

## TEACHING HISTORY

### Nationalism and History in an Italian classroom

by *Simonetta Ortaggi*

This article is about how a teacher coped with nationalist prejudice in her class at a school near Trieste. The region has for a long time been populated both by Italians (especially in the towns and along the coasts) and by slavs, mainly Slovenes, as in the neighbouring Yugoslav state of Slovenia. Many of her pupils belonged to families from the peninsula of Istria, once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then after the First World War successfully claimed by Italy. The Italian province of Venezia Giulia was extended to include a large part of Slovenia, at the expense of the new state of Yugoslavia. Under the Fascists further territorial encroachments occurred, and their nationalist policy involved linguistic and other discrimination against the slavs throughout Venezia Giulia. This strengthened resentment of the Italian (and later the German) occupation; the Resistance was strong, and by April 1945 Yugoslav forces, partisan and regular, controlled most of the area. But they reached Trieste itself only just ahead of the Allied forces (the NZ division under Freyberg had raced up from near Ravenna as the Germans were collapsing), whose brief was to secure for the West at least the important port of Trieste. Churchill seems to have hoped to return Venezia Giulia to Italy so as to 'split their Communist forces' and 'fit in with the very friendly interest the Americans have in Italy'. Tito on the other hand, for the Yugoslavs, hoped to establish the frontier 20 miles west of Trieste, at the Isonzo river. In the event a settlement temporarily established two zones — Zone A comprising Trieste and its surroundings, Zone B the area south along the coast — under Italian and Yugoslav administration respectively, but envisaged as a future Free State of Trieste. Istria apart from the zones was given to Yugoslavia. The Free State did not come into being; after years of uncertainty and negotiation a crisis boiled up in 1953-4, and finally it was agreed that the two zones (by this time in any case partly assimilated) should be incorporated respectively into Italy and Yugoslavia.

Simonetta Ortaggi taught 20 years later in what had been Zone A. This article (here slightly abridged) originally appeared in a publication by a regional group of leftwing teachers: *Riflessioni ed esperienze critiche*, Quaderno no 2, Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa del Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The translation is by Lesley Caldwell and Anna Davin.

Borgo San Mauro, some 10 miles north of Trieste, near the seaside resort of Sistiana, was built in the 1950s to house Italians from Istria who at that time were in refugee camps. The land, basically woods and fields, belongs to the Opera Profughi, a refugee organization. So do the houses, which are let at minimal rents. They are blocks of two or at most three storeys, each with four or six small flats of three rooms, kitchen etc, without central heating, but each with a share of the ground around their block. These gardens, with hard work and care from the elderly and from the men in their spare time, provide a modest supplement to the domestic budget and are Borgo's most characteristic feature.

From the early 1950s, and especially after the 1954 settlement by which the Istrian peninsula, including Zone B, was definitively recognized as Yugoslav territory, the 'repatriation' of great numbers of Italian 'refugees' formed part of an important political operation by the Christian Democrats. While indulging in exactly the same chauvinist propaganda as the fascists, they tried to gain credit among the 'liberated' local population, and to make people forget the shameful responsibility of the Italian Fascists for the persecution of Slovenes, the invasion and occupation of Slovenia, etc. The refugee population of Borgo San Mauro came to accept completely the chauvinist stories and arguments dished out by the Christian Democrats. Some accepted them because they fitted in with individual prejudice—anti-slav feeling flourished after the tragic experience of abandoning their homes and passing through refugee camps; some for convenience—to be a refugee conferred all sorts of permanent advantages, in housing, work, and so on; some no doubt for both reasons. Hatred for the slavs was a central element in this chauvinist ideology: they were presented as usurpers of Istrian territory and of Zone B. Borgo San Mauro was carefully placed as a bastion, an Italian wedge penetrating a predominantly slav and 'red' zone. The village of Visogliano, which provided six of our pupils, was part of this slav and peasant background, at least in origin, though the construction of large and small apartment blocks occupied by the Italian middle class had already given it a more urban identity.

The children in our class were all Italian speaking, there being a separate school for Slovenes. But the Visogliano children brought a wider range of backgrounds, which was to be an important factor in our discussion of ethnic minorities. Two of them were of Istrian origin but were not refugees, as one of them stressed, because their families had left immediately after the war (for Sweden and the United States respectively) and after working and saving abroad had returned and bought their own homes. One of these had a Slovene mother from nearby Aurisina, and an Italian father from Sušak (the other side of Istria). She had Slovene relations in Italy and in Yugoslavia, and she clearly identified strongly with them. Another girl from Visogliano played an important part in the ethnic division of the class: she was strongly linked through her maternal grandmother with the slav and peasant tradition, though her father was Italian and an artisan. The rest of the children from Visogliano and Sistiana were middle class, and also more sophisticated: three came from families of southerners who had settled in the area at different periods, and they seemed rather sensitive to anti-Slovene behaviour. All of these but one had peasant grandparents, but they appeared much less aware of their peasant origin than the children of Borgo San Mauro.

Coming as they do from poor and uneducated peasant families, the people of Borgo find themselves comparatively well-off in their new circumstances. The men mostly do factory work, at the Timavo paper mill and in the factories of

AUSTRIA

ITALY

YUGOSLAVIA

SLOVENIA

ISTRIA

Rijeka (Fiume)

Udine

Trieste

Venezia

Ravenna



- o o o o o Italian/Austrian frontier after 1866
- o - o frontier after WWI
- frontier today
- - - limits of zone A and zone B, 1945-54
- /// zone A
- \\ zone B
- ≡ Italian occupied between the wars

Inset:  
Trieste: zone A and zone B

CHANGES IN THE EASTERN FRONTIER OF ITALY SINCE 1866

Monfalcone and Trieste. Domestic cleaning is the commonest work for women, much of it at the local Rest Home, and there is also a lot of outwork, for instance finishing knitted garments for a firm in Bolzano which delivers and collects them. As a result of political decisions about its site and its amenities, Borgo is a real ghetto. It lacks any social or cultural facilities or organizations: its greenness and gardens and pure air are appreciated, as are the subsidized rents, but there is neither a hospital nor an outpatients' clinic, only a chemist's, and no place for gatherings or entertainments. It seems to be intentionally cut off from outside contact; it is effectively an island of refugees. The large and comfortable Rest Home belongs to the Opera Profughi. The parish priest is a refugee, who teaches religion in the middle school as well. In this way a powerful combination of family, church and school is achieved. The choice of a refugee as priest suggests a conscious reinforcement of the ghetto, of people's identification of themselves as refugees, thus strengthening resistance to the outside world. The parish priest is a central figure. The people of Borgo accept his authority, for religious or political reasons, but also through the habit of submission and timidity in dealing with those in power.

Given this context, the importance of any initiative from teacher or school is obvious: the school is the only institution that is both external to the ghetto and intimately linked with it. A psychological factor again deriving from this context also has to be carefully taken into account: namely the fact that the term 'refugee' is regarded as a serious insult. It implies both social inferiority — the refugee has no house, no job, etc — and personal inadequacy — the refugee has abandoned home and family, is rootless. This attitude is current among the children: a very close friendship broke up because one girl called another 'refugee', and they only made friends again later, after our class discussions on the problem of relations between Italians and Slovenes.

So these children, except in a couple of cases, were completely without a locally-rooted culture. In their previous school, where they had already spent five years together as a class, the teaching was organized entirely around writing and learning by rote, and it was dominated by religion and patriotism. Such teaching — completely leaving out drawing, music and gymnastics — was successful in getting the children through exams, but failed at the ideological level: the values drummed into them with such determination melted like snow in the sun with the new context of middle school.

## OUR WORK ON THE RESISTANCE

In discussing various aspects of one year's teaching, I should explain that I started out handicapped by complete unfamiliarity with the idiom of my pupils, and indeed with the general world of children. [Her previous teaching was in a technical institute]. I concentrated on listening to what they said and taking in what they wrote, so as to get a sense of their interests, and of how they felt and thought. I found work with an anthology a useful starting point. The children would constantly interrupt the reading, and their interruptions indicated one feature of how their minds worked: the way they instantly appropriated the material and applied it directly to their own experience. I tried to exploit this to the full, leaving them quite free to interrupt and to stray from the point. Opportunities and ideas thus emerged for work which would fully involve them, and this was the original

impetus for our work on the Resistance. Reading extracts in class about the Nazi persecution of Jews immediately evoked countless stories which the children had heard at home about the German occupation of Istria. All the children without exception were involved in telling and listening to these stories, and they also wanted me to join in. The exciting — and sometimes funny — nature of the situations, and the immediate recognition they sparked off, made up for the lack of historical background. At the same time the absence of this historical dimension enabled all the children to contribute without inhibitions about their scholastic competence. From this session subsequent work to fill in the history of it all took shape. Most of the children added to their stories, which were then typed up and put together, and as a result they started asking the obvious question, why did the Germans want to kill the partisans? (They used the term 'partisan' without being able to explain who they actually were; in the same way they took for granted the presence of the Germans.) They were encouraged to go back for more information to their families, who had supplied the stories in the first place.

With the shift from stories to a level of fact and information academic techniques and anxieties came into play. Some copied passages from the encyclopaedia, others said they hadn't been able to do their homework because 'what did their parents know about it?' Finally they turned to teacher for the answers. My explanation concentrated on three basic themes: the responsibility of Mussolini and all the fascists for the outbreak of war; the puppet character of the Salò Republic; [1] and the Resistance as a struggle for national liberation waged by workers and peasants. (The failure to stress the aims of social as opposed to national revolution may be open to criticism, but it seemed necessary to simplify in the initial explanation.)

The children's subsequent compositions provoked interesting reflections. One general point, at least in relation to what they wrote themselves (there were also more sophisticated projects which drew heavily on encyclopaedias and books), was their perception of the social roots of the Resistance: for them, because of their particular family origins, it was entirely a peasant affair — this came across clearly in their written work. So one girl, describing incidents which she said took place in the countryside of Istria and Friuli, added that the partisans were 'none other than peasants from the towns and cities'. Or a boy who another time had talked proudly about his peasant origins — perhaps because of a very close relationship with the family of his grandparents in the country of Istria — explained that the partisans 'defended their homes with sticks and pitchforks'. He did a drawing which showed the 'little peasant' with his pitchfork confronting Hitler, who is saying 'I have the world in my grasp', to which the peasant is replying (in dialect) 'Not true at all — the world is everyone's'. Another child, a girl — Istrian again — whose young uncle had been a partisan and was executed in the town square, presented the partisans after a brief historical introduction as 'poor people who were ready for anything', who opposed the German invaders and carried out daring military enterprises 'like a real army'. Then she went into a detailed account of how the peasants prepared hiding places for the partisans, in which she took for granted (and later she also spelt it out) that the partisans were themselves peasants:

They [the partisans] had hideouts where they could lie up, they were in other people's houses where trapdoors had been made under the beds, or cellars behind cupboards, so that the partisans would have somewhere to go when the

Germans were combing the district. Because the Germans would go looking for people to send off to concentration camps, and for partisans so as to shoot them. They thought that this would make people too scared to work with the partisans. Well these cellars that the peasants made in their houses were tiny dark hidey-holes, and they'd leave a tin there with some food and bits of candle and matches, and when they heard that the partisans were coming they'd move the bed or the cupboard and let them in: five or even ten people if there was room.

There are two other interesting points in this child's account, which is entirely her own, without information from the teacher. One is the awareness of the object of the German raids, that 'they took everybody away to work in Germany': this came up in all the children's writing. The other is the mention of treachery, which is referred to much less. ('Many people though were afraid of the Germans and so as to save their own skins they spied for the Germans and betrayed the comrades.')

The use the children made of the teacher's explanations showed their ability to conceptualize. For instance they immediately grasped the notion of a puppet government — this image made such an impression that some months later one girl, writing in another context about Mussolini's government, felt constrained to add in brackets, 'which later was to become a puppet government'.

We returned to the subject of the Resistance several times, and in different contexts. There was a visit to La Risiera [site of a concentration camp] and the gathering of information for that, and the reading out of an extract about Neapolitan street urchins during the 'Four Days'. [2] This text brought out another feature of the children's understanding — its very immediate nature. Many of them wondered what they would have done in that situation, and whether they would have been capable of risking their lives for an ideal.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN ITALIANS AND SLOVENES

The Italian Resistance was not the only theme of contemporary history we dealt with. Another concerned relations between Italians and Slovenes in Venezia Giulia under Italian fascist rule. This was of direct relevance for the children, who were strongly affected by the anti-Slovene ideology of most refugee families. It was also true that preferential treatment accorded to the refugees had created new causes of tension: the Slovenes felt they were discriminated against, especially in the aftermath of the war, when they too were fighting great poverty. And some of their families had even had their land confiscated to provide the site for the refugee village.

Entrenched anti-Slovene feeling among the children of Borgo first became obvious in a girl's essay on 'My Home Country'. This began:

After the Second World War a treaty was signed in Paris on 10 October 1947: a vast part of Venezia Giulia, Istria, and various islands in the Gulf of Quarnaro were given to Yugoslavia. Then the people of Istria wanted to stay in the Italian Fatherland and they came to Trieste. So the first little villages for people from Istria were started. To begin with they were refugee camps, but they were too small, and not very hygienic because they were just badly made huts. So the builders decided to build really proper towns for the people who had 'emigrated' or rather been driven out.

This was the only composition on the subject that had such a firm historical and ideological line; and the ethnic conflict was only implied. But it was a very significant case: this mature and intelligent child, who had done her own research for the project, brought out at the intellectual and historical level an attitude common to all the Borgo children of her age, but which was only later made clear in class. A conversation between two children which I overheard gave me another clue: 'Why do we have to learn Slovene when they don't want to learn Italian?' I consulted a friend outside school, who confirmed that this represented a widespread attitude. So at this point I proposed a discussion in class on the problem, to be preceded by a brief historical introduction from me. I gave them a run-down of Istrian history from its colonization by the Venetians long ago to the events of the two World Wars. While I spoke the atmosphere was expectant and tense. The discussion which followed was the most animated and indeed inflamed that we had all year, with arguments and quarrels breaking out, especially between the two children for whom the issue was most sensitive: the girl who wrote the composition quoted above on her home country, and the girl from Visogliano mentioned earlier, whose mother's family were Slovene.

The accusations launched at the Slovenes exposed most clearly how ignorance and misinformation had fostered antagonism to the local Slovene population. The children seemed to believe that the local slavs had emigrated very recently from Yugoslavia to Italy. According to them the Slovenes settled in Visogliano only after the building of Borgo, and out of rivalry had opposed various improvements in Borgo. The indignation this provoked in the girl from Visogliano is scarcely surprising: she lived in a house built by her Slovene forebears more than a hundred years ago. It's significant too that this belief was not confined to the children from Borgo: in teaching the higher classes I found that it was even shared by children from Trieste. And many of them when writing an essay on 'Relations between Italians and Slovenes in the region' took this to mean commercial relations across the Italian-Yugoslav frontier!

The discussion that day (and its continuations outside school) revealed something else too — a feeling among many of the Borgo children of threat, of being surrounded, which was strengthened by news in the papers and on the radio about Yugoslav troop movements near the border. Moreover, a comparison with how the Italian minority in Yugoslavia were treated produced in only one case a defence of Yugoslav policies and criticism of Italian attitudes, even though there were several families with relatives in Yugoslavia. They were rather more ready to comment on instances of exclusiveness by Slovene families or by the teachers at the Slovene school. (In Aurisina the same building housed both the Slovene and the Italian school, but there was absolutely no contact between them; this was partly the fault of the Slovene school, which was very jealous of its independence.)

After the first class discussion I proposed a history project. Various written sources were used[3] and an oral source: the rich memory of the grandmother of the girl from Visogliano, who was persecuted by the fascists and helped partisan groups during the war.

The documents dealing with fascist measures to repress national identity through the educational system impressed the children at once. An attitude familiar to them in everyday life, intolerance of Slovenes, was suddenly through these texts revealed as a hateful and apparently irrational oppression. They were also struck by the fact that parish priests had been rewarded for their work in undermining national

minority consciousness.[4] The reading of these texts began to break down the animosity of the first discussion. Then we went on to look at events of World War Two of which they knew nothing at all — the Italian invasion and occupation of part of Yugoslavia and the simultaneous Nazi attack on Yugoslavia. We read letters from Italian soldiers in the army of occupation, which had been confiscated by the military censors because of their too graphic descriptions of Italian brutality, and we saw photographs of sacked villages and other atrocities committed by the Italian army.[5] None of them had known about any of this, and it made an interesting link with the documents about repression of ethnic identity. It suddenly made sense instead of seeming irrational: they could make the connection between cultural oppression of a minority and the bringing of another people under imperialist control.

Although their views had seemed so firmly entrenched, so much rooted in family experience and opinion, the children were not traumatized by their discoveries about the history of Slovene-Italian relations. The readings and discussions had a positively liberating effect on the children who had experienced the problem from the other side, because of their Slovene family connections. The intelligent and sensitive girl who had identified most closely with her parents' sufferings as refugees was able to overcome her initial rejection of the new information, and make an effort to find out more and to understand. After the readings on the Italian occupation of Slovenia she produced a very full account entitled 'The Oppression of the Slovenes and the Croats', which drew on the historical section of a volume recently published by ANED entitled *From the Fascist Gangs to the Massacre of La Risiera*. Another child, who had initially stressed — using his grandparents as an example — the tragic experience of the Istrians who had had to leave their homes, their relations, their land and other property, was able to write after our readings on the Italian invasion of Yugoslavia: 'The loss of Istria was the fault of the fascists, because when they had it they went on to try and take Yugoslavia. The fascists were to blame because they were greedy.'

## CONCERNING THE TEACHING OF HISTORY AND LINKS WITH THE PRESENT

Our work on the Resistance and on the problems of relations between local ethnic groups, and the interest these subjects aroused, confirmed the correctness of doing contemporary history. In a discussion towards the end of the year about school and the subjects studied, most of the children were in favour of recent history ('because it's closer to us') rather than the more distant past. (We'd started classes on ancient history at the beginning of the year and they had become more and more infrequent and marginal.) As the year wore on there were numerous requests for explanations of events described in news broadcasts, especially concerning Vietnam and Portugal.

This need for class work on current affairs ought to be tackled more generally. Moreover the whole basis of the school history syllabus, or at least how it is split into periods, seems open to question. The problem is the same for both young and older classes in the middle schools. The present periodization is based on an abstract and intellectualist concept of history. It assumes an abstract starting point, from which historical understanding is somehow to grow naturally and develop into a supposedly global view. So it ignores the actual process of learning, where the child



gradually works from a concrete starting point through to a more mature grasp of history. This specific characteristic of children's intelligence makes our official guidance not just inadequate but scandalous, particularly in the case of the younger classes.

One possibility would be to combine in the same year project work both on subjects from recent and contemporary history, which could make use of various research approaches like oral history and visual material, as well as books, and on subjects from more conventionally 'historical' periods. This could mean that the sense of immediacy could be retained and integrated with the considered retrospect, each contributing to the development of a more complex historical awareness. The combination would offer a rich field for experiment and for the thematic synthesis of past and present.

A second aspect of my experience which has wider implications and can serve as a starting point for discussion, concerns the relation between school and society. I tried whenever any opportunity occurred through remarks made by the children to encourage and develop greater awareness of social problems. We discussed such questions as child labour, industrial injuries and deaths ('white murders'), mental hospitals; and through them we built links between the real world and the class room. From talking about child labour, for instance, we passed to the question of compulsory education and the difficulties of those who don't get through their exams: this gave the pupils who were best at school work a new sense of responsibility for the others, and they set up groups to help those who were having trouble with their revision. Industrial injuries was a topic which directly interested several of the children, whose parents had had accidents at work. And there was a long discussion in class with a team from the Centre for Mental Health at Aurisina, an out-station of the psychiatric hospital in Trieste, and also a visit to the Centre where the children talked with doctors and patients.

The experiences which I've briefly described here could usefully be combined with efforts of a different kind, organized more systematically, and designed to bring the children to an understanding of our society by analyzing and demystifying some of the more important mechanisms for creating ideological consensus, like advertising, for instance, or magazines. A teacher's aim should be to build links between the classroom and the real world; and the teacher of history should seize every opportunity to encourage the discussion of current social problems which interest the children.

1 From Oct 1943 most of Italy, except beyond the southern battle front, was nominally ruled by a government headed by Mussolini and known as the Salò Republic. Mussolini's position was due entirely to German intervention after the surrender of the Badoglio Government to the Allies (it had previously replaced the Fascist government and imprisoned Mussolini); and effective power — both military and political — was in German hands.

2 This was an uprising against the Fascists and the Germans which took place on the news of the Allied landings in Sicily, and was brutally repressed after four days.

3 In particular the texts collected in 'La Scuola' come strumento di propaganda e di snazionalizzazione' [The School as means of propaganda and for undermining national consciousness], in *Bollettino dell' Istituto Regionale per la Storia di Liberazione in Friuli—Venezia Giulia*, 111, March, 1975.

4 Documented in the same issue of the *Bollettino*.

5 See G. Piemontese, *29 Months of Italian Occupation in the Province of Lubiana, 1946*.