Between empire, nationhood and class: identity and sovereignty at the Italo-Yugoslav Border, 1945-54

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‘The working men have no country,’ reads the beginning of a well-known passage from the Communist Manifesto, which is often quoted as evidence of communism’s internationalist inclinations and hostility to nationalism. At first sight nationalism and Marxism do indeed appear to rest on mutually incompatible visions of humanity: while the former sees humanity as fundamentally divided into nations, the latter insists that the truly important divisions within the social world are aligned with class and cut across national loyalties. Given this basic difference, it is not difficult to see why nationalist and communist leaders have often tried to discredit the others’ views by portraying them as distorted or misleading representations of social reality. According to classic Marxist theory, nationalism is little more than an ideological veil which serves to obscure underlying class conflict, and prevents the proletariat from realizing its own interests. By contrast, nationalist leaders opposed to communism have often insisted that communism is itself an ideologically distorted view of society, which threatens to tear apart national unity and even endangers the survival of the nation.

Although it certainly seems apt in many cases, this black-and-white contrast between nationalism and communism is of little help when trying to disentangle the role of nationalism in the Cold War. A closer look at the historical development of communist doctrine and political strategies reveals several points of cohabitation and even a fusion of nationalist and communist ideas. To start with, the rise of communism itself owes a great deal to its successful manipulation of nationalist aspirations. This was justified by both Marx and Lenin as an acceptable means of furthering the communist cause in pre-
revolutionary societies.\(^3\) The successful appropriation of nationalist sentiments also proved crucial in ensuring the long-run survival of communist regimes, once established. Though the operations of the repressive apparatus and, in Eastern Europe, the threat of the Red Army were doubtless essential, they were not sufficient to keep communists in power for over four decades. To shore up popular support for their regimes, communist elites had to resort to other solutions, and nationalist narratives, folkloric traditions and symbols provided a rich and effective resource.\(^4\) In this way communist leaders, like their predecessors and successors, sought to capture the legitimating potential of nationalism and manipulate it to their own advantage. Yet this does not mean that communist regimes simply manipulated nationalism were purely manipulative. As will be argued here, an instrumentalist explanation is not sufficient to account for the full variety of nationalist manifestations under communism.

‘Classic’ nationalism theory provides few insights for understanding the particularities of communist nationality policies. If one follows the widely used definition of nationalism proposed by Ernest Gellner many communist nationality policies would not even qualify as nationalist. According to Gellner, nationalism is ‘primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ – that is it demands the formation of culturally homogeneous nation-states; it is therefore at odds with the mixing of different nations under the same political roof, as well as with the dispersal of a single nation across different states.\(^5\)

Arguably, one shortcomings of this and similar theories is its broad-brush understanding of the link between modernization, cultural diversity and the state. It tacitly assume that cultural homogeneity is unavoidable for modern social organisations, that nation-states have become the ubiquitous container for it and that therefore, all nationalist movements must ultimately aspire to achieve the convergence of state with nation. As Brendan O’Leary puts it, Gellner ‘appeared to assume that the range of possibilities in modern times is bifurcated: there is a simple choice between nationalist homogenisation through assimilation, and nationalist secession which produces another nationalist homogenisation.’\(^6\) Admittedly there is plenty in the long historical record of state partition, ethnic cleansing, coercive assimilation and forced population transfers to support this account. Yet it is surely too indiscriminate to encompass the full range of responses to cultural diversity in the modern world. While many modernizing states have indeed embraced the nation-state ideal as the
only legitimate model of socio-political organization, cultural heterogeneity fuelled by the contemporary reality of migration flows, has actually persisted to a far greater degree than Gellner recognised. In 1971, when the term ‘nation-state’ was already well-entrenched in everyday language, political debate and scholarly discussion, only about a third of all the states in the world contained a nation that accounted for more than 90 percent of the total population. Four decades later, little has changed. Admittedly, as a result of the break-up of multinational socialist federations, the total number of would-be nation-states has increased. But the vast majority still contain at least one significant ethnic (or national) minority. Although extreme nationalist movements may still find this undesirable, the more mainstream, moderate forms of nationalism have largely accepted the existence of national minorities as legitimate. The trajectory of the nation-state into modernity has been fraught with difficulties, far from linear, and constantly entangled with other, forms of socio-political organization.

Communist federations such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia represented one of these rival types of socio-political organization. Their nationality policies often explicitly encouraged the cohabitation of different nations within the same political unit. They recognized the existence of distinct, autonomous national identities at sub-state level while at the same time promoting a common Soviet (Czechoslovak, Yugoslav) identity. These Communist nationality policies are not the only ones that escape Gellner’s definition.

If the nation-state is indeed seen as only one among several modern forms of polities, then it is plausible to assume that the cultural homogeneity of Gellner’s nationalism should also be seen as only one possible form of several modern forms of identity and legitimacy. Building on this assumption, the remainder of this chapter examines the competing forms of identity and legitimacy at the Italo-Yugoslav border in the decade following World War II. Its key proposition is that in this border region, the Cold War entailed not only an ideological confrontation between two different political visions, but also a confrontation between competing forms of nationalism. Nationhood remained an important basis of collective identification and political legitimization in all parts of the region, but was incorporated into both the political system and public discourse in significantly different ways on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain.
Observed from afar, the history of border formation in the north-eastern Adriatic seems to be a textbook example of nation-state building and ethno-cultural homogenization. As part of the former imperial borderland, the region has seen the coming and going of many administrations, including the Venetian and Austro-Hungarian empires, the Kingdom of Italy, Nazi Germany, Allied Military Government, the Italian republic and Tito’s Yugoslavia. Each of them contributed to a complex patchwork of cultural legacies and left the north-eastern Adriatic with a culturally and ethnically mixed population; the region’s main urban centre, the port city of Trieste, was home to Italians, Slovenians, Croats, Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks and Serbs, as well as several smaller minorities. From the late nineteenth century, this multiethnic tapestry began to unravel. The rise of nation-states triggered conflicting visions of identity and borders, and led to processes of cultural assimilation and inter-ethnic violence and migration which gradually reduced the ethno-cultural complexity of the region, and gave way to internally homogeneous nation-states. Today, most of the countries whose borders meet in the region – Italy, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia – are effectively conceived of as nation-states with an ‘ethno-cultural’ majority of 90 per cent of the total population or more.

While this account is not incorrect, its insight into the nature and impact of nationalist principles in this part of the world is rather limited. From early on, the ethnic and cultural complexities of the region inspired principles of sovereignty and border legitimation in which cultural diversity was seen as an asset to be preserved rather than an obstacle to be eliminated. For instance, the Austro-Hungarian settlement of 1867 allowed Slovenes and Croats in Carniola and Istria to establish a range of cultural institutions and obtain considerable public prominence in order to accommodate their increasingly vocal nationalist demands. Although these policies in turn provoked resentment among local Italian nationalists, and certainly did not give rise to a harmonious multiethnic coexistence, they were repeatedly invoked by later administrations and pressure groups. Even the Nazi occupiers, who took over power after Italy’s capitulation in 1943, sought to present themselves as heirs of the Habsburg Empire, and promised to restore the multi-ethnic harmony and the commercial prosperity which the region had supposedly enjoyed before the advent of Fascism. These promises were designed to appeal to the local Slav population, which had been disenfranchised by fascist assimilationist policies but now had to be
mobilised in the anti-communist struggle against the partisans. They were also aimed at the Italian-speaking mercantile elites, frustrated by the dwindling volume of overseas trade following Trieste’s incorporation into Italy. Similar nostalgic ideas, organised around the image of Habsburg Trieste as a cosmopolitan commercial hub, were evoked by various autonomist movements, which argued that Trieste should enjoy the status of a ‘free city’, and as such serve the needs of the hinterland while still maintaining a measure of local autonomy.

In the years following the end of World War II, these kinds of alternative principles of identity and legitimacy were given a new lease of life. Poised at the southern tip of what would come to be known as the Iron Curtain, the disputed territory assumed an unprecedented geopolitical significance, which firmly anchored its fate to the logic of Cold War politics. This changing geopolitical context was also reflected in the fluctuating fortunes of competing proposals for the solution to the ‘Trieste problem.’ The Council of Foreign Ministers (United States, the Soviet Union, France and Britain) initially put its faith in a ‘scientific’ solution in order to establish ‘objective’ patterns of ethnic settlement, but it soon became clear that this was a blind alley: the members of the international boundary commission could not agree on a definition and method of measuring, and came back empty-handed. The assumption that borders should be drawn by making ethnicity coincide with polity thus had to be discarded and the Council of Foreign Ministers turned to alternative solutions. This resulted in the proposal for establishing an independent, multinational and multilingual state, to be called the Free Territory of Trieste (FTT) whose administration would be entrusted to the United Nations – an arrangement modelled on the League of Nations administration of Danzig in the inter-war period. This solution was eventually enshrined in the Paris Peace Treaty, signed in February 1947.

However, by the time the Free Territory was due to be translated into a political reality, the global geopolitical situation had changed. In spite of growing local support for the new territorial and political arrangement the intensification of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union made the day-to-day functioning of the Free Territory impossible. The fact that many local supporters of the Free Territory had definite left-wing leanings, and favoured an autonomous Trieste under Yugoslav sovereignty aroused suspicions among pro-Italian groups (of all political colours) and Western observers alike. Trieste’s socialists were known for their support for multinational coexistence and
communist internationalism, inspired by Austro-Marxist conceptions of sovereignty and ‘personal autonomy’. Their views on the nationalities question also had a lot in common with those defended by South Slav social democratic groups in the Habsburg Empire and appeared disconcertingly similar to solutions adopted in Tito’s Yugoslavia at the time. Despite the fact that Trieste’s autonomist movement also encompassed a right-wing group that eventually formed a separate party the overlaps with communist principles of sovereignty and identity – in particular the fact that both accommodated different ethnonational groups under the same political roof – proved too disturbing, and contributed to the gradual abandonment of the Free Territory as a solution to the Trieste problem. Other proposals, including those based on the requirement to make political borders coincide with ethnic ones, were allowed back onto the negotiating table.

The persistence of nationalist animosities in the region was a major factor as well. The permanent blockade against normal political and economic functions provided a breeding ground for discontent in the Free Territory and a stimulus to permanent mass mobilization. There were often violent clashes, even bloodshed and mass migration. As ethnic tensions showed no sign of abating, representatives of the Anglo-American military administration became increasingly willing to listen to Italian nationalist arguments about the ‘natural’ antipathy between Italians and Slavs. In this sense the abandonment of the Free Territory also indicated the acceptance by ‘high politics’ of the persistence of local nationalist antagonisms. Equally important was the electoral defeat of the Communist Party in Italy in February 1948 and Yugoslavia’s expulsion from the Cominform later in the same year. These events made the threat of a Soviet take-over seem far less likely and slowly downgraded the Italo-Yugoslav border dispute from a major Cold War front line to a more limited quarrel. In October 1953, after another round of mass demonstrations and escalating tensions between the two neighbouring states, Western allies announced the imminent withdrawal of their units from the Free Territory, which provided both sides with a further incentive for reaching a compromise. The following year the FTT was finally dismembered and divided between the two neighbouring states. Although no principle was officially adopted as the basis of the division, and decisions were to a large extent driven by pragmatic considerations, the influence of ethno-national criteria and beliefs in the inherent hostility between Italians and Slavs was unmistakable.
Throughout this volatile period, the north-eastern Adriatic effectively served as a battleground for competing conceptions of nationhood. They were promoted by both the Italian and the Yugoslav authorities, as well as by the Allied administration and various local interest groups. The remainder of this chapter takes a closer look at two of the most influential competing conceptions of nationhood. The first was promoted by Italian nationalist groups opposed to communism, and was based on an implicitly racialised idea of the Italian nation as the bearer of a superior civilization, destined to rule over the north-eastern Adriatic and protect it from Slavo-communist barbarism. The rival conception of belonging, defended by the Yugoslav authorities, was premised on the idea of Yugoslavia as a multinational federation whose unity depended primarily on common ideological affiliations and class consciousness rather than ethno-cultural ties. Both of these conceptions were alternatives to the Gellnerian principle of nationalism yet for the border dispute to be settled, both were eventually displaced by the ideal of the ethno-culturally homogeneous nation-state.

To elucidate the key elements of each of these conceptions of nationhood and sovereignty, I draw in the rest of this chapter on political speeches, official announcements, reports and commentaries published in major pro-Yugoslav and pro-Italian newspapers distributed in the region between 1947 and 1954, as well as on a selection of secondary sources. The pro-Italian newspapers covered here all were published in the Free Territory, including La Voce Libera and Giornale di Trieste, otherwise known as Il Piccolo, and the weekly review of political affairs Trieste. Among these, Giornale di Trieste was most unequivocally in favour of the annexation of Trieste to Italy, and represented the voices of those Triestines who ‘recognised themselves in [...] the Western, Atlantic, and European camp.’ The pro-Yugoslav newspapers comprise the Croatian daily Riječki list, later renamed Novi list, the Slovenian bi-weekly Nova Gorica, later renamed Primorske novice, and the Italian minority daily La Voce del Popolo, all published on the Yugoslav side of the border. Together with the Slovenian bi-weekly Slovenski Jadranski dnevnik and the Slovenian minority daily Primorski dnevnik, both published in the Free Territory, most of these newspapers had their roots in clandestine antifascist, pro-communist periodicals established during the Second World War. After the establishment of the Yugoslav federation, these newspapers were placed under the close supervision of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and functioned as a conduit for communist agitation and persuasion.
Pro-Italian and anti-communist Triestine newspapers shared an unambiguous commitment to the Italian national cause, and appealed to those Italians who felt that Trieste, and the north-eastern Adriatic as a whole, formed an integral part of Italian national territory. The opening issue of Giornale di Trieste, published in March 1947, presented the daily as ‘above all an Italian newspaper’, whose coverage sought to ‘correspond with the exigencies of a population that is largely Italian in terms of culture, language and sentiment’ (6 March 1947). According to an editorial published in the same newspaper shortly afterwards, Trieste ‘was and remains an Italian city,’ and its streets were ‘our streets’ (3 May 1947). The opening editorial of La Voce Libera, in July 1945, was permeated by similar sentiments, and spoke about ‘the love we bring to our Trieste, to the tormented Julian lands, and to the whole of Italy,’ thus signalling a belief in the national tie that links both Trieste and the surrounding region to Italy (23 July 1945). Yugoslav claims to this territory, the same editorial argued, were ‘clearly opposed to designs of history and culture,’ and were therefore not destined to last.

At first sight, the notion of ‘Italianness’ (Italianità) underpinning these writings – associated with history, culture, language and sentiment – conforms to a cultural, perhaps even ‘civic’ conception of national belonging, since it appears to be open to everyone, regardless of racial or ethnic descent. Yet, as Pamela Ballinger points out, this interpretation is rather misleading: from the nineteenth century onwards, ideas of nationhood in Italy were characterized by a slippage between culture and race, with language and culture often standing for ethnic descent and biological ‘race.’ The notion of Italian civiltà, which blends modern ideas of culture, civilisation and civility, stands at the centre of this slippage and ties modern conceptions of Italian culture and language to a hierarchy of human races. The historical roots of this notion stretch back to the ideological universe of enlightenment Venice, within which the eastern shore of the Adriatic appeared to be poised mid-way between barbarism and civilisation, and so demanded the enlightened intervention of Venetian civiltà.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as the notion of the enlightening, assimilatory civiltà became one of the core elements of Italian national identity, it gradually assumed racist overtones. Admittedly these were not overtly biological: in the eyes of many Italian
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nationalists, nothing prevented ‘Slavs’ from becoming civilised. Yet they could do so only by shedding their Slavic background and assimilating fully into Italian civilisation or culture.\(^{31}\) In the twentieth century, this racialised notion of civiltà was incorporated into fascist understandings of Italian identity, its imperial past and its future role as the bearer of a Fascist empire. Fascists often spoke of Dalmatia, as well as the north-eastern shore of the Adriatic, as a land in need of Italian civilisation, or singled out particular cities in Dalmatia as superior to other towns that were permeated by barbarism, irrationality, low levels of hygiene, and, more generally ‘balkanism.’\(^{32}\) The ‘new’ Fascist civilisation was believed to be morally responsible for saving humanity, including the inhabitants of the Balkans, from the combined threats of democracy, communism and Jewish conspiracy.\(^{33}\) At the same time, this civilizing mission also served to justify Fascist colonial expansion and thus helped secure ‘living space’ for the expansion of the Fascist ‘New Order’.\(^{34}\)

This imperial racialized understanding of Italianness, centred on the belief in the superiority of Italian civiltà, provided the basis for much of the reporting in the pro-Italian newspapers circulating in the region. This was particularly evident in the reports from Dalmatia and those parts of Istria under Yugoslav rule, which repeatedly drew a sharp contrast between the glorious achievements of Italian civilization and the ingrained barbarity of Yugoslavs. In the eyes of *Il Piccolo* the north-eastern Adriatic was characterized by a ‘Roman, Venetian and Italian configuration’, associated with ‘an unbroken progression of a two-thousand-year old civilisation’ whose heritage was now being destroyed by the barbaric actions of Yugoslav communists (27 October 1954). In a characteristic comment accompanying the photo reportage from the Istrian town of Pula/Pola, published in *Giornale di Trieste*, the town’s Roman amphitheatre was used to symbolise the towering and timeless presence of Italianness, and to provide a stark contrast with what was described as a pitifully small and lonely group of pro-Yugoslav protesters.

Similar rhetorical constructs, based on dichotomies of past and present, imperial glory and communist barbarism, life and death, can be found in *La Voce Libera*. A photo-reportage from Zara/Zadar, one of the major urban settlements on the Dalmatian coast, was composed exclusively of images of ruins, decaying buildings and empty streets (14 June 1948). As one of the graphically most prominent subtitles suggested, the images represented a ‘Venetian city’, which is ‘dying in a long and grey agony’. The message is clear: the Slavic inhabitants of Istria and Dalmatia have no legitimate claim to the eastern shores of the Adriatic, and are
incapable of preserving the achievements of Italian civilization. The presence of the Yugoslav authorities in the region is therefore an ‘occupation’, and evidence of ‘Yugoslav expansionism’ (1 April 1948). Evidently, the understanding of Italianness shown in these article has a racial boundary: the benefits of Italian civiltà can be generously extended to Slavs, but only insofar as they remain second class citizens, and refrain from challenging the primacy of ethnic Italians as the only legitimate heirs of the Roman and Venetian Empires.

In several articles the contrast between Italian civilization and Slavic barbarity overlapped with characteristic Cold War dichotomies of communism and democracy, totalitarianism and freedom. Differences in economic and political systems were presented as stemming from cultural and mental predispositions and anchored in racial differences. As the frequently used derogatory term ‘slavo-communist’ suggests, Slavs were perceived as inherently prone to communist ideals, and hence to non-democratic, totalitarian modes of political rule. Such ideas were conveyed by visual elements such as caricatures and comic strips, where Slavs typically appeared rather intimidating, wearing a uniform and sometimes even barefoot and with hairy legs (e.g. Giornale di Trieste, 2 November 1953). Pro-Italian newspapers also frequently included reports about the cruel measures employed by the Yugoslav authorities to deal with the opposition in the newly acquired territories. Reports on various cases of ‘infoibamento’ – that is, the politically motivated killings of local inhabitants opposed to communist rule, followed by the mass burial of corpses in karstic pits known as ‘foibe’ – were particularly common. One such report was accompanied by a photo of a group of people looking at an array of human remains – bones and skulls – retrieved from one of the local pits, which served as a material ‘proof’ of Slav brutality (Giornale di Trieste, 1 April 1948, 2). Such reports and images helped solidify the perception of Slavs as intrinsically prone to cruelty, oppression and totalitarianism.

Given the racial conception of Italian civiltà, and a similarly racial understanding of communism, it should not come as a surprise that pro-Italian commentators were rather suspicious of Yugoslav efforts to promote a multinational identity for the region. The activities of the Italo-Slav Antifascist Union, the major communist organization in the region in the early post-war years, were dismissed as being internationalist in name only: in reality they were inherently Slav and ultimately aimed at slavicising the whole region and ‘erasing, as soon as possible, every trace of Italianness in the name of the Italo-Slav fraternity’ (La Voce Libera, 1 April 1947). Following a similar logic, communist activities in Italy were
presented as inherently anti-Italian. In one editorial, the newspaper linked to the local branch of the Italian Communist Party, Il Lavoratore, was described as ‘the organ of Panslavism in Trieste’ and as ‘a panslavic daily’ (La Voce Libera, 28 May 1947). Another article, published in the run-up to the 1948 Italian elections, argued that the name and image of the Italian communist leader Palmiro Togliatti ‘were raised on banners around the streets of Trieste by Slav communists in order to negate Italians,’ and suggested that communist appeals to internationalism were nothing but a cunning ploy. Yugoslavia, claimed the commentator, ‘is a Slav nation’, while Italy has not, and because of that, if Italy became communist, Yugoslav interests would always take precedence over Italian ones, and despite Togliatti’s claims to the contrary, Trieste would not go to Italy (Giornale di Trieste, 10 September 1947, 1).

It is important to note that the pro-Italian newspapers examined here were not alone in perpetuating an imperial and implicitly racialized notion of Italianness. At the time the whole of Italy was undergoing a difficult process of transition from a short-lived empire to an ethno-culturally homogeneous nation-state – a process which has often been discussed in relation to other Western states, but which is rarely acknowledged as an important part of Italy’s post-war experience. Italy’s democratic leaders initially fought hard to separate colonialism from Fascism, arguing that Italy should be allowed to maintain some form of temporary control over its pre-fascist colonies, and facilitate their orderly transition to independence under the aegis of the United Nations.35 Regaining control over territories in the north-eastern Adriatic, in particular over Trieste, ranked even higher ? much higher highest on the agenda. Many Italian observers felt that the city and the surrounding region were an integral part of Italian national territory, with historical ties with Italy which went much deeper than those of other territories.36 Clearly the newspaper coverage just analysed echoed such sentiments.

Yet appeals to the civilizing mission and imperial duty no longer enjoyed the kind of international support they once did. In a world organized around the global contest between the Soviet Union and the United States – both staunch supporters of decolonization movements at the time37 – colonialist appetites and imperial models of sovereignty were falling out of favour. In addition domestic support for colonial possessions was in decline. At a time when continental Europe was itself stumbling under the burden of post-war reconstruction, and had to resort to outside help to feed and clothe its population, the expense
of colonial possessions was increasingly hard to justify. In Italy the task was made even harder due to the stigma associated with Fascism. Italian citizens returning from the former colonies, including those coming from the north-eastern Adriatic were not looked upon with much sympathy. Their new neighbours, the inhabitants of Italy’s urban centres, tended to see them as both competitors for scarce resources, and living reminders of a shameful fascist past. Given these domestic and international pressures, Italian authorities had little choice but to forego their imperial dreams, and adapt to the reality of Italy as a nation-state. By 1952, Italy had lost all of its colonies, except for Somalia, and although the territorial contest over the north-eastern Adriatic took somewhat longer to settle, its outcome in the end was a rejection of Italy’s claim to its former territories.

In this context, territorial claims like those advanced in the Triestine newspapers were beginning to sound anachronistic, at least from the perspective of Italian metropolitan centres. Nevertheless, some elements of the imperial conception of Italianness, in particular its racial assumptions, proved tenacious, and can still be seen in the new idea of Italianness centred on the concept of the nation-state. For instance, beliefs about the deeply engrained hostility between Italians and Slavs, and about the incompatibility of their ways of life, proved influential in determining the final shape of the Italo-Yugoslav border. Faced with persistent inter-ethnic prejudice and conflicts in the area, members of the Allied Military Government were becoming more and more prone to accept that the only solution to the dispute was to make ethnicity coincide with the state border, in as far as possible. The reports appearing in the Triestine pro-Italian newspapers at the time reinforced these ideas, and sometimes themselves explicitly resorted to ethno-national principles of border formation – for instance when they mourned the loss of ‘ethnically’ Italian villages and towns annexed to Yugoslavia (e.g. *Il Giornale di Trieste*, 19 October 1954).

Ethno-racial markers also continued to play a role in assessing the eligibility of applicants for Italian citizenship from the former colonies. According to the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, all Italian citizens who were domiciled in the territories annexed to Yugoslavia prior to World War II were to be automatically granted Yugoslav citizenship, but were also given the right to opt for Italian citizenship, provided that their customary language was Italian. Since Slovenians and Croatians residing in the region normally spoke Italian fluently, this clause gave them in principle the possibility of opting for Italian citizenship as well. But on
the Italian side, this prospect prompted worries about Italian-speaking ethnic Slavs deliberately ‘abusing’ the provisions of the Peace Treaty to ‘infiltrate’ the Italian part of the region. Although local authorities could not legally reject such applications, they often required the applicants to relocate to other regions in Italy, or else to register with the local authorities as foreigners. Much like the imperial understanding of Italian nationhood found in Triestine nationalist newspapers, the notion of Italianness underpinning these decisions had a clear ethno-racial rationale. In this way, old ethno-racial markers were re-inscribed into the new, nation-state centred idea of Italianness. Yet the uses of the racial boundary in the two contexts differed: in the first case, racial markers served to justify territorial expansion and the inclusion of Slavs – albeit as second-class citizens – while in the second case, the boundary was used as a means of exclusion, and prevented Italian-speaking Slavs from acquiring citizenship.


Even a quick glance at the front pages of pro-Yugoslav newspapers in the first post-war decade shows that appeals to national belonging were integral to their coverage. Articles regularly addressed their readers in national terms, and some of the newspapers also featured recognizable national symbols, such as the Slovenian national coat of arms, complete with the ‘national mountain’ (Triglav) and sea waves. Yet these national references and symbols were typically combined with symbols of communism, references to the overarching ‘brotherhood and unity’ of Yugoslavia’s nations, and appeals to non-national collectivities, in particular to workers and peasants. Furthermore, the categories normally used to refer to the nation, such as the words ‘narod’ in Serbo-Croatian, ‘ljudstvo’ in Slovenian and ‘popolo’ in Italian, evoked different shades of meaning. Like the English usage of ‘people’ they could connote simultaneously an ethno-culturally homogeneous collectivity as well as an ethno-culturally mixed group which shared a common allegiance to proletarian rule. Thus a characteristic announcement of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia on Labour Day in 1947, reproduced word-for-word in several newspapers, was addressed simultaneously to ‘the peoples/nations [narodi] of Yugoslavia’ as well as to ‘workers’, ‘peasants’, ‘the intelligentsia’, ‘the youth’, ‘women’, ‘citizens’, ‘soldiers’ and ‘officers’ (Riječki list, 1 May 1947, 1). A similar array of collective subjects was invoked in an editorial in the Italian minority daily. Its author described the Labour Day as
… a luminous day, when the working class and the peasants, people’s intelligentsia, the youth and women, all of the Croatian and Italian nations/peoples [popolo] of our land, along with other peoples/nations [popoli] of Yugoslavia and with comrade Tito, are reconfirming their conscious and resolute effort to bring to completion all of the tasks of the five-year plan. (La Voce del Popolo, 1 May 1947)

This mixture of appeals to national belonging and working-class comradeship, underscored by the ambiguity of the categories of collective identity used, was wholly in line with the official socialist Yugoslav approach to nationality and statehood. Modelled on the Soviet federal system, the Yugoslav constitution recognized the existence of distinct, autonomous national identities at sub-state level while at the same time assuming a common Yugoslav identity, rooted in a shared loyalty to the communist cause. The simultaneous emphasis on national distinctiveness and overarching Yugoslav working-class comradeship was presented as the only form of nationhood that was capable of guarding Tito’s Yugoslavia against the shortcomings, which were held to have led to Yugoslavia’s descent into bloody inter-ethnic conflict in World War II. Particular targets were the attempts by Yugoslav elites in the interwar period to build a ‘synthetic’ Yugoslav culture, based on the belief that Yugoslav peoples, despite being culturally, linguistically and religiously different, in fact constituted a single national whole. This understanding of Yugoslavism came to be perceived by many non-Serbs as an attempt to Serbianize the country, and despite the gradual abandonment of ‘integral Yugoslavism’ in the 1930s, inter-war Yugoslavia was subsequently remembered as an oppressive state intent on forcibly assimilating Yugoslav peoples into a single nation.

This selective memory enabled the communist elites to construct their project of Yugoslav ‘brotherhood and unity’ as an entirely unprecedented endeavour to link the South Slavs together under a single political roof while at the same time maintaining their national distinctiveness. In contrast to inter-war Yugoslavia, went the argument, Tito’s Yugoslavia was addressing the true causes of pre-war oppression and war-time bloodshed. These were not limited to exploitative relations between nations, but also encompassed capitalist exploitation, nationalist antagonism between different national bourgeoisies and the continuing influence of other ‘forces of the past’ including feudal relationships, the Church and imperial interests. Following this argument, the true solution to national Yugoslav national question could not be found solely in the continuation of the South Slav national
liberation struggle. Rather the struggle had to be integrated into the international struggle of the working classes against both domestic capitalists and imperialist forces abroad. In short, the equality and brotherhood of Yugoslav nations had to go hand-in-hand with — and, where necessary, be subordinated to working-class comradeship and allegiance to a communist vision of modernity.

This notion of Yugoslav ‘brotherhood and unity’ as a new and unique form of collective belonging was prominent in public speeches and news reports at the time. Yugoslavia, as Tito declared in an interview, was building a ‘new community,’ a community within which ‘every nation/people [narod] represents a specific unit on its own, yet they all together also form a strong unit’ (Glas Istre, 6 June 1947). Eros Sequi, the first secretary of the Union of Italians and one of the ‘good Italians’ trusted by the Yugoslav regime, defended a similar vision of Yugoslavism, and described the new Yugoslavia as ‘a state in which nationality is fully free to develop, and where economy, political power and every human activity are based on a new foundation of collaboration between humans and nations’ (La Voce del Popolo, 1 January 1947). Italians living on the Yugoslav side of the border were regularly mentioned as equal members of the new Yugoslav nation. As one article argued, the ‘great idea of brotherhood and unity,’ forged in the common struggle against Fascism, was capable of overcoming the hostility between Italians and Croats in Istria, and helped unite them in ‘a strong front’ (Riječki list, 2 March 1947).

It is no coincidence that none of these examples provides a particularly clear definition of Yugoslav unity. Up to about mid-1947 party officials deliberately avoided mentioning their communist credentials, and instead emphasized the equality and freedom of Yugoslav nations, the need for economic rebuilding and development and the importance of education and women’s rights, etc. The principal motivation for such a policy was the need to consolidate the position of the Communist Party at home without alienating the general population, but also the fear of damaging Yugoslavia’s position vis-à-vis the West. Given the mounting tensions between the two superpowers, it was strategically much wiser to blow the horn of national liberation and equality than to provoke unwanted attention with loud proclamations of loyalty to the communist cause. Similarly, local activists involved in preparations for the visit of the international boundary commission in 1946 were asked to avoid using any symbols that would signal loyalty to the Soviet cause, and instead prepare graffiti, banners and flags that emphasized Slovenian identity and loyalty to Yugoslavia.
Communist symbols such as the hammer and sickle, found on the walls across the towns and villages in the region, were to be erased immediately, and replaced with ‘writings in the national spirit’, such as ‘Slovenians have been here from times immemorial’ and ‘For us, life exists only in Yugoslavia’.  

From about mid-1947, references to the common communist cause became more common. As a commentary published on the Day of the Republic (the anniversary of the declaration of the republic on 29 November 1943) made clear, Yugoslavia was ‘a country in which its nations/peoples [narodi], united in brotherhood, are building for themselves a better future, building a socialist society’ (Riječki list, 29 November 1947). Following a similar logic, ‘workers’ were now often singled out as the key bearers of the new Yugoslav identity. A speech delivered by Tito, reproduced in Glas Istre, is a case in point. When talking about the five-year plan, Tito started by pointing out that the tasks of the plan were shared by ‘all citizens of Yugoslavia,’ but then emphasized that workers were expected to bear the brunt of responsibility for fulfilling the plan, and had the duty ‘to work day and night,’ ‘selflessly,’ to achieve the goal. Given its leading role in the country’s reconstruction, working-class comradeship was also expected to provide the connecting tissue of Yugoslav unity, tying the different nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia into a single indivisible whole. ‘In our country,’ argued Tito, ‘there is only one collectivity … All our working people merged into one single, huge collectivity, into a strong fist, united in thought and action’ (Glas Istre, 5 September 1947).

To be sure, these idealistic proclamations of ‘brotherhood and unity’ were far from the everyday reality of inter-ethnic relations in the region or in Yugoslavia as a whole. While cross-national collaboration and trust were certainly not absent, and indeed were often motivated by shared political persuasion and in particular loyalty to communist ideals, they were often paralleled and sometimes even outweighed by hatred and violence. This was especially true in the case of relations between Slavs and Italians. The decades of fascist rule had left a legacy of bitter memories and mutual suspicion that proved difficult to dispel, and forced many Italians to ‘opt’ for exile.  

Newspapers on both sides of the border were instrumental in keeping these memories and suspicions alive. Pro-Yugoslav newspapers were full of reports about the continuing discrimination faced by the Slovenian minority in Italy, about the persistence of fascist attitudes on the other side of the border, and about the devastation left behind by decades of Fascist rule in the region (e.g. Slovenski jadran, 5.
November 1954, 1; Novi list, 29 November, 1954). According to one commentator, Italians were also particularly prone to ‘bourgeois’ values, since their cultural capabilities were ‘most ruthlessly manipulated and made deviant by decades of Fascism’ (La Voce del Popolo, 1 January 1947). Despite frequent references to Italo-Slav fraternity, such reports and assertions did little to undermine the assumption that Italians were inherently prone to Fascism and hostile to both Slavs and communism.

Equally there is plenty of evidence that adherence to communism among local Slovenians and Croats did not automatically mean that ethno-national interests were subordinated to the common proletarian cause. Here too, the difficulties posed by the task of determining Italian citizenship among inhabitants of former Italian territories annexed to Yugoslavia after World War Two serve as a useful example. As mentioned earlier, the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty technically allowed local inhabitants of Slav descent – however that was determined – to apply for Italian citizenship, as long as they could prove that Italian was their ‘customary language.’ However, the definition of ‘customary language’ was slippery, and left the local administration considerable room for manoeuvre. In the instructions distributed to the local People’s Committees in Yugoslavia, ‘customary language’ was translated as ‘domači jezik’ – literally, ‘home language’ – thus suggesting that in order to qualify, applicants had to use Italian not only in the public realm or at work, but also in the private sphere. This translation provided the necessary grounds for refusing to grant Italian citizenship to all those applicants of non-Italian origin who were judged to be using Slovenian or Croatian language in their family environment. Thus a female applicant from Šempeter, whose husband remained on the Italian side of the border, was sent a letter explaining that the People’s Committee ‘cannot issue a document assigning Italian citizenship to a person who is Slovenian […] since this would lead to serious consequences.’ Evidently, local communist officials were reluctant to accept a complete fusion between nationhood and allegiance to communism inscribed in the official version of Yugoslavism, and continued to uphold the ethno-cultural conception of Slovenian identity. Yugoslav newspaper coverage, replete with references to territories that ‘ethnically’ belonged to Yugoslavia, did little to discourage such views (e.g. Slovenski Jadran, 7 October 1954).

These different meanings and practical uses of Yugoslavism suggest that communist support for nationalism was not simply instrumental. It may of course be that some Party members used the rhetoric of national liberation and equality merely as a propaganda trick, aimed at
furthering communist goals. Yet there is little doubt that many communist Yugoslav officials were genuinely concerned about the fate of ‘their’ nations, and became attracted to the communist cause at least in part because of its commitment to national equality. This led the highest echelons of the Party to take every opportunity to present communist goals as entirely commensurate with particular national interests, and in fact to insist that allegiance to the proletarian cause was the only route towards the fulfilment of national liberation. For instance, according to Milovan Djilas, then one of the top leaders of the Yugoslav Communist movement, Yugoslavia was undergoing both ‘a social transformation’ and ‘a national rebirth’: ‘While fighting for the freedom and independence of our nations/peoples [naroda] we are simultaneously building a new society, a new social order in which people will be equal’ (Riječki list, 15 April 1947). Rather than simply an exercise in communist manipulation, the constant oscillation between working class identity and national belonging can therefore be seen as a compromise that made Tito’s Yugoslavism appear attractive to a relatively broad range of interest groups, and helped broaden the regime’s popular support. Yugoslavia thus functioned - like any other nation - as a symbol with multiple meanings, which were ‘offered as alternatives and competed over by different groups manoeuvring to capture the symbol’s definition and its legitimating effects.’

Given its malleability, it is not a surprise that the double-layered nature of Yugoslavism persisted throughout the existence of communist Yugoslavia, regardless of the substantial political, economic and especially cultural changes which it underwent in subsequent decades. In the years that followed the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, Yugoslavia’s political leadership embraced a new set of political and economic principles, centered on the ideal of ‘worker’s self-management’ and premised on a rejection of ‘Soviet’ or ‘Stalinist’ models. The Party was expected to refrain from commanding and managing all aspects of social, political and economic life in the country, and limit its role to political education and persuasion. In the aftermath of these shifts, new tropes entered Yugoslav public discourse, organized around slogans such as ‘debureaucratization’, ‘decentralization’, and of course ‘workers’ self-management’. These shifting discourses crystallized around a new understanding of Yugoslavism, based on the idea of Yugoslavia as a meeting point of East and West, which lasted until the early 1960s and was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on a common Yugoslav culture. As Tito put it in 1954, ‘[w]e are following our own path into socialism, and we will not allow anyone, neither those in the East nor those in the West, to make us stray from this path’ (Primorske novice, 2 April 1954).
Despite these changes, the understanding of Yugoslavism underpinning newspaper coverage in the northeastern Adriatic in the mid-1950s remained broadly the same: the Yugoslav nation was portrayed as a multinational community of workers, united in the support for socialism. For instance, in an editorial published in Novi list on the day of the Republic, both ‘working class’ and ‘Yugoslav peoples/nations’ were mentioned, perpetuating the characteristic fusion of class solidarity and nationhood (29 November 1954). However, explicit proclamations of belonging to a Yugoslav community of brotherly nations and working peoples, such as those encountered in the late 1940s, were now rather rare. By the mid-1950s, the particular Yugoslav mode of belonging had, arguably, become so deeply-engrained that its existence was taken for granted. In other words, the communist version of Yugoslavism had become a form of ‘banal nationalism.’ As such, it was sustained with the help of small, barely noticed reminders, such as references to ‘us’, ‘our president’ or ‘our country’, without repeatedly specifying what the ‘we’ referred to, or how it related to communism, nationhood, and working-class comradeship.

Exceptions to this rule were those exalted moments of national celebration which accompanied major national holidays, as well as major international events involving Yugoslavia. On such occasions, explicit references to Yugoslav ‘brotherhood and unity’ and its particular combination of socialist values and national belonging, came back to the fore. As in the late 1940s, communist officials and newspaper commentators alike insisted that communist goals were entirely consistent with particular national interests, and provided the best possible guarantee for the attainment of full national liberation. A commentary published in a Slovenian bi-weekly a few days before 25 May – the official day of Tito’s birth, celebrated as the Youth Day - is a case in point:

In our struggle for national liberation, for the unification of all the parts of our national body, Slovenians of the littoral have found in Tito our most powerful supporter. His resolute words, supported by the common will and actions of all Yugoslav nations, have recently prevented great evil and a new injustice that was being prepared for us by our greedy neighbors with the support of their godfathers. (Slovenski Jadran, 21 May 1954).
The reports accompanying the dismemberment of the Free Territory of Trieste and the signing of the London Memorandum in 1954 are particularly telling in this respect. Once the shape of the new Italo-Yugoslav border had finally been defined, the Yugoslav authorities were faced with the difficult task of justifying the ‘loss’ of Trieste. To do so, they presented Yugoslav willingness to sacrifice a part of its ethnic territory as an admirable gesture and a model for solving similar disputes elsewhere in Europe, but also repeatedly emphasized that Yugoslavia had effectively achieved everything it could realistically be expected to (e.g. Novi list, 7 October 1954). At the same time it was made clear that Yugoslavia was entitled to much more, and that the new arrangement of borders was not there to stay, since it did not coincide with the ethnic distribution of the population. As argued in a speech by the Slovenian writer France Bevk, reproduced in Primorske novice, even though the London Memorandum was the best possible solution under the circumstances, ‘if we look into the more distant future, we should not forget that unnatural borders, which unjustly cut into the body of a nation, cannot endure’ (Primorske novice, 15 October 1954). Yet again we see that the Yugoslav formula of nationhood was capable of accommodating rather different relationships between national belonging and communist ideals. This malleability also helps explain why and how Yugoslavism could function alongside ethno-cultural principles of border legitimation, and thus help formulate a territorial arrangement that was, in no small part, underpinned by nation-state-centred ideas of sovereignty.

[B] 4. Concluding reflections

The notions of belonging which were fostered by pro-Yugoslav and by pro-Italian newspapers in the north-eastern Adriatic both departed from the ideal of an ethno-culturally homogeneous nation-state, but did so in very different ways. The understanding of Italianness in pro-Italian newspapers was centred on the imperial notion of Italian civiltà as a trans-national force which gave Italy the right to expand into foreign territories and rule over populations that were considered civilizationally inferior. In contrast, pro-Yugoslav newspapers promoted a form of collective belonging and sovereignty anchored in transnational working-class comradeship and allegiance to proletarian rule. At the same time, these transnational bonds of identity and loyalty coexisted and sometimes merged with ethno-cultural and even racial notions of identity and sovereignty. Within pro-Italian nationalist discourse, Italian civiltà was implicitly based on racial categories and hierarchies, most evident in portrayals of Slavs as inherently barbaric and totalitarian, and in the anxieties
about granting Italian citizenship to applicants of Slavic descent. Likewise, Yugoslav ‘brotherhood and unity’ often drew on an ethno-racial understanding of belonging, in which Italians appeared intrinsically prone to Fascism, claims to territories in the north-eastern Adriatic were ethnically based, and applicants for emigration were occasionally prevented from setting aside their Yugoslav citizenship on the grounds of their ethnic descent. These findings strengthen the view that we need to move beyond the narrow definition of nationalism as a political doctrine that requires ethnicity and polity to coincide, and instead acknowledge that the ideal of the ethno-culturally homogeneous state was just one of several available responses to manifestations of the rise of nations as political subjects. Even where it was in the end asserted it coexisted and sometimes competed with other principles of national sovereignty and other forms of national belonging, in this case those characteristic of multiethnic empires and multinational communist federations.

To account for these alternative forms of nationhood and sovereignty, we need to abandon the idea that nationhood nation-statehood was the only truly decisive and politically influential form of collective belonging in the modern era. Rather than being studied in isolation, the links between nationhood and political systems need to be situated in the broader context of competing projects of collective identification and popular legitimacy in the 19th and 20th century, including in particular those based on class and racial ideology. The close proximity of class and nation is not a coincidence: they both call for an abstract sense of community in an analogous, universalistic way, and they are also both related to political power and to the state. Due to these commonalities, national and class ideologies typically spread together and were often in competition for the same mass allegiance. As argued here, racial categorization, sometimes disguised as ‘culture’ or ‘ethnicity,’ was an integral part of the same mixture. Arguments about racial and civilizational superiority often appeared side-by-side with notions of national sovereignty and working class allegiance, and were used together with them to buttress claims to sovereignty and territory. Gender categories, though left unexplored in this analysis, were often also part of the mix. To be sure, such interlinkages were not limited to post-war Italy and communist Yugoslavia, but also appeared for example in imperial and post-imperial South Africa several European countries in the inter-war period and can also be seen in contemporary contexts, including contemporary immigrant societies in the West. The encounter between these different forms of identity and loyalty, and the associated principles of legitimacy and sovereignty, was resolved in different ways.
This discussion has also suggested that different models of nationhood and sovereignty, including those that appear logically incompatible, could often exist alongside each other. The persistence of ethno-racial prejudice in both pro-Yugoslav and pro-Italian newspapers, as well as in everyday negotiations over citizenship in the north-eastern Adriatic, offers a telling example. In spite of official proclamations of multinational brotherhood and unity in the Yugoslav case, and proud endorsements of Italian civiltà as a trans-national force on the Italian side, ethno-racial perceptions of belonging and sovereignty were widespread, and occasionally received indirect endorsement in public discourse. The malleability of identity categories often contributed to that as well. As the Yugoslav case shows, the categories used to refer to the nation were often rather ambiguous. This allowed the communist notion of Yugoslavism appealing to a variety of interests groups and segments of the population, including some that were not particularly attracted to communist ideals as such, but could be swayed by arguments about national liberation and equality.

When considering the particular case of communist Yugoslavia, it may be tempting to interpret these ambiguities of nationhood as a direct result of conscious manipulation devised by the communist authorities. Yet this interpretation is far too rigid to account for the range of meanings and uses attached to Yugoslavism. As Oliver Zimmer points out, scholarly observers are often too consumed by the quest for logical consistency to notice that social actors are not particularly bothered by internal paradoxes and contradictions in their perceptions of national identity. The notions of belonging and legitimacy motivating their actions and claims are often guided by disparate pragmatic considerations and tacit assumptions, including in particular the need to construct a national identity that makes sense and allows them to achieve particular goals within a specific local, domestic, or international context. As we have seen, the negotiation of identity and loyalty in the north-eastern Adriatic was constrained by historical legacies and memories of the war and the inter-war period, the growing opposition to colonialism in the international arena, as well as the need to justify territorial demands and consolidate domestic support in a crisis-ridden situation. To this we could add the shared condemnation of Fascism and Nazism, and the need to create a distance from war-time atrocities. At some level, the emphasis on trans-national loyalties, whether rooted in allegiance to communism or in the notion of civiltà, allowed both pro-Italian and pro-Yugoslav actors to sidestep the issue of their own complicity in the advance of Fascism.
As for the Cold War it is undeniable that from the crisis of May 1945 onwards ‘high politics’ significantly affected the course of the dispute. But once we take a closer look at the notions of identity and sovereignty promoted by different social actors, and the socio-political and historical context in which they were embedded, it becomes apparent that nationalism cannot be reduced to the manipulations of elites motivated by Cold War politics. Although numerous manifestations and competing symbolic displays of national belonging in the border region clearly were more or less directly supported and often carefully managed by the political elites nationalist passions were not necessarily a matter of pure and conscious manipulation. Rather they were often guided by genuine feelings of national loyalty, which could easily go hand-in-hand with transnational allegiances. The power of nationalist sentiments among the general population should not be discounted either. To be considered legitimate any solution to the border dispute therefore had to take into account nationalist sentiments as well. While in the end ‘block cohesion’ eventually took precedence over particular national interests, it is also the case that the final shape of the border was not a result of an arbitrary diktat from on high but the outcome of complex negotiations in which nationalist pressures were central.

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