

# Italy's National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe: the significance of a neo-fascist commemoration

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9 March 2006

A “foiba” (plural “foibe”) is a natural sinkhole in the shape of an inverted funnel, up to 200 meters deep, formed by water erosion. These formations are typical of the Kras region, an area east of Venice divided between Italy, Croatia and Slovenia.

Over the past several years, Italy's right-wing alliance led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has sought to exploit events related to the *foibe* during and in the immediate aftermath of World War II to mount a nationalistic, anti-communist propaganda campaign, with the consent of their left opponents, the former Stalinists of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS).

The historical facts have been grossly simplified or taken out of context to serve the cause of Italian neo-fascist and “patriotic” revival via hours of television broadcasts and other news reports devoted to spreading partial or false information.

According to the ultra-right version of history, Marshal Tito's Yugoslav Stalinist regime was responsible for the mass murder of 20,000 innocent Italians who were captured, killed and thrown into the *foibe* in 1943 and 1945. Many of them were allegedly pushed into the sinkholes alive. In addition, according to this story, 350,000 Italians were forced out of their homes by Tito's occupation.

In honor of the victims and their families, or at least such was the claim, the Italian parliament passed a law in March 2004 that names February 10 as the “National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Victims of the Foibe.” The choice of the date is itself provocative: on February 10, 1947, Italy ceded to Yugoslavia parts of Venezia Giulia (a region in the Kras area) in the Treaty of Paris.

And so it goes—on every February 10 now, nationalistic propaganda pollutes the Italian ether and promotes chauvinism, exploiting tragic events that continue to remain unexplained. Footage of corpses being removed from the *foibe* and images of elderly women weeping alternate with that of neo-fascist leader Gianfranco Fini visiting the area, or of state president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi addressing the significance of Italian patriotism and nationalist sacrifice. This year, the propaganda has deliberately been aimed at affecting the upcoming elections in April.

The first distortion is contained in the premise of the “Memorial Day” itself, which combines two distinct historic episodes: events that took place in and around the *foibe* in 1943-1945 and the exile of Italians from the so-called “unredeemed territories” between 1945 and 1960. In fact, in regard to the latter events, the Yugoslav authorities never issued an expulsion decree, while their Italian counterparts ignored the plight of the immigrants, rerouting thousands of people to remote regions, like rural areas in Sardinia.

Although closely related, these episodes cannot be understood by lumping them together as one horrifying consequence of the “fury of Tito's Communism,” as the philistines of the Berlusconi government self-

servingly assert.

This article will focus specifically on the events surrounding the *foibe*.

The history of the area that became Yugoslavia is largely one of oppression and repression. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Slavic populations of the Balkans were under the domination of Austria-Hungary in the north and the decrepit Ottoman Empire in the south. Until then known as South Slavs, they expressed on many occasions their aspiration to create a nation-state. Many were inspired by the project of forming a greater Balkan Union of Socialist Republics, for which Marxists such as Svetozar Markovic, Dimitrije Tucovic and Christian Rakovsky had fought for decades.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Balkan region was a cauldron of social and national conflicts, with the Great Powers intervening to stir up the pot and advance their own interests. Near the end of World War I, conditions of terrible economic hardship, famine and disease radicalized masses of workers in the Kras region, who organized strikes and demanded the immediate end of the war. The end finally came, leaving these territories in the hands of the Italian military occupation as a temporary arrangement until an international settlement could be reached.

Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created in December 1918 (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929—“Jug” means “south”) as a project of the Croatian and Slovenian ruling classes responding to the recent October Revolution in Russia, with the assistance of the imperialist countries interested in dividing the spoils of war.

The newborn state's northwestern territories bordered Italy. Various treaties (Versailles 1919, Rapallo 1920) established Italian sovereignty over the Venezia Giulia region, as well as the western part of Croatia and Slovenia (Istria and part of Dalmatia). Numerous ethnic groups that had coexisted for centuries lived in these territories. In the aftermath of World War I, Italian governments, particularly under Mussolini's fascists, carried out a policy of ethnic cleansing known as *Italianization*, aimed at erasing any hint of Slavic culture, considered inferior and barbaric by the fascists, while imposing Italian as the official language and “culture.”

Throughout the 1920s, Slavic schools were shut down in the region; cultural centers were burned; the use of the Slovenian and Croatian language was prohibited in the government bureaucracy and the justice system; laws were passed that specifically limited non-Italian associations, gatherings and public events; names were Italianized to eradicate any appearance of Slavic influence, and so forth. In the 1930s, Mussolini's anti-Semitic and racial laws further differentiated between the “pure Italians” and “inferior” peoples.

During World War II, after the devastating bombing of Belgrade by the German Luftwaffe, the Italian military, alongside the armed forces of fascist Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, invaded Yugoslavia. The Mussolini regime gained control of Dalmatia, Slovenia (which became the

province of Ljubljana), Croatia (ruled by Mussolini's ally Ante Pavelic, head of the fascist Ustashe, infamous for its brutality) and part of Montenegro.

Yugoslavia then became the theater of some of the most horrific war crimes ever committed, for which hardly any Italian officials were ever held accountable, thanks in part to the Vatican's protection. In fact, many of the war criminals participated in the leading postwar bourgeois party, the Christian Democrats. Out of a Yugoslav population of 16 million, nearly 1.4 million civilians were killed during the war. Italy was responsible for the killing of at least 250,000 Yugoslavs, a vast majority of whom died as the result of massacres and pogroms, not in combat.

The fascist regime of Rome was directly responsible for killing, raping, torturing, starving and mutilating thousands of people and destroying hundreds of villages. The Second Italian Army led by General Roatta was particularly brutal in its tactics.

A fact deliberately concealed for decades is that the Mussolini regime built concentration camps in both Yugoslavia and Italy. They held some 30,000 Croats and Slovenians, including children, women and the elderly, many of whom were sentenced to death by Italian tribunals. Mass deportation, torture and arson were routinely used against the growing opposition that found expression in the People's Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia led by Tito.

On September 8, 1943, Italy signed the Cassibile Armistice with the UK and the US, officially ceasing the hostilities between those powers. This agreement, however, did not specify the relations between Italy and Germany. Italian fascism was alive and well: the Germans helped Mussolini escape from prison on September 12, enabling him to found the fascist *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI) in northern Italy at the end of that month, in direct proximity to the areas in question.

The ambiguities related to the armistice and the war and political situation as a whole contributed to the speed with which events unfolded. Many pro-Mussolini elements who supported the RSI viewed the pact as a betrayal of their German allies, therefore continuing a strong fascist presence.

The day following the Italian armistice with the US and the UK, Hitler's army launched an invasion of the territory previously occupied by the Italians, hauling some 30,000 people off to concentration camps (particularly the San Sabba rice refinery). The Italian forces handed over the entire region as well as thousands of soldiers who were eventually killed or deported by the Germans.

During those days of disorientation and chaos, Slovenian Communist leader Edvard Kardelj led a counteroffensive aimed at destroying the fascists. The line between Italians and fascists was partially blurred, certainly by decades of terror and brutality. The Yugoslavian partisans and peasants, joined in the struggle by Italian soldiers who had been abandoned by their government and protected by Tito's partisans, captured and killed 250-300 Italians, mostly fascists, police and "Blackshirts" or paramilitaries. Among them, according to official sources, there were some women, children and elderly, possibly relatives of the fascists. Their corpses were thrown into the *foibe*. Up to 2,000 Italians in total were killed in 1943, including non-*foibe* killings.

As indicated by the Report of the Slovene-Italian Historical and Cultural Commission issued in January 2000 by a joint body of Italian and Slovenian historians, "the killings were motivated not only by national and social factors, but also by a wish to strike at the local ruling class," a fact that the current right-wing alliance and its apologists wish to ignore.

The second *foibe* episode occurred in 1945, in the aftermath of the German surrender. Starting May 1 and continuing for the next six weeks, Yugoslav partisans carried out the occupation of the Adriatic coast in order to create a *de facto* state before the Allied forces could reach and bring the area under their control. Tito's partisans launched this campaign to reclaim the territories with the aim of eventually annexing the areas in

question, still predominantly populated by Slavs.

This campaign involved the persecution of anyone who was considered hostile to the newly emerging Yugoslavia. Events quickly spun out of control: the OZNA (the intelligence agency), the army, gangs of Croats, Serbs, Slovenes and even Italians participated in a wave of repression against elements such as the Ustashe, Chetniks, spies, perceived "betrayers of the popular struggle," "defectors from the people," "enemies of the popular army" and so forth.

As noted by writer-historian Gianni Oliva in his book *La Resa Dei Conti* (published by Mondadori in 2000), the Tito leadership as early as May 6 realized that the situation had gotten out of hand and issued a warning about the risk of atrocities and revenge killings, admonishing the OZNA for operating irresponsibly.

But events proceeded at a rapid rate: hundreds of people were killed and their bodies disposed of in the *foibe*. Eyewitnesses have claimed that only corpses were thrown in the pits. There are, however, reported cases of victims having been thrown in alive. At times, people were shot by a *foiba* and fell in, pulling with them other people who were still alive.

The total number of dead during those bloody 40 days, according to more serious historians, is set at about 5,000, 570 of whom would have been *foibe* victims. The Italian-Slovenian report mentioned above argued that the events "were triggered by the atmosphere of settling accounts with the fascist violence; but, as it seems, they mostly proceeded from a preliminary plan which included several tendencies: endeavors to remove persons and structures who were in one way or another (regardless of their personal responsibility) linked with Fascism, with the Nazi supremacy, with collaboration and with the Italian state, and endeavors to carry out preventive cleansing of real, potential or only alleged opponents of the communist regime and the annexation of Venezia Giulia to the new Yugoslavia."

One of the reactionary aspects of the current Italian right-wing campaign over the *foibe* issue is the implication that supposed victims of the "communists" were somehow more significant than those who died at the hands of the Italian, German or Allied military.

The journalist Indro Montanelli, at one point Berlusconi's partner in the direction (and ownership) of the newspaper *Il Giornale*, before his death in 2001 claimed that victims during wartime, such as the Yugoslavs who died as a result of fascist brutality, should not be compared to those (the Italians) who were killed after the end of the war. Moreover, he argued that Italy never carried out ethnic cleansing, while the Yugoslav Stalinists were fully guilty of such a crime.

Regarding the latter issue, Montanelli was merely showing his sympathies for fascism when he claimed that Mussolini's *Italianization* campaign in the 1920s and 1930s and anti-Semitic and racist laws implemented in the late 1930s never occurred.

In the final analysis, the action by the Italian parliament in instituting the so-called National Memorial Day is an attempt by the political elite, along with the media and elements in the intelligentsia, at falsifying history to justify its own sinister agenda today. The legitimization of the fascist heritage and its brutality should serve as a serious warning to the working class about the actual state of class relations in "democratic" Italy.



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