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THE CREATION OF THE KINGDOM OF CROATIA IN 1941 ON THE PAGES OF THE PERIODICAL “L’ILLUSTRAZIONE ITALIANA”

Antonio Violante

ABSTRACT

With the May 18th 1941 agreement, the fascist Italy recognized the institution of the Kingdom of Croatia, and had also designated Aimone di Savoia as its sovereign, that was suppose to found a new dynasty, able to guide the country towards a renaissance, after twenty years of the Croatian population's being tormented ever since Versailles. This study does not aim to analyse the historic context that has seen the birth and formation of this new state, tightly allied with the Axis powers, and also limited by their political and territorial interests, nor does it aim to investigate its ephemeral existence which ended with Germany's defeat; but it does aim to verify how the creation of this political subject was treated by the periodical “L’illustrazione italiana”, one of the Mussolini regime's biggest means of propaganda. After an analysis of its

articles dedicated to the Kingdom of Croatia, and after comparing that to the reality provided and documented by other sources, it shows how obviously the Italian state tried to acquire an hegemony on the Adriatic, all the while basing such intent upon historical and cultural motivations, and how this attempt was presented as both the result of an unbreakable friendship between Italians and Croats, and as an operation aiming to guarantee a new European order in the name of the justice. The reality was, as it is well known, that even though the Kingdom of Croatia was born as an Italian protectorate, during its short existence it “slipped” slowly towards German influence, considering the incompatibility between its own and the Italian geopolitical interests.

KEYWORDS

Italian imperialism in the Adriatic, racism, Slavic identity in Dalmatia, fascists, Nazis, ustaša

ITALY'S IMPERIAL AMBITIONS

When the Axis powers attacked Yugoslavia on April 6th 1941 (together with minor allies such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), Italy had a minor role of Germany's subordinate¹, that started the bombing of Belgrade without giving any notice to Mussolini's government. This Hitler initiative in the Balkans, which induced Yugoslavia to surrender unconditionally already on April 17th, surprised Italy completely despite its obvious political ambitions regarding the Balkan area, and despite the Adriatic hegemony project. Consequently, the fascist Italy had no other choice but to follow the actions of its German ally: at first alone, defending the bases in

Venezia Giulia, Zadar and Albania fearing Yugoslav attacks, and after April 11th, when it became clear that the Yugoslav army was undoubtedly defeated, marching towards Ljubljana along the Dalmatian coast, towards a part of Herzegovina and towards Montenegro. The occupation of a vast part of Yugoslavia can be interpreted as the result of the nationalist Italian politics and also of the fascist imperialism, that – as already recognized in historiography – had as one of its main goals the destruction of Versailles' Yugoslavia (COLLOTTI, 1974, p. 11). Mussolini himself said it in a letter to Hitler on April 6th 1941: “Yugoslavia is Versailles' most authentic creation and deserves its destiny”². However, during the entire period between two world

¹ In regard to this, it is useful to consult OLIVA, 2007, p.45.

² A phrase mentioned by COLLOTTI, 1974, p. 11, from Documents on German Foreign Policy, London, 1962, D series, vol. XII, n.289.

wars, Italian policy in Yugoslavia was never linear or coherent (BURGWYN, 2006, p. 18), always oscillating between two opposite poles: supporting the Karađorđević monarchy or the Croatian separatism. In regard to the latter, the speech given by Dino Grandi (a fascist hierarch) during the meeting of the Fascist Great Council on February 5th 1929, just a couple months away from becoming the Foreign Policy Minister, appears to be very useful: he asserted that in order to defend the Mediterranean race from the Slavic races' menace, the sole barrier represented by the Adriatic as a trench between the East and the West was not going to be enough anymore. It would be necessary to build a number of states on the East coast, controlled by Italy; Croatia was to be among these, considering that Albania already existed. Furthermore, Grandi thought that such policy conducted by Mussolini would be the natural sequel to those pursued by Caesar and Napoleon, and that meant – in Grandi's opinion – a cordon of "client states" to work as a "cushion" between the Latin civilization and the Adriatic sea (considered not as a cultural melting point but as an Italian "lake"), opposed to the Orthodox East beyond the river Sava.³ It is easy to see how between two wars Italy built an "imperial" project of expansion towards the Adriatic that met the ambitions of the Giulian, Istrian and Dalmatian nationalism (which later on was absorbed by the so-called "frontier fascism"). However, despite the Italian hospitality granted to Ante Pavelić and his ustaše since 1929, in order to support them in their attempts to disarticulate the Yugoslav state under the Serbian supremacy, this intent never brought concrete results. In fact in 1932 – the same year Mussolini granted a Croatian office at the Foreign Affairs Ministry so he could coordinate the ustaše terrorist activities against Yugoslavia – several activist of the movement in Zadar tried to instigate an insurrection in Lika; however, not only such action turned out unsuccessful because of the lack of reaction of the local Croats, but the Yugoslavs answered by decapitating the Trogir Lions, important heritage of the Venetian domination over Dalmatia (BURGWYN, 2006, P. 37) and therefore perceived as a symbol of the Italian expansionistic intents in the region⁴. Yet, the Italian benevolence towards Croatia

was rightly seen with doubt by Ciano, a figure certainly subdued to Mussolini's wishes, but not completely void of judgement autonomy, which can be found in his diaries. In fact, on October 4th 1938 he wrote about the Germans' non-official undeclared intention of venturing towards the Adriatic in accord with the Hungarians (because of their historical ties to Croatia); there is also mention of his consequent apprehension regarding the possibility of a tight alliance between Hungary and Germany resulting in Hungary's claim on Fiume (later on called Rijeka). Finally, Ciano's conclusion on the matter is lapidary: "our true friendship is with Belgrade", and not with Croatia, one could add; such point of view was shared by Mussolini too, according to a diary entry of October 5th, indicating the Duce's will to "reinforce the ties to Belgrade". However, the incoherent Italian politic towards the East Adriatic coast was about to go in a completely different direction⁵. In fact, the intent of making a "friendly state" in Croatia under the Italian hegemony became even stronger at the beginning of 1940 and before Italy entered war with Germany. In his diary, on January 21th, Galeazzo Ciano wrote about Mussolini wanting to arrange a meeting between his son in law and Pavelić, which actually took place two days after. In the diary there

The S. Marc's lions were so loaded of symbolic values by the Italian irredentism that Yugoslav nationalists simply could not see them as mere art. (WÖRSDÖRFER, 2009, p.64). The destruction of the Trogir Lions and their subsequent underground discovery made by Italian soldiers was amply emphasised in the "L'illustrazione italiana", to the point of appearing in the front page in the issue n.22 of June 1st 1941 with an article by Gian Paolo Callegari, *Passeggiata sen'armi dove si è svegliato il leone*, pg.. 807-808. The article puts the blame for the destruction of this "Venetiality" symbol (and therefore a symbol of the italianity of Dalmatia) on Belgrade's "bestiality": it is a concrete proof of the fact that in this region the nationalistic contrasts use material symbols quite a lot, and they also follow their destruction. Trogir's case shows (openly supportive of Italy) the conflict between the Latin and the Slavic world in Dalmatia that was to be "given back" to Italy: "By wanting to do maximum damage to Trogir's Latin roots and also to give the city an inexorable Slavic imprint, it was the worst possible insult that Belgrade could send to the profoundly Catholic Dalmatian coast..."

⁵ In regard to the incoherent Italian policy towards Yugoslavia between two wars since it was a liberal state until the fascist days, that sometimes supported the Serbian monarchy against other nationalities and sometimes chose to support separatist movements against Belgrade, consult MONZALI, 2004, pg. 15-33; GOBETTI, 2007, pg.. 30-31; CATTARUZZA, 2007, pg.. 194-205.

³ A speech quoted literally in BURGWYN, 2006, p.36.

⁴ Such an act of vandalism was considered as a preview of destructions to come in Dalmatia (WÖRSDÖRFER, 2009, p.55.

is also mention of the political climate in Zagreb during the regent Pavle's visit to the city, a mixture of indifference and barely concealed contempt: "a funeral, during which people did not take of their hats", almost as if the moment was right for an insurrection. That is why the diary has a mention of the action guidelines to be given to Pavelić, presumably following Mussolini's indications to Ciano himself: "insurrection, occupation of Zagreb [done by Croatian nationalists], Pavelić's arrival, inviting Italy's intervention, the constitution of the Kingdom of Croatia, offering the crown to the King of Italy". This line of action is consequently confirmed again in Ciano's diary: "... the Duce spoke of Croatia. He is itching for action. He wants to speed things up by taking advantage of the European disorders. Yet he did not give precise directions except saying that he is convinced that attacking Yugoslavia will not bring France and England against us" (April 9th 1940). The entry continues: "I gave audience to Pavelić. The Croatian situation is now mature and if we delay too much, a lot of sympathies [of the Croatian insurgents] will go to Germany⁶. He will prepare a chart indicating the exact positions of the revolutionary forces and the most urgent matters. Afterwards we shall continue to the executive phase. I did not set any dates, on the contrary I urged him to avoid any premature action" (May 10th 1940). However, a dismemberment of Yugoslavia induced by Italy was never going to succeed, despite the attack plan elaborated by the general Mario Roatta (who was the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army) presented at the beginning of July. It contained the invasion of Austria with the aid of German vehicles, but nothing happened because of Germany's veto (BURGWYN, 2006, pg. 44-45). Mussolini still hoped that an Italian intervention in Yugoslavia could be justified by an internal Yugoslav revolution, but that never happened. Furthermore, he ignored the German unavailability to accept the possibility of Yugoslavia being under Italian influence, other than Hitler's firm intent to control Yugoslavia's economy and the Nazi relations with the ustaše (BURGWYN, 2006, p.45), which were parallel with the ones conducted by the Italian government.

DIFFERENT INTERESTS INVOLVING YUGOSLAVIA

The motivations of the German aggression on Yugoslavia a few days after the Prince Pavle's regency ended are too well known to be analysed in the present work. Still it is useful to highlight Mussolini's worries, considering the enormous force and the lack of reliability of the German ally, and the fact that once Yugoslavia fell (which was bound to happen) nothing could stop them from gaining control of Croatia and especially of Dalmatia, which was the fascist nationalism's declared target because it was an "Italian region" denied by the Great Powers after Versailles. This is why the Duce decided to play the Pavelić card before it was too late for Italy to get a part of Croatia. Therefore, on March 29th in Villa Torlonia, after the Hitler's invasion was already decided, the Duce met Pavelić informally, the first one after the future poglavnik came to Italy 12 years before. Mussolini guaranteed Pavelić his support once the latter was settled in Zagreb, and in return Italy would have annexed the Dalmatian coast. After Germany conquered Zagreb, arriving on April 10th and met by a jubilant crowd (a unique case among those of Nazi occupation in Europe), the Italian government – whose army was still prudently kept on the borders – was panicking in face of the possibility of not having any influence over Croatia. That is why a new meeting on April 11th between Mussolini and Pavelić confirmed the previous agreements, and the latter was quickly sent to Zagreb with his fellows ustaše with instructions to take over before the Germans could establish a pro-Nazi Italophobe as head of Croatia. The reality was that the fascist government was taken completely by surprise by the Yugoslav collapse, and did not have a clear picture of goals to pursue; therefore it was forced to improvise (MONZALI, 2004, p. 34) in order to stop the Germans from gaining complete control of all conquered regions.

The installation of Pavelić in Zagreb was the proof of the extreme incoherence of the Italian political strategy: in fact, during the previous years the fascist state created and nurtured a Croatian nationalist with no power, no charisma and also not well known in his own country. Yet the attitude Pavelić was suppose to have once Croatia was in his hands could not however match the Italian interests on the East Adriatic coast: the ethnic and national contrast in Dalmatia between the Italian cultural minority and the

⁶ Such hypothesis was correct, if we consider what happened from April 6th 1941 on.

Slavic majority was a historical reality⁷, which became even more solid after the end of the Habsburg empire. Such a misunderstanding that resulted from the unnatural alliance between Italy and the freshly created Croatian state was ultimately the cause of an atrocious civil war that did not involve two opposite sides that fought each other, but multiple subjects (Croats, četnici, Muslims, partisans, Italians and Germans) going “everyone against everyone” and ready to make temporary tactical alliances against another of the components involved and perceived as temporary common enemy. In such conflict, no group will manifest loyal collaboration with its allies, but all of them will negotiate with others, even if they are sworn enemies; even the Italians and the Germans – theoretically unbreakable allies through the Pact of Steel and through the personal friendship between the Duce and the Führer – were going to pursue (especially in Croatia) their own objectives, incompatible with the ones pursued by the other partner. The consequences were usually not in favour of Italy, because of its military and political weakness.

If we consider how Italy found itself in such context, in a position of inferiority towards Germany already in april 1941, it could be useful to analyse how the invasion of Yugoslavia, and especially the creation of a Croat state that according to Italy was suppose to become a “kingdom” with a Savoia family prince, were treated in the weekly magazine “L’illustrazione italiana”⁸, an important voice for Mussolini’s regime propaganda.

In an editorial published in the number 15 of the magazine on April 13th 1941, signed by “Spectator”

(p.504) and entitled “Belgrade’s treason”, the author exposes the contrast (present ever since the foundation of the “Kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovenes”) between “Italy’s generous and unique forbearance”, opposed to Yugoslav ungratefulness, so obvious despite the fact that Italy renounced the rights guaranteed by the Treaty of London “over not entirely Slavic territories”, in order to allow the creation of the new Adriatic state. Such lack of fairness of the Yugoslav government started already in January 1924: Mussolini and the Yugoslav Prime Minister Nikola Pašić signed a treaty of friendship and collaboration between Italy and Yugoslavia. The Italians would have renounced their irredentism, and in return there would be no more “obviously pro-imperialistic agitations among the Serbs”; according to “Spectator”, Italians have honoured the stipulated condition, while the Belgrade did not. Yet the magazine’s most significant reproach to the Yugoslav policy was published in occasion of the March 27th coup d’État that saw Yugoslavia’s exit from the Tripartite Pact, which was suppose to “place the country into tomorrow’s European system, enjoying absolute independence and equality”. In reality, despite various possible interpretations of the end of prince Pavle’s regency⁹, by committing political suicide Yugoslavia did not miss out on joining “the future European system” as “an equal”, but it avoided becoming a satellite of the Axis. The “Illustrazione italiana” places responsibility of such decision “that summarizes a string of years of conspiracy and intrigue” on the ambition of the Serbian military class, encouraged by England to open a new battlefield in Europe against Germany. Italy’s full ideological enslavement to its German ally also shows through a Nazi government’s statement, which the magazine quotes literally, and which blames the same “clique of conspirators” for the fall of Stojadinović’s Italy-friendly government and the March 27th putsch, and also considers them responsible for resorting to regicide and starting the World War I after the Sarajevo assassination.

⁷ Despite expressing opinions regarding members of his own family, Enzo Bettiza (2009, p.34) pointed out with clarity the lack of sympathy towards the Croats among Spalato’s Italians: “[by] making a distinction between tolerable Serbs and intolerable Croats, this brought out into the open a feeling which was very common in the Italian colony. The Serbs were considered as indirect and far antagonists; yet it was the Croats [...] who were the domestic antagonists, a close and direct opponent. The Croat was the closest “other”, more similar, more insidious”.a

⁸ A Milan magazine that was published with no interruptions between 1873 and 1962. It was among Italy’s favourite illustrated weekly magazines before the TV era, and had a public of medium and high class readers, considering also the high quality of its articles written by famous writers, and the quality of the photographic reportages. It went through a crisis after the Second war, after the fall of fascism and the monarchy, and became a monthly periodic in 1951. It was closed in 1962.

⁹ According to Sergio Romano (in the Introduzione to BURGWIN’s essay, 2006, p.13) and contrarily to what the main part of historiography says about this subject, “it was not an attack of patriotic pride, but a military coup d’état organised by politicians and army officers concerned more with their careers than with international consequences of their actions or their homeland’s destiny.

However, there are few observations to be made in regard to this: a regicide certainly took place, but in Marseille in 1934 when King Aleksandar was killed by ustaše terrorists, bitter enemies of the Serbian nationalism. It was clear then that Serbia was not behind the Sarajevo assassination, but the central Empires that declared war on the Balkan country. Finally, the article does not mention the most important detail: Italy did not fight against Serbia during World War I, but it sided with the Entente as Serbia's ally, a country that in German opinion numbered both in 1914 and 1941 "the same notorious conspirators whose acts of terror have always posed a threat to the Balkans". Contemporarily, "L'Illustrazione italiana" speaks highly of the Croatian nationalism embodied in Pavelić, and mentions his appeal to the nation to detach from Serbia and the request to the Duce for Italy's military help, as per agreement between him and Mussolini.

ITALIAN DALMATIA AND SLAVIC DALMATIA

At this point it is interesting to analyse the approach to the subject of Dalmatia, a region contended between Italy and Croatia: these two states were not only tied through their tight allegiance (or at least formally), but they were also in an asymmetrical relationship where the eastern partner owed its independence to Italy, and where the latter acted as guarantee. Considering that such subject was not important to Germany, and therefore there were no reasons for Italy to feel subordinate, it is presented with a significant title "Our Dalmatia", in an article by Bruno Astori (n.17 of April 27th 1941, pg. 606-611). The bottom line is that of Italian lands which were "martyrised" not only during the last two decades, but since 1848 when the city council of Spalato sent a petition to Vienna asking for the administrative annexation to Venice. Ever since, and even more from 1859 on (and especially after 1866) the Austrian government has supposedly been persecuting the Italian part of Dalmatia and favouring the Slavic one, "up to the point of extermination". A "big massacre" that translated into the censorship of Italian press, and the Empire encouraging the clergy to make the Church more "Slavic" by introducing Glagolitic in liturgies, and the Habsburg dynasty favouring the creation of a "annexationist" party, aiming to unite Dalmatia and Croatia, opposed to the

traditional "autonomist" party in the Dalmatian Diet, Italy-oriented. In order to make the pro-Croatian side win the elections, Vienna used violence against Italians at the polling stations, and even resorted to vote-fixing. Subsequently, Italian schools were suppressed, favouring the Slavic ones, despite the lack of adequate teachers and in some places even lack of students; the situation culminated in the elimination of the Italian language in public administration. Finally, in the monarchic Yugoslavia, the coup de grâce arrived with the 1930 agrarian reforms that damaged particularly the Italian land owners with many expropriations. Furthermore, despite the fact that Italians in Dalmatia were definitely a minority, the region was presented as completely saturated with Italian culture¹⁰, especially in Zara, Sebenico, Spalato and Ragusa. The common denominator was "the mediterranean civilisation, completely different from the one in the Balkan hinterland". Therefore, the advanced "Slavisation" of the coast and islands population has been ignored, and also the fact that back then Dalmatia could not have unequivocal Croatian or Italian national identity, but there were Dalmatians who were in many cases perfectly bilingual, and who considered almost as being forced the fact that they had to chose exclusively one nationality and exclude

¹⁰ In order to proof this theory, Mussolini's regime has also resorted to changing history. For example, according to accurate documentation assembled by Davide Rodogno (2003, p. 101) the Morlach Slavophone component was a "rural Latin population" of Roman ancestors, while "Dalmatia's blood" was really the blood of a mythical Italy. In reality, there were about 4000 Italians in Dalmatia (the total population of the region was 297.274 according to the 1931 census, which became 381.100 in 1940 according to a demographic projection of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and 2220 lived in Spalato, 300 in Sebenico, 500 in Ragusa, 1000 in Veglia. Also, after World War I more than 10.000 people of Italian origin chose to have Yugoslav citizenship (RODOGNO, 2003, p.103. Enzo Bettiza in his *Esilio* (which is to be considered more than a mere autobiography or a book of memories) gave what is perhaps the best definition of these Dalmatians who were "Italian" by culture yet were never residents (until 1941) inside territories politically belonging to Italy, and that until 1918 were loyal subjects of the Habsburg empire. The writer brought the example of some of the members of his own family (there were also few who chose Yugoslav nationality), but his description could easily fit the entire Italoophone population of Spalato and other Dalmatian cities: "It was [...] as if that Italianity were mysterious, peripheral, perhaps more cultural than ethnical, profoundly radicated in a family whose children, during the Austrian age, could not have any other direct educational contact with the real Italy" (BETTIZA, 2009, p. 27).

the other one. However, "Dalmazia nostra" also shows a hint of anti-Slavic cultural racism, which is almost explicit: in fact, they consider Dalmatia divided from Croatia and Bosnia by Dynamic Alps, where "the [territory] transformation is so sudden that it is almost as if time shifted back centuries". The article ends after a long historical excursus, and with a declaration of Italy's return in all Dalmatian territories after 150 years". A few observations are due in regard to this conclusion: the Dalmatian coast was colonised by Venice, except Ragusa that kept its independent republic status, but they were never under "Italian" sovereignty, not even during Roman Empire when the administrative system in Augustan Italy was different than the one in its provinces. There is also the fact that towards the end of April 1941 the territorial division between Italy and Croatia was anything but defined, and the region was to be Italian only from Zara and Spalato on, with the addition (with no space continuity) of the Bay of Kotor, separated from the rest of Montenegro. The remaining coast, including the islands of Brač and Hvar, Neretva's estuary and Ragusa would remain Croatian.

THE CROATIAN INSTITUTIONAL CONTRADICTION

After the Treaty of Rome on May 18th 1941 that defined the borders between the Kingdom of Italy and "the Kingdom of Croatia", some profound, formal and substantial contrasts emerged between those two countries, that soon would mutate into strong rivalry covered with false good relations, and then into a terrible civil war inside Croatian territories that the Italian allies not only were not able to sedate, but even to restrain. Also, despite the appearances and the treaty between two sovereign states, which were fully autonomous in their own political choices, during the decision process regarding the determination of assets of the entire ex-kingdom of Yugoslavia's territories only Germany had a say in the matter; in fact, despite the fact that Italy was an Axis ally and an equal to its Nazi partner, at the end it got only what Germany allowed them to have. However, some political and institutional contradictions appeared already on April 10th, the day Germany and not Italy conquered Zagreb¹¹; it was there, under the

protection of the German army, that the proclamation of the Nezavisna država Hrvatska (NDH, the Independent state of Croatia) took place, which was not a kingdom. The first ustaša government was made on April 16th, with Pavelić acting both as prime minister and Head of State; the state territory was not yet defined, despite the announcements saying that it would match the historical "Great Croatia", meaning Zagorje, Slavonia, Srijem, Bačka, Barring, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Dalmatia (PRIVATEER, 1993, p. 57). Only after Yugoslavia surrendered on April 17th, Italians and Germans started negotiations in order to establish Croatia's borders and juridical status. The negotiations were not easy on Italy, being in a position of weakness compared to its powerful ally, and they have in fact ended abruptly on April 24th when Hitler decided to give Italy power over area west of an imaginary line going from Vrh, Samobor, Sarajevo, Novi Pazar and the Ohrid lake. The Führer was particularly against giving Italy a true protectorate over Croatia, and also against a possible customs-free area between the two countries; there is no prospective for Italy to penetrate economically the Balkan area in order to have free access to the region's resources, not even the Adriatic territories. Hitler would have allowed only some military control over a part of Croatia, but solely in order to give his weaker ally the responsibility of keeping the country in order; there was a clear possibility of civil war between the ustaše and other ethnic, religious and political components of the new State, considering the hatred and the wish for revenge against all non-Croatian and non-Catholic. That is why Hitler accepted - and showed quite some farsightedness in the author's opinion - Pavelić as Croatia's leader, renouncing the possibility of having a pro-German candidate from the beginning¹². In fact, with a poglavnik "sponsored" by Italy and however at least formally pro-Italian, Germany would not have to restrain the ustaše extremists: keeping the region peace was important considering that Germany was about to get into violent war with the Soviet Union.

capitulation) was at its minimum strength (PRIVITERA, 1993, p. 54)

¹² The candidate was the ustaša colonel Slavko Kvaternik, pro-Germany oriented and a declared enemy to Italy. The fact that Hitler did not allow him to become poglavnik instead of Pavelić left some of the Nazi wondering about just what was going on in the Führer's mind (on this subject, BURGWYN, 2006, pg.. 58-59).

¹¹ The Italian offensive begun starting April 11th, and remained mainly near the coasts when the Yugoslav army (close to

Furthermore, in possible conflicts between the Croatian and the fascist nationalisms, that despite apparent friendship were full of profound issues especially in regard to the control of the Adriatic coast (claimed by both parties), the Germans could have been both super partes intermediaries and Croatia's defenders if Italy interfered in their territories. That way the Germans would have controlled possible Italian claims, and at the same time Croats would have depended even more on the Nazis. Pavelić himself knew that he could not ruin the cordial relationship with Italy, because he owned his poglavnik office to Mussolini; on the other hand he also knew that he needed to explain to Croatian nationalists his docility in handing over cities and a good part of the Dalmatian territories (part of the "Great Croatia" project) to Italy. These territories were at first given to Croatia with the August 26th 1939 Sporazum, consequently lost after the Axis Powers' invasion, but were not given back. This issue tied Pavelić inevitably to Germany - in order to placate the Croatian nationalists' fury for the "gift" he gave Italy, interpreted as treason - and therefore put him in the position of granting any German request. Yet, there is more to the underground war between Italy and Germany over the control of Balkan resources: the Italian military occupation of large pieces of Croatia's territories was a fantastic excuse for some Nazi propaganda, that could deny Germany's intentions of hegemony over minor states and put the blame on their fascist ally, by saying that small countries connected to the Axis would take part in a "new order" as equals (Redoing, 2003, p. 55). It was a lie, but nevertheless it proved useful as it gave the image of Italians being oppressors of the Croatian people, while the Germans were defending it but without interfering into their internal issues (meaning the ethnic cleanse and massacre against minorities). So, the German attitude towards the Italy-Croatia relationship was to push the contenders to a direct conflict (especially when it came to the Dalmatian issue). The German government, by declaring its political "lack of interest" in the Croatian issue, wanted to keep a privileged position inside the Rome-Berlin game, observed by Croatian politicians that would then formulate their "independence" policy based on the results" (SALA, 1974, p.57)

Such solidarity between Croatia and Germany was not due only to the common national socialist ideology and the Central European culture, but that in

the Führer's words, perhaps after a meeting with Pavelić¹³, opened to a possibility of a biological affinity between these two peoples:

If the Croats were a part of the Reich, they would be loyal auxiliaries of the German Führer, like police guards in our regions. Yet they should not be treated as they are now treated by the Italians. The Croats are proud. [...] The Croats really do not wish to be considered Slavs. According to them, they descend from the Goths. The fact that they speak a Slavic language is just an accident (COLLOTTI, 1974, p.45; PRIVATEER, 1993, p.60).

However, there was some reluctance - not even that hidden - from quite some Germans towards the idea of a Croatia controlled by Italians, and deprived of the Dalmatian coast because the latter was annexed to Italy; such reluctance matched the opinions of the Croatian nationalists, which were brought to Hitler's attention by the Italophobe German plenipotentiary general in Zagreb, Edmund Glaise von Horstenau. He informed the Führer of the prevalent hostility towards Italians in Croatia, opposed to the pro-Germany current in Zagreb. Hitler himself did not wish to give Croatia to the Duce, despite being favourable to the idea of an Italian Dalmatia during a private meeting with Glaise; such idea could be useful to Germany, as it could become "a permanent base of Italian-Croatian conflicts, where Germany could always have the referee role" (BURGWYN, 2006, p.57,64).

THE GROTESQUE MAY 18TH FARCE

Such a proliferation of contrasts and irreconcilable interests between Italy, Germany and Croatia, allies and formally united, is never mentioned in the fascist regime propaganda, and therefore it never appears in

¹³ The meeting gives a glimpse of a reevaluation of Josip Frank's theory: under the influence of eugenics (popular at the beginning of the XX century) he questioned the theory of Croats belonging to the Slavic race. This idea was rekindled by Pavelić in order to provide "biological" and cultural motivations to a possible union between the ustaše movement and the Nazism. According to the future poglavnik, instead of belonging to the Slavic race (considered inferior), the Croats were Germanic because they were genetic descendants of Goth tribes which afterwards became Slavic (PRIVITERA, 2007, p. 74). Obviously whenever Pavelić met the Italian authorities, he never said a word about the Arian origins of the Croats; on the contrary, he always pointed out the Latin culture inherited by his people and the Catholic religion they had in common with Italians too, as opposed to the eastern Orthodoxism of the Serbs.

"L'Illustrazione Italiana". The May 25th 1941 front page of the issue n.21 shows an image of the Duce and the poglavnik at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome on May 18th, in occasion of the treaty that would have defined the borders between the Kingdom of Italy and the "Kingdom of Croatia". With an editorial entitled "Verso il nuovo ordine europeo. Il risorto Regno di Croazia" ("Towards a new European order. The resurrected Kingdom of Croatia") and signed by "Spectator", the magazine emphasises the idea of friendship between the two states and two peoples with common interests. The Versailles Treaty is condemned as an act of injustice towards the Croatian people, "forced to be part of an artificial state and to suffer everyday humiliation because of regime's supremacy", meaning the Serbian dynasty monarchic regime, defined "of an inferior civilisation" using explicit anti-Slavic racism. There is also some institutional ambiguity regarding the denomination of the new state, that Italy calls repeatedly "Kingdom" consistently with the Italian text of the May 18th treaty between Italy and Croatia, its attachments and the final protocol, but the letter that was sent that very day from Mussolini to Pavelić - and the Duce's answer - mentions only "the Croatian state". Such different denominations are not a coincidence: Mussolini was notoriously anti-monarchic despite the diarchy he thought he was forced to endure with the king Vittorio Emanuele III, while Pavelić thought that the Croatian crown on a Savoia's head was something acceptable only if the sovereign had no real power, and the poglavnik could remain both the Head of Government and the Head of State of the new NDH.

The designated sovereign of this "kingdom" was Aimone d'Aosta, Duke of Spoleto, defined as "valiant and brave prince of the Savoia House". The event during which the "antique kingdom" of Croatia was reinstated thanks to "King and Emperor of Italy" was highly emphasised: a summary of Croatia's medieval history was given, and one of its main points was the moment Duke Tomislav became king in 924 and the loss of Croatian independence, when the country became Hungary's fief. Successively, while describing the May 18th Roman ceremony, there is mention of Pavelić's role, "asking that [Vittorio Emanuele III] would designate the founding monarch of a new Croatian dynasty, that will take the country to its deserved renaissance". May 18th, defined as "a

memorable moment of contemporary history", is also seen as a remedy to "the most iniquitous decisions taken in Versailles", but is also the beginning of "that new European order, destined to start an era of justice, peace and true collaboration between peoples". Such words are sinister and ironic considering especially ethnic massacres that were already happening in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and that would get worse in months to come. However, considering the behind-the-scenes activity that are widely known today and the description made by Ciano (who was there), the ceremony of designation of the sovereign that would mark the birth of the "new kingdom" as the ideal continuation of the medieval Croatian monarchy, appears as a farce event with tragic consequences. In fact, there were preliminary agreements prior the the Rome May 18th ceremony, which were made on May 6th at the Monfalcone railway station where Mussolini and Ciano met Pavelić and his escort of ustaše: according to the Count Luca Pietromaschi's diaries (a fascist, head of the "Gabinetto armistizio-pace" (GABAP) inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that managed all issues regarding Yugoslavia following orders from Ciano) the people in the meeting looked like "gangsters one could see in American movies" (BURGWYN, 2006, p. 65), while the Duce's son-in-law wrote in his own diary on May 7th that the poglavnik's escort gave the meeting "a strange far west feeling". After Monfalcone, Mussolini abandoned the idea of a customs-free common area with Croatia and also renounced Italy's claim of entire Dalmatia; Pavelić subsequently told Glaise in Zagreb that he obtained a diplomatic victory over Italy, whose control over Spalato was purely appearance, and if there were to be an Italian king on Croatian throne, he would be just a symbolical figure unable to pose a threat to his "Führerstaat" (BURGWYN, 2006, p.65). The failure in matters of customs-free area now prevented Italy of establishing a true protectorate over Croatia, now destined to exist under total German economical hegemony, despite Germany allowing a strip of Croatian territory for Italy's military occupation for as long as the war lasted. Such modesty in the Italian requests (including having to settle for a "puppet sovereign" in Croatia with no real power) was a consequence of Italy's weak political and military position compared to the German ally. In fact, the Duce was afraid that if he insisted on

territorial and political requests, Pavelić would definitely turn on him, relying on German protection only. However, what really provides an insight into the ephemeral farce that the May 18th Rome ceremony was are Ciano's diary entries, revealing the lack of enthusiasm of the chosen for the role of Croatian king. On May 8th the diary says that Pietro Acquarone (a minister of the Royal House) informed Ciano that the Duke of Spoleto was indeed proud of the task that awaited him, "but that he was also very worried about losing his freedom". Such words actually give a glimpse of the real aversion Aimone di Savoia felt: he did not dare contradict the wishes of his royal uncle Vittorio Emanuele III with an explicit refusal, but he also did not like the idea of leaving his beloved military navy where he was an admiral¹⁴, or

¹⁴ There are multiple sources reporting how Aimone was absolutely contrary to becoming a king, and they are assembled in VIGNOLI, 2006, passim, together with Aimone's personal comments which assert the same lack of interest. Yet there is an episode less known of a meeting in Trieste between Indro Montanelli and Aimone di Savoia. The Italian journalist went there from Zagreb (where he was working as correspondent) to interview the Duke, convinced (as many others) that he was about to come in Croatia in order to take possession of his throne. This resulted in an almost surreal conversation during a dinner, which was not published then; yet it was Montanelli himself who revealed the episode on the "Corriere della Sera" on June 6th 1998 in his column "Montanelli's room" (p. 37). According to the journalist it was something not short of a comic sketch, and it provides an insight into the Duke's reluctance to accept Croatia's throne. This is the dialogue, followed by a short Montanelli's comment: "Me [Montanelli]: "Please, help me out. How am I to call you: Your Highness or Majesty?". Him: "Call me Aimone". Me: "I can't". Him: "Then call me as you want, but not Majesty". Me: "You want to renounce the throne?". Him: "I cannot: it was inflicted upon me by our King". Me: "So?". Him: "So nothing". Me: "But are you or are you not going to Zagreb?". Him: "Would you go, if you were me?". Me: "Me, no". Him: "So why do you want to send me then?". Me: "No, I just wanted to know if I can reveal this conversation to my newspaper"- Him: "Feel free to, but I am sure they will not publish it". In fact I never even wrote it. Instead I put a note from my Director saying: "Unpublishable interview. My advice is to follow the news from the Stefani Agency, and keep in mind that this situation never begun and never ended. It simply isn't. " He was right: from that moment on nobody spoke of it anymore, not even in Zagreb where I returned the day after, and where I was told that it was Pavelić who suggested crowning a king in order to give a royal blazon to his infamous police regime. Yet Pavelić denied this when I met him - ten years later in Argentina. He said that it was the Duce's idea because he wanted to show the Germans that Italy was still important." So, Aimone was the designated king yet he was detested by the two most important men in Italy because of his dissolute lifestyle, surrounded by commoners. In fact, Ciano wrote in his diary (November 17th 1941): "The King

the brilliant life he had in Italy. Another secret that emerges from the diary is what Acquarone said to Ciano about the difficulty of communicating his designation to Aimone himself, because he was found after 24 hours of search "in a Milan hotel, where he was hiding with a girl". Such reticence is confirmed by another of Ciano's diary entry on May 14th, following a meeting with Aimone; it appears that the Duke of Spoleto, despite being proud of his designated role, "did not have a precise idea of his duties and was vaguely impressed". Ciano felt necessary to reassure Aimone by saying "he would be a crowned lieutenant in the Fascist Empire", but also wrote about the need to control the Duke, whom he did not trust to be completely available to carry out the difficult job he was assigned.

The "L'illustrazione italiana" described solemnly the ceremony and the Croatian delegates, but in order to understand how things really went it is useful to read some more Ciano's testimonies from his diary, written on May 18th: "approving murmur" of the Croatian delegates upon seeing the Duke of Spoleto before he started his speech. Such feelings could be due to the relief they felt after seeing Aimone, who was significantly more physically imposing than his uncle, the King of Italy, who was very short. Yet Ciano was worried about the cold reactions of the low number of people on the streets, who (wisely) did not give much importance to the event despite the emphasis the regime put on it. Such worries are accompanied by doubts about the solidity of the situation, as Ciano perceived a feeling of temporality that in his opinion caused people's indifference. In fact he writes bitterly: "only one news would put the entire Country on fire: that peace was made".

TERRITORIAL CONTRASTS UNDER A FAÇADE OF HARMONY

"L'illustrazione italiana" elaborates also on the territorial issue of the Croatian state. Yet also in this case, a harmonic situation between Italy and its ally

wants the Duke of Spoleto to go away from Rome, and Mussolini will let him now that through Russo [the undersecretary of the government]. This young man's attitude is quite absurd: he lives with the Pignataro girl, takes her to the state room, goes to restaurants and taverns and gets drunk. Few nights ago, in a place near Piazza Colonna, he took a napkin, twisted it and put it on his head like a crown while the waiters and the owner were applauding; the owner is called Ascension, lives between the kitchen and prison, and is his best friend. Such a fine King figure!"

is presented, but cannot be confirmed by reality or the treaty signed by the two governments. In fact, the May 18th treaty text postpones indefinitely the definition of the borders, a quite problematic issue considering the conflicting interests involved regarding territory and Adriatic contro. On the other hand, the editorial mentions the promise to Croatia of "righteous borders, economical prosperity [...] free manifestation of its culture, that has always been oriented towards Italian civilisation". Such empty rhetorics are easily proven false considering the territorial dispute between the two states and the pro-German feeling which can be found in many Croats during the war, even those in Dalmatia. Among many possible examples that testify the fact that there was no attraction on the Croatian part towards Italian culture, there is Bettiza's testimony regarding the situation in Spalato, which certainly was not due to sympathy for Yugoslavia or being partial to Italy. According to the writer, in the city between two wars

there was obsessive spreading [...] and affirmation of the Slavic identity in Dalmatia. [...] Belgrade, and especially Zagreb, thought that Dalmatia - craved by Italy that already possessed Zara and Lagosta - was a very exposed and vulnerable point in the new Yugoslav kingdom. That is why they tried in many ways to hide traces of Rome and Venice in toponymy, town planning, monuments' aesthetics, especially in Spalato where those traces were everywhere, strong and profoundly intersected with the city (BETTIZZA, 2009, p.215).

Bettiza's thoughts on the growing Slavic identity in Dalmatia opposed to the Italian one (or even Roman and Venetian) through physical structures are very similar to moderate points of view expressed by Ciano and the Italian king during discussions about the definition of the two states' borders. There were extreme positions of the Dalmatian irredentists, the Duce and a great part of diplomacy and army corps that wanted the annexation of the entire Dalmatian coast based on historical claims and the better military defence of the Adriatic provided by the Eastern coast (REDOING, 2003, p. 105-107), opposed to other pragmatic evaluations of the situation. According to Ciano, leaving Spalato to Croatia was preferable to making them into enemies, as he wrote in his diary on April 29th: "Is it really

worth the effort to save a city where the only Italian thing are monuments, only to lose control over a big and rich kingdom? There is no denying the history of those stones, but the living's present is more important". The diary (on April 30th) also indicates the king's point of view, fully favourable to giving Spalato away: "The King thinks that less Dalmatia we take, less problems we shall have. If it wasn't for certain sentimentalism which is easily explained", he said, "I would be in favour of giving Zara away too."

The "righteous borders" which were set on June 7th 1941 with a royal decree, give fully the idea of Italy's weakness, despite assigning Italy a part of Dalmatia going from Zara to Spalato, with the Bay of Kotor separated both from the rest of the region and Montenegro; Italy was incapable of asserting its territorial and economical interests in the eyes of its Croatian and German allies. In fact, the treaty clauses that make Italy a guarantee of Croatian independence and its territorial integrity are ambiguous; according to those, Croatia should have been, at least formally, a sort of Italian protectorate, but was prohibited from having a war naval fleet¹⁵ and had to accept the Italian military transits on the coastal road Fiume-Kotor and the (interrupted) railway Fiume-Ogulin-Spalato. Finally, Italian Dalmatia was divided in three provinces of Zara, Spalato and Kotor, but was not economically independent and could not count on Croatian resources which were in part controlled by Germans and ruined by the civil war: therefore it could only depend on Italy. Dalmatia was just a piece of arid land inhabited by "almost half million Croats that dominated numerically the ethnic Italians (BURGWYN, 2006, p.66).

On the other hand, despite such a sombre situation and the awareness of the maximum Italian state authorities, the article hereby analysed pictures an image of "imperial" Italy, fully able to support Croatia economically and military, whose borders were defined by "the perception of the "vital space", a great conquest of the contemporary political ideas, that are destined to be instated in Europe with the

¹⁵ According to the article n.2 of the treaty's attachment that defines military efforts regarding the littoral Adriatic area; that is how Italy - almost openly - wanted to prevent the possibility of Germans controlling the Adriatic, through an escamotage of ships flying Croatian flags. In fascist imperial projects, the Adriatic sea was and had to remain an Italian lake,

Axis' victories, restoring the unity that peace treaties [Versailles] have violently changed, to the point of compromising the western society's destiny". There is an allusion to an "European unity" which is not very ante litteram, based not on free associations between states but on the Axis' hegemony founded by the German Reich, and apparently by a future mediterranean fascist "empire", which was later subject to theories of concentric circles enlargement all the way to Africa and Middle East (REDOING, 2003, chart 1, p. 497). Croatia would have been a part of that empire inside the "second circle", which included the entire Balkan area. This was an attempt to acquire more space than Germany allowed. Such project was based on different principles than the ones in the Nazi "vital space" theory, that wanted to eliminate the populations of conquered territories in order to make space for the arian race, which was biologically superior. Fascist Italy wanted to create a net of "satellite" states depending on Rome, whose populations were not to be annihilated or enslaved, but they were to absorb the "superior" Italian civilisation that would grant order and justice (OLIVA, 2007, p. 49). This system was based on Mussolini's idea of an "Italianness" capable of absorbing other cultures (WÖRSDÖRFER, 2009, p. 147), openly inspired by the "client states" in Ancient Rome which were placed on the margins of the territories annexed to the Urbe. However, those fascist projects were ruined by a basic contradiction: the true winners in the Yugoslav campaign were the Germans, and they decided which regions would be under Italian occupation, saving those of main economical and strategic importance for themselves (ROCHAT, 2008, p. 360). Despite this fact, according to Rochat (2008, p.361) the Balkan regions occupied by Italians play an essential role in the fascist war which often is undervalued. They were the only concrete result of the expansionist politics, and were supposed to be an anticipation of the Mediterranean empire that Mussolini promised, a proof that Italians were capable of dominating new vast territories acquired by force of arms and kept with significant military effort.

The occupied territories which were obtained with a dose of luck and with external military aid inspired Ciano to conclude a rapid negotiated peace, before they could be ominously lost. He wrote in his diary (May 6th 1941): "I provide him [to Mussolini] with some of my considerations, meaning that a

compromise peace should be considered as something good for us, especially now that we got what we wanted". Such thoughts were reasonable, but they collided with the mediterranean empire project which was not yet finished and was also a non-negotiable part of the regime propaganda. There were persistent hegemony intents despite some limitations in the Balkan area noticed by Rochat (2008, p. 363): "the fascist domination cannot count on the Italian minorities' support or any other favourable conditions".

Italian expansion ambitions were means of propaganda during the entire Mussolini regime, despite war bad luck. This can be perceived visually through a map inside the Touring Club Italiano Guida d'Italia published in Rome in 1942 (image 1). Corsica, Nice area, Ticino, Malta and Dalmatia are compared to Italian regions; Dalmatia was not represented only by using a segment correspondent to the real annexations accomplished, but it included the entire region from Fiume to Kotor without territorial continuity. In regard to the same topic, there is also the interesting example of a western Balkan chart¹⁶ (image 2) which illustrated the project of Dalmatia's annexation: the claim on the region is not limited to the provinces of Zara, Spalato and Kotor which were controlled by Italy, but they continue following the entire east Adriatic coast, going into the hinterland too and including the Croatian Krajina, Lika and Herzegovina up to (and including) Mostar.

The "L'illustrazione italiana" accepts as righteous solely the annexation of a part of the coast, leaving the other parts to Croatia. Such an approach could not be different, considering the publishing date which was immediately after the treaty with Croatia. Italy wanted to maintain a good relationship with Croatia, and above all wanted to avoid it getting closer to Germany, which was inevitable if the fascist expansionism proved to be too menacing. The magazine refers to a "reciprocal collaboration [...] with a certain future": these words are involuntarily ironic considering the ever-growing hatred between Croats and Italians despite their formal alliance, and the precarious territorial solutions which were cancelled with Italy's defeat on September 8th 1943. There is

¹⁶ The map from the Guida d'Italia is taken from RODOGNO, p. 102; the second one is from RODOGNO, 2003, p. 104 and has been previously published by L.Missoni, Luci e ombre sulle Dinariche. L'Italia nei Balcani, Anonima Arti Grafiche, Bologna 1942.

also mention of the “vital space” where Croatia was included and “for which Italy had bigger plans”. Therefore, a “client” state following the above mentioned theory; Italy would not take away their independence but will take Venice’s place in a context of Adriatic hegemony. In fact, there was to be a comeback of “times when San Marc’s lion was on the eastern Adriatic gates. The only change is the fact that the lion is now transfigured into the imperial Italy’s emblem”. Then there is the speech given by the Italian king, who was famously anti-Germanic and with no sympathy whatsoever for the Croatian nation whose leaders claimed Gothic ancestors¹⁷. While talking to Pavelić, unconcerned with the truth and paying no attention to the ridicule, he said: “With much hope, we salute the new order in Europe that marks the rebirth of the Croatian nation, whose history has so many ties to our own and that for centuries has tenaciously oriented its intellectual and moral existence towards the Roman civilisations”. In fact, according to that logic, the Croatian people welcomed the reinstallation of monarchy and the return to the never forgotten ancient Roman and Venetian habits “as the realisation of a dream which was mortified for quite a long time”. What it really was is a grotesque sham, and nobody among those who took part in it actually believed it was true, and that very soon would have catastrophic consequences for both Italian and Yugoslav peoples.

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¹⁷ From Ciano’s diary, November 3rd 1941: “The Duce is indignant with Pavelić because he claims Croats are of Goth origins: that equals gravitating in Germany’s orbit. This could have immediate effect on the current situation.

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