

## **Borut Klabjan, Gorazd Bajc, *Battesimo di Fuoco. L'incendio del Narodni dom di Trieste e l'Europa adriatica nel XX secolo.***

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023, 416 pp.



“Battesimo di Fuoco” begins with an impactful title that succeeds in putting across how this research appears very useful for our understanding of the historical phases that led to the implosion of Europe in the 1920s.

A meticulous work rich in previously unpublished details that begins in the mid-nineteenth century and focuses on the transformations of the international context after the First World War from one steeped in extreme nationalism to fertile ground for the fascist dictatorship.

In “Battesimo di Fuoco” we note how one of the epicenters of this black earthquake was the multicultural and Central European Trieste.

The metaphor of the earthquake is useful to understand how the earth tremors of the murder-

ous events of the Narodni Dom fire of July 13, 1920, spread throughout the Adriatic area as the grounds for a rigid proto-fascist and military nationalism.

The echoes of the repressive dynamics of Trieste spread everywhere in Italy with both affinities and differences; one example for all, the murder of the socialist parliamentarian Giuseppe Di Vagno in 1921 in Puglia, which shows how we can and must analyze the dynamics in the past considered as purely local in a perspective of wide international scope.

The painstaking work of Klabjan and Bajc offers us an interesting interpretation, according to which the Adriatic cannot be understood without taking into account the historical, political, social and anthropological events affecting the city of Trieste as symbol for the entire Adriatic area. A capital - as it is defined in the book - of the Austrian Coast and the Upper Habsburg Adriatic, not only commercial and economic, but also a symbol of that multicultural idea that unites the Adriatic cultural realities harshly attacked by the dictatorship.

In the historical overview of the book, Trieste emerges as a “city without history” capable of such a transformation as going from the anonymous periphery of an Empire to a cosmopolitan urban centre of global importance; all of this in 200 years.

Here, the different aspects of this Habsburg’s “Babylon” where Austrians, Germans, Greeks, Armenians, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Italians and English speakers find their space are understood and described.

In “Battesimo di Fuoco”, many pieces of this patchwork are brought together and the emergence of differences between nations from 1848 onwards is described, when national identities begin to come to light, forming associations in defense of even their

most basic rights. It will suffice to think of the long battle fought by the Slovenian community to get the chance to open schools in the city, already established in the surrounding area. Only in 1887, the Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius-Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda manages to open the first Slovenian kindergarten, followed a year later by the establishment of a first private school. A long journey towards mediation and research for synergy and cooperation with the local authorities begins.

The book deconstructs the historical-urban minimization according to which the city of the Coast can be easily divided into Italian-speaking “civitas” in the centers and a Slavophone suburb on the outskirts of the city and in the rural areas, as many of these data are constantly shifting, during the sudden transformations of the contemporary age.

The complex data research is fundamental, suggestive of the importance of the study, while it is easy to infer how difficult it is, even nowadays, to try and give precise figures on the number of inhabitants with respect to a principle of nationality that changes over time and symptoms of a changing city.

In such complex but very fluent reading, different aspects helpful for the study of mass media social history are examined egregiously. The pages dedicated to the press, seen as the engine of development of the city’s history, are many and extensive, with newspapers becoming the voices of the different communities.

The work describes the Trieste’s newspaper competition between the Slovenian-language “Edinost” and “Il Piccolo”, in Italian: the two facets of the same coin in a phase of political, cultural, economic and sports and recreational development. The press shows the first frictions and words really become a double-edged sword to build and destroy the identity of a city. Sentences are sometimes derogatory, useful to understand the mistrust and repercussions of the national hatred of the Short Century. These pages show the beginning of a long struggle in defense of Trieste’s public space, where the closer the advent of fascism, the more the Italian-speaking press becomes racist and tends to dampen that transnational Adriatic vocation. Even music is used to differentiate the two communities, suffice it to think of the myth of Verdi, used to reiterate the dichotomy between the “dignified” and “civil” Italianity versus the “Slavic uncouth savagery.”

The book lingers on the identity need of the different communities, and in particular of the Slovenian community, to erect a Narodni Dom: a house of values and culture, and to build it at the center of the city, in the effort to demonstrate the integration and strength of the Slovenian community.

This work succeeds in piecing together the vicissitudes of the process and the reasons that lead the Trieste administration to hinder this construction for fear of “an oasis of Slovenian language and culture descended into a hostile environment”, as stated by the Trieste historian Pirjevec.

A complex and ambitious building, as described by Edinost, with national holidays, concerts, gala evenings, theatrical performances, singing rehearsals, Sokol meetings [...], typographies, administrative offices, warehouses and private apartments.”

A Slovenian Ortygia in the Trieste of the early 1900s, with restaurants and the Hotel Balkan. Trieste’s 1900 coincided with the beginning of this construction,

inaugurated in 1904, a citadel that in 16 years has managed to host 600 theatrical performances, 95 rallies, 84 conferences, home to 33 associations and 28 other spaces.

The in-depth journey goes on intensely: in 1914 the echo of the Sarajevo attack reaches Trieste, the city is rife with rumors, one of these claiming that one of the Sarajevo attackers worked in the typography based in the Narodni Dom and that Trieste's Slovenian parliamentarian Trieste has fled.

The research focuses on the collapse of Trieste's multiculturalism, with Italy's declaration of war to Austria, when the situation became much more entangled; episodes of the assaults on the Piccolo and the buildings of "Italianity" are reported. Light is shed on a dark period in which denunciations become a widespread practice, encouragements to Serbia and Russia or banal conversations between unfortunates are ground for arrest, numerous anecdotes are reported that infect the mind and always make the practice and culture of denunciation sad in the eyes of the reader and the scholar, as in the case of several women, Ana Pegan's case being the most significant due to the alleged statements in favor of the enemy state.

Trieste became Italian in 1920, and the work undertakes to collecting the shards of the great broken vase of international debate that reaches the coast, due to the implosion of Austria-Hungary which coincided with the birth of the state of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, in 1918. A singular and quite serious situation, suffice it to say that in post-war Trieste 150,000 Italian fighters were already being held captive by Austro-Hungarians in precarious sanitary conditions, in addition to the Austro-Hungarian veterans returning from the Russian countryside. A city of transit ready to deflagrate, where even the presence of the flags of the different neighboring states was a problem.

For the first time, Italy tried to become a multinational leader, dreaming to annex the Slovenian Slavs and the Germans of South Tyrol; it tried to reach Slovenia by deploying its military forces, reached the gates of Ljubljana and, as in Albania, it remained in Saseno until 1920, a wavering line that then prepared the grounds for the events of Rijeka (1919-1920), entered by legionnaires led by D'Annunzio, and the unrelenting rise of fascism in 1922.

Since the Italian incorporation of Trieste, Narodni Dom had become a place "supervised" by the new authorities, "its guilt being the "incubator of Yugoslav propaganda" in the city, a situation that led to the exodus of part of the population, that feared extreme nationalism. There are numerous episodes of violence reported in the book by Klabjan and Bajc, such as the violence of August 1919 – the confirmation of what will happen in 1920 – described by the socialist-oriented Slovenian cultural weekly "Njiva" published in Trieste: "on this date the very rich collections of the Slovenian Reading Room and the Czech circle, the Association of the Slovenian teaching staff of Trieste and the district, as well as the well-stocked popular library, were set on fire."

We are immersed in "anti-Slavic propaganda" and its long-lasting consequences, again for that anticipation of global history in Trieste's microcosm, the book describes the practice of the burning of the books, that we will find again in the following decade, as well as the repeated attempts of censorship of the press "of the other", the different, Slovenian or non-Italian. Attacks on the "other" are also repeated in Split and Pula, in

Rijeka, in Zadar, places often present in the stereotypical and evergreen toponomatics and narrative of the “good Italian people” who absolve themselves of the crimes committed in the Istrian and Dalmatian area.

The Narodni Dom fire of July 13, 1920, is an example of a global story that anticipates the collapse of a mixed community, that imploded at the end of the First World War. A story that is a fitting example of how a people becomes a crowd, fascists and nationalists who seek and find the martyr Giovanni Nini, who died during the riots, a search for a martyr that we also find in Maria Goretti, used by fascists as the first saint of the Agro Pontino to be reclaimed or by the Democrazia Cristiana with the saints of the dead militant, Gervasio Federici, for the 1948 elections.

A book rich in reconstructions, different sources, composite traces, which observes and analyses its themes under many different angles, while reconstructing the political positions of several consulates present in Trieste: Czechoslovak, French, British, American.

The last part of this work is dedicated to the phases of forced Italianization, the change of surname and identity, a Trieste in which the Caffè Commercio symbolically becomes the Caffè XXX° Novembre, the day on which the Habsburg troops leave Trieste and the desire to make the other go unnoticed is emphasized, as can also be seen in the rationalist reconstruction of Trieste, as well as Bolzano, in the name of a new era which aims at stifling the past. A new era with strong repercussions, also from the point of view of identity, assimilation that can even hurt the psyche, as can be seen from the pages of this book, in which the possible correlations with forms of linguistic suppression and psychic discomfort are discussed. It is no coincidence that Edoardo Weiss and Franco Basaglia lay the foundation of their work in Trieste.

A name change that will also reach the Narodni Dom, becoming during the fascism the “Hotel Regina”, then in the post-World War II decade “Devonshire house”, a building that speaks, a community, the Slovenian one, that says almost disappointed: “we even have fewer schools now than before 1918”, a new Italian Trieste that is at the center of a division, a division that causes divisions, suffice it to think of Trieste’s communist movement, divided between “titini” and “cominformisti”.

The epilogue is a historical chronicle of the dream and a project of an alternative Pan-Yugoslavian place in Trieste, a Kulturni dom, built in 1964 as partial compensation, which however is not in the city center, tracing a long journey until the restitution of that historical place to the Slovenian community in the hundredth anniversary of the “fire” and the difficulty of re-establishing a relationship with the Italian state, stressing the fear for the different memory and for the belonging of the Slovenian community to Italy. The work also dwells on how the anniversaries of the Narodni Dom fire are often overlooked and underestimated by Italian politics and society, demonstrating how stereotypes remained present in the press until recently.

“Battesimo di Fuoco” is a milestone on the new studies on the great role of memories in Italy and Europe.

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