

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of nationhood in twentieth century Europe: lessons from the Northern Adriatic borderlands

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This article is a short introduction for a special edition on Italian nationhood. The articles that comprise the special edition are the following: From a cosmopolitan to a fascist land: Adriatic irredentism in motion; Erecting fascism: nation, identity, and space in Trieste in the first half of the twentieth century; Building Italianità in northern Adriatic: The case of population from Pola.

Keywords: irredentism; fascism; Italianità; nationhood; borderlands

The border “was neither alterable with force nor with negotiation.” With these words Italian Foreign Minister Aldo Moro responded to the criticism of segments of Italian public opinion that staunchly opposed the Osimo Treaty, the final territorial settlement between Italy and Yugoslavia over the upper Adriatic border in 1975. Although Italian, Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian scholars have paid increasing attention to this topic, the Adriatic borderland has remained somewhat understudied within Anglophone scholarship. Scholars have investigated the multi-faceted nature and complex legacy of its turbulent geo-political transformations, yet only a few have focused on the trajectory of ideas of nationhood in this contested borderland over the course of the twentieth century, and its significance for nationalism studies.

When investigating this multi-ethnic region, many authors have examined life under the Habsburgs in the Adriatic borderland (Millo 2002), Adriatic irredentism (Reill 2012), and the “fascistization” of the Adriatic region (Hametz 2012). Others, instead, have focused on the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the Cold War (Valdevit 2004; Pizzi and Hietala 2016); the phenomena of ethno-political violence between Italians and “Slavs” (Pupo 2007; Pirjevec 1977); and the diplomatic process that led to Osimo (Bucarelli 2008). More recently, scholars have investigated the historical and political process that paralleled the affirmation of competing nationalisms across the Adriatic border (Cattaruzza 2007; Wörsdörfer 2009), the issue of the exodus (Ballinger 2003), its public memory, (D’Alessio 2008; Verginella 2008), and the politicization of the border dispute within the broader context of post-war reconstruction. However, only a few (Hametz 2005; Capano 2016), have begun analyzing the evolution of ideas of nationhood in the Adriatic

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borderland, the fluidity of its political meaning, and its enduring legacy within the local and national public sphere.

This special section aims to fill this historical lacuna and, building on a wide set of new archival sources, provide insights into the state-led socio-political and cultural processes that transformed the Adriatic borderland from a cosmopolitan into a national space within public discourse. Based on the research of Italian and Slovene historians, it analyzes the nationalization (“Italianization” in this case) of the Adriatic border. In addition, it examines the rhetoric surrounding its changing territorial configuration through the thoughts, strategies, and actions of a wide network of political and social actors from the nineteenth century to the early years of the Cold War.

The first article, “From a cosmopolitan to a fascist land: Adriatic irredentism in motion,” undertakes the examination of Adriatic irredentism both as an intellectual and popular movement. It suggests that while this movement initially strived to affirm the multi-national nature of the Adriatic space, it later merged within the broader nationalist mainstream that vouched for its exclusive Italian cultural identity and Italian territorial sovereignty. The second article, “Erecting fascism: nation, identity, and space in Trieste in the first half of the twentieth century,” continues to explore the radicalization of ideas of nationhood by discussing the fascist re-making of the urban space of Trieste/Trst through the analysis of monuments, buildings, and squares of what became the political, economic, and cultural center of the Adriatic borderland. Finally, the third article, “Building Italianità in northern Adriatic: The case of population from Pola,” investigates the constructed nature of state-sponsored ideas of nationhood post-1945 through the lenses of the organized transfer of most of the local Italian population from the Adriatic city of Pola/Pula in 1947. It also studies the use of its public memory to further legitimate claims of territorial sovereignty over the city in the early years of the Cold War.

While investigating the contested past of the Northern Adriatic borderlands this special section extensively studies the complex and multi-faceted historical process that witnessed both the affirmation and demise of ideas of Italian nationhood across the region. It suggests that this multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and heterogeneous cultural space experienced years of irredentist rhetoric, fascist violence, and political manipulation that considerably undermined its traditional role as a bridge between peoples and cultures. Like other borderlands, and despite its unique past, this case study is representative of the lasting aftermath of the borders’ fluidity. Amidst prolonged border disputes such as those between China and India, Iraq and Syria, or Russia and Ukraine, the authors invite scholars of nationalism to a broader reflection on the reckless use of nationalist rhetoric, the costs of nationalizing the public space, and the aftermath of locally constructed memories.

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