

# “Our Victims Define Our Borders”:

## Commemorating Yugoslav Partisans in the Italo-Yugoslav Borderland

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This article discusses local cultures of remembrance of Yugoslav partisans fallen during World War II in Trieste, now part of Italy, and investigates the role of memory activists in managing vernacular memory over time. The author analyses the interplay between memory and the production of space, something which has been neglected in other studies of memory formation. On the basis of local newspaper articles, archival material, and oral interviews, the essay examines the ideological imprint on the local cultural landscape, contributing to a more complex understanding of memory engagement. The focus is on grassroots initiatives rather than state-sponsored heritage projects. This article argues that memory initiatives are not solely the outcome of national narratives and top-down ideological impositions. It shows that official narratives have to negotiate with vernacular forms of memory engagement in the production of a local mnemonic landscape.

**Keywords:** *Italy; Yugoslavia; Trieste; borderland; memory, memorials; partisans; World War II*

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### Introduction

Despite political gestures that aim at overcoming historical differences, many issues related to war, occupation, ethnic conflict, population transfer, and violence from the past remain unresolved. They are especially challenging in multi-ethnic societies and regions with a long history of border changes.<sup>1</sup> A high degree of cultural heterogeneity defines the former Italo-Yugoslav borderland and the city of Trieste/Trst in particular. This is an area which has experienced regular re-drawings

of borders and reconfiguration of the state order almost to the present day.<sup>2</sup> The complex heritage of the twentieth century remains at the center of public debate. Local historical diatribes often reach beyond the regional framework and feed into national narratives and international tensions. Memories of war stir local emotions and spread in concentric circles through Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia. The politicization of public memory as an aspect of the re-evaluation of the past is an important part of the local public sphere.<sup>3</sup>

In the last decades, scholars have shown how discourses of fractured memories have been formed and how divided historical narratives run alongside and intersect with ethnic and ideological divisions. On the basis of interviews with the local population or official memory practices, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have analysed memories of ethnic and ideological violence. They have demonstrated how different narratives stress certain events while forgetting other stories of violence.<sup>4</sup> Even the physical landscape has been affected by clashing memorials, so that it has become a contemporary site of contestation.<sup>5</sup> As Katia Pizzi puts it, “Trieste was, and still is, finding it difficult to shake off the heritage of its already heavily monumentalized past.”<sup>6</sup> But even if some attention has been given to the ways memories and (certain) memorials are reconfigured and reinterpreted over time, the interplay between memory (in its various forms) and the production of geographical space has received relatively little attention. The most discussed cases are the Risiera di San Sabba camp in Trieste and the “foiba” in Basovizza/Bazovica. Both speak clearly about contrasting memories and the exclusion of victims’ self-representations.<sup>7</sup> However, despite these studies, there has been no systematic research into the local mnemonic landscape. This is surprising if we consider the centrality of the territorial dimension and the role played by history in the formation of local collective memories. Spatial characteristics and artefacts from the past are the elements that embody the emotions of a community, encoded in material form, narrations, and practices. Based on an analysis of monuments and memorials to Yugoslav partisans in Trieste, this study focuses on the ideological imprint shaping the local cultural landscape in order to contribute to a more complex understanding of memory engagement in European borderlands. It demonstrates how forms of dissidence and of “multidirectional” memory, as signs of a divided present, bring tensions to the fore.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of this article will briefly introduce the history of the city and set the discourses of divided memories in the northern Adriatic context. In the next part I will present the process of local memory engagement through the construction of memorials. Much scholarly work focuses on the officially sanctioned memory landscape, taking for granted that monuments are installed by national governments in a unilateral top-down direction. Studies of the most impressive Soviet memorials in Berlin, Vienna, or in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe tend to promote this vision.<sup>9</sup> The recent popularization of forgotten Yugoslav *spomeniks* confirms this assumption. Writing about the exhibition of work by the photographer Jan Kempenaers in London in 2013, dedicated to his pictures of Cold War Yugoslav

monuments—"Spomeniks"—Joshua Surtees in the *Guardian* defined them as "bizarre architectural 'medals in the countryside' planted by Tito."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, this essay re-directs attention to lesser-known memorials, uncovering grassroots initiatives rather than exploring state-sponsored heritage projects. However, this memory-activism opens up new questions: given that the existing literature has presented memory-entrepreneurs mainly as political actors who invoke memories for political gain, for whom "no publicity is bad publicity,"<sup>11</sup> the case of Trieste calls for more detailed research into the management of the past and into civic memory production that goes beyond official initiatives.

In an attempt to find a conceptual framework that can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the way monuments operate within historical discourse, I have drawn primarily on John Bodnar's work on public memory and commemoration. Like Bodnar I use the notion of vernacular memory.<sup>12</sup> On the basis of archival material and interviews with the local population, I argue that vernacular memory cultures have produced several examples of bottom-up memory signs. However, the aim of this article is twofold: On the one hand, I will show how collective remembrance is an outcome of the agency of individuals or groups who come together, "not at the behest of the state or any of its subsidiary organizations, but because they have to speak out."<sup>13</sup> On the other, I am interested how different state-sponsored narratives are negotiated and reproduced by local communities in a border context. My primary inquiry is what relationship exists between the attitude of local people toward the rearrangement of political borders, the contestation of collective memories, and the creation of a subaltern mnemonic landscape. In recent years, scholars have shown the state's role in creating and controlling border communities, but also have pointed out that borders are places where memories intertwine, overlap, and clash, producing what Tatiana Zhurzhenko calls "communities of memory."<sup>14</sup> Here, the Italo-Yugoslav borderland is used as a heuristic tool that can go beyond local dimensions to uncover more general aspects of memory politics. Finally, this essay aims at entering the debate about the supposed specificity of Central and Eastern European processes of remembering.<sup>15</sup> It argues that even if the rise in the political use of history is particularly evident in post-socialist countries, it cannot be seen as an explicitly Eastern European phenomenon, since it has much in common with other political uses of the past in Europe and worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

## Historical Background

In Habsburg times an important center of economic and cultural exchange, Trieste (known as Trst by Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians; Triest by Germans and Hungarians; and Terst by Czechs and Slovaks) today is in a peripheral position not only in geographical terms but also at the political, social, and economic margins of Italy. Like several other post-imperial historical centers, it is a town with a

“relatively short but occasionally glorious past, a more modest present, and an uncertain future.”<sup>17</sup> However, the town has often been at the center of contrasting local, national, and international narratives and has been noted for its frequently changing political and symbolic borders. In both scholarly and popular imaginations, this area has typically been viewed as either a transitional zone, an area of cultural cross-fertilization, or as a site of violent “civilizational” shifts. Especially in the twentieth century, it often functioned as a powerful symbolic boundary. It is a place where several key axes of European symbolic geography met: the West and the East; the German, Latin, and Slav Worlds; Europe and the Balkans; and fascism, democracy, and communism.<sup>18</sup>

After World War I and the fall of Austria-Hungary, Trieste became part of the Kingdom of Italy and the new eastern borderland, renamed Venezia Giulia, played a key role in Italy’s post-war national symbolism. Symbolic language has been evident at several levels from toponomastics to commemorations, architecture, and in the shaping of the cultural landscape in general. Even if monumentalization started soon after the end of the Great War (*parchi della rimembranza, zone sacre*), this process gained particular importance in the Fascist era. In the provinces annexed after World War I (Trieste and Venezia Giulia, but also South Tyrol), newly erected monuments, buildings, and spatial planning in general had an important ideological and national function, while commemorative practices and related rituals helped to shape the nation and integrate individuals into the national body.<sup>19</sup>

Soon after Mussolini took power, anti-fascists formed illegal groups and organized subversive and propagandistic actions. Thus, after the attack on Yugoslavia in 1941, the resistance movement in the region could rely on an already established “culture of anti-fascism” among part of the population. After the collapse of the regime in summer 1943, the region was occupied by Nazi troops and became part of the Third Reich, with the name Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland, until the end of the war. Following the German defeat, the area became contested again. “Few areas in Europe have been so consistently disputed, both on the battlefield and at the conference table, and it is difficult to find an example wherein boundary changes have been more frequent or where the problem of paying due regard to the interests and wishes of the people who constitute the majority of its inhabitants has presented more difficulty,” argued the geographer Arthur Moodie at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in London in February 1943.<sup>20</sup>

The victory of the Allies in 1945 opened the possibility of revising the former Italo-Yugoslav border. Italy, on one hand, tried to maintain the pre-1941 borders, and Yugoslavia, on the other, tried to annex as much of the area as possible. While the Italian claims referred to earlier, pre-war arrangements, the Yugoslav demands were advanced on the basis of the victories of (and the losses sustained by) the Yugoslav partisan army, which had a strong presence in this area. However, it had already become clear during the war that the so-called Trieste question was much more complex, transcending Italian–Yugoslav bilateral relations. “Proper” war and the Cold War overlapped in this region and it is impossible to divide the two periods clearly.

The northern Adriatic after World War II with memorial sites analyzed in the article



The area soon turned into a symbolic stage for European bipolarity. By June 1945, under the pressure of the western Allies, the Yugoslav army had already left Trieste

and moved 20 km to the east, towards Koper (Capodistria in Italian). They were replaced by American and British forces. The failure of the boundary commission to determine a “scientifically-based ethnic border between Italians and Slavs” led to the constitution of the Free Territory of Trieste (FTT, 1947–1954).<sup>21</sup> With the Treaty of Paris coming into effect on 15 September 1947, the FTT was divided in two zones: Zone A (including the city of Trieste with a narrow coastal strip to the north-west) was administered by British and American armies, while Zone B (the north-western part of the Istrian peninsula, an area today shared by Slovenia and Croatia) was administered by Yugoslav military forces with a seat in Koper. This territorial division represented not only the border between Italy and Yugoslavia but also the physical (and mental) border between East and West and between communism and capitalism. It defined the “southern end” of the Iron Curtain, which in the aftermath of the war—to cite Churchill’s historic speech of March 1946—divided Europe from “Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic.” In fact, the border between Italy and Yugoslavia was only “Iron” during the first decade after the end of the war. Tito’s conflict with Stalin, which culminated in the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948, led to the border between Italy and Yugoslavia becoming more of a “Venetian blind” than an insurmountable division between East and West. In particular, living conditions along the border gradually improved from 1954 onwards with the repartition of the Free Territory of Trieste between Italy and Yugoslavia. The situation was finally settled in 1975, after the conference on security and co-operation held in Helsinki, with the signing of the Osimo Treaty between the two neighbouring countries.<sup>22</sup> With the independence of Slovenia and Croatia and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, the border between Italy and Yugoslavia changed into an Italo-Slovene borderline and the politics of memory created new pasts and new myths.

## **Building Memory**

Two decades of political exclusion, social conflict, ethnic marginalization, and war (especially World War II but also earlier conflicts in Ethiopia and Spain) heavily affected the population of the northern Adriatic region. Four years of war and the battle for Trieste in the last days of April and at the beginning of May 1945 cost hundreds of lives. The end of the conflict brought with it a wave of commemorative activities to give voice to histories of suffering and silenced memories. Mass funerals of local partisan soldiers were organized after the end of armed hostilities. Both in Trieste and in the villages around it, local communities buried their fallen. Usually, they organised mass services and guards of honour that took part in processions to the cemeteries, where tombstones or simple memorial plaques were erected. In most cases, they displayed the names of the fallen, but sometimes headstones showed distinctive political and ideological symbols, for instance, a red star or a hammer and sickle.<sup>23</sup>



Meanwhile new commemorative processes developed and the first monuments to fallen partisans were constructed, as symbols of the "concretisation of history."<sup>24</sup> A plaque commemorating three partisans was built by local residents on the Greta hill (Komenščina na Trsteniku, today known as via Bruni, in the suburb of Trieste) and was unveiled on 30 May 1945.<sup>25</sup> Several others followed in the summer months of 1945. In Rodik, a village on the Karst plateau thirty kilometers north-east of Trieste, a zone where the wartime repression of the local population had been particularly cruel, a monument was unveiled in July of the same year. A year before, on 21 July 1944, Wehrmacht soldiers of the 118th Jäger Division and other collaborationist units had killed seven boys and girls from the village, using extreme violence. On the first anniversary, "men from the village went to Bazovica and brought back the material for the monument on a carriage. Our monument was the first to be constructed after the war."<sup>26</sup> A simple monument, around three meters high, was erected from local rocks, and a plaque with the names and dates of birth of the victims was placed on the upper part of the memorial stone. The names of the fallen partisans from the village followed on the lower part. A red star was placed on the top of the monument, as was the case with the great majority of memorials at that time, but the order of precedence of the names inscribed on the plaque shows that rather than celebrating a glorious revolutionary battle the memorial expressed pain and mourning for "an entire generation lost by the village community."<sup>27</sup> Even if memories of atrocities, burned houses, and deportations have been largely "frozen"—to use a term elaborated by Tony Judt—by giving precedence to more heroic examples of partisan struggle, and by spreading a positive message of post-war reconstruction, this case of extreme violence remained at the center of local collective memory.<sup>28</sup> In the following years, memories of atrocities were transmitted orally within families rather than through schools or in other official rituals; as argued by Zerubavel, the family is an important social environment that provides the context of mnemonic socialization.<sup>29</sup> Remembrance was ritualized by local communities rather than by official memorialization and the monument in the main square embodied the cultural memory of the community.

Intense memory activity was not uncommon in many smaller centres, such as in Longera/Lonjer, a village in the suburbs of Trieste. Here on 24 March 1946, on the first anniversary of the attack of the police on the local "bunker" where partisans were hiding and where four of them perished, a similar monument was unveiled.<sup>30</sup> In Dolina a simple, around two-meter-high memorial with the names of the local partisans and other victims was dedicated on 28 July, in Sgonico/Zgonik and Trebiciano/Trebče, similar monuments but made of stones were inaugurated solemnly on 29 September 1946, while in Contovello/Kontovel, Bagnoli/Boljunec, and in the district of San Giovanni/Sv. Ivan, plaques and same kind of memorials were unveiled on Sunday, 2 November 1947, after All Saints day, when the population gathers at cemeteries.<sup>31</sup> If the initiatives and the coordination of the celebrations were in the hands of former partisans and their supporters, a closer look shows that the

majority of the memorials were erected mainly by those whom Bodnar calls “ordinary people.”<sup>32</sup> The discourses at the celebrations were highly political and mirrored the struggle for territorial appropriation of the region. But the population participated also to express their personal sentiments.<sup>33</sup> Thus, political content intertwined with voices of grief for fallen comrades and sorrow over the loss of loved ones.

Unlike state-sponsored monumental memorials, as was the case with Soviet monuments erected in Berlin or Vienna immediately after the war, these partisan memorials were realised on the initiative of village communities and groups of combatants who had returned home after the war. Usually, veterans nominated a committee and appointed a president, who assumed the function of coordinator and distributed tasks among the members. But the roles varied and very often they were not strictly and formally defined. The projects were mainly self-directed and were carried out on a voluntary basis.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the monuments were financed by local communities: funds were raised by collecting money door to door and the sum was usually employed for the purchase of building materials. Other works (carving, etc.) were carried out by volunteers and artisans, who were themselves often former partisans or their sympathizers. Because of limited financial resources, these memorials usually consist of large slabs of stone (even if sometimes local marble could be found), on which, in most cases, stands a red star (the symbol worn by the Yugoslav partisan army, but also by the Italian Communist partisans) and an inscription commemorating the fallen combatants (i.e., “Honour to the fallen Partisans,” etc.). In many cases, the names of the fallen partisans and murdered hostages were engraved on the monuments.<sup>35</sup>

They were usually constructed in the middle of village squares or on the main routes leading into the village. Memory activists wanted them to be placed on the nodes of major axes to confirm the general importance of their subject and maximize their visibility.<sup>36</sup> In the village of Dolina, where a monument was constructed at the end of July 1946 and placed in proximity to the monument commemorating a Slovene nationalist gathering from the nineteenth century, the positioning also drew symbolic power from the meaning of the already existing memorial.

Because of the ethnic composition of the population of the surroundings of Trieste, predominantly inhabited by Slovenes, the inscriptions on the monuments are usually in the Slovene language.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Italian partisans, the inscriptions were also in Italian. In this way, the monuments assumed a transnational character, which was also reflected in official commemorations. Even in Slovene-speaking areas out of Trieste, most of the speeches were given in Slovene and Italian—something that was more a reflection of the political situation than an act arising from a practical need for bilingual ceremonies. Most of the ceremonies had a standard scenario: memorials were covered with wreaths brought by the families of the fallen and/or by the local veterans’ organisation, nearby houses were adorned with flags (Slovene, Yugoslav, Soviet, and Italian—with the red star in the middle, but not infrequently also American and British flags), local choirs sang partisan songs in Slovene and Italian,



### The memorial in Sgonico/Zgonik built in 1946



and after the speeches, again in both languages, a moment of silence followed, and other songs concluded the ceremony.

Such practices of remembrance transcend the traditional spatial and conceptual schemes provided for commemorative purposes, such as the local cemetery, and instead become part of the public sphere and of general, collective mourning. The case was similar to many parts of Yugoslavia, where “there was barely a village . . . that did not have its local war memorial.”<sup>38</sup> Similar practices also developed in what was becoming the Free Territory of Trieste. Even if this was a long-term process, from the first post-war months onwards, the claim that not a single village lacked plaques in memory of the fallen partisans also become true for the Zone A of the FTT. This is confirmed by Patrizia Dogliani, who analysed the fascist and anti-fascist heritage in Italy, affirming that the Friuli–Venezia Giulia region (created in 1963, with Trieste as its capital), along with Emilia-Romagna, has the highest number of memorials to anti-fascist resistance in Italy.<sup>39</sup>

### A City without Resistance?

However, it would be misleading not to consider the difference between the suburbs and the surrounding villages on one side, and the city centre, the central *piazza*, on the other. In Trieste, even many pro-Yugoslav manifestations were held largely in the Italian language. The nationalist and fascist narratives of superior civilization and practices of racial exclusion against the “Slavs” left behind long-term effects that persisted well beyond the break-up of the regime in summer 1943 and the official end of the war in 1945.<sup>40</sup> This challenges perceptions of two ethnically divided blocks and conventional views of the “Slavness of Triestine communism.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, it reveals forms of shared supra-national narratives (based on anti-fascist solidarity) developed primarily during the war years.<sup>42</sup> The Slavic-Italian Anti-Fascist Union (*Unione Antifascista Italo-Slava* in Italian and *Slovansko-italijanska antifašistična unija* in Slovene, UAIS/SIAU), the regional successor to the Partisan Liberation Front (*Osvobodilna fronta*) and the central umbrella organization for all local pro-Yugoslav left politics (until the split in 1948), just as in Yugoslavia, promoted the ideal of brotherhood and unity. In the case of Trieste, however, “brotherhood and unity” did not refer to the Yugoslav nations and nationalities, as was the case in Yugoslavia, but rather advocated brotherhood and unity between Italians and “Slavs” (Slovenes). However, the Allied military government that ruled zone A from mid-June 1945 for the next nine years made sense of their *mission* by adding the familiar image of national and class character to the ideological contraposition between anti-communism and communism.<sup>43</sup> Although the complexity of choices went well beyond ethnic and political contrapositions, the Allied military government (AMG) officials portrayed it as a clear-cut division, with Trieste presented as predominantly Western, civilized, democratic, and Italian and its suburbs as Eastern, Balkan, Slav, communist, and backward. Their mental geography designated ethno-national spaces in the urban milieu, trying to confine the “Slav-communists” to the

suburbs and beyond the "city walls." Thus, the funerals organized by the UAIS/SIAU in the first post-war months through the centre of Trieste, portrayed as exclusively "Italian" and therefore "off-limits for Slav-communists," could be seen as "popular forms of transgression" of this "attempted ethno-national ghettoization of Trieste."<sup>44</sup>

The unveiling of partisan monuments became controversial in that they represented support for Yugoslav territorial claims in the spirit of the propagandist post-war slogan "our victims define our borders."<sup>45</sup> The Cominform division of the anti-fascist milieu in the Zone A of the FTT after 1948 additionally entangled the local commemorative options. At a local level, the Yugoslav withdrawal from the Cominform was painful, especially in Zone A of the FTT: this option divided entire communities, families, and former combatants. The division did not occur along national lines. Only a minority of Slovene Communists followed the Yugoslav anti-Stalinist path. Most of them remained loyal to the Soviet line. If a joint celebration was in some cases still possible, the new context made the construction of monuments, planning of ceremonies, and any anti-fascist commemoration in general very difficult and often impossible. Memorials were now owned by Stalin supporters, belonging to Italian and also Slovene communist factions that rejected Tito and Yugoslavia. On the other hand, they were also claimed by Tito's supporters, who were a minority but were able to count on a solid and widespread organisational core and the support of neighbouring Yugoslavia. At the same time, the anti-fascist experience was also shared by anti-Communist Slovenes, who emphasised the primacy of the pre-war, national rather than international, anti-fascist struggle. The latter was symbolised by the monument dedicated to four anti-fascists erected in Basovizza/Bazovica in September 1945, which affirmed the importance of remembering the pre-war fascist discriminatory policy against ethnic minorities. Even today it represents one of the most important sites of memory for the Slovene minority in Italy.<sup>46</sup>

But was this memory activism meant to support territorial claims over the region? In addition to performing the function of memorialising artefacts in the public sphere, the question arises of whether post-war memorials to fallen partisans also functioned as markers of ethnic and/or political/ideological borders and tools for territorial demarcation. After WWI, victorious Italy, as on its new northern border with Austria (the Victory Monument in Bolzano/Bozen), erected a series of monuments on its new eastern border, for example, in Redipuglia/Sredipolje and Kobarid/Caporetto. These regions were ethnically extremely entangled. In accordance with the state politics of nationalization of its borderlands, these memorials were unveiled (also) with the aim of performing a national and ideological demarcation of the area.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the complexes built by the Soviets in Berlin and Vienna after WWII "were meant to glorify the wartime sacrifices and victories of the Soviet army but also to signal—by drawing on the notion of frontier camps—Russia's claim to govern a large chunk of Europe."<sup>48</sup>

The extremely entangled political situation and the struggle for territorial appropriation were also reflected in memorials and commemorations. Despite the public discourse of unity and the aim of creating an anti-fascist national memory-image, it was rare for a public gathering to unite all anti-fascist elements. The contents of partisan ceremonies reflected the complex political reality and were an argument in the hands of the pro-Yugoslav option. Therefore, these commemorations (regardless of nationality) were perceived as legitimating the annexation of the area to Yugoslavia and, despite the high number of local victims, a central partisan monument in Trieste was never constructed. This creates the impression, opposed to the Viennese space of memory described by Heidemarie Uhl as a “city in resistance,” of Trieste being a “city without resistance.”<sup>49</sup>

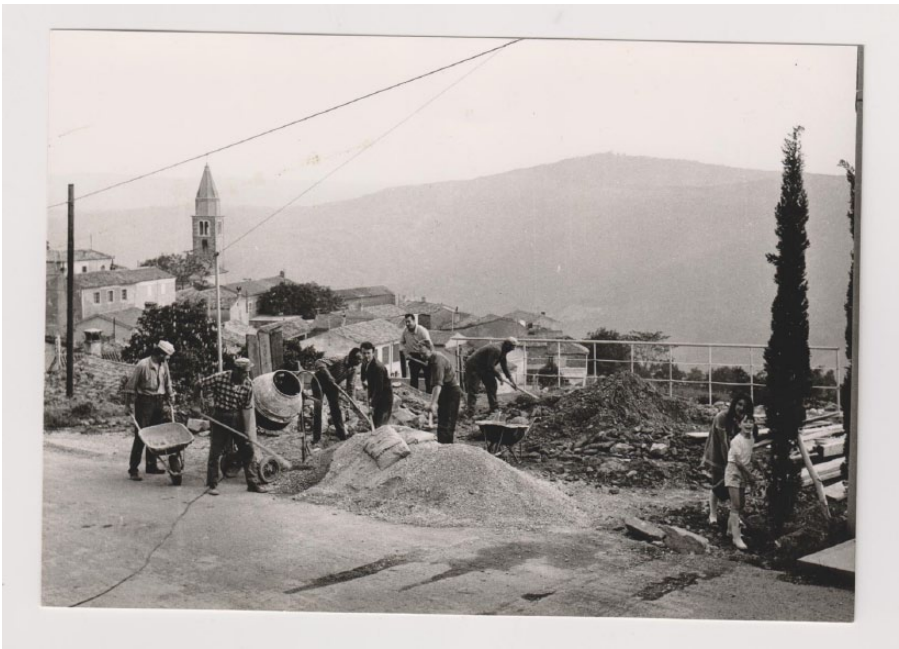
Were partisan memorials in the Italo-Yugoslav borderland also erected with the aim of establishing a national and ideological demarcation of the disputed territory? Could it be that they were even part of the celebratory system of arches, memorials and flags which welcomed the Boundary Commission, the body that visited the region in March and April 1946 and was, in the eyes of the locals, the arbitrator that would adjudicate the territorial belonging of the area? Even if political and cultural leaders promoted the vision of the fallen as fighters for annexation to Yugoslavia, this rhetoric was short-lived. If in the first weeks after the war, these local practices of remembrance could be balanced by an optimistic rhetoric of a better future in socialist Yugoslavia, after the Allied military government took control of the region and the signing of the Paris treaty in February 1947 established the FTT, any territorial change was highly improbable. A closer look at the sources shows that local committees did not explicitly erect monuments for this purpose and traditional forms of remembrance of the dead dominated. The intertwining of revolution and tradition is confirmed by the visual language of the monuments, displaying on the same memorial a traditional cross together with a more revolutionary red star. The great majority of the memorials were constructed to memorialize local partisan fighters and victims of Nazi and Fascist terror (deported to concentration camps or executed) rather than being markers of territorial annexation. Even if murdered hostages and prisoners were often given secondary importance in comparison with “proper” partisans who had fallen in battle, their names were inscribed on the monuments and their sacrifice was used as a proof of the suffering of the local population. Therefore, if from the very beginning monuments served to evoke the victorious partisan war, what prevailed and what was central both in the inscriptions of the monuments and in the celebrations were loss and mourning.

### **Managing Memory**

In 1954, the Free Territory of Trieste was divided between Italy, which obtained Zone A from the British and American army, and Yugoslavia, which kept Zone B. The border between the two countries was fixed *de facto*. At that time, in the former Zone A, tensions between the supporters of Tito and Stalin gradually calmed down,

especially when, after Stalin's death, the international political scene witnessed a rapprochement between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s. The new relationship between Moscow and Belgrade had a decisive impact on the local political climate. Even if "memory apartheid" persisted in several forms in Trieste, the reconciliation of the two main leftist political tendencies favoured a new wave of monument building. However, it was only after the parliament passed a new law on regional autonomy, permitting local administrations to pass planning acts, that new memorials could be constructed.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the late 1960s and especially the 1970s saw a new phase in the construction of monuments: Sgonico/Zgonik in 1969, Aurisina/Nabrežina in 1970, Prosecco/Prosek and Prebenico/Prebeng in 1972, Gabrovizza/Gabrovec in 1973, Caresana/Mačkolje in 1974, and Dolina and S. Croce/Križ in 1975 are only some examples of the new "statuomania."<sup>51</sup>

### Local volunteers building the memorial in Prebenico/Prebeng in 1971



But modern times required more formal approaches than in the past: the new boards were often formally registered at the local court, spaces were officially purchased, and memory spaces were designed by professional architects. Furthermore, after a gradual generational transmission of memory (even if many veterans were still living), the aesthetics of the monuments changed. Nonetheless, even if Mannheim warns us about the "fundamental distinction between appropriated memories and



personally acquired memories,” these examples reveal more mnemonic persistence than change.<sup>52</sup> Almost thirty years after the end of the war, the organizational models of commemorations (the establishment of a committee, etc.) remained unchanged and their implementation, in the form of anniversary celebrations, with speeches, recitals, and songs, remained largely the same. Memorials were still the result of bottom-up initiatives but became more imposing. The more the number of survivors of war diminished, the more the shape and dimensions of monuments increased. The new monuments were now in fact small memorial parks. Equipped with flowerbeds, artificial lighting, and poles for brandishing flags or banners, they bore inscriptions which were usually bilingual Slovenian-Italian. Even if most of the work was still carried out by local artisans after their working hours, funding solely on the basis of donations became extremely difficult.<sup>53</sup>

Because of the increasing costs of construction, an active role was played by local municipalities (with the exception of Trieste, they were mostly ruled by left-wing political majorities and with a strong presence of Slovenes throughout the Cold War period). Thus, local political leaders (such as mayors, but also regional and local deputies, cultural leaders, etc.) entered the celebratory mechanism and often used memory politics to strengthen their social power and promote their political careers. Since the boards were not able to collect the required sums of money, new monuments were often co-funded also by several organizations, like the partisan Veterans organization of Slovenia (*Zveza združenj borcev NOV Slovenije*, founded in 1948), the Slovenian minority organisations in Italy (like the Slovene cultural and economic union, *SKGZ*), and the communal authorities.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the memorial park in S. Croce/Križ, which was set up in 1975, the board asked for help from the Slovene Veterans organisation, which financed a huge bronze star. The designers of the plan intended the star to show the “sufferings of our people and their struggle against national and social repression before and during the war, by putting special emphasis on the National Liberation Struggle.”<sup>55</sup> The star, whose creator was the Slovene sculptor Stojan Batič, was placed at the centre of a long rectangular wall built by the village community, where the names of the fallen and the victims were inscribed.

The veterans organizations, be they Italian (especially the *Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d’Italia* [ANPI], linked to the Italian Communist Party) or from Slovenia and other parts of Yugoslavia, usually participated in the commemorations by providing speakers. They were expected to convey the double meaning of the local anti-fascist struggle: both national and social. The speakers were sometimes a source of friction between local committees and central offices, whether in Trieste (or Rome) and in Ljubljana (or Belgrade). The main accusation was usually based on a “lack of understanding of the local reality” and the “particular” audience of the border.<sup>56</sup> A speaker from central Slovenia, who might open old sores among supporters of the Cominform and the Titoists, was undesirable. The new boards of memory activists united in balancing between several political options, and aimed at overcoming the divisions of the past. At the same time, a Slovene speaker was expected to have an ethnic sensibility and include “the Italian democratic people” in



order not to be labelled as nationalist. Usually this was linked to demands for a more "just world," which Slovenes shared with the "Italian proletariat." A brochure published by the board for the unveiling of the monument in Aurisina/Nabrežina in 1970 stated that "the contribution of our Slovenian working man has always been substantial and important from this aspect. Especially because the Slovenes have always acted in solidarity with the Italian workers and without a doubt, . . . the consciousness on the need for solid, reliable equality with everyone, especially the Italian working people, has been deeply rooted and felt by these Slovenes, especially if the struggle for general labour and special national rights is to bring the desired results."<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, an Italian speaker was expected to emphasise the significant contribution of the Slovenes in the struggle against Nazism and Fascism. Someone who would stress the importance of the Italian *Resistenza* without highlighting the "suffering of Slovenes and Croats" during the fascist period—and the primary role of the Slovene partisan movement—would be just as inadequate. Italian speakers were expected to acknowledge that fascist Italy led a policy of cultural genocide against the Slovenes and Croats.<sup>58</sup>

After several years of internal ideological conflict, many speakers emphasised the unity and "cooperation of all village people of various political opinions" in setting up new memorials.<sup>59</sup> They wanted to re-establish the tradition of joint commemorations that characterised the first post-war period. At the unveiling of the monument in Prosecco/Prosek, a village in the municipality of Trieste, in 1972, the speakers were the chairman of the board (Josip Ferfolja), the representatives of veterans associations and organizations of deportees, the Slovene communist Marija Bernetič, former deputy at the Italian parliament, her colleague Albin Škerk, the representative of the socialist party and first Slovene in the Trieste city council after WWII (Dušan Hreščak), the representative of the local Slovene non-communist, "national" party (Slovenska skupnost) Drago Štoka, the regional representative of the Italian Veterans association (ANPI) Paolo Sema, and some other locals. In short, all political components of what was considered progressive and anti-fascist society were represented. Based on the example of large popular fronts during the war, the organizers aimed to express a message of unity and cooperation to gain political credit and national rights. The pamphlet issued by the board ascribed a clear national meaning to the partisan monuments in the region, since they proved the "presence of the Slovene national community in Italy. There are only few such external visible signs that would speak clearly about our presence in the Trieste region."<sup>60</sup> Even more, the local poet and writer Miroslav Košuta, author of the foreword to the booklet issued together with the construction of the memorial in Križ, saw the new monuments as "stations on the Via Crucis of our people, proofs of its Slovene and anti-fascist origins, of its liberty redeemed with blood."<sup>61</sup> Thus, together with their commemorative function, these monuments had a clear political function; not only did they represent political revenge against conservative parties and those state authorities in Italy who were trying to downplay the anti-fascist myth in the country, but also signs of counter-memory against regional and local official narratives

which, in the eyes of local memory activists, were trying to “hide” the presence of the Slovene minority. They considered the minority policy largely inadequate and understood the partisan memorials, and especially their inscriptions in the Slovene language, as one of the few visible testimonials to the physical presence of Slovenes on the territory. As Madeleine Hurd points out, “language remains an extremely potent marker of ethnicity” and since rights of minorities in European borderlands are often suspended between possibility and marginalisation, the representation of minority languages as part of the production of space is always a question of the power of its speakers.<sup>62</sup> Rarely did ordinary citizens express their disagreement in violent terms but they often channelled it through local monuments as vernacular symbols with which they identified. In this sense, the partisan memorials and related commemorations not only celebrated past events but also served as significant political tools in the present.

In many cases, bureaucratic complications had to be surmounted; these complications however, were not merely a result of sluggish bureaucracy, but arose from the opposition of local authorities to such memorials.<sup>63</sup> In the case of right-wing administrations, as was the case of Trieste throughout the Cold War (except for a center-left government in the middle of the 1960s), partisan memorials provoked harsh political disputes and long-lasting public debates. One of the most significant cases is the monument for the fallen from Servola/Škedenj, S. Anna/Sv. Ana, and Coloncovez/Kolonkovec. During the war, these were peripheral parts of Trieste but in the next decades they became an integral part of the urban space. In these districts, from the early post-war years—but especially after 1971, when a committee was established—local memory activists tried in vain to set up a memorial. The city administration opposed it on the ground that the same area already had a monument: the concentration camp of “Risiera di San Sabba,” declared a monument of national interest in 1965. However, many believed that the reason for the objection had little to do with the Risiera camp. In fact, a monument to local partisans in the city centre would demolish the myth of the local post-war political, economic, and religious elites, which was constructed on the image of Trieste being a bulwark against “Slav-communism.” For decades, local political leaders legitimised their social power through the representation of the past as the patriotic struggle of “Italian Western civilization” against “Eastern, Slavic/Yugoslav barbaric communism.”

Negotiations between the activists and the political elite produced no effect in the short term.<sup>64</sup> Because of the negative responses of the authorities, the committee resolved to make a self-appropriation of the public sphere and promote their own memory space. Overnight, local memory activists placed a memorial stone, a cube, on which a bilingual inscription stated “Glory to the Fallen.” In its proximity, on 1 November (All Saints) and 25 April (Liberation Day in Italy), these memory activists organized celebrations with laying of flowers and lighting of candles. Pupils of the local Slovene primary school declaimed songs and performed short recitals, while other participants included families of the fallen, members of the Committee, and other citizens, usually left-wing. These semi-official ceremonies, modest at the beginning but gradually more organised,

constantly challenged the official silence of the authorities with respect to local victims, as well as the essence of the institutionalized interpretation of the recent history of Trieste. Because of growing public visibility and the changing political climate, in 2001, during the second mandate of the center-left mayor Riccardo Illy, the municipality officially recognized this site of memory, allowing the area to be improved and the temporary memorial stone to be replaced by a monument.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

Even if some scholars affirm that the mutating political picture in the 1990s produced several attempts "to leave history behind," the end of the Cold War, on the contrary, brought history to the fore.<sup>66</sup> Memories not only melted after being frozen, but the new geopolitical setting enabled the rise of many competitive claims to emphasize *their* past. The growing literature on memory and identity in Central and Eastern Europe tends to present the role of history, politics of memory, and issues of collective identity as especially pronounced in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe. However, the reinterpretation of the past, assigning new meanings to communism, collaborationism, resistance, and patriotism, is not limited to transition countries from the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia but is a widespread phenomenon in many European countries.<sup>67</sup> In Italy, the transformation of the Communist Party, the biggest "western" communist party, the rise of new political forces such as the *Lega nord* and *Forza Italia*, and the presence of post-fascists in the government led to a weakening of the anti-fascist myth and to a revision of the Resistance paradigm.<sup>68</sup> In this new context, what was the role played by the Italo-Yugoslav border? It is no coincidence that the most significant attempt to unite Italy's "fractured memory" took place in Trieste.<sup>69</sup> It was here that Luciano Violante, head of the new post-communist left, met the post-fascist leader Gianfranco Fini in March 1998, to overcome the national traumas stemming from past political divisions. In this attempt to create a shared national memory they found a new common enemy in "failed" Yugoslav communism and its bearers, the Yugoslav partisans. Since then the partisans have been increasingly presented as a tool in the hands of "Slavic annexationism," as President Giorgio Napolitano stated in 2007, causing an international controversy between Rome and Zagreb.<sup>70</sup> The "foibe" and the "exodus" from Istria (presented as ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslavs against Italians) and the concentration camp of the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste have been elevated to the principal sites of memory through which individual memories have been channeled into collective and political narratives of World War II. Thus, the memorialization of Yugoslav partisans amounts to near-subversive acts and their monuments have become signs of subaltern (or semi-official) counter-memory, which have so far remained outside the national corpus of the local lieux de mémoire.

In conclusion, the partisan memorials in Trieste and its region, which in the long term produced multiple memories and historical myths, confirm the impact of institutionalized

commemorative practices on individual memory,<sup>71</sup> but show us also that memory building is not a unilateral process. Several grassroots memory initiatives show us that they are not merely the outcome of national narratives and ideological impositions. Instead, official narratives have to negotiate with vernacular forms of memory engagement in the production of local mnemonic landscape. Often commemorations were perceived as public demonstrations but these spaces were not intended, in its initial stage at least, solely for political purposes, but to mourn the dead. What I argue is that “ordinary people” created their own memory space to gain official acknowledgement of their primary role in “fighting Nazi-fascism” and their suffering during the war. The persistence of these markers in the present confirms the incongruity of official and vernacular narratives and shows that local forms of memorialization bring their own specific set of challenges. In our case, local memory initiatives redirect the perspective from a horizontal analysis of European politics of the past, divided between East and West, and call also this to be integrated with a vertical study of memory-making.

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