

# Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century

Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth  
to the Twentieth Century:  
Volume 2

Edited by

Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta

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Anida Sokol, Roberto Sciarrone and Alessandro Vagnini

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# THE LAST RISORGIMENTO: RIOTS IN TRIESTE IN 1953

MICHELE PIGLIUCCI

## Introduction

One of the main propagandistic goals of the Italian Kingdom's entry into World War I against the Central Empires was to conquer Trieste, the final path of Italian unification. When Italy lost World War II, the city of Trieste was occupied by Anglo-American troops and stayed under military control for nine years, until a diplomatic decision about the borders between Italy and Yugoslavia was not reached. A "cold war scenario" was established in the city during the military occupation: the Yugoslav secret service's agents worked to organize a "fifth column" to set up a Yugoslav invasion of the city, while the Italian secret service's agents secretly trained Trieste's youth (and Fascists too) to defend the city with NATO weapons hidden in it. In this context a civil disorder took place on November 3–6, 1953 in which English policemen were compelled to attack the protesters, killing six and injuring dozens of people.

### ***Cold war scenario in Trieste occupied for nine years***

When Italy lost World War II, Yugoslav Partisans, led by Marshal Tito, engaged in a military race to liberate the city before the Allied troops; this was called "the race to Trieste." Yugoslavs freed Trieste before the Allied troops with the purpose to gain a geopolitical advantage in the area. Tito, in fact, wanted to establish a great Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that would include also Trieste; with the motto "*Trst je naš*" (Trieste is ours) Yugoslav troops occupied the city from May 1 to June 12 1945, terrorizing the Italian population whom they considered responsible for fascism. The Yugoslav occupation ended on June 12, 1945, when Tito left the city to the Allied troops after an agreement with General Alexander.

Two years later, the Treaty of Peace assigned the entire region of Venezia Giulia to Yugoslavia except for a strip of coastline that included Trieste, Capodistria and some other towns with the majority of the Italian

population. On this strip of land not assigned to Italy or Yugoslavia an independent state called the Free Territory of Trieste was established. It was composed of two zones with a provisional military administration: the A zone, which included the city of Trieste and the surrounding area, was under a provisional Anglo-American administration and the B zone, which included the rest of the territory, was assigned to the provisional administration of Yugoslavia. According to the goal of the Treaty of Peace, this territory had to remain independent, led by a president that had to be appointed by the United Nations. But the Free Territory of Trieste was never established officially and a president was never appointed; Italian and Yugoslav diplomacies started to work to convince the Allies that they had the right on the entire territory.

Therefore, a long period of uncertainty about Trieste's future began. The population in the city was divided into three groups: the supporters for the city's return to Italy, the proponents of Yugoslavia and the supporters of the Free Territory of Trieste as an independent state. These three groups were politically organized: the Italian parties were a single block that included all political parties except the Communists, including Fascists, Monarchists, Christian Democrats and the Socialists; the Slavs were a well-organized minority with a secret component linked to Yugoslavia; and the pro-independence block represented a novelty in the political scenario of Trieste. The main pro-independence party was the *Fronte dell'Indipendenza del Territorio Libero di Trieste* (Independence Front of the Free Territory of Trieste), a new party that gained more than eleven thousand votes in the elections of 1949. The Independence Front collaborated with the Yugoslav formations, which through them hoped to diminish the support for the Italian cause; in fact, the independence of the Free Territory of Trieste could weaken the Italian presence and allow in this way a cultural and economic penetration of Yugoslavia, which would prepare the path for a possible future annexation.

The other pro-independence party was the Communist Party. From 1948, when Tito was expelled from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), the majority of the Communists of Trieste remained loyal to the Italian Communist Party and then to the Soviet Union and decided to leave the position of Yugoslav propaganda and to take the pro-independence side. Just a small part of the Communists (especially Slavic-speaking ones) remained loyal to Tito and joined a second Communist party, born after the split of 1948 and managed by Branko Babić.

Despite having the same goal, independent parties were divided into two blocks: the Independence Front was allied with the Slav parties and the Communist Party of Vittorio Vidali was linked to Italy and was ready

to react with weapons against an eventual invasion of the Yugoslav army. Indeed, while the Italian diplomacy worked to prevent the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste and to regain the possession of the city, Tito threatened on several occasions to invade the city in order to avoid the area being placed under Italian sovereignty. The Italians knew very well that in case of a Yugoslav invasion the Allied military government would not defend the territory; this widespread feeling was subsequently confirmed in the documents preserved in the National Archives in London.

The Italian government decided to equip the Italian population of Trieste for a defense in case of a Yugoslav aggression. While the chief of staff of the Italian defense was designated to plan the military invasion of Istria, at the same time the Minister of Defense Taviani took the charge of organizing the defense of the city from the inside. The youth of Trieste—and especially the Fascist ones—were brought in convoys to Monfalcone, the first town over the border in Italy, where they were trained to use weapons in special military camps. At the same time, Taviani sent the Partisan leader Enrico Martini Mauri to the city with the task of setting the weapons (secretly brought in the city) and organizing a resistance. Despite the *cold war* scenario, he did not dislike involving in the resistance both the Fascists and Communists, ones who were the most prepared to fight.

At the same time Tito seriously planned to invade the city and organized groups that had to support an eventual invasion from the inside of the city: the so-called fifth column, probably led by the Yugoslav Partisan Franz Štocka, the former head of the city command during the Yugoslav occupation in May 1945.

### **Civil disorder November 3–6, 1953**

In this scenario, a critical political phase stared in Italy: the elections of June 7, 1953 rejected the politics of Alcide De Gasperi, who tried unsuccessfully to create a new government but did not gain a vote of confidence in the parliament. Italy was in a political crisis without a government in a very delicate moment.

The task of setting up a new government was given to Giuseppe Pella, who achieved a parliamentary majority by involving the right wing parties in the Trieste issue. Pella was sure that the only way to solve the issue was the partition of the Free Territory of Trieste: the A zone should be placed under Italian sovereignty; while Italians would lose the B zone.

However, the government was not strong enough to support this solution in front of public opinion: Italians still hoped to regain possession of the whole area. Meanwhile, the more time passed, the more the

situation became complicated for Italy; in local elections of Trieste in 1952, the Independence Front doubled the votes from eleven thousand to twenty-two thousand. So it was necessary to operate quickly to create political conditions for a division between the two territories.

Tito agreed with this aim; for the dictator it was important to guarantee to the Slovenians access to the sea through the possession of the B zone, but he knew that the occupation of Trieste would unleash a war and undermine the balance between the Yugoslavs in his state and the relations with the West.

Premier Pella decided to make the first move; on the occasion of a demonstration of former Partisans in Slovenia in a place close to the border with Italy, he decided to mobilize the army, demonstrating their readiness to react to an invasion. This move quickly raised the already high tensions between the two states: Tito reacted by mobilizing troops to the border, and the two states started threatening that they will occupy the city.

The move achieved the expected outcome: Allied diplomacy's offices began to work for a quick solution of the issue to avoid a war in which Anglo-American troops in the city would have been involved. Meanwhile in Yugoslavia and in Italy there were street demonstrations in every city; but in Trieste the Allied military government banned demonstrations for all the parties. This ban was broken by the Yugoslav supporters on October 14, 1953, when a large number of protesters crossed the streets of the city and were tolerated by the British police.

However, violent clashes took place when the protesters started fighting with Italians. And it was just the beginning: on November 3, the city of Trieste was celebrating the patron saint's day and also the anniversary of the entrance of the Italian troops into the city in 1918. This date was the occasion for a big march prepared by the Italian citizens of Trieste with the support of the Italian government, but the British police decided to forbid this event and seized the Italian flag put on a flagpole by the mayor.

The day after, November 4, was the anniversary of the Italian victory in World War I. The inhabitants of Trieste marched again in the city to demand the return of the confiscated flag; new clashes erupted, which were extended throughout the city and lasted late in the night. The next day, November 5, students decided not to return to school after holidays but to march again protesting against the police violence of the day before. Violent clashes with the police erupted; the police decided to respond with weapons killing a fourteen-year-old boy, Piero Addobbatiand, and a sixty-five-year-old man, Antonio Zavadil.

On November 6, the clashes turned into a real riot. The city was crowded with protesters from the early morning; people attacked policemen and set fire to their vehicles. The protesters crossed the whole center of the city, attacked and destroyed the headquarters of the Independence Front and then came to the Unità d'Italia square, where they attacked the headquarters of the police by using guerrilla tactics: they crawled behind the edge of the sidewalk to defend themselves from the gunfire of the police shooting from the roof of the building, then they came close to the building and attacked it with hand grenades.

A student Francesco Paglia disarmed a policeman and tried to shoot, before being hit. The police responded by shooting at people across the square, killing four citizens and injuring dozens. The riot ended just when the square was occupied by US troops—which were respected by the Italians. The US troops replaced the policemen and interposed themselves between the protesters and the building.

In three days, riots had caused six deaths and dozens of people were injured. After the riots, the police department was dismantled and many had to leave the city forever. In Italy, newspapers gave prominence to the clashes and people were sure that a resolution to the issue was quickly needed. In a few months, on October 5, 1954, the Memorandum of Understanding of London was reached; it was the agreement on the division of the Free Territory of Trieste between Italy and Yugoslavia. The city and the A zone were assigned to Italy, while the B zone was given to Yugoslavia.

### **The role of the Yugoslav secret service**

Who organized these clashes? The British government was convinced that the Italian secret service had planned and staged the clashes with the goal to force the Allied command to seek Italian intervention and, in this way, to pass the administration of the city to them.

Indeed, historical documents prove that Premier Pella had been privy to the organization of a big march in the city, even that he had sent money for this, but it is difficult to think about an Italian strategy of tension because clashes could cause a war with an uncertain outcome. Pella had wanted surely a large demonstration but not a serious riot.

But certainly someone wanted riots in Trieste. A few days before, certain persons under the guise of Italian agents hired some members of the gang of the Cavana quarter to turn the marches into violent clashes, giving them Yugoslav money in exchange. Our opinion is that the Italian secret service was not behind these clashes for several reasons: the riot



was more valuable to Tito than to the Italian cause and we can observe in private documents that no one in the Italian government knew about this operation, neither in Rome nor in Trieste. In the following days several people went to the office of the Italian delegation in Trieste demanding their reward, but they were turned away by the workers.

After all, General Winterton, the head of the Allied military government in the city, claimed that the Yugoslav money given to the Cavana gang members had not come from the Italian government but from an unknown source. It is possible to suppose that agents of the Yugoslav secret service had organized these clashes to force Pella to agree with the split of the territory. Cavana members could have been hired by Yugoslav agents to begin the riot, believing that they were hired by the Italian service.

It is just a theory. We know that in these demonstrations there were students, workers, children, women, pensioners from Trieste; thousands of people clamoring for freedom of their city. Fifty-one years later Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the Italian president of the republic, reminded the public about this event by giving a gold medal to the memory of the killed people, recognizing the Trieste riot as a real last step of the Italian Risorgimento. As in the past, Trieste was the city in which the Italian Risorgimento was concluded for the second time.

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