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Studying Borders in the Gorizia Area

Raimondo Strassoldo

I Introduction

I have had several opportunities, in the last few years, to sketch to different audiences some aspects of the border *problematique* in this area.¹ The boundary is, and it has been for several centuries, a looming presence here. In my personal experience I remember the tense atmosphere around 1947, when Communist Yugoslavia cast claims deep into our Friulian plains, and writings to this effect would appear on the walls of villages near my home, and out of fear some close relatives fled to South America. We would look in apprehension to the wall of — now — Yugoslav mountains enclosing the horizon to the East, as if ready to crash down and overwhelm our lowlands. In my schoolyears, teachers would bring us to the huge war cemetery of Redipuglia, to drive deep into our tender souls the idea that this is sacred Italian land, because hundreds of thousands of Italians had died to "redeem" it from foreign barbarians; and to the Castle of Gorizia, to stare at the lost territories on the other side of the border, to instill in us a sense of mourning and, by implication, fear, hate and revenge. And I remember, in 1953, the student demonstrations for the return of Trieste to Italy, and the military mobilisation; from

¹ See, for example: R. Strassoldo, 'Perspectives on Frontiers: the case of the Alpe Adria', in M. Anderson, E. Bort (eds.), *The Frontiers of Europe*, London and Washington: Pinter, 1998, pp.75-90; R. Strassoldo, 'Cross-Border Cooperation from the perspective of the ARGE Alpe-Adria. Empirical Findings', in G. Brunn, P. Schmitt-Egner (eds.), *Grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit in Europa. Theorie, Empirie, Praxis*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998, pp.172-84. References to earlier work can be found in those articles.

family friends in the army we would hear that Italian defences could not resist a Yugoslav assault for more than eight hours; and soldiers were crying in the streets. Then a 10-year period of standstill came, during which the world beyond the border dropped out of our conscience; save for the hectic digging of a kind of Maginot line along all major rivers in our area, the building of barracks, military convoys logging the roads, and the ubiquitous signs prohibiting any use of cameras, sketch-books, binoculars etc. in a strip of about 20 km width along the border.

In the mid-sixties it became relevant again, in a quite different manner. Families had begun to equip themselves with cars, and the more enterprising ones started to go across the border to buy much cheaper Yugoslav fuel, and other goods. Some started also to make tourist excursions there. Soon the border became an attraction, public administrations across the border began to cooperate in the handling of the problems it created, and the need to study them emerged. Thus I happened to start a career as a professional border analyst.

II History

So much for personal reminiscences. Shifting to a different approach, it can be argued that there are solid physical reasons that make this an archetypal border area. The mountains just east of Gorizia form the continental divide between the waters that flow into the Adriatic and those that flow into the Black Sea. They also form a divide between the Central European and the Mediterranean climates and land-forms, and thus between vegetational and agricultural regions and, eventually, between ethnic cultures. In the sixth century, the Slavs (Slovenes), having settled the whole middle section of the Danube basin, occupied also the mountains and foothills around the Friulian plains, where they were stopped by the Lombards. A neat altitudinal/ethnic border (with some local confusions) emerged then, and endures to our own times: the highlands are Slovenes, the plains

are Friulian. Politically, the situation has been much more complex. For some centuries (800-1420), the neo-Latin, German and Slav peoples/territories had been united in encompassing political entities: first the Duchy of Carinthia (800-1000), and then the ecclesiastical principate called Patriarchate of Aquileia. Since the fifteenth century, the region was partitioned between the main powers, polarising this part of Europe: Venice on the Adriatic side, and the Habsburgs on the Danube side. The new political border only very roughly matched geographical and ethnic realities. Slovene mountain areas came into Venetian hands ("Venetian Slovenia"), and Latin (Friulian) plains went into Austrian hands. This of course was no problem in pre-nationalistic times; it became so when the two principles, of "natural frontiers" and of "national unity", became the paramount forces of geopolitical dynamics, in the nineteenth century. The mismatch between political, ethnic and geographical borders gave rise to the opposing claims from Italians and Slavs to this region. In order to linguistically support such claims, Italian nationalists invented for it, in 1863, the name *Venezia Giulia* (alluding to Venice and to the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar). Thus the ideological foundations for the Irredenta movement, Italy's aggression in 1915, fascist racist policies and Yugoslavia's bloody backlash in 1945 were laid.

The border between the Republic of Venice and the Habsburg empire in this area had been a tortuous and shaggy line, with many enclaves and exclaves on both sides (there even was a village that belonged to the Habsburgs most of the year, but was ritually handed back to Venice for a few days during a festival). It became a more continuous line in Napoleonic times, but started to shift back and forth, between the Friulian plains and the heartland of Slovenia, to the east or the west of Gorizia, according to the pressure of military and political power. Such are the main structural facts beneath the world of personal experience I mentioned in the previous section.

III The Ethnic Make-up of Gorizia

As a result of this, Gorizia is a complex cultural entity. For almost one thousand years, up to 1918, it was part of predominantly German-speaking political systems, first the County of Tyrol and then the Habsburg empire. Accordingly, its political class was partly German, and this culture became more conspicuous when Germanisation became a policy of the Habsburgs, since the eighteenth century. However, the German component of Gorizian grassroots culture (as distinguished from the official, institutional one) was weaker than the other two, the Italian and the Slovene, and it was systematically obliterated from the public scene in Fascist time. For instance, the German books section in public libraries were packed up and sent to rot in the basements. Now it only survives as an afterglow, in the memory of a handful of intellectuals² and in the practice of a few formerly aristocratic families.

Basically, Gorizia was the predominantly Italian (Friulian) capital of a political community made up roughly by 2/3 of Slovenes in the highlands and 1/3 of Italians (Friulians) in the plains. Gorizia was then, from the political, administrative and social point of view, a centre; what ran through it was merely a boundary between two peasant, primitive, oral languages, of little cultural or political import. After the last war, this ethnic border became a state boundary; Gorizia lost 75 % of its provincial territory, and found itself precariously exposed at the very tip of a salient of a sealed frontier. Only since then can Gorizia properly be called a border town.

The Slovene minority group left on the Italian side of the boundary today amounts to some 8-15 % (according to different definitions and different, Italian or Slovene, sources) of the total provincial population, and is rather well organised. It has suffered in the past from the cleavage between Catholic and Marxist factions (with other complications), but that seems to have been largely

superseded in the last generation.³ The Italian majority has also been torn by ideological divisions, particularly strong because in part they overlapped, in the crucial years of 1945-48, with the attitudes toward political allegiance. Part of the Italian Communists in this area had supported the claims of Yugoslavia over Venezia Giulia, subordinating the national principle to the "international" ideology of the communist movement; this made them appear as traitors and an object of deep distrust in the eyes of the other Italian political forces. The majority of Gorizian Italians place themselves firmly in the conservative, centre-right part of the spectrum. The trauma of 1945-8, the relevant number of State employees, both military and civilian, connected with border-control and defence, and the settlement here of a sizeable community of refugees from the territories lost to Yugoslavia, further explain the strength of nationalist forces, especially in the town itself. In the ethnically Italian/Friulian rural areas, however, these factors are less powerful, and a strand of moderate, popular, even progressive Catholicism survives. It is from these attitudes that, in the late fifties and in the sixties, the main drives came for a rapprochement with the Slovene minority and with Italian leftist parties, and with Slovenia across the border. And it is from this ambience, which was in power at the regional level, that the resources for cultural activities in this direction came. The Institute of Mitteleuropean Cultural Meetings and the Institute of International Sociology were expressions of the centre-left, Catholic forces, led mainly by people grown in the Friulian countryside, like former trade-union leader Rolando Cian and Arch-Bishop Pietro Coccolin.

² Istituto di Storia Sociale e Religiosa, *La cultura tedesca nel Goriziano*, Gorizia 1995.

³ For a well organised, balanced and updated report on the Slovene minority, see P. Stranj, *The Submerged Community. An A to Z of the Slovenes in Italy*, Trieste: Editoriale Stampa Triestina, 1992.

IV A Footnote on Friulians and Italians

A point of clarification seems here in order. We have used the phrase Italian-Friulian to characterise the neo-Latin ethnic component of the province of Gorizia. Friuli is the name of the whole region between the Livenza and the Isonzo rivers, which in the middle ages enjoyed political autonomy as the *Patna del Friuli*, and retained some vestiges of it also in the almost four centuries of Venetian domination. Its population developed a language which is usually acknowledged as one of the Neo-Latin languages, distinct from Italian, and more akin to Catalan, Provençal and Swiss-Romantsch. Thus, Friulians are mostly considered an ethnic (and even national) group different from Italians, although this is a bitterly contested issue. The plains west of Gorizia are certainly part of Friuli from a geographical and ethnic point of view, although they have belonged to different political systems for five centuries. Friulian has long been only an oral, rural language; the upper classes mostly used, and almost always wrote, standard Italian. Thus the neo-Latin ethnics of the Gorizia province considered themselves both Italian and Friulian, or either, according to circumstances. The use of the latter term seems to have prevailed in the last decades before the end of the empire, when too much stress on being Italian could entail suspicions of Irredenta leaning. Loyal citizens and institutions would call themselves Friulian, even though using the Italian language.

The two ethnic/national definitions could be used almost interchangeably until the annexation to Italy, when a policy of systematic "Italianisation" was implemented by the nationalists, the fascists, and also by the Republican, democratic regimes. The indigenous Friulian-Italians have been effectively submerged by newcomers from other parts of Italy and from the lost territories of Istria and Dalmatia, so that it makes sense, in some context, to distinguish between the now minorised, autochthonous Friulian component and the properly Italian one.⁴

⁴ Istituto di Storia Sociale e religiosa, *La cultura friulana nel Goriziano*, Udine, 1988. For a summary in English on the general "Friulian question" see

Both the Slovenes and the Friulians in the province of Gorizia were mostly rural, Catholic folk, so they had few motives for the antagonism typical of situations in which ethnic, class and ideological cleavages overlap. This is the reason why the re-opening of the psychological border has been easier for the Catholic-popular-Friulian component than for the nationalist-conservative Italian one.

V The Institute for Mittel-European Cultural Meetings (ICM)

The ICM was established in 1966, by a group of Gorizian intellectuals and politicians and with the financial support of the Regional government, with the aim to promote encounters between Italian scholars and their peers from all *Mittleuropa*, that rather indefinite area ranging from Germany to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. In those years of tough confrontation between the socialist and the capitalist blocs, of unpromising neutralism of Austria, and of ultra-nationalist attitudes in most Eastern countries, this was no mean ambition. It was felt that mutual understanding and trust could best be attained at the most rarified level of high culture, on themes like poetry, literature, music, philosophy, architecture, etc. Thirty-one conferences on such themes have so far been organised, and most of them have resulted in the publication of the proceedings, in several languages. The Institute has become a reference point in many of the countries involved, and has prompted similar initiatives in some of them; beginning with Austria. Gorizia has resumed its place in the cultural geography of Central Europe, where one often hears the phrase "the spirit of

R. Strassoldo, "The Case of Friuli", *International Political Science Review — Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, Vol. 6, no. 2, 1985 (special issue on "Ethnicity and regionalism"), pp. 197-215. For a broader, and updated, set of analyses see R. Strassoldo, *Lingua, Identità, Autonomia. Ricerche e riflessioni sociologiche sulla questione friulana*, Udine: Ribis, 1996.

Gorizia" to mean the reconstruction of some sense of unity among the different cultures of the area.

The sudden collapse of the socialist world and of the Soviet empire in 1989, and the rush towards reintegration of the former satellite countries into Western Europe have radically altered the context, and could have foreclosed the original aims of the ICM. Cultural integration could now be pursued along more normal, institutional channels (states, universities, cultural markets, etc.). But it was felt that the web of relations built by the ICM across the whole Danube area was a heritage that should not be wasted. The ICM continues its activities, and is seeking a new role in the framework of the Trieste-based Central European Initiative.⁵

VI The Institute of International Sociology (ISIG)

ISIG was established two years later, essentially by the same group as the ICM. President of both institutions was the then Mayor of Gorizia, Senator Michele Martina. As the name makes clear, this was an institute specialising in the use of the conceptual and methodological tools of that peculiar discipline, sociology — very popular in those years. The topics to be studied, as listed in the ISIG charter, were the "social factors" that promote peaceful relations among peoples, nations and ethnic groups. The reference here was to the "peace research" movement, or network, which was then blooming under the charismatic leadership of Johan Galtung. In addition, ISIG was to study any other issue impinging on the "social, cultural and economic development" of the local community.

ISIG was conceived as ethnically integrated: Italian and Slovene scholars were present both in its Scientific Council and in the staff.

An issue that was central both to "peace research" and to the "local development" themes was clearly that of the border. ISIG launched an articulated research programme on this theme. A study of the evolution of Italy's north-eastern border, from the beginning of history to the present day, was done by geographer Giorgio Valussi. The legal-administrative and practical aspects of border management in contemporary Italy were described by the customs official Luigi Buratto. An *équipe* of economists and statisticians analysed the evolution and structure of border traffic in the province of Gorizia since its beginnings in 1955. Sociologist Renzo Gubert carried out an encompassing sociological survey of the "border situation". Data on attitudes, opinions, and reported behaviour relating to various aspect of the border situation (inter-state and ethnic relations, ideologies, expectations of development, scopes and aims of border crossings, defence and border-control institutions, etc.) were collected through a voluminous questionnaire from a sample of 1,215 citizens and analysed through the then most updated sociological-statistical techniques. Emidio Sussi studied the evolution and structure of inter-ethnic relations, both within the province and across the borders, analysing the content of official and printed sources. Raimondo Strassoldo started a systematic, and systems-oriented, interdisciplinary theoretical study on the concept of boundaries and, on the empirical level, a research on the various problems connected with the heavy military presence in the region. Emidio Sussi and Annamaria Boileau carried out a sample survey on the "mutual images" of the several micro-ethnic groups (11 of them) along the Italian-Yugoslav border. All these studies were published in book form and presented as papers in several national and international meetings. One of them was organised by ISIG itself in Gorizia, in 1972, as its official *debut* in the international scientific community. They stimulated some interest abroad, and an ISIG staff member was called to Strasbourg to act as "expert consultant" in the programme of the Council of Europe concerning "frontier regions". A second international conference was held to celebrate the Institute's first decennial, in 1979.

However, more ambitious plans were not fulfilled. The project, prodded by New York sociologist Feliks Gross, of specialising ISIG in

⁵ For a detailed report of the activities and publications in the first 20 years, see R. Tubaro (ed), *Cultura mitteleuropea. Vent'anni di lavoro, studi e ricerche*, Gorizia: Istituto per gli incontri culturali mitteleuropei, 1986.

the monitoring of "border problems" all over the world, a kind of "early warning" look-out on border tensions and conflicts, in the service of the whole international community, did not materialise because of the inability to find adequate resources. Also the project, so dear to ISIG's first director, Franco Demarchi, of extending the know-how on borders built up in Gorizia to all the "border situations" in the Danube basin, could not take off. Here the difficulties were not only financial but also organisational. It was not possible to find researchers willing and capable to engage in such a complex and even irksome long-term project; and the difficulties of securing reliable co-operation from academic and political institutions in the Balkan countries proved insurmountable.

After 1973, the engagement of ISIG on border and international issues ebbed, for several reasons; one of them being financial difficulties, which forced the Institute to accept research grants on any issue, in order to survive; the other being the earthquake that shattered Friuli in 1976, and which deviated the Institute's energies toward disaster and reconstruction studies. It took more than ten years before activities on international and border issues could be resumed.⁶

⁶ For a rather detailed account of the history of ISIG, its activities and publications up to 1988, see R. Strassoldo, 'Vent'anni di sociologia a Gorizia, appunti per una bibliografia', in *Studi Goriziani*, Vol.68, 1988.