

The spatial imaginary of the Balkans in second world war Italian service newspapers

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QUELLO CHE C' E' DIETRO IL PARAVENTO

(dis. di GEMIGNANI)

Figure 1. What's behind the divider (Source: «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 7 febbraio 1943, p. 2. Image courtesy of the National archives and records administration, College Park, Maryland)

Introduction

In February 1943, propaganda officers of the Italian Second army in occupied Yugoslavia struggled against the grim reality of recent events: Axis forces had suffered serious reverses in North Africa

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and Russia; Italian cities were increasingly falling prey to Allied aerial bombing; and, for the seemingly forgotten soldiers of the Second army, a year of costly mobile operations had failed to extirpate insurgency in the occupied zones. The illustration titled «What's behind the divider» (Figure 1), which took up half a page in the army's weekly service newspaper, epitomized the response of the propaganda officers to their dilemma.² The drawing depicted two combatants locked in a vicious hand-to-hand struggle. On the left, a uniformed and helmeted Italian infantryman, donning the little metal star of the Royal Italian army on his collar, was presented as the stronger of the two. His opponent on the right represented the Yugoslav partisans, identified by the red star on his cap. Compared to the Italian, the partisan appeared shoddily attired, his clothing poorly patched and his footwear in tatters. He was also depicted with long hair and beard, in the way Italian illustrators typically portrayed Serbs. The partisan seemed poised to attempt a low blow against his opponent.

But, the illustration's caption drew its reader's attention to the dividers or screens flanking the two belligerents, with an arrow atop the first divider pointing left towards «Europe» – portrayed as a gleaming mountain defended by well-drilled troops equipped with powerful artillery and an ample supply of trucks and ammunition – and a second arrow pointing right towards «Russia» – by contrast a barren wasteland featuring a monstrous wolf-like creature and a pile of human skulls. The device of the divider performed several symbolic functions. First, by portraying the struggle between the dividers as being hidden from the view of the main fronts, it acknowledged the sentiment within the army that Yugoslavia was an ignored and unappreciated theater of the war. Second, it reassured the Italian soldier that, with all of Europe behind him, he could draw upon the material and technological superiority of the Axis, whereas the partisan's Soviet backers could

² Quello che c'è dietro il paravento, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 7 febbraio 1943, p. 2.

offer only human cannon fodder and death. Third, it equated the Italian soldier's life-and-death struggle in Yugoslavia to the existential clash of civilizations that was taking place between the Axis powers of Europe and the Soviet Union. Deployed to a borderland region on the edge of Europe, the Italian soldier in Yugoslavia was European civilization's first defense against a foreign and inhuman communist menace.

In relaying these messages to his audience, the illustrator drew upon and contributed to what was by this point a well-entrenched spatial imaginary of the Balkans. Spatial imaginaries are «textual, visual or performative representations» that, while fluid in their contents and meanings, tend to «reduce complexity and shape identities [...] by homogenising space», often for political ends.³ One of the pioneering studies of spatial imaginaries was Maria Todorova's 1997 work, *Imagining the Balkans*.⁴ Surveying European and American journalistic, literary, and political output between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Todorova identified «Balkanism» as an essentialist discourse, framework, or «cognitive straightjacket» that guided observations and explanations about the Balkan peninsula and its populations.⁵ Taking full shape following the Balkan wars and the first world war, Balkanist discourse portrayed the Balkans as a backward, primitive, barbarian, and violent space, plagued by tribalism. But Balkanism also presented the region as a liminal space, a «semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental» inner-European other, that served as a «bridge between East and West».⁶ The illustration of «What's behind the divider» visually and literally depicted this spatial liminality, while drawing on stereotypes of barbaric violence in the features of the Yugoslav partisan.

³ K. Lawson, R. Bavaj, B. Struck, *Spatial Imaginaries*, in *A Guide to Spatial History: Areas, Aspects, and Avenues of Research*, St. Andrews, Institute for Transnational and Spatial History, 2021, <https://spatialhistory.net/guide/spatial-imaginaries.html> (last visited on 11 October 2024).

⁴ Citations are to the updated edition. M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, rev. ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁵ M. Todorova, *Scaling the Balkans: Essays on Eastern European Entanglements*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 89.

⁶ M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, pp. 16–17.

This study examines Italian military propaganda from occupied Yugoslavia through the lens of the Balkanist paradigm. Although Todorova's work integrated French, English, German, Russian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbo-Croatian sources, it offered very limited commentary on the Italian reception of and contributions to the pan-European discourse on Balkanism. Todorova's assertion that Italian writers used the adjective «Balkan» in a generally neutral fashion has been supported by studies of early twentieth-century travel writers and journalists commenting on the breakup of Yugoslavia.⁷ But, the spatial imaginary of the Balkans remains understudied in the Italian context. The same can be said of fascist Italy's wartime propaganda.⁸ Recent studies have focused on propaganda for the home front, highlighting administrative dysfunction and the challenges faced by the regime in developing a convincing official narrative in the face of defeat.⁹ On the home front, scholars have shown that fascist propagandists increasingly relied on the demonization of the British or Soviet other to mobilize public support for the war.¹⁰ Propaganda designed for and directed to Italian military personnel in theaters of operations has garnered even less attention, perhaps because military propaganda involved different institutions and the sources are more difficult to locate. However, some Italian army service newspapers from the second world war have survived in various libraries and archives. A few studies of Italian occupation practices

⁷ M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 31. L. Banjanin, "Un viaggiatore italiano alla scoperta della Bosnia," *Philologist: Journal of Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 28 (2023), pp. 20–33. P. Patterson, "On the Edge of Reason: The Boundaries of Balkanism in Slovenian, Austrian, and Italian Discourse," *Slavic Review*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2003), pp. 110–41.

⁸ J. Pili, *Building an Enemy: Great Britain as Depicted by Italian Fascist Propaganda*, in A. Wilson, R. Hammond, J. Fennell (ed.), *The Peoples' War? The Second World War in Sociopolitical Perspective*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, p. 71.

⁹ L. Petrella, *Staging the Fascist War: The Ministry of Popular Culture and Italian Propaganda on the Home Front, 1938–1943*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016.

¹⁰ J. Pili, *Anglophobia in Fascist Italy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2022. M. Stone, *Italian Fascism's Wartime Enemy and the Politics of Fear*, in M. Laffan, M. Weiss (ed.), *Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 114–32. M. Stone, "The Changing Face of the Enemy in Fascist Italy," *Constellations*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2008), pp. 332–50.

have integrated these sources effectively into their analysis,¹¹ but not with a central or systematic focus on the propaganda apparatus or on the creation, form, and reception of propaganda content.¹²

Like the soldier newspapers of the first world war, the service newspapers of the second world war contributed to the «mental universe» of the combatants.¹³ For Italian personnel in the occupied space of Yugoslavia, Balkanism formed part of their mental universe. This paper examines the Balkanist content in Italian military propaganda by placing these sources into their structural, social, and situational context. Italian military authorities and propaganda officers came to the occupied territories with an already well-rooted imaginary of the Balkans in place. The study first examines how Balkanist assumptions guided the policies and counterinsurgency strategies that shaped experiences of occupation on the ground. The study then shows how army propagandists attempted to impart those same assumptions onto Italian rank-and-file combatants who may not have shared the prewar conditioning of their commanding officers. This propaganda imagined the Balkans in three main ways: as a geopolitical space for irredentist and imperial expansion or defensive anticommunist crusade; as a topographical description that explained the challenging environmental and combat conditions faced by Italian troops; and, as an ethno-racial classification that demonized and dehumanized enemy partisans and occupied populations alike.

¹¹ See, for example, A. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia, 1941–1943: Strategie di repressione antipartigiana*, Roma, Viella, 2011, and S. Schmid, *Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien, 1941 bis 1943/45*, Berlin, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020.

¹² See the appeal for rigorous, systematic treatment of propaganda in T. Dell’Era, “La propaganda nel regime fascista,” *Passato e Presente*, vol. 25, no. 71 (2007), p. 136. Pioneering work by Mario Isnenghi and Teodoro Sala was not followed up on until recently. M. Isnenghi, “Russia e campagna di Russia nella stampa italiana, 1940–1943,” *Italia Contemporanea*, vol. 32, no. 138 (1980), pp. 25–47. T. Sala, “Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia nella propaganda per le truppe occupanti italiane (1941–1943),” *Movimento di liberazione in Italia*, vol. 24, no. 108 (1972), pp. 91–114. N. Virtue, “Religion, Race, and the Nation in *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 1942–1943,” *Modern Italy*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2018), pp. 373–93.

¹³ R. Nelson, “Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond,” *War in History*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2010), p. 168.

Balkanism as policy

Long before the invasion and partition of Yugoslavia, the Italian officer corps had absorbed the key features of interwar transnational discourse about the Balkans. The lengthy entry on the «Balkan region» in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* from 1930 revealed the extent to which Balkanism had permeated academic and official circles within Italy. Penned by a team of authors that included a geographer, a geologist, a zoologist, a botanist, a linguist, and an historian, and citing English, French, and German literature, the encyclopedia entry defined the spatial extent of the Balkans primarily according to topographical criteria, bound by seas, rivers, and mountains. Of the Yugoslav territories, the authors excluded only Slovenia from consideration. The ethnographic and historical sections of the article emphasized the supposedly unique relationship between culture and spatial conditions that characterized the region, noting how «the Balkans, like few other regions, constitute a clear example of how human affairs depend strictly on the natural conditions of that part [*spazio*] of the earth's surface on which they take place». The authors explained how, following the Romanization of the peninsula, a series of «barbarian invasions» – stemmed briefly by Venetian colonization – resulted in «ethnic fragmentation and mixing», which explained the «complex, difficult, and shaky» political conditions of the Balkans. In particular, the authors blamed Ottoman conquest and rule for the region's violent «guerrilla» tradition and for halting the historical evolution of the Balkan nations as part of the «European world». Instead, «there was a progressive orientalizing of customs» to develop a hybrid form of «Balkan civilization» characterized by «political, cultural, and civil immaturity». This lack of «wisdom and political moderation» informed the «fratricidal» Balkan wars of 1912/13 and doomed the postwar Yugoslav

state, which the authors dismissed as «new Serbian imperialism».¹⁴ Reflecting the views of established area experts and, semi-officially, of the fascist regime, the encyclopedia article described the Balkans as a liminal geographic, ethnographic, and political space, characterized by primitiveness, fragmentation, and violence.¹⁵

Themes of primitive violence dominated the Italian army's interwar assessments of the Yugoslav armed forces. While Italian military planners warned against underestimating the combat power of the Yugoslav army,¹⁶ they also employed essentializing assumptions that drew from Balkanist discourse. An October 1930 intelligence report described the Yugoslav soldier as being «led by hatred, brutality, [and] violence», while «higher senses of altruism and humanity are almost held in disdain, as signs of weakness». The «intellectual laziness» of the largely Serb officer corps was said to be «aggravated by the excessive habit of drinking, which is characteristic of the entire race». The report concluded: «The moral picture of the Yugoslav soldier is on the whole different from that of the western combatant. However, if he is morally inferior, his primitive qualities are, in the case of war, a good fighting aid».¹⁷

Thus, in 1941, when Italian generals applied martial race theory to justify their employment of irregular Serb bands as counter guerrilla forces, they drew not only upon colonial experience but upon a bed of ethnographic assumptions about the Balkans as a region beset by tribalism.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1930), s.v. *Balcanica, regione*, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/regione-balcanica_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/regione-balcanica_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/) (last visited on 1 October 2024).

¹⁵ The *Enciclopedia Italiana* represented a semi-official effort to accumulate expert knowledge on subject matter while expressing a fascist worldview. P. Cannistraro (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Westport, Greenwood, 1982, s.v. *Enciclopedia Italiana*. R. Bosworth, *Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism: From Dictatorship to Populism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2021, p. 72.

¹⁶ J. Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922–1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 76.

¹⁷ L. Longo, *L'attività degli addetti militari italiani all'estero fra le due guerre mondiali (1919–1939)*, Roma, Ufficio storico dello stato maggiore dell'esercito, 1999, pp. 407–10.

¹⁸ On the colonial dynamics of Italian policy, see F. Goddi, *Fronte Montenegro. Occupazione italiano e giustizia militare (1941–1943)*, Gorizia, LEG, 2016, pp. 154–72, and N. Virtue, *Revisiting the «Colonial Hypothesis»: The Policies and Language of the Italian Army in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia*, in M. Aterrano, K. Varley (ed.), *A Fascist Decade of War? 1935–1945 in International Perspective*, London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 134–48.

Echoing the historical and ethnographic interpretation of the *Enciclopedia Italiana* article, an Italian army high command report described Yugoslavia as a «mosaic of peoples, religions, and civilizations», within which the tribal, patriarchal, warlike, and self-interested Serbs exemplified «Balkan culture».¹⁹ General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli's assessment of «the peoples of the Balkans» considered the Serbs to be the most «rough and warlike» ethnic group in the region.

All told, the Serbs, despite their rough nature, still seem the best to me. The Croats are unctuous and false; true hypocrites, with a deep-rooted cowardliness that contrasts with the warlike and chivalrous spirit of the Serbs and Montenegrins. [...]

It is preferable to support national aspirations among the Serbs and Montenegrins rather than the Croats and Albanians. They are all more or less untrustworthy, but the least untrustworthy are still the Serbs.²⁰

By 1942, the policy advocated by Pirzio Biroli had been widely if unevenly applied by Italian military authorities in Montenegro, Herzegovina, Bosnia, and Croatia, much to the consternation of their Croatian and German allies as well as some fascist functionaries.²¹ But even Italian officers who were opposed to accommodating the Serbs agreed that the «Gypsy-like and colorful» Četnik bands they encountered expressed a sense of «military prowess».²²

The Italian army's local recruitment of irregular armed bands failed to stanch the rising tide of resistance across occupied Yugoslavia. Reflecting the lack of humility and the prejudiced

¹⁹ G. Pardini, *Mussolini e il «Grande Impero». L'espansionismo italiano nel miraggio della pace vittoriosa, 1940–1942*, Alessandria, dell'Orso, 2016, p. 116.

²⁰ A. Pirzio Biroli to Comando Supremo, 12 August 1941, in A. Biagini, F. Frattolillo (ed.), *Diario storico del Comando Supremo. Raccolta di documenti della seconda guerra mondiale*, Roma, Ufficio storico dello stato maggiore dell'esercito, 1989, vol. 4, tomo II, pp. 239–46.

²¹ M. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975. J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. E. Gobetti, *The Royal Army's Betrayal? Two Different Italian Policies in Yugoslavia (1941–1943)*, in G. Albanese, R. Pergher (ed.), *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 189–209. N. Virtue, «Occupation Duty in the Dysfunctional Coalition: The Italian Second Army and its Allies in the Balkans, 1941–43», *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2011), <https://jmss.org/article/view/58010> (last visited on 11 October 2024).

²² F. Mantovani, «I diari di Enzo Ponzi. L'esperienza di guerra in Croazia di un capitano dell'ufficio Propaganda (maggio-novembre 1942)», *Diacronie*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2017), p. 13, https://www.studistorici.com/2017/10/29/mantovani_numero_31/ (last visited on 11 October 2024).

worldview that plagued the Italian intelligence services of the fascist era,²³ staff officers in Yugoslavia resorted to Balkanist stereotypes to explain the spread of revolt. In annexed Dalmatia, intelligence officers blamed the first signs of anti-Italian resistance on the region's «endemic brigandage», which they were convinced was being redirected and coordinated by London and Moscow.²⁴ Later reports accused Croatian ustaše – the ostensible allies and agents of the fascist regime – of provoking dissent among Dalmatians who, «by tradition, instinct, a Balkan people», simply «refused to suffer any government».²⁵

The presence of armed resistance by a successful guerrilla movement in Slovenia prompted Italian officers to apply Balkanist representation to Slovenes, a group that the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (and Todorova)²⁶ excluded from categorization as a Balkan people. There, Italian authorities initially hoped to win over the local populations through what the Foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, described as a policy of «liberal treatment».²⁷ At first, Italian officers who had seen service in Bosnia and Croatia greeted transfer to Slovenia, with its European castles and cultivated fields, optimistically.²⁸ Guerrilla resistance disabused them of this notion. Now intelligence officers claimed that Habsburg rule had the same effect upon Slovenes as the Ottoman legacy had wielded on other Balkan nations. Citing a «very good expert on the subject», one

²³ G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane, 1935–1943. Dall'Impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005, pp. 152–54.

²⁴ Reports from Dalmatia in 1941 referred to «English» and «Russian» propaganda, spies, and agents. Archivio dell'ufficio storico dello stato maggiore dell'esercito, Roma [hereinafter: Aussme), N1–11, b. 582, *Diario storico* [hereinafter: Ds] VI Corpo d'Armata, luglio 1941, allegati, Notiziario n. 69, 11 July 1941. Aussme, N1–11, b. 583, Ds VI Corpo d'Armata, settembre 1941, allegati, Situazione in Dalmazia, 29 July 1941. Aussme, N1–11, b. 381, Ds Divisione fanteria «Cacciatori delle Alpi», ottobre 1941, allegati, Relazione informativa, 10 October 1941.

²⁵ Aussme, N1–11, b. 585, Ds VI Corpo d'Armata, gennaio 1942, allegati, Notiziario n. 244, 3 January 1942. National archives and records administration, College Park, Maryland [hereinafter: Nara], T-821/64/0953–56 (cited as microfilm collection/roll/frame), Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia, 2 July 1942.

²⁶ Todorova excluded Slovenia from her definition of the Balkans because Slovenes did not share the legacy of Ottoman rule. M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 31.

²⁷ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*, ed. R. De Felice, Milano, Rizzoli, 1990, p. 505. M. Cuzzi, *La Slovenia italiana*, in F. Caccamo, L. Monzali (ed.), *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia, 1941–1943*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2008, pp. 225–26.

²⁸ M. Casanuova, *I°/51*, Firenze, Fauno, 1965, p. 102.

intelligence report explained that the «dissatisfaction, restlessness, hypocrisy and perfidy» of Slovenes stemmed from their history of domination under the Habsburg and later Yugoslav states. This legacy, the report concluded, meant that Slovenes lacked the political maturity to appreciate the benefits of Italian rule.²⁹

These examples demonstrate the fluidity and malleability of Balkanist discourse, and they reveal the extent to which the intellectual and interpretive framework of Balkanism proliferated within the officer corps of the Italian army. Moreover, they show that Balkanist assumptions and expertise were consciously leveraged to explain resistance and to guide Italian policies of occupation and repression across Yugoslavia. Italian commanders repeatedly concluded that the indigenous populations in the occupied territories responded only to «demonstrations of force and fear of punishment».³⁰ General Roatta's infamous 3C circular directed Second army personnel not to trust civilians and to treat the enemy according to the principle of a «head for a tooth», in a way that was «comparable to colonial warfare».³¹ While not equivalent to the ways in which the «wild East» served as a «colonial space» that facilitated Nazi genocide, by 1942 the former Yugoslav territories had become «zones of exception» for Italian combatants: occupied spaces within which different rules and conditions applied than on other fronts.³² A growing body of literature has exposed the Italian army's terror-based counterinsurgency strategy featuring summary executions,

²⁹ Aussme, N1-11, b. 1058, Ds XI Corpo d'Armata, luglio-agosto 1942, allegati, Notiziario informativo n. 64, 29 June 1942.

³⁰ Aussme, N1-11, b. 381, Ds Divisione fanteria «Cacciatori delle Alpi», ottobre 1941, allegati, Relazione informativa, 16 October 1941, and Notiziario informativo n. 34, 29 October 1941. Aussme, N1-11, b. 514, Ds Divisione fanteria «Cacciatori delle Alpi», novembre-dicembre 1941, allegati, Notiziario informativo n. 40, 5 November 1941.

³¹ M. Legnagni, «Il 'ginger' del generale Roatta. Le direttive della 2a armata sulla repressione antipartigiana in Slovenia e Croazia», *Italia Contemporanea*, vol. 209/210 (1997-1998): pp. 159-60, 170.

³² On the eastern front as a «zone of exception» for German personnel, see E. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2021, p. 7.

collective reprisals, mass internment, and environmental despoliation.³³ Balkanist assumptions helped develop and sustain these measures. Italian military authorities then drew upon that same set of assumptions to help motivate the junior officers and conscript soldiers who were tasked with executing their policies.

Military propaganda in the Balkans

The Italian army's wartime propaganda apparatus represented a point of convergence between fascism and Italian military culture. During the 1930s, Mussolini's regime had sought to centralize control over the various propaganda instruments in the country through the bureaucratic structure of what eventually became the ministry of Popular culture (Minculpop).³⁴ This attempt to fascistize all forms of propaganda and cultural activity had produced friction with military authorities following the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.³⁵ With Italy's entry into the second world war and mass mobilization in 1940, Minculpop and the Italian armed forces high command came to an agreement that effectively transferred many propaganda tasks back to the military.³⁶ This included the creation and distribution of propaganda directed towards Italian military personnel. Although military publications were expected to comply with Minculpop directives and required formal approval

³³ See J. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941–1943*, New York, Enigma, 2005, P. Fonzi, *Oltre i confini. Le occupazioni italiane durante la seconda guerra mondiale, 1939–1943*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2020, E. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra. Gli italiani in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, F. Goddi, *Fronte Montenegro*, A. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, and D. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, trans. A. Belton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006 [Torino, 2003].

³⁴ P. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1975, p. 106.

³⁵ E. Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda. Il «Corriere della Sera» e la guerra d'Etiopia*, Milano, Unicopli, 2004, p. 12.

³⁶ P. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, pp. 220–21.

from Rome, in practice military commands produced much of their own material under varying degrees of censorship and supervision.³⁷

The personnel in charge of the propaganda offices, sections, and units in occupied Yugoslavia therefore enjoyed a relatively high degree of initiative. These officers were all fascist party members.³⁸ For the most part, they were reservists who were expected to have some combat experience as well as civilian experience in fields related to communications, journalism, and publishing.³⁹ The tasks of the propaganda officers included reporting on morale, giving speeches, liaising with dignitaries, overseeing counterpropaganda directed at the occupied populations, and supervising various forms of assistance and entertainment for military personnel, which included service newspapers.

Italian soldiers in Yugoslavia had access to major daily civilian newspapers like the «Corriere della Sera», which were sent from Italy, and military magazines like «Fronte» and «Forze Armate», which were printed in Rome and were directed at personnel on all fronts.⁴⁰ However, these materials did not reach all units equally, they often arrived late, and troops complained that they lacked appeal.⁴¹ It was the more limited run of service newspapers printed in the field by army, corps, and division commands that directly addressed the conditions confronted by the occupying forces in the region. These publications became more prominent following the first winter of the occupation. An early example was the «Per Voi, Soldati» section that first appeared in the daily newspaper «Il Popolo di Spalato» in December 1941. The newspaper was

³⁷ N. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale (1940–1943)*, Roma, Ufficio storico dello stato maggiore dell'esercito, 1998, pp. 283–85.

³⁸ Nara T-821/413/0241, Ufficiali addetti al servizio «P» – Requisito della iscrizione al P.N.F., 20 May 1942.

³⁹ A collection of personnel files for Second army's propaganda officers are available in Nara T-821/413/0001–340.

⁴⁰ N. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, pp. 285–89.

⁴¹ Nara T-821/413/0350, Andamento e sviluppo del Servizio «P», 3 November 1942. Aussme, N1–11, b. 585, Ds VI Corpo d'Armata, dicembre 1941, allegati, Relazione mensile sul servizio «P» per il periodo dal 15 ottobre al 15 novembre 1941, 8 December 1941.

established by fascist civil authorities in Split, but subsidized by the VI Corps (and later the XVIII Corps), whose propaganda officers arranged and edited a half-page section that was directed specifically at Italian military personnel.⁴² It featured an array of political propaganda, trivia, satirical essays, letters, and poetry, read by as many as 20.000 soldiers on a regular basis.⁴³ The editors encouraged Italian personnel to contribute their own pieces of writing to the newspaper, offering a small cash reward for the best entries.⁴⁴

The most important and impressive of the Italian army newspapers in occupied Yugoslavia was «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio». Appearing in mid-1942 with the blessing of Minculpop and the high command in Rome, it was published weekly with a run of 25.000 copies.⁴⁵ «Tradotta» was named and modelled after the Italian Third army's successful propaganda newspaper from the first world war.⁴⁶ The newspaper contained a combination of war bulletins and photographs, overtly political propaganda articles, a sports section, as well as cartoons, letters, and short stories. As with «Per Voi, Soldati», the editors of «Tradotta» called on Second army personnel – «men of letters and novices of the pen, the most famous writers and the humblest infantryman» – to contribute their writing and artwork to the newspaper.⁴⁷ Propaganda officers were told to print material that was intelligible to highbrow and humble readers, and that avoided blatant exaggerations or polemical diatribes.⁴⁸ The aim of military propaganda was to speak to the reality

⁴² Aussme, N1–11, b. 585, Ds VI Corpo d'Armata, gennaio 1942, allegati, Relazione mensile sul servizio «P» per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941, 5 January 1942.

⁴³ Aussme, N1–11, b. 1068, Ds XVIII Corpo d'Armata, gennaio 1943, allegati, Relazione sul servizio «A» dal 15 Novembre al 15 Dicembre '42, 3 January 1943.

⁴⁴ Due chiacchiere fra noi, «Il Popolo di Spalato», 16 dicembre 1941, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome [hereinafter: ACS], MCP-Gab, b. 141, f. Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata, G. Castellano (Smre) to G. Casini (Minculpop), 4 July 1942. N. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, p. 286.

⁴⁶ For the first world war edition, see M. Isnenghi, *Giornali di trincea, 1915–1918*, Torino, Einaudi, 1977, and V. Wilcox, *Morale and the Italian Army during the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁷ Collaborate alla «Tradotta», «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 1 novembre 1942, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Nara T-821/513/0686–0777, «Bollettino Mensile», 8 August 1942,

of the Italian soldier in a way that domestic periodicals could not. In the eyes of the Second army's propaganda officers, this made the army's service newspapers among the best suited vehicles for imparting a sense of duty and mission upon Italian soldiers stationed in the Balkans.

The Balkans as geopolitical and strategic concept

Propaganda presented the occupied territories geopolitically as part of fascist Italy's imperial space, but also and increasingly strategically as a liminal space protecting the Italian *Patria* from powerful enemies on other fronts. The idea of empire was central to Italian fascism, but the specifics of its imperial vision for the Balkans remained vague until the second world war. Propagandistic and academic literature from the 1930s had promoted Italian imperial expansion in the Adriatic along irredentist «territorial» lines and on the universalist basis of «moral and economic hegemony».⁴⁹ With Italy's declaration of war in 1940, and even more so following the invasion and partition of Yugoslavia in 1941, these vague expressions of expansionism coalesced into more concrete theories defining the Balkan peninsula as part of Italy's *spazio vitale* [living space] within the framework of a multiethnic Imperial Community headed by Rome.⁵⁰

Well into 1942, references to Italy's imperial mission could be found in the army's propaganda in occupied Yugoslavia. The newspaper «Popolo di Spalato» identified the entire Mediterranean as Italy's «vital sphere» [*sfera vitale*], within which it was Italy's historic destiny to bring «the light of its universal genius to others».⁵¹ Readers of «Tradotta» were presented the

⁴⁹ S. Bianchini, *L'idea fascista dell'impero nell'area danubiano-balcanica*, in E. Di Nolfo, R. Rainero, B. Vigezzi (ed.), *L'Italia e la politica di potenza in Europa, 1938–40*, Milano, Marzorati, 1985, pp. 173–86. E. Gentile, *La Grande Italia: The Myth of the Nation in the Twentieth Century*, trans. S. Dingee and J. Pudney, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2009 [Milano, 1997], pp. 171–82. D. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, pp. 42–71.

⁵⁰ G. Pardini, *Mussolini e il «Grande Impero»*, pp. 125–85.

⁵¹ Il Mediterraneo e l'Italia, «Il Popolo di Spalato», 30 aprile 1942, p. 2. Italia mattiniera, «Il Popolo di Spalato», 9 maggio 1942, p. 2.

by now familiar line that Italy was fighting to free itself from «suffocation» in the Mediterranean and to impose a new order in which «Rome returns as a beacon of civilization and justice», fulfilling fascism's mission of «imperial resurrection».⁵² This resurrected Roman empire included the so-called Independent state of Croatia as a fascist puppet state, even if Italian generals found their Croatian counterparts exceedingly difficult to manage in practice.⁵³ Military propaganda portrayed Italian soldiers as having liberated Croats from an eight-hundred-year «period of slavery» under foreign rule. The «light of *romanità*» would ensure the voluntary integration of Croats into the new Imperial community.⁵⁴ Another author expressed pride in this simultaneously liberating and imperialist mission:

I feel that in this land of slaves, martyrs and heroes, the Italian cause has dug a deep furrow with the sharp plough of history marching to the step of the new legions. Now more than ever I see the sublime light of a universal mission shine upon my dusty uniform.⁵⁵

These messages of Italo-Croatian unity within a universal Roman imperial framework sat uneasily with conditions on the ground and with the national and irredentist themes in Italian propaganda. The VI Corps's newspaper, «La Sentinella», ran an article at the end of 1942 on the Roman and Venetian architectural heritage in the coastal city of Split, noting how in the city «that which is not Roman is Venetian, in happy continuity». The article dismissed «Slavic» examples of art and architecture as «obscene».⁵⁶ These examples, which emphasized the return of Roman or Latin civilization to a region held in a state of backwardness by centuries of misrule, show how both the

⁵² Roma doma, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 25 ottobre 1942, p. 1.

⁵³ On the Italian army's challenging relationship with Croatian authorities, see E. Gobetti, *The Royal Army's Betrayal*, and N. Virtue, «Occupation Duty in the Dysfunctional Coalition.»

⁵⁴ Per conoscere la Croazia, «Notiziario del V Corpo d'Armata», 1 settembre 1942, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Paesaggi di Croazia, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 4 ottobre 1942, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Spalato e l'ombra di Diocleziano, «La Sentinella», 24 dicembre 1942, p. 3.

irredentist and universalist lines within Italian propaganda could be justified by making recourse to the key assumptions of Balkanism.

Imperial and irredentist themes never disappeared from the army's propaganda, but they became less pronounced towards the end of the occupation. Following the defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad, messages of imperial greatness gave way to propaganda exploiting fear of the Allied threat to Italy itself. In particular, it was the Soviet enemy that Second army propagandists linked spatially to the Balkans, by presenting the zone of occupation as an extension of the eastern front. The liminality so central to Balkanist representation took shape in geopolitical and strategic terms, whereby the antipartisan war in Yugoslavia was presented as a peripheral campaign within the broader titanic contest between European fascism and Asiatic communism. Anticommunist themes were nothing new to the fascist regime, which had consistently targeted communists as its principal internal and external enemy throughout the *Ventennio*. The Axis invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 produced another flurry of propaganda activity that demonized the Soviet enemy as godless, barbaric, and foreign.⁵⁷ The Italian officer corps shared a phobia of communism.⁵⁸ Moreover, Italian commanders saw value in presenting irregular guerrilla warfare in the Balkans as constituting a «single front» in common with that of other more conventional fronts in the war.⁵⁹

Italian military propaganda depicted Yugoslav partisans as «Bolsheviks» who took orders directly from Stalin, whose visage appeared regularly in the illustrated pages of «Tradotta».⁶⁰ This propaganda tried to convince soldiers that occupation duty in Yugoslavia was equivalent to

⁵⁷ M. Stone, "Italian Fascism's Soviet Enemy and the Propaganda of Hate, 1941–1943," *Journal of Hate Studies*, vol. 10 (2012), pp. 73–97.

⁵⁸ A. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ M. Legnani, "Il 'ginger' del generale Roatta," p. 159.

⁶⁰ Gloria alla cavalleria!, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 25 ottobre 1942, p. 2. Ribelli cruciali, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 15 novembre 1942, p. 2. Per chi combattono!, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 10 gennaio 1943, p. 1. Vattene! La nostra terra non è per te, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 17 gennaio 1943, p. 1.

frontline combat on the eastern front. Soldiers were reminded «that even fighting here on the stony ground of the Balkans you keep the war far from your family, from your home, from your fields».⁶¹

The Italian Second army, authors insisted, constituted a critical line of defense against an enemy inspired by «Asiatic philosophies» that threatened Italian families and Christian European civilization.⁶² Propaganda thus connected the antipartisan operations in Yugoslavia to the «crusade» against Bolshevism on the eastern front:

Here, in the Balkans, we don't just fight against an underhanded enemy that waits in hiding to claim victims for its ranks: here we fight an idea that is devoid of any human thought, that would like to bathe the world in a lake of blood and desolation. [...] You don't need to go to Russia to see desecrated churches and the destruction of religious ornaments. Just come to the Balkans.⁶³

As exemplified in the «What's behind the divider» illustration,⁶⁴ the Balkan region was presented as a semi-European space, vulnerable to «the sinister influence that Russia exerts from afar», but central to the preservation of European culture and identity.⁶⁵

The Balkans as topographical concept

Another author, commenting on the hybrid form that combat had taken for «we of the Balkans», argued that their theater reflected a combination of all the main fronts of Italy's war:

we have, here, the Russia of winter and the Africa of summer; that would be to say mud and rocks, cold and dust in turns; and an enemy as cowardly as the English, as cruel as the Russians, as treacherous as the French, as quick as the Americans and as barbaric as the Australians.⁶⁶

⁶¹ «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 14 febbraio 1943, p. 5.

⁶² Le donne partigiane, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 27 giugno 1943, p. 2. N. Virtue, «Religion, Race, and the Nation», p. 380.

⁶³ Il comunismo dei partigiani, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 8 novembre 1942, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Quello che c'è dietro il paravento, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 7 febbraio 1943, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Taccuino del combattente, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 7 marzo 1943, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Le lettere del fante Bonaventura, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 10 gennaio 1943, p. 6.

This passage not only connected occupation in southeastern Europe to combat on other more newsworthy fronts; it also identified the soldiers of the Second army as being «of the Balkans» themselves, having confronted an especially challenging enemy and a uniquely challenging set of environmental conditions. The natural environment featured heavily in representations of occupied spaces during the second world war, often interacting with stereotypes and images of occupied populations and enemy combatants. In the war against the Soviet Union, the expansive steppes and vast forests contributed to angst-laden imaginaries among Axis personnel about the «Savage East».⁶⁷ For Italian soldiers in occupied Yugoslavia, it was the rugged mountainous topography that defined the Balkans as a bleak, treacherous, and hostile space.

In his official 3C circular, Mario Roatta defined the «environment in which we operate» – including the terrain, climate, and indigenous populations – as «generally hostile».⁶⁸ The first impression of Enzo Ponzi, a propaganda officer with the «Sassari» infantry division based out of Knin, was that «the landscape is almost always hideous, craggy, rugged, barren, worse than the Carso» where he had served during the first world war. Ponzi's diary entry concluded, «what a sad arrival!»⁶⁹ An article in «Popolo di Spalato» described Herzegovina in entirely negative terms, as a «bare and desolate place» whose towns were a «modest conglomeration of mountain houses» where the Muslim population «live off the few crops that some depressions in the ground have allowed them to cultivate. Figures of a hard-hearted primitive people».⁷⁰ The authors of «Tradotta»

⁶⁷ D. Alegre Lorenz, «Fear and Loathing on the Eastern Front: Soviet Forests and the Memory of Western Europeans in the German Military Forces, 1941–1944», *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2021), pp. 125–41.

⁶⁸ M. Legnani, «Il 'ginger' del generale Roatta», p. 168.

⁶⁹ F. Mantovani, «I diari di Enzo Ponzi», p. 9.

⁷⁰ Il paese dell'Erzegovina, «Il Popolo di Spalato», 6 maggio 1942, p. 2.

likewise portrayed the region as a «sad and cursed land [...] that only has twigs and rocks»,⁷¹ and as a «hostile world in its natural and human manifestations: a rugged, distant, cloudy landscape».⁷²

Army propagandists emphasized the physical environment of the Balkans as a shared obstacle that united the dispersed personnel of the Second army. Mario Casanuova, an officer in the «Cacciatori delle Alpi» infantry division, observed that «danger and squalor makes men simpler, better and serves to unite them even if they are very different according to character and social class». He recalled after the war that «we were in fact rich in squalor and dangers».⁷³ Propaganda officers recognized that shared hardships could be mobilized to bolster cohesion and camaraderie within and between military units. A story in «Popolo di Spalato», for example, highlighted the camaraderie that emerged between Blackshirts and Alpini during a difficult and wintry march through the Tomorr mountains of Albania.⁷⁴ But, it was especially in the pages of «Tradotta» – that is, in a newspaper distributed throughout the Italian-occupied zones – where the topographical space of the Balkans was purposefully deployed to foster identification with the Second army as an imagined secondary group.⁷⁵

Direct references to «the Balkans» – as opposed to more specific places, regions, or nations under Italian occupation – featured more prominently in «Tradotta» than in service newspapers geared towards narrower audiences. A three-scene play written by a member of the V Corps was set in «the Balkans».⁷⁶ The fictitious sponsor for a photography competition was «Balcania

⁷¹ Bivacco, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 10 gennaio 1943, p. 3.

⁷² Disegni di un legionario, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 6 dicembre 1942, p. 3.

⁷³ M. Casanuova, *I°/51*, p. 114.

⁷⁴ Comandata sul Tomori, «Il Popolo di Spalato», 3 dicembre 1941, p. 2.

⁷⁵ On concepts of camaraderie and primary versus secondary group identity, see T. Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁷⁶ Il guardafilo ferito, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 20 settembre 1942, p. 3.

Perfumes and Beauty Products», headquartered in «the Balkans».⁷⁷ The newspaper's final issue of 1942 was a special color edition inspired by «Christmas in the Balkans». The editors' Christmas salute to their readers emphasized that, regardless of where they were stationed, all Italian soldiers were colleagues in a single united Balkan theater [*in Balcania*]:

Today, the Christmas holiday brings us even closer together wherever you are in these Balkans

[*questa Balcania*] in which we have lived for more than a year and a half.

We see you in your garrisons in Slovenia, in Croatia, in Dalmatia, in Serbia, in Herzegovina, we stand beside you in the isolated little posts along the railroad, in the frontier posts on the wind-beaten roads, in the guard posts: all of you, we see you all, comrades-in-arms of the Balkans [*commilitoni di Balcania*].⁷⁸

The «life of the soldier in the Balkans» was full of hardship. It was portrayed as a series of long marches through «rugged, malignant, stony mountains», laden with heavy packs, over paths of stone «that split the soles and shred the uppers» of Italian boots.⁷⁹ The threat of «ambush» was said to be the Italian soldier's «daily bread».⁸⁰ And yet, the newspaper claimed, these shared dangers had produced a sense of belonging and duty among Italian combatants. Propaganda section chief Aldo Centofanti himself penned a story about a soldier who had spent fourteen months «in the Balkans» before finally being granted leave. The soldier returned to «his green world» of La Sila in Calabria, only to find himself feeling out of place among friends and family who did not understand how the war had affected him. He «returned to his world almost in silence, as he had lived in silence during his fourteen months in the Balkans», thinking repeatedly of his

⁷⁷ 1° concorso «una licenza per un sorriso» organizzato dalla «Tradotta» per il dentifricio Balcanaja S. A., «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 25 aprile 1943, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Natale in Balcania, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 20 dicembre 1942, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Disegni di un legionario, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 6 dicembre 1942, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Imboscata: nostro pane quotidiano, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 1 novembre 1942, p. 2.

fallen comrades, «the screams of the wounded, the crackling of machineguns...» After two weeks at home, the soldier asked to return to his unit in Bosnia as quickly as possible.⁸¹

The Balkans as ethno-racial concept

Italian impressions of the natural environment intertwined closely with their representations of the guerrilla enemy and occupied populations as racially primitive and savage. A letter from the fictitious Private Bonaventura to his girlfriend, published in «Tradotta», lamented that the rocky terrain defined not only the region but its people:

There is nothing here but stones: you turn around and you see stones, and in front of you yet more stones, to the right and to the left, wherever you look, stones and then more stones: where do you expect people with good morals to be born?⁸²

Other articles offered contemptuous descriptions of the living conditions of the local population, characterized by «filth everywhere partly because of the lack of water, partly because of negligence and poor education».⁸³ An especially hyperbolic essay noted how

the villages are dirty, the hovels are filthy, education is backwards or else absent. The incurable desire for the ghastly is the prevailing and absolute law that is sown among these sterile mountains and barren plateaus of agony and anguished moans.

The author credited traditions of «mountain banditry» – rather than the disruption of invasion, partition, occupation, and civil war – for the «social chaos» that Italian soldiers encountered in the field.⁸⁴ A purported letter from an Italian corporal to his mother described the Balkans as a

⁸¹ Feritoia, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 18 ottobre 1942, p. 2.

⁸² Le lettere del fante Bonaventura, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 3 gennaio 1943, p. 6.

⁸³ Anche «Bose» è vestito, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 22 novembre 1942, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Il piccolo serbo, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 15 novembre 1942, p. 2.

«land that we cannot love», inhabited by «people that have nothing in common with us, filthy drunks, scoundrels, traitors that neither feel physical pain nor share the refinement of our race».⁸⁵

In the context of a brutalizing guerrilla war, contempt easily transformed into hatred. Although their propaganda declared that «hate» was «a Balkan word»,⁸⁶ Italian military authorities valued «hatred against the enemy» as a key element in combat motivation.⁸⁷ The characteristics of guerrilla warfare and hatred of the partisan enemy was a central theme of Italian propaganda in occupied Yugoslavia.⁸⁸ Propaganda portrayed the «cowardly ambushes of the partisans»⁸⁹ as dishonorable tactics that justified ruthless countermeasures.

We Italians do not know the cowardly ways of betrayal and disgrace, we have always fought openly and fairly [*a viso aperto*] [...] against the cursed enemy. No longer: Italian soldiers have learned how to hate these murderers of women, this enemy that dares compare itself to Rome and its civilization, and stoops to machinegunning a child.⁹⁰

The army's propaganda frequently focused on children – invariably depicted as half-starved and clothed in rags – as «the innocent victims of Balkan communism»⁹¹ and the «pitiful remains of a people that has decreed its own extermination».⁹² These interpretations drew on and contributed to a Balkanist reservoir of imagery presenting «the Balkan people» as a savage, tribal, and self-destructive group for whom communism offered special appeal.⁹³

⁸⁵ Al partigiano comunista addosso sempre!, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 23 maggio 1943, p. 5.

⁸⁶ Riconoscimento, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 30 maggio 1943, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Nara T-821/413/1134, Assistenza morale alle truppe, 19 January 1942.

⁸⁸ T. Sala, «Guerriglia e controguerriglia.»

⁸⁹ Facciamo il punto, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 25 ottobre 1942, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Odiare, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 8 novembre 1942, p. 1.

⁹¹ Il piccolo serbo, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 15 novembre 1942, p. 2. The quotation is from «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 28 March 1943, p. 1.

⁹² Fame, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 6 giugno 1943, p. 1.

⁹³ Although it became a more central feature of Balkanist discourse after the second world war, communism was first grafted onto the image of the Balkans during the interwar period. M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 133.

Atrocity propaganda emphasized not only the assassination of «entire families, including women and children and honest priests» by partisans,⁹⁴ but the gruesome treatment of Italian wounded and prisoners. «Tradotta» warned that the partisans mutilated and executed any Italian officers and non-commissioned officers they captured, coercing enlisted men to assist with the executions and subjecting them to forced labor afterwards if they were not themselves shot. In a running section labelled «Telegraph news from the Balkans», the newspaper attributed these atrocities to ethno-racial characteristics in a region where «human flesh has as much value as tree bark»:

The execution is for partisans a ritual associated with the primordial savage massacres customary to these barbarous and primitive people. The partisan, killing, enjoys feeling the old bloody instincts rise again.⁹⁵

Mixing Balkanist and anti-Slav rhetoric, a eulogy to a fallen carabinieri described him as a «victim to an ambush in this sad and murderous Balkan war» that pitted the «brigandage of the Slav partisan against the heroic chivalry of the Latin soldier».⁹⁶ The recurring anti-Slav themes in Italian propaganda – which emphasized the supposedly characteristic physical attributes of Balkan Slavs and regularly referred to populations and partisans alike by the derogatory and ethnically charged epithet, *crucchi* – were rooted in the histories of Italian irredentism and border fascism.⁹⁷ But, reflecting the interwar fusion of Balkanism with European racist discourse, Italian propagandists

⁹⁴ «Picchiasodo», 28 luglio 1942, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Notiziario telegrafico dalla Balcania, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 26 aprile 1943, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Feritoia, «La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio», 4 ottobre 1942, p. 3.

⁹⁷ N. Virtue, «Religion, Race, and the Nation», pp. 375, 381–82. S. Bartolini, *Fascismo antislavo. Il tentativo di «bonifica etnica» al confine nord orientale*, Pistoia, Istituto storico della Resistenza, 2008. T. Catalan, *Linguaggi e stereotipi dell'antislavismo irredentista dalla fine dell'Ottocento alla Grande Guerra*, in T. Catalan (ed.), *Fratelli al massacro. Linguaggi e narrazioni della prima guerra mondiale*, Roma, Viella, 2015, pp. 39–68. E. Collotti, *Sul razzismo antislavo*, in A. Burgio (ed.), *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia, 1870–1945*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999, pp. 33–61.

in occupied Yugoslavia refashioned these ethno-racial stereotypes within the framework of the spatial imaginary of the Balkans.⁹⁸

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Italian military authorities approached the occupation with an already well-established bed of Balkanist assumptions, which informed the ways they processed intelligence, interpreted insurgency, and developed policy and strategy. As the state of security in the occupied territories worsened, army propagandists increasingly employed Balkanist imaginaries in their messaging towards rank-and-file personnel. This messaging manifested itself geopolitically, topographically, and ethnographically. Geopolitically, fascist and military propaganda portrayed parts of the Balkans as imperial or irredentist spaces for Italian expansion, but it also portrayed the Balkan region in its entirety as a liminal space and battleground between a civilized Christian West and a savage communist East. Speaking more directly to the situation of the individual combatant, military propaganda also emphasized the uniformly bleak and rugged topographical and environmental features of the Balkans to establish a sense of comradeship or group identity among the dispersed units, garrisons, and personnel of the Second army. Propagandists explained the hostility and armed resistance that Italian soldiers faced by proliferating ethno-racial assumptions about semicivilized, tribal, and violent Balkan peoples.

The extent to which this propaganda was received and assimilated by ordinary soldiers is difficult to measure. Postwar memoirists claimed that conscript soldiers regarded propaganda officers with contempt,⁹⁹ and that soldiers largely rejected «fascist propaganda» about the

⁹⁸ M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, pp. 124–25.

⁹⁹ E. Loss, *Memorie inutili di un ottuagenario: Nato senza camicia negli anni '20*, p. 31, http://reader.ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/v/473655/Memorie_inutili_di_un_ottuagenario (last visited on 24 September 2024).

necessity of the occupation and the motivations behind the insurgency.¹⁰⁰ Certainly, near the end of the war, there was a growing distance between common soldiers and the military leadership.¹⁰¹ In the case of occupied Yugoslavia, it has also been assumed that Italian soldiers from rural backgrounds likely sympathized with fellow peasants.¹⁰² There is some evidence for this, even in the army's propaganda. An article in «Per Voi, Soldati» section of «Popolo di Spalato» claimed implausibly that in Croatia «everyone likes us [...] because we are peasants too».¹⁰³ Army chaplain Pietro Brignoli later recalled that the peasant conscripts in his unit were troubled by the Italian policy of burning rural villages. But, he also encountered soldiers who regarded local populations as an «inferior race» and who recommended «gassing [*ipritare*] the region».¹⁰⁴

For some combatants, the conditions and circumstances of military occupation and guerrilla warfare seemed to confirm the veracity of Balkanist assumptions. Mario Casanuova initially felt sadness for «the poor families that saw their homes destroyed» in Italian reprisals, but he noted that «the pity quickly disappeared when I realized that the huts burst like fireworks factories, because almost all of them were full of munitions hidden in the attic».¹⁰⁵ In his role as chaplain, Brignoli was tasked with performing last rites on Slovene prisoners before their execution. He noted how the ritualized and drawn-out performance of the execution by firing squad made the condemned appear like the emotionless and fatalistic barbarians that propaganda made them out to be. When Brignoli met the prisoners in private, they «cried their hearts out» for a quarter of an hour. But, by the time they were led to the execution site, the prisoners appeared

¹⁰⁰ M. Casanuova, *I°/51*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁰¹ B. Bellomo, *Lettere censurate*, Milano, Longanesi, 1975, p. 178. A. Lepre, *L'occhio del Duce. Gli italiani e la censura di guerra 1940–43*, Milano, Mondadori, 1992, pp. 79–98.

¹⁰² D. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, p. 163.

¹⁰³ Živio Duce (Viva il Duce!), «Il Popolo di Spalato», 9 dicembre 1941, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ P. Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati. Le spietate rappresaglie italiane contro i partigiani in Croazia dal diario di un cappellano*, Milano, Longanesi, 1973, pp. 97, 109.

¹⁰⁵ M. Casanuova, *I°/51*, p. 59.

calm. Brignoli explained that, since the attending Italian soldiers saw the prisoners only at that point, «they concluded that they were apathetic people, for whom we were almost doing a favor by killing them».¹⁰⁶

A survey of censored wartime correspondence – sources that need to be treated cautiously given the biased agendas of censor officials and the tendency of letter writers towards self-censorship¹⁰⁷ – reveals that, although defeatism had become widespread by 1943, soldiers often echoed themes from fascist propaganda in their letters.¹⁰⁸ Second army personnel were demoralized and unmotivated. Mainly, the soldiers expressed a longing for home and a fear of partisans. But, they also echoed propagandistic themes of anticommunism and anti-Slavism, often contrasting Italian civilization with perceived Balkan barbarism. Several letter writers drew comparisons between their theater and «Russia», noting the hostility of the «wild people» of the Balkans. Fearful of partisan brutality, letter writers accepted the army’s harsh reprisals as justified. They expressed little compassion towards the local populations and depicted the landscape only as ragged, dangerous, and devastated.¹⁰⁹

Some soldiers heeded their propaganda officers’ call to contribute short stories and poems for potential publication in their service newspaper. While most of these contributions were never in fact published, some survived among the records of the Second army’s propaganda office. As with private correspondence, these contributions most often sought escape from the torment or

¹⁰⁶ P. Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁷ L. Rizzi, *Lo sguardo del potere. La censura militare in Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale, 1940–1945*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1984, pp. 26–30. P. Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra. Sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1997, pp. 16–17. On the other hand, it has been noted that, by the end of the war, letter writers increasingly defied the censors, who themselves frequently allowed subversive information to reach its destination. E. Cortesi, “‘La verità è verità e non si cancella.’ Gli italiani e la censura postale, 1940–43,” *Contemporanea*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2002), pp. 117–21.

¹⁰⁸ P. Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra*, pp. 312–13. B. Bellomo, *Lettere censurate*, pp. 20–29.

¹⁰⁹ B. Bellomo, *Lettere censurate*, pp. 148–57. G. Manca, “Lettere dal fronte. I soldati italiani nella Jugoslavia occupata (aprile 1941–luglio 1943),” *Passato e Presente*, vol. 24, no. 68 (2006), pp. 124–31.

boredom of occupation duty, writing wistfully of loved ones back home. But here, too, authors sometimes emulated propagandistic references to the «Balkans» as a «cursed land».¹¹⁰ One short story set during a rainy «Balkan October evening» painted a characteristically bleak scene among whitish rocks.¹¹¹ Another described the «Balkan guerrilla war» as «a hard, rough and tumble life with little satisfaction, full of traps and ambushes [...] exhausting work».¹¹² The correspondence and literary contributions of Italian military personnel suggest that, while military propaganda failed to achieve its intended purpose of improving morale and combat motivation among Italian troops, it was more successful in imparting vocabularies and interpretive frameworks, which included spatial imaginaries of the Balkans.

These imaginaries were kept alive in the immediate postwar years as the Italian state and military establishment sought to avoid the prosecution of Italians for war crimes. The government of Yugoslavia sought the extradition of hundreds of Italian officers, soldiers, and civilian functionaries to stand trial after the war. The Italian War ministry responded with «counter-documentation» on crimes committed by the partisans or Ustaše, highlighting the «complex» nature of hate-fueled ethnic and religious violence in the Balkans. The memoirs of senior officers similarly justified Italian violence as a legitimate response to the exceptionally brutal character of the guerrilla enemy in the region.¹¹³ Roatta's memoir reminded readers that communism «exerted great fascination among the Slav populations of the Balkans».¹¹⁴ His close collaborator, Giacomo Zanussi, wrote that guerrilla warfare was inevitable «in a Balkan state, where bearing arms is as common as tea is for the English».¹¹⁵ Writing nearly two decades later, Mario Casanuova, a

¹¹⁰ Nara T-821/439/0579–83, *Il cieco*, n.d.

¹¹¹ Nara T-821/439/0570–73, *Una magnifica avventura*, 8 February 1943.

¹¹² Nara T-821/440/0305–306, *Sulla guerriglia balcanica*, 27 November 1942.

¹¹³ F. Focardi, «A Successful Strategy: The Failure to Punish Italian War Criminals and the Creation of a Self-absolving Memory,” *Journal of Military History*, vol. 88, no. 2 (2024), pp. 404–409.

¹¹⁴ M. Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette. L'esercito italiano in guerra 1940–1944*, Milano, Mondadori, 1946, p. 173.

¹¹⁵ G. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, Roma, Corso, 1945, p. 98.

medical officer with antifascist leanings, described in exotic terms the ethnographic «blending of East and West» in the «boiling cauldron» of the Balkans, where the war took on the character of a Western film.¹¹⁶ Although Balkanist rhetoric and stereotypes largely disappeared from European discourse during the Cold War,¹¹⁷ the memory of occupation and counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia may have contributed – alongside the «orientalizing rhetoric» on the *foibe* massacres produced by Istrian exiles – to the resurgence of Balkanist discourse in Italy during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, still evident in European and Italian representations of the Balkans today.¹¹⁸

The pervasiveness and influence of the memory of fascist Italy's wartime occupation of Yugoslavia should not be exaggerated. The Yugoslav theater remained a largely forgotten front when compared to the campaigns in North Africa or against the Soviet Union, about which Italian veterans produced many more memoirs.¹¹⁹ Nor does this study seek to overstate the effectiveness of the Italian army's propaganda during the second world war. Nonetheless, even if many Italian combatants in Yugoslavia wanted nothing more than to return home and forget the occupation, their service newspapers at the very least familiarized them with a Balkanist paradigm comparable to that shared by literary and political circles elsewhere in Europe at the time. That paradigm ultimately conditioned how the Italian army represented and how Italian participants remembered the Balkans as an occupied space.

¹¹⁶ M. Casanuova, *I°/51*, pp. 7, 19, 92.

¹¹⁷ M. Todorova, *Scaling the Balkans*, p. 88.

¹¹⁸ P. Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 154–56. F. Tarabusi, «Development, Balkanism, and New (Im)Moralities in Postsocialist Bosnia-Herzegovina», *Focaal*, vol. 87 (2020), pp. 75–88.

¹¹⁹ A. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, p. 113. Scianna estimates that Italian authors published over two hundred memoirs on the eastern front. B. Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941–1943: Operations, Myths and Memories*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 267.