


The Italian Fascist regime, the Catholic Church and Protestant religious minorities in *terre redente* (1918-40)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.80505>
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This article explores the policies of discrimination and oppression towards Protestant communities in interwar Italy exercised by the state authorities and often incited by the Catholic Church. In particular, the circumstances in the multi-ethnic north-eastern region, the Julian March, are analysed in the context of so-called Border Fascism. The Protestant Churches had had in the past a prevalently ethnic character, but with the annexation to Italy, their background had been in several cases either concealed or, through migrations, Italians eventually became majorities. Another significant characteristic is that Slovene and Croatian minorities only rarely adhered to Protestantism, other than the relatively few Seventh-day Adventists and 'Fratelli'. Based on the archival documents, oppressive actions of the Fascist authorities against Adventists in Trieste as a response to a complaint by the Catholic curia accusing them of proselytism are reconstructed. The investigations and harassments of Adventists show all basic similarities to the episodes of oppression against certain Protestant minorities in other parts of Italy, while the nationality of their members was a crucial factor in determining why of all minority religions, aside from the Jewish, it was this community which experienced the most oppressive police treatment in the Julian March region.

Historical context

The implementation of oppressive state policies and measures, largely towards Protestant minorities in the new territories that Italy gained from the dissolved Habsburg monarchy (mainly the region

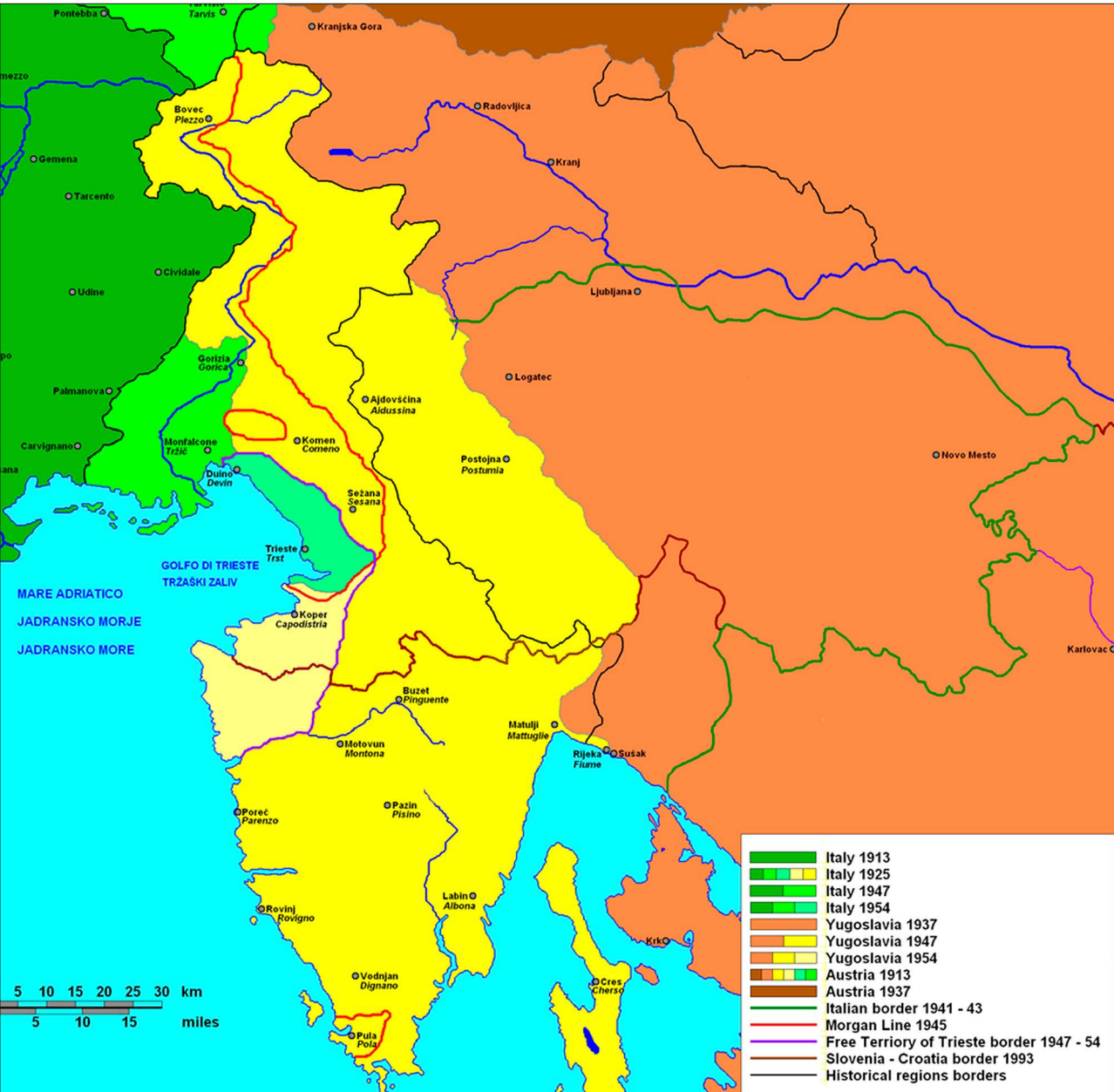
called the Austrian Littoral) along the northern Adriatic after World War I, will be discussed based on a regional case study analysing the involvement of major actors with a contextualization of the legal instruments and practices used.¹

The relevance of the research issue in this particular geo-political framework and time is multifarious. Few other regions of the world experienced such radical changes of political structures and shifting borders. In 1797 this territory, previously part of the Venetian Republic, was assigned to the Austrian Empire. A brief period of French rule followed between the years 1805–9 (Kingdom of Italy) and 1809–13 (Illyrian Provinces), while the Congress of Vienna (1814/15) consolidated the borders of the Austrian Littoral for approximately one century (Grandits 2018: 21–3; Žitko 2016: 61–2; Žitko 1999: 577–8). The territory identified as the birthplace of the concept of irredentism, the political action that aggravated the relationship between Italian

1 The author acknowledges that the research project 'Antifascism in the Julian March in Transnational Perspective, 1919–1954' (J6-9356) in the scope of which this article is published, has been financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

and Slavic populations as early as the nineteenth century; Italians demanding that the region with its significant Italian minority be incorporated into Italy (Hametz 2012: 32; Wörsdörfer 2009: 16). The 1920 Rapallo Treaty assigned the area that became known as the Julian March (It. Venezia

Giulia, Slo. and Cro. Julijska krajina) to Italy, although the majority of its population were ethnically Slovenians and Croats. Much of these lands, that in the interwar period were comprised of the province of Gorizia, Trieste, Pula and Rijeka (the latter since 1924), were of Venetian historical



The changing borders between Italy and Yugoslavia/Slovenia in the 20th century. Herigona, 29.12.2009. Wikimedia Commons.

provenance: hence, the name *terre redente* ('redeemed lands'). However, in the aftermath of WWI, the time of social crises provided an opportunity for inhabitants with pro-Italian nationalist agendas to substantially influence public opinion, increasing at least the noise of dissatisfaction with the new border that did not include all territories promised by the Allies to Italy in the Treaty of London (1915). The feeling of *vittoria mutilata* ('mutilated victory') and the so-called culture of defeat (see Schivelbusch 2003) were especially evident in this multicultural borderland, which became the place of one of the first violent Fascist acts directed towards the Slovenian and Croatian minority; for example, the squadristi's attack on the Yugoslav consulate in Trieste and the arson that destroyed the Slovenian National Home (Kacin Wohinz and Verginella 2008: 17–28; Pirjevec 2016; Gerwarth and Horne 2012: 4). Consequently, the first anti-Fascist and other previously anti-Italian movements also emerged in the Julian March; Slovenians and Croats particularly acting in opposition to the intensifying Fascist policy of a forced assimilation of (never recognised) national minorities that openly supported inclusion into the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia ('Slavic irredentism') (Kacin Wohinz and Verginella 2008: 24). This severe Fascist policy was based on the conviction that the region must be annexed to the rest of Italy as soon as possible and to that end it should be politically controlled and ethnically homogenized to blend in with the rest of the nation (Klabjan 2018: 991). The border remained a major issue after World War II. Between the years 1945 and 1947 the institution of Zone A and Zone B of the Julian March was introduced under Allied and Yugoslav military administration, followed by the establishment of the Free Territory

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Fascists burning down the Slovenian National Home and Hotel Balkan in Trieste, 1920.

of Trieste (1947–54) that divided part of the former Julian March into Italian and Yugoslav administration zones. In 1954 the area was divided between Italy and Yugoslavia, while it was only the Treaty of Osimo in 1975/7 which finally settled the border that has remained intact following the split of Yugoslavia and today divides the historical region among three countries.

The exploration of the cooperation between two institutions with similar interests but different motives in relation to religious minorities – the Fascist regime and the Catholic Church – in the Julian March, compared to other parts of Italy, to some extent depicts certain particularities. This is due primarily to the special regional policy ('Border Fascism') towards the Slovenian and Croatian Catholic clergy and also frequent suspicions of the anti-regime activities of certain Catholic and Protestant groups, mostly but not solely based on national affiliation rather than religion. The viewpoints will be examined through the archival and other sources of the state (predominantly the archives of the police and the prefecture) and Church archives covering the interwar period and

the months following Italy's declaration of war on the Allies on 10 June 1940, which exhibit a clear discourse of exclusion, with references to a 'freely interpreted' concordat and relevant laws.

The matter of religious minorities under the Fascist regime during the interwar period in the region of the Julian March has been scantily researched, with the exception of the repression of Jews after the introduction of the Italian Racial Laws (by authors such as Bettin 2007; De Felice 2001; Bon 2000; Podbersič 2016). Although the vast majority of the population in Italy² and the northern Adriatic were Catholic, including in the borderland's major centres, they displayed religious diversity in the nineteenth century and even before that. In interwar Trieste several Protestant communities were allowed to operate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church with a Germanophone ethnic background and the Swiss Reformed Church had been present continuously since the eighteenth century; the Anglican Church was founded in the first half of the nineteenth century; the Methodist Church with Italian character formed in the late nineteenth century; while the Waldensian Evangelical Church, also with typically Italian followers, was constituted in the area only after World War I. The latter was affiliated to the Reformed Church in 1927. Of the unpermitted religious communities, the Adventist Church was peculiar due to its majority Slovenian membership, while the position of the Salvation Army was uncertain, as it was in other parts of

2 Only approximately 135,000 people in Italy were Protestants in 1911, while 42 million were Catholic. In 1932 Mussolini was convinced that the number of Protestants stayed the same, adding that 37,000 of them were foreigners; however the Protestants were in fact fewer at that time (Piccioli 2003: 497; Spini 2007: 147).

Italy, especially in the 1930s. In Rijeka Protestantism was until 1918 mostly linked with the Hungarian and German communities, but, as would be expected, this ethnic character was gradually lost with emigration, Waldensian evangelism and the Fascist policy of national unification. In this sense we can understand that the larger 'Hungarian' Reformed Church and smaller 'German' Lutheran Church affiliated with the 'Italian' Waldensian Church in 1921 to strengthen their position as Protestant Churches, while it was at the same time a sign of a compromise, endorsing 'Italian' Protestantism. Likewise, in Opatija, the 'German' Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1920 was affiliated with the Waldensian Church. In Pula the 'German' Evangelical Church of Augustan and Helvetic confession closed in 1919, but in the same year the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church was opened. The merger also happened in Gorizia, where a once strong German Evangelical Church of Augustan and Helvetic confession was mostly dissolved, while their premises were taken over by the 'Italian' Methodist Church in 1922 (Carrari 2002: 143–54; Gottardi 1993: 81, 98, 101–3; Rajšp 2018: 11–40).

Moreover, the scholarship has mostly overlooked the position and role of Protestants within and in relation to the movements that the Fascist regime generated during the interwar era (particularly different modes of resistance). We can assume that the major reason for this lies in the predominant representation of anti-Fascists as Slavic (Slovenian and Croatian) and/or communist, while most Protestants were of Italian, German and Hungarian origin. Furthermore, Jews were predominantly Italophone. Protestant groups were indeed rarely involved in active resistance. However, acts of symbolic defiance occurred; for example with religious

conversions from Catholicism, which were considered as a break with the supposed Italian national unity that required adherence to the Catholic faith; besides, all Protestants were subjected to police surveillance and some individuals and even entire religious communities were suppressed.

The legal regulation of non-Catholic religious communities in Italy

Minority rights are often perceived to have been the product of the World War I peace treaties, but in fact they have a much longer history in international law. During the interwar period the protection of minorities was more of an international power play and applied to new and defeated states only, while the systems and practices created for their implementation under the League of Nations were defunct (Gilbert 1999: 397, 406, 409). Thus the Italian state authorities, in line with their unification and assimilation politics, did not formally recognise any type of minority status in the country (Pelikan 2013: 314). Accordingly, the national, ethnic and religious 'minorities' had very limited rights³ and the reference to these entities applied to non-Italian and/or non-Catholic groups that were at state-level minorities *per se*. No convention or treaty on minority rights has ever included an explicit definition which clearly identifies holders of minority rights; however the 'minority' groups in question are consistent with Francesco Capotorti's approximation of a generally applicable authoritative definition of a minority proposed in a study prepared for the UN Sub-Commission

3 Rights for national 'minorities' were mostly linguistic, including those cited in the Lateran Treaty, which stated that priests not fluent in the 'local language' could get a coadjutor (Mercati 1954). However, this clause was circumvented in practice.

on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities – that is to say, they are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position,⁴ and exhibit some distinctive subjective and objective markers based on self and other identifications (see Jackson-Preece 2014: 5; Vizi 2013). Furthermore, these identities, especially self-ascribed, should not be considered as fixed, but rather mutable, overlapping, multiple, heterogeneous and primarily time/place contingent. Henceforth the possibility of changing religious affiliation (Mithans 2016b) and even national identification (for 'hybrid identity' see Ballinger 2003), forced assimilation processes, mechanisms to restrain believers from leaving religious communities and the belief that one is 'born into religion' (cf. Jakelić 2010), all from different aspects illustrate the intersubjective character of a minority (and majority) identity (cf. Jackson-Preece 2014: 10).

The Fascist regime's treatment of minority religions in Italy was, unsurprisingly, deeply dependent on the state of the relationship between the representatives of the majority nation and majority religion. That was particularly the case when relating to the Protestant communities, given their 'traditional' antagonisms with the Catholic Church.

The legislative frames and with that the means to justify structural violence, mostly police and state violence based on ethnocentrism and (Catholic) religiocentrism, directed towards Protestants and other minority religions and groups (see Kamouzis 2017) considerably changed

4 A numerical minority can also be dominant, especially, but not exclusively, in the context of colonialism and even post-colonialism, and refers to religious minorities as well.



Signing of The Lateran Pacts, 1929.

in 1929 with the introduction of two key legal acts – the Lateran Pacts and the Law of Allowed Religions n. 1159 (*la legge sui culti ammessi* n. 1159). The Lateran Treaty explicitly acknowledged the Catholic Church in Italy as the state religion and represents Mussolini's approval of the politics of re-confessionalization. The Law of Allowed Religions, which due to the absence of a general law on religious freedom, is still in force today, was on the other hand at first reasonably well accepted by the Protestants, as the legislative context in which the confrontation between the Catholic Church and Protestant religious communities that took place changed from tolerated to allowed (Spini 2007: 127–30; Rochat 1990: 124–47). The Catholic bishops protested against the law, convinced that it obstructed the regulations in the Lateran Pacts (Perin 2011: 154–65; Zanini 2015: 691). Indeed the Law of Allowed Religions was also an instrument of the regime intended to remind the Catholic officials not to take their privileges for granted and must be interpreted in the context of the conflict between the Pope and Mussolini

over Catholic Action.

However, the royal decree n. 289 (28.2.1930), that was to implement the law of the previous year, showed that the law primarily provided a system suitable for guaranteeing political control and extensive interference with faiths other than Catholic through a series of considerable restrictions on the freedom of religion. Regulations were especially restrictive regarding opening new temples or oratories. The proselytising activities of non-Catholics were constrained. Moreover, the members of a so-called permitted or allowed religious community could hold 'public meetings' in places of worship only on condition that they were presided over or authorized by a religious official approved by the Minister of the Interior. However, according to article 18 of the Consolidated Law on Public Security, a meeting, although held in a private form, could also be considered public due to the place where it was held, the number of people present, or the purpose or subject of the meeting. The police practice applied this last provision to religious meetings of non-Catholics in private

places, forbidding and dissolving by force those meetings not authorized. This was a serious breach of basic religious rights when even worship at home could thus be denied (Madonna 2016: 13–14).⁵

The legal order of treatment of religious communities by the state had in fact four levels: the Catholic Church, with the Concordat, regained the position of an established Church in Italy; some minority religions permitted by the state had a special juridical status (e.g., Waldensians, Baptists, Methodists, Orthodox Christians, Jews, etc.), while all other religious communities that did not make an agreement with the state were subjected to the common law and were most vulnerable to attacks (Jews excluded, for their status did not make them ‘invulnerable’). Finally, there were also the banned religious communities.

However, it would be false to assume that such a policy was limited to Italy or characteristic only of Fascist and proto-Fascist regimes, as similar practices and legislation were extant in countries without authoritarian and/or totalitarian regimes. In particular, commonalities can be noticed in cases of the treatment of banned and unrecognised Christian communities throughout interwar Europe (Kapaló 2019).⁶

Anti-Protestant repercussions

In the 1920s Catholics perceived the ‘Protestant danger’ as an indistinct entity, and primarily they opposed the proliferation of that ‘heresy’ among the citizens of

central and northern Italy. This is the reason for the fixation of the leading members of the Catholic Church with Waldensian, Baptist and especially Methodist proselytism (Zanini 2015: 690; cf. Moro 1998: 45–63). The Fascist authorities, however, had already started their aggression against Pentecostals in 1925, and the oppression only intensified in the following years.

In April 1927, the regime’s campaign against the Protestant communities stepped up further when Arturo Bocchini, Mussolini’s Chief of Police and the head of the Italian secret political police, OVRA, instructed the prefects in each province to provide him with regular reports on their activities and membership, beginning regular surveillance of Protestant groups throughout Italy (Davis 2010: 66; Spini 2007: 137–50). Especially from 1938 onwards, with the introduction of the Racial Laws and the beginning of the war, a climate of distrust resulted in frequent police reports being filed by anonymous informers, civilians, volunteering to improve the efficiency of state surveillance, making numerous accusations against Jews, Pentecostals, and other religious minorities (Fonio 2011: 87). In particular, they collected detailed information on jobs, incomes, and behaviours and attitudes towards the regime (Franzini 2001: 141). For the most part, the root causes of the denunciations were ideological hate, competition in business, and/or mere personal dislike (Fonio 2011: 87).

Strengthened by the climate created by the 1929 Lateran Pacts, Catholic priests and bishops requested the involvement of state authorities in the defence of the Catholic faith (Scoppola 1973: 331–94; Davis 2010: 66–70). Subsequently in the 1930s hostility towards the religious minorities increased, usually due to the fear of anti-Fascist/anti-Italian sentiments of their representatives

5 ASTs, 3242 Prefettura di Trieste. The circular letter of the Ministry of the Interior, 31.3.1931.

6 Cf. Đurić Milovanović 2017: 449; AJ 69, 309 Vojislav Janjić, The Minister for Religious Affairs to all mayors of Belgrade. Belgrade, 5.5.1924.

as perceived by the state authorities. The suspicions the regime harboured towards any minority, religious or otherwise, which maintained international ties, was combined with a general prejudice regarding the populace and their capacity for self-determination (Rochat 1990: 74–5; Zanini 2015: 692). Not only did many Protestant Churches preserve contacts across borders, many pastors were educated outside Italy; and to varying degrees almost all were funded from abroad, usually by the USA (Rochat 1990: 17–20). That raised additional suspicions, especially with further German-Italian rapprochement and when World War II finally broke out.

While permitted denominations were tolerated, their activities were in great part expelled from the public sphere. Their ‘religious propaganda’ – proselytizing and public expressions of religious belief – was strongly opposed by the Catholic Church⁷ and often also by the Fascist militia (see Scoppola 1973: 352–63). The Vatican went so far as to request control over the missionary activities of Waldensians and other Protestants in newly acquired territories in Africa (Bosworth 2006: 258). Nevertheless, the civil administration in some disputes acted as a protector of the rights of religious minorities, particularly Protestants, against the pressures of the Catholic Church aligned with Fascist militia (Scoppola 1973: 339; Viallet 1985).

It is important to point out that while surveillance and intimidation of Protestant groups was part of the everyday life in the

interwar years in Italy, based on and incited by the idea of exaltation of the national value of the unity of faith propagated by Fascism, we cannot in fact speak of *persecution* prior to 1939. Only the years of the war would clearly show that in those legal acts was concealed a wide scope for administrative intervention according to the changing political directions (Scoppola 1973: 346; Rochat 1990: 241–74).

The exception were the Pentecostals. A real change in attitude towards Pentecostalism occurred between 1933 and 1934, and on 9 April 1935 the Pentecostal denomination was banned on the grounds that its rites had proved ‘harmful to the physical and mental health of the people’ (Scoppola 1973: 359). This shift in opinion occurred during the third phase of interwar Catholic anti-Protestantism, according to Renato Moro, following the *national* anti-Protestantism of the 1920s with hostility towards Protestants as *foreigners*, and the phase of *national religion* and *national-Catholic ideology* in the years between 1929 and 1933, marked by hostility towards Protestants as *enemies of religious peace* in relation to the Catholic Church and the state during the time of serious crisis over the question of Italian Catholic Action and its autonomy in 1931. The third phase of *Catholic Fascism* of the mid-1930s, with hostility towards Protestants who were considered as *anti-Italian* (Moro 2003: 318), were years of a convergence between the Catholic Church and the regime that lasted until 1938.

The Salvation Army was another religious group that was dissolved by the Fascist authorities, by means of a provision dated 17 August 1940. In 1939 and 1940 the oppression of Jehovah’s Witnesses reached its peak, when OVRA began persecuting Jehovah’s Witnesses in a more ‘efficient’ way than even Pentecostals (Rochat 1990: 229–39).

7 The Vatican even published and sent to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs a booklet titled *Il proselitismo dei protestanti in Italia* (‘Protestant Proselytism in Italy’) and the question of ‘religious propaganda’ was discussed in the only meeting between the Pope and the Duce on 11 February 1932 (Scoppola 1973: 340–2).

Complaints against several religious minorities after 1938 and especially with the entrance of Italy into the war, were followed by much more hostile measures than previously: premises were seized under the laws of war, oratories were closed, and permissions granted to particular religious officials were revoked (Scoppola 1973: 352–5; cf. Rochat 1990: 256–330).

Protestant communities in the Julian March

The issue of religious minorities on the one hand evolved differently within the context of so-called ‘Border Fascism’ (see Vinci 2011) in the Julian March than they did at the state level, while on the other hand the overall pattern was strikingly similar.

In comparison with the other Italian provinces, Fascism in the Julian March succeeded in thriving very early on by penetrating into already long-lasting social and especially national disputes that the war only intensified. Fascism in the border region was determined by the ‘defence of the state border’, accompanied by strong aggression towards external and internal enemies. Francesco Giunta, an Italian statesperson and leading politician in the early years of Fascism, who helped to build the Fascist movement in several regions of Italy and was particularly active in Trieste and the surrounding cities, persisted in declaiming that the uprising must start in the Julian March (Vinci 2004: 32). In this region Fascism was confronted with the as yet unfamiliar social, cultural and political circumstances of the ex-Austro-Hungarian territories populated by Italians, Slovenians, Croatians, Friulians, Germans, Hungarians and other nations and ethnicities. The enlarged state for the first time had to deal with sizeable national minorities (Pelikan 2013: 314). After the introduction of new borders in the Kingdom of Italy, 350,000 Slovenians and 150,000 Croatians (or

people of those origins) remained, as well as around 190,000 Germanophone South Tyroleans. Depictions of ‘Slavs’ as ‘barbarians’ that would happily accept the authority of the ‘descendants of the great Rome’ and assimilate were common misrepresentations of the time, based on myths and false national identity based concepts of *italianità* and *romanità* (see Visintin 2000: 79–95; Vinci 2004: 30–1). However, at the same time mistrust of the same people intensified after a proliferation of resistance movements, conditioning the responses of the police, intelligence services and militias.

In regard to the concept of ‘minority’ in this geographical setting, it is important to point out that Slovenians and Croatians in this region were in fact a numerical ‘majority’, although not in the major cities, and consequently they possessed limited political and economic power. Furthermore, few of the members of the religious minorities were ‘Slavs’. It is significant, though, that many of the Catholic bishops and archbishops were Slovenians and Croatians – in the interwar period gradually substituted by an Italian ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In the context of relations between the religious communities and the state in this border region where the religion of the majority was not a divisive factor but nationality/ethnicity very much was, the Fascist authorities wanted to prevent the regional Catholic clergy, and especially the hierarchy, from interfering in the process of ethnic assimilation of the Slovenian and Croatian minorities. To that end, in collaboration with the Holy See the approach of apostolic visitations had been used that produced reports based on ungrounded accusations, which led to the forced resignations of the last Slovenian archbishop of Gorizia, Frančišek B. Sedej in 1931 and of the bishop of Trieste and Koper Luigi Fogar in 1936. The latter was a Friulian



Lutheran Church in Trieste around the year 1900. Ed. Vierbücher, Milano.

who displayed sympathies towards national minorities (Pelikan 2013: 314–15).⁸ Moreover, restrictions on the use of the Slovenian and Croatian languages in the Catholic churches as the last ‘bastions’ where these languages were allowed to be spoken in public increased in the 1930s and in parishes near Trieste their use was banned (Pelikan 2002: 302; Mithans 2016a: 758–60).

Let us dwell on some characteristic insights of the communities in major cities – in more detail the Seventh-day Adventists in Trieste as a religious community that, besides the Jewish one, suffered direct oppression in the Julian March, while several other religious minorities experienced discrimination.

The great majority of Protestants in Trieste, Gorizia, Pula and Opatija were of Italian or German background; in Rijeka they were also of Hungarian origin. In the aftermath of WWI, the Julian March was a place where central European Protestantism encountered Italian and Swiss Protestantism, reducing and merging the differences based on language and customs. However, already at the time of the Austrian Empire it was quite common for the Evangelicals not to strictly divide the community according to Augustan and Helvetic rites in part for practical reasons, with the exception of Trieste, the largest city in the region.

The main Protestant communities were situated in Trieste, which was also the seat of the Seniority, which in 1863 comprised Protestant parishes in Trieste, Gorizia, Ljubljana, Maribor and Venice (the latter until 1866), and other communities that evolved in the region in the following years (e.g., Pula, Rijeka, Opatija). The Lutheran

8 Cf. AJ, 373, 1 General consulate of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes [SHS] in Trieste to the Embassy of the Kingdom of SHS to the Holy See, 12.3.1928.

Church was established in 1778 by German settlers; the Swiss Reformed Church built their own church in 1785, where the service during the interwar period was taken in Italian and once a month in German, while before the war it was only in German. The third oldest Protestant Church was the Anglican community, which was founded in 1830, but ceased to exist after World War II. Characteristic of Trieste was larger number of Italian speaking Protestants; amongst them there were also Methodists who had been present in the city since the late nineteenth century, and Waldensians as newcomers who in 1927 affiliated with the Reformed Church⁹ (Patzelt 1999: 45, 159–66; Carrari 2002: 143–54; Rajšp 2018: 14). The unpermitted Adventist Church with its majority Slovenian membership stood out, as will be illustrated in the subsequent section.

As presumably several Protestants in Trieste were members of Masonic lodges, organisations that were banned in 1925 by the state authorities due to their supposed anti-Fascism, in 1927 the prefect of Trieste raised the alarm that Protestant Churches were taking cautious anti-Fascist action through their dependent institutions as

well, which was disapproved by the police. The surveillance of the Protestant Churches continued according to Bocchini's order, but no particular information that would trouble the authorities was found. The 'suspicious behaviour' of Protestants in the Julian March was thus especially in the 1920s mostly related to their (supposed) involvement in Freemasonry. Although some individuals were suspected to have anti-Fascist sentiments because they were, according to the police, Freemasons, among them the Methodist pastors Umberto Ghetti from Pula and Felice Dardi from Trieste, further investigation showed they were not politically engaged anymore and no measures were then taken. In the case of Pastor Dardi, suspicion was also directed at him because of some public meetings he held, which, however, turned out to be merely a reunion of Methodist pastors (Carrari 2002: 158).¹⁰ Even though several Protestant communities in the Julian March had a prevalently non-Italian ethnic character, such as German speaking Lutherans, Hungarian Reformed Evangelicals, as well as Anglicans, and were surveilled, they were usually not considered dangerous to the regime.¹¹ Likewise, the Catholic Church

9 According to the data of the *questura* of Trieste, in 1929 there were approximately 600 Lutherans, 200 Reformed, 150 Waldensians, fewer than 100 Methodists, and 80 Anglicans in Trieste (Carrari 2002: 156–7), the estimated number of Adventists in Trieste and its suburban area in 1940 was around 180 (ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. Priest of S. Antonio Taumaturgo to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 5.3.1940; ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. The Priest of Servola to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 10.2.1940). The number of Lutherans and Reformed significantly decreased, as in 1923 there were still around 1200 Lutherans and 580 Reformed (Patzelt 1999: 161).

10 ASTs, 11511 The letter of the Prefect of Trieste to the Public Attorney. Trieste, 5.4.1930.

11 The Greek and Serbian Orthodox communities present in Trieste, Rijeka and Peroj near Pula were in a similar position (ASTs, 3242 Prefettura di Trieste, Comunità greco-orientale, The certificate attesting that the activities of the Greek Orthodox Church in Trieste are solely religious, beneficial and educational. Trieste, 9.2.1937). ASTs, 3242 Letter of the Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate for Religions, to the Prefect of Trieste. Rome, 3.6.1941; ACVCVTs, Prefecture to the Evangelical Community of Helvetic Confession recognising its 'Italian character' and thus considering it as an institution under public law. Trieste, 7.10.1924.

was more tolerant towards Protestant groups that did not proselytize outside their minority ethnic communities (Rochat 1990: 20, 144–5) than towards those that did, for example Adventists or Pentecostals. Yet the dissolved Lutheran and Reformed community in Gorizia in the 1920s decided rather not to ask for permission to hold their religious service in German on a regular basis, expecting political resistance at a time when the regime was already planning to gradually suppress Catholic worship in Slovenian, and their pastor had already been subject to police interrogation (Patzelt 1999: 230–40). For many of these communities the situation worsened with the commencement of World War II; and in the case of religious communities associated with the UK such as the Salvation Army, to some extent already in 1935 with British opposition to the war in Ethiopia.

Some consolidation in the form of early ‘ecumenism’ or ‘pan-Christian ideas’ among Evangelicals of Helvetic confession, Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans and Serbian Orthodox, excluding the Catholics,¹² emerged in Trieste as a response to the attacks by the latter mostly in the press and by the members of Catholic Action. Protestant communities in Trieste and elsewhere also experienced pressure from the state authorities, evidenced for example by difficulties in organizing religious education for children (Carrari 2002: 148–151), while their buildings had usually been restricted to more concealed locations even in the past (Gottardi 1993: 127). The collaborations were in fact much more profound,

12 One such ‘interdenominational’ event was the reopening of the San Silvestro church (the Evangelical Church of Helvetic Confession and Waldensian Church) in 1928. The Catholic Bishop Fogar was invited, but he courteously declined the invitation (Carrari 2002: 149).

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The inhabitants of Rijeka/Fiume cheering D’Annunzio and his raiders, 1920. Edward Alexander Powell, *The New Frontiers of Freedom from the Alps* (Project Gutenberg).

especially at the organisational level, with the Waldensian Church in Italy joining and sharing facilities with the Evangelical community in Rijeka in 1921, the same as a year before with the Lutheran community in Opatija (Gottardi 1993: 75–7, 97) and in 1927 the Reformed Church in Trieste.

In Rijeka the interethnic and interconfessional Evangelical community, autonomous since 1890, united the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. The community changed its name after World War I, first to the United Reformed and Evangelical Church of Augustan confession in 1921, then to the Christian Evangelical Reformed (Waldensian) Church, and finally in 1933 just to the Evangelical Church. The majority, over 60 per cent, of adherents belonged to the Reformed Church and the community had, until the end of World War I, a Hungarian ethnic character that was marginally maintained.¹³ Like most other Protestant communities with German and Hungarian believers that were affected

13 In 1931, the whole community consisted of 480 followers and 90 children (Patzelt 1999: 229).

by the emigration of their flock, the community transformed into a congregation with majority Italian adherents. Close by, in Opatija, in the Evangelical Church of Augustan and Helvetic confession, established in 1908, Lutherans prevailed. According to the joining agreement with the Waldensians, the religious service and religious study had to be held in German at least every two weeks (Gottardi 1993: 75–85, 81, 96–8; Patzelt 1999: 225).

The Lutheran and Reformed Evangelical community in Pula was founded as a filial to Trieste in 1866, gained independence in 1872, and was disbanded in 1919. The new Protestant community of around 100 people, the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church, which ‘took their place’, was in some sort of ‘ecumenical’ spirit comprised of several ‘denominations’: Baptists, Methodists, Waldensians, Adventists and Pentecostals. The pastor, Bartolomeo Cassano, who arrived in the city in 1927 not only succeeded in keeping such a heterogeneous community united and active, he also managed to ensure that the city was aware of its presence and its activity, overcoming the constant mild oppressive acts by the Catholic clergy under the fascist regime. His preaching had an anti-Catholic accent. He often took the opportunity to challenge the worship of the Virgin Mary and the saints on the days of the Catholic feasts. Gradually it became a community truly open to everyone, even to occasional passers-by (Gottardi 1993: 103).

In Gorizia the Evangelical Church of Augustan and Helvetic confession was established in 1861 by new German settlers. After WWI, this weakened Evangelical community of only around 100 remaining followers was not able to rebuild their church, damaged during the war, so in 1919 they rented it out and in 1922 sold it to Italian Methodists. Some of the

believers joined the Methodist Church. Henceforth it was the second community of the Seniority of Trieste (after the one in Pula), as Patzelt states, to not only *de jure*, but also *de facto* dissolve. The Methodist priest Pio Armati, who was friendly toward the German Evangelicals, proposed the unification of the two communities under the name ‘Italian Evangelical Methodist Episcopal Church’, but this was rejected by the German Evangelical Presbytery. The temporary existence of the dissolved remaining community was still possible because of the good relationship with pastor Armati, despite the fear on the part of the Methodists that their pastor would consolidate German believers and weaken the Methodist community. The pressure of the Methodist Church hierarchy on the rest of the Lutherans and Reformed communities intensified through the interwar period and with the prohibition on using their church the already very shaken co-existence was finally broken (Patzelt 1999: 230–40).

We can observe a familiar pattern that in the border region between Italy and Yugoslavia, Croats and Slovenians had not formed ‘older’ Protestant communities even though on the mainland there existed majority Croatian and Slovenian Protestant communities but were likewise mostly of ‘foreign’ ethnic character.

Oppression of unpermitted Protestant communities in the Julian March

When discussing the issues of oppressed religious minorities in the Julian March, three smaller and rather marginal Protestant denominations should be mentioned. The Salvation Army, an evangelical movement and organisation, had a hall in Trieste. Considering their characteristics, such as a profoundly British appearance and direct dependence on London, their

paramilitary character, and that they were the only religious entity in Italy that allowed women to become preachers, it was almost inevitable that the Fascist regime would eventually perceive them to be a threat or at least enough of a nuisance they would need to be moved against in some fashion. After a period of tension and temporary closures that caused a degree of diplomatic conflict between Italy and the UK, a disbanding of the Salvationists when the war began in Italy was expected (Rochat 1990: 229–39). At the end of 1940 a police report stated: ‘Apparently the activities of adherents of Protestantism are not in any contradiction to the directives of the Regime. Besides the religious sect “The Salvation Army” that was dissolved recently, no other pseudo-religious sects in this district seem to have an anti-national background.’¹⁴

The second group, again of non-Italian ethnic affiliation in Opatija, was the Evangelical Christian Church of the Brethren, the so-called *Fratelli*. Brethren were repressed all over Italy and destined for clandestine work. In the Julian March they were present also in Trieste, Monfalcone, Piran, Gorizia and Oslavia. A small community existed in Opatija, from 1928, sustained by the preacher Alfredo Veneziani from Trieste and Ivan Puz, an emigrant convert from the USA. They were ethnically Croats and held unpermitted religious community meetings at the private house of one of the believers. To ‘exorcise’ this ‘prayer house’, the Catholic parish priest made sure to place, during a procession, a statue of the Virgin Mary on the gate of the house opposite. The community was also known as ‘the religion of Puz’ and is a clear example of the ‘evangelisation

14 AS 1829, 31, 575 Report on political and economic conditions in the province of Trieste. Trieste, 23.12.1940.

of the returned’, more a phenomenon of Pentecostal circles (Gottardi 1993: 164–7). Their ethnic background made them, as in the case of Slovenian Adventists, a ‘double minority’ (cf. Măran and Đurić-Milovanović 2015: 87) – that is, a religious and a national ‘Other’.

The third group, the Adventists, were for the most part relatively well tolerated by the authorities in other parts of Italy, but stand out due to state oppression and the opposition of the Catholic Church in the Julian March. In Trieste the community was formed in 1925. There is not much information on the early years of the community’s existence in the city of Trieste and the countryside between Trieste and Koper until the year 1939 when an internal crisis emerged, while at the same time the community experienced increased police oppression that nearly put an end to the church (Rochat 1990: 187; Carrari 2002: 152). To elaborate, in the borderland, enforced Italianization made the Catholic Church and Fascist regime more apprehensive of any form of ‘disturbance’. Therefore, the Adventist Church, with its Slovenian character, was a more likely target of denunciations and police surveillance. Moreover, some Adventist publications were printed in Yugoslavia after this denomination had been prohibited there in 1924¹⁵ and brought to Italy, which caused

15 E.g., *Glasnik: organ Zajednice jugoslovenskih adventista* (‘Herald: Organ of the Yugoslav Adventist Community’), publisher and editor-in-chief N. Slankamenac [Adventist minister in Belgrade, added by the author], 1926–19??; Ellen Gould Harmon White, *Stradanje Isusovo za spasenje čovječanstva* (‘The Sufferings of Christ, 1869’), (Nakladno društvo G. Šašić i komp., 1927). Besides, Adventists also organised conferences in 1925 and 1931 in Serbian and Croatian parts of the country and their Publishing House was named Izdavačka knjižara ‘Preporod’.

further suspicion (Rochat 1990: 187; Sala 1974: 37–41).

In the second half of the 1930s the police in Trieste (*questura*) received a couple of reports produced by the Catholic curia condemning Adventists for ‘religious propaganda’; mostly dissemination of their periodicals, and investigated the matter according to their wishes (Sala 1974: 40).¹⁶ In January 1940, a Slovenian Catholic priest from the suburban parish of Servola sent a complaint against the small Adventist community of 30 to 40 followers to the Bishop’s Office in Trieste, which triggered a chain of events unfavourable to this small Protestant community.¹⁷ In response, the Bishop’s Office ordered a report on the activities of Adventists from the parish priest of San Antonio Taumaturgo (St. Anthony the Hermit) in Trieste. That Adventist community was, according to the priest, comprised of about 150 people, and the service was hosted by a Slovenian family.¹⁸

Information on Adventist proselytization collected by two parish priests seemed to be enough for the Bishop’s Office to request intervention by the police. The police commissioner agreed with the Catholic curia about the seriousness of the ‘issue’, indicating that Adventist activities amounted to false and subversive propaganda that divided the people, citing Mussolini in saying that what is done against the ‘State and the Nation’ is a crime.¹⁹ Naturally,

the police measures became more aggressive towards the Adventists soon after Italy joined the war, as did further accusations by the Catholic priest. Because many of the Adventists were Slovenians, the authorities considered them more likely to collaborate with the enemies, although Yugoslavia was not yet involved in the war. The priest from Servola correctly predicted in his letter of August 1940 that ‘the civil authority will do much more [than before Martial law was imposed on 27 July 1940 – added by the author] because the sect takes advantage of the war by paying the poor people to join their flock; they draw children into their midst while their fathers perhaps shed their blood for their country.’²⁰ In fact, the report from a priest from Trieste mentions that most of the adherents were poor workers to whom, ‘in a certain abundance’, subsidies (money, food and clothing) were distributed. Often, in this way, whole families would be supported.²¹ Adventists in Italy were dependent on the Adventist mission, in particular the European division located in Bern, which appointed their leadership and provided the necessary funds, in addition to a very high level of internal contributions (a tithing) (Rochat 1990: 19).

The war did indeed change the attitude of the police towards the Adventists which was until then still restrained and focused on individuals. In December 1940, one of the weekly reports of the police in Trieste to the Ministry of the Interior stated:

- 16 ADT, 1938/623 Police commissioner of Trieste to the Bishop Antonio Santin. Trieste, 22.11.1938.
- 17 ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. The Priest of Servola to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 8.1.1940.
- 18 ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. Priest of S. Antonio Taumaturgo to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 5.3.1940.
- 19 ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante.

Police commissioner of Trieste to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 4.4.1940.

- 20 ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. Priest of Servola to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 5.8.1940.
- 21 ADT, 1940/40 Propaganda protestante. Priest of S. Antonio Taumaturgo to the Office of the Bishop of Trieste and Koper. Trieste, 5.3.1940.

... the Catholic organizations grouped in the Catholic Action are directed by the Curia and have for some time shown a certain awakening, especially to counteract the Adventist action. The activity of these organizations has so far remained within purely religious limits ...²²

The next section of the report mentions:

... various Protestant and pseudo-religious sects that exist in this province do not cause excessive concern, because they still have few adherents and limited activity, with the exception of the 'Adventists', a community which has been recently developing especially among Slovenians. Their development has been cut short by known repressive measures and the Adventist sect is currently completely disorganized.²³

If the police, on the volition of the Catholic diocese, intervened against the Adventists in 1940 based on their likely 'subversive' actions due to the significant number of Slovenians in this religious organisation, the opposition of the Catholic Church was a response to the Adventists' increased proselytization activities. However, both authorities in the Julian March agreed that non-Catholic 'religious propaganda' was unacceptable as it threatened the unity of the nation. This may be a discourse of 'Othering' (see Dervin 2016: 43–55) *par excellence*, as it

22 AS 1829, 31, 575. Report on political and economic conditions in the province of Trieste. Trieste, 28.12.1940.

23 AS 1829, 31, 575 Report on political and economic conditions in the province of Trieste. Trieste, 28.12.1940.

clearly indicates the subordinate position of Slovenian Adventists who, apart from anything else, were likely to lose the support of their majority Catholic Slovenian minority. However, the conversion of some Adventists, which unfortunately I cannot back up with historical sources, could be an act of protest against the Catholic Church's non-interference against violent Fascist policies towards Slavic minorities, similar to the conversions to Orthodoxy of their compatriots in emigration in Yugoslavia (Mithans 2016b).

Conclusion

Protestant or Evangelical Churches and denominations, and to some extent other religious minorities in interwar Italy, represented an organised alternative platform for religious people vis-à-vis the Catholic Church in particular, and in most cases also against the interests of the Fascist regime. Another significant characteristic of Protestant communities was their multicultural and multi-national composition, even though that was not limited to borderlands such as the French-speaking Waldensian valleys and the Julian March. However, especially in the case of the latter, that was more pressing for the Fascist authorities due to the minorities' connections to the former state (Austria-Hungary) and to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, a country with which Italy, except during one short period, had unfriendly relations.

The reasons for the interventions of the Italian Fascist regime against religious minorities were usually based on suspicion of a non-Catholic community being involved in subversive activities. Intimidation was usually (unconvincingly) justified on the basis of a protection of 'public morality' and 'national unity'; therefore repercussions occurred particularly in

cases of connections with foreign countries in Europe or the USA, or when the state powers expected to gain some political advantage by supporting the accusations of the Catholic officials. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church and its organisations, irrespective of the nationality of their members, sought every opportunity to condemn the 'heretics'.²⁴ Throughout the years of the regime, surveillance and intervention intensified. The religious communities that experienced severe oppression in Italy aside from the Jews were unpermitted and banned denominations, especially Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Salvation Army, and mostly after 1938 and during the war when special laws were applied (Carrari 2002: 139, 156–7).

In the Julian March, where Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses were almost non-existent, the Seventh-day Adventists in Trieste were harassed by police on behalf of the Bishop's Office, which eventually caused their temporary disbandment. The peculiarity there was surveillance, intimidation and confinement of several Catholic priests of Slovenian and Croatian origin (Kacin Wohinz and Verginella 2008: 82–3), due to their support of or sympathies towards anti-Fascist movements, opposition to violation of minority rights and/or connections with Yugoslavia. These preoccupations of the Fascist regime backed by the 'pro-Italian' Catholic hierarchy at least to some extent decreased their dislike of religious minorities, although (mutual) religious prejudices were very much present

24 The more assertive organisations of the Slovenian Christian Socials stated among their aims, besides fervent anti-Fascist activities, to inform Slovenian papers in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia of the religious 'renegades' (Kacin Wohinz and Verginella 2008: 204).

(Pelikan 2018: 41–2). We can assume that where other divisions existed religion was not as important a divisive factor. On the other hand, as previously indicated, in the case of Adventists the reaction of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy as well as the police was practically the same as in other cases of intimidation of minority Christian groups all over Italy. The police proceeded in the way the Catholic hierarchy wished.

If the treatment of Protestants and some other marginal religious groups in Fascist Italy was largely dependent on the relations between the Catholic Church and the state authorities, the situation in the Julian March was even more complicated and forced assimilation of national minorities made the dialogue between religious communities very difficult. However, incentives for cooperation and solidarity between some Protestant Churches and the Orthodox Christian community did exist, but unfortunately did not succeed in including the Catholic Church. ■

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AJ = Archive of Yugoslavia
69, The Ministry for Religious Affairs in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (1919–29)
373, Embassy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Holy See
ARS = Archive of Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana
The collection of the sources of the royal questures of Trieste and Gorizia, SI AS 1829
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