), groups of Italians explored the karst caves and extracted the bodies of the victims;¹⁹ in 1943–44 the retrievals were sometimes supported by German forces, and after the end of the conflict by British–American forces.

In the political debate of the Cold War in Italy, especially under pressure from the Right, the *foibe* events were interpreted as one of the main causes of the exile of about 250,000 people from the new territories acquired by socialist Yugoslavia between 1943 and the 1960s. In practice, they were mostly residents of Italian background, who became a minority in the eastern area of the Adriatic borderland. This perspective acquired its own forms of commemoration in the public memory; it started with the covering, in 1959, of the *foiba* of Basovizza (located near Trieste, still in Italian territory), and the construction of a shrine on the site. From the 1990s the place received more public attention in the country, becoming

one of the most important sites in the definition of Italian national identity. This identity had suffered from a deep crisis, exacerbated by the socioeconomic difficulties of the previous ten years. The (especially institutional) recognition of the *foiba* of Basovizza made this place of remembrance the main site for the representation of national martyrdom in the Julian March, replacing the Redipuglia Sacrario (which inarguably held that role until the 1980s) in the public memory.²⁰

In short, from the point of view of the historiographic interpretation of the *foibe* events, research has shown that the violence that led to these massacres was the result of a partially planned intervention by Yugoslavian authorities, and of the intersecting of ideological and national tensions. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as revenge against Italian fascism, which had denied national rights to Slovenians and Croatians (including the use of their mother tongue and the forced translation of names and surnames into Italian-sounding substitutes) and had been occupying Yugoslavia along with the Nazis since 1941; on the other hand, the National Liberation Front, taken over by communists, was essentially trying to eliminate all opponents of the construction of the new socialist regime, as it was doing in the rest of the country. In the northern Adriatic area this entailed a revolt mainly against Italians, but also against all those who did not accept Tito's leadership, regardless of their nationality. Here, we are particularly interested in the way that anti-partisan war propaganda employed images of *foibe* victims.

After the killings of September–October 1943, and after the Axis powers regained control of the borderlands in October, collaborationist authorities (and particularly a group of firefighters led by Italian marshal Harzarich) actively worked to exhume the bodies of *foibe* victims in Istria, where in the previous month most of the massacres had occurred. During those operations, a total of 217 bodies were extracted from 31 different caves; of those, 116 civilians and 18 soldiers were identified, including some German soldiers.²¹ The exhumations were followed by the local and Salò Republic press, which in the following months would regularly report on the explorations in the Istrian *foibe*. The general tone of the articles emphasised the monstrous brutality of Slavic communist partisans; the only defence against them were Italian–German forces, and people should cooperate as much as possible with them.²² In some cases, these articles featured pictures of the excavations and the corpses themselves, but the quality of the print did not allow for sufficient definition.²³

Figure 3.2 Cover of *Le macabre foibe istriane*, a Nazi–Fascist booklet printed in 1944

Between the end of January and March 1944, two publications were circulated among the locals by German and Salò authorities, one shortly after the other: *Le macabre foibe istriane* ('The Macabre Istrian Foibe') and *Ecco il conto* ('Here's the Bill'). These publications showed some of the corpses extracted from the Julian caves clearly and in detail. The authors of the two sixteen-page booklets cannot be identified, nor is it possible to ascertain their place of publication or their circulation. Considering similar publications of the same era, in the same area, the circulation could have been a few thousand copies. In any case, by analysing the content of the two booklets, we can formulate some hypotheses and we can argue that at least the first one was also addressed to the residents of the Italian Social Republic, as Istria was referred to as 'the other side' of the Adriatic Sea; in other words, it seems that the writer was not from the borderland, but from within the Italian peninsula, in relation to which Istria and the surrounding areas appear as the other side of the Adriatic Sea.²⁴

In *Le macabre foibe istriane*, the authors are explicit about the content of the booklet. On the front and back cover a collage of putrefied faces and decomposing bodies strewn on the ground clearly point towards the content. On the back cover, the following words are printed in large characters: 'A tragic record of the Communist-Slavic

barbarity, dedicated to the memory of all Istrian and Italian people, a warning for today and for the future'.²⁵ Five pages of text follow, alternating with five pages of pictures of the victims' bodies; the last four pages are completely dedicated to them. The captions leave no doubt as to the propaganda purposes of this operation, aimed at creating an easy consensus in the population. The captions included: 'A horde of Slavic communists – an enormous, soulless beast – slaughtered these brothers of ours';²⁶ 'That the terrible fate of these graves and these corpses may stay with you, Istrian people, and inspire you to rightfully avenge your brothers, victims of the merciless savagery of Slavic communists';²⁷ and again: 'A monstrous crime that echoes the brutal wickedness of Senussi²⁸ barbaric hordes: this brother of ours, killed because he loved Italy, with the usual shot to the back of the head, then in his tender parts horribly mutilated'.²⁹ Conversely, the text of the pamphlet begins with two extracts from two publications of the collaborationist regime established by the Nazis in northern Italy. In the first (a speech by Alessandro Pavolini, secretary of the Republican Fascist Party), the tragedy of the *foibe* is presented as a direct consequence of the 'betrayal' of 8 September and the armistice that the king and his forces signed with the Allies. Subsequently, Pavolini, with a rhetoric that blends nationalism and anti-Semitism, denounces the brutality of Russian and communist culture, represented in the Julian March by Slavic people. Excerpts such as the following exemplify this point of view, heavily influenced by physiognomic and racial-genetic biology and anthropology that were popular in Italy at the time:

Bolshevism is war's corpse, Merexzowski³⁰ [*sic*] wrote in his journal, as he suffered hunger and cold in a small room in Petrograd. The corpse is putrefied, and fills Russia with its deadly stench. It oozes necrotic secretions on life, onto religion, onto anything that is human and sacred. It is a horrid idea invented by Jews, tolerated by the blond and languid Slavs, executed by the square-jawed Tartars. Like an atrocious six-pointed star, the hellish idea burns bright in the mind of Lenin, a Tartar with the face of a satyr.³¹

The leader's speech is followed by the 5 January 1944 column, 'Corrispondenze Repubblicane', from the *Regime Fascista* newspaper, edited by Roberto Farinacci, which reports the news of an order sheet with which Yugoslavian partisans had ordered the extermination of Italian people in the borderland, presumably found in the pockets of 'a killed Slovenian Communist messenger'. The news item is followed by an anonymous reflection piece that compares

the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers pictured in the booklet's pages to martyrdom; this would encourage readers to continue the fight and maintain unwavering ideals. Then, a geographical and geological description of the *foibe* is provided, as well as a brief history of the Julian March. The tone of this latter part, which seems especially addressed to those who did not live in the area, confirms that the booklet may have also been circulated in the rest of Italy, occupied by German authorities. In conclusion, the concept of martyrdom is revisited, and Italian people are incited to make any sacrifices necessary to defend the nation – including their lives, as the *foibe* victims have done. The nation has to be as one, acting in the spirit of the Harmonious Collective: 'we must be one mind, one will, in the service of the Nation: *mens una, unum pectus*'.³² This is another example of Fascism's obsession with the cult of its own myths.

The second booklet dedicates significantly less space to ideological elaboration, and has no anti-Slavic content. It focuses solely on blaming communism. An even greater number of images fills its pages. On the cover, a collage of newspaper headlines echoes the many news reports that the press had circulated in the preceding months about the *foibe* exhumations. Among them, the one that catches the eye is the headline, 'Istria like Katyn: the Bolshevik ways in Istria: tragic discovery in a foiba'.³³ The back cover is dominated by the picture of a fist smashing a red star, above the word *Basta!* ('Stop!'). The first paragraph reminds readers that 'in 23 days, the communist hordes' have spread to Istria, causing massacres among the residents, people who just want 'to live and work in peace'. Two pages link some of the most well-known massacres to the names of presumed Communist leaders, concluding with a criticism of international communism as the ultimate cause of the *foibe* killings. The remainder of the booklet includes further pictures of the decomposed bodies of the *foibe* victims, accompanied by captions similar to those in *Le macabre foibe*. Finally, the last page is entirely dedicated to the support of German troops, openly inviting readers to do their 'duty' and give them 'unconditional collaboration and a sincere attitude'; German forces, a 'guarantee of victory', would be the only ones to ensure peace and order.

The two booklets differ in their attitude towards the Slavic component of the region. In this sense, *Le macabre foibe istriane* may be closer to the Fascist rhetoric than *Ecco il conto*: in fact, in their administration of the Adriatisches Küstenland, German authorities enacted a policy that restored the national rights of Slovenian and Croatian people, allowing them to open schools and to use their

languages and their names. In this way, they sought to gain consensus, establish themselves as the continuators of Habsburg policy and counteract the attempts at assimilation perpetrated by Mussolini's regime.³⁴ To further separate and distance the territory from the puppet state administration of northern Italy, German authorities encouraged a sense of national identity in the residents of Friuli (the region immediately west of the Julian March, bordering Veneto), through the application of classic methods of mass nationalisation: publications in the Friulan language, support for the establishment of folkloric groups and choirs, and public initiatives centred on identity and the people.³⁵

The absolute enemy was thus communism, uniquely targeted by *Ecco il conto*. The common trait between the two booklets and the focus of this chapter is the pictures, which seem to be the work of the same author. Their general aesthetic is similar, and is pervaded by a morbid attention to the most gruesome details. The bodies were used as puppets in the staging of a demonic, evil world that echoes, not so subtly, the hellish visions of the Flemish tradition and of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Bruegel the Elder. The very cover of *Le macabre foibe istriane* recalls the faces in Bosch's painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*. The corpses are strategically placed so as to evoke a particular scenic effect; the expressions on their faces are intended to show the inhuman, bestial nature of the enemy, and not of the victim, despite the latter being the one depicted. One of these pictures in *Ecco il conto* shows naked, bruised and battered bodies, male and female, laid out in rows, with the caption 'The death parade: women also among the victims of Stalin's beastly hordes'.³⁶ The images were thus employed with no qualms and no respect for the private suffering of the families, a pornography of horror that appears as a further abuse of the victims.

The photos in the two booklets are similar to those in a Spanish publication from only a short time earlier (December 1943), a report on the results of the so-called 'Causa General'.³⁷ The 264-page book collects the first results of an inquiry conducted by Franco's Ministry of Justice, which started in 1940 with the aim of documenting the 'Red' violence perpetrated during the Civil War. The book contains numerous photos of victims' bodies, in various states of decomposition.³⁸ This text – both in the parallel drawn between judicial inquiry and highly emotional images, and in the state of the corpses and their presentation – evokes an item of Nazi propaganda published in various languages after the invasion of Poland, in the first months of 1940, titled 'Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority

in Poland: Compilation Founded on Documentary Evidence and Published for the German Foreign Office.³⁹ In this publication, Nazi forces attempt to justify the invasion of Poland by showing dozens of cases in which the German minority had been the target of heinous acts of violence from the local Polish population.

Comparing the Nazi representation of Germans killed by Polish people, and those that emerge not only from the two booklets (with a nearly identical aesthetic), but also in all Nazi-Fascist propaganda about the victims of the *foibe* in 1943, some strong similarities emerge. In both cases, the Slavic enemy is dehumanised, demonised, painted as a barbaric, cowardly killer. In both cases, accounts and images present the corpses of the victims being tied together and thrown in the pits alive. In both cases, there are accounts of black dogs being killed and buried with the victims, because it was said that the killers believed that the sacrifice of the animal would atone for all their sins in the eyes of God. This appears as a sort of pagan ritual shared by different Slavic populations, represented as indisputably barbarians.⁴⁰

Based on a general analysis of these two booklets from the winter of 1944, it can be argued that their language is markedly informed by Nazi propaganda. Nazi officials probably took the photos and subsequently decided to use them in the anti-partisan war, with the assistance of Italian collaborationists. In the *Adriatisches Küstenland*, in fact, the 'SS-Standarte Kurt Eggers – Kommando Adria' was in operation, the local branch of the SS-Kriegsberichter-Kompanie (SS War Reporter Company), which from December 1943 took the name of the Schwarze Korps reporter who had been killed in battle near Kharkov in August 1943. The Kommando Adria, led by Austrian Franz Hradetzky, managed Nazi policy propaganda activities in the region. It was based in Trieste and had no fewer than thirty war reporters. They followed all military operations and edited a German newspaper (the *Deutsche Adria Zeitung*) in addition to the *Adria Illustrierte*, which was also published in Italian, Serbo-Croat and Slovenian. Hradetzky's men were also in charge of a multilingual radio station. The support for Friulan independentism was also an initiative of the Kommando Adria.⁴¹

It can be argued that the publication of the two booklets might also have been an initiative of the SS-Standarte Kurt Eggers, like the general framing of the propaganda about the *foibe* in 1943. Furthermore, in the last few months of 1943 the German headquarters had circulated a manifesto denouncing partisan violence and inviting people to support German troops; this manifesto depicted

four different images of dead children, lying face down on the ground, supposedly victims of Communist violence.⁴² The general structure of the manifesto is very similar to the two *foibe* booklets.

The display of criminals' bodies (especially those sentenced to death) has ancient roots, but the display of the victims' bodies for political propaganda reasons seems qualitatively different, strongly determined by Nazi ideology and potentially able to influence both Spanish and Italian Fascism in the context of total war.

After 1945, in the long aftermath of the war and when the fate of the region was still uncertain, the images produced (in all likelihood) by *Kurt Eggers* reporters were at first forgotten in the acute political conflict between Italians and Yugoslavians. They re-emerged in the 1960s in the press associated with Istrian exiles. Among their first publications was the special issue of the magazine *Difesa Adriatica*, which in 1965 republished some of the gruesome images.⁴³ They were mostly revisited by Father Flaminio Rocchi in his work on the Dalmatian-Julian exodus (published in 1970), which represents a summary of the so-called Italian 'militant theses' on the Adriatic issue.⁴⁴ Such images have regularly reappeared from time to time in the political press of the National Right and of the Istrian associations in Italy, generally without mentioning their origins.

The reasons behind the reappearance of those images may be linked to Italian state institutions' public recognition of the Risiera of San Sabba, the only Nazi concentration camp in Italy equipped with a crematorium. Italian nationals in the region contrasted the memory of the *foibe* and the exodus with that of Nazi victims. This occurred in the context of attempting to make the two events equal, fuelled by political forces that used these themes to seek consensus, and in the broader context of anti-communism and the Cold War.

Corpses forcing political clashes: the Risiera of San Sabba and its public memory

The harsh anti-partisan war in the *Adriatisches Küstenland*, and the presence in the region of some Nazi individuals who had participated in the Aktion Reinhardt (the plan to exterminate the Jews in the General Government district of occupied Poland) and Aktion T4 (a programme of forced euthanasia at various extermination centres located in psychiatric hospitals in Germany and Austria), led German authorities to establish a *Polizeihaftlager* (police internment camp), which they equipped

with a crematorium by adapting some rice-drying stations. The structure was set up in the former rice-husking facility in the San Sabba neighbourhood outside Trieste, near the docks. Around 5,000 people died there, either gassed by truck exhaust fumes or individually killed in various ways. An even greater number of people were sent to the work camps in central-eastern Europe. Most of the victims belonged to Slovenian and Croatian minorities. The vast majority of Jewish people who were temporarily interned at San Sabba, and who belonged to the various communities in the northern Adriatic region, died at Auschwitz.⁴⁵

On 3 December 1945, four factory workers, on behalf of Trieste Council, removed the rubble of the crematorium, which had been blown up by Nazis immediately before the end of the conflict on 29 April. Under the debris, a large amount of human remains, ashes and bones, was found.⁴⁶ Immediately, communists sent men to patrol the area, because the victims' relatives would come in the hope of finding some remains, and would take some of the ashes to honour them privately.⁴⁷ On 6 December 1945, the Allies' police forces conducted a more in-depth inspection and confirmed that the remains had been collected in six paper sacks generally used for concrete mix, and that they were mingled with some personal effects likely to have belonged to the victims.⁴⁸

After the findings, on the initiative of communist sympathisers with Yugoslavia, a Committee for Honouring the Dead was created, which included Trieste's Liberation Council, the Jewish community, the Slovenian Red Cross, Sindacati Unici (United Trade Unions), the Julian Partisans' Association and other communist-inspired organisations. However, members of the National Liberation Committee (the coordinator of pro-Italian parties) were conspicuously missing, because, after the signature collection that the communist forces started in September in favour of a Yugoslavian Julian March, the dialogue between the two national fronts had been to all intents and purposes interrupted. Therefore, between 6 and 8 December the ashes were collected in an urn and temporarily hosted at the Slovenian Red Cross premises at 4, Via Carducci. The building also hosted the Trieste branch of OZNA, the Yugoslavian secret services.⁴⁹ It is not clear whether all the human remains recovered were placed in that urn, since three concrete mix sacks certainly contain more material than a common urn for human ashes.

In the meantime, the citizens would visit the Risiera and the urn to bring flowers and honour the victims. The Committee, consistent

with its mission, organised a ceremony that would include a funeral procession leaving from Piazza Unità, Trieste's main square; this would be followed by both a Catholic and a Jewish religious ceremony. Subsequently, the procession would continue towards the San Giusto Cathedral, where the ashes would be temporarily placed in a nearby museum.⁵⁰

However, the Allied Military Government withdrew its permission for the ceremony, as Italian parties had not been involved; while they claimed their anti-Fascist identity, they had not been able to reach a consensus on how to conduct the ceremony. The ban did not, however, change the minds of the organisers. Committee and organisation members showed up at the square with the urn containing the ashes. The violation of the Allies' ban caused the police to intervene. They tried to confiscate the remains and disband the ceremony, but the protesters succeeded in their intent: 'the urn was taken by a few brave comrades, who carried it in their arms to the hospital's chapel.'⁵¹

To date, there is no information on the fate of the ashes in the following days. It is known, however, that on 21 December 1945 the council and the Italian parties organised another ceremony, while the communists invited their sympathisers to boycott the event. This ceremony occurred entirely at San Giusto: the Catholic liturgy being officiated by the bishop inside the cathedral, while the rite conducted by the Jewish rabbi took place on the concourse. Polemically, Trieste's communist newspaper reported that the ceremony was attended by many collaborators, including some who had perpetrated acts of violence at San Sabba. The ashes, according to the press, were placed in four coffins that were sent by truck to Sant'Anna,⁵² to be buried in the city's cemetery.⁵³

In 1975, on the occasion of the re-opening of the concentration camp as a museum, which coincided with the thirty-year anniversary of the end of the war and the ten-year anniversary of the declaration of the concentration camp as a national monument by the president of the Italian Republic, Giuseppe Saragat, the ashes were placed in a vault near the site where they had been originally found.⁵⁴ They were no longer a subject of political contention in the anti-Fascist movement; however, other remains became a cause of conflict between the Movimento Sociale Italiano (the new Fascist party) and the anti-communist organisations close to it, and the anti-Fascist circles (which, after resolving the issue of Trieste with the 1954 London Memorandum and the final agreement on the border, had long moved on from the post-war debates).

In February 1974, during some renovation works on the sewage system, around 150 metres from the Risiera's entrance, a mass grave was found with eight corpses, with no personal items. The forensic assessment placed their death around the Second World War, but a mystery remains about the reasons for the deaths of those people. Two opposing views took hold. Some assumed that the deaths had occurred at the beginning, or in the last few days, of activity of the concentration camp, at a time when the crematorium had not yet been set up or had already been destroyed. Others believed that the burial of victims outside the concentration camp made no sense, and that the bodies were victims of the Yugoslavian forces that had been in the city in May 1945.⁵⁵ The debate, however, was not protracted and the event was soon forgotten by public opinion.

The memory of the Risiera crimes re-emerged as strongly as ever between 1975 and 1976, thanks to the numerous testimonies given by the victims during the war crimes trial against concentration camp leaders. However, no one was ever imprisoned. Furthermore, the issue of collaborationism was not addressed, and only one of the legally indictable subjects (Josef Oberhauser) was still alive at the time of the trial. The former German officer, who had already spent a few years in prison in Germany in the 1960s, was sentenced to life *in absentia*, but Italy's requests to West Germany for extradition went unheeded. Oberhauser died a free man at the end of 1979 in Munich.⁵⁶

However, the trial led to the discovery of other human remains,⁵⁷ which definitively confirmed the existence of the crematorium, refuting the arguments of revisionists.⁵⁸ These continue to deny the memory of the concentration camp and dismiss the Risiera murders as normal warfare, considering the crematorium as an invention of anti-Fascist propaganda, all the while trying to present the *foibe* killings as much more dire instances of violence in public opinion.

The Allies Police report about the discovery of the ashes in December 1945 already contained some testimonies about how the remains of the victims burned in the crematorium had been thrown into the sea from the docks.⁵⁹ These considerations were confirmed by witness accounts during the trial.⁶⁰

The dive unit of the Carabinieri, Italy's military police, conducted a series of surveys in February 1976, which yielded a few dozen kilograms of partially carbonised human bones. Video-recordings of these surveys were then shown to Italian audiences in a documentary aired on national television.⁶¹

Conclusions

In this brief excursus I have attempted to show the central role played by bodies in the definition of public memory associated with some of the main world war-era events in the northern Adriatic region, at the border between Latin, German and Slavic cultures. The Great War undoubtedly marked a separation in collective identities and power hierarchies in Europe. By comparing the tributes to the corpse of a Habsburg official to the Unknown Soldier and to the remains of tens of thousands of soldiers at Redipuglia, these transformations – and the massive influence of the totalitarian Fascist state – can emerge.

No private dimension was possible for the bodies of those who died during momentous historical events. Institutions and political movements, in these examples, intervened heavily in the treatment of the corpses and ascribed various symbolic meanings to them. However, the *foibe* victims of 1943 could not escape collaborationist propaganda, in a climate where not only the enemy, but also the victims were generally dehumanised.

The remains of the victims of the Risiera di San Sabba concentration camp were caught in the national conflict between Italians and Slovenians over the fate of the region. As the crossroads of diverse political, religious and ethnic identities, this area saw the intersections of different public rites: in the commemoration of 9 December 1945, communist, Catholic and Jewish rites overlapped, whereas the 21 December celebrations excluded the communist element by being centrally located in Trieste's great Saint Giusto Cathedral.

The bodies of Second World War victims continued to reappear at various times, in the context of a judicial inquiry that partially succeeded in integrating the historical truth; however, this remains misunderstood by public opinion, which in turn was heavily influenced by developments during the Cold War. Therefore, in some cases, corpses in the Adriatic borderland took on a life of their own, unwillingly becoming actors on the political stage. The real dimension and meaning of death was thus forgotten and replaced with a constant revision of the sacred aspect of politics, to the advantage of those who would benefit from it and the subsequent power games.

Notes

- 1 Translated from the author's Italian by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 Some recent international works have highlighted the main historical issues for Trieste and the Adriatic Borderland: P. Ballinger, *History in*

- Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); M. Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian, 1918–1954* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005); N. Kent, *Trieste: Adriatic Emporium and Gateway to the Heart of Europe: A Twentieth Century Tragedy* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011); G. Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); R. Wörsdörfer, *Krisenherd Adria 1915–1955: Konstruktion und Artikulation des Nationalen im italienisch-jugoslawischen Grenzraum* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004).
- 3 A. C. Bowman, *Zones of Strain: A Memory of the Early Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1982), pp. 111, 155; P. Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. ix–xv.
 - 4 G. L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: H. Fertig, 1975).
 - 5 These themes were extensively examined in my doctoral thesis, from which part of the reflections presented here derive: G. Dato, 'L'uso delle memorie: il caso di Trieste, confine culturale e ideologico nel cuore dell'Europa 1945–1965', PhD thesis, University of Trieste, 2013.
 - 6 F. Todero, *Una Violenta Bufera: Trieste 1914* (Trieste: IRSML-FVG, 2014), pp. 32–4; B. Klabjan, 'Od Trsta do Sarajeva in nazaj: dinastična lojalnost in nacionalna pripadnost v habsburškem Trstu na predvečer prve svetovne vojne', *Acta Histriae*, 21:4 (2013), 749–68.
 - 7 J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 119–27.
 - 8 G. L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 94–8; B. C. Mossman and M. W. Stark, *The Last Salute: Civil and Military Funerals, 1921–1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1991), p. 3.
 - 9 L. Fabi, *Redipuglia: Storia, memoria, arte e mito di un monumento che parla di pace* (Trieste: LINT, 1996), pp. 14–16, 22. F. Todero, *Le metamorfosi della memoria: La grande guerra tra modernità e tradizione* (Udine: Del Bianco, 2002), p. 67.
 - 10 M. Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani, 1848–1945* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1989), pp. 346–8; Fabi, *Redipuglia*, pp. 9–22.
 - 11 Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp. 57, 88.
 - 12 Todero, *Le metamorfosi della memoria*, pp. 67–8.
 - 13 P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 115–31.
 - 14 Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp. 15–18; Todero, *Le metamorfosi della memoria*, pp. 29, 43, 101–2.
 - 15 E. Gentile, *Il culto del Littorio* (Bari: Laterza, 1994), pp. 54–9.
 - 16 For the full text of the Duce's speech, see http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1008030.files/DifesaDellaRazza_Trieste.pdf (accessed 15 October 2014).

- 17 On the founding of the Sacrario di Redipuglia and its role in Italy's republican national identity, see G. Dato, 'Il Sacrario di Redipuglia: un tempio per la nazione', *Acta Histriae*, 1–2 (2014); G. Dato, 'La memoria della Grande guerra e i discorsi ufficiali presso il Sacrario di Redipuglia. Dalla ricostruzione al boom economico', *Qualestoria*, 2 (2014); G. Dato, *Redipuglia: il Sacrario e la memoria della Grande guerra 1938–1993* (Trieste: IRSML, 2015).
- 18 This was a national movement, members of which were shot by the Fascist Special Tribunal in 1930.
- 19 The most significant studies about the *foibe* are: R. Pupo and R. Spazzali, *Foibe* (Milan: B. Mondadori, 2003); J. Pirjevec, *Foibe: Una storia d'Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).
- 20 Ballinger, *History in Exile*; G. Dato, 'Foiba of Basovizza: the pit, the monument, the memory, and the Unknown Victim, 1945–1965', *West Croatian History Journal*, 8 (2014), 35–62.
- 21 Pupo and Spazzali, *Foibe*, p. 26.
- 22 R. Spazzali, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto* (Trieste: Lega Nazionale, 1990), pp. 120–52.
- 23 'I massacratori di Vines hanno superato quelli di Katyn', *Il Piccolo*, 23 October 1943; 'Tutte le salme recuperate', *Il Piccolo*, 28 October 1943; 'Nel fondo della cava di Villa Bassotti', *Il Piccolo*, 11 November 1943.
- 24 Spazzali, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto*, pp. 154–7.
- 25 This is the original text: 'Tragica documentazione della barbarie comunista-slava dedicata alla meditazione degli istriani e degli italiani tutti, monito per oggi e per domani'.
- 26 This is the original text: 'Un'orda di comunisti slavi – bestia immane senz'anima – ha fatto scempio di questi nostri fratelli'.
- 27 This is the original text: 'La sorte atroce di queste bare e di queste salme vi accompagni e vi inciti, istriani, alla giusta vendetta dei vostri fratelli, vittime della spietata ferocia dei comunisti slavi'.
- 28 The Senussi were Libyan tribes that fought Italian colonial troops during the various campaigns for the conquest of the African country.
- 29 This is the original text: 'Mostruosa criminalità che ricorda la brutale malvagità delle orde barbare senussite: ucciso – questo nostro fratello – reo di amare l'Italia, col solito colpo alla nuca e poi orrendamente mutilato della sua parte molle'.
- 30 The authors were probably referring to Dmitrij Sergeevič Merežkovskij.
- 31 This is the original text: 'Il bolscevismo è il cadavere della guerra, scriveva nel suo diario intimo Merexzowski [*sic*], che in una piccola camera di Pietrogrado soffriva la fame e il gelo. Il cadavere era putrefatto e riempiva del suo fetore ammorbante la Russia. Esso lasciava gocciolare il suo liquido necrotico sulla vita, sulla religione, su ogni cosa sacra dell'umanità. Era un'orrenda idea inventata dagli ebrei, tollerata dai biondi e languidi slavi, messa in esecuzione dai tartari dal volto quadro. Come un'atroce stella a sei punte, l'infernale idea ardeva nel cervello di Lenin, dal volto di satiro, di origine tartara'.
- 32 This is the original text: 'dobbiamo essere un'anima sola, una volontà sola, al servizio della Patria: *Mens una, unum pectus*'.

- 33 This is the original text: 'Come a Katyn, I sistemi bolscevichi in Istria. Tragica scoperta in una foiba'.
- 34 K. Stuhlpfarrer, *Le zone d'operazione: Prealpi e Litorale Adriatico, 1943–1945* (Gorizia: Adamo, 1979), pp. 150–2.
- 35 P. A. Carnier, *Lo sterminio mancato: La dominazione nazista nel Veneto orientale 1943–1945* (Milan: Mursia, 1988), pp. 87–9.
- 36 This is the original text: 'Parata della morte. Anche donne si trovano fra le vittime delle bestiali orde di Stalin'.
- 37 I am grateful to Luis Rios, forensic anthropologist at the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid, for suggesting this comparison when I presented this chapter at the conference, from which these proceedings arose.
- 38 Ministerio de Justicia, *La dominacion roja en España: Avance de la informacion instruida por el Ministerio publico*, Causa general (Madrid: Ministerio de Justicia, 1940). A digital copy of the text can be found at www.causageneral.org (accessed 15 October 2014).
- 39 The original German title and bibliographic references are: *Dokumente polnischer Grausamkeit: Im Auftrag des Auswartigen Amtes auf Grundurkundlichen Beweismaterials zusammengestellt* (Berlin: Bearbeitet und herausgegeben von der Deutschen Informationstelle, 1940). The Italian version of the text is cited by Apih in his posthumous work: E. Apih, R. Spazzali, M. Cattaruzza and O. Moscarda Oblak (eds), *Le foibe giuliane: Note e documenti* (Gorizia: LEG, 2010), p. 20. I am grateful to Roberto Spazzali for his interesting remarks on the subject of this chapter.
- 40 Apih *et al.*, *Le foibe giuliane*, pp. 18–21.
- 41 Carnier, *Lo sterminio mancato*, pp. 85–6.
- 42 Archivio fotografico IRSML-FVG Trieste.
- 43 'Era il suo sangue', 'Norma Cossetto', *Difesa Adriatica*, 21–28 May 1965.
- 44 F. Rocchi, *Lesodo dei giuliani, fiumani e dalmati* (Rome: Difesa Adriatica, 1970), pp. 66–95.
- 45 To date, there is no systematic research on the Risiera di San Sabba. The main historiographic analyses are: A. Scalpelli (ed.), *San Sabba: istruttoria e processo per il Lager della Risiera* (Trieste: LINT, 1995); S. Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste, 1930–1945: identità, persecuzione, risposte* (Gorizia: LEG, 2000); M. Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale, 1866–2006* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007); Wörsdörfer, *Krisenherd Adria 1915–1955*.
- 46 'Nuove prove della ferocia nazifascista alla pilatura diriso di san Sabba', *Il Lavoratore*, 4 December 1945.
- 47 R. Pajer, *Ich war I 69186 in Mauthausen: Wiechals Jugendlicher ins KZ-Netzwerkgeriet und darausbefreit wurde* (Klagenfurt-Wien: Kitab, 2010).
- 48 Civilian Police Report, 6 December 1945, Risiera di San Sabba permanent exhibition.
- 49 British counter-intelligence reports, winter 1945–46, National Archives, London, WO 204/12783.
- 50 *Il Lavoratore*, *Primorski Dnevnik*, 8 December 1945.
- 51 *Il Lavoratore*, *Primorski Dnevnik*, 10 December 1945.
- 52 *Il Lavoratore*, *Primorski Dnevnik*, *Giornale Alleato*, *La Voce Libera*, 22 December 1945.

- 53 Sant'Anna Council Cemetery burial records, December 1945.
- 54 Acts of the Risiera di San Sabba Civic Museum, ashes vault.
- 55 'Scoperta nei pressi della Risiera una fossa comune con resti umani', *Il Piccolo*, 14 February 1974; 'Emozione a Trieste per il ritrovamento di sette scheletri presso la Risiera di San Sabba', *L'Unità*, 15 February 1974; 'Si tenta di ricostruire gli scheletri delle vittime', *Il Piccolo*, 15 February 1974.
- 56 D. Nanut and F. Cecotti, *Testimoni giudici spettatori: Il processo della Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste 1976* (Trieste: Aned, 2013).
- 57 Scalpelli, *San Sabba*, pp. 173–9.
- 58 This trend has recently been epitomised by Ugo Fabbri, who tried to participate in the 2006 Teheran revisionist conference with a paper that can be found at www.vho.org/aaargh/fran/livres7/TEHERAN/Fabbriit.pdf. It is unclear whether Iranian authorities formally approved his participation at the conference.
- 59 Civilian Police Report, 6 December 1945, Risiera di San Sabba permanent exhibition.
- 60 Scalpelli, *San Sabba*.
- 61 'AZ Un fatto, come e perché: Processo per I crimini alla Risiera di San Sabba' [television programme], by Emilio Ravel. Broadcast by RAI on 13 March 1976.

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