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Erminio Fonzo

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1. Author's information

University of Salerno

2. Author's contact

efonzo@unisa.it

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Use and Abuse of History and Memory: the Istrian-Dalmatian Exodus and the Current Refugee Flows

ERMINIO FONZO
University of Salerno

Abstract

After the World War II, about 300.000 Italian people abandoned Istria and Dalmatia, which were annexed by Yugoslavia, and moved to Italy. The exodus is tied to the atrocities committed by the Slavic forces, the so called *foibe* massacres. Today the memory of these events is growing, mainly in its public-institutional representations, and many initiatives are organized to remember the exiles. Knowledge and awareness of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, however, are limited to a minority of the population; the story is often told in an one-sided way and memory lends itself to political (and unfair) uses. The exodus is sometimes mentioned within the public discourse about the current migration flows, but, generally, memory is used to reject immigrants, and not to welcome them. Remembrance, indeed, is mainly cultivated by right-wing groups, which oppose the arrivals of foreigners. Moreover, often the associations of Istrian-Dalmatian exiles do not use the memory of their exodus to favour the reception of immigrants.

Keywords: Collective memory; *Foibe* massacres; Immigration in Italy; Istrian-Dalmatian exodus; Public use of history.

*Let us act in such a way that collective memory may serve
the liberation, and not the enslavement, of human beings
(Jacques Le Goff, 1977)*

1. Italian refugees in the XIX and XX centuries

Memory is a powerful weapon, because it is able to forge mind, identity and opinions of citizens. Collective memory, indeed, is the basis of the beliefs of citizens, influencing their views and their *weltanschauung*. Today, as pointed out by several historians (mainly Nora, 1984, 1992, 2013), we are experiencing an “explosion” of memory, as remembrance and celebration of the past are more and more widespread. The State plays a key role in this phenomenon, through days of memory, public celebrations, building of

monuments and other initiatives, and it is engaged in shaping a sort of official memory, negotiated (often, with harsh polemics) among political forces (on the Italian case, see De Luna, 2011). In other words, the State has an important position in establishing the *norms of remembrance* (Zerubavel, 2003, pp. 1-10) which each *mnemonic community* follows. Memory, however, lends itself to easy abuses and is used to justify hostile acts of one group against another (Todorov, 1996).

Such an “explosion” of remembrance has affected all the world, including Italy. For Italians, an important *lieu de memoire* is emigration. As is known, millions of Italians have left the country from the late XIX century to the 1970s and, consequently, emigration is engraved in the memory of individuals and families. In addition, since some decades the collective memory of emigration has been growing, mainly in its public-institutional representations, and many remembrance initiatives (construction of monuments, public celebrations, production of movies and songs, etc.) have been dedicated to emigrants.

The growth of such initiatives is tied to the arrival of large flows of immigrants, begun in the Seventies (Colucci, 2007; Sala, 2011). Memory could be useful to improve the perception of foreigners by Italian citizens, who often have stereotypical information on immigration, and to favour policies of reception. However, it is rarely used in this sense: only in few cases, indeed, memory pushes citizens and ruling class to welcome foreigners (Fonzo, 2017).

Today, the most debated issue of the migratory phenomenon is that of asylum seekers, who since 2011 have been reaching the Italian coasts in massive waves. Although being only a minority of the immigrants arriving in Italy, they provoke the sharpest polemics. In other words, the asylum seekers - black-skinned men who arrive by boat through the Mediterranean - are more “visible” than other immigrants. Many Italians have a negative perception of them and complain about their reception.

Therefore, examining how much is the memory of Italian refugees alive and to analyze how it is connected to the present migratory phenomena can be an interesting subject within the more general analysis of the attitude of Italians towards immigrants.

First of all it must be noted that drawing a clear distinction between refugees and economic migrants – or between voluntary and forced migrations – is impossible: in general, people who escape from wars and

persecutions come from underdeveloped countries and the reasons why migrants move are more than one; all migrants, in a certain sense, are forced to leave. In this article the words refugees and exiles are used in an extensive sense, including people migrating because of wars or persecutions and migrants that apply for asylum.

In this respect, it should be noted that Italy has been affected several times by the problem of refugees and political exiles. During the *Risorgimento* many patriots were forced to escape and seek asylum abroad. The story repeated itself during the fascist dictatorship, when thousands of anti-fascist militants were forced to seek asylum in other countries.

Furthermore, in two cases Italy had to face the problem of war refugees. During the World War I many citizens moved from the area of operations to other Italian regions. The most massive flow took place in 1917, when the Italian army suffered a serious defeat in Caporetto and a wide area of national territory was occupied by the Austrian army. About 600.000 citizens, living in the occupied land and in the zone near to the battlefield, moved to other regions (Ceschin, 2006).

The other massive flow of refugees was that of Istrian and Dalmatian people, escaped after the World War II because their regions were annexed by Yugoslavia. In the wake of the annexation, the great majority of the Italian population decided to leave and move to Italy, while a minority migrated to other countries and another minority remained in the territories under Yugoslavian rule. It must be remembered that Julian Venetia and Dalmatia had been disputed between Italians and Slavs for several decades, mainly after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the relations among ethnicities were difficult. In addition, during Mussolini's dictatorship the government imposed the forced Italianization, discriminating against the Slavs (Vinci, 2011); during the different stages of the Italian-German occupation of Yugoslavia (1941-1945), many atrocities were committed against the population (Gobetti, 2007; Del Boca, 2005).

After the World War II, Istria and Dalmatia were occupied by the Yugoslavian armed forces, which, in turn, committed atrocities against Italians. The phenomenon is known as *foibe* massacres (the *foibe* are natural cavities, in which part of the corpses of the murdered people was thrown) and developed in two stages: one in September-October 1943, after the first Slavic occupation; another in the spring of 1945, after the end of the Nazi-fascist rule. It is impossible to establish the exact number of victims, which

amounts about some thousands, including those thrown in the *foibe* and those killed in concentration camps (Pupo & Spazzali, 2003; Oliva, 2002). The word *foibe*, anyway, is commonly used in a symbolic way to indicate all the victims of the Yugoslavian repression.

Because of these events, about 300.000 people – including native Italians, Italians moved in the interwar period and a group of Slavs - moved to Italy from 1947 to the late '50s. The exiles, a part of whom were hosted in refugees camps until the 1960s, had problems with integration (Miletto, 2005; Pupo, 2005, pp. 205-224). Formally, the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus was not a forced migration, as people were not expelled by force, but, in fact, the conditions imposed them to flow.

2. *The memory of Italian refugees*

Today the memory of the Italian refugees is poor, with the partial exception of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus.

In the case of political refugees, escaped during the *Risorgimento* and during the fascist dictatorship, the memory of exile blends in with the celebration of the heroes of unification and Resistance. Therefore, these people are not remembered as exiles, but only as fighters for the Unification or for freedom.

The refugees of Caporetto, in turn, have never been remembered by the Italian public opinion. During the fascist dictatorship, the 1917 defeat was considered a page to be forgotten and, therefore, nobody spoke of the displaced persons. Also after the collapse of dictatorship, the subject of exiles has been neglected and even the historians have been partially ignoring the event for many years.

The case of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, which has raised many polemics since its beginning, is different. Even today, discussing exodus and *foibe* in serenity is quite impossible and, in general, these subjects lend themselves to sharp polemics and one-sided interpretations.

The exodus, indeed, happened during the Cold War, when the Italian political scene was divided in two major blocs: one led by the party *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and tied to the U.S.; another, tied to the USSR, led by the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI). The latter did not always welcome

the Istrian-Dalmatian refugees, considering them “fascists” who had left a communist country.

Moreover, the foreign relations of Italy did not help the exiles either. In 1948, the Marshal Tito was “excommunicated” by Stalin and, consequently, got closer to the Atlantic bloc; in 1954, with the London Memorandum, Italy and Yugoslavia found a solution, albeit temporary, for the question of Trieste (Cattaruzza, 20007, pp 283-326). Following these events, a sort of tacit agreement was reached: on the one side, Italy did not spoke of the crimes committed by Slavic forces; on the other side, Tito did not claim the delivery of Italian war criminals, provided for in the treaty of peace (Pirjevec, 2007, p. 149). The PCI, in turn, was interested in keeping silent on the events of the 1940s, because it had been in a difficult and ambiguous position, caught between the necessities of supporting Tito’s socialist regime and endorsing the Italian claims on the Julian-Venetia. In other words, in Italy almost nobody wanted to damage the relations with Yugoslavia, which, in addition, was an important economic partner. Therefore, during the so-called Italian first republic, public institutions did not pay any attention to the memory of exodus and *foibe* (Apih, 2010, pp. 85-95; Pupo, 2005, pp. 17-24).

Until the 1990s, memory was only cultivated by the associations of exiles, such as the *Associazione nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia* (ANVGD), and by the right-wing parties. For the right, indeed, remembering the events happened in the Julian Venetia was logical: first of all, the victims were Italian expelled (or killed) by foreigners, which could be enough for nationalist groups. Moreover, the persecutors were both Slavic and communist, two categories against whom the right had been fighting at least since the early XX century (Collotti, 1999).

Therefore, right-wing parties and associations of exiles often protested for the little attention reserved to their tragedy. The question also had an economic implication, as Yugoslavia confiscated the goods of refugees as war reparations and the Italian government, in change, paid the exiles an amount considered insufficient.

Only after the end of the Cold War things changed, because of several reasons: the dissolution of Yugoslavia; the collapse of the PCI, which became a more moderate party; the new framework of foreign policy and the new balance of power.

In addition, in the early '90s almost all traditional parties disappeared and a new right, able to take the power, arose¹. This new right – which is, at least in part, a renewal of the old right - struggled for the institutionalization of the remembrance of exodus and *foibe*. The question was important also because the Italian government expected to reach an agreement about the reimbursement of the exiles' goods. Some right-wing political leaders, moreover, also requested a revision of the Treaty of Osimo, which in 1975 had established the border between Italy and Yugoslavia.

Gradually the Italian left accepted the point of view of the right about *foibe* and exodus. In the 1990s the main party born from the dissolution of the PCI, the *Partito democratico della sinistra* (later *Democratici di sinistra*) was strongly committed to demonstrate that it was far from the communist ideology and used to highlight this difference whenever possible. The events happened in the Julian Venetia were a useful argument for showing such a difference.

The attention paid to exodus and *foibe* is part of a more general reinterpretation of the recent Italian history, developed after the collapse of the so-called first republic. In the 1990s, indeed, the centrality of antifascism, emerged since the early 1960s, was questioned by political groups, newspapers and some historians, who proposed a different approach, often reevaluating the fascist experience and highlighting the atrocities committed by communist regimes (De Luna, 2011).

In short, in the early 1990s time was ripe to approach the question of the Julian Venetia in a different way. Already in 1991 the Italian television broadcasted a programme about the *foibe* massacres (Pirjevec 2007, p. 201) and in November the president of the Republic, Francesco Cossiga, visited the *foiba* of Basovizza² (*La Stampa*, 4 November 1991). Two years later the

¹ The *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, neo-fascist party of the Italian first republic, in 1995 transformed into a more moderate party, *Alleanza Nazionale*, and formed a coalition with a new political force, *Forza Italia*, led by Silvio Berlusconi, and with the *Lega Nord*. The coalition went to the power in 1994 (when the transformation of the *Movimento Sociale* was in progress) and, again, in 2001.

² The so called *foiba* of Basovizza (fraction of Trieste), is a mine, not a *foiba* in the strict sense of the term, where corpses of killed Italians were thrown in 1943 and in 1945. The mine is the most symbolic place of events happened in the Julian Venetia and in 2007 the Italian authorities inaugurated a shrine in honour of the victims.

president Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, successor of Cossiga, declared Basovizza a national monument and the Italian and Slovenian governments appointed a commission of historians charged to shed light on the events (Commissione italo slovena, 2000). Since then, Italian media have been frequently speaking of the massacres (but less of the exodus).

In addition, an important turning point came in 1998, when Gianfranco Fini, leader of the *Alleanza nazionale* party, and Luciano Violante, prominent member of the *Democratici di sinistra* and president of the Chamber, participated in a public debate in Trieste and agreed about the necessity of achieving a shared memory on the recent Italian history, including *foibe* and exodus (*La Stampa*, 15 March 1998). Some intellectuals and politicians, most of whom were close to the left, expressed their concern for the “falsification” of history and for its political use (Pirjevec, 2007, p. 225), but the path toward a “shared memory” was not interrupted.

The right-wing groups, furthermore, claimed that an official award was assigned to the victims and in 1995 some deputies presented the first parliamentary proposition (API XII, *Disegni di legge e relazioni*, session of 11 July 1995). The debate went on for several years (see API XIII, *Allegato A ai resoconti*, session of 1 March 2001; API XIV, *Discussioni*, sessions of 4 and 10 February 2004) and in 2004 the agreement was reached. With the law no. 92 of 20 March 2004 the Parliament established to assign the award, consisting of a medal with the imprinting “La Repubblica italiana ricorda”, to all the “infoibati”, apart from those condemned by a court for collaboration with the Nazis. The law, furthermore, established the *Giorno del ricordo* (Memorial day) in order to “preserve and renew the memory of the tragedy of Italians and of all victims of *foibe* and of the exodus of Istria, Fiume [Rijeka] and Dalmatia people”. The day is celebrated each year on 10th February, anniversary of the signature of the treaty of Paris, which in 1947 left Istria and Dalmatia to Yugoslavia. The law also provided for the establishment of a museum of the Julian-Dalmatian civilization in Trieste and a Museum - historical archive of Fiume in Rome. At the Chamber almost all deputies voted in favour, with the exception of the far left (502 yes and 15 no) (API XIV, *Discussioni*, sessions of 11 February 2004). During the discussion, the major attention was reserved to the victims of the *foibe* massacres, which were the most known symbol of the events in the Julian Venetia, but not to refugees.

Many intellectuals criticized the law, arguing that the *Giorno del ricordo* was a sort of counterbalance of the *Giornata della memoria* (established in 2001 to remember the victims of the Holocaust): the celebration of 10th February would be a rightist remembrance day, established to compensate the *Giornata della memoria*, pleasing to the left.

What is certain is that the Parliament aimed to create a *mnemonic tradition*, or, at least, to extend this tradition - which until then was only known by the exiles themselves and by few other people - to the whole national community. As pointed out by many scholars (for example, Zerubavel, 2003; Ridolfi, 2003), the anniversaries play an important role in shaping the collective memory and, consequently, the identity of each community.

Since 2005, the *Giorno del ricordo* has been celebrated with a number of initiatives: schools uses to prepare special activities; public and private television broadcasts programmes dedicated to the *foibe* massacres and, less often, to the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus; local and national institutions organize specific ceremonies. The celebration also involves the presidency of the Republic. Giorgio Napolitano - a former member of the communist party, Italian president from 2006 to 2015 - used to organize a ceremony for the distribution of the medals. In 2007, this caused diplomatic problems, because Napolitano stated that the massacres were provoked by «a movement of hatred and bloody fury and an annexationist plan of Slavs, which prevailed in the treaty of peace of 1947 and which took the sinister form of an ethnic cleansing»³. The statement, which espoused the most extremist positions, provoked the angry reaction of Slavic media and institutions (*La Repubblica*, 13 February 2007). A clarification came in 2010, when Napolitano met the presidents of Slovenia and Croatia in Trieste for a commemoration of all the victims (*Il Piccolo*, 14 July 2010). The incumbent president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, pays less attention to the anniversary and, generally, on 10th February only issues a statement to remember the victims.

Among other initiatives, it should be mentioned the production of a TV movie, *Il cuore nel pozzo*, by the national television in 2005. The small screen, as is known, plays a central role in shaping collective memory and identity and, in this case too, has given a great contribution to the dissemination of

³ Full text of the speech: <http://presidenti.quirinale.it/elementi/Continua.aspx?tipo=Discorso&key=930>. Retrieved on 8 April 2017.

the knowledge of the events. The movie, indeed, was watched by about 10 million people, but was criticized by Slavic media and Italian left for telling the story in an one-sided and unfair way.

More recently, the singer Simone Cristicchi has written the song *Magazzino 18* (published in 2013) in honour of exiles and has realized a theatrical show, with the same title, in cooperation with the journalist Jan Bernas, author of a book on the subject (Bernas, 2010). The show was quite successful, but some leftist publicists criticized it (see, for example, *Il Manifesto*, 28 December 2013).

Another important initiative took place in 2015, when the municipality of Rome inaugurated the *Casa del ricordo*, a centre for studies dedicated to the history of the Julian Venetia.

In essence, in the last few years knowledge and awareness of the tragedies of the Julian Venetia have significantly increased. Since the 1990s, furthermore, many books have been published, including scientific studies, memorialist works and popular books.

The interpretation endorsed by the right has become a sort of “official version” of the story. Only some political groups and publicists, in general close to the far left, still contests it. It is true that the main initiatives (establishment of the *Giorno del ricordo* and production of the TV movie) were carried out when the government was in the hands of the right. (government Berlusconi II, in office from 2001 to 2006), but the institutional left, today represented by the *Partito Democratico*, has accepted the official version⁴. In essence, the memory of the events happened in the Julian Venetia is more and more widespread, mainly at the institutional level. The effort of exiles and right-wing parties has been crowned with success. The commitment of the political parties, however, is different: for the right-wing groups *foibe* and exodus are a real warhorse, while the leftist and centrist parties, in most cases, limit their engagement to the institutional occasions.

It is no coincidence, moreover, that the left-wing politicians who narrates the events happened in the Julian Venetia from the nationalist point of view, are all former members of the PCI, not only Giorgio Napolitano and Luciano Violante, but also other prominent leaders, such as

⁴ The Party was established in 2007 by the merger of *Democratici di sinistra* and some catholic groups, originating from the DC.

Walter Veltroni, former secretary of the *Partito Democratico*, who wrote the preface of Bernas' book, and Piero Fassino, former secretary of the *Democratici di sinistra*, who on several occasions expressed one-sided opinions (for example: "it was an ethnic cleansing against women and men guilty only to be Italians", *La Stampa*, 11 February 2014). Probably, they want to remark their difference from the PCI; the members of the *Partito Democratico* coming from a catholic political tradition use more measured tones (it is the case, for example, of the incumbent secretary, Matteo Renzi). The official memory of the events is also shared by the *Movimento 5 stelle*, another important party of the Italian political arena.

However, although the institution of the *Giorno del ricordo* and the other initiatives have actually increased awareness and knowledge of the events, the majority of Italian citizens continues to ignore them. Between 2008 and 2012 the ANVGD commissioned some surveys in order to evaluate how aware are Italians with the events. The last survey was carried out in 2012 and showed that Italian population has a poor knowledge about that. Only 22% of respondents, indeed, know the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, while 15,2% states to have just heard of it, and 61% of the sample completely ignores the events. The knowledge of the *foibe* massacres is somewhat higher: 43% of the sample is able to tell what they were, 16 % states to have heard of it and 38,6 % is totally unaware of the phenomenon (Ferrari Nasi e associati, 2012).

There has not been a significant growth of familiarity with events in recent years, in spite of the remembrance initiatives: the people aware of the exodus amounted to 23,5% in 2008; 15,2% in 2010; 22,4% in 2012; for the *foibe*, the trend is 40,6% of people able to tell what they were in 2008; 37,7% in 2010; 43,7% in 2012.

The poor knowledge of such a historic event is part of a more general ignorance of history, frequently detected in Italy.

The picture that emerges, in short, is of a collective and public memory which, thanks to efforts of institutions and political groups, overlaps with the personal memory of individuals and families (exiles and their heirs) and, obviously, do not coincide with it, as the direct victims of the exodus bears the scars of the escape and keep an emotional tie with their homeland. The personal memory of exiles, in other words, is much more alive and

“concrete”, as they have the strongest consciousness of the events⁵. It is, anyway, the basis for the construction of collective memory, as is demonstrated by the fact that, quite often, exiles are invited to tell their story during public celebrations. The idea of the ethnic cleansing itself is somehow tied to the personal memory of exiles, who believe to have been deliberately forced to escape by Slavs. The ANVGD surveys, however, show that the operation of building a collective memory, by making the personal memory of exiles a common heritage of the country, only succeeded in part.

The history of exodus and *foibe*, in addition, is often decontextualized. Italians are considered innocent victims, while, during Mussolini’s dictatorship and during the Italian-German occupation of Yugoslavia, fascist authorities and black shirts committed many atrocities against the Slavs. Obviously, memory is always selective: everybody only remember a part of the events (including the events of his own life), generally those that fit into his mental framework and are functional to determinate exigencies. Anyone who wants to commemorate the Julian Venetia events starts the narrative from the Yugoslavian occupation and cancels the fascist domination and the Italian-German occupation. In Italy, indeed, there is often a tendency to a sort of self-absolution, which drives to remove their own faults and to remember only those of the others (Focardi, 2013). Obviously, the Italian crimes do not justify the Yugoslavian reaction – characterized by atrocities and cruelty that cannot be justified under any circumstances – but help to understand the situation of the Julian Venetia and the relations among ethnic groups.

The exodus, furthermore, is often considered the consequence of a deliberate ethnic cleansing directed against Italians, while the Yugoslavian army mainly acted for political, and not ethnic, reasons (even if the Italians were the most numerous victims).

More in general, the story is often told with mistakes and unproven detail; the number of “infoibati” and exiles is frequently exaggerated; anybody who questions the official version is accused of negationism (for example, see *Il Giornale*, 10 February 2017).

⁵ On this aspect of collective memory, see Halbwachs, 1925; 1950.

3. Memory and present refugees

Within the public discourse about the current migration flows, usually Italian exiles are ignored.

The memory of the exiles of Caporetto, as seen above, is almost inexistent and the event is almost never mentioned within the debates about present refugees. Just in very few cases, the current humanitarian crisis has been compared to the 1917 exiles. It happened, for example, within the congress *Profughi / Rifugiati. Spostamenti di popolazioni nell'Europa della Prima guerra mondiale*, held in Rovereto (Trento) in November 2015. On the occasion, the historian Peter Gatrell argued that Europe had learned nothing from the past refugees flows and stigmatized the lack of remembrance (Ermacora, 2016). In addition, the roundtable *1915-2015. Un secolo di emergenze umanitarie*, held within the congress, discussed the refugees question in a diachronic perspective.

No other relevant initiatives have connected the exiles of the World War I and present refugees.

The Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, on the contrary, sometimes is mentioned within the debate about the arrival of immigrants. When that happens, memory is used in order to oppose, and not to favour, the reception of foreigners.

First of all, it must be remembered that political leaders often instrumentalize memory to strengthen their opinions and consider history a weapon to be used in the political debate. This use (and abuse) of history and memory often concerns the events happened in the Julian Venetia.

Sometimes, the exodus is connected with the present immigration and often, the people most engaged in remembering Istrian and Dalmatian refugees struggle against the arrival of immigrants in Italy. The memory of exodus, indeed, continues to be mostly a rightist memory because, even if the left has accepted the right-wing narrative, for nationalist groups exodus and *foibe* are a real warhorse: in their opinion, these events demonstrate the rightness of their hostility against Slavs and communists and endorse their interpretation of history.

Today, one of the most engaged political parties in commemorating the Italian victims is *Fratelli d'Italia*, resolutely opposed to receive immigrants and refugees, but strongly committed to remember the events happened in the Julian Venetia. The secretary of the party, Giorgia Meloni, and other leaders frequently issue statements to invite citizens to honour the Italians forced to escape, considering them “victims of a real ethnic cleansing”⁶.

The political leader most committed to fight against immigration, Matteo Salvini, secretary of the *Lega Nord* party, also struggles for a greater remembrance of the Italians fled from Istria and Dalmatia, always underlining the difference with present refugees. In March 2016, for example, he stated: “I do not think that Julian exiles snatched, raped, assaulted, claimed breakfast, lunch and dinner” (*Il Giornale*, 1 March 2016), implying that present refugees do these things. In 2017, in addition, he participated in the official ceremony in Basovizza and argued that the Italian exiles “really were our citizens, who escaped from war, from terror and from persecution. They were exiles” (*L'Huffington post*, 10 February 2017), meaning that the current refugees are not real refugees, but only economic migrants (an idea continuously endorsed by Salvini⁷).

Quite often, the parallelism between past and present flows is explicitly rejected, by distinguishing between true refugees (the Istrian-Dalmatians) and false refugees (the present immigrants coming to Italy). In most cases these opinions only appear in web pages and online newspapers, read by a niche audience; sometimes they also reach mass media.

Many polemics were provoked in February 2016 by a statement of Roberto Spazzali, director of the Regional Institute for the History of the Movement of Liberation in Friuli Venezia Giulia (IRSML). During a conference in the town of Bondeno (Ferrara), Spazzali took a question from the audience about the relation between present and past flows of refugees and stated:

Within the sea of people which today arrives in our country there are large numbers of young people who – it seems – accept to leave their land at the first “woof”. I wonder why

⁶ See http://politica.diariodelweb.it/politica/articolo/?nid=20150210_334467. Retrieved on 19 April 2017.

⁷ In the 1990s, indeed, one of the publicists most committed to bring the foibe to the attention of the public was a member of the Lega Nord, Marco Pirina, author of several studies on the matter.

this inertia. Why the inhabitants do not organize a defence of the territory? What relation the refugees have with their homeland? The exiles from Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia were forced to leave because they were not in condition of defending their homeland, also because the Communist Party, in Italy, looked with regard at the Yugoslavian communists⁸.

The newspaper *Il Giornale* quoted the speech under the title “refugees are cowards”, words never pronounced by Spazzali. Nevertheless, controversy immediately arose and many intellectuals and publicists strongly attacked the historian. The National Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement in Italy (INSMLI)⁹ distanced itself from Spazzali and stated that accusing refugees of cowardice is “not only a historically unsustainable claim, but also an offense to the sense of justice and humanity”. The president of the IRSML, Anna Maria Vinci, and many newspapers also criticized the historian’s declaration.

Spazzali stated to have been misunderstood, specifying that he does not consider that the refugees are coward: «I have never thought about calling “coward” the Middle-East refugees, in opposition to those from Istria, as the title [of *Il Giornale*] makes understand»¹⁰. Few days later, Spazzali resigned as director of the IRSML.

Other intellectuals, political leaders and publicists have also underlined the difference between the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus and the present flows, using several arguments. First, they point out that present refugees do not escape from war, but from peaceful countries, as is demonstrated by the fact that they are only males, who leave their families at home. Giorgia Meloni, for example, stated that “the images of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus are not as those of the boat arriving with men of working-age: if you escape from war, you do not leave wife and sons under bombs” (*Il Gazzettino*, 25 october 2015).

Moreover, many people have noted that, if refugees leave because of war, they do not try to defend their motherland before escaping; on the contrary, the Istrian-Dalmatian exiles only left because they were not in

⁸ “Foibe, Difesa è dovere”, in <http://www.comune.bondeno.fe.it/tutte-le-altre-notizie/1153-foibe-difesa-e-dovere>. Retrieved 15 April 2017.

⁹ The InsmlI is the head of a network of regional and local institutes, including the IRSML. In February 2017 changed its name in “Istituto nazionale Ferruccio Parri”.

¹⁰ For the debate, see <http://www.storiastoriepn.it/spazzali-ed-i-profughi-di-ieri-e-di-oggi>. Retrieved 15 April 2017.

condition to fight. This argument, used by Spazzali, is also present in many articles.

Sometimes, right-wing politicians and newspapers remind us that in the past the left used to “spit on refugees” and compare this behaviour with the present attention for refugees (*Il Giornale*, 10 September 2015).

Finally, the memory of the exodus is exploited within the polemics about the accommodation of refugees, criticized by many Italians, according to whom the government is spending too much money: some newspapers and websites have noted that the Istrian-Dalmatian exiles were accommodated in camps in poor condition, while the current refugees are housed in luxurious hotels¹¹ (which is a common belief of the Italian public opinion, although being completely false).

Just on very rare occasions, the memory of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus is used to demand to welcome immigrants and refugees. For example, in 2015 the president of the Chamber, Laura Boldrini, stated that history “teaches us that who escapes from wars and persecution must always be welcomed”¹².

Additionally, some newspapers highlighted the parallelism between the past and the present flows. For instance, a prominent journalist, Pierangelo Buttafuoco, expressed his scorn for the hatred for refugees, arguing that in the ‘40s it was raised by the left towards the Italian exiles and today is backed by the right against the migrants arriving in Italy (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 7 September 2015). Another publicist, Piero Sansonetti, affirmed that today “there is a foiba called the Mediterranean”, with reference to the frequent shipwrecks of the migrants’ boats (*Il Garantista*, 11 February 2005). Other commentators, including Gian Antonio Stella (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 January 2016) and the Swiss historian Toni Ricciardi (*Il Caffé*, 13 September 2015), endorsed similar ideas.

Catholic intellectuals and publicists also argued that history should teach the importance of welcoming foreigners. For example, Andrea

¹¹ See, for example, the article by Francesco Lamendola, *Ma quando i profughi erano gli italiani dell'Istria, né la Chiesa, né i cattolici se la presero tanto calda*, 29 August 2016, www.ariannaeditrice.it; Mauro Cottarelli, *Ponti d'oro per i (falsi) profughi ma nemmeno la presenza per ricordare quelli di Istria e Dalmazia*, 9 February 2017, www.rischiocalcolato.it. Both retrieved 10 April 2017.

¹² Full text in http://www.camera.it/leg17/1131?shadow_comunicatostampa=8828. Retrieved 5 April 2017.

Riccardi, founder of the *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*, speaking of the humanitarian corridors, stated: "I believe that, in order to prepare to the future, we must not forget the past, [we must] remember, for example, the reception of many protagonists of the Julian-Dalmatian exodus. Remembering the past helps us to build the future" (*La Stampa*, 8 march 2017). The catholic newspaper *Avvenire* (11 July 2014) had expressed the same opinion.

It is relevant, furthermore, that some scientific initiatives have examined past and present flows of refugees in a comparative way. In 2016 the University of Trieste organized a series of seminars on the subject *Fare Spazio. Migranti, esuli e rifugiati di ieri e di oggi*, open to general public and held in Trieste and in Gorizia. A further congress was held at the University of Fiume¹³.

On rare occasions, this kind of initiatives involves schools (which often participate, as seen above, in the celebration of the *Giorno del ricordo*). In 2011 the Comprehensive School of Oppido Mamertina (Reggio Calabria) organized a congress titled *I diritti umani e la problematica dell'immigrazione*, about Shoah, Julian Venetia and present humanitarian crisis¹⁴.

On this point, the position of the associations of exiles is particular: on one hand they mainly represent right-wing people, who do not like the arrival of foreigners; on the other hand, they promote the remembrance of a flow of refugees and, therefore, they cannot ignore present immigration. Sometimes, indeed, the leaders of the associations mention the current refugees in their speeches and works.

Here too, it is rare that memory pushes towards some kind of openness for refugees, and, when that happens, it is just in a partial and ambiguous way. For example, in 2013 year Lucio Toth, president of the Federation of the exiles associations (Federesuli), former president of the ANVGD (1992-2013) and former senator of the DC, stated:

¹³ <http://www.editfiume.info/lavoce/cultura/23149-i-migranti-gli-esuli-e-i-rifugiati-di-ieri-e-di-oggi-parliamone>. Retrieved 5 April 2017.

¹⁴ <http://www.unmondoditaliani.com/shoah-immigrati-ed-immigrati-ricordi-per-non-ripetere-lorrore.htm>. Retrieved 5 April 2017.

The present immigrants come from other continents, other cultures and it is natural that they struggle more than us to adapt to Italian reality. Because they have been through it, Istrian-Dalmatian exiles have for them all the understanding they deserve. [...]

[The exiles] would like to see, on the one hand, that the Italians remember – unlike some administrators of the Capital – the composure of the Istrian-Dalmatian people faced with their condition of refugees; on the other hand that the extra-communitarian immigrants may have some gratefulness and respect for the law of a country which, first and foremost in Europe, welcome them with the generosity of its sailors, its financiers, its volunteers¹⁵.

Toth's statement is ambiguous, as he invokes understanding for immigrants, but, at the same time, shows to agree with the stereotypes on migrations (such as the idea that foreigners do not respect the law).

In 2015 Antonio Ballarin, successor of Toth as president of Federesuli, hoped that refugees might be welcomed, but specified that they must go back to their countries when the war will finish: "the only way to dull the pain of an exile is to make him come back to his country, because, if an exile dies far from his identity, will die sad"¹⁶.

The incumbent president of the ANVGD, Renzo Codarin, has been even more explicit:

The oblivion of the complicated events of the Eastern border is even more disgraceful if compared with the clamour reserved to the analogous present phenomena, but, secondarily, it is opportune to highlight some differences. [...] Spazzali has rightly underlined that the present refugees are hopeful young, who leave their land and their families without trying to create a resistance or opposition movements, maybe following the mirage of the economic prosperity (*Il Friuli*, 9 February 2016).

A statement of the Angvd provincial committee of Pordenone reiterated the idea that it is not possible to compare present refugees and Istrian-Dalmatian exiles, because the latter «benefited from the State aid because it was well-deserved» (*Il Gazzettino*, 12 September 2015).

¹⁵ See http://www.coordinamentoadriatico.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5379&Itemid=38. Retrieved on 19 April 2017.

¹⁶ Full text: <http://www.anvgd.it/notizie/18382-intervento-di-antonio-ballarin-presidente-federesuli-alla-presentazione-del-libro-protagonisti-senza-protagonismo--23set15-.html> Retrieved 19 April 2017. See also a previous statement by Ballarin in *Difesa Adriatica*, official paper of the ANVGD, December 2013.

In short, the Istrian-Dalmatian associations always underline the difference of the present flows and hope that the refugees will go back as soon as possible.

Just in few cases, memory is the key for a better acceptance of foreigners by the Istrian-Dalmatian associations. For example Livio Dorigo, president of the *Circolo Istria* (a left-wing association) invited Italians to help migrants and protested against the barriers built against them, because “maybe we forgot when we were exiles” (*Il Piccolo*, 9 September 2015). The *Circolo Istria*, however, is not one of the most popular associations of exiles.

Other groups engaged in the remembrance of *foibe* and Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, such as *Unione degli Istriani*, *Comitato 10 febbraio* and *Lega nazionale* – all close to the political right – till now have ignored the flows of refugees towards Italy.

It is also true, on the other hand, that the main institutions and associations dealing with the refugees question, such as UNHCR and Italian Council for Refugees (CIR), never mention the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus.

It is important to point out that actually the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus and the present migrations are different events. There is not only the difference of context, due to Cold War and Italian situation in the 1940s. The refugees arriving in Italy leave their countries for a plurality of reasons: wars and persecutions, but also hunger; the Istrian-Dalmatian exiles, on the contrary, only left for the annexation of their territory. Moreover, the latter were Italians moved to Italy, so that their integration, in spite of some problems, was easier. Today the refugees come from different cultures, are unable to speak Italian and, in most cases, their relations with the native people is weak, if not inexistent.

Nevertheless, both the flows are migrations of people who seek a better life in Italy because they are forced, for different reasons, to leave their land. The memory of the Istrian-Dalmatian exiles – and, more in general, that of Italian emigration - could urge citizens to reflect on refugees question and reception of foreigners, about which many people have stereotypical and, in substance, wrong knowledge.

At present, awareness and knowledge of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus are rising, even if they are still limited to a minority of the population. However, memory is almost never used to improve understanding and

knowledge of migrations. In other words, memory is used to reject, not to welcome: history, unfortunately, is almost never a *magistra vitae*.

History and memory cannot change the perception of migrations of the people having unambiguous ideas against the reception of foreigners; history and memory can make the average citizens think, who do not stand prejudicially against immigrants but are exposed to the alarmist messages on immigration conveyed by media. Sometimes, the Italian emigration is invoked to claim policies for the reception of foreigners, although with many limits and rarely in a fruitful way (Fonzo, 2017). In the case of Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, on the contrary, memory is almost never used in this sense.

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