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**FOIBA OF BASOVIZZA: THE PIT, THE MONUMENT,
THE MEMORY, AND THE UNKNOWN VICTIM.
1945.-1965.**

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Pic 1 The Basovizza pit

(F. Rocchi, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, Roma: ANVGD, 1962, 9.)

The "Foiba" of Basovizza is a mine pit located in the outskirts of Trieste, on the western side of the border between Italy and the former Yugoslavia, in the contested and multiethnic Julian March region.

For the Italian, Slovenian, and Croatian public opinion, foibas are related to the killings committed by Tito's partisan forces after the armistice between the Allies and the kingdom of Italy

(September 1943), and throughout the Yugoslav military occupation of the whole Julian March in May 1945. Soldiers and civilians were thrown into such pits, sometimes still alive or after being tortured. Numbers of victims and causes of these massacres remain a disputed issue for the national historiographies of the three countries.

After WWII, local and national Italian leaders raised strong concerns with regard to the memory of the September 1943 and May 1945 Yugoslav violence. The exploitation of these public memories was manifold; it was mainly directed to ease the Italian position at the peace conference, to gain political control of an area sorted characterized by an uncertain sovereignty, and to strengthen the Italian national identity during the beginning of the Cold War. Among those slaughters, the Basovizza case received special attention. This article analyzes the genealogy of the “Foiba di Basovizza” as a site of memory.¹

Key words / Ključne riječi: Basovizza, Foiba, Venezia Giulia, Julian March, Trieste, sites of memory, commemoration, war trauma.

Thanks to a wide range of sources available at Italian institutions, at cultural, veterans' and Istrian exiles' associations, as well as the Julian press between the 1940s and the 1960s, for the first time the memorializing of the “Foiba di Basovizza” is the main subject of an historical analysis. It focuses on collective memory's main agents, illustrating the variety and the complexity of different symbols, targets, and rituals. Heterogeneous organizations backed foibas' memory. Beneath a surface of general agreement, there were diverse and rival interpretations.

Despite the high recurrence of foibas in Italian public discourse in the Julian March, strikingly the monumentalization of the site took a relatively long time, being achieved only in 1959. The consequential commemorations found wide popular support only after the 1990s.²

1 The political use of history and memory produced in last decades a wide array of publications. Among the most relevant to this research are: Murray EDELMAN, *The Symbolic Uses of Power*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985. David W. BLIGHT, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge: Harvard University press, 2001. David W. BLIGHT, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & the American Civil War*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. Paul CONNERTON, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Michael E. GEISLER, *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, Middlebury: Middlebury College Press 2005. John R. GILLIS, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. David I. KERTZER, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. Susannah. RADSTONE, *Memory and Methodology*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000. Katherine VERDERY, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, New York: Columbia University press, 1999. Jay WINTER, Emmanuel SIVAN, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

2 Pamela BALLINGER, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, Princeton:

As part of the Western world, settled at its borders, the Italian Julian March society was more familiar with the memory and the exaltation of heroes. The commemorations for WWI soldiers at the Redipuglia shrine³ remained for decades the most important site of memory for the Italian identity at its eastern boundaries. Scholars⁴ explained that only after the 1960s did the memory of victims start to overtake the memory of heroes in the public sphere. The memory of the unknown victims of Basovizza was just the beginning of a more modern type of “civic religion”, which thrived only after the end of the Cold War and the renaissance of National ideology.

What is a “foiba”, and how does it differ from a common pit?

We may consider one literal meaning and at least two symbolic implications for the present background.

A foiba is a natural phenomenon of karst terrain where underground water carves out caves and depressions over geologic time; the collapse of these caves creates natural sinkholes on the surface, from a few to hundred meters in depth, becoming true abysses. They are extremely common in the karstic plateau region shared by Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. Because of the rocky character of the soil, which is difficult to dig, foibas were traditionally used as waste disposal sites, and some suicide victims occasionally chose foibas for their last act.

Approximately 400 to 500 people, mainly Italians, died in the karstic pits of the Istrian peninsula after September 8th 1943.⁵ The Italian public discourse on the issue accused communist and pan-slavic extremism, which attempted to terrorize the Italian people and expel them from the Julian March. For the fascist propaganda, it was a “national genocide”.⁶ Yugoslav politics justified the incidents as normal war actions due to the Nazi and Fascist Balkanic war that erupted in 1940, or as an uncontrolled peasant uprising⁷ aimed at vindicating the long lasting

Princeton University press, 2003. For a general analysis on the former Habsburg countries' public memory, see: Maria BUCUR, Nancy MERIWETHER WINGFIELD, *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001.

3 The Redipuglia shrine was built in 1938, and contains the remains of more than 100.000 soldiers. Only 40.000 of them have a certain identity. Gaetano DATO, “The Redipuglia Shrine: a Temple of the Nation”, *Acta Histriae*, 2014 – 1.

4 Omer BARTOV, “La memoria della Shoah: la questione del nemico e della vittima”, in *Storia della Shoah, vol. II, La memoria del XX secolo*, ed. by Marina CATTARUZZA, Marcello FLORES, Simon LEVI SULLAM, Enzo TRAVERSO, Torino: UTET, 2006. Georges BENSOUSSAN, *L'eredità di Auschwitz: come ricordare?*, Torino: Einaudi, 2002. Georges BENSOUSSAN, *Israele, un nome eterno: lo Stato di Israele, il sionismo e lo sterminio degli ebrei d'Europa (1933-2007)*, Torino: UTET, 2009.

5 Jože PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, Torino: Einaudi, 2009, 31. Raoul PUPO, Roberto SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, Milano: B. Mondadori, 2003, 26.

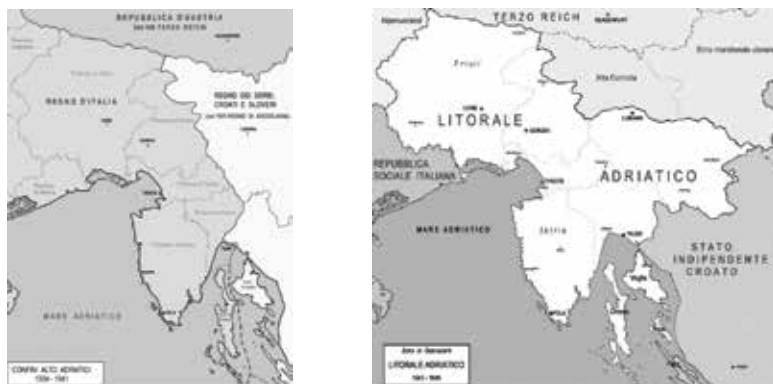
6 PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 110-113.

7 The myth of peasant rebellions of XVI c. was an important feature of Croatian political debate between the two World Wars, involving all parties. Matja Gubec, the most well known leader of those revolts, was particularly

fascist persecutions of Slavic minorities. Some Italian and Slovenian historians however determined in different degrees the existence of a top down misdirected strategy not designed for ethnic cleansing, but to substitute the previous fascist power with a new “popular” socialist regime. Thus, the majority of 1943 victims were in fact representatives of the Italian authorities or high society members, but personal revenge cannot be excluded in many cases.⁸

The May 1945 violence involves foibas’ second symbolic meaning, as it mainly occurred in the western Julian March. The Yugoslav partisan army deported thousands of Italian and German soldiers captured after the conquest of the city of Trieste on May 1st 1945, but the numbers of victims are contested ranging from a few hundred to several thousand. The numbers of POWs who survived prison camps remains uncertain.⁹ The most contested issue today is determining who died in a foiba soon after the last battles, who died in the camps, and how many residents disappeared in those days. The foiba and the “infoibamenti”, the act to kill someone throwing him in the pit, through a synecdoche became a way to refer to the whole Yugoslav anti-Italian violence.

Around 250.000 Italian nationals¹⁰ emigrated from the part of the border region absorbed by the Yugoslav Federation. The foiba represented for them the metaphor of Slavic and communist terror, from which they were escaping.



Pic 2 Julian March maps
Borders 1921 - 1941 and Nazi Adriatisches Küstenland

(F. Cecotti, B. Pzzanei, *Storia de Confine Adriatico Italiano 1797 - 2007*, IRSML, Trieste 2007)

celebrated. Vjeran PAVLAKOVIĆ, “Myths and Symbols in Interwar Croatia: The Case of Matija Gubec”, in *Journal of the Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation*, 2008.

⁸ PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 7-13. PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d’Italia*, 45.

⁹ PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d’Italia*, 95-99. PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 27-30.

¹⁰ Raoul PUPO, *Il lungo Esodo*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2005, 13.



Pic 2 Julian March maps
AMG Venezia Giulia and Free Territory of Trieste

(F. Cecotti, B. Pizzanei, *Storia del Confine Adriatico Italiano 1797 - 2007*, IRSML, Trieste 2007)

In addition, we may also consider the use of foibas during the whole conflict by all warring sides, in order to hide corpses from time to time.¹¹

Basovizza became a bloody battlefield, in the course of the last days of the war. Axis troops, mainly composed of Germans, fought Yugoslavs who tried to conquer Trieste. Hundreds of victims were lying on the ground. While the victors provided regular military burials for their fallen soldiers, the Germans and their allies were quickly buried in an abandoned pit dug 40 years before in search of coal, together with dead horses, bombs and ammunition.¹²

The Yugoslav occupation lasted until June 12th 1945. In the following years, an Allied Military Government (AMG) ruled by Anglo-American forces settled in Trieste and surrounding areas, thus allowing the return of an Italian administration in October 1954.¹³ In those years some witnesses, widely exploited by the Italian press along with further similar accounts related to other foibas, reported of mass killings in the Basovizza pit during the first days of May 1945. Public opinion claimed that military and civilian personnel had been “killed just because they were Italian”, claiming a “national genocide”.¹⁴

As a result of these alleged events, the Basovizza mine pit slightly shifted its name in public discourse. Being considered a foiba like many others,

¹¹ PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d’Italia*, 141-143.

¹² Ibid, 113. PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 225-226.

¹³ From 1945 to 1947 there was the AMG Venezia Giulia (Julian March). It was divided in two zones respectively administrated by US-UK army in A Zone, and Yugoslav army in B zone. After the peace treaty application in September 1947, the Free Territory of Trieste (FTT) was established by UN in a minor part of the region. As the previous entity its administration was split under the rule of the same two military authorities. See maps.

¹⁴ PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 110-113.

it definitively became the quintessential foiba after the 1959 memorializing, as shown on following pages.

The Basovizza pit is extremely deep. It is 4.40 x 2.10 meters large and 256 meters deep. A tunnel 2 meters high proceeds horizontally for 735 meters from the bottom of the hole.¹⁵

Shortly after the establishment of the AMG, vague news about Basovizza began to spread. Pro-Italian organizations of Trieste pleaded with military authorities for an inquiry which might include the exhumation and identification of the bodies in the pit. The request reached top ranking allied officers, and it was later supported by General Alexander, Churchill and Eden. In August 1945 the hole was fenced in and patrolled, and the AMG started the inspection by way of excavation. This technique was probably not accurate enough, and despite the alleged findings of human remains, German uniform rags, and horse carcasses, the search was abandoned two months later. Other ammunition and unexploded devices, gathered in the area, were then thrown into the pit. The reason for the interruption of the search was formally attributed to the lack of proper equipment, which would be imported later on. In press releases, authorities did not deny the Italian reports of the Basovizza incidents, supporting their potential truthfulness. In fact, AMG never provided any further research, and no official statement was ever released in regard to the pit content.¹⁶ Rather than providing protection for the pit, under the supervision of the local municipality, the site officially became a landfill.¹⁷



Pic 3 De Giorgi's exploration at Basovizza pit, August 1948

(ACT, ripart. XII-LLPP, divisione 3, XII-321/12-49.)

¹⁵ PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, 111-112.

¹⁶ PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 125-126, 232-233.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 233.



Pic 3 De Giorgi's exploration at Basovizza pit, August 1948

(ACT, ripart. XII-LLPP, divisione 3, XII-321/12-49.)

In the ensuing years, a petition for additional research into that controversial mine became a leitmotiv in the Italian press. Many other explorations were conducted in those times, by AMG Civil Police, private associations, and Italian authorities along the border region under their control. The investigations were conducted in 71 foibas and pits. Half of them contained corpses. The total number of bodies exhumed was 464. Out of these, 247 wore a military uniform. Only 61 civilians and 53 soldiers were identified. Among the soldiers' bodies, besides Italian and German soldiers there were a few partisans and one Soviet officer, while among civilians many Slovenian villagers were exhumed.¹⁸

Since then, only two more investigations have been carried out at the Basovizza pit

In August 1948 nine speleologists, supported by the AMG Civil Police officer De Giorgi, in an attempt to organize a detailed exploration, documented that the actual depth of the hole had risen to 192 m, in spite of the original 226 m. Afterward, in December 1953, a company trading ferrous scrap was authorized to collect all metal objects from the pit. The company declared that it was able to reach the bottom of the abyss without encountering any corpses or explosives.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 32-33. PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, 141-147.

Once again the municipality allowed dumping activities in Basovizza, this time for the disposal of waste from an oil refinery, and for goods seized by customs.

Mysteries and uncertainties permeated the pit. The unclear situation provided any political group the ammunition to speculate and promote the best fitting plot to suit their interests.

A crucial argument surrounding such narratives was the report made by the Italian media about the corpses stored in the mine. Shortly after the AMG inquiry, on November 30th 1945, an article by Giovanni d'Alò in the national newspaper "Giornale della Sera" first reported an estimate based on cubic meters, destined to become extremely pivotal to public opinion. According to it, at the depth of 190 m, there were 18-20 m of bodies for a 20 m² surface, resulting in 420-480 m³ of cadavers. Calculating 3 corpses for each cubic meter, 1200 to 1500 bodies were supposed to be stocked in the pit. Such high numbers boosted efficaciously any kind of national concern, and easily supported manipulation among the press, politicians and opinion makers. It was then estimated that up to 5 bodies per cubic meter were present in the cave, thus exceeding 3000 total. Even though it was clear that the Basovizza pit was not a natural foiba, nor that the history of violence was unambiguous, in August 1948 inspector De Giorgi stated that in Basovizza there was "the biggest natural burial ever heard of".¹⁹ Decades later, in 1990, De Castro, the Italian Political Advisor to AMG, admitted the instrumental use by local and national Italian leaders of unchecked information on the number of dead in the foibas.²⁰

We should now concentrate on the agents of such memory. Who had an interest in Basovizza, and for what reason?

As the title reveals, the article predominantly addresses the twenty years after WWII. The complex and manifold political context of Italy and Trieste in those days cannot be fully analyzed here. However I will now focus on the main groups who chose to legitimize the Italian victimhood in the after-war Julian March. I will provide a list of most of them, whereas through the monumentalization of the Basovizza pit and its commemorations their key words, psychology and symbolism will become clear.

I start by listing the Istrian exiles' organizations in Italy. They considered Trieste and its outskirts the only true remnants of an Italian Julian March, where the so called "Adriatic culture", the Italian East Adriatic tradition inherited from the ancient Venetian history was still preserved. The Trieste area did not belong to

19 PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, 131-133, 141-144. PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 233.

20 PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, 131-133.

the Venetian Republic, but for the sake of post-war migration processes, around 50,000 Triestines emigrated from the city until 1965, mainly to the Americas and Australia, while the same number of Istrians replaced them.²¹ Thus, Istrian issues and leaders acquired a prominent position in the cultural and political environment of the Julian capitol. For instance, Bartoli, Trieste's mayor from 1949 to 1957, was an Istrian as much as Santin, the city's bishop from 1938 to 1975.

Italian parties, excluding communists, supported to various degrees the memorializing of Basovizza. In considering this point, it must be stressed that the cornerstone of Julian politics was the interweaving between national and ideological issues. The uncertain destiny of Trieste from 1945 to 1954, which could capitulate to either Italian-capitalism, Yugoslav-communism, or an independent rule, was the central topic of political debate. It also included the expansion of communist power in Europe and neighboring countries of the "socialist-slavic" world. Nonetheless vast differences existed between the anti-fascist parties such as the Italian Socialist or the Democrazia Cristiana (the biggest ruling party), and the new-fascist or monarchist organizations. At the same time, the urgency of a national identity endangered by communists inside and outside the country, encouraged in Trieste the cooperation between new-fascist and anti-fascist activists and leaders, much more than on the mainland. Thus the distance in the ideological-cultural setting between the local municipal institutions and the central ones in Rome became particularly prominent in certain situations concerning national issues, particularly in the 1960's.

Two specific sectors were outstandingly involved in civic religion, public rites and public memory, and they had an irreplaceable role for the Basovizza cult. On one side there were the Federazione Grigio Verde (Gray-Green Federation),²² and the Lega Nazionale (National League).²³ On the other the Catholic Church, which played an exceptional part, because of its traditional social role in dealing with death and running public rites, while anything showing communist brutality was welcome.

Eventually, two main factors deeply influenced the history of the memory of Basovizza

In 1948 the break between Tito and Stalin moved the Iron Curtain from the north-eastern Italian border to the frontiers among Yugoslavia and other communist countries. The Balkan leader became an independent partner of the western alliance, and the question of Trieste was downgraded from an international

21 Claudio SCHIFFRER, "Il linguaggio delle cifre", in *Trieste*, 47-1962, 11.

22 It was a federation of WWI and WWII veteran groups.

23 Cultural-charitable association financed by Rome, and controlled by Italian parties.

to a regional issue. Italy and Yugoslavia started direct negotiations thanks to US-UK mediation. As a consequence, Rome stopped any international complaints on foibas and other alleged anti-Italian Yugoslav violence, and Belgrade quit requesting extradition of the supposed 800 Italian war criminals of the Balkan invasion in WWII.²⁴

Secondly, after 1954, the end of FTT, and the reunification of Trieste with Italy, Italian-Yugoslav relationships turned particularly positive in political and economic terms. Triestine arguments became even more provincial, while the Italian-Yugoslav border became the most open between Western and Eastern Europe.

The Monumentalization

Shortly after the 1943 foiba killings, the local newspaper of Trieste “Il Piccolo” pressed authorities to build a monument to commemorate the victims of the karstic pits. Although past Yugoslav violence was still a fresh topic in the Italian Social Republic²⁵ and the Adriatisches Küstenland,²⁶ leading to numerous public rites and a strong anti-partisan propaganda, no memorial was erected.²⁷

Almost six years later, the FTT Civil Police of Trieste wrote to the municipality about the presence of 200 m³ of bodies in the Basovizza pit. In those years, a law assigned to municipalities the duty of gathering all the deceased under its jurisdiction and burying them in the city cemetery. In the March 31st 1949 session of the municipal government of Trieste, led by mayor Miani, the letter was discussed and it was promptly deliberated to assign to the pertinent office the task of planning the exhumation. At the same time, vice-mayor Visintin recommended building a “sepulchral monument” for the victims of foibas exhumed in the vicinity, to be placed in the burial grounds of foibas’s victims in the graveyard. The proposal received unanimous support from the city government.²⁸ A few days later, the provisions were implemented by the internal municipal structure, and on April 4 the same municipal government established a special commission for the exhumation project of the Basovizza pit, for which inspector De Giorgi suggested four speleologists.²⁹

24 PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d’Italia*, 147-149.

25 Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI). It was a puppet state of Nazi Germany led by Benito Mussolini and his Republican Fascist Party, and it rose after September 8th 1943 over north Italy.

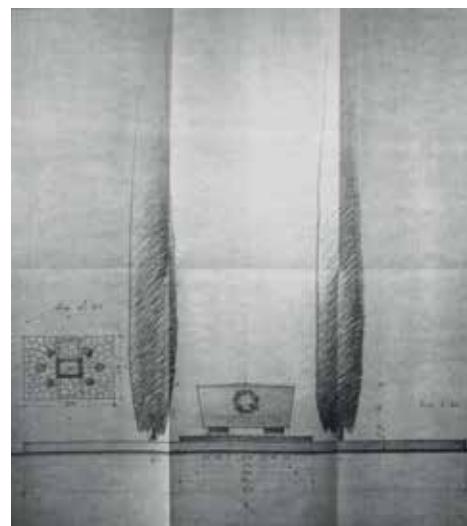
26 This name refers to Julian March and part of North-Eastern Italy, which was annexed by Nazi Germany after September 8th 1943.

27 Roberto SPAZZALI, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto*, Trieste: Lega nazionale, 1990, 147.

28 Archivio del Comune di Trieste (ACT), Verbale Giunta del comune di Trieste, seduta del 31/03/1949.

29 ACT, Segr. Gen. 2° - Affari Generali 4/53-49. Lettera della Segreteria Affari Generali all’Ufficio V – Polizia Urbana, all’Ufficio XI – Sanità ed Igiene, e all’ufficio XII – Lavori Pubblici, 02/04/1949. ACT, Verbale Giunta del comune di Trieste, seduta del 04/04/1949. ACT, Segr. Gen. 2° - Affari Generali 4/53-49 Lettera della

The Lega Nazionale soon came on the scene. Some of its fellows, claiming the presence of their relatives in the Basovizza pit, together with Lega Nazionale’s executives, supported the municipality’s initiative for the monument. On May 19th 1949, de Szombathely, president of LN, wrote a letter to the city administration, requesting 53 m² in the city cemetery on the site where twenty foibas’ victims were already buried.³⁰ De Szombathely advanced a project in which the Lega Nazionale would cover the expenses and build a monument, while the municipality would provide the foundations and graves. The number of tombs would be determined by the number of bodies exhumed in Basovizza. The message included a sketch of the work, which denoted the choice of a simple and classical burial style. De Szombathely appeared extremely confident regarding the acceptance of his proposal: he asked authorization to hold a public ceremony for the beginning of the project which coincided with May 24, the anniversary of Italy entering into WWI.³¹



Pic 4 Project of the monument at the city cemetery proposed by Lega Nazionale

(ACT Uff. tecnico 321/12-1949 Ufficio. Prospetto allegato alla lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al Municipio, 19/05/1949.)

On May 27, Mayor Miani replied to de Szombathely’s letter, after debating it in the May 23 session of the municipal government. Miani, although agreeing to the necessity of the mausoleum, declined the Lega Nazionale’s request for the ceremony, and invited the organization to wait for the results of the inquiry of the special commission for exhumation. Moreover, Miani affirmed that a realistic project of the burial would be possible only after the real number of victims would

Segreteria Affari Generali all’Ufficio V – Polizia Urbana, all’Ufficio XI – Sanità ed Igiene, e all’ufficio XII – Lavori Pubblici, 07/04/1949.

30 The corpses were exhumed in the foiba “Plutone”. 16 of them were identified. “16 salme della foiba Plutone tumulate a S. Anna”, *La Voce Libera*, Trieste, 26/05/1947, 1.

31 ACT Uff. tecnico 321/12-1949 Ufficio Lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al Municipio, 19/05/1949.

be clear. These would anyway not include only Italian bodies. The mausoleum “*must regard indiscriminately all victims*”. Such a statement needs some attention because it demonstrates that the mayor was aware of the real complexity of the history of the Basovizza pit, beyond any public exploitation of the issue.³²

The Lega Nazionale’s president wrote two more letters in June and December, calling for the beginning of construction and the encircling of the area presumed to host the cadavers.³³ No responses were recorded in the municipal archive or in other institutions.

Meanwhile, the city elections were held on June 12th 1949 and appointed Bartoli as new mayor, supported by a stable pro-Italian majority. During the electoral campaign, propaganda often involved foibas.³⁴

The national debate on the Basovizza abyss led the Italian ministry of defence to activate its specific department to honour the dead (Commissariato generale per le onoranze ai caduti – acronym: Onorcaduti). In order to provide independent information on Basovizza, in July 1949 Onorcaduti entrusted a group of experts to hold an investigation about the pit’s content. Letters both from Onorcaduti and from the experts did not get any attention from the municipality of Trieste, at least until January 1950, as explicitly revealed by the internal communications of the City Hall.³⁵

De Szombathely’s letter, dated March 1950, received the same amount of indifference, despite the fact that mayor Bartoli was a Lega Nazionale’s affiliate and executive.³⁶

The only official reply by the city administration followed a city council inquiry dated March 23 by Movimento Sociale, the new fascist party, which supported de Szombathely’s letter’s content.³⁷ For instance, such a party was able to get control of the Lega Nazionale by the end of that year, over the previous CLN-oriented administration.³⁸ Two weeks after the inquiry, Bartoli answered repeating that the administration was still waiting for the end of the special commission’s

32 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del sindaco di Trieste alla Lega Nazionale, 27/05/1949.

33 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al sindaco di Trieste Michele Miani, 01/06/1949. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al sindaco di Trieste Gianni Bartoli, 06/12/1949. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49.

34 PIRJEVEC, *Foibe*, 145. The most read Italian newspaper in Trieste at the time, “Giornale di Trieste” and “La Voce Libera” were also checked by the author from March to the election day, held in June 6th 1949.

35 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera dell’Associazione provinciale sminatori di Ferrara - Reparto Speleologi al comune di Trieste, 13/07/1949. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del colonnello capo ufficio, Morandi alla Giunta municipale di Trieste, 23/09/1949. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Relazione del 24/01/1950 dell’Ufficio V all’assessore. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49.

36 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al sindaco di Trieste Gianni Bartoli, 18/03/1950. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49.

37 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Interrogazione del consigliere del Movimento Sociale Italiano del Comune di Trieste, Giovanni Bruggeri, al sindaco Gianni Bartoli. 23/03/1950, Prot. N° 1431/1.

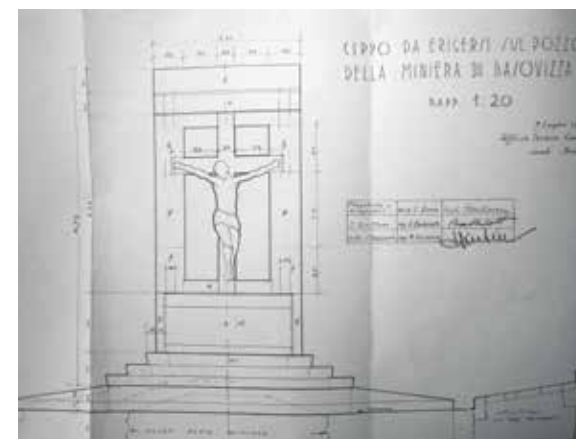
38 Archivio di Stato di Trieste (AST), gab. pref., b. 621. G. Palutan, *Situazione della Lega Nazionale*, 26/07/1950.

investigation, and its results would be soon announced.³⁹

On May 10 the final resolution was delivered by the commission. It declared the impossibility of proceeding with the exhumation. It stated that too much time had passed since the killings and the AMG 1945 explorations had made the collection of integers and identifiable bodies impossible. Even if a 1948 De Giorgi’s project of exhumations seemed technically feasible, it would be useless for the purpose of the planned mausoleum, and extremely unsafe because of the alleged presence of explosives. Health officer and commissioner Binetti suggested covering the pit instead, and to erect upon it a commemorative monument.⁴⁰

A year later, the department of public works developed a project for the pit cover, which included a religious monument. The plan would cost nearly 2 million liras.⁴¹

Neither the commission’s paper, nor the cover project became public domain at the time, and another of de Szombathely’s letters remained unanswered.⁴² Meanwhile, as previously stated, the Basovizza pit continued to be a landfill with the approval of the same administration.



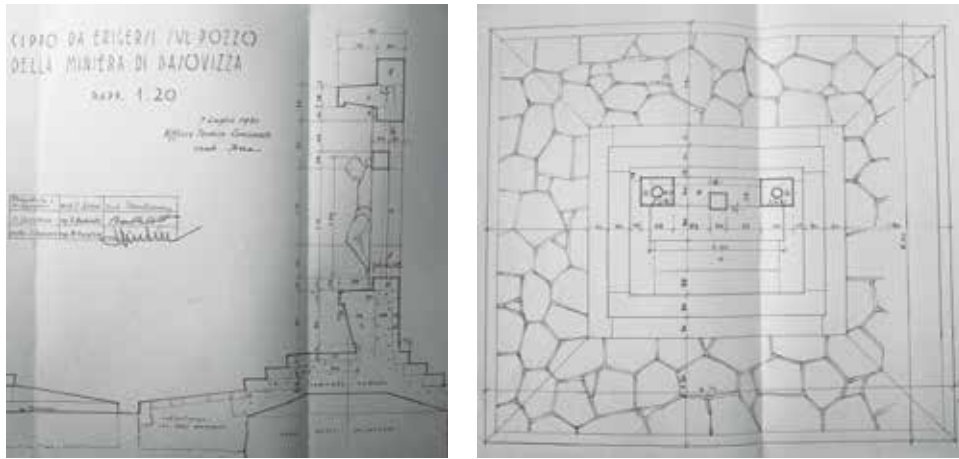
Pic 5 Project for the cover of the Basovizza pit
City of Trieste, Department of public works
(ACT, Ripartiz. XII-LL.PP., Divisione 3, XII-321/12-49)

39 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Risposta del sindaco Gianni Bartoli all’interrogazione del consigliere del Movimento Sociale Italiano del Comune di Trieste, Giovanni Bruggeri. Prot. N° 6/11/2-49.

40 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Verbale della seduta tenuta il 10/05/1950 della Commissione Giuntale per il recupero delle salme giacenti nel «Pozzo della Miniera» di Basovizza.

41 ACT, Ripartiz. XII-LL.PP., Divisione 3, XII-321/12-49. Relazione dell’Ufficio tecnico del Comune di Trieste. PIRJEVEC, *Foibe*, 146.

42 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del presidente reggente della Lega Nazionale, Marino de Szombathely, al sindaco di Trieste Gianni Bartoli, 06/12/1950.



Pic 5 Project for the cover of the Basovizza pit

City of Trieste, Department of public works
(ACT, Ripartiz. XII-LL.PP., Divisione 3, XII-321/12-49)

Years went by. In September 1954, one month before the return of the Italian administration in Trieste, the department of public works released a new document. It summarized the results of all the collections of WWII bodies in the city after May 1945. Among those, the existence of “4000 bodies” in Basovizza, inside “a foiba called Mine” was recalled. The author then reiterated briefly the official decisions on the matter taken up by the municipality, and the necessity of covering and monumentalizing the pit. Somehow, redoubling the account of Basovizza’s victims in an internal document did not have a nationalistic purpose. It presumably reinforced the idea that further exploration and exhumation was not possible and that the only solution was to put into practice the department’s project.⁴³

Seven months later, the city government acquired that document, and debated it in its session, fully endorsing it.⁴⁴ Mayor Bartoli thus wrote to the prefect, the representative of central state in the city, about the approval of the new arrangement of the “abyss called Mine”. Nevertheless, he estimated further delays in its realization due to the lack of an appropriate construction project and a financial plan, which were soon going to be made.⁴⁵ For the first time, even the

43 ACT, Deliberazioni 1955 - Giunta municipale. Aprile, N. 360-553. Ripartizione XII-LL.PP. – Sepoltura resti degli infoibati. Allegato delibera di Giunta, seduta 14 aprile 1955.

44 ACT, Deliberazioni 1955 - Giunta municipale. Aprile, N. 360-553. Delibera di Giunta, seduta 14 aprile 1955.

45 ACT, Segr. Generale, 5/1955, Domande – esposti diretti al Comune (Giunta). Lettera del sindaco Bartoli alla Prefettura di Trieste – Servizi Amministrativi, 16/04/1955.

local newspaper announced the covering of the Basovizza pit.⁴⁶

The administration however did not seem seriously involved in truly bringing forward the project. The Italian ministry of defence, being now able to directly intervene in the contested region, called to duty the city municipality. Gen. Ricagno, Onorcaduti’s executive chief, on April 18th 1955, began to directly address the prefect and the mayor of Trieste, showing pragmatism and real knowledge of the pit’s history. In his letter, he asked for the situation of “‘foibas’ in which bodies of various nationalities are arranged, including Italian victims”. The general asked for appropriate protection of such “sites”, inhibiting any use as landfill, and requested an estimate for any inspection or exhumation that had to be done.⁴⁷

Astonishingly, the department of public works and vice mayor Visintin, replying to Onorcaduti and to the prefect, did not mention the documentation in their possession, and petitioned Gen. Ricagno to resume explorations and exhumations in foibas, particularly in the Basovizza pit.⁴⁸ The prefect then wrote both to Onorcaduti and to the municipality, agreeing to the searches, but declared the inability to finance them; the public official then asked if City Hall or Onorcaduti may have enough funds.⁴⁹

It was clear that the city administration did not want to close the matter. It did not respond to this last communication, causing the prefect to send that same letter five times from August to November.⁵⁰ Finally on November 29th 1955, vice mayor Visintin wrote back claiming that the administration had no money for such initiatives.⁵¹ Still no one replied to Onorcaduti. In a December 22 letter, Onorcaduti announced to the prefecture and to City Hall that the military chaplain of the Redipuglia shrine was going to represent in person Onorcaduti’s interests, and he would be in contact with local authorities.⁵²

The chaplain’s commitment was probably effective, as shown in the following Onorcaduti letter of March 1956, in which Gen. Ricagno demonstrated decisive improvement in his knowledge of the pit. In short, he adopted all the conclusions of the municipal papers; “in order to stop the piling of garbage in the pit and to prevent adverse consequences in public opinion”, he agreed to covering

46 “Un monumento a Sant’Anna in memoria degli infoibati”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 24/04/1955, 3.

47 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del Commissariato generale onoranze ai caduti in guerra al Comune di Trieste, 18/04/1955.

48 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera della Rip. XII – LLPP firmata da Visintin per il sindaco al Commissariato Generale del Governo e a Onorcaduti, 31/05/1955. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49.

49 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del Commissariato Generale del Governo al Sindaco di Trieste, 14/06/1955. ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49.

50 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettere del Commissariato Generale del Governo al Sindaco di Trieste.

51 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del Sindaco di Trieste, firmata dal Pro-Sindaco, al Commissariato Generale del Governo, 29/11/1955.

52 ACT, Segr generale 35/89-1949 b. 6/13-49. Lettera del Commissariato generale onoranze ai caduti in guerra al Comune di Trieste, 22/12/1955.

the mine with a “*simple and decent arrangement*”.⁵³

Minor communication and other delays in the municipality’s course of action did not register any particular change in the following three years. In October-November 1957, a German delegation arrived in the region to plan the collection of the bodies of WWII soldiers. Thanks to an official agreement between the Italian and German governments, all the German bodies in Italy had to be collected and preserved in a masoleum in Costermano, close to the Garda lake. Onorcaduti and local speleologists supported the initiative, which was mainly carried out in the foibas of Monrupino and Basovizza. Although German reaction to the existence and content of the Basovizza pit is not known, it is certain that an inspection in Monrupino revealed the presence of German soldiers in that foiba. Unexpectedly, both pits were later ignored by the German delegation.⁵⁴

Finally the Ministry of defence took control of the Basovizza pit in the spring of 1959. On May 21 Onorcaduti simply communicated to the municipality that the covering of the pit had been assigned to a local construction business. The project maintained the “*simple and decent arrangement*” chosen in previous communication. It was built in such a way as to allow easy opening.⁵⁵ By the end of the summer the Basovizza pit was finally monumentalized, ready for its first official commemoration, on November 2nd 1959.

Together with the covering of the Basovizza pit, which, since then, has officially been called “foiba” losing forever both in institutional correspondence and in the press its identity as the ‘mine pit’, the foiba of Monrupino was also covered in an identical way. This was due to the man who was the author of the first institutional ceremonies in Basovizza, and probably the main person in charge of the Onorcaduti’s choices on the issue: Father Rocchi. The priest, an Istrian exile himself, had moved to Rome after WWII. He was a public figure, and chief executive of an important Istrian association in Italy, the Associazione Nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia (ANVGD), a cultural and charity organization. He personally pressed national authorities to cover the pits. As he revealed in his books and articles, Italian and Istrian exiles needed a place in Italy to commemorate and honor their dead, victims of Yugoslav wrath of 1943 and 1945.⁵⁶ The “foiba”

53 ACT, Ufficio tecnico 368/1956, Ostruzione pozzo contenente salme di vittime di rappresaglia – Basovizza e Monrupino. Lettera del Commissariato generale caduti in guerra al Commissariato generale del governo per il territorio di Trieste, 12/03/1956.

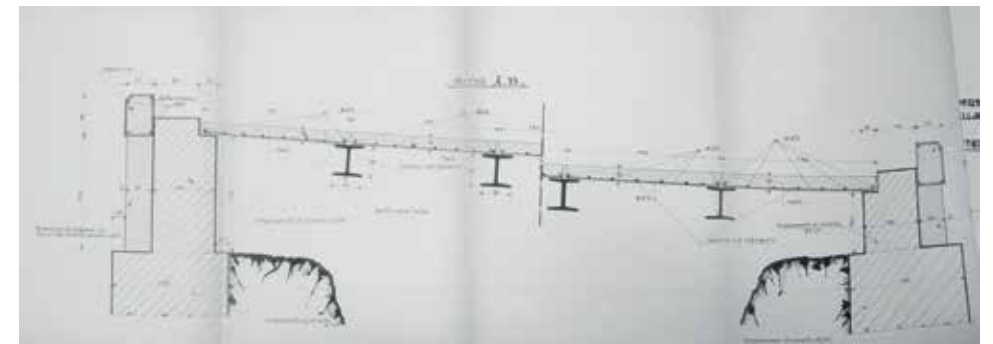
54 SPAZZALI, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto*, 246-247. PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d’Italia*, 158. “L’eventuale recupero delle salme di Basovizza”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 11/10/1957, 4. “Forse sarà svelato il segreto del tragico pozzo di Basovizza”, *Il Piccolo*, 12/10/1957, 4.

55 ACT, Ufficio tecnico 368/1956, Ostruzione pozzo contenente salme di vittime di rappresaglia – Basovizza e Monrupino. Lettera del Commissariato generale caduti in guerra al Comune di Trieste, e per conoscenza al Commissariato generale del governo per il territorio di Trieste, 21/05/1959. Archivio Onorcaduti (AOC), Basovizza (foibe) Trieste – copertura con struttura – T31 7/50 (2). Verbale dell’assemblea ordinaria dei soci della Società “Ing. P. Parovel – A. Pierini – D. Trebbi – Costruzioni” del 16 giugno 1959.

56 SPAZZALI, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto*, 251; PUPO, SPAZZALI, *Foibe*, 234. Fabio ROCCHI, *Padre Flaminio Rocchi – L’uomo, il francescano, l’esule*, Roma: ANVGD, 2007, 11, 39. Flaminio ROCCHI, “I fiori e il

of Basovizza, believed to be the one with the most violent history, had to be monumentalized, while the main characteristic of the foiba of Monrupino was its location. In a booklet for the first commemoration, Father Rocchi stated that the foiba of Monrupino was very close to the border, and just a few meters away from the only railroad connecting Italy to Yugoslavia.⁵⁷ It was in fact visible from passing trains, and easier to reach than the site of Basovizza. It is possible to hypothesize that the foiba of Monrupino was seen as potentially more “attractive” than the Basovizza pit, which risked drawing criticism for its controversial history and its conversion to a landfill from time to time.

The radical right did not accept the covering of the foiba at a point in history when the political movement registered the highest electoral support in Trieste.⁵⁸ Its opposition reached the national parliament. Triestine congressman Geffer Wondrich of MSI and party leader Almirante criticized the covering of the foiba, and suggested to proceed once again with exhumations to the minister of Defence Andreotti and the rest of the government. Andreotti and his vice ministers reaffirmed the urgency of giving proper recognition to the sites, and assured that the covers were removable in case of future explorations.⁵⁹ The pits however were never reopened.



Pic 6 Basovizza site - Cover and structure

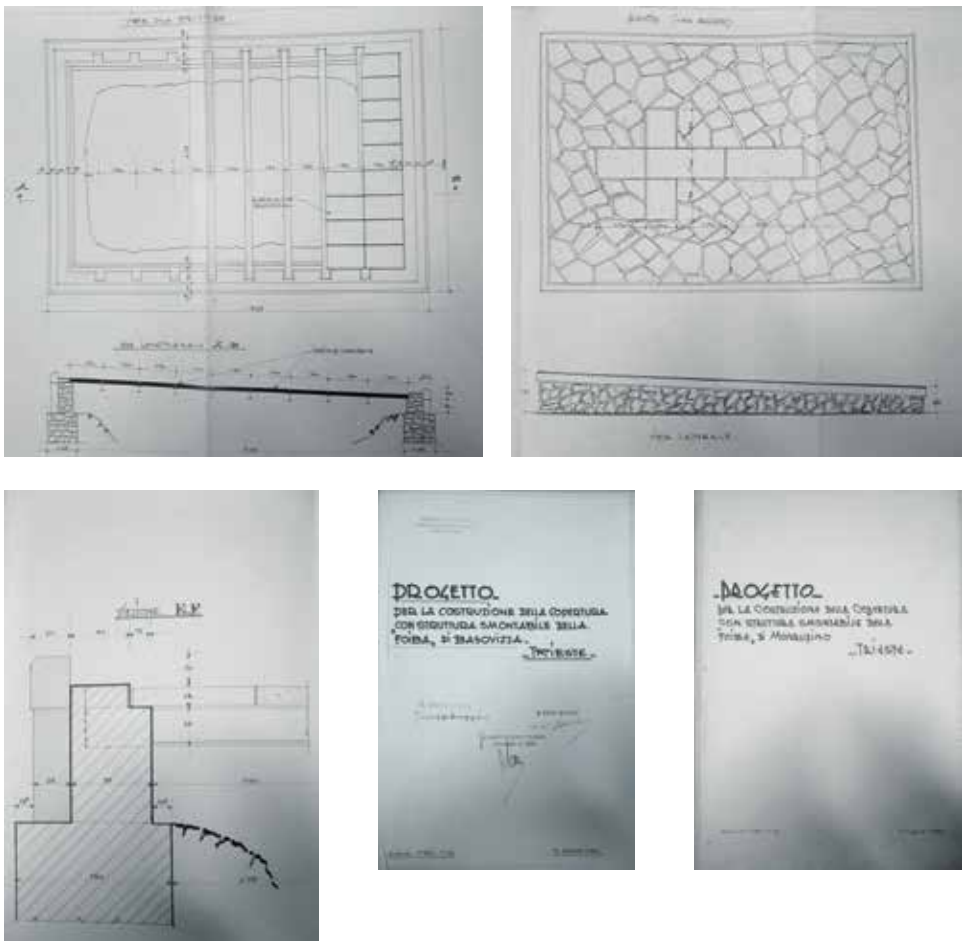
(Archivio Onorcaduti, Basovizza (foibe) Trieste, copertura con struttura – T31 7/50 (2).)

ricordo della Patria sulle foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino”, *Difesa Adriatica*, Roma: 9-14/11/1959, 1.

57 Flaminio ROCCHI, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, Roma: ANVGD, 1959, 6.

58 17% in 1958 national election. MSI constantly aroused its support since 6% got in first vote after WWII in 1949, held by AMG for Trieste city council. Sergio ZILLI, *Geografia elettorale del Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Consenso, territorio e società, 1919-1996*, Udine: Istituto friulano per la storia del movimento di liberazione, 2000, 206. Alberto GRASSI, *Il “Corriere di Trieste” tra propaganda e realtà: un’interpretazione dell’indipendentismo nel Territorio Libero*, Trieste: Hammerle, 2009, 96.

59 Proceedings of the Italian Parliament., *Risposte scritte ad interrogazioni, Atti Parlamentari, III legislatura – discussioni – seduta del 4 dicembre 1959*, allegato al resoconto della seduta, 3692-3693. Proceedings of the Italian Parliament, *Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, III legislatura – discussioni – seduta del 12 dicembre 1959*, 12192-12193.



Pic 6 Basovizza site - Cover, structure and project's first pages
(Archivio Onorcaduti, Basovizza (foibe) Trieste, copertura con struttura – T31 7/50 (2).)

The Commemorations

Following the covering of the pits, fierce competition arose among pro Italian organizations in order to gain control of foibas' public memory.

Thus, the interpretation of MSI protests acquired new meanings. The first public commemoration at the Basovizza pit was held only shortly before the monumentalization of the site in 1959 by the "Associazione Caduti e Dispersi della RSI" (Fallen and Displaced people of RSI), an organization closely connected

to MSI.⁶⁰ The date of the event had a special, provocative meaning: April 25, Liberation Day in Italy, a date officially dedicated to honor the end of fascism and WWII. At the same time, two days earlier, Italy and Yugoslavia signed a groundbreaking agreement in Udine,⁶¹ which opened the borders between the two countries and boosted economic cooperation. The radical right could not welcome the new cooperative relationship between Italy and Yugoslavia, because it reduced room for political opposition. Consequently, the memory of foibas became a good opportunity to reignite the national clash, at least on the electoral level.

The new fascist commemoration consisted of a religious celebration and the placement of flowers and wreaths; also some military and civilian authorities took part, including public figures as Faraguna, a member of the city government. This led to harsh criticism in the Slovenian minority's newspaper, to which Istrian exile publications replied. Anyhow the whole matter was ignored by the Italian mainstream media.⁶²

The "Associazione Caduti e Dispersi della RSI" celebrated just another commemoration at Basovizza during the period analyzed in this essay. It happened in 1961, approximately on the same date as the previous one, but it did not receive similar backing by institutions.⁶³ This was probably due to the more official commemoration of November 2nd and the new national political climate, in which the Democrazia Cristiana would soon cooperate with the socialist party rather than the right wing.

Father Rocchi, the bishop of Trieste Santin, and national Istrian associations such as ANVGD were rather the organizers of the first institutional event at the Basovizza pit, on November 2nd 1959. It was not an impressive event, since only a few hundred people attended, but it received strong support from political and religious leaders both in the region and nationwide. Such celebrations continued until the rite of November 1962. Starting in 1963, the Lega Nazionale and other local organizations took control of the commemorations, and national support tended to wane. Local groups and national Istrian exiles' circles clearly demonstrated their memory conflict, especially in 1964, while the site of Basovizza soon began to be neglected by the municipality and the population. The pit had virtually no maintenance until the 1980s, and just a few people gathered at ceremonies.⁶⁴ Let us look at these events in detail.

The 1959 event was clearly a consecration and an inauguration of both

60 Ads in *Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 18-19-20/10/1959, and in *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 18-20/10/1959.

61 "Sensibile liberalizzazione del traffico delle persone e dei veicoli oltre confine", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 23/04/1959, 2.

62 "Številke in špekulacija", *Primorski Dnevnik*, Trieste: 26/04/1959, 2. SPAZZALI, *Foibe: un dibattito ancora aperto*, 249. PIRJEVEC, *Foibe – Una storia d'Italia*, 164-165.

63 "Trieste commemora i suoi figli barbaramente uccisi nelle foibe istriane", *Il Secolo d'Italia*, Roma: 13/05/1961, 5.

64 AOC, Basovizza (foibe) Trieste – copertura con struttura – T31 7/50 (3 - 4).

the Basovizza pit and the foiba of Monrupino as sites of memory. It had specific characteristics that made it different from the initiatives later sponsored by the Lega Nazionale.

First of all, the initiative for commemorations established its roots in Rome thanks to the personal initiative of Father Rocchi. Not only had he previously pressed the department of defense to cover the pit, but he also handled invitations to the ceremony, he wrote a special booklet for it and ANVG was considered by the local press as the main organizer of the event.⁶⁵

Influential civil and military local authorities were present at the memorial, and official letters of support came from the most important ranks of the Italian government, including the president of the Republic Gronchi. The most relevant members of the Italian clergy and the Vatican, excluding the Pope, sent their letters of salutation.⁶⁶

Besides authorities, the participants in the ceremony could be divided into two groups: the local organizations, mostly represented by the Lega Nazionale and the Federazione Grigioverde, and the national/Istrian ones. Both were endorsed by MSI and DC, but at the time DC was more powerful in the national and Istrian groups, while the MSI was stronger at the local level.⁶⁷

Rocchi was the minister of ceremony too, and he transformed the pit's cover into an altar, from which he celebrated mass. He only shared the scene with another Istrian fellow countryman, Bishop Santin, who concelebrated the rite. No political speeches were given to the assembly, because the tribute had "a religious purpose only".⁶⁸ The plainly religious and Istrian framework in which the inauguration was held, was underlined by the choice of the same date of the commemoration to All Souls' Day, and through a special prayer authored by the bishop: "La preghiera dell'infoibato". Its words did not support radical revanchism over Istrian lands, but focused on Christian pity for victims. They also offered a powerful image. The foiba of Basovizza was depicted as a "calvary, having its summit sunk deep into earth, which constitutes a teaching post heading, through justice and love, to the roads for peace".⁶⁹

65 ROCCHI, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, 19. Fiori sulle foibe nel giorno dei Morti, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 29/10/1959, 4. "La città si appresta a celebrare le ricorrenze dei solenni anniversari", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 30/10/1959, 4. "Omaggio di tutti i Caduti dalle autorità civili e militari", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 01/11/1959, 4. "Trieste si appresta a celebrare le glorie del Risorgimento e della nostra Redenzione", *Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 01/10/1959, 4. "A Basovizza e Monrupino memore omaggio agli infoibati", *Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 02/11/1959, 5.

66 "Consacrata la terra carsica che racchiude i morti nelle foibe", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1959, 4. ROCCHI, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, 19-24.

67 "Consacrata la terra carsica che racchiude i morti nelle foibe", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1959, 4.

68 Flaminio ROCCHI, "I fiori e il ricordo della Patria sulle foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino", *Difesa Adriatica*, Roma: 9-14/11/1959, 1.

69 Ibid.



Una foto del rito di Basovizza. In basso: il Segretario del Veneto di Trieste, il sindaco di Trieste, il Vescovo Moro, Santin, il Comandante Generale del Governo Militare, Giovanni Palermata, il Comandante del Presidio per il mare, Mario Sarti, Presidente dell'Associazione Vittime Civili di Guerra, il sig. Gianni Bartoli, prof. Rodolfo Biondini, Presidente del Circolo Rimpatriati Italiani degli Istituti, dottor Fausto Zello per il Comitato Provinciale dell'ANVG di Trieste, Mons. Alfredo Buttler, Presidente della Associazione Cattolica Americana.



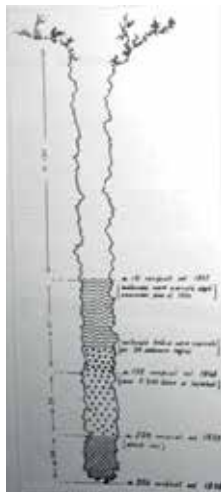
Pic 7 Top left side: Triestine political and clergy figure at the ceremony of Basovizza
Top right side: Father Rocchi leads the ceremony at Basovizza
Center: Father Rocchi leads the ceremony at Monrupino
 (Difesa Adriatica, 9-14/11/1959, 1)

Another specific feature of Santin's prayer was the meaning of "sacrifice". Such a topic was openly debated in Rocchi's booklet in 1959 and it represents one of the most interesting differences from the new fascist and radical right character

of foibas' memory.

The theme of sacrifice was related to the Julian March people, and specifically to the Istrians who perished in foibas, and to those who fled Yugoslavia after WWII in the so called "Istrian exodus". Father Rocchi wrote that the mistakes of the fascist regime and the catastrophic end of the war provoked such sacrifice. In that period, the priest seemed to consider Yugoslav violence over Italians as revenge for fascist aggression against Slovenian and Croatian minorities during the dictatorship and for the Axis' invasion in the Balkans during the last conflict. Rocchi thought that Italians at the North Eastern borders paid for the whole country, and that the exiles demonstrated their loyalty to Italy. Thus the originality of Rocchi's vision of foibas' public memory was grounded in the rejection of Mussolini's politics, together with the strong Christian framing of the celebrations and the national setting of the ceremony.⁷⁰

Other aspects were similar. ANVGD printed a flyer for the inauguration that denounced the presence in the Basovizza abyss of "1.000 bodies of Triestine civilians, 500 Italian guards, 1.000 Wehrmacht soldiers", while the foiba of Monrupino contained "2.000 bodies of civilians and soldiers", with no national discrimination.⁷¹ In the booklet, Father Rocchi adopted the accounting of bodies in cubic meters, naming the two foibas "the biggest mass graves in Italy". He also attached a sketch of the vertical section of the Basovizza pit in order to visualize his theory.⁷²



Pic 8 Sketch of the vertical section of the Basovizza pit

(F. Rocchi *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, 3)

November 1960 commemorations had scarce impact even in the local press. They were organized by a Committee which included ANVGD, the Lega Nazionale and other Istrian and veterans' associations. Neither Rocchi, nor Santin celebrated the mass. The rite was carried out by a delegate sent by the bishop.⁷³

Many were the reasons for the low profile of the event. The most important was that such sites of memory were the last to be included in a far bigger national pantheon, in which more military oriented places played the role of protagonists.

⁷⁰ Ibid. ROCCHI, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, 19-24.

⁷¹ Flyer: *Commemorazione degli infoibati*, ANVGD, Roma 1959. ROCCHI, *Le Foibe di Basovizza e Monrupino*, 3.

⁷² Ibid, 5-6.

⁷³ "Messa per gli infoibati domani alle ore 15", *Il Piccolo Sera*, Trieste: 31/10/1960, 2. "Riti di ricordanza sulle foibe e oltre confine", *L'Arena di Pola*, Gorizia: 08/11/1960, 3.

For example, at the Redipuglia shrine around 50,000 people gathered in those years, during the public holiday of November 4.⁷⁴

In November 1961 things went differently and there was a revival of the 1959 commemoration. The sketch of the vertical section of the Basovizza pit became a stone memorial. Its inauguration, together with a symbolic lamp, provided an opportunity for a new great event organized by Father Rocchi and ANVGD. Again Bishop Santin concelebrated a mass, this time supported by the Slovenian parish priest of Basovizza Marjan Živec,⁷⁵ and again local and national authorities personally joined the event or sent an official letter.⁷⁶

In November 1962 the Committee organized the celebration for the second time. It had the same result as the 1960 ceremony.⁷⁷

On the other hand, in November 1963, only the Lega Nazionale was responsible for the celebration,⁷⁸ which had a strictly local profile. In addition, the Lega Nazionale chose to define a new day of remembrance for foibas, and inaugurated a new anniversary on June 12th 1964; none of the ANVGD members were present, but the press witnessed the presence of the "Associazione Caduti e Dispersi della RSI" together with local civilian authorities and the military.⁷⁹ This demonstrated the different ideological approach to the foibas issue that the Lega Nazionale and its Triestine partners had, bringing to the surface the antagonism between the Christian perspective of Rocchi and DC. June 12 was indeed the anniversary of the end of the Yugoslav occupation of Trieste in 1945, a sort of alternative liberation day in opposition to April 25. It highlighted the strong connections between the Lega Nazionale and new fascist forces. The pitiful approach of Santin and Rocchi in the celebration of All Souls' Day could not be exploited in the political arena as much as a celebration on June 12, which pointed directly to the wounds of WWII interethnic conflict. That kind of public memory did not look for any compromise with the previous passive and generic Christian message of peace, even if the program of the events was the same: masses and wreaths with no speeches. But the approach was different, and press comments underlined the differences.

According to a reporter, it was also a meaningful opportunity to add an anniversary to the commemorative calendar of the Italian history in Trieste.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ DATO, "The Redipuglia Shrine: a Temple of the Nation".

⁷⁵ The priest seemed to be close to Slovenian minority's right wing groups, and especially to the party Slovenska Skupnost. For instance, he celebrated Bazoviški junaki (Heroes of Bazovica/Basovizza) with them in his parish. "Proslava Bazoviških žrtev", *Novi List*, Trieste: 10/09/1964, 4.

⁷⁶ "Lampada di fraternità sulla foiba di Basovizza", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 01/11/1961, 4. "Lampada di fraternità accesa dal Vescovo sulla foiba", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 3/11/1961, 4.

⁷⁷ "Onoranze agli infoibati", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 01/11/1962, 4.

⁷⁸ "L'omaggio ai caduti di tutte le guerre", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1963, 4.

⁷⁹ "Pellegrini della pietà sull'altipiano", *Piccolo Sera*, Trieste: 12/06/1964, 2; "Pellegrinaggio di amore sulle foibe del Carso", *Il Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 13/06/1964, 5.

⁸⁰ "Ricordo degli «Infoibati»", *Il Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 12/06/1964, 5.



Pic 9 Commemoration at Basovizza pit
Father Rocchi uses the cover as an altar 02/11/1961
(Lega Nazionale photo Archive)



Pic 10 Stone memorial illustrating a section of the foiba, at its inauguration in 1961
(F. Rocchi, *L'esodo dei giuliani, fumani e dalmati*, Roma: Difesa adriatica, 1970, 97)

Such tension among different interpretations of Italian nationalism and foibas memory erupted in November 1964. The “Unione degli Istriani” (Istrian Union), an Istrian exiles association, promoted in Trieste the first congress for all the Istrian associations in Italy. It took place on November 3rd and 4th 1964. A short celebration in Basovizza and Monrupino was carried out by the Istrian organizations on November 3, but the Lega Nazionale and its fellows did not participate. The next day, when DC congressman Barbi, ANVGD president, gave his speech during the conference in the largest theatre of the city, he was sharply contested by a new fascist group. Notwithstanding the intervention of bishop Santin, the protesters were hardly contained. Such an incident was a repetition of a similar episode dated October 26 in the main square of Trieste, during the anniversary of the return of the Italian administration in 1954. Minister Spagnoli, member of the first two governments supported by the Socialist party during the Moro administration, received similar public opposition, which included the call for an Italian recapture of Julian March. For both incidents the local newspaper “Il Piccolo” clearly took the side of protestors, downplaying their role and uncovering their true political leanings, while Istrian magazines such as “L’Arena di Pola” or “Difesa Adriatica” defended the DC politicians and ANVGD.⁸¹

⁸¹ “Tornano in folla gli istriani alla città che prima li accolse”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1964, 4. “È viva l’epopea grigioverde nei cuori dei fanti a convegno”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1964, 4. “Si inchinano gli istriani all’eroismo e al martirio”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 04/11/1964, 4. “Scomposta faziosità – L’incontro istriano a Trieste”, *L’Arena di Pola*, Gorizia: 10/11/1964, 1. “L’incontro istriano a Trieste”, *L’Arena di Pola*, Gorizia: 10/11/1964, 1. “Il raduno istriano”, *Difesa Adriatica*, Roma: 16-21/11/1964, 3. “Suggellato dalla speranza il grande raduno degli esuli”, *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 05/11/1964, 4. “L’appello unitario del presidente Barbi”, *Difesa Adriatica*, 16-21/11/1964, 1. “Giornate istriane a Trieste”, *L’Arena di Pola*, Gorizia: 10/11/1964, 4. “Richiamo al fervore del

Severe criticism appeared in the Slovenian minority press, particularly regarding the anti Slovenian slogans of the demonstrators, clearly showing the conflict inside the Italian majority.⁸²

In the end, the radical right prevailed over foibas' memory. In 1965, June and November commemorations were organized by the Lega Nazionale and other local groups.⁸³ New fascists could openly show their symbols at the ceremonies, as here attached photos demonstrate. Authorities were present at the June initiative, but deserted the one in November. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Moro, maybe in order to moderate the conflict inside the Italian memories of Julian March, sent an official telegram to the organizers to honor foibas' victims.⁸⁴



Pic 11 Basovizza pit, 02/11/1965
(Lega Nazionale photo Archive)

⁸² 54 per suscitare nuova fiducia", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 27/10/1964, 4.

⁸³ n. 241-242. "Svečanosti ob 10-letnici povrayka Italije v Trst", *Primorski Dnevnik*, Trieste: 27/10/1964, 4. "Bartoli je ob ploskanju fašistov zahteval Istro-Reko-Pulj-Zadar", *Primorski Dnevnik*, Trieste: 04/11/1964, 4.

⁸⁴ "Onorate le vittime del tragico maggio", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 13/06/1965, 4. "Fiori sulle foibe", *Messaggero Veneto*, Udine: 13/06/1965. "L'ora del ricordo", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 02/11/1965. "Tributo di amorosa pietà alle vittime del cieco furore", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1965, 4.

⁸⁵ "Tributo di amorosa pietà alle vittime del cieco furore", *Il Piccolo*, Trieste: 03/11/1965, 4.

Conclusion

The development of the genesis of the foiba of Basovizza had three stages. First, the "foiba" did not exist in nature; private citizens dug it for civilian purposes. Then WWII gave the pit a new meaning, depending on the history of the conflict in Julian March. Eventually, only monumentalization and regular commemorations transformed the Basovizza pit into a site of memory, giving it the recognition of "foiba".

The real potential of the memorial became clear only in the 1990s, but it was between 1945 and 1965 that its basic characteristics were shaped.

Beyond the new centrality of the memory of victims after the 1960s, as recalled in the beginning of this article, Basovizza's memory has another specific feature. I agree with the analysis of the psychologist Paolo Fonda and his fellow scholars about the public memory of foibas. It particularly fits the June 12 events. Fonda underlined how such commemorations reenact the war mentality and its related traumas in times of peace, favoring political exploitation of memory and history.⁸⁵ Such tactics could be particularly and harmful for a population heavily traumatized by the direct experience of two world wars, and several border changes.

This particular situation is even more complex than it appears. For Freud, death is the most perturbing factor of human existence, while foibas represented by themselves a non conventional relation with death. Unknown corpses corrupted by elements continued to rot in the depths of the earth: "the open abyss of foibas seems to absorb everything that is alive".⁸⁶ Symbolically, the world of the living and the world of the dead have no separation. Thus, the persisting mystery on the bodies of Basovizza has become a symbolic attribute, making the site more and more powerful and attractive to those inclined to embrace a certain kind of public memory of foibas. The covering and the memorializing of the pit crystallized a specific post-war momentum, and interrupted the mortification and the corruption of the site, transforming it into a place of mourning. A landfill is definitely the most inappropriate place to root national identity and to celebrate Julian victimhood.

As seen in this article, the memory of the foiba of Basovizza wasn't just a consequence of May 1945 facts. It was a process of selection and recognition of the past too that emerged during the first two decades of the Cold War.

It is evident at last how the local and international political context of those years was the main contributing factor in the shaping of the foiba of Basovizza's memory.

⁸⁵ Paolo FONDA, "Il perturbante straniero interno", in *Il perturbante nella storia. Le Foibe, uno studio di psicopatologia della ricezione storica*, ed. by Luisa ACCATI, Renate COGOY, Verona – Bolzano: QuiEdit, 2010, 165-166, 170.

⁸⁶ Igor PRIBAC, "Considerazioni, ricordi, immagini dalla Slovenia" in *Il perturbante nella storia. Le Foibe, uno studio di psicopatologia della ricezione storica*, ed. by Luisa ACCATI, Renate COGOY, Verona – Bolzano: QuiEdit, 2010, 103.

SAŽETAK

FOJBA IZ BAZOVICE: JAMA, SPOMENIK, SJEĆANJE I NEPOZNATA ŽRTVA. 1945.-1965.

Gaetano DATO

Fojba u Bazovici je rudarska jama smještena na periferiji Trsta, na zapadnoj strani granice između Italije i bivše Jugoslavije, u spornoj i multietničkoj Julijskoj krajini. Za talijansku, slovensku i hrvatsku javnost fojbe se vezuju uz ubijanja koja su izvršena od strane Titove partizanske postrojbe nakon primirja među Saveznicima i Kraljevine Italije (rujan 1943.), te tijekom jugoslavenske vojne okupacije cijele Julijske krajine u svibnju 1945. Vojnici i civili su bili bačeni u takve jame, ponekad još uvijek živi nakon pretrpljenih mučenja. Brojke i povodi ovih masakra ostaju predmet rasprava u nacionalnim historiografijama ovih triju zemalja. Poslije Drugog svjetskog rata, lokalni i nacionalni vođe u Italiji izrazili su svoju zabrinutost u vezi sjećanja na jugoslavensko nasilje u rujnu 1943. i svibnju 1945. Eksploatacija tih javnih sjećanja je bila višeznačna; većinom je bila usmjerena kako bi se olakšao položaj Italije na mirovnoj konferenciji, kako bi se osigurala politička kontrola nad područjem koje je imalo neutvrđeno vlasništvo, te da se učvrsti talijanski nacionalni identitet u početku Hladnog rata. Među tim pokoljima slučaj iz Bazovice je dobio posebnu pažnju; ovaj članak analizira genealogiju Fojbe Bazovica kao mjesta sjećanja.