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**Yugoslavia on My Mind: Politics of Memory of World War II between Slovenia and Italy**

This essay explores certain aspects of memory cultures between Italy and Slovenia from the demise of Yugoslavia to the present. The aim is to go beyond the local, bilateral case to challenge explanations of neatly defined cultures of remembrance and to demonstrate that focusing exclusively on post-socialist countries tends to perpetuate Cold War visions. Indeed, these methodological perspectives and structural attitudes suggest that states and their institutions are the only creators of memory politics in a top-down direction. Such a vision does not leave room for different forms of memory cultures. If we adopt a different approach, focusing on vernacular rather than official memories - produced by state institutions - we can ask whether memory cultures were indeed diametrically opposed. Even if forms of suppressing divergent memories were often violent in eastern European countries, it would be misleading to think that in western societies different memories peacefully coexisted in mutual dialogue.

By presenting the case of Slovenia and Italy, I will argue that the politics of memory in post-socialist societies are not *per se* unique or different from those in some other parts of western Europe. Moreover, if post-Cold War politics of memory in Slovenia are as they are, it is not only because of the country's socialist past. They are framed in close interaction with politics of memory on different levels and directions, *in primis* with those of its neighboring countries with which Slovenes share a troubled past (especially Austria and Italy), and narrated “within the context of a European discursive universe” (Sierp, 2014, 2). A closer look at local commemorative practices throughout Europe shows that those in socialist countries are probably less different from western Europe than we might think. Thus, this essay demonstrates that the borders of memory cultures are blurred and that perceptions of WWII in the east and in the west of Europe share differences as well as commonalities.

To do this it is particularly fruitful to examine the impact of different politics of memory in a larger, a transnational context of border areas. Borders not only divide and delimit but are often places of junction and mutual influences and borderlands are crucial sites for the recovery of memories, their contestation and re-negotiation (Zhurzhenko, 2011, 74). Therefore, I will use the case of the Italo-Slovene borderland; first, to challenge the vision of a hermetic and exclusive post-socialist memory, and second, to show how politics of memory intertwine across national borders. Managing the past and redefinition of collective identities after 1989 and 1991 are not specific to post-communist societies (Kattago, 2012, 89). The obsession with memory and the reinterpretation of history are European, even global, phenomena rather than an eastern European peculiarity (Collotti 2000).

The Primorska region, the westernmost part of Slovenia today, at the border with Italy, through which the Iron Curtain ran in the first post-war years, seems appropriate to test the degree of permeability of national memory cultures. After the demise of the Habsburg empire in 1918, the region underwent several territorial changes: from the annexation to Italy and the theatre of a harsh policy of anti-Slovene ethnic suppression, to the incorporation into the Third Reich between 1943 and 1945 - with an extremely high rate of victims and general war-time violence. If in other regions of Slovenia today the struggle between the communist-led Liberation Front and collaborationist units was harsh, in this region because of its territorial liminality and unclear belonging the partisan leaders were able to organize an efficient and widespread underground movement supported by the majority of the local population. After the war the region was occupied by Yugoslav, British and American troops. At the Paris Peace Conference, the western part was returned to Italy, the eastern part was given to Yugoslavia, while part of it, including the port-city of Trieste, was granted the status of Free Territory administered by both armies until 1954. Even if tensions gradually decreased both at the state and local levels, as a result of which the demarcation was increasingly a line of conjunction rather than rupture, after the end of the Cold War new contrasts emerged.

In post-war Slovenia, the key emphasis in commemorative practices became the incorporation of the Primorska region into Yugoslavia in 1945. After gaining independence in 1991, Slovenia did see new interpretations of history and calls for its revision, yet its visions of the past did not entirely change. Why? Mainly because the end of WWII and the partisan struggle resulted in the 'national liberation' of Slovenes and the annexation of most of the Primorska (Littoral, previously named Venezia Giulia) to Yugoslavia. This had an important impact not

only on the region itself, but on the national collective memory in general, since it enabled the activation of the Slovene national program. Even if the contested cities of Klagenfurt/Celovec, Gorizia/Gorica and especially Trieste/Trst remained outside its borders, after World War II socialist Slovenia, as part of Yugoslavia, gained a large part of what Slovenes considered their ethnic territory. A similar understanding of the past can be observed in some parts of Croatia, especially in Istria and in Rijeka/Fiume, where the post-war order brought not only socialism but also ‘national liberation’ for the Croatian-speaking population (Dota, 2010, 29).

During the changing geopolitical situation from the end of the 1980s onwards, *new* histories came to the fore. While in Slovenia this provoked harsh discussions on ‘victims of post-war killings’, in Italy the ‘foibe’ (pits used as graves) and the ‘exodus of Italians’ became central elements in the post-Cold War national narrative. Accusations of Yugoslav ethnic cleansing against local Italian-speaking population were mounting. However, the construction of the image of the ‘Italians’ being victims of WWII and its aftermath was not something new. This had already begun during the war, together with the fall of Mussolini in summer 1943, at a time when the collapse of Italy opened, again, the question of a geopolitical reconsideration of the northern Adriatic area. This image has been supported by the ambiguous role of Italy as ‘co-belligerent’ of the Allies and it continued into the Cold War when Italy played an important role in the geopolitical strategies of the west. Especially right-wing parties and organizations cultivated and propagated memories of ‘Yugoslav crimes’ against Italians. Memories of ‘foibe’ and ‘exodus’ were not frozen or submerged. During the Cold War, such memories had no major impact at the national level, but were the dominant theme of the local memory discourse. Especially the local right and major exile organizations were confined within their exclusive realm of remembering. They built their identity on their own perception of history according to which national identity was the main trigger for the post-war ‘exodus’ (Ballinger, 2003). They were organizing commemorations in Trieste, Gorizia and other Italian towns, which at that time were relegated mostly to far-right circles. Yet in 1980, they succeeded in entering the national discourse: in Basovizza/Bazovica a village 15 km east of Trieste, at the border with Yugoslavia, the pit where corpses were found after the war, the ‘foiba’, was recognized as “a monument of national interest”. Thus, its perception of a neo-fascist *lieu de memoire* slowly dissolved and was reimagined as a site of national tragedy.

What was new in the 1990s? After the collapse of the socialist world and the demise of the anti-fascist myth in Italy these narratives became central to the recreation of a (supposedly) lost Italian identity. Yet now they were no longer marginalized, neither politically nor geographically. After 1989, in Italy, the so-called “First Republic” had become mired in political collapse. The transformation of the Italian Communist Party, the biggest “western” communist party, the rise of new political forces as the *Lega nord* and *Forza Italia* and the presence of post-Fascists in the government led to a weakening of the anti-Fascist myth and to a revision of the Resistance paradigm (Mammone, 2006, 217). Not only in Yugoslavia and in eastern Europe but also in Italian society a widespread debate about “reconciliation” and “pacification” took place. As elsewhere, its aim was to rebuild the country around a revised version of the national past and the “eastern border” helped to set a narrative of victimhood against one of guilt and responsibility (Clifford, 2013, 243).

In the new international atmosphere, previously marginal commemorative practice turned into events attended by state representatives. In 1991, the Italian President Francesco Cossiga introduced the ritual of attending the commemoration at the Basovizza foiba, thus elevating it to a ceremony of national importance. His successor Oscar Luigi Scalfaro declared the site a national monument in September 1992, and since then it has been propagated as a site of ‘Italian martyrdom’ equivalent to genocide committed by Yugoslav communists, which was for decades silenced due to political reasons, including the international balance required by the Cold War (Pirjevec, 2009, 199–208; Verginella, 2010, 49).

These mnemonic processes and upheavals had their political backgrounds. If Italian politicians on the regional level mostly supported Slovene (and Croat) independence, the official statement of the national foreign policy was rather ambiguous. From an initial denial followed by skepticism of the foreign minister Gianni De Michelis, Italy recognized Slovene independence in January 1992, but later blocked its accession negotiations with the European Union. The attitude of the first Berlusconi government, in charge between 1994 and 1996, proved to be especially harsh. Only after a long dispute over compensation issues and property restitution to the exiles, did Italy lift the veto of a Slovenian accession agreement. If European diplomacy solved the controversy on the political level, the controversies left negative feelings in the population. Together with the escalation of narratives of the past based on the reevaluation of the Fascist period and the criminalization of Yugoslav partisans, this policy provoked different reactions and introduced additional elements to a harsh debate

in Slovene society. Yet such politics of memory did not end in 2004 when Slovenia joined the European Union. In March 2004 the Italian Parliament passed a law establishing on 10 February Italy's national Day of Remembrance and the case of "foibe and exodus" became the *topoi* of Italian national remembrance accepted by the great majority of the political parties (Mattioli, 2011, 157–193). Even if some scholars saw the new law "in clear apposition...to the Holocaust memorial day" (Gordon, 2006, 183), its significance is more nuanced and complex. In fact, these new narratives enabled not only the perpetuation of the image of the Italians as *brava gente* and as victims of WWII in the general posthumous amnesty, but also to criminalize "Yugoslavs", along with "Germans", for the "tragedies of the Italian nation" (Pirjevec, 2009, 201–230; Osti Guerrazzi, 2010, 240–241; Focardi, 2013).

However, all these memory operations have shaped not only memory cultures and perceptions of the past in Italy. Even if in Slovenia official politics dominated by the center-left Liberal-democratic party (LDS) for most of the 1990's mostly overlooked historical controversies and postponed memory aspects, the waves of commemorative discourses did not stop at the Italo-Slovene border. What was central in Slovene internal and foreign policy at the moment was the entrance into key Western institutions, the EU and NATO *in primis*; but the new wave of Italian memory had a direct impact on the perceptions of the past in Slovenia too. If official politics remained mostly passive, it was the so-called civil society that entered the memory discourse. Different organizations protested. The end of the unilateral vision from the socialist past brought to the fore new events related to the plurality of political groups that opposed Fascism in the border area, part of Italy between 1920 and 1947. Disputes about who was first to oppose Fascism challenged the manichean narrative of Socialist Slovenia in which the Communist party held the monopoly over anti-Fascism. One of the major changes regarded the rediscovering and the gradual rehabilitation of the prewar antifascist organization TIGR (an acronym for Trieste, Istria, Gorizia, Rijeka – the major towns of the region annexed by Italy and that should be freed). This organization was founded in 1927 by Slovenes and Croats in Italy who violently opposed the Fascist practices in the region. They were not the only group operating in the region in the interwar period. Others were no less active (Borba, Orjuna etc.), but they were the most durable and overshadowed the myriad of national oppositions in the region. In order to preserve the memory of TIGR, a new organization was established in 1994. By organizing commemorations, publishing memoirs and bulletins, and building memorials, the *Društvo za negovanje rodoljubnih tradicij organizacije TIGR Primorske* (Association for the Cultivation of Patriotic Traditions of the Organization TIGR

in Primorska) was aiming to preserve the good name of antifascism, to provide bottom-up protection of what it considered the national interest of Slovenia, as well as to place emphasis on the national rather than ideological nature of the resistance (Rožac Darovec, 2016, 897–898).

Similar to currents in previous decades, memory activism was often the result of vernacular initiatives. It was the pressure of the so-called civil society that forced the Slovene political establishment to react to memory initiatives coming from its western neighbor. If on the Italian side of the border the foiba of Basovizza was proposed as a national monument and the “eastern border” became the buzzword for a new, national mnemonic strategy, on the Slovene side of the border, south of Nova Gorica, a tower – the Cerje Tower - to “the defenders of the Slovene soil” has been constructed. The works started in 2002 and were completed in 2011. After severe polemics between the TIGR organization on the one side and the Museum in charge of the content on the other, the initial idea of a barrier against the western memory menace turned gradually into a more moderate survey of the development of Slovene national history (Delo, 6 May 2011, Spomenik na Cerju po desetletju zapletov urejen, accessed on 7 February 2017). Now it hosts a historical exhibition on five floors, divided into five main periods (<http://www.tigr-drustvo.si/cerje>, accessed on 7 February 2017). The Isonzo/Soča front and World War I are particularly emphasized in the permanent exhibition to underline a general loss that covers the population of the region in general, beyond ethnic and political divisions. Its ground plan coincides with the four cardinal points, and presents Slovenia as a European crossroads of four groups of “nations”: Romance, Germanic, Hungarian and Slavic. Thus, initial messages of nationalistic defense clash with contemporary displays of a standardized “European” narrative of a shared memory (Rožac Darovec, 2016, 901).

Along with new monuments several other memory initiatives in Italy were mirrored in Slovenia. The temporal contiguity of national memorial days is not a coincidence: when in March 2004 the Italian parliament introduced the “Giorno del ricordo” (Day of Remembrance), as a response, in September 2005, the Slovene parliament introduced the Day of Restoration of Primorska to the Motherland as a state holiday. Several initiatives sustained these mnemonic strategies and tried to popularize a new vision of the past. Public television and media in general played a central role in these activities, as is shown by the success of the movie *Il cuore nel pozzo* (*The Heart in the Pit*), and, more recently, the theatre play *Magazzino 18* by Simone Cristicchi (Verginella, 2010). In 2005 the Italian national

broadcaster RAI screened the movie, showing a black and white image of violent Yugoslav partisans against innocent Italians; the Slovenes responded in 2010 with *Črni bratje* (Black brothers), the story of a group of young antifascists from Gorizia/Gorica. However, the attempt to respond to the initiatives coming from Italy assumed far less importance in Slovenia. The movie went almost unnoticed and a theatre play was in preparation but never performed.

Not only did waves of memory transcended borders but physical appropriation of sites took place. In February 2009 an Italian exile group, together with institutional representatives and the Italian general counsellor in Slovenia, tried to pay tribute to a supposed mass grave in the Slovene village of Lokev, not far from the Italo-Slovene border. The initiative was not opposed by the Slovene authorities. They allowed it, but the commemoration was opposed by the local population. Locals saw it as a provocation and organized a protest against the event. The police separated the two groups, national media followed the event, and polemics and accusations, again, lasted for weeks (*Il Giornale*, 1 March 2009, accessed on 23 February 2017). The exile leaders claimed that Slovenia did not manage to clarify its own past and “that part of the Slovene political establishment has fake aspirations for reconciliation”, while the right wing local leader Roberto Menia and at that time under-secretary in the Ministry of the Environment, who took part at the pilgrimage, invited Slovenia “to officially apologize to Italy as it ought to be ashamed of its past in front of Europe”. On the other side, local protesters accused not only the exiles of provocation but also the Slovene authorities for allowing the commemoration (*Mladina*, 28. February 2009, accessed on 23 February 2017).

The chronology and the improvised nature of these practices show that rather than being a premeditated memory strategy arising from its socialist past, Slovene politics of memory seem not only the result of an increasing nationalism, but a response to nationalistic memory initiatives in Italy. This assumption is supported by the short-term institutional enthusiasm for these commemorations. Because of political divisions in 2007, two different commemorations for the “Restoration of Primorska to the Motherland” were organized and if, initially, the government was in charge of the celebration, already in 2010 it withdrew its support. Its organization (and its costs) had to be taken up by organizations and local municipalities (*Primorske novice*, 13 & 14 July 2010). The Cerje tower faced similar dynamics: though the works started with great pomp, the complex is still unfinished, and both the central

government and local administrations refuse to manage it because of the financial consequences entailed (Primorski dnevnik, 2 February 2017, 16).

A minor engagement of the central government in these memory activities is probably the consequence of a mitigation of the war of memories on the state level. In 2007 the Italian president Giorgio Napolitano was speaking of “slavic anexionism” and provoked harsh resentment in Slovenia and especially in Croatia, yet in 2010 he met in Trieste the Slovene president Danilo Türk and the Croatian president Ivo Josipović. All three laid flowers on the former *Narodni dom*, a site of memory of local Slovenes, burnt in 1920 by Fascists, and on the monument to the “exodus of Italians” from Istria after the war. Afterwards, they attended a concert for peace organized by Riccardo Muti (Il Piccolo, 14 July 2010). Since then, a memory armistice, the “spirit of Trieste”, has prevailed in official narratives, but at the local level different interpretations of World War II continue to evoke harsh diatribes.

Were - and are - memory cultures in the western and eastern parts of Europe really so different? Is a division in west and east useful? Bruno Groppo (2013, 239) synthesized the memory division of Europe between the dominance of the communist past in countries of the former Soviet bloc and the primacy of the Shoah in western Europe. However, it is impossible to draw a clear and linear boundary that would not change in time and space. The case of Slovenia and Italy has shown that memories are not divided simply into west and east, but also diverge on political and cultural lines within specific national, regional and local societies.

As claimed by Uilleam Blacker and Alexander Etkind (2013) in the introduction to *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, memories that inhabit the phantom space of eastern Europe may clash and divide, but their contact creates a form of entanglement. They are in constant and interchangeable flux, which provides the basis for common characteristics in eastern European memory cultures. Yet if this could be true for a vision incorporating “Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany all the way to Siberia”, mutual memory influences, mnemonic exchanges, overlappings and entanglements exist also between western and eastern Europe. National memory cultures are often transnational in their consequences. They overcome geopolitical boundaries and influence other national politics of memory. Therefore, if we consider only countries considered as socialist in its political and economic system until the beginning of the 1990s, we see that they are defined in advance as specific and different. Too often analyses of politics of memory are conceptually predetermined and continue the



Cold War dichotomy between two Europes. In scholarly research, the west and the east often seem to be divided not by an Iron Curtain and by different political, military and economic systems, rather by studies on memory cultures. Lagrou has convincingly shown us how a comparative approach allows us to better understand memory processes in different national post-war societies using the examples of France, Belgium and the Netherlands - this essay shows the fruitfulness of comparing cases across former geopolitical borders (Lagrou, 1997, 186).

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