

Trieste, Crossroads of Cultures in Central Eastern Europe: Transformations, Contradictions and Continuities at the Italian Eastern Border

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight some peculiarities of this border region contested between Italy and Yugoslavia where the ethnic differences, cultural and the geographical characteristics blend together in an extraordinary example of European multiculturalism. Thanks to its location, on the eastern border, the city has always played an important strategic role and exchange with the world of the Slavic peoples and Austria. For this reason, Trieste was one of the most important Italian cities, in particular, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. His soul mixes Mediterranean and Central European characters and its harbor is the largest and most important of Italy, one of the most important maritime cluster in Europe. This has made and still makes Trieste a place of exchanges and meetings. But Trieste is also a city that has been a refuge, a second chance and, at times, even an exile for many people who have come to live. This quality has made this city very lively and original and is evident in its urban fabric and in its monuments.

Trieste is also the mingling of Greek and Slovenes, Jews and Christians, of Austria and Italy, of invaders and fugitives, sea and Bora recounted in the books of Claudio Magris, Scipio Slapater and Laura Boschian. Trieste is a interlacement of art movements, literary, historical, social, geographical, natural and architectural, the paradigm of that which once was studied such as the famous "Mitteleuropa": and is now, of course, the complicated "plural society" in which we all live.

Keywords: Mitteleuropa, Trieste, multiculturalism, transformation, Adriatic, Central Eastern Europe, exile, Magris, Slapater

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Trieste: one-thousand faces of a single city

From the 18th Century onward the important port city of Trieste and its hinterland has formed a peculiar and complex geopolitical, economic, and social reality. With the passage of time an extraordinary example of multiethnic coexistence emerged that, however, in the 20th Century also saw strong conflicts.

Trieste is the location where the Adriatic Sea meets Mount Carso. Differently from nearby Venice, Trieste is known for its amalgam of ethnic groups and cultures. Italians, Germans, Slavs, and also influential Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities have all coexisted. At the same time, however, these groups have maintained their own identity with recurring temptations of isolation and reciprocal mistrust.

As the city's monuments testify, Trieste has played the role of conquered city, a place of refuge and exile, and site of rebirth. The Roman amphitheater, the bas relief of the altar of San Giusto, the neighborhood of Teresiano, the Grand Canal built by the Austrians, and lastly, the Jewish ghetto with its buildings on Via del Monte are witnesses to the intractable struggles in the city.

The heterogeneity and multiplicity of the elements that make up the city have created a model for the complexity of all of modern civilizations.

Trieste is also the Bora, the East-North-East wind that in the winter can surpass 100 kilometers per hour. It is a wind that changes the face of the city and the Triestines are accustomed to it. In the end Trieste is also identified by its port; this natural extension of the city is looked upon by the peoples of Eastern Central Europe, today in crisis but one time a flowering source of power and income for its residents. The port has occupied and continues to occupy a central role in the economic history of the city, strongly influence the life of its inhabitants.

The City and its Port

Throughout the 18th Century, the Austrian Empire developed a growing interest in Trieste as a secure maritime link to the various regions under its control. The two fundamental events were the 1717 declaration of Charles VI of the Habsburg dynasty on the freedom of navigation in the Adriatic and the Certification of a free port that Trieste and Fiume obtained in 1719.

Charles VI's concession was intended to increase the commercial traffic on Trieste and to economically develop Austrian possessions at the expense of then-decadent Venice. The Eastern Company was founded for the same reason to expand commerce with the Middle East with the concession of financial and commercial privileges.

The economic takeoff of the port was not immediate. The most important changes arrived beginning in 1740, under the reign of Maria Teresa and continued under her son Joseph II. With the promulgation of the Edict of Tolerance of 1781, non-Catholic minority

immigration to the Adriatic port was encouraged with would eventually constitute in the following century the multiethnic bourgeoisie of Trieste, the economic motor of the city until the second half of the 19th Century.

The commercial hub of Trieste in the first half of the 19th Century attracted groups of Protestant, Jewish, Greek, and Armenian bankers and merchants who believed in the economic potential of the free port and created dense networks of commercial relations. IN this period the German component played a central role in administrative positions, and among the artisans and employees. This situation changed due the block of commercial traffic during the First World War which caused the city to be abandoned by the German component.

The free port attracted also Slovenian communities and many merchants joined the privileged Imperial Eastern Company as minor shareholders. The Slovenian merchants that reached Trieste at a young age are those who managed to fully integrate themselves in the society of the city, contracting advantageous matrimones as full members of the Triestine bourgeoisie.

Following the French Revolution, the Treaty of Campoformio made Trieste the main transit point of the commerce of the whole Mitteleuropa which created great wealth a subsequent population increase in the city. The three following French occupations and the naval blockade against England caused a grave economic crisis for the port and the city population was reduced by 35%.

The Port of Trieste in the 19th Century

The Restoration and the renewal of the certification of free port ended the economic crisis and gave birth to a rapid revival of the port's activities: the maritime commerce opened to traffic with the Middle East, the Indies, and Mediterranean countries. The Austro-Hungarian Empire with the three ports of Fiume, Venice, and Trieste thus controlled a vast area of commercial importance. In only three years, from 1812 to 1815 the population of Trieste doubled. The number of workers grew continuously due to the consolidation of the harbors and the creation of new structures in the port, which introduced steam power in 1819.

The English who arrived in Trieste during the war against Napoleon played a key role in this transformation. The English exploited as much as possible the possibilities offered by the free port and the vast commerce origination in the European colonies and wisely invested in the financial services of commerce. Therefore, from 1830 onward insurance activity had a notable development and quickly became the driving force of the Triestine economy. Le Generali, Il Lloyd Adriatico, la Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà, created an unbreakable axis between commerce, banks, and insurance which brought major investments and great profits to the Adriatic city. The diffusion of railroads characterized the economic development in the second half of the 19th Century with the completion of the Südbahn line.

However, the first signs of crisis appeared due to the incapacity of the Habsburgs to understand the great changes that were happening in the Western economy which required strong investments by the sovereigns in the port of Trieste. It was the cosmopolitan capitalist bourgeoisie which initially headed the effort to reverse the incipient crisis.

The competitive bid for the construction of a new port of Trieste was published in 1863. The winner of the competition, the engineer Talabot was announced two years later. Talabot proposed the burial of the old docks aside the railroad line and the construction of three harbors (width 40m and length 50m) protected by a breakwater dike of over 1000 meters. The work was finished 18 years later quickly became obsolete. In 1887 a new project began to increase the docks and harbors.

The communications via land were also strengthened with the construction of other railroad lines which increased traffic between Trieste and its hinterland. The Pontebbana which followed the Northwesterly direction (Trieste-Udine-Pontebba-Tarvisio-Villaco-Salisburgo-Monaco) was inaugurated in 1859. In 1906 the Transalpine (Tauri) was inaugurated connecting from South to North, Trieste-Gorizia-Piedicolle Jesenice-Villaco, which linked the area with Linz-Prague, but was poorly adapted to the travel of goods due to the steep cliffs.

The Lloyd Company played a fundamental role in the industrial development of the city. In December of 1837 the company had for repair facility in a building situated near the old leper hospital. After the expansion of the workshop in 1839, the company possessed new machinery and became the embryo of the first Lloyd arsenal. In May of 1853 it was decided to create a large naval yard in Trieste for the maintenance and periodic reparations of Lloyd's ships which would eventually employ 3000 workers.

In 1867 with the Ausgleich the empire of the Hapsburgs became the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in 1872 the Austrian Lloyd was renamed Österreichisch - Ungarischer Lloyd or Austro-Hungarian Lloyd. Two years later Lloyd became a shareholder of the Suez Company: the opening of the canal permitted new commercial routes from the Adriatic to East Africa and above all to Asia which led to the rapid expansion to the port of Trieste. The number of steamships doubled between 1850 and 1870. However, the true change occurred between 1870 and 1914 when the total capacity increased from 68,000 to 268,000 tons, while the total strength of the fleet that in 1850 was at 4510 steamships, in 1913 arrived at 190,558. The Lloyd obtained hegemony in the ports of the Mediterranean and in the port of Trieste passed not only the products of the Mediterranean countries but also those from Asia which had previously only arrived in the ports of the Atlantic Coast.

The end of the free port in 1891 brought a halt to the expansion of economy of Trieste: the merchants lost the advantage of being able to use their own warehouses in the city which were no longer duty free, while the city population suffered due to an increase in prices caused by direct taxation on goods, without obtaining an increase in salary compensation. The first signs of the crisis were noted in the 1860s when the port of Trieste lost the Italian markets following the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. The

commercial activity expanded again when the sailing ships were replaced by steamships. The Eastern route of traffic became more important and the merchandise from India such as raw cotton, jute, rice, seed oils, and coffee were privileged despite the lack of treatment of these products.

The development of new means of communication at the beginning of the Twentieth Century contributed to Trieste's loss of status as an emporium to be transformed into a transit point. As a result of industrial development, the city population had surpassed 175,000 around 1900 before arriving at 250,000 on the eve of the First World War. In the same years the port of Trieste saw the development of other family managed companies such as the Cosulich, Tripcovich, Premuda and Gerolimich all originating in Dalmatia.

During the 1890s the Cosulich had sufficient resources to acquire 7 steamships and 4 sailing ships in the span of a few years. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century the Triestine branch of the family inaugurated the first commercial line between the Atlantic and North America distinguishing itself in the transportation of emigrants to the Americas.

The First World War and the Beginning of Decline

Notwithstanding the rapid development of world maritime commerce which preceded the First World War, the port of Trieste headed toward a phase of economic decline from which it would not reemerge. The years immediately preceding the First World War are characterized by a strong development in world maritime commerce. The Julian port recorded a decline and remained between the world average in commerce despite numerous interventions such as the construction of new buildings, the installation of new mechanical tools in the existing structures and the enlargement of the port.

A two-fold change occurred in the social structure of the city with the transformation from emporium to transitory traffic: many old families concentrated specifically on financial and insurance activities, while at the same time a new group of courageous transporters established themselves, these shipping agents were the children of the most important families of captains and ship-owners.

Trieste suffered greatly during the Great War due to its vicinity to the front. With Italy's victory the majority of the non-Italian citizens abandoned the city for Austria or the newly formed Yugoslavia. New immigrants reach the city, particularly from Southern Italy. The impoverishment of the territories of the defect Hapsburg Empire had harsh repercussions on the port of Trieste: in fact the Italian businesses did not manage to provide for the vacuum created by the reduction of the flowering markets of Mitteleuropa. On the contrary, the insurance companies remained in a state of economic wellbeing, so much that in these years their capital is worth one third of that of the entire Kingdom of Italy.

With the annexation to Italy, Trieste found itself as a border city, without its own hinterland and under a military governorship led by the general Carlo Petitti of Roreto who was overwhelmed by the changes that the city faced.

The strikes in the naval yard increased following the October Revolution in Russia whereas the suffering of the just concluded war reinforced the international Austro-Marxist pacifist tradition. In 1919 the Socialist parties of Trieste and the nearby Slovene population were fused together. Capitalism had a two-faced enemy: red and Slavic. The response was the cohesion of nationalist interests and those of military authorities which were reinforced by the reentry of war veterans. This explosive situation helped open the doors to the birth of fascism which found fertile ground in Trieste to rapidly assert itself, in particular after the euphoria created in the city population after the occupation of Fiume in 1919 by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio.

In the peninsula many had seen in the conquest of Trieste, a privileged access to the city's historic markets. Commercial penetration of the Balkans was theorized both in the Danube and Eastern regions to continue the tradition of Lloyd's century-old intelligent and patient work as well as that of the family enterprises, in the insurance, financial, and mercantile sectors. The networks of these companies had reached all of the Near and Far East and the Americas and represented vehicles of economic, commercial and financial influence of exception value.

Trieste between the two Wars.

The modernization of the port infrastructure in the years following the conclusion of World War I were focused on the area of the transportation of wood from Servola which was declared a free port. In 1922 the free port model from the pre-war period was reconfirmed and two years later work began to remodel of the harbors V and VI which had been damaged during the war. A new regulatory plan for the area of Zaule was created which led to successive industrial development.

Given the necessity of general organization of the port of Trieste in 1926 the General Warehouses were privatized with various shareholders and became the Autonomous Port Authority. The warehouse workers lost the privileges of public employment when they were hired by the Port Authority from January 1, 1927 onward according to the norms that regulated private employment. In this period the Port Authority boasted 500 office employees, 700 factory workers with a contract, 600 temporary workers, and 110 supervisors belonging to the Commissary of Public Security. The entire workforce was insured by the labor laws due to the association of the Port Authority with the labor union Giuliano of workplace incidents.

In 1929 an agreement was signed in Monaco (or Munich?) that ended the tariff war with Germany for the acquisition of the markets of the former Mitteleuropa. The agreement stipulated Prague would be the geographical marker; to the north of the city Hamburg would have had lower tariffs, whereas to the south Trieste would have lower tariffs. The hoped for improvements did not manifest due to the world economic crisis of 1929. The port activity would later be focused on industry, in particular the transportation of

primary resources which could not be found on Italian territory: the port activity was limited however to merchandise of great volume but low value.

The local economic elite attempted to continue their policy of monopoly and privilege that had made them successful in the past. The fusion of the port activity with navigation resulted in an overestimate of the price of ships commissioned at the naval yards. Through this strategy the public finances destined to the shipping industry were received as compensation for the loss of the traditional lines of commercial traffic after the war. These funds helped to balance the budgets for the port industries.

In this period the local industries, beginning with the iron industry benefitted from three kinds of finance: direct investments in the national navy mechanics, confirmed and led by Ciano which covered 42% of the production cost, the shipbuilding orders, managed by the Italian Marine Military and local aid.

The Anonymous Society of the Industrial Zone of the Port of Trieste which was founded in January 1929 in the attempt to incentivize industrial production would soon become a failure. The funds were used to balance the failing budgets of the local businesses without an adequate long-term organizational strategy. With the crisis of 1929 many businesses ended up in the hands of the State. The true change of direction began in 1933 when many enterprises were placed under control of IRI which from this point onward privileges the commerce in the Tyrrhenian Sea at the expense of the Adriatic. The situation slowly worsened in the following years: in 1936 the Lloyd and the Cosulich companies entered into serious financial difficulties.

In the case of the Lloyd, Benito Mussolini decided to intervene with the intention of making the company a leader in commerce with the ports beyond the Suez Canal. Although the Triestine companies played a central role in the reorganization strategy of the regime, the Cosulich and Free Triestine Navigation companies decided to transfer their headquarters to Genoa due to the excellent services offered there and the prestige of the trade routes of the city.

Trieste headed toward a phase which tied to public assistance; the State identified Trieste solely as a port of transit and occasionally took necessary measures to improve its function.

The political failure of the fascist expansion in the Balkans together with the rise of national socialism and the dynamism of the German economy marked the definitive crisis of the Triestine local elite. (From 1930 onward Germany controlled almost the entirety of European commerce in the Danube basin.)

In the end Trieste lost its cosmopolitan connotation and its multicultural identity with the emanation of the racial laws of 1938: the Italian government dramatically lost control of the situation and the port which had once been full of people and goods, was occupied by warships.

The Contested City

Following the Italian armistice of 1943, on September 9 the Germans occupied Trieste and constituted the OZAK. (Operations Zone Adriatisches Küstenland) or Operations Zone of the Adriatic Shore, and the entire area was directly administered by Nazi authorities.

At the end of the Second World War in May 1945, Trieste was occupied for 40 terrible days by Marshal Tito's Yugoslav soldiers. In the following month the city passed under the control of the Allied Military Government, which controlled the city until 1954.

The Belgrade agreement reached in June 1945 foresaw the division of Trieste from Istria. The Zone A included the Adriatic port, Gorizia and the strip of territory extended north to the Valley of the Isonzo, Pola and a small enclave all of which was administered by the Allies. The Zone B, or rather all of the rest of the region was instead administered by the Yugoslavs. In July 1946 the Free Territory of Trieste was created which extended along the coast between the rivers Timavo and Quieto. The Free Territory became active on September 15, 1947 after with the signing of Paris Peace Treaty on February 10.

Throughout the Cold War, Trieste became one of the principal Western barriers against Soviet expansion. In 1952, due to the agreement in London in the month of May, Italy was able to insert its own functionaries in the civil administration of the city and with the two party declaration of October 1953 the Anglo-Americans announced their intention to transfer administration of Zone A of the Free Territory of Trieste to the Italian government. In London on October 5, 1954 the Memorandum of Understanding was signed and on November 4 Italy reassumed direction administration of Zone A.

After the celebrations for the return of Trieste to Italy the sober reality of massive material damage caused by the war remained: the railroad lines and infrastructure had been destroyed by bombardments. The port was not spared and was not able to become competitive with the other Mediterranean ports, especially those in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Trieste had been surpassed in its port structures and was poorly suited to commerce with Europe and the East. Emigration from the area of Trieste was the sad reaction to the crisis: in four years, from 1954 to 1958 around 16,000 people left Trieste for Australia or other destinations due to widespread unemployment.

This disastrous situation was worsened by the effects of the Suez Canal crisis which in 1956 had a negative impact on the commerce of the Northern Adriatic region. The second crisis which blocked the transit in the canal from 1967 to 1975 had terrible consequences. The Italian government during the years of the interdiction did not notice the need to begin an adequate modernization process. On the contrary, in world shipping the use of containers became ubiquitous in part due to the wells present between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf which, in turn, led to the construction of supertankers.

The criticism of the central government was not heeded and the energy crisis of the mid 1970s aggravated the situation, planting the seeds for the largest and most difficult crisis that would invest all of the Italian ports in the 1980s.

The Last Border: Osimo, 1975

In the period of European Cold War detente beginning in August 1975, the Osimo agreement was signed on December 10, 1975. The agreement stemmed from the last act of the Helsinki accord stipulated by the Security Conference for Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The definitive cession of Zone B of the former Free Territory of Trieste, from Northwest Istria to Yugoslavia, recognizing the borders that had been determined at the end of the Second World War.

The Treaty of Osimo, which signified the desire for detente in relations with Western and Eastern Europe caused a political crisis among the Triestines due to a rebirth of past conflicts. In 1975, the exiles from the peninsula felt betrayed by a State whose diplomatic body had once again appeared unprepared and too conciliatory. At the same time the rancor of the refugees of Zone B grew because the Italian political class had led them to believe that Zone B would have returned to Italy.

Feeling betrayed by the national political of the Christian Democrat party, which had had a notable success in Trieste from 1946 onward, but had not met expectations, a large number of Triestines of strong Italian identity demonstrated their discontent and resentment with a new political movement: The List for Trieste.

In the elections of June 25, 1978 the List for Trieste became the most important local political formation. From that point it has always been present, directly or indirectly, on the Triestine political scene. In this sense it is important to remember that agreements with other formations which contributed to the election of candidates of the List for Trieste to both the National and European Parliaments.

Conclusions

As written in the beginning, it was the empress Maria Teresa who began the development of Trieste due to her belief that the economic and social fate of the city was tied to its port.

Her action proved decisive in the transformation into one State of the vast and complex realities of the countries and territories on the Hapsburg's domain. It was her project to transform Trieste into the Southern outlet for these regions which turned the city into the commercial emporium of the State.

Until 1750 the economic dynamics of the small Adriatic city were based on the agriculture of the lowlands and hills immediately surrounding the urban center. The maritime traffic was short range and the merchants, who had integrated themselves into the established elite according to the Venetian model, had invested their money in the acquisition of land.

The institution of the free port was the pretext for a rapid and modern social dynamism. The impulse in this sense came from the state authorities and not from the local elite which saw the development as a threat to their traditional privileges.

Trieste's role as a central hub of Austrian commerce that was acquired under the Hapsburg's was not the natural evolution of the history of the Adriatic port as much as the result of a revision of its history. The inadequacy, backwardness, and weakness of the local forces rendered the external relationships decisive in the process of the ethnic, demographic, political, and administrative transformation of the city.

Next to the old city of Trieste, the agricultural hinterland began to prosper after the consolidation of the Austrian Empire under Maria Teresa. Two worlds faced each other in a small geographical area: one destined to dissolve in the attempt to defend its own privileges and traditions and one able to interpret new demands which would become the protagonist of the modernization of the city's lifeblood. The city was on one hand compactly Italian with its historical noble and merchant elites in decadence and other hand, in its hinterland, heterogeneous and lively, where settlers from the Near East, Jews, Greeks, Germans, and Illyrians converged. An anchored aristocratic economic mentality based on finance met with a bourgeois mentality of commercial expansion and greater profits. The modern Trieste with all of its complexity, characterized by its dynamism and the vivacity of foreigners in search of fortune, was born from this meeting and the subsequent fusion of the two worlds

Far from representing a point of rupture, the meeting of this heterogeneous and multiform world became an element of continuity with respect to the cultural and linguistic roots of the old Latin and Italian commune which remained the fundamental and distinctive trait of the city despite the constant common patrimony of all of its components.

The Serbian and Greek communities, characterized by their closed religious and cultural identities, remained tied to their traditions even though they were fully immersed in the city's fabric through their various activities.

The profound ethnic and demographic change that accompanied the rise of Triestine traffic transformed into an element of conservation and diffusion of Italian identity, understood in linguistic and cultural dimension. Therefore, this multinational reality was not only a phenomenon tied to the merchant's vocation, but also a consequence of the influence of geography and history.

The nature of the German presence in Trieste was peculiar. The Germans, for the most part, in various historical periods inserted themselves into the Triestine society, and were integrated into the surrounding area thus losing their German identity. In time, this phenomenon acquired the sense of a choice of values and lifestyle, an adherence to a civilization considered more suited to the times. A unifying force was played by the Italian language in this process of integration of new components: Italian was used both in the Julian hinterland and the Mediterranean and Adriatic ports from where the majority of the immigrants came. Ranking before Italian language was the Triestine dialect which was the key for full insertion in the ranks of citizenry.

The Jewish community of Trieste, which had neither a common language nor place of origin to unify it had its own particular place in the city. It was composed of Sephardic and Ashkenazim, Austrian citizens from the heart and periphery of the empire, by Italians

from the Northern Central part of the Peninsula, and above all by foreigners attracted to Trieste by the commercial and financial development of the city and by the reality of a young society without a hierarchy or barriers. In a city that had lost its old ruling class and was creating a new one, the Jews played an essential role in the formation of a modern Triestine bourgeoisie and contributed to give it its unmistakable cosmopolitan imprint.

The coexistence of different elements in Trieste emerges in the poetry of Umberto Saba. It is the ideal scenario of ambiguity and fraudulent senility and the identification of life and bourgeoisie that we find in the literature of Italo Svevo, which belongs to the great analytic scientific tradition of the Mitteleuropean narrative. Svevo saw a dead end in the city's bourgeoisie, the end of the Jewish-Triestine governing class that became the symbol of the dominant class of the old Europe.

Scipio Slapater worked to create a new culture and life in the attempt to transform a sunset in an aurora, with the desire to renovate its own universality heredity opening itself to dialog with other cultures. Slapater understood that the future of Trieste consisted in the equal dialog between Italians and Slovenes.

Trieste is the synthesis of German culture, Hebrew tradition and spiritual Italian identity that we find in the lyrics of Carlo Elia, but also in the exasperation of the antislav nationalism of Ruggero Timeus Fauro who is convinced of the ineluctable nature of a national conflict. This atmosphere of hope and strong determinations was interrupted by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo: the prologue of the tragedy that covered Europe in blood. The war brought the irredentist sentiment toward immediate and concrete political action with the definitive collapse of the hoped-for synthesis between Trieste and its hinterland. For Trieste the end of the war represented a radical and irreversible transformation of its historic role. The rupture of the political ties with the Danubian Balkan hinterland which had rendered Trieste prosperous, giving it the dimension of a European city, marked the shattering of the traditional political structures of Mitteleuropa. Fascism would do the rest turning the city into a difficult frontier outpost. Today Trieste's international role of the past is a distant memory rendering the city of today a mirror of the general condition of our civilization¹.

¹ This research was followed patiently by Prof. Carlo Felice Casula, Roma Tre University.

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