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## **RECONSTRUCTING BORDER SOCIETIES ON THE TRIPLEX CONFINIUM IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

*This article builds on the work of Professor Drago Roksandić concerning the Triplex Confinium, by expanding the temporal and spatial dimensions of his interpretive insights into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Venetian Republic in 1797 disappeared as one of the three original participants in the Triplex Confinium, the basic elements of a tripartite struggle for hegemony over the region remained. The rivalry between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires continued and the Venetian Republic was replaced as the third component by the South Slav movements. The essay seeks to place competing centers of power in a diverse geographic and demographic setting, both of which were essential elements in the formation and prolongation of a Triplex Confinium border. With the coming of the Second World War, once again the cast of characters in the competition over the Triplex Confinium border changed. Mussolini's imperial vision drew heavily on the historical precedent of the Venetian Republic. He sought to turn the Adriatic into an Italian lake by dominating first Albania and then the Dalmatian coast as the key to access to the Mediterranean. Hitler's imperial vision drew upon the Habsburg policies of settling Germans in Slovenia and Vojvodina, seeking to create a southern bulwark against the Slavs through empowering the Volksdeutsch and germanization receptive elements in the hybrid population of the region. As the successor to the Illyrian movement radically transformed by the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Partisan movement led by Josip Broz-Tito consistently represented itself as a Yugoslav movement committed to the creation of a federation of Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians and Macedonians in which no one nationality would predominate. The essay explores the other participants among the South Slavic population (and Albanians) in the civil war. In Yugoslavia it was a result of an encounter between the rivalry of external powers and the internal tensions generated by war, replicating persistent patterns from the period of the Triplex Confinium.*

*Key words: Triplex Confinium, South Slav movements, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Second World War, imperial visions, Mussolini, Hitler, Tito, civil war*

In a 2000 article, Drago Roksandić analyzed the evolution of the military borderland system and societies in the Habsburg, Venetian and Ottoman Empires from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the triple frontier first came into being, throughout the wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century into the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, adding the tantalizing phrase, “and often considerably longer.”<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay is to take up this lead by suggesting that his insights still retain a high level of interpretive value into the twentieth century, particularly during the Second World War.

Roksandić stresses, in addition, that throughout the historical period of his focus, war brought about changes on the three sides within their boundaries and in the *Triplex Confinium* as a whole. This leads to a double perspective: from above as an integral part

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<sup>1</sup> Drago Roksandić, “Stojan Jankovic in the Morean War, or of Uskoks, Slavs and Subjects”, in: Drago Roksandić – Nataša Štefanec (eds.), *Constructing Border Societies on the Triplex Confinium*, Budapest 2000, 245.

of building a modern state and from below as the displacement of peoples through migration, flight and conversion, and the adoption of multiple identities – ambiguous and hybrid. To be sure, there are significant changes in the borders and the character of the states themselves participating in the conflicts over territory within the confines of the triple frontier region. In fact, one can argue that with the end of the Venetian Republic in 1797, the *Triplex Confinium* in the strictest sense of the term also comes to an end. Yet only in the strictest, that is formalist sense. The geographic and cultural elements that characterize the complex nature of this region did not disappear with one of the component state structures.

The military frontier between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires remains relatively stable over the first three quarters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in Croatia-Slavonia it was hardly “a haven of order and prosperity”; it was instead an unstable and “stagnating society” in the words of its historian.<sup>2</sup> The Ottoman loss of Bosnia in 1878 eliminated the second major imperial component of the original *Triplex*. Yet a few short years before this, Italy gained Venetia, the core of the old Republic and agitation by irridentists began in earnest to claim the rest. In the meantime, among the among the Croats and Serbs three visions of statehood competed within the confines of the old *Triplex Confinium*: Croatian autonomy within the Habsburg Empire, a federative South Slav union (the Ilyrian idea) and a greater Serbia. As it turned out a problem in their development shared by all three was the lack of one of the key elements in the sovereign, ethno-linguistic unity characteristic of the nation-state model that was becoming the norm in the European system.

For the purposes of this essay the *Triplex Confinium* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the region) may be envisioned as a shatter zone mixing multiple cultures, religions, ethnicities and economic activities. The only permanent geographic border ran along the northern and eastern shore line of the Adriatic. How far the hinterland of the region extends depends like that of Braudel’s “Mediterranean” varies, depending upon shifting elements within a *longue durée*, particularly the effects of warfare, population movements and economic development. To orient the reader, it may be useful to identify and include in the region the following place names employed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, always keeping in mind that these geographies carry symbolic as well as physical properties and have themselves fluid peripheries: Carinthia, Carniola (Slovenia), Croatia, Istria (Venezia Giulia), Dalmatia, Bosnia. Economically, the region is divided roughly into three zones on the basis of land use: the coastal, mainly commerce and shipbuilding, the hilly-forested, mainly grazing and lowlands, grain producing, sugar beets and animal husbandry, though the Dinaric Mountains ruing in a northwest to southwest direction made connections between the coast and fertile lowlands difficult.

The region has been and remains one of the most complex “shatter zones” in Europe. It was the only space in Europe where three major contending religions, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam encountered one another, interacting at all levels, alternately fighting, trading, occasionally intermarrying and perhaps most often living side by side, peacefully but in separate villages and always vulnerable in times of trouble to secular and religious zealots who were able to exploit latent suspicion or hostility among

<sup>2</sup> Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Military Border in Croatia, 1740-1881. A Study of an Imperial Institution*, Chicago 1966, 193 and *passim*.

them.<sup>3</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century an overlay of ethno-nationalism, stimulated by small educated elites, further complicated the feelings of identification and antagonism by introducing another criteria of defining self and the other. Finally, the growth of manufacturing, especially in Western Bosnia (Bosanska Krajina) and Croatia (Zagreb) contributed to breaking down the traditional ethnic differences and, as we shall see, created a space where the multinational appeal of the Communist led Partisans strongly resounded.<sup>4</sup>

During this century of intermittent wars and shifting boundaries the ethnic composition of the region also went through a number of significant changes. Census figures for the entire region are not available but some indication can be gained from comparing the census figures for Istria in 1910 under Habsburg rule and in 1921 under Italian rule. According to the former, there were approximately 250,000 inhabitants of the peninsula excepting Trieste and Rijeka. Of these, 52% were Italian, 39% Croatian and 9% Slovene. According the latter, the population had increased to 265,000 with 66% Italians, 24% Croatians and 9% Slovenes. These figures have been challenged, as might be expected. An independent scholar working after the war estimated that by 1939 out of a population of 284,000 about 146,000 (51%) were Italians, 81,000 (29%) were Croatian and 34,000 (12% Slovenes with an additional 20,000 (7%) mixed and 3,000 (1%) of other origins). There are several problems in interpreting the data. In some districts of northwest Istria the population speaks a Croatian-Italian dialect which makes it impossible to include them in either nationality. Moreover, in the first post-war census counted only 80,000 Italians in the peninsula, suggesting that many Italians had decided to adopt a new identity, although there was a significant Italian emigration after 1947. The figures continue to shift radically after 1948.

Even more dramatic shift took place in the city of Trieste where after the First World War, the Italian occupation brought pressure on the Slovene population, which counted about 30% of the population to adopt Italian identification or emigrate, the course followed by about 100,000 Slovenes.<sup>5</sup> Ethnicity, however defined, was not a very good indicator of primary loyalty of the population especially in Trieste. For example, the outbreak of the First World War opened up a latent split between the cultural ties with Italy and political affiliation with Austria-Hungary. A small but vocal body of Italian nationalists had been agitating for the inclusion of the city in Italy since the unification of Northern Italy in 1866.

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<sup>3</sup> See especially: Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford 2001. For the concept of "Shatter zones" see: Omer Bartov – Eric D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, Bloomington 2013; Alfred J. Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands. From the Rise of the Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War*, Cambridge 2014.

<sup>4</sup> This is the important contribution of Marko Attila Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia. The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941-1943*, Oxford 2006, especially 7-8, 54, 160, 281-284. For an optimistic view of the Habsburg economic developmental policies in Bosnia see: Michael Palaret, "The Habsburg industrial Achievement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. An Economic Spurt that Succeeded?", *Austrian History Yearbook*, 1993, 133-152 and more fully in: Palaret, *The Balkan Economies, c. 1800-1914. Evolution without Development*, Cambridge 1997, 203-238.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Bufon – Julian Minghi, "The Upper Adriatic Borderland: From Conflict to Harmony", *GeoJournal*, 52/2, 2000, 122-123, based on data in: Carlo Schiffrer, *La Venezia Giulia: saggio di una carta dei limiti nazionali italo-jugoslavi*, Roma 1946; Lavo Čermelj, *Slovinci in Hrvatje pod Italijo med obem vojnama*, Ljubljana 1965.

But the local diets in Trieste and Istria were more concerned with local problems and the commercial ties of Trieste, the fourth city in the Habsburg Monarchy as a major export port for the Monarchy. It was already clear by the outbreak of war that the region was developing a borderland identity or frontier society institutionalized at the sub-state level as a form of regional autonomy.<sup>6</sup> After Italy's entry into the war in 1915, Trieste maintained its loyalty to Austria-Hungary as did most of the Adriatic littoral which furnished 50,000 volunteers to the Habsburg Army while only about 1000 Italian irridentists fled to join the Italian Army.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the end of the war and the Treaty of Rapallo which cleared way for Italian annexation of Venezia Giulia including Trieste was both a commercial disaster for the city which lost its connection to the Central European hinterland and signaled a political shift to the right. As a reaction to the "Red biennium" of 1919 – 1920, Italian fascist gangs attacked the Croatian and Slovene migrant workers. In the elections of 1921 the right including the fascists won 47% of the vote. The Italian government of Mussolini encouraged anti-German sentiment up to 1935 in hopes of deflecting disappointment at its failure to restore the economic vitality of the city.<sup>8</sup>

As in the past warfare profoundly disrupted and further complicated the reorganization of states and the reconstruction of stable border societies in the region, leaving unresolved until 1924 the delimitation of borders between Italy and the new Kingdom of the Croats, Serbs and Slovenes. Although it appeared that the destruction of the Habsburg Empire had eliminated the participation of the Germans in the region, this situation lasted barely more than a decade. The Anschluss in 1936 rekindled the dreams of former Habsburg officers and Hitler himself in the region. The stage was set for another three way struggle for domination through redrawing boundaries, establishing spheres of influence and in the treatment of the local populations.

The shadows of a new and dark picture of the triple frontier were already falling in the nineteen twenties and thirties. But the harsh reality of renewed state rivalries and the ethnic conflicts over borders and policies in the upper Adriatic borderland did not fully emerge until the outbreak of war.

## 1. Italy's Imperial Vision

Following the First World War, Italian statesmen and politicians expressed anger and disappointment over the failure to gain the territory they had been promised in the Treaty of 1915. Traditional diplomacy of the Liberal governments had failed to win recognition as a great power in Europe and a colonial power in the Mediterranean.

Mussolini's rise to power clothed these aspirations in a new visionary ideology of empire. Although he did not develop a full blown program until the eve of the war, he had already laid the foundations earlier. In an early indication of his intention to bring the

<sup>6</sup> Emilio Cocco, "Borderland Mimicry: Imperial Legacies, National Stands and Regional Identity in Croatian Istria after the Nineties", *Narodna umjetnost*, 47/1, 2010, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Sondhaus, *In the Service of the Emperor: Italians in the Austrian Armed Forces, 1814-1918*, Baltimore 1990, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Maura Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian, 1918-1954*, Woodbridge, Suffolk 2003, 21, 24-25, 28.

Adriatic littoral under the control of Italy as prelude to a more adventurous Mediterranean policy, he extracted in March 1925 a semi-colonial economic agreement from Albania. This was, in the words of MacGregor Knox "the first fascist trophy."<sup>9</sup> Following much preparation, Italy occupied Albania in March 1939 giving it a strategic control over the Gulf of Otranto, the key to the southern gateway of the Adriatic to the Mediterranean.

Mussolini could not complete his domination of the Adriatic as long as Yugoslavia existed. In 1924, he had taken a first step by concluding a treaty with Yugoslavia which finally recognized Italy's annexation of Fiume. But the Yugoslavs reacted by signing a treaty with France which incensed Mussolini who began his anti-Yugoslav policy aimed at its destruction. This involved signing treaties with countries on Yugoslavia's borders in a diplomatic web of encirclement and giving encouragement and support to Croatian terrorists in exile in Italy. Within a few short years Mussolini had raised his sights to a new level, further radicalizing Italian foreign policy, in part as a reaction to domestic factors, to embrace militarism and empire. In 1934 he declared that "Italy's historical objectives have two names: Asia and Africa. South and east are the cardinal directions which must excite the interest and will of Italians." The aim was to extend Italian hegemony beyond the Adriatic to the entire Mediterranean and the northern half of Africa inspired by the transformative values of fascism and to prove to the Italians that they were a warrior nation.<sup>10</sup>

Mussolini's military support of Franco was a further step in expanding his Mediterranean ambitions. As John Coverdale powerfully argued, ideology was less important than geopolitical considerations. Although Mussolini set no specific goals or expectation of rewards from Franco, he surely expected reciprocal support for his own policies in the Mediterranean and possibly even bases for the Italian navy in the Balearic Islands.<sup>11</sup>

Preceding this involvement in 1936, Mussolini definitively turned against Italy's allies in the First World War to embrace a special Rome-Berlin Axis. He came to realize that British opposition to his colonial adventure in Ethiopia, where they had no vital interests, foreclosed any hope of London's support for his Mediterranean policy which could be interpreted as threatening the British lifeline to India. Beyond that, he was willing to overcome his suspicion of Hitler's expansionist aims in Austria and trade his protection of Austrian independence for an alliance with Hitler which would secure his continental rear.<sup>12</sup> All this emerged with startling clarity in his confidential speech to the Fascist Grand Council in February 1939.

Mussolini confided to his fascist followers that Italy's geopolitical interests differed from Germany but nevertheless historical necessity required on alliance with him. To illustrate the point, he unfolded a sweeping vision of Italy's destiny. "States are more or less independent according to their maritime position..." Italy was surrounded by an inland sea. The exit to the ocean was controlled by Great Britain through its possession of Gibraltar

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<sup>9</sup> MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny. Dictatorship, Foreign Policy and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Cambridge 2000, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Cassels, "Was there a Facist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty", *International History Review*, 2, (May) 1983, 159-160, quoting Mussolini's speech to Fascism's second quinquennial assembly and Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941*, New York 1982, 102.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, Princeton 1975, 76-77, 388-390.

<sup>12</sup> Cassels, "Switching Partners: Italy in A. J. P. Taylors' *Origins of the Second World War*", in: Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*, Winchester, Mass. 1986.

and Suez, leaving Italy “a prisoner in the Mediterranean.” Mussolini then expounded on an ambitious and somewhat phantasmagorical scheme “to break the prison bars (Corsica, Tunisia, Malta and Cyprus) by expansion in Africa. For this Italy needed backing on the continent which was the reason for the Rome-Berlin Axis. He then proceeded to connect the link with the Adriatic which may have taken second place in the imperial dream, but represented more concrete and realizable goals. Italy’s separate interests from Germany were not confined to the recently occupied Albania, but included ‘the unfinished business of the First World War in the Adriatic and at the expense of Yugoslavia.’ The control of this inland sea was essential to Italy’s conception of her position as a Mediterranean power.” It had been left unsatisfied by the Peace Treaties of 1919.<sup>13</sup>

When it came down to realizing the grand vision, Mussolini expressed his willingness, once he had belatedly joined Hitler in attacking France and declaring war on Britain, to postpone his demands for parts of French north Africa and his claims on Great Britain in East Africa to the signing of a future peace treaty. But realizing his goals in the Adriatic appeared more within his grasp. Even before the French surrender, in April 1940, he was planning for a little war with Yugoslavia. Because Hitler discouraged him, he reluctantly ordered the demobilization of 600,000 men after the fall of France. When Britain continued to resist, Mussolini listened to the siren call of Count Ciano who offered an attack on Greece as compensation for the postponed showdown with Yugoslavia. Annoyed by Hitler’s failure to consult him on any of his military operations, Mussolini jumped at the chance to act boldly on his own. “I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be re-established.”<sup>14</sup>

The Italian invasion of Greece proved disastrous for several reasons. The defending Greek forces inflicted a humiliating defeat on the elite elements of the Italian army and drove them back into Albania. Contrary to Mussolini’s intentions, his unilateral policy brought Germany into the Balkans. Reviving Mussolini’s failed diplomatic initiative, Hitler proposed to Ciano that Yugoslavia and Bulgaria be brought in to partition Greece with Italy. The Yugoslavs rebuffed him. Hitler was increasingly drawn into the Balkan vortex for reasons outside the region, his preparations to invade the Soviet Union and his alarm at British military support for Greece. But the decisive event bringing German forces into the region and foreshadowing the friction with Italy over the disposition of the Adriatic region was the anti-Axis coup in Belgrad. Completely unexpected by Germany and Italy, it forced Hitler to secure his communications on the eve of Barbarossa and he launched a *Blitzkrieg* against Yugoslavia and Greece. The Italians tagged along but hardly contributed to the rapid defeat of the Yugoslavs and Greeks at the hands of the German panzers and Luftwaffe. Hitler’s decision to destroy and partition Yugoslavia re-created the Triple Frontier with all its complexities of state rivalries and ethnic conflicts.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Frederick W. Deakin, *The Brutal Friendship. Mussolini, Hitler and the Fall of Italian Fascism*, New York 1962, 5-8. The full document was later published by Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. Lo Stato totalitario*, II, Turin 1981, 321-327.

<sup>14</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943*, New York 1946, 300.

<sup>15</sup> Hitler’s decision to partition Yugoslavia was motivated by a number of factors. General Mario Roatta, the Italian Chief of Staff, considered it a mistake that would lead to nationalist discontent, civil war and a drain on the Axis powers. Mario Roatta, *Otti milioni di baionette*, Milano 1946, 164-165. See also: Ulrich von Hassel, *Diaries, 1938-1944*, New York 1947, 191.

## 2. Slovenia

In the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia, negotiations opened up between Italy and Germany on the one hand and Italy to define the new constituent states and borders of a truncated Yugoslavia. In April 1941 Italian Foreign Minister Ciano and German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop sat down to draw the border line of the two occupation zones between Germany and Italy on a large map. They decided to split Slovenia which was created in 1919 mainly from former Habsburg territories. The Italians incorporated the southern part as the Province of Ljubljana. The Germans occupied and then de facto annexed the northern part, dividing it into two administrative units, the western part under the authority of the Gau Carinthia and the northeastern part under the Gau Styria. At times, Hitler referred to these areas with different names adding to the tangled lines of command. In the last Habsburg census, these areas showed a mixed population roughly representing an increased number of Slovenes toward the southern part achieving an overwhelming majority centered on Kranj in the former Habsburg duchy of Carniola.<sup>16</sup>

The Italian Army Chief of Staff, General Mario Roatta described the partition as lacking any reasonable foundation and at points "absurd." An Italian manufacturer, Alberto Pirelli added that the line made no economic sense, passing so close to Ljubljana that aqueduct and electricity serving the city as well as the surrounding mines and cotton manufactures ended up in German hands.<sup>17</sup>

In Slovenia the Axis attack on Yugoslavia sparked the creation of National Council, consisting of all the legal parties in the region, which appealed, in vain, to the Germans to take all Slovenia under their protection and not to partition it with the hated Italians. A coalition of left wing parties which had existed since 1927 took the new name of Liberation Front and began to form its own committees in Ljubljana and the villages. It shortly fell under the control of the underground communist party organization. It launched hit and run attacks on the occupying forces and collaborationist figures in the National Council and extended control over large areas in the Italian zone.

The Slovene Communists had their own demands, however. At the Second meeting of the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) convened by Tito to create the nucleus of a provisional government, the equality of nationalities in the postwar Yugoslavia was recognized, but the Slovene wanted more: they persuaded Tito to allow the use of the Slovene language at all level of command among the Partisans.<sup>18</sup> Fearful of a communist takeover in the post-war period, the traditional leaders formed Village Guards (*Domobranci*) and other smaller armed formations some supported by the Germans and others by the Italians. The first small *četnik* unit formed in April 1942 and established a connection with an underground Slovenian Alliance, which recognized the government in exile. It too organized its own formations under separate commands. Armed

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice William, "The Nazis, German Nationalism, and Ethnic Diversity: The Adriatic Coastland under Friederich Rainer", *Slovene Studies Journal*, 17/1-2, 1995, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing. The Axis and the Holocaust 1941-1943*, London 1990, 24-25.

<sup>18</sup> Tito's concession was attributed by a member of the Slovene delegation to his "personal friendship with the Slovenes." Petranović, *Srbija*, 459-460. But the Slovene Communists resisted Tito's attempts to create mobile brigades operating outside of Slovene territory. *Ibid.*, 528.

by the Village Guards, they avoided fighting the Italians, conserving their strength for the anticipated struggle with the communists at the end of the war.<sup>19</sup>

The Nazi leaders initially conceived of Slovenia as proving ground for the spread of Germanic culture into an old contested frontier zone.<sup>20</sup> The occupation authorities immediately began the replacement of Slovene by German in the schools of northern Slovenia (Upper Carniola) and then in April 1942 the mass deportation and replacement of Slovenes by *Volksdeutsch* from Italy and Eastern Europe. But the Governor (*Reichsstadthalter*) of Carinthia, Friederich Rainer, son of a border family dedicated to "Stop the Slavs" changed his views in the face of local resistance. After the fall of Mussolini in 1943, he seized upon the opportunity to exploit the long standing anti-Italian feelings in the Slovenes who had lived under Italian rule in Istria in the nineteen twenties. Consciously inspired by the Habsburg nationality policy, he advocated winning over the all Slovenes by instituting a policy of autonomy in the old *Triplex Confinium* region under his control as High Commissioner of Operation Zone Adriatic Coastline. He restored the Slovene language, removed Italian officials and even appointed a Slovene and former Habsburg officer as mayor of Ljubljana. Although he introduced other reforms in his newly pragmatic fashion, he remained committed to the idea of a Greater Germany in which the Slovenes would play only a subordinate role.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Croatia

Proclaimed within days of the German invasion, the Independent State of Croatia. (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska – NDH*) drew its main domestic support from two strands of Croatian politics. The first originated with Ante Starčević, becoming increasingly radicalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A product of the military frontier, half Croat, half Serb, he turned against his youthful belief in the South Slav unity to advocate an independent greater Croatian state including Bosnia. Fiercely anti-Serb whom he described as "beggars" and "slaves" opposed to the civilizing mission of the Croats, he insisted that the Serbs of the military frontier and Bosnia were really Orthodox Croats.<sup>22</sup> His associate Eugen Kvaternik, who died in 1871 in an uprising on the military frontier

<sup>19</sup> Bogdan Novak, *Trieste, 1941-1954. The Ethnic, Political and Ideological Struggle*, Chicago 1970, 49-57; Charles Zalar, "Yugoslav Communism: A Critical Study", Prepared for the U. S. Senate, Subcommittee on the Judiciary, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, Washington, DC 1942, 80-100; Arrigo Petacco, *A Tragedy Revealed. The Story of the Italian Population of Istria, Dalmatia and Venezia Giulia, 1943-1956*, Toronto 2005, 53.

<sup>20</sup> According to Dr. Robert Ley, the Reich Organization Leader, referring to the venerable Carinthian tradition: "The heart of the nation lies not in the middle but on the border... There is the greater love." William, "The Nazis", 10.

<sup>21</sup> William, "The Nazis", 12-23. It was Rainer who took the initiative in organizing the Slovene Home Guards to fight the Partisans. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Mario S. Spalatin, "The Croatian Nationalism of Ante Starčević. 1875-1871", *Journal of Croatian Studies*, 15, 1975, 19-146; Gerald G. Govorchin, "Pravaštvo and the Croatian National Issue, *East European Quarterly*, 12/1, 1978, 57-78; Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics*, Ithaca 1984, 85-91 and in general on Croatian politics: Jill A. Irvine, *The Croat Question. Partisan Politics in the Formation of the Yugoslav Socialist State*, Boulder, CO 1993.



became a martyr of the movement whose descendents became leaders in founding the NDH. His son-in-law, Josip Frank, and his followers (the Frankovci) adopted more violent tactics against the Serbs and introduced the idea of returning the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia to their true Croatian origins by converting them to Catholicism. In the prewar period these violent and increasingly racist ideas were held by a small minority of the Croat population. Although the South Slav idea gained ground in Croatia during the First World War, yet the suspicion toward the Serbs remained high in Croatia as the centralist intentions of the Belgrad loomed larger in the negotiations culminating in the creation of a Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

The heir to the Frankovci legacy who further radicalized it was Ante Pavelić, the leader of a fascist organization of Croat exiles (the Ustaša) founded sometime in the 1920s as a reaction against the centralizing tendencies in Belgrade. Pavelić had attempted to revive the small, ardently anti-Serb Frankest Party of prewar Habsburg Croatia by seeking Italian and Hungarian help in promoting the secession of Croatia from Yugoslavia. Having fled to Italy in 1929, he embraced some of the external trappings of fascism and a fuzzy version of Mussolini's corporatist order and racist theories borrowed from National Socialism and directed against "alien" elements, first and foremost Serbs and later Jews and Gypsies. Neither Mussolini nor Hitler had much respect for him, but his dependence on them made him malleable for their purposes.<sup>23</sup>

One little noted peculiarity of what constituted ethnic purity for the Ustaša was the admission of Muslims into the camp of the racially pure. Muslims were celebrated as "blood brothers" and martyrs for the Croatian cause; Muslim intellectuals praised the spiritual regeneration of the NDH.<sup>24</sup> The movement's program underwent some modification over time but retained its original commitment to the construction of a society based on patriarchal values of the traditional peasant community (*zadruga*). What it added was elaborate panoply of cultural symbols, linguistic revisions and heroic myths, often propagated by radical Ustaša students.<sup>25</sup>

The new borders of the NDH both expanded the nominal territorial size of the state and reduced its political autonomy making a mockery of its "independence." Negotiations between Italy and Croatia over the borders and authority of the NDH proved complex and contentious, hammered out in three separate agreements. The fascist propaganda machine had staked out Italy's claims during the April war on the basis of economic needs justified

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<sup>23</sup> For long the standard treatment Ladislav Hory – Martin Brozszat, *Der kroatische Ustaša Staat, 1941-1945*, Stuttgart 1964, retains its value but must be supplemented and on some issues revised by Stanley Payne, "The NDH in Comparative Perspective", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7, 2006, 409-416; Ivo Goldstein, "Ante Pavelić. Charisma and National Mission in Wartime Croatia", in: António Costa Pinto – Roger Eatwell – Stein Ugelvik Larsen (eds.), *Charisma and Fascism in Interwar Europe*, London – New York 2007, 87-96.

<sup>24</sup> Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation. The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945*, Pittsburgh 2013, 37-38, 52, 102, 115, 302, 316. For historical precedents of these relationships see: Wendy Bracewell, "Frontier Blood Brotherhood and the Triplex Confinium", in: Roksandić – Štefanec, *Constructing Border Societies*, 29-46. In contrast to the Ustaša and Partisans, the četniks were split over supporting or recruiting Muslims especially in Bosnia where local četnik commanders were virulently anti-Muslim. Hoare, *Genocide*, 291, 296, 307-308.

<sup>25</sup> For an extended development of this thesis which does not ignore the terrorist aspects of the regime see: Yeomans, *Visions, passim*.

by Italy's hereditary rights as a successor to the Venetian Republic. The occupation of the Dalmatian coast, all its islands and the interior up to the "natural borders" of the Velebit and Dinaric Mountains would secure Italy's strategic borders and solve once and for all the Adriatic question. Two economic zones would guarantee Italy control over the bauxite and copper mines to supply Italian manufacturers and provide a valuable source of exports. The first agreement consolidated these claims in a "first zone" which deprived pre-war Croatia of 150 factories and most of the Adriatic coastline. The second agreement committed the NDH not to construct any military bases within an 80 kilometer "second zone", or to maintain a navy in the Adriatic except for coastal vessels. It enabled Italy to extend a sphere of influence over this part of Croatia extending up to the German demarcation line. By the terms of the third agreement, Italy promised to defend the political independence of a Croatian "Kingdom", although the Italian candidate for the throne never showed up. Mussolini assured Pavelić that he would withdraw Italian troops from Croatian territory, but he never did. Instead he maintained them under various designations, extending their control as the Croatian security forces proved incapable of containing the internal uprisings that began almost immediately after the Yugoslav surrender.<sup>26</sup> The NDH fell rapidly under the domination of the two occupying powers, embroiling all three states in a struggle over policy and resources.

The boundaries of the NDH encompassed a "shatter zone" of nationalities, contributing to the instability of the state. Scarcely half of the population was Catholic. Out of a total of 6.5 million inhabitants, 3.3 million were Catholic Croats, 800,000 were Muslims, 2.2 million Orthodox Serbs, 100,000 Germans, 18,000 Jews and several hundred Italians.<sup>27</sup> Determined to purge the new state of its "alien" elements the Ustaša began immediately to carry out a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing. According to statistics compiled by the Ustaša leaders, they expelled 120,000 Serbs from their territory and dumped them into Serbia. A massive program of forced religious conversion reminiscent of the policies in the seventeenth century aided and abetted by the Croat clergy turned as many as 250,000 Orthodox believers into Catholics.<sup>28</sup> Widespread disagreement exists on the number of Serbs who were massacred by the Ustaša or died in the camps. The most reliable estimate calculates that over 300,000 Serb inhabitants of the territory of the NDH lost their lives during the war. This does not include the murder of 30,500 Jews representing three quarters of the prewar Jewish population of Croatia.<sup>29</sup> Even the local German and Italian

<sup>26</sup> Zdravko Dizdar, "Italian Policies toward Croats in Occupied Territories during the Second World War", *Review of Croatian History*, 1, 2005, 182-185.

<sup>27</sup> Paul N. Hehn, "Serbia, Croatia and Germany, 1941-1945: Civil War and Revolution in the Balkans", *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 13/4, (Winter) 1971, 349, citing Rudolf Kizling, *Die Kroaten, Graz – Köln 1956*, 177 and, with slightly different figures, Jovan Marjanović, *Ustanak i narodnooslobodilački pokret u Srbiji 1941*, Belgrade 1953, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Veljko Đurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje*, Belgrade 1989. According to Archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac, the NDH was "the most important event in the history of the Croatian nation" while the Orthodox Serbs were "renegades from the faith of their fathers." Petranović, *Srbija*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> See the balanced discussion in: Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country. Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, 125-127. For reports on much higher estimates of deaths in the concentration camp of Jasenovac see: Vladimir Dedijer, *Vatikan i Jasenovac. Dokumenti*, Belgrade 1987; Bogoljub Kočović, *Žrtve Drugog svetskog rata u Jugoslaviji*, 2nd ed., Sarajevo 1990, XII, XVI-XVIII, 85-88 estimates 370,000 to 410,000 deaths of Serbian civilians. For the Jews: Louis Kostanich, *Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia*, Chicago 1981.

army units were appalled by the massive and random Ustaša terror; there were incidents of clashes between Ustaša and Italian troops attempting to protect the civilian population.<sup>30</sup>

At first the Serbian population reacted with stunned incredulity. When the truth dawned on them, thousands of young men from the villages in Krajina took to the hills where they were taken under the wing of the Partisan and četnik bands that had begun to form as the Croatian units of the Royal Yugoslav Army disintegrated.<sup>31</sup> Pavelić was able to recruit three divisions from these deserters who were originally trained for the Russian front. But the developed of the armed resistance forced the German army to employ them in the territory of the NDH. According to Pavelić's figures, the total number of Croat soldiers serving under German command was 170,000 while another 92,000 served under Croatian officers. Within the NDH the regular army units were not considered as good fighting material. The Militia, an elite party formation of 20,000 fought well, although they earned a reputation for being brutal.<sup>32</sup>

The combination of brutality and poor leadership crippled the Croatian Army and Militia, hampering it from repressing the uprisings in their own territory. The Italians stepped into the breach. Mussolini grasped the opportunity to advance his cherished goal of "Italianizing" the annexed territories which he claimed as a legacy of the Venetian Republic. Dalmatia was the keystone of this policy, despite the few Italians living there.<sup>33</sup>

In the spring of 1941 Italian troops moved back into the second zone to replace and disperse the Croatian forces which were unable to deal with the outbreak of local revolts. The second zone was then merged with the first zone to form a Governate of Dalmatia. Under the rule of the governor, Dr. Giuseppe Bastianini, a series of measures ranging from the removal of visible symbols of Croatian nationality to the dissolution of all Croatian associations and the introduction of Italian in the schools were carried out with uneven results. The Italian occupational authorities encouraged the settlement of Italians, aiming at "the elimination of Slavdom in the Adriatic territories." They launched a vast program of public works to employ the emigrants, but this too fell short of expectations. The Italian policies sparked resentment among the Croatian population. At the same time, German propaganda throughout the NDH with particular effect in Dalmatia represented the Italians as impotent and spread the illusion that after their victory the Germans would restore to Croatian rule the territory in Dalmatia occupied by the Italians.<sup>34</sup>

The conflict among the three powers of the new *Triplex Confinium* intensified throughout the remainder of the Second World War. It centered on three questions: their inter-

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<sup>30</sup> For the Italian attempts to shield the Jews from annihilation see: Jonathan Steinberg, *All or nothing. The Axis and the holocaust, 1941-1943*, London 1990, 29-35, 46-47, 56-67, 115 ff.; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 597-604. However, over 80 percent of the prewar population of Jews in Yugoslavia perished during the war. *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>31</sup> The Croat Communist Vladimir Velebit admitted that "if Ante Pavelić had not implemented such a stupid policy in the so-called Independent State of Croatia, we [communists] would never have been able to launch the Serbs into rebellion." Petranović, *Srbija*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 107-108; A. Djilas, *The Contested Country*, 125; Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941-1945*, Zagreb 1977, 95-100, 114-123.

<sup>33</sup> Count Ciano quipped that "The Croats invoke statistics to prove that in Dalmatia only the stones are Italian..." Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 342.

<sup>34</sup> Dizdar, "Italian Policies", 188-190; Frank P. Verna, "Notes on Italian Rule in Dalmatia under Bastianini", *The International History Review*, 12/3, (August) 1990, 535-536.

action with the collaborationist regimes and the irregular forces of the insurgency (Partisans, četniks and others), the treatment of the Jews, and relations with the Allied powers. At the same time, the irregular forces were pursuing their own aims in addressing these same questions which brought them into conflict with one another and embroiled them in complex relationships with the occupying powers and the collaborationist regimes. As the civil strife intensified, there were numerous cross-overs from one side to the other, especially from četniks to Partisans which replicated similar changes in allegiance in the old *Triples Confinium*. These multivalent entanglements continue to haunt the collective memories of post-Yugoslavia and nowhere more persistently than in the Adriatic region.

#### 4. The German-Italian Rivalry

Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy shared “a common destiny” in their equal determination to overthrow the international order established in 1919 and to infuse their imperial designs with a radical transformative ideology. The main thrust of their expansionist designs – Germany’s to the east and Italy to the west – were historically grounded and in theory complementary. But the friendship between Hitler and Mussolini, complex to begin with, became “brutal” as their relative weight of their military and economic power tipped sharply in Hitler’s favor not only in the Upper Adriatic region but in Southeastern Europe and North Africa.<sup>35</sup> In the former region, the civilian and military authorities of the occupying powers were often at odds with one another, complicating the fashioning of a consistent relationship with Croatia which found itself caught between the conflicting policies of the two powers.

Although Hitler repeatedly assured the Italians that they should enjoy primacy in Croatian affairs, German civil administrators and military men began as early as 1941 to assume great authority and control, beginning with economic relations.<sup>36</sup> The Germans quickly obtained concessions from Croatia in the bauxite mines of Hercegovina. With subtle German backing, the Croats were able to stave off Italian demands for a custom union. German economic preponderance remained unchallenged to the end of the war.<sup>37</sup>

Shortly after the collapse of Yugoslavia, Hitler appointed General von Glaise-Horstenaus, army chief of staff in Croatia. Glaise was a former officer in the Habsburg army who had little respect for the Italians and increasingly less for the Ustaša. He was often at loggerheads with his civilian counterpart representing the foreign ministry, SA *Obergruppenführer*

<sup>35</sup> In his diaries the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano faithfully recorded all Mussolini’s criticisms of the Germans. His complaints frequently focused on their demeaning treatment of Italy and its contribution to the war. He also condemned their brutality in Slovenia, Croatia and Greece. He even expressed fears that they planned to incorporate the Alto Adige into the Reich. Above all, he resented their encroachment on his imperial design for the seas and hinterland of the Adriatic and Mediterranean. Yet he was also awed by German strength and flattered by Hitler’s skill in manipulating him. See for example: Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, 366, 371, 374, 376, 387, 391, 392, 402, 435, 439, 509, 531.

<sup>36</sup> Holm Sundhaussen, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte Kroatiens im nationalsozialistischen Grossraum 1941-1945. Das Scheitern einer Ausbeutungsstrategie*, Stuttgart 1983, 79-88 and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Srdjan Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia, 1942-1943”, *The Historical Journal*, 36/4, (December) 1993, 882-887; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 233-245.

Siegfried Kasche, a fanatical supporter of Pavelić. Within months of his appointment Glaise was complaining of anti-German speeches by his Italian counterpart and the damage to Germany of Italy's exploitative economic policies in Croatia. He was equally unhappy with the failure of both the Ustaša forces and the Italian army in holding down the various insurgent groups operating in Croatia. He was also appalled by the indiscriminate killing by the Ustaša of Serbs in Croatia. Backed up by high ranking officers in the German army of occupation, Glaise argued for the submission of all Croatian army and Ustaša units to the German Command. After a long bureaucratic battle with Kasche and Pavelić for Hitler's support, all the Croatian forces were finally brought under the control of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>38</sup>

The problems with the Italians arose from a different but related source, relations with the Serbian nationalist bands (*četa*). The tradition of armed bands operating as bandits or fighting a guerilla war against the Ottoman Empire extended back into the days when substantial part of the *Triples Confinium* was under Turkish rule. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these bands were increasingly undergoing a process of nationalizing or serbianizing which meant attempting to win over by word or violent deed the Orthodox population of the western Balkans to identify with the fledgling Serbian state. They received military aid from Belgrad, and played an important role in the Balkan Wars where their principal enemies were the Bulgarians and Turks. But the outbreak of the First World War brought them into collision with the Habsburg Army in which Croatian units were prominent. Croatian officers and civil administrators were active agents of denationalizing Serbia during the brief period of the Austrian occupation, all of this laying the foundations for a bitter rivalry that would last almost a century.

In the interwar period the *četnik* veterans of the war pursued a campaign of violence against the Croats and Muslims to the point in 1936 where the normally pacifist Croatian Peasant Party organized its own armed militias to protect its countrymen.<sup>39</sup> The Croatian militias were heavily recruited among former Austro-Hungarian army officers who duplicated in large measure the structure of the Habsburg officer corps. If as John Paul Newman has rightly argued the Croat-Serb conflict in the form of Ustaša against the *četniks* was "a refraction of the Habsburg war" then too the Italian involvement in their conflict was another dimension of the same war.<sup>40</sup> And part of what was at stake for all was control of the upper Adriatic, the old triple frontier.

The terror unleashed by the Ustaša in Bosnia and Hercegovina from the very moment their forces entered the annexed territory drove the local Serb and Muslim population to appeal to the Italian Army for food and protection. Serbian youth fled from their villages and began to organize *četa* in the mountains. The first spontaneous groups of *četniks* to appear, they operated independently of Colonel Draža Mihailović of the Yugoslav General Staff who was beginning to organized scattered officers and

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 881, 889-893; Hehn, "Serbia, Croatia and Germany", 357.

<sup>39</sup> Sabrina Ramet, "Vladko Maček and Croatian Peasant Defense in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia", *Contemporary European History*, 16/2, (May) 2007, 219-221.

<sup>40</sup> John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War. Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945*, Cambridge 2015, especially 30-36, 157-161, 183-184. In line with the radicalization of politics on all sides, Newman also notes that the Croatian veterans of the Habsburg army ended up being alienated and marginalized during the Second World War by the radical genocidal policies of the Ustaša which ran counter to their traditional conservative principles. Ibid., 253-257.

Gendarmes in western Serbia.<sup>41</sup> Although Italy had formal relations with the NDH, the Italian army leaders quickly grasped the advantages of working with the četniks in order to curb the excesses of the Ustaša which had plunged the region into civil war and combat the activities of the Partisans whom they rightly regarded as a greater threat to their long term interests. Moreover, they took a different view of the Croat state than Mussolini. They perceived the many former Habsburg officers in the Croatian as well as the German forces in their zone as heirs of their old enemy in the First World War. Italian intelligence took an even broader view, commenting that "The Croats have been historically and remain our enemies. The reason: the Adriatic Sea... and we cannot survive with a Greater Croatia and, even worse, if we were to establish old Austria."<sup>42</sup>

The četniks responded to the overtures of the Italian army with offers of cooperation to stabilize the situation. General Ambrosio of the Italian Second Army then proceeded to occupy the demilitarized zone and remove the area from Ustaša control. He demanded that all administrative posts and as well as confiscated property formerly held by Serbs be returned to them and that all Orthodox Churches be reopened. But his policies even when extended to the demarcation line with the German zone failed to restore order. Relations between the occupying forces and the četnik bands grew more complex, often determined by local conditions.<sup>43</sup> The political situation became extremely fluid with both the Italian and, briefly, the German authorities attempting to negotiate with the Serbian bands which were not centrally organized and themselves engaged in efforts to manipulate the occupying powers into serving their aims of weakening the Ustaša as well as crushing the Partisans. By the summer of 1942 the četniks in the Italian occupation zone had succeeded in obtaining recognition by General Mario Roatta as an auxiliary force which he armed and supplied. This enabled them to engage the Germans in negotiations to reach an accommodation with the Ustaša, although it did not last long.<sup>44</sup> In the fall of 1942 the Germans and Croats on the northern flank and the Italians and četniks on a southern flank mounted a combined operation against the Partisans on the Neretva River, the only time this kind of cooperation was carried out. It was followed almost immediately by četnik attacks on the Ustaša. The Krajina was falling into a state of chaos.

The Allied invasion of North Africa forced the Italian and German authorities to reconsider their options. The Italians began planning for a partial withdrawal of their forces to bolster the defense of the homeland against a possible Allied invasion. Roatta sought to bring the četnik bands under tighter control in order to replace his forces. The Italian command now under the leadership of an anti-German, General Ambrosio, refused to endorse the German strategy of an all out offensive against all guerilla forces in the Balkans. Their protection of the četniks aimed at preventing costly military operations and the pen-

<sup>41</sup> Matteo J. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance*, Baltimore 1975, 12-16 for the initial steps in the formation of the movement, particularly valuable for its reliance on the Italian and German archives and Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, Stanford 1975, 122-125.

<sup>42</sup> Dizdar, "Italian Policies", 208; Lucien Karchmar, *Dražo Mihailović and the Rise of the Četnik Movement, 1941-1942*, London 1987, 702-707.

<sup>43</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 48-60; Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 161-163 and *passim*. Cf. Joel Halpern, *A Serbian Village*, 2nd revised ed., New York 1967, especially 295-296 on nature of local patriotism and perception of other national groups as alien.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-83; Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 246-254.

etration of the Germans into their zone of occupation. By contrast Hitler, ever suspicious of the četniks' ties with the western allies, was determined to destroy any resistance group that might link up with an Anglo-American landing along the Adriatic coast.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the bands, out of Mihailović's control, were more interested in reaching local agreements with the Ustaša and Germans, while maintaining their ties with the Italians, in order to free their hands for ethnic warfare against local Croat and Muslim civilians and crush the Partisans. The Partisans, having won a great moral victory over the četniks in their breakout on the Neretva River, were willing to reach a truce with the Germans in order to finish off their local rivals. The more the possibility of an Allied landing loomed, the more the tangled situation in Krajina resembled a civil war. At the same time, the Germans had lost patience with the Italian failure to control the anarchic četnik bands in the vicinity of the bauxite mines, moved into the area violating the demarcation line with Italy, disarmed the Serbian units and occupied the mines.<sup>46</sup> In February 1943 differences between the Italian and German commands reached a near-breaking point.

In the months before the Italians capitulated and the German occupation of their zone, the position of the četniks in western Yugoslavia declined rapidly. German pressure and the movement of their troops into the Italian zone forced the Italians to reduce and then, in May, to withdraw almost all support for the četnik bands; the Partisans gained ground with the local population as četnik desertions to their ranks increased; the British finally gave up on the četniks as an effective anti-Axis force. By the time of the Italian surrender in August the četniks were no longer operational in western Yugoslavia. The Italian command had not prepared its troops for the capitulation had they were rapidly overwhelmed by the Germans who had been moving additional divisions into the country. In the long run, the Partisans were the winners as they were best positioned to scoop up vast amounts of military equipment from the demoralized Italian forces. Although the Germans pushed them back into the hills, they returned in force when the *Wehrmacht* began its withdrawal from the Balkans. They were then able, in the waning months of the war, to determine the future political structure of the old *Triplex Confinium* and for Yugoslavia as a whole by fulfilling their wartime slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity"<sup>47</sup>.

As late as October 1942 Serbs from outside the old monarchy made up about ninety percent of the Partisans.<sup>48</sup> The "denationalization" of the Partisan movement and political implementation of the national idea accelerated with the collapse of the četnik bands, the decline of the Ustaša appeal as their armed forces came under German control and the advance of the Partisans into Croatia and Slovenia. The party only gradually moved from a position of granting autonomy to creating three national republics in the old *Triplex Confinium* – Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia. In August 1944 Tito even offered

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<sup>45</sup> Hitler wrote Mussolini that an Allied landing in the Adriatic would unite "the Communists, Mihailović, the Partisans and all other *comitagyés* [bandits] against the Axis powers" in line with the plans of London and Washington. Hitler to Mussolini, February 16, 1943, *Les lettres secrètes échangés par Hitler et Mussolini*, Paris 1946, 149-154.

<sup>46</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 121-127.

<sup>47</sup> For the ideological evolution of the Partisan (Communist) view on the creation of a federal Yugoslavia see: Petranović, *Srbija*, 522-530.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Dedijer, *The War Diaries of Vladimir Dedijer*, I: April 6, 1941 to November 27, 1942, Ann Arbor 1990, 335.

the Croatian home Guards, četniks and Slovenian Home Guards amnesty if they joined the Partisans by September 15 although opposition flared in the rank and file against admitting "those who killed and tortured comrades."<sup>49</sup> Tito's propaganda line on a federative scheme for Yugoslavia won increasing approval and support, particularly in Slovenia and Croatia.

As the Germans withdrew the anti-Partisan forces disintegrated. Tito pushed his Partisans to occupy Trieste. As they moved through Slovenia they turned savagely against the Slovenian home Guards, killing 11,000 and an unknown number of retreating Ustaša forces.<sup>50</sup> The small and weak anti-communist groups did not prove to be much of an obstacle but jurisdictional disputes with the Italian and Croatian communist parties foreshadowed more serious disputes in the future.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the Partisan forces were engaged in a race with the advancing British forces to occupy Trieste. A new phase in the history of the *Triplex Confinium* was opening up, involving another set of three great powers, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States, and a deeply divided population. But that is another story.<sup>52</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The reconstruction of the border societies in the Upper Adriatic three times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1918 – 1924, 1941 – 1954 and 1991 – 1995) ran parallel to the original model in the seventeenth century; but parallel lines do not meet. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of this essay, the reconstruction of the model features three competing state systems sharing similar though not identical "fascist" ideologies; in the earlier version the rivals shared similar but not identical imperial ideologies. In the latter day version the frontiers between the three were contested, fluid and sites of both conventional warfare conducted by professional armies and irregular warfare (*mali rat*) fought by irregular armed groups often with their own political agendas with cases of crossovers from one side to another, if not literally duplicating the phenomenon of blood brotherhood. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century "undisciplined" or "criminal" elements like the Uskoks and Morlacchi constituted much less politically conscious frontier societies and were able to operate more freely over longer periods of time, but ultimately were brought under control as the military frontier was consolidated. The parallels were not ignored by the propagandists of the day or in the decades since. Mussolini frequently made reference to Italy as the heir to the Republic of

<sup>49</sup> Milovan Djilas, *Wartime*, New York 1977, 403-404.

<sup>50</sup> The number is still in dispute. See: Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 757-766 for a discussion. Ranković provided the figures on the Home Guards. According to figures provided to the Soviet embassy in Belgrade bright after the war, the security organs of the newly established Yugoslav state had liquidated about 200,000 collaborators who were "active opponents of the new regime." Valentina Volkitina et al. (eds.), *Narodnaia demokratiia: mif ili realnost?*, Moscow 1993, 101, citing foreign ministry document.

<sup>51</sup> For the difficulties created for the Italian Communist Party by Tito's stand on Trieste see: Silvio Pons, "Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3/2, (Spring) 2001, 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> The most complete account of the crisis from the Russian perspective is Leonid Gibianskii, "Triestskii vopros v kontse vtoroi mirovoi voiny (1944-1945)", *Slavovedenie*, 3, 2001, 3-28, and from the Anglo-American perspective: J. R. Whittam, "Drawing the Line: Britain and the Emergence of the Trieste Question, January 1941-May 1945", *The English Historical Review*, 106/409, (April) 1991, 346-370.



Venice. Hitler's agents, themselves former Habsburg officials cast German expansion into the region as a fulfillment of a Habsburg destiny. Many Croats expressed similar sentiments. But the parallels do not cease there.

The final stage in the civil war played out in the Upper Adriatic region was marked by the same deep irony as in the rest of Yugoslavia, but with a twist uniquely characteristic of the old scenario of the *Triplex Confinium*. The anti-Partisan Slovene defense forces collaborated with the Italians and then the Germans against the communist dominated Partisans, even as they cherished hopes in an Anglo-American landing in the Adriatic that would save them from both their domestic and foreign enemies. But as in the past, great powers with imperial interests to defend intervened to affect the outcome of local struggles and shape the contours of new borders; the Soviet Union and Great Britain replaced Italy and Germany as the contending powers. Was this another version of a "brutal friendship"?

Like Hitler and Mussolini Churchill and Stalin agreed to vaguely defined division of spheres of influence in post-war Yugoslavia, each hoping that Tito and his Partisans, emerging as the dominant anti-Axis force in the county could be controlled. As the Red Army raced for Belgrade, assisted on its left western flank by the Partisans, the British Eighth Army raced for Trieste also assisted on its right eastern flank by the Partisans. But nothing is simple in the border region of the old *Triplex Confinium*. The twist comes with the relations on the ground between the Yugoslav, Italian and Austrian communist parties, each with a stake in the fate of their respective populations and the delimitation of the border between their three countries.

The Second World War left a legacy of violence and population displacement which was not unique for the region except in the level of intensity and scale. One suggestive explanation points to the layering of two new radical transformative ideologies, fascism and communism on a bedrock of older religious, ethnic and national antipathies under wartime conditions that generated deep feelings of the struggle to survive. The only other region in Europe where similar conditions played out was parts of Poland and Ukraine. Suggestively, this was also the site of an historic encounter among three empires imposed on a shatter zone of mixed and moving populations where three times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1917 – 1920, 1939 – 1945 and 1989 – 1991) new borders were drawn and large populations were displaced or killed. And once again history was ransacked for justification. For a brief time, there were hopes that room could be found in these two regions within a European home with a common citizenship. But these hopes are now fading and darker shadows are gathering on the frontiers once again.