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From the Adriatic to the Black Sea: The Italian economic and military expansion endeavour in the Balkan-Danube area

Abstract: During the years that followed the end of the Great War, the Adriatic area found itself in a period of deep economic crisis due to the emptiness caused by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The ancient Habsburg harbours, which had recently turned Italian, had lost their natural positions of Mitteleuropean economic outlets toward the Mediterranean due to the new political order of Central-Eastern Europe. Rome, then, attempted a series of economic manoeuvres aimed at improving Italian trade in the Julian harbours, first of all the port of Trieste, and at encouraging Italian entrepreneurial penetration in the Balkans. Resolved in a failure, the desire for commercial boost toward the oriental Adriatic shore coincided with the Dalmatian Irredentism and became a topic for claiming the 1941 military intervention across the Balkan peninsula. Italian geopoliticians, who had just developed the geopolitical discipline in Italy, made the Adriatic-Balkan area one of their most discussed topics. The fascist geopolitical project aimed at creating an economic aisle between the Adriatic and the Black Sea, in order to bypass the Turkish straits and become completion and outlet toward the Mediterranean of the Nazi Baltic-Mitteleuropean space in the north. Rome attempted the agreement with the other Danubian States, which subscribed the Tripartite Pact, in order to create a kind of economic cooperation area under the Italian lead. Therefore, the eastern Italian geopolitical border would have been traced farther from national limes. Rome would have projected his own interests as far as the Danubian right riverside, sharing with Berlin the southern part of that area consisting of territories historically comprehended (and contented) between German and Russian spheres of interest, which the Reich intended to reorganise after the alleged Soviet Union defeat. These Countries, framed by the Baltic, Mediterranean and Black See shores, found themselves entangled once more by geopolitical ties enforced by the interests of foreign Countries.

However, these projects remained restricted to paper: the invasion of Yugoslavia turned into a failure and exposed Italy's military weakness; Rome proved to have no authority about the New Order organisation. Italy could dream up about its power only among magazines pages.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Balkans, Fascist Italy.

Introduction

Fascist Italy, mindful of its Latin heritage¹, considered itself a global power operating in three strategical theatres: the Mediterranean basin, the Balkan area and the African continent. Securing both of the Adriatic shores and a naval supremacy in the Mediterranean would have guaranteed ideal conditions for the outset of economic penetration into the Danubian basin through the Balkans. The African continent, on the other hand, would have been a colonial territory, where to find raw materials, as well as an oceanic outlet. Sea hegemony would have been the starting point for fascist expansionism, empowered by a new international attitude: the final goal would have been the creation of a Mediterranean *greater space*² which would have put European, African and Asian *greater spaces* in communication.

The Adriatic Sea found itself serving the role of a link between Mediterranean and Danubian-continental fascist interests. Italy was already holding the whole western shore, and following the 1920 Rapallo Treaties³, gained the Eastern Julian coastline, Istria and Cherso, Lussino, Pelagosa and Lagosa islands.

However, the Dalmatian regions, provided for in the Secret Pact of London (1915)⁴, were not annexed, although Italian troops occupied them for several years after the Great War.

Trieste, an important harbour city, became Italian but even though its geographical position had not changed, the commercial role drastically had: with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, six customs barriers appeared in the hinterland, behind the port, which meant perpetual delays for freight trains coming from Mitteleuropa and burdensome customs duties.

The need to revive Trieste's economy and the disappointment for the non-allocation of Dalmatia at Versailles were the main causes of the desired expansion outside the oriental border.

¹ With the shift of the capital city from Florence to Rome in 1871, it also determined a geographical and political shift from Piedmont toward the Mediterranean sea. Resurfaced memories from ancient Rome and Latin heritage began to merge with Savoy culture, becoming Italian foreign policy's common *cliché*.

² *Großraum*, or an exclusive influence area for a hegemonic Power. Word coined by Carl Schmitt (1888–1985).

³ The Treaty signed on 12 November 1920 between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, with which the two States reciprocally established their own borders and sovereignties.

⁴ On 26 April the Italian government secretly signed the Pact of London, which sanctioned the Italian war commitment alongside the Entente Powers. According to art. 5 of the Pact, the Dalmatian territories would have belonged to Italy. However, at the end of the Great War, because of the opposition of the U.S. President Wilson and the other Entente Power, only some areas of what was agreed were assigned to Italy.

Lastly, but not less important, there was Albania, a keystone in the Adriatic theatre. After establishing a protectorate between 1919 and 1920, Italy occupied the country in April of 1939, opening a new direction of expansion toward the Balkans and the oriental Mediterranean.

For these reasons, at the end of the Great War, when Italian Adriatic territorial claims found international recognition, geographers immediately contributed to prove the legitimacy of the expansion across the sea. Moreover, the Balkan-Danube area became one of the most debated and analysed topics for Italian geopoliticians: in those years *Geopolitica. Rassegna mensile di geografia politica, economica, sociale, coloniale*⁵ saw the light, a monthly which, taking a leaf from the German Geopolitik's book, became the Italian theoretical manifesto of geopolitical current of thought⁶.

In spite of the short lifespan of the paper and its low readership, its pages offer precious testimony to the views on foreign affairs that were spread in the Italian athenaei, often in significant discrepancy with the true intentions of the Duce. "Geopolitica" will be used as the primary source of reference for the present contribution.

⁵ The apex of geographical studies during the fascist period was reached at the end of the era. In these years, the studies of political geography, a branch of the discipline was used to identify the systems of "laws" relating to the territory of the states (Caldo 1982). In the years immediately preceding the war, modelled after the initiative carried out in Germany by general Karl Haushofer with the magazine "Zeitschrift für Geopolitik", Italy formed a nucleus of intellectuals who took an interest in the so-called geopolitics, the branch of geography that studied the territory and the states using scientific principles adapted then to the political needs of the moment. In January 1939 the first issue of "Geopolitica", founded by Ernesto Massi and Giorgio Roletto, was born, under the auspices of the national education minister Bottai. Published in Milan by *Sperling and Kupfer*, the magazine had the University of Trieste as its intellectual cradle. See A. Vinci (1990), M. Antonsich (1994), G.M. Losano (2011), Sinibaldi (2010).

⁶ Although inspired by French and German schools of thought, Italian geopolitics developed its own connotations that differed from the experience beyond the Alps. The Italian school was based on two pillars: the scientificity and historical-statistical implications. However, the difficulties encountered at the academic level to achieve the recognition of geopolitics as a science convinced the geopoliticians to emphasize the importance of the second pillar. The Italian geopolitics, moreover, recovered an *ante-litteram* geographical-political heritage that, although of different ideological inspiration, contrasting and often decontextualised, allowed it to reach the aim of giving Italian geopolitics an even older tradition than that of French and German schools. The cartographic representations of geopolitical factors edited by Dante Lunder and Mario Morandi enriched and briefly explained the studies published with a graphic language never used before.

Gazing East

In 1939, the third number of “Geopolitica” was almost entirely focused on Trieste, and not without reason: a few days earlier the Third Reich had invaded Czechoslovakia and pervaded deeper into the economy of eastern Europe. Acting as the only Habsburg port, the historical function of Trieste was that of a transit and distribution centre for the countries of central Europe, of the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Grioni 1939). The port specialised, for decades, in a particular sector of commerce, that was defined as “transit trade”⁷. The city was guaranteed a percentage with the sole passage of goods through its port, to the point where it was possible to talk about “exportation”. Unfortunately for Trieste, following the new European asset created at the end of the Great War, the transit trade fell into decline, precisely when the city was being *redenta*⁸. As already mentioned, the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire brought enormous imbalance of trade in the area: for centuries, Trieste had been a port of the Habsburg monarchy, whose customs, needs and languages were followed; now the port was serving a state separated from its historical inland (La Marca 1979). Although the new states born from the ruins of the empire did not have their own fleets, let alone adequate ones, since the greater part of the Austrian tonnage was handed to Italy, no swift occasion for economic expansion opened up for Rome.

Entrepreneurs from Trieste understood at once the variety of problems that were about to arise: from the Austrian ashes six new States arose, and with them six new customs barriers. This resulted in long stops for travellers and for the influx of goods alike; the golden era when loads travelling from Vienna used to find prompt shipping in Trieste was definitely over. Moreover, the rivalry between Italy and Yugoslavia further undermined the trade to Hungary and the Danubian region.

The Fascist Trade Union of Trieste developed orders to protect the function of transit trade, allowing special treatment to companies specialised in these operations and guaranteeing commerce with those countries with free currency that allowed the use of *clearings*⁹ and hard currency. Due to the *Anschluss* and the Munich Agreements, the port was nevertheless at risk of a new era of decadence.

⁷ “*Commercio di transito*” in Italian. This name meant all commercial operations determined by the purchase abroad of a consignment of goods, which was then resold on a foreign market and, once passed through Trieste, manipulated and processed. Transit trade mainly took place between Central and Danubian Europe on one side and the Mediterranean and Levant countries on the other.

⁸ Redeemed.

⁹ The settlement of accounts or exchange of financial instruments especially between banks.

The damage to Trieste's economy was caused by the fact that the majority of the city's commerce was taking place in territories now under the Reich. If it was previously possible to establish bilateral trade agreements regarding the goods coming from Germany with Austria and Czechoslovakia, now the city wasn't able to play that intermediary role with the territories recently annexed by Berlin. For the first part of 1939, "Geopolitica" followed closely the fate of Trieste, but it did not propose many valid solutions. One must keep in mind that the major investors and promoters of the magazine belonged to the *élite entrepreneurs* of Trieste, who would have suffered the most from the decline of the port.

The review managed to foresee, albeit in a veiled way, the dangers for the Italian economical interests in the area. According to "Geopolitica" the only viable solution to save the port would have been to reconstruct Trieste's inland, in order to lift the city from its geographical reality, perhaps by investing in infrastructure that could link the Black Sea to Trieste, since, "while the ports of Northern Europe had canals and lowlands behind them, Trieste had mountains and on this geographical factor did the competition stand"¹⁰ (Rachello 1939). The missed economic upturn of the Friulian city became an additional argument to the Dalmatian irredentism. Although the thesis on the "Italianness" of Dalmatia were refuted many times since 1915¹¹, the fascist doctrine continued to nourish the irredentist feeling with far-stretched geographical and historical motivations. The authors of the periodical also thought that the Velebit-Dinaric ridge was only the southern extension of the Italian mountain range of the Julian Alps, separating the Dalmatian peninsula from the Balkan inland (Carelli 1941). Furthermore, according to geopoliticians, the settlement on the two shores of the Adriatic, established by the Roman domain, was uninterrupted until the fall of the Roman Empire. Subsequently, the Republic of Venice kept the two shores united for about eight centuries, albeit with some border changes. With the cession of Veneto to Austria and the end of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, Dalmatia stopped being the bastion of "Italianness" and began its connections with the Habsburg power. The myth of the "mutilated victory"¹² was triggered by the fact that the Secret London Pact had not been complied with; this was also one of the topics that favoured the rise of fascism. Moreover, the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia created an obstacle to Italy's goals and a heated Adriatic rivalry. For the editorial board though, the only natural way out for the Italian economy in that region was to aim at the east and the Balkans¹³.

¹⁰ *Mentre i porti del Nord Europa avevano alle spalle canali e pianure, Trieste aveva alle spalle la montagna e su questo fattore geografico giocava la concorrenza.*

¹¹ See for example the work of Giuseppe Prezzolini, 1915, *La Dalmazia*.

¹² *Vittoria mutilata*.

¹³ However, starting from the second half of 1939, "Geopolitica" took no interest in the city: probably with the outbreak of war the editorial staff abandoned the question to avoid uncomfortable situations of friction with the Axis allies, first of all Germany.

The perfect summary of all the topics used throughout the years by the paper regarding the Adriatic matter was the *Sintesi Geopolitica*¹⁴, published by Mario Morandi in 1941, right at the end of the military campaigns. The map was divided into five areas, the main one, representing the Adriatic situation up until April 1941, contained the other four thematic pictures. The horizontal parallel lines, which represented the sea, finally put both Adriatic shores in direct communication. The mountains, represented in an extremely stylised way, created a chain that began from Sicily, passed through the Apennines and the Alps and entered into the Balkan territories via the Dinaric Alps, uninterruptedly. Italian industrial areas, marked by a point-like motif, were finally able to extend their economic power to the east. Trieste's port radiated a bundle of lines, a metaphor for Italian business dynamism. The Balkan area became the aisle that put Italian peninsula into communication with the Danubian region and with the area between the Vardar river and the Aegean sea, bounded by regular geometrical lines. Even the coastlines were finally safe: the continuity between the Italian, Dalmatian, and Albanian shores is underlined by a thick dark line with a motif reminiscent of the merlons of a medieval rampart. Such a line follows through the Strait of Otranto, now definitively sealed up as far as the coasts of the Aegean Sea (Morandi 1941)¹⁵ – Fig. 1.

In March of 1939 Mussolini found himself thinking about Italian relations with its Teutonic ally: Hitler's initiatives in Austria and Prague had been carried out without consulting Rome and without taking into account Italian interests. In a speech held at the Grand Council of Fascism, in the aftermath of German action in Czechoslovakia, Mussolini came to the conclusion that Italy's problem was "the balance of forces inside the Axis"; it was necessary to enhance the stature towards the neo-transalpine comrade and to curb Hitler. Furthermore, the lack of English and French activity persuaded the Duce that the deployment of the Axis could have brought in results in only one direction.

In order to demonstrate Italy's autonomy in regard to Germany and because of the strong Italian interests in the Balkans, Albania's occupation was seen as the better solution for the imbalance generated by the actions of the Reich (Di Nolfo 2006). Albania's crown was taken by Vittorio Emanuele III. With the acquisition of Albania, Italy gained the geopolitical security of having the domain over the Adriatic Sea.

¹⁴ Geopolitical Synthesis, a column by Mario Morandi, which consisted in a geopolitical map focused on a topic.

¹⁵ The Republic of Venice, the territories promised to Italy in the Secret Pact of London, the danger of the encirclement of the Little Entente and a map of the summer climates are represented in the minor side maps: the isothermia between the two peninsulas was one of the topics to which geopolitics clung to show the proximity of Italy to those territories.



Fig. 1. Map of Morandi's *Sintesi geopolitiche*, No. 22: *L'Adriatico*

Source: M. Morandi (1941: 294-295).

The advantages following the gaining of Albania were several: the new Adriatic situation guaranteed full Italian control over the Strait of Otranto, strategically reinforcing Italy and the Axis in the Mediterranean and Balkan scene. Yugoslavia, seeing a substantial increase in the shared border, would have been induced to continue its pro-Italy policy and to find new reasons to collaborate with Rome. Greece would have also been coaxed in a policy of appeasement towards Italy and of increased restraint towards Great Britain. Finally, following the geopolitical theories, the acquisition of a new *vital space* would have allowed Italy to access agricultural, forestry and mineral (especially oil) resources of the *Land of the Eagles* (Massi 1939). The Italian sphere of interest widened to the southern part of the Balkans: "Geopolitica" often addressed the matter of Albania's territories¹⁶, by then considered well and truly an integral part of the Italian empire and a steppingstone for a future eastern expansion.

A fast and superficial glance at the geographic map will be enough to understand the geopolitical significance that is held by the [Albanian] territory as key position for the Adriatic, as a dam against any expansionist velleity and as bridgehead

¹⁶ See D. Lunder (1939), E. Massi (1939), D. Jaranoff (1940), R. Pess (1940).

for our political and economical penetration in the Balkans. In order to explicate its function of Mediterranean power, Italy must secure the Adriatic Sea, in other words, Italy must have control over it. [...] regarding the crucial problem of our political and economical penetration in the Balkans, Albania turns out to be an optimal irradiation base, given that it confines with Greece [...] barring the roots (of) the British power in the Aegean sea¹⁷ (Pess 1940).

In 1940 the paper gave news of the beginning of the construction of a great trans-Balkan railroad, starting from the shores of Albania and reaching Thessaloniki and Bulgaria. This railway line would have supplemented the Italian economy with the ones from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, making it possible for Italy to exchange its manufactured goods for mineral and agricultural products (Lunder 1940).

Throughout the fascist period, the primary aim of foreign policy in the region was to destabilise the area as much as possible, in order to undermine the pro-French alliance named the *Little Entente*¹⁸. That is why the dissolution of Yugoslavia was sought, and the dialogue with the confining countries, such as Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria was favoured. Key privileged partners were found in Hungary and Bulgaria, the losers of the Great War, which shared their revisionist spirit with Rome. Moreover, similarly to Italy, these countries knew fascist-inspired movements, which, even if in alternate and not always fortunate moments, were also in power.

The greatest degree of consideration was given to the area extending from the Balkans to the Danube, being the link between central Europe, the territories under German influence, and the Mediterranean, the Italian influence sector. Owing to this function of *limes* between the two spheres of influence, the area was the focal point of political friction between the two regimes (Antonsich 1994).

In the spring of 1941 the “Völkischer Beobachter”, German National Socialism affiliate newspaper, drew the border between the two hegemonies: every land that extended north of the Danube belonged to German interests, every land that

¹⁷ *Un rapido e superficiale sguardo alla carta geografica basterà a farci comprendere la portata geopolitica che ha il territorio [albanese] come posizione chiave per l'Adriatico, come argine contro eventuali velleità espansionistiche e come testa di ponte per una nostra penetrazione politico-economica nei Balcani. L'Italia per esplicare la sua funzione di potenza mediterranea deve avere la sicurezza dell'Adriatico, in altre parole deve averne il controllo. [...] per quanto riguarda il problema importantissimo della nostra penetrazione politico-economica nei Balcani, l'Albania si rivela per noi un'ottima base di irradiazione, in quanto essa confina con la Grecia [...] scalzando così la potenza inglese dall'Egeo.*

¹⁸ Alliance between Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia arose, after the First World War, with the aim of preventing the revision of the peace treaties, and particularly that of Trianon, for the benefit of Hungary. The alliance, welded between 1920 and 1921, also counted on the collaboration of France.

extended south, on the other hand, belonged to the Italian sphere of influence. The two allies, therefore, would have parceled out that huge area framed by the Baltic sea, the Adriatic and the Black Sea; a geopolitical key area for trade between the north and the south of the continent, and also between Europe and Russian territories. The editorial staff of “Geopolitica” shared the German newspaper’s opinion and adopted its view even if, with regards to Italy, it was far from the truth.

The geopolitical map published in December 1939 by Mario Morandi is explanatory: *Sintesi geopolitiche No. 10: il Bacino Danubiano* (Geopolitical Synthesis No. 10: the Danubian Basin), which not only was exquisitely functional but also had a remarkable composition. Symmetry was the key in understanding this square map: the first element that caught the reader’s eye was the Danube, a dark thick line dividing the map horizontally in two equal sectors: each representing the sphere of influence assigned to the two powers of the Axis. An imaginary line, coinciding with the binding of the pages, connected the Baltic sea to the Strait of Otranto, dividing the map vertically. This way the area taken in analysis was divided into four equal sectors: Italy, Germany, Eastern Europe and the Balkan-Danubian basin, were all fitted into this regular geometric shape, each occupying a quarter. Morandi placed in each corner of these squares the symbol of the Powers contending the area: at the top left the swastika, spreading its influence from the port of Hamburg; at the top right the hammer and sickle stood out¹⁹. On the other hand, in the lower part, two Lictorian fasces appeared, denoting the corners of the Italian peninsula and of the Greek and Balkan area. A further division was laid down by the area of commercial influence of the two major ports, which spread circularly like ripples on the water: the north was ruled by Hamburg, the south by Trieste (Morandi 1939) – Fig. 2.

The Reich could have, undoubtedly, made claims of hegemony in the Danubian area using politics, economy and, most importantly, warfare, while Italy could only daydream throughout propaganda and the pages of “Geopolitica”. As already mentioned, the methodology used by Italian geopoliticians was the extensive use of statistics, which held a quantitative foundation apt for the study of certain phenomena. Alongside this, a historical context was built, which allowed a dynamic environment to fit and support events.

For the development of their arguments, Italian geopoliticians used historical analysis, which was founded upon ancient political traditions and geographical ideas deeply rooted in the history of the Italian peninsula. With regard to the Balkan case, for example, the myth of ancient Rome and the Venetian domination of the *Serenissima* Republic on the Dalmatian coastlines during the modern era were used, so as to trace some kind of historical continuity between the empires.

¹⁹ The Axis powers and the USSR were still bounded by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact at the time of publication of this charter.



Fig. 2. Map of Morandi's *Sintesi geopolitiche*, No. 10: *Il bacino Danubiano*

Source: M. Morandi (1939b: 628–629).

The political thinking of the republican Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872) was also reinstated: his thoughts, expressed in the *Lettere Slave*²⁰, were decontextualised and distorted in order to build a solid excuse for Italian expansionism (Scocchi 1940: 486–490).

Italy's expansion, at first, looked more like a desire for economic collaboration between states rather than an attempt at military submission. All the studies carried out by "Geopolitica" before 1941 confirm this assumption. In the years between 1918 and 1938 (thus even before the beginning of fascism), Italy had tried expanding its economic initiatives in the Balkans, failing for the most part because of a lack of entrepreneurial activities and for the constraints posed on bank activity (La Marca 1979). According to "Geopolitica", the "world that came out after Versailles", expression of British imperialism, was doomed to fail, and would later be regenerated under the guidance of the Tripartite Pact. With the Italian conquest of Albania, a new era of change was opening up for Rome, which would have had a new economic and political role in the world's scenario. For all these reasons a new attempt at expansion in the east was necessary (Pracchi 1940).

²⁰ A short essay from 1871 in which Mazzini described the directions of the future international politics of Italy.

An *ad hoc* conflict: the illusion of the “parallel war”

While the German forces had already defeated Poland and the Netherlands, and France was close to falling, Mussolini was forced to remain neutral to the conflict because of the unpreparedness of the Italian army. The “non-belligerence”, however, was a bitter pill for the Duce, who had founded his political programme and the regime authority on military expansion and warriorlike ethics. When in 1940 the German victories on the field caused the material obstacles and internal politics of the intervention to vanish, Mussolini decided to enter the fray. On 10 June 1940, Rome declared war on Paris and London. After a clumsy military offensive in the Alps, Mussolini managed to secure an armistice with the already defeated France at the start. Becoming aware that there was no fair military effort, and consequently there would have been no equitable division of the spoils of war, Mussolini hastened to cut out an exclusive area for Italy in the Balkans, before Hitler turned his attention to it.

For this reason, an *ad hoc* war was created, which “Geopolitica” had the chance to reflect on. The base from which the Italian ambitions started were as usual anchored to ancient history and to Latin culture, but there was no shortage of ideas based on racial and economic reasons. In the months preceding the Greek and Yugoslavian campaigns, the magazine published a series of articles in which, through complicated racial analysis and reconstructing a partial and biased historical context, it was possible to demonstrate the proximity between the modern Yugoslavs and the Italians and, at the same time, the inferiority of the “southern Slavs” compared to the Mediterranean-Italic race (Battaglia 1939; Anonymous 1941). These articles served to undermine the credibility of the Yugoslavian state, portrayed as an artificial *collage* of different ethnicities, races and languages.

The real invasion began in March 1941. On 25 March, Yugoslavia, in order to avoid diplomatic encirclement, joined the tripartite pact for about forty-eight hours. The Italian indignation was not long in coming, since the entry of the Slavic country was seen as a betrayal, not only towards the fascist objectives but also towards the original principles of the Pact. “On 25 March [...] we felt it [...] almost like a day of mourning. For the first time a false element, ethnically ill and notoriously treacherous, was admitted to enter the healthy family of the Tripartite” (Carelli 1941). The situation changed rapidly: to avoid joining the Axis, a *coup* by a group of pro-British Serb officials deposed Prince Regent Pavle and the Prime Minister. In response, a few days later the Axis forces invaded Yugoslavia: the war operations took place between 6 and 17 April, when the high Yugoslav command was forced to surrender (Cattaruzza 2015). The cold shower for the interventionists arrived soon: after the Yugoslav capitulation, Italy had to deal with the Reich’s presence in the area as a “third factor”. The German-

-speaking element, which remained discrete during the Weimar Republic and the first five years of the Nazi regime, had begun to show closeness to the National Socialist party, after the *Anschluss*: this was an important factor that determined the structure that Hitler eventually decided to give to the region (Wörsdörfer 2004). When Germany proceeded with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the spoils of war were divided equally between Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary; in this way, Italian expansionism had a reduced room for manoeuvre. The provinces of Ljubljana, Split and Kotor were assigned to Italy while the provinces of Rijeka and Zadar were enlarged. Montenegro was temporarily ruled by a civil commissariat, while a large part of Kosovo and Macedonia were annexed to Albania. Furthermore, the Independent State of Croatia, an Italian-German military *condominium*, was created. The State was formally a monarchy²¹ and a protectorate subjected to Italy. The government was placed in the hands of the far-right nationalist party Ustaše and its Poglavnik: Ante Pavelić.

Apparently, Italy had thus fulfilled the highest aspirations of radical nationalism, owning directly and indirectly all the eastern Adriatic coast, from Trieste to Albania. However, the context in which these territorial expansions matured was not the most reassuring. The German occupation of part of Slovenia, which had never been nationalist, took place to prevent the Italian presence in the immediate eastern border, already weakened by the major presence of alien populations, on which one could make little reliance during war (Violante 2013). In April 1941, Mussolini complained: “After the Yugoslavia collapse, we found half of a province on our hands and, we must add, the poorest half. The Germans communicated a boundary to us: we could not but acknowledge it” (Susmel 1960). Despite the Duce’s proclamations, Italy remained a medium power, unable to determine the conditions for its foreign policy.

Even the editorial staff of *Geopolitics* was able to express subtle disappointment; however, in the critical situation of conflict there was no room for complaints, the magazine immediately aligned itself with the Duce’s decision. The Italian aspirations were finally put aside in favour of an apparent compactness of the Axis front and of an obsequious respect for the decisions coming from beyond the Alps. The case of the Independent State of Croatia is perhaps the most emblematic to demonstrate how “*Geopolitica*” was always at the service of fascist politics. The same instruments that had been used until a few months before to justify military intervention in Dalmatia were used to raise the new and unexpected ally to the level of the other Axis forces²².

According to the magazine, with the entry of the Kingdom of Croatia into the “family” of the Tripartite Pact, the problem of Italian security on the eastern border was overcome, therefore an expansion in that direction was no longer necessary.

²¹ The Prince Aimone of Savoia-Aosta was appointed, but he never set foot in Croatia.

²² See G. Carelli (1941), R. Sertoli Salis (1941).

The Italian claims against the eastern coast were completely abandoned. The peoples who, until a few months before were called “swarm of Slavs”, now became valiant populations, unjustly set by the Habsburgs against the Italian peninsula, to placate the ethnic minority wishes of independence. The Croatian economy, mainly agricultural, would have been perfectly complementary to Germany, an industrial country, and to Italy, an agricultural-industrial country. Moreover, the proximity of Croatia to the Danube economic basin would have guaranteed Italy the much-desired commercial mobility to the east. The contradiction of the new geopolitical vision was summarised in this sentence:

Few thousands of Italians from Dalmatia would not have been enough justification for a total annexation of the Adriatic coast [...] to sacrifice our influence in Croatia for some historical memory and for a few kilometres of coastline once you could still get the most absolute security in Adriatic, it would have been a mistake. This is not a compromise solution, but an unequivocally realistic solution (Salis 1941).

With the *Wehrmacht*'s intervention in Yugoslavia in April 1941, not only the clumsy Italian campaign in the peninsula ceased, but also the military credibility of Rome: the dream of a “parallel war”, where Rome would have managed the conflict in autonomy and fought on equal terms alongside Berlin, then dissecting Europe according to their hegemonic desires, finally ended. The tensions between the Axis powers in the Danube area, the mutual lack of esteem and trust between the regimes' hierarchies and, finally, the campaigns in Yugoslavia and Greece clearly indicated that Rome could only obey the decisions taken in Berlin, the only true power between the two (Deakin 1962). With this string of events, “Geopolitica” was slowly preparing to make its readers accept the reality of fact, a relationship of subordination in terms of economic competition in that geographical sector (Vinci 1990). For this reason, all subsequent articles on the subject were cautious in establishing the Italian primacy, preferring compromising proposals with the Germans, for example in the economic field, or using subtle arguments, such as ones relating to race.

The “Geopolitica's” coverage of the Greek campaign was also subtle. On 12 October 1940, Berlin notified Rome that, following Romania's request, a German military mission would go to Bucharest and that *Luftwaffe* airplanes would defend oil wells (Knox 1982). The Duce was outraged by the occupation of Romania, a decision taken without consulting him: once again Hitler made Mussolini face the facts. Thus, it was decided to invade Greece via Albania: “This time I will pay him back with his own coin: he will know from the newspapers that I have invaded Greece. Thus, the equilibrium will be restored” (Ciano 1980), the Duce affirmed. The invasion of Greece, which lasted until April 1941, was an organisational disaster and humiliation for the Italian army.

“Geopolitica”, however, when reporting the military venture used triumphal tone as early as November 1940. While Italy suffered heavy defeats in the Hellenic mountains, the magazine dedicated an article to Greece, where the country was presented as poor and backward, projected exclusively to the sea and slave to London, to which it delegated its military defence. For this reason, it was accused of being a state with little sense of national independence: according to the authors, the greatest sin committed by the Greek people was having favoured British politics and therefore being a potential threat to Italy, despite having signed a promise of neutrality with the Axis countries (An asterisk²³ 1940). The Greek campaign was long and bloody: not only did the army not complete the invasion in a short time, but also gave way to the Greek army to carry out a counterattack in the Italian territories in Albania, which took place from November 1940, thanks also to the support from the RAF. Geopolitics did not give further information about the Greek campaign until the capitulation of Athens: in April 1941, a geographic map of Greece was published, edited by Mario Morandi, in which the Hellenic territories were analysed (Morandi 1941).

Here the roles were switched. Greece was presented as a country that had tried to rise to Aegean power, encroaching beyond its geographical boundaries: the invaded became the invader. In the following months, after fighting in the peninsula and establishing a collaborationist regime, Geopolitics made a sharp turn and rewrote Greek history and its relations with Italy: the Greek peninsula had always been subject to foreign powers, due to its very important function as a natural link between the West and the East. The amputation of Thrace and Macedonian departments in favour of Bulgaria was the price to pay for having supported London. It was not specified who was the new master of Greece but certainly with the conclusion of the Hellenic campaign also the project of “parallel war” failed once again. The partition zones were defined and assigned by Berlin without any consultation with Rome: Geopolitics no longer dedicated any further study to the turbulent peninsula.

Towards the Black Sea: neighbourhood policies with Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania

The Italian geopolitics agreed in supporting, even if never openly, the need to avoid direct contact between the *vital spaces* of the two main Axis powers in the Danube area. For this reason, there was a strong focus on Hungary: a perfect buffer between the spheres of influence, a country that came out defeated by the Great War and which found itself mutilated in various territories in favour of neighbouring countries. The Italian diplomatic apparatus and “Geopolitica”

²³ It was common for the editors of the magazine to sign with one, two or three asterisks concealing the name of the true author of the article.

were always very careful to maintain frequent and friendly relations with their Hungarian ally.

The magazine dedicated numerous articles to the Magyar country, supporting more than once the territorial claims and the need for the establishment of a “Great Hungary” that could organise the Danubian area under its own influence. In particular, Hungary was openly supported to resolve its dispute with Romania regarding Transylvania, a region lost by the Magyar country following the Treaty of Versailles: “the Italian border is on the Carpathians [...] the Fascist Government cannot tolerate variations that do not lead to a strengthening of Hungary or at least to its consolidation” (Three asterisks 1939), the magazine declared in 1939. In May of the same year, the editors published a study on Transylvania, where they did not only expose the territorial dispute, but also used the occasion to demonstrate, with various historic fabrications, how Hungary and Italy were linked: this is how the Magyar country became an ancient Roman bastion against the Slavs and Turks²⁴, which since ancient times was inspired by the Mediterranean’s “civilising breaths” (Three asterisks 1939).

According to the editorial staff, the line of demarcation between East and West passed through Transylvania²⁵: the authors pretended not to be biased in finding a solution but suggested a way of compromise, where the Western Latin culture, strong in Transylvania, could represent a point of encounter between the Magyars and the Romanian people, brothers in culture of the Italian people, though Greek by faith. According to the authors, the Hungarian influence would have “purged” the Romanian culture of the Greek component, allowing it to come into contact with the Latin heritage.

“Geopolitica” also expressed open sympathy for Italian-Hungarian cultural relations and promoted an academic friendship between Rome and Budapest, demonstrating the desire for tight cultural exchange between the two countries (Anonymous 1940). However, the vaunted proximity between Italy and Hungary was more in the print than the facts: once again, “Geopolitica” depicted a diplomatic context that was far from reality²⁶.

As for Hungary, “Geopolitica” had immediate sympathy for Bulgaria, which supported the desire to review the borders. The country was defeated in both the Balkan Wars and the Great War and gave up the southern Dobrugia to Romania and the Western Thrace to Greece as a result of the Treaty of Neuilly, effectively losing access to the Mediterranean Sea. “Geopolitica” continued to insist on the

²⁴ And, following Operation Barbarossa, also anti-Soviet.

²⁵ It was common to speak about the “European mission of the Hungarian nation”, where St. Stephen’s crown was able to gather and unite different cultures and ethnicities of the Danube. See N.d.d (1939), Three asterisks (1940), D. Cametti Aspri (1940), P. Scrosoppi (1941), G.D. (1939).

²⁶ See Ciano’s diary notes: G. Ciano (1980: 384).

idea of a mutilated Bulgarian country, regarding sea access, vital for its economy, but also of a link with the Mediterranean culture and dynamism. In the vision of the Danubian area as a watershed between the Italian and the German spheres of influence, the magazine called for a Bulgarian friendship to bring Sofia closer into Rome's orbit. The magazine's Bulgarian contributor and correspondent Dimitri Jaranoff argued that the Danube made Bulgaria an essential country because of the connection between the states of the basin and central Europe. Across the river, the economies of large countries such as Czechoslovakia, Austria and Germany could be easily connected to the Black Sea, where the railway network and the large Bulgarian ports could push Mitteleuropa's goods to the Balkans and to the Mediterranean. However, the proximity to the Danubian system was, according to Jaranoff, artificial and temporary: the true Bulgarian vocation was Mediterranean (Jaranoff 1940). The magazine devoted few articles to Bulgaria, mostly focused on the friction with Romania.

One may ask, therefore, why "Geopolitica" had neglected the relations between Italy and Romania, even though the two Latin countries were effectively united by ancient cultural bonds. The motivation is found in Italian foreign policy, which, albeit seeking a diplomatic friendship, never completely succeeded in finding a favourable echo in Bucharest. An agreement between the two countries was attempted from the second half of the twenties, when General Averescu came to power in Romania. However, even though he was in favour of fascism, he always avoided jeopardizing the stability of the Little Entente and the relations with France. Although there were mutual interests to establish stable commercial contacts, these were conditioned by belonging to different political constellations. The activity carried out between 1933 and 1936 by Nicolae Titulescu, a Romanian diplomat and politician, drastically deteriorated the relations between the two nations, in response to the policy of the Four-Power Pact, which was particularly disliked by France and by the countries of the Little Entente. Rome's open support for the revisionism of the countries bordering Romania, first and foremost Hungary, could certainly not be welcomed in Bucharest. Romania also supported the Western democracies in imposing economic sanctions on Italy in 1936. When in August 1936 Victor Antonescu replaced Titulescu, the Italian press cheered for the elimination of an obstacle to friendly Italian-Romanian relations. However, the political-diplomatic situation was now compromised and relations between Bucharest and Rome remained tense (Grego 2010).

Therefore, "Geopolitica" followed the official Italian foreign policy line too: even without hostility, the magazine always took the side of the countries that opposed Romania, with regard to territorial disputes, namely Hungary and Bulgaria. The only occasion "Geopolitica" sided with Romania was in December 1939, when the Soviet Union put pressure on Bucharest to obtain Bessarabia. The surreal solution proposed by the magazine for Bucharest was to peacefully

liquidate the disputes with Hungary and Bulgaria and to embrace the Italian influence in the Balkan-Danubian region: a solution, according to the authors, “well seen by many chancelleries”. The geopolitical influences from both the continent (with reference to Germany) and the east could only be balanced by Mediterranean influences (Three asterisks 1939).

Conclusions

As we have seen, the attempt of a military and economic expansion beyond the eastern border was one of the main themes of the fascist foreign policy. In the production of “Geopolitica”’s articles, two phases can be identified. In the first phase, prior to military intervention, Italy was depicted as a hegemonic power in progress, which by picking up the legacy of ancient Rome, was preparing to rebuild a Mediterranean imperial unit. Equal to its German ally both from a diplomatic and military point of view, Italy could afford to express its expansionist goals, grasping every pretext and any justification both geographical and historical. In the second phase, which followed the entry into war, the editorial staff played a role of mediation and compromise: military unpreparedness was unmasked, so “Geopolitica” worked in the production of articles that would make their readers accept the status of a secondary power that Italy had to play in relation to Germany. Prudence and respect for Berlin were necessary measures to not irritate the powerful ally.

Although it has always remained independent of the will of the regime and never became its megaphone²⁷, “Geopolitica”, with its articles, well represents the collapse of the Italian hegemonic dream, which attempted to rebuild a Mediterranean geopolitical unit, independent of Berlin, and the completion of the German Mitteleuropa, which extended from the Baltic to the Danube, thus dividing the two halves of that great geopolitical area known as *Trimarium*.

Once the war ended, geopolitical studies, compromised by the instrumental use by the Axis regimes, were denied for decades. In the same way, Italian relations with the Balkan and eastern countries remained in line with the United States until the end of the Cold War.

²⁷ The magazine was founded under the regime’s auspices but was never used as direct voice of power. On the contrary, the exponents of the government, despite not having any kind of hostility, showed misunderstanding and underestimation of the journal’s propaganda potential.

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Od Adriatyku po Morze Czarne: włoska ekspansja gospodarcza i militarna na Bałkanach i w obszarze naddunajskim

Zarys treści: Po zakończeniu I wojny światowej region Adriatyku znalazł się w okresie głębokiego kryzysu gospodarczego z powodu pustki spowodowanej upadkiem Cesarstwa Austro-Węgierskiego. Dawne porty Habsburgów, które dostały się Włochom, straciły swoje naturalne zaplecze jako okna Europy Środkowej (Mitteleuropy) na Morze Śródziemne z powodu ustanowienia nowego porządku politycznego w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Rzym podjął zatem szereg działań ekonomicznych mających na celu poprawę włoskiego handlu w portach juliańskich, przede wszystkim w porcie w Trieście oraz zachęcenie włoskich przedsiębiorców do penetracji Bałkanów. Realizowane bez powodzenia działania mające na celu pobudzenie handlowe wschodniego wybrzeża Adriatyku, połączone z dalmatyńskim irredentyzmem, stało się powodem oczekiwania na interwencję wojskową, która nastąpiła w roku 1941. Włoscy geopolitycy, którzy wówczas rozwinęli właśnie tę dyscyplinę, uczynili obszar Adriatyku wraz z Bałkanami jednym z najczęściej dyskutowanych tematów. Faszystowski projekt geopolityczny miał na celu stworzenie włoskiego szlaku handlowego między Adriatykiem a Morzem Czarnym, ominięcie cieśnin

tureckich oraz ekspansję z północy w kierunku Morza Śródziemnego nazistowskiej przestrzeni bałtycko-środkowoeuropejskiej. Rzym podjął próbę porozumienia się z innymi państwami naddunajskimi, które podpisały Pakt Trójstronny, aby stworzyć rodzaj obszaru współpracy gospodarczej pod przewodnictwem Włoch. Dlatego wschodnią granicę wpływów geopolitycznych Włoch wytyczono daleko od granic narodowych.

Rzym planował objąć swoją kontrolą obszar aż do prawego brzegu Dunaju, dzieląc się z Berlinem jego częścią południową, składającą się z terytoriów historycznie traktowanych (i akceptujących to) jako niemiecką i rosyjską strefę interesów, którą Rzesza zamierzała zreorganizować po oczekiwanej klęsce Związku Radzieckiego.

Kraje te, położone pomiędzy brzegami Mórz Bałtyckiego, Śródziemnego i Czarnego, zostały ponownie uwikłane w więzi geopolityczne narzucone przez interesy obcych krajów. Jednak projekty te pozostały jedynie na papierze, gdyż włoska inwazja na Jugosławię przerodziła się w porażkę i ujawniła słabość militarną Włoch. Rzym okazał się nie mieć wpływu na organizację powojennego Nowego Porządku. Włochy mogły marzyć o swojej potędze tylko na stronach czasopism.

Słowa kluczowe: Geopolityka, Bałkany, faszystowskie Włochy.

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