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Istria Between Yugoslavia and Italy: The Position of Youth, 1945–1954

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This article deals with the position of young people and the role of communist youth organizations in Istria in the years after the World War II. During this period, Istrians were torn between Yugoslavia and Italy, and a diplomatic struggle for territory was being waged. It will briefly address some of the aspects of young Croats and Italians' daily lives, their political mobilization within larger organizations, and the challenges they faced due to political and social processes occurring during this period. Some of these included upbringing and education, ethnic coexistence, young people's involvement in reconstructing and building the country through work actions, echoes of the conflict between Yugoslavia and Cominform among young people in Istria, and Italian emigration from Istria. This article will try to answer some questions about how young people coped with these processes in Istria, a troubled border area in a turbulent time, using primarily archival records kept in the Croatian State Archives in Zagreb and relevant literature.

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KEYWORDS:

Istria, Croatia, Yugoslavia, youth, Communist youth organizations, 1945–1954

The Political Situation and Youth Organizations in Istria

Everyday life for Istrian youth was influenced by various geographical, historical, and cultural aspects that were very different from those of the rest of Croatia's regions. After World War II and Istria's liberation by the Yugoslav army led by Tito, Istria was united with Yugoslavia. This was a gradual process that involved enormous diplomatic efforts, and there was a constant possibility of war hanging in the air.¹

The Allied division of Istrian territory in June 1945 and the establishment of a temporary military administration in the Julian region (the question of which territories would belong to which country remained open until a final resolution was reached), which was divided into Zone A and Zone B, transpired due to the great powers' interests in this area. This necessary division created a great deal of tension for all who were involved. Zone A consisted of Trieste and Pula, and was managed by the Allied Administration, while Zone B, which consisted of the rest of Istria, was given to the Military Administration of the Yugoslav army.² This sparked a diplomatic struggle between Italy and Yugoslavia, who both sought unification with the disputed territory. A peace treaty signed between Italy and Yugoslavia in February 1947 and implemented in September of that year confirmed the cession to Yugoslavia of prewar Italian territory in Dalmatia, Rijeka, the Kvarner Islands, and most of Istria. It also affirmed the decisions of the Council of Ministers about Istria's further division into the Free Territory of Trieste (FTT), which was further divided into Zone A (Trieste and its environs), and Zone B (the area south of the city to the Mirna River, which was eventually handed over to Yugoslavia).³ This was a significant victory and united almost all of Istria and other parts of the former Julian region with Yugoslavia.⁴

There were many quarrels, disputes, and even an escalation of the conflict between Yugoslavia and Italy before a final decision was made to resolve the issue. In 1949, Italy improved its position by joining NATO and the Council of Europe, which was founded in 1949, while Yugoslavia's international position deteriorated sharply due to the conflict with the USSR and Cominform. That year, the United States, Great Britain, and France stated in a tripartite declaration that they would hand over FTT to Italy, which Yugoslavia strongly opposed.⁵ There were also disputes about the conclusion of the Balkan Treaty of Yugoslavia with Turkey and Greece, which involved military assistance if a conflict were to break

¹ For more information, see: Darko Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski. Model povijesne prijelomnice (1943–1955.)* (Pula: CASH, 2001), 173–77; Glenda Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001); Marina Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border, 1866–2016* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

² Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 171; Zdenko Pleše, "Osnovne karakteristike političkog i ekonomskog stanja u Istri 1945.–1947.," *Oslobođenje Hrvatske 1945.* (Zagreb: IHRPH, 1986), 612; Katarina Spehnjak, *Britanski pogled na Hrvatsku 1945–1948.* (Zagreb: Golden marketing, Tehnička knjiga, 2006), 104–09.

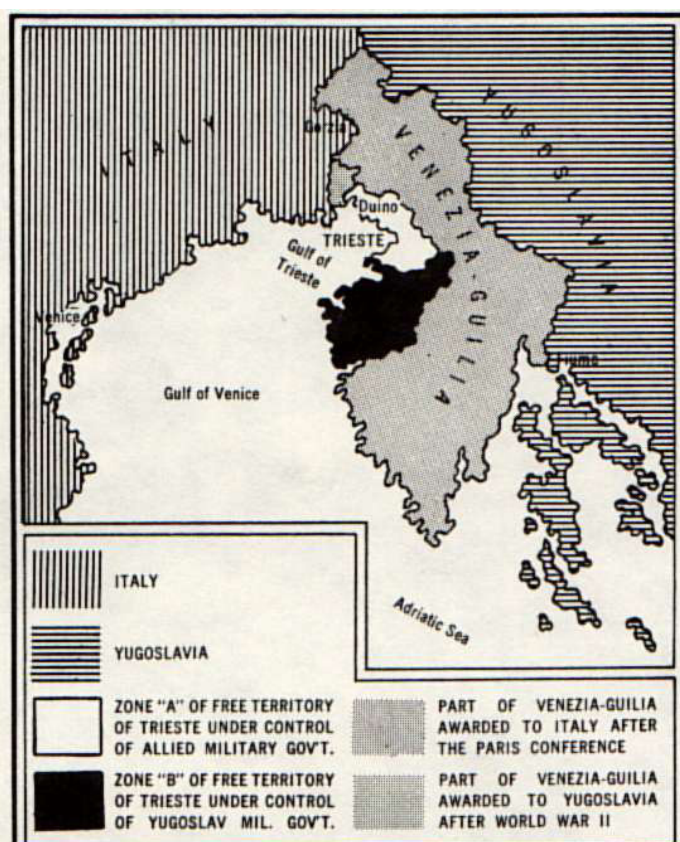
³ Zdenko Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji 1945.–1991. od zajedništva do razlaza* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga; Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2008), 137; Branko Petranović, *Historija Jugoslavije 1918.–1988.* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988), 459; Dušan Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest* (Zagreb: Golden marketing, 1999), 211.

⁴ "Istra i slovensko primorje vraćaju se u krilo svoje domovine," *Vjesnik NFH*, 15. 9. 1947; "Pula, Istra i dio slovenskog primorja u krilu domovine," *Vjesnik NFH*, 17.9.1947.

⁵ Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji*, 137.

out, and the internal organization of territory under foreign administration. In a joint declaration in October 1953, the Allies decided to end the Anglo-American military administration in Zone A, withdraw their troops, and hand Zone A over to Italy. The decision was condemned by the Yugoslav government and the public, and was followed by numerous demonstrations against the loss of Trieste and other territory within the zone.⁶ The tensions between Italy and Yugoslavia culminated in 1953 in the Trieste Crisis, during which saw the largest deployment of military forces from both countries.

In 1954, the London Memorandum presented the final demarcation of the two countries. Yugoslavia was given Zone B and a smaller part of Zone A, and Italy was given the rest of Zone A with Trieste.⁷ These decisions posed an additional challenge for this specific multi-national milieu of intertwined influences and cultures.



Map 1: The Free Territory of Trieste⁸

⁶ "Jednostrana akcija protiv naših naroda. USA i Britanija predale Trst i Zonu A Italiji," *Vjesnik SSRNH*, 9.10.1953., 1.
⁷ Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008*. (Zagreb: Novi Liber, Europapress holding, 2008), 441.
⁸ Free Territory of Trieste United Nations - Resolution N.16 - January 10, 1947, accessed September 29, 2021, <http://freeterritorytrieste.com/>

But what was the position of young people in Istria? Were they organized? And if so, under whose leadership? In Istria, and in the whole of Yugoslavia, youth organizations and other socio-political organizations were formed. This article will use information found in the Croatia archives will focus on presenting information about young people and how they were mobilized within youth organizations. Of course, it is not possible to describe in detail each of these topics and explore these issues more deeply. These are just roadmaps for the overall picture, which will need to be improved.

First, I will focus on youth organizations in postwar Yugoslavia. Two youth organizations that existed in Croatia during the immediate postwar period were the Alliance of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ), and the Unified League of the Antifascist Youth of Croatia (USAOH). In 1946, the federal antifascist youth league (USAOJ) changed its name to the People's Youth of Yugoslavia (NOJ). USAOJ formally followed the organizational principles of the Popular Front of Yugoslavia (NFJ), which it was a collective member of and based its operations on bureaucratic democratic centralism. Both SKOJ and USAOJ acted under the auspices of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) as a part of its program and did not have any independence in decision-making. Their development, activities, and organizational structure were influenced by the instructions and directives of the top party and state authorities. They coordinated their primary organizations at all levels of society (factories, unions, schools, villages), and city, county, district, and regional committees were organized throughout the entire country. In 1948, SKOJ and USAOJ merged into a single organization called the NOJ. The main tasks of the two organizations remained the same: in addition to strengthening and augmenting their membership, they were to further consolidate the people's government by administering governmental measures to build socialism and involving youth in these tasks. It is important to emphasize that young people were involved in all processes taking place in the country. They were the implementers and essential factors of government and party policy and were simultaneously the object of these measures.⁹

The Alliance of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ)'s regional committee for Istria and the regional committee of the League of Antifascist Youth of the Julian region (USAOJ) for Istria operated in Istria from 1945 to 1947. Within the FTT, which had been established in 1947, Zone B was divided into two districts: Buje, which was mostly Croatian; and Koper, which was dominated by the Slovene population. Both, however, had a significant number of Italians. In 1951, there were two branches of the People's Youth of Croatia (NOH) in these areas. The first was the Communist Youth of FTT (KOSTT), which originated from the former SKOJ and brought together a large number of young people. Around 1,800 of the 3,500 young people in the Buje district were members, and the proportion in Koper was similar. The other branch of the NOH was the Antifascist Youth Alliance of FTT (SAOSTT). Members of KOSTT were also members of SAOSTT. This area had a county committee for SAOSTT and two district committees—Buje and Koper—which also managed KOSTT.¹⁰

⁹ Tatjana Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma: mladi Hrvatske 1945.-1954.* (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2017), 15, 495.

¹⁰ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.4.4 Komisija za ideološko-politički rad 1945.-1962. Korespondencija s CK NOJ, "O omladinskoj organizaciji STT-a," March 27, 1951.

In 1949, NOH Rijeka's regional committee was established when SKOJ and NOJ were merged in 1948 into a single organization as the NOH regional committee for Istria and Rijeka, which was founded after Istria's unification with Yugoslavia in 1947.

The NOH's central committee of and NOH Rijeka's regional committee decided to strengthen SAOSTT and quickly brought together 90 percent of youth in Buje and Koper. This organization still had its own specific differences, especially in the Koper district due to its proximity to Trieste, economic differences, and the fact that over seven hundred young people were employed in Trieste. According to archival documents, this resulted in problems involving young people in the organization and working with them under the SAOSTT program, as young people working in Trieste were often influenced by the Italians' political leanings ("Italian nationalists"), which were contrary to Yugoslav leanings. In Buje, there was much more developed political work with young people, there was no direct connection with Trieste, and young people from that district had mostly sided with the anti-Fascists during the war. The relationship between Italian nationalism and the communist system was complex, which made attracting young Italians to Yugoslav youth organizations certainly posed an additional challenge.

Due to a probably greater connection with Italian nationalists and a lack of a strong sense of belonging to the idea of a Croatian and Slovenian Istria, young Italians, and especially those from smaller towns, decided not to join the SAOSTT, and a small group of young people who were members of KOSTT acted on its behalf.¹¹

Demarcation Zone

The years that passed in diplomatic competition and struggle for the disputed territories were very turbulent for the inhabitants of Istria. Most of the population was in favor of uniting with Yugoslavia. Under Allied rule, however, the situation Zone A and Zone B was uncertain and difficult, and protests by Croats and Slovenes, as well as Italians, were frequent. The arrival of the International Demarcation Commission in 1946, which was to report on the situation in the Julian region to the Council of Foreign Ministers, was significant and was used to prove the Istrian population's desire of the for unification with Yugoslavia.¹² At this time, large events were organized in Zones A and B in support of the of joining the Julian region and Istria with Yugoslavia, which were regularly covered in the press.¹³

It is interesting to look at how young people and the rest of the population in Istria prepared for the arrival of the Commission for Demarcation. The youth organizations—the Alliance of Antifascist Youth of the Julian Region (SAOJK) and the SKOJ's regional committee for Istria—were focused on welcoming the

¹¹ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.4.4, "O omladinskoj organizaciji STT-a," March 27, 1951.

¹² On August 26, 1945, the Provisional National Assembly of the DFY passed a resolution demanding the Yugoslavia annex the Slovenian Littoral, Venetian Slovenia, Trieste, Istria, Rijeka, Zadar, and the islands of Lastovo and Palagruža. The demands were based on the principle of nationality and the right of self-determination. However, on September 19, 1945, the Council of Foreign Ministers in London decided on the border between Italy and Yugoslavia. The Inter-Allied Demarcation Commission was in Istria during March 15–24, 1946.

¹³ *Vjesnik NFH*, 1946, in various places.

committee members. The goal was to present to the commission Istria's Yugoslav character and its Croatian character south of Dragonja River. The directive for the Alliance of Antifascist Youth of Croatia (USAOH)'s central committee was to prepare and organize speeches and events, point out slogans, and prepare people to give basic answers to the commission.¹⁴ Many young people, and especially those in Labin, Pazin, and Buzet, participated in these events, but in other parts of Istria the turnout was lower. The desired results were more difficult to achieve in smaller towns inhabited by Italians. The USAOH was not satisfied with this and blamed its shortcomings on incompetent staff. On the whole, however, the commission's reception was successful. According to a report by the USAOH, the commission was greeted in almost every village by between three hundred and five hundred people shouting appropriate slogans and cheering for unification. In the towns, the welcome was much bigger: over 15,000 people gathered in Pazin, and 10,000 in Opatija and in Labin.¹⁵

It is worth noting that the leaders of the USAOH emphasized the importance of raising awareness of the Istrian Croats' national affiliation in Istria and their connection to their Slavic ethnicity. They stated that, during the years when Istria was under foreign rule, Croats had begun to identify themselves as Istrian, but now, to raise awareness of their national identity, they organized Croatian language courses, events held in Croatian, rallies, and reading groups. They also tried to extend the youth organizations to those young people who, until recently, had been considered enemies, and they concluded that the youth should aid the Slavic-Italian Union.¹⁶

166 In Istria, the unification of its larger part with the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia contributed to a positive attitude toward the authorities, and the number of youth organization members also increased.¹⁷ Nevertheless, soon after the initial euphoria over the arrival of the new government, the population began to show aversion to the totalitarian system of government through apoliticism and political disinterest. The new communist government, the Communist Party (KP)'s undisputed power, the structure of large organizations (the Popular Front, the Women's Antifascist Front, USAOH, etc.) and how they operated were all very similar to the fascist corporate state that had previously ruled Istria.¹⁸ This claim, at least among young people in Istria, seems to be supported by the drastic decline in SKOJ membership: in 1946, in just three months, membership decreased by as many as 2,000, and again in 1947 by another 1,078. The reason for this, of course, was not only a lack of interest among young people. It was also

¹⁴ Smoljan, Rusac, "Živio Tito!", 174-180.

¹⁵ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.4.1. Organizaciono-kadrovska komisija 1945.-1962. Korespondencija s CK NOJ, Izvještaj o radu, March 22, 1946; "Omladina Pazina i okolice priredila je veličanstven doček međunarodnoj komisiji," *Omladinski borac*, March 22, 1946, 1.

¹⁶ HR-HDA-1282. Oblasni odbor SAOJK za Istru, II. oblasna konferencija SAOJK za Istru, May 25, 1946.

¹⁷ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 2. Kongresi, Treći kongres NOH-a, 1949, "NOH pomoćnik Partije u izgradnji socijalizma i komunističkom odgoju omladine."

¹⁸ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 236.

due to internal confusion, the SKOJ's poor cooperation with the KP in general, and especially the management and improvement of the SKOJ organization.¹⁹

Choice of Citizenship

Due to historical circumstances and its geographical position, Istria had a large proportion of ethnic Italians. In 1945, there were allegedly 332,271 people living in Istria, of which 176,075 (53%) were Croat, 54,210 (16.3%) were Slovene, and 91,316 (27.5%) were Italian.²⁰ During the war, Italians were divided into supporters of the fascists (these mostly came from urban areas), and those who supported the partisan movement, which led to skirmishes between them and extensive demographic changes during the postwar period. There were also disputes between the Communist Party of Italy and the KPJ, which had opposing views of Istria's unification with Yugoslavia and later of the Cominform resolution.²¹

This caused the demographic changes that began at the end of World War II and continued with the emigration of not just Italians but also Croats and Slovenes. Demographic changes were a consequence of Istria's unresolved status, diplomatic struggles over it belonging to Yugoslavia or Italy, issues around ethnicity, changes in the state order, confrontations with pro-fascists, and economic conditions. There were various reasons behind the exodus of the primarily Italian population from Istria, including fears of antifascist revenge after twenty-five years of fascist crimes and postwar liquidations of those associated with the fascist regime (and also of those who were not). Among the latter, some were considered influential representatives of the Italian state in Istria while others were considered class enemies. There were also persecutions, insecurity, nationalization of industry and trade, the impossibility of economic prosperity, forced labor, collectivization in rural areas, interethnic tensions, and the situation with Cominform and the persecutions of its followers.²²

Due to its position on the current negotiations pertaining to Trieste, until 1947, Yugoslavia tried to keep the Italians in the region either because of its position in the negotiations regarding Trieste or, more likely, because it was a matter of diplomatic propaganda. After the conflict with the Cominform countries, and once it was established that Yugoslavia would not be getting

¹⁹ HR-HDA-1225. PK SKOJ za Hrvatsku, Zapisnik sa sastanka PK SKOJ-a za Hrvatsku, December 23, 1946, no. 381; "O radu skojevske organizacije u Hrvatskoj u 1947," no. 624; Marina Štambuk-Škalić; Marijana Jukić. "Hrvatska u izvještajima partijskih komiteta 1945-1948. (Izabrani dokumenti) - 2. dio." *Fontes* 16, no. 1 (2010): 252; Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 47-59.

²⁰ Dukovski, "Dva egzodusa: hrvatski (1919.-1941.) i talijanski (1943.-1955.)." *Adrias*, no. 15 (2008): 129-165. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/35558>, 147.

²¹ For more, see: Franko Dota, *Zaračeno poraće: konfliktni i konkurentski narativi o stradanju i iseljavanju Talijana Istre* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2010); Darko Dukovski, "Egzodus talijanskog stanovništva iz Istre 1945.-1956.," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 33 (2001), no. 3: 638-41; Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 117; Marino Manin, "O ljudskim gubicima Istre u Drugom svjetskom ratu i poraču," in *Identitet Istre - ishodišta i perspektive*, ed. Marino Manin (Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti "Ivo Pilar," 2006), 125-41; Marica Karakaš Obradov, "Emigracije talijanskog stanovništva s hrvatskog područja tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata i porača," *Radovi Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Zadru* 55 (2013): 204-25; Vladimir Žerjavić, "Doseljavanja i iseljavanja s područja Istre, Rijeke i Zadra u razdoblju 1910-1971.," *Društvena istraživanja* 2 (1993), no. 4-5 (6-7): 631-55.

²² Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 219.

Trieste, more substantial pressure began being put on the Italians to leave. Italian emigration was governed by optant agreements with Italy. The first agreement, the Provision on the Options of the Peace Treaty with Italy, was passed in 1948. The second was accepted in 1951, and the opt-out possibility lasted until 1953. Italians emigrated in three ways: voluntarily through choosing Italian citizenship (as optants), being released from citizenship, or emigrating illegally.²³

The refugees or optants, known as *esuli*, came from all social classes, but most were peasants, laborers, and fishermen. An opt-out license was obtained on the basis of a simple criterion: the optant's statement that they were ethnically Italian, or in other words, that their mother tongue was Italian. Croats did not have the same opportunity as the Italians did to choose their citizenship. However, they tried to bypass this by presenting themselves to the Italians and hiding the fact that Italian was not their mother tongue, and some Croats managed to emigrate this way.²⁴ However, the language criterion cannot be viewed as completely reliable. Some people refused to identify themselves as Italian despite the language they spoke, and they did not become optants. Others spoke both languages equally well and did not have a strong sense of ethnic identity.

In 1948, of the 15,000 applications, which included 21,000 family members, about 4,000 were filed by Croats. These applicants were mostly women and children whose husbands and fathers were working in Italy. Many Croats who wanted to go to Italy claimed they were Italian, as did others who wanted to obtain Italian citizenship but remain in Yugoslavia and be exempt from military service.²⁵ Under the language provision, however, there were many rejections (1,537 requests were rejected in 1949).²⁶

Authorities examined the process of choosing citizenship with caution. According to original documents, reactions of the party and state authorities toward optants were twofold: either the authorities were indifferent toward optants (many of whom were party members or belonged to the League of Communists), or they took steps to prevent too many people from emigrating. The authorities' attitudes toward optants seems to have been motivated by self-interest: the Ministry of the Interior could order optants who had chosen to become foreign nationals to leave the country and relinquish their houses and properties. As was stated during a meeting: "Our organizations not take any political measures to deter people from choosing citizenship, and in fact, the leadership believed it would be better for them to leave because we would be left

²³ Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji*, 53; Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 219, 229., Ivo Nejašmić, "Iseljavanje iz Hrvatske – brojčani aspekti stoljetnog procesa," u *Političko-geografska i demografska pitanja Hrvatske*, no. 8 (1991): 61-82.

²⁴ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 227-28; Marica Karakaš-Obradov, *Novi mozaici nacija u "Novim poredcima"* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2014), 318-34; Ivo Nejašmić, "Iseljavanje iz Hrvatske – brojčani aspekti stoljetnog procesa," 61-82; Nejašmić, "Iseljavanje iz Hrvatske od 1900. do 2001.: demografske posljedice stoljetnog procesa," *Migracijske i etničke teme*, 30, no. 3 (2014): 414; Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji*, 53; Žerjavić, "Dosljeljanja i iseljavanja s područja Istre, Rijeke i Zadra," 631-56.

²⁵ Branislava Vojnović, ed, *Zapisnici Politbira Centralnog komiteta Komunističke partije Hrvatske 1945.-1952.*, sv. I (Zagreb, Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2005), 477.

²⁶ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 219.

with their property."²⁷ On the other hand, in order to prevent too many emigrants, members of the KP and SKOJ often visited places where people could choose their citizenship and persuaded the population against it.²⁸

Even members of the KP, SKOJ and the People's Youth became optants, and the penalty for attempting to opt out was expulsion from those organizations. By May 1948, for example, in the Labin district, twenty-five party members had become optants.²⁹ Also, employees in various institutions who became optants were fired and removed from the rationing system.³⁰

The issue of choosing citizenship was regularly associated with the influences and actions of opponents of the regime and their promotion of a better and more comfortable life in Italy. Sources reported that some "hostile elements and agents" were paying women to sleep in front of the National Liberation Committee building in Pula so that so that rumors would spread throughout the city about how many were waiting without documents.³¹ There were frequent references to the claim that if half the population of Istria became optants, Istria would be united with Italy.³²

It is believed that the largest number of inhabitants emigrated from Istria before 1948 (around 52%). Many young people in Istria applied for Italian citizenship and left. According to NOH reports, by 1947, 2,501 young people aged fifteen to twenty-five³³ and about three hundred children had emigrated from Istria.³⁴ In 1948 alone, 11,000 applications for Italian citizenship were filed in Rijeka, 500 in Labin, 400 in Pazin, 600 in Rovinj, 1,500 in Lošinj (of which 400 were Croats), over 2,050 in the Poreč district, and in the Vrsar district almost 90 percent of its inhabitants filed for choice of citizenship.³⁵ Of the total number of optants from the Rijeka area in 1951, about 40 percent were young people who were mostly members of the NOH, and among the optants were also several secretaries of actives.³⁶ When the process had been completed, only thirty-three students remained in the Italian general high school in Rijeka.³⁷ There were significant demographic changes in the region due to the high numbers of people who opted for Italian citizenship.

In the years 1950-1951, the next big wave of departures occurred when about 15,000 people from Istria, mostly from Zone B of the FTT, left for Italy. According to some estimates, around 160,000 people emigrated from Istria between 1945 and the end of the 1960s; other estimates place the total between 186,000 and 188,000. Recent research indicates there were around 200,000

²⁷ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice sekretarijata NOH-a, April 21, 1948.

²⁸ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.1. Plenum CK NOH-a 1946.-1962. Materijali V. Plenuma ZV NOH-a, September 17-18, 1948; Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 174-75.

²⁹ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice sekretarijata NOH-a, Zapisnik April 19, 1948.

³⁰ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice sekretarijata NOH-a, April 21, 1948.

³¹ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.1. Materijali V. Plenuma ZV NOH-a, September 17-18, 1948.

³² HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice sekretarijata NOH-a, April 19, 1948.

³³ Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 60.

³⁴ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, June 20, 1947.

³⁵ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice sekretarijata NOH-a, Zapisnik April 19, 1948.

³⁶ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Zapisnik sa II. Plenuma Oblasnog komiteta NOH-a za oblast Rijeku, February 23, 1951, box. 1; HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 344. Komisija za ideološko-politički rad, "Neki podaci o političkom radu."

³⁷ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 344. Komisija za ideološko-politički rad, "Izveštaj ZV NOH-a o političkom i organizacionom stanju NOH-a," October 1, 1948, no. 723.

emigrants from Istria and Rijeka between 1945 and 1956.³⁸ However, the actual total is still a matter of debate.

Illegal Emigration

There is relatively little data in the archives or in the literature about the illegal emigration of young people from Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1961, and especially for the period before 1950. Most young people aged twenty-five and younger, and especially those from the coastal area, up to age twenty-five, emigrated illegally primarily for economic reasons. However, they also emigrated for political reasons, out of “adventurism” as was stated in official documents, to avoid Yugoslav military service, or to avoid punishment for criminal offenses. They fled by land or, more successfully, by sea. For young people from Istria, which was one of the regions with the highest levels of illegal emigration, the most common and immediate destination was Italy. However, most of these emigrants moved on from there to other countries. Along with Rijeka and Pula, the highest numbers of people left from Zagreb, Zadar, Šibenik, and Split. However, most of those who left came from Istria and the area around Zadar, where the Italian minority was the largest.³⁹

District	Escapes	Captured	Total
Labin	103	140	243
Buzet	121	118	239
City of Rijeka	40/100	377	417/477
Rijeka	51	126	177
Poreč	40	58	98
Total	355/415	819	1174/1234

Table 1. Emigration from Croatian districts, 1948-1952.⁴⁰

Young Italians and Croats

The issue of nationality was one of the most important in Istria, and it was rooted in Istria's division according to “Italian” cities and “Croatian” villages, Istria being united with Croatia, and mass Italian emigration. Although the government claimed it promoted “brotherhood and unity,” it did nothing to guarantee it would be implemented for non-Yugoslav ethnic minorities, which meant the issue of nationality remained a political one.⁴¹ This issue was specific to Istria because

³⁸ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 230; Dukovski, “Dva egzodusa: hrvatski (1919.-1941.) i talijanski (1943.-1955.).” *Adrias*, no. 15 (2008): 129-65, 147. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/35558>.

³⁹ Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 186.

⁴⁰ Šarić, Tatjana. “Bijeg iz socijalističke Jugoslavije – ilegalna emigracija iz Hrvatske od 1945. do početka šezdesetih godina 20. stoljeća.” *Migracijske i etničke teme* 31, no. 2 (2015): 195-220. <https://doi.org/10.11567/met.31.2.1>.

⁴¹ For more information, see: Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1997); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 238-40; Ernest Gellner, *Nacije i nacionalizam* (Zagreb: Politička kultura, 1998), 21.

in no other part of Croatia was the nationality question so prominent and the situation on the ground so polarized.

After the war ended, the Yugoslav government decided to promote a policy of Italian–Slavic brotherhood that was similar to South Slavic brotherhood and unity. This was most likely just a form of propaganda connected to the goal of uniting Istria and Trieste with Yugoslavia. The slogan “Fratellanza italo-slava (Italian–Slavic Brotherhood)” could be seen on posters and walls in Istria and Rijeka at the end of the war and during the period immediately after it.⁴²

As shown by original documents from youth organizations, Italians and young people (who are essential to this article), often felt their problems were ignored and many experienced a language barrier as well and felt they were not receiving the support from the authorities they thought they deserved. The frequently proclaimed “brotherhood and unity” and “the development of equality and brotherhood among the Croatian and Italian people of Istria” were then high on the list of priorities.⁴³ However, equality among nationalities was not always respected in practice.

At a meeting of the NOH Secretariat held at the end of 1947 to discuss attitudes toward Italians in Istria, an opinion was expressed that “there is much talk about brotherhood and unity among Croats and Italians, but there are often irregularities regarding the Italians, and this gives them opportunities to complain.”⁴⁴ The NOH’s central committee issued a directive to correct this, but it was more challenging to implement in the field. One of the reasons for this was a lack of capable staff, and there were constant complaints about the inadequacies of those on the SKOJ and NOH committees was a constant complaint at the time.

In order to balance relations among nationalities in youth organizations’ committees, which were given special attention, a recommendation was made to fill them with Italians, especially in Pula and the district of Pazin. To this end, Miko Tripalo, then a member of the NOH secretariat, insisted that “regardless of their competencies, Italians should be received in the City of Pula, the Pazin district, and at the Raša mine.”⁴⁵ In Rovinj in 1949, for example, there were five Croats and three Italians in the political bureau of the NOH Committee, which had nine members, and at the plenum there were six Croats and three Italians.⁴⁶

It was frequently pointed out that Italian youth were not completely clear about where they stood in Yugoslavia. Archival documents contain instructions for relations with the Italian minority, including how to explain the position of national minorities and their rights, and that they should refrain from sectarian attitudes. Nevertheless, they should be included in the organization and become active in it. The NOH wanted to fully include Italians in its programs, yet only a small number of young Italians were involved in the organization. For example, in Rijeka in 1948, only 1,000 of a total of 3,000 young people were members of the NOH. Many Croatian leaders of the People’s Youth viewed Italians with

⁴² Vanni D'Alessio, “Politika obrazovanja i nacionalno pitanje u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji: škole s talijanskim nastavnim jezikom u Istri i Rijeci.” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 49, no. 2 (2017): 224. <https://doi.org/10.22586/csp.v49i2.46>

⁴³ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 291.

⁴⁴ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, December 26, 1947.

⁴⁵ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, December 26, 1947.

⁴⁶ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.1. Trinaesti plenum CK NOJ-a. Materijali CK NOJ-a, 1949.

skepticism and had took a sectarian attitude toward them, claiming that they were challenging to work with.⁴⁷

Some Italians involved in youth organizations complained about a lack of support, and some SKOJ members argued that they were “not conscious enough.” At the meeting of the SKOJ’s Istrian regional committee, Mario Severi, secretary of the SKOJ committee for the city of Rovinj, denied this: “I do not think that is true. We Italians have been fighting alongside Croats since the first day of the war. We have suffered with them, died, did our best; we fought to join Yugoslavia, we fought when the Allied Commission for Demarcation came, and we are fighting now.”⁴⁸ Therefore, any success in embracing Italian youth was regularly highlighted. At the beginning of 1946, there were 3,016 Croats and 133 Italians in the League of Antifascist Youth in the Julian region and the Poreč district, and an additional 485 Croats and 267 Italians outside of the organization. In 1947, 160 young Italians “who are actively working” were included in the organization.⁴⁹

The Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the NOH held in February 1949 warned the Istrian leadership that it needed to pay more attention to the inclusion of Italian youth because “this work has been neglected.” The situation improved, and by the beginning of 1949, NOH committees had been established in Italian villages with over 95 percent of youth involvement.⁵⁰ The Third Congress of the NOH in 1949 also supported the inclusion of minorities, which was defined in its resolution as one of the main tasks for the leadership of all NOH branches, thus “further strengthening the political unity among the youth, expanding the People’s Youth by creating new actives and bringing together young people outside the organization, and especially those in rural areas and among ethnic Italians and Czechs.”⁵¹

However, some young Italians in Istria and Rijeka resisted these influences and had a strong sense of regional affiliation. For example, young people at the Torpedo factory in Rijeka indicated their nationality in their personnel files as Fiuman instead of Yugoslav, Italian, or Croat. A large part of the Italian youth did not belong to the NO organization and were mistrustful of them.⁵² Even during the census, Italians identified themselves as Istrian rather than their actual nationality, but as Istrians.⁵³ Some peculiarities were also highlighted. For example, fans at football matches referred to themselves as Sušačani versus Fiumani or Italians, and cheered for their teams accordingly.⁵⁴

In Istria, everyday life was influenced by geographical, historical, and cultural factors that differed from other areas of Croatia. There was a mixture of cultures and languages, and mixed marriages were frequent, which gradually

⁴⁷ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 344. Komisija za ideološko-politički rad, Korespondencija s CK NOJ, Izvještaj ZV NOH-a o političkom i organizacionom stanju u NOH-u, October 1, 1948.

⁴⁸ HR HDA 1225, PK SKOJ za Hrvatsku, Zapisnik Oblasnog savjetovanja SKOJ-a za Istru, July 24, 1946, no. 290.

⁴⁹ HR-HDA-1231 RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, June 20, 1947.

⁵⁰ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.1. Peti plenum CK NOH-a, February 1949.

⁵¹ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 2. Treći kongres NOH-a, “Rezolucija o osnovnim narednim zadacima NOH-a”.

⁵² HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.4.1. Prepiska s CK NOJ, Izvješće od November 5, 1947.

⁵³ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. “Politička situacija na terenu,” April 19, 1948.

⁵⁴ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o političkom stanju organizacije NO Rijeke, 1952.

led to the assimilation of the Italian and Slavic populations, although both also tried to maintain their ethnic identities.⁵⁵ Particularly in urban areas, which had more Italians than the Slavic rural areas, Italian was often spoken and sometimes even used in public administration. In order to improve the Italian minority's standing and keep them better informed about and more open to the People's Youth, recommendations for specific measures were made, which included publishing textbooks and newspapers in Italian and communicating in Italian with Italians in certain institutions. As one person making these recommendations in 1947 stated, "It is unusually important and urgent to publish an Italian youth newspaper."⁵⁶ Magazines aimed at young people—*Vie Giovanili* with a circulation of 2,800 copies, and *Il Pioniere* in 1948 with a circulation of 5,000 copies—were published soon afterward.⁵⁷

Socialization and Education

For the Italian community, the issue of protecting the Italian culture and language through the education of young people was especially important, and Italian schools began to be opened at the end of the war. In May 1945, fifty Italian primary schools and twenty secondary schools were opened in Istria. By the summer of 1946, there were sixty primary schools and fourteen secondary schools with around 17,000 students enrolled.⁵⁸ In addition to schools, there were also Italian cultural clubs.

After a twenty-year ban, Croatian schools also began opening in Istria, and by December 1945, there were 259 of them serving approximately 29,800 students. Secondary schools were also opened, including five-grade general secondary schools in Pazin and Opatija, a teacher's college in Opatija, and an economics school in Pazin with 1,672 students, along with ten boarding schools. The biggest problem for the schools was a lack of staff.

By the early 1950s, parents could choose to enroll their children in either Italian or Croatian schools. Later, however, this changed. In the early 1950s, the Council for Education, Science, and Culture of the People's Republic of Croatia decided that only those who had identified themselves as belonging to a particular national minority could attend schools for national minorities. All others were required to attend a school where Croatian was the language of instruction. As a result of the exodus, the political crisis, and prejudices against Italians, the number of Italian schools in Istria and Kvarner began decreasing. Only a few Italian secondary schools in the Croatian part of Istria remained open in the following years, and the number of Italian primary schools rapidly declined.⁵⁹

The NOH organization established actives in both Croatian and Italian schools to further involve young people in the NOH, and to extend its influence and guidance to young ethnic Italians. They increased their efforts during the

⁵⁵ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, December 26, 1947.

⁵⁶ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, December 26, 1947; Šarić, *U vrtlogu komunizma*, 281-83.

⁵⁷ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. Izvještaj o kulturno-prosvjetnom radu organizacije NOH-a u 1947., no. 527.

⁵⁸ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 239.

⁵⁹ D'Alessio, "Politika obrazovanja i nacionalno pitanje u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji," 226-31. <https://doi.org/10.22586/csp.v49i2.46>.

period when there was an option to apply for Italian citizenship. According to archival documents, the NOH approved of the optants' choice to emigrate because "this was improving the political and social makeup of young people in schools." Optants were not considered to be loyal to the new order anyway, so it was better for them to leave.⁶⁰

In Istria, Young people's socialization and education had to be organized in parallel with one track for the Italian minority and another for the Croats. For young Croats, reviving the Croatian language, culture, knowledge of ethnic history—everything that had been underdeveloped in Austria-Hungary and suppressed or banned in fascist Italy—was crucial.⁶¹ For the new generation, Croatian-language-based kindergartens and schools, and speaking Croatian in children's homes were urgent necessities. Although often fluent in the Croatian Chakavian dialect, many students were unfamiliar with standard Croatian, so efforts were made start them with Croatian-based school curricula and language instruction as soon as possible. The government also organized literacy courses (in 1947, 28,698 people in Istria and Rijeka were illiterate) and language courses in Croatian and Italian. Cultural centers, public faculties, educational centers, libraries, and reading rooms were opened and reading groups were organized.⁶²

Youth Involvement through the Patronage of the Youth Organization

Youth organizations in Istria and Rijeka were smaller and less influential than those elsewhere. As in other parts of the country, youth organizations participated in the country's postwar reconstruction, cultural and educational efforts, and cultural and educational work, and they were also politically active. However, reports from youth committees in these areas often mentioned political stagnation among youth, and especially among those already in the workforce, and they described the organizations' efforts as lackluster or inadequate. An additional problem was that about 25 percent of young people, and especially Italians and young women in rural areas, were not part of the NOH.⁶³ Attendance was so poor that county and city committees often did not even hold meetings. Members did not carry out the tasks they were assigned, and there were few cultural and sporting events.⁶⁴

In Istria, youth were generally less interested NOH initiatives but during 1945 and 1946, in the zone administered by the Yugoslav army, youth participation in organized activities was higher. These included renovating factories, cleaning the streets, constructing a bridge in Rijeka over the Rječina River, land reclamation along the Raša River, and constructing the water supply system in the village of Tinjan. Young people working in factories all worked overtime.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. Izvješće o radu NOH-a u 1949.

⁶¹ Štambuk-Škalić; Jukić. "Hrvatska u izvještajima partijskih komiteta," 118.

⁶² HR-HDA-1220. CK SKH. 3.2.1. Izvršni komitet CK SKH 1945. –1974, Pozivi i prilozii za sjednice, Godišnji izvještaj za 1947, March 30, 1948.

⁶³ Vojnović, *Zapishnici Politbiroa*, sv. I, 520; Vojnović, *Zapishnici Politbiroa*, sv. II, 183.

⁶⁴ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o radu Oblasnog komiteta i organizacije NO riječke oblasti u 1949. godini.

⁶⁵ "Kako živi i radi omladina Istre," *Omladinski borac*, February 1, 1946, 3.

Forced mobilizations, as documents say, were not necessary because “young people are geared up to solve economic problems.” However, this also created a problem because the youth education neglected studying and sports.⁶⁶

However, a question is then raised about the accuracy of the claim that forced mobilization was not necessary. The situation may have changed from year to year because information about this issue from the documents varies. In 1947, the pages of *Omladinski borac*, the NOH’s newspaper, boasted that Istrian youth had provided three brigades instead of the two planned for the first shift of the youth labor action to construct the Šamac–Sarajevo railway. They later became udarne (shock) brigades on the railway. The newspaper also highlighted the accomplishments of young people who worked in Istria itself rather than on the railways (land reclamation along the Raša River, road construction, building a sewage system in Rovinj, logging, harvesting broom plants, etc.).⁶⁷

The following year, the situation changed. In 1948, with the exception of those in Rijeka and Pula, Istrian district youth organizations did not fulfill any of their obligations related to mobilizing youth for work actions, and the Istrian brigades “seriously failed.”⁶⁸ That year, only 50 percent of the planned quota went to work. In 1949, the mobilization was again successful when twenty brigades with 3,804 young people took part in federal youth labor actions.⁶⁹

A few years later in 1952, NOH reports continued to mention “political disinterest and passivity among some youth,” and then “a certain impact of hostile action on some working youth, and others, as a particular problem for youth leaders.” Some young people still refused to take part in youth actions, there was no interest in the system of workers’ self-management, and young people did not have a place for themselves in society. Some even openly criticized the system, used Italian, and recruited young people to flee to Italy. These, however, were individual cases rather than a widespread phenomenon.⁷⁰

In 1952 in Istria, as in some other parts of Croatia, the NOH organizations were plagued by apoliticism, inactivity, and disorganization. Some actives had no influence over young people or were even unable to convene meetings. Many young people were members in name only. The youth leaders were not fully competent, were unable to manage operations, and some of them had been convicted of crimes and fled across the border.⁷¹ The NOH’s central committee constantly sent instructors to Istria in an attempt to improve work with young people and encourage them to become more involved in the organizations’ activities. There was no improvement, however, so a special commission was formed to deal exclusively with the issues in Istria.⁷² One of the reasons for this

⁶⁶ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3.3. Sjednice Sekretarijata NOH-a, June 20, 1947.

⁶⁷ “Omladina Istre premašuje obaveze,” *Omladinski borac*, October 5, 1947, 4.

⁶⁸ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.4.4. Korespondencija s CK NOJ, Izvještaj ZV NOH-a o političkom i organizacionom stanju u NOH-u, October 1, 1948.

⁶⁹ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o radu Oblasnog komiteta i organizacije NO riječke oblasti u 1949. godini.

⁷⁰ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o političkom stanju organizacije NO Rijeke, 1952.

⁷¹ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o političkom stanju organizacije NO Rijeke, 1952.

⁷² HR-HDA-1231 RK SSOH. 3.4.4. Korespondencija s CK NOJ, Izvještaj ZV NOH-a o političkom i organizacionom stanju u NOH-u, October 1, 1948.

inability to achieve the desired level engagement in Istrian youth organizations was staff who did not understand the specifics of Istria or the mentality of the Istrian population.

Cominform

The year 1948 was especially turbulent for Istria. In Zone B of the FTT, in the Croatian-Slovenian part of Istria, the Communist Party of FTT, along with most of the population, sided with Tito's policy against the USSR. Yet in Zone A, the Italian communist movement accepted the Cominform Resolution. Due to that, tensions between the two Zones and the issue of the delimitation of the Julian region escalated, and both sides made serious accusations.⁷³

There were quite a few Cominform supporters in Istria. Although there were new young members, many older members of the KP of Croatia had grown up in the Italian Communist Party. The centers of Cominform supporters were Pula, Vodnjan, Rovinj, and Labin, and about 200 people from the Croatian part of Istria were arrested between 1948 and 1950. The younger members, former members of the SKOJ and young members of the KP, often could not find work in their places of residence after serving their sentences, and they eventually left Istria.⁷⁴

The acceptance of the Cominform Resolution by some of the Italian and Croatian youth in Istria was explained in archival documents as the result of "insufficient political work," "enemy influence," and weak regional youth leaders. The fact is, however, those in the Istrian Italian minority were torn apart in the situation regarding their opinion toward the Cominform because the Italian KP had accepted Cominform views. The situation for Istrian youth organizations regarding the Cominform was different from the rest of Croatia, and there were reports of "widespread hesitation," and in some cases, such as in Pula, the secretaries of the NOH also sided with Cominform. The entire NOH committee in Pula was dismissed, as was the NOH committee at the 3. Maj shipyard in Rijeka, all of whom were former members of the SKO. In Rijeka and Pula, those who supported the resolution were mainly Italians from several companies, public warehouses, an Italian and Croatian grammar school and teachers' college, a maritime technical school, and the Raša mine.⁷⁵

As a part of youth organizations' broader ideological and political work and in addition to organized political and ideological lectures, and in this case, as a means of suppressing Cominform's influence, young people were organized in other ways. For example, a large gathering of 8,000 young people (slet) was organized and presented to the public as a mass gathering against the Cominform policy.⁷⁶ Sports rallies gathered together young people from schools, towns, and villages around a common goal, and this case, it was also an opportunity for young people to be ideologically indoctrinated in a unique way through preparations leading up to a rally, this time against Cominform. The celebration of World

⁷³ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 256.

⁷⁴ Dukovski, *Rat i mir istarski*, 262.

⁷⁵ HR-HDA-1231. RK SSOH. 3.3 Izvršna tijela CK NOH-a, Dopis Centralnog komiteta NOH-a Centralnom komitetu NOJ-a, 3. lipnja 1949.

⁷⁶ HR-HDA-1285. Oblasni komitet NOH-a Rijeka, Izvještaj o radu Oblasnog komiteta i organizacije NO riječke oblasti u 1949. godini.

Youth Day was used for the same purpose, as was the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the SKOJ, when a big celebration was held in Pula with a youth-led torchlight procession in Rijeka.

Conclusion

Much more could be written about young people in Istria in the immediate postwar period. These are just small anecdotes from the stories of young people under the patronage of youth organizations as presented in relevant archival documents. In the postwar period, Istria was undoubtedly one of the most sensitive areas in Europe—divided between Yugoslavia and Italy, East and West, communism and democracy. The turbulent postwar period in Istria was characterized by, among other things, Istria's liberation by the Yugoslav army rather than the Allies, which set off a long-term diplomatic struggle for Istria between Yugoslavia and Italy. Marked by numerous processes initiated by the new authorities, the inhabitants of Istria—Italians, Croats, and Slovenes—had to manage and find the best way of life for themselves and their loved ones. Several simultaneous and significant processes occurred throughout the country and in Istria: postwar reconstruction and young people's involvement in labor actions, seeking coexistence of three ethnic groups, and organizing education for all of them in Istria. The issue of choosing citizenship and the departure of the Italian population from Istria was especially important for this area where major demographic changes had taken place. The situation with Cominform left its mark there as well, and its supporters were arrested. Youth organizations in Istria sought to have young people under their control and influence, win their support, and shape them into people who would pursue the policies of the ruling party. Were they successful? It seems that, in Istria, this task was much more complicated than it was in other parts of Croatia, probably due to the specific issues in Istria, which proved to be too much for youth organizations.

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