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ISTRIA AND THE AUSTRIAN LITTORAL: A CASE STUDY IN NATIONALITY AND LOCAL AUTONOMIES

The history of Istria in the XIX century can be defined as the history of an era with more modern and rational forms of political, territorial and social organisation, following the collapse of the Venetian government after about five centuries of ruling and the turbulent period under French and Austrian rule from Campoformio (1797) to the Congress of Vienna (1814). However, the problems regarding the Istrian peninsula became more complicated.

Venice, during its five-century ruling in Istria, consolidated a civic culture in the region that has lasted almost to the present day, and was eradicated and violently destroyed only after the second world war. France brought to Istria, as well as Europe and Italy, the new sense of nationality, by including Istria and Dalmatia among the Illiric provinces; Austria brought order (Austria was an orderly country!), the seriousness of its efficient bureaucracy of Theresian and Josephin origin together with the sense of the State.

During the XIX century, Istria, a bordering land at the far eastern end of the Italian peninsula and at the beginning of the so-called Mitteleuropa, was involved in many complicated matters during the absolutistic and constitutional eras, which had their effects at national, linguistic, ethnic and cultural level and involved Istria directly.

In 1815, the Istrian peninsula, following its reconstruction by Austria, became part of the administration of the “Austrian Littoral” (*Kustenland*), which comprised Istria, Trieste and the county of Gorizia. It was in this framework that the region started a struggle for unity in its century-old history, a history that nonetheless had divided the region into two parts: one part was firstly a patriarchal marquisate and then a Venetian marquisate (it included the coastal development that stretched from Muggia to the North and after 1420, when the Patriarchy of Aquileia collapsed, to Albona, Fianona and Quarnero); the other part was the mountainous (internal) part of Istria also known as the county of Pisino, which had been under Hapsburg rule since 1374).

In the XVI and XVII centuries, the Istrian peninsula went through phases of profound decadence and depopulation (a consequence of the battles between Venice and Austria, the incursions of the Turks and natural calamities (malaria, bubonic plague); it experienced the settlement, favoured and supported by Venice, of populations fleeing the Ottoman threat; it suffered natural disasters, pestilences and famine (bubonic plague, malaria), calamities that decimated or almost emptied the area. The situation in coastal towns was far better, as the population in those areas was mainly of Italic-Venetian origin. However, the Venetian government did little during the final stage of its existence for the prosperity or at least an economic recovery of the region.

Nonetheless, Venice managed to leave a Venetian mark in Istria: men of letters, scientists, learned people of various cultural sectors lived in Istria from XII century up to 1797; in particular, I am referring to the Vergerio, the painter Vittore Carpaccio, Francesco Patrizi, the geographer Pietro Coppo and Gian Rinaldo Carli, to mention a few.

The fall of the Serenissima was the occasion for making mythicizations which started in the first half of the XVIII century and continued to exist over time (the love for St. Mark’s lion, the famous “*ti con nu e nu con ti*” [you with us and us with you] of the inhabitants of the Dalmatian village of Perasto), thus creating a Venetian-Istrian-Dalmatian *koiné* along the whole of the Adriatic coast, from Istria to the Bocche of Cattaro.

They were historical-ideological mythicizations which were first denied in the crucial year of 1848, when the idea of a republic of Saint Mark, risen again in the old territorial borders that

existed before 1797, clashed with real facts. This was due to the new Croatian, Dalmatian attitude of turning more to national interests than to the insurrectional centres of the Italian peninsula, that had to be regarded with friendliness. Just think about the Slav congress of Prague held in 1848 to which the Croats invited the Dalmatian man of letters Niccolò Tommaseo.

The French were not very much appreciated by the Istrian population during their short dominion over the “Illiric Provinces” (comprising the county of Gorizia, the Austrian Littoral with Trieste, Istria, the Carniola with Ljubljana, the Croatian littoral, Dalmatia, the former republic of Ragusa – in 1806 Napoleon’s army entered the town and declared the end of the republic) because they treated Istria as a land of conquest, that could be bartered with Austria, if necessary and advantageous for French politics.

After the catastrophic Napoleonic campaign of Russia, Istria came under the second Austrian domination. In 1813, the Napoleonic code and all the French administrative and jurisdictional laws were abolished. After the Congress of Vienna, the absolutist Austria of the Restoration exerted its power, even if it did not do so in an extremely harsh way, but this fact was nonetheless seen as the desired “*return of Astrea*”.

As the “Circles” of Gorizia, Trieste and Fiume were formed, it seemed as though two maritime provinces were to be created: one belonging to the Adriatic and the other to the Quarnero. In this new organisation, Trieste was the seat of a “circular Captaincy” and an imperial-royal government – subsequently Lieutenantcy – for the whole new province of the Littoral.

The Littoral was then encompassed, together with the Carniola, in a “reign of Illiria” (1816, made up of the provinces of Carniola, Carynthia, and the Littoral – Istria, Trieste, Gorizia), which was created almost simultaneously to the Lombard-Venetian reign that also encompassed Friuli. The first two provinces then became separate provinces, each with their own composition of provincial states, whilst the Littoral did not obtain a representation similar to that of the provinces of the Lombard-Venetian reign, to which it attained. However, it remained detached from the other two above-mentioned provinces and was an independent body. This situation lasted until the crucial year of 1848. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that some internal administrative changes had been made, such as the one that led to the setting up in 1822 of a new “Circle” in Pisino, whilst under Hungarian pressure, the Circle of Fiume, encompassing the districts of Albona, Bellai, Castelnuovo, Castua, Laurana, Volosca and the Quarnero isles, was closed. The Circle of Pisino was transformed into the “Circle of Istria” in 1825, when Trieste was an administratively autonomous district and had a city Magistrature that depended directly on the Littoral. The new circle, which still had its headquarters in Pisino, existed until 1860. The seat was then moved from Pisino to Parenzo and subsequently to Pola. This was a remarkable territorial transformation within the Austrian administration.

Following the new political organisation of the Austrian Empire, in 1861 Istria became an autonomous province with the title of Margravate – Marquisate – and the seat of the provincial Diet was Parenzo (its emblem bears a golden goat with red horns in an azure field).

Nonetheless, these events and changes in the area are important to better understand the gradual development of many contradictions, many contrasts at social and ethnic level - wished by Austria against the Italian autochthonous population of Istria and Dalmatia – which gave a sharp tone to Istrian vicissitudes at the end of the century.

The French domination, and the Restoration era, after the Congress of Vienna, brought an end to the century-old division of the Istrian peninsula into two Istrias (Venetian and Hapsburg). The creation of the “Circle of Pisino”, allowed the Croatian part of the population - under the direct influence of the “National Croatian Awakening”, promoted by Ljudevit Gaj (writer of grammar books and dictionaries in Croatian) and Count Drasković through his “Dissertation” (which became the actual programme of the Croatian uprising) - to start a new policy that no longer aimed at a common cohabitation, like the one that had existed for five centuries during Venetian rule. This led Italians

to opposition because an old ethnic and social structure that had favoured them as the leading class had been changed. However, this happened in an era when Illirism had not yet become a hostile political movement on the part of the Slav ethnic component that was almost naturally considered subordinate and did not show any substantial progress in the first half of the XIX century.

As a matter of fact, in the whole Istrian and Giulian area, Trieste was the only town that had developed a strong “Italian” bourgeoisie in the previous century, and the Giulian town became an extremely important “*factory of Italians*” in the XIX century, not through coercion but through spontaneous assimilation. In 1822, when the “Circle” of Pisino with its districts was formed, a new event occurred, that is 50 or 60,000 Slavs of mountainous Istria – county of Pisino – were encompassed in the mainly Italian population of ex-Venetian Istria. The area was deprived of its century-old capital, which had been Trieste since 1797, and the newly-formed “Circle” of Istria encompassed some districts that had nothing in common with the Italians (Istrians) “*neither origin, nor history, nor language, neither usages and customs nor interests*”, as underlined by the Rovigno historian Bernardo Benussi (who is today considered the founder of Istrian historiography).

According to the historian Fulvio Salimbeni and to a national historiography with an Italian tendency, this event contributed to blurring completely the ethnic and social physiognomy of the Istrian territory, thus stressing that the Austrian government already had the intention to use any means to deprive Istria of its character of Italian province and make it appear more Croatian. Croatian historiography had a similar attitude in the sense that it tried to claim a Croatian substrate for Istria, referring to the century-old presence of Venice in the region as an occasion that was used to denationalise original Istria, or to overwhelm an autochthonous Istrian feature, just like the Croatian component had been overwhelmed over the centuries by the Venetians.

However, Istria took on a specific ethnic, cultural and social physiognomy only in the first half of the XIX century when Trieste was detached from the rest of the circle and the “Circle of Istria” (ex-Venetian and ex-Austrian Istria) was set up. It was at that time that the Croatian and Slovene ethnic component acquired primary importance in the internal part of the peninsula. The Italian character of the province was gradually limited to the coastal towns and a few villages of inland Istria (Pinguente, Pisino, Albona, Buie, Montona), that had become islands in an ethnic Slav environment. And this Istria that was institutionally and administratively standardised in the Austrian context, soon revealed its ethnically complex nature when the Risorgimento ideology of united nationalities became the post-Risorgimento ideology of nationalism which clashed one with the other in terms of majorities and minorities, oppressors and oppressed, in those lands as well as in other parts of Europe.

It has to be borne in mind that Trieste and Istria, at least the mountainous part, were considered hereditary dominions of the Austrian Empire, and the government pretended to ignore national differences, by imposing the German language as the only official language of administration and education.

After 1860, and a year after the constitution of the Reign of Italy, the Italians of Istria increasingly expressed their separatist will to detach themselves from Austria – at the same time the same thing happened in Dalmatia through a political battle between the Italians, supported by their autonomist party (led by Bajamonti – the admirable authority of Spalato – Count Borelli and N. Tommaseo) and the Croats, led by the national party – (there were numerous journalistic reportages in Italian language on the result of the political and electoral battle for controlling the local administration in the single municipalities of Dalmatia until the end of the 1880s).

The first Istrian Diet that gathered in Parenzo in 1861 refused to elect the provincial deputies that had to be sent to the Council of the Empire in Vienna (there are many copies of the “Proceedings of the Provincial Istrian Diet in Parenzo” from 1864 onwards at the Library and archive of the Centre for historical research of the Italian Union of Rovigno). It has to be remembered that Austria had become a constitutional State according to the “October diploma” of 1860; and in

1867 the Austrian Empire, in compliance with the Austrian-Hungarian agreement, became the two-fold Austrian and Hungarian monarchy. The Istrian refusal of 1861 (the famous Diet of no one of Parenzo) was the first expression of the separatist political will of Austrian Italians which became increasingly stronger over time in the declining Austria of the end of the century.

The first disagreements arose in 1848 when the Croats occupied Fiume until 1867, when it became once again part of the reign of Hungary in the Hapsburg context, as a “*corpus separatum*” (the work and attitude of Marie Therese and Joseph II as regards the *corpus separatum* and Fiume was remarkable). The movement of national Croatian awakening, characterised by loyalist clericalism, was strongly felt not only in Fiume, but also in Istria towards the end of the century.

From an economic and commercial viewpoint, after the treaty of Campoformio, Istria gradually moved towards Trieste (free navigation in the Adriatic sea and opening of free ports in Trieste and Fiume – declaration made at the beginning of XVIII century by Charles VI), although the creation of the Austrian Lloyd for navigation in 1836 brought about a crisis for the Istrian and Dalmatian marine. This led to the setting up in Trieste, with Istrian and Dalmatian forces, of private navigation companies that made a fortune and influenced the Mediterranean and international Adriatic traffic. I am referring in particular to the famous ship owners of Lussino-Lussinpiccolo, such as “*Tripovich, Cosulich, Martinolich, Gerolimich*”.

The development of a process of industrialisation in the province (Trieste, Monfalcone, Pola) allowed a strong socialist party to assert its authority in the Istrian peninsula. It changed, in the years preceding the 1915-1918 war, the political struggle on Giulian soil.

World War I had the objective of annexing Venezia Giulia to Italy, thus freeing the whole Italian population of the Adriatic area from Austrian dominion. The disappearance of Austria meant that the Giulians and Istrians were realising a dream they had had for over fifty years. Venezia Giulia was then created, to which Zara was annexed, but unfortunately new problems and disagreements arose and had dramatic consequences for the majority of the autochthonous Italian populations of Istria and Dalmatia.

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