

**Constantly Mobilized. Mass Rallies in Fascist Italy During the 1935-36
Ethiopian War: Case Study Based on the Province of Istria**

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, I am analyzing the mass rallies that the Fascist regime organized in Italy's Province of Istria in correlation of the 1935-36 Ethiopian war. Relying on official regime representation of these events through the writing of the regime-affiliated press and confidential documents, I discuss the main organizational and ideological features of the mass rallies, with an emphasis on the manner in which the fascist authorities prepared them and the way they were presented in the press. The thesis also deals with the question whether the mass rallies were highly centralized propagandistic celebrations, with an ideological meaning imposed from the center in Rome, or were regional events, initiated or even spontaneously improvised by local authorities. Since the Province of Istria's population was made by a majority of Slav-speaking people, I will also include their perception of the Fascist mass rallies through the writing of their émigré press.

It will be argued that the Italian Fascist regime organized the mass rallies during the Ethiopian war in order to obtain constant mobilization of support from the masses towards the regime and its military endeavor in Ethiopia, as well as a useful propaganda and tool of Fascist pedagogy aiming for the total fascistization of the Istrian people.

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Introduction

Massive crowd around three thousand persons intervened at gathering in Albona stop huge enthusiasm became uncontrollable at announcement annexation Ethiopia to Italy and proclamation our King Emperor greeted by explosion of exaltation stop demonstration of joy continues at sound of national hymns stop,

Marshal Laurenzi

(Telegram in Italian sent by the commander of the *Carabinieri* in the Istrian town of Albona to the Prefecture in Pola describing the mass rally after the proclamation of the Empire on May 9th 1936¹)

“Maybe for the first time in their lives, Italians wore their Fascist dresses without a sense of discomfort and their acclamations were spontaneous”.² With these cautious words the leading historian on Italian colonialism Angelo Del Boca follows his description of the euphoria generated in Fascist Italy after the Ethiopian War of 1935-36 was proclaimed as finished and the Italian Empire was proclaimed in May 1936. Modern historiography regards the 1930s as a period of consolidation of the corporative Fascist state and of forging a genuine “mass consent around the figure of Benito Mussolini and his Fascist regime. This perspective implies that every facet of the society was invaded by fascist ideology, including the educational system, leisure and entertainment and the working place.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in late 1935 and early 1936 is often seen as the climax of that period of consolidation. Although there was widespread skepticism towards the war in its initial stages, the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations increased the domestic popularity of the fascist regime and the support for the war in Ethiopia. The official Fascist propaganda celebrated incessant Italian victories in Ethiopia, parties were organized by the regime’s organizations after every victory, not a single school course passed without mentioning the war, and newspapers were filled with ecstatic letters from the front. More

¹ Državni Arhiv u Pazinu (DAP), Prefecture in Pola (PP), 1935, b(ox): 281, f(older): XVII-A-5-10/2

² Angelo Del Boca, *Guerra d’Etiopia. L’ultima impresa del colonialismo* [The Ethiopian War. The Last Feat of Colonialism], Milano 2010, 243.

specifically, the days of May 1936, after the Italian occupation of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa on May 5 and the proclamation of the Italian Empire, the rebirth of the Empire “on the fateful hills of Rome” on May 9, are considered the climax of a wide societal consensus achieved by the leadership of the Fascist regime.

This thesis focuses on Fascist Italy's Province of Istria (or Pola), during the years 1935- 1936. Part of the wider Julian March (*Venezia Giulia*) region, annexed by Italy after World War I from the doomed Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Province was a contested border region. Since the majority of the population in the Province was non-Italian (roughly two thirds), the fascist totalitarian repression policies were different as compared to the rest of Italy, since they were oriented against Slavic speakers (Croats and Slovenes) in what many authors today call “Border Fascism”. Thus, while in Italy proper fascist repression was oriented mostly against socialists, in the Julian March region (and thus Istria), oppression was used mostly as a tool of assimilating the local Slavic speaking population, referred to by the authorities under the term *allogeni*. The word derives from Greek and means people of “other” [*allo*] “descent” [*genos*]. The names and surnames of the Slavs were Italianized, and all toponyms in the Province were given their Italian name variants. In this thesis, the Italian name variants for the localities that will be used.

Like all other Italian Provinces, the Istrian one was headed by the Prefect (*Prefetto*), while the various *Comuni* (municipalities) in it had the *Podestà* as the officials heading them. On the provincial level, the head of the National Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*) was the Federal Secretary (*Segretario federale*). The provincial capital of Istria was Pola.

Much has been written on the Ethiopian war in Italian historiography. The most comprehensive view was published by Angelo Del Boca, as part of his series of works about

Italian colonialism in East Africa (*Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*).³ More recently, Del Boca updated his findings on the Ethiopian War in a distinct volume.⁴ Both Del Boca and, more recently, Emilio Gentile in his work *Fascism of Stone*⁵ tackle the question of mass rallies during the Ethiopian war, but their analyses are confined to the descriptions of the main events (such as the huge rallies marking the end of the war in May 1936) on a mere couple of pages. No work has yet comprehensively focused on the war-related mass rallies and the impact of propaganda and state-sponsored events on the everyday life in the country. The issue of mass rallies in Fascist Italy in general was tackled in two works. First, in Emilio Gentile's book *Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*,⁶ and second, in Mabel Berezin's *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Inter-war Italy*.⁷ Both these works touch only slightly on the topic of the mass rallies during the Ethiopian war.

There is no work dealing with the topic on a provincial level, more specifically on Istria. Croat and Slovene historians have mainly focused on the anti-Slav repression in the Julian March region during the Fascist regime and anti-Fascist local resistance. Most notable, in this perspective, are the works of Ernest Radetić,⁸ Lavo Čermelj,⁹ Tone Crnobori,¹⁰ Darko Dukovski¹¹ and Herman Buršić.¹² In these analyses, however, the Ethiopian war occupies just one chapter, or even less, being conflated with the discussion about the impact of the Spanish Civil War. The main works on the Fascist regime in the Julian March written in Italy are

³Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. II. La conquista dell'Impero* [Italians in East Africa. II. The Conquest of the Empire], Milano 2001.

⁴Del Boca, *Guerra d'Etiopia*, Milano 2010.

⁵Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra* [Fascism of Stone], Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010

⁶Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996

⁷Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Inter-war Italy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

⁸Ernest Radetić, *Istra pod Italijom 1918. – 1943. [Istria Under Italy 1918-1943]*, Rijeka 1991.

⁹Lavo Čermelj, *Slovinci in Hrvatje pod Italijo med obema vojnama [Slovenes and Croats Under Italy Between the Two Wars]*, Ljubljana 1965.

¹⁰Tone Crnobori, *Borbena Pula [Fighting' Pula]*, Rijeka 1972.

¹¹Darko Dukovski, *Fašizam u Istri. 1918-1943 [Fascism in Istria 1918-1943]*. Pula 1998.

¹²Herman Buršić, *Od ropstva do slobode. Istra 1918-1945 [From Slavery to Freedom. Istria 1918-1945]*, Pula 2011.

authored by Elio Apih,¹³ Almerigo Apollonio,¹⁴ Marta Verginella¹⁵ and Marina Cataruzza¹⁶. However, even in these works, the Ethiopian war is mentioned in a mere couple of sentences. Except my student's take on the Croat and Slovene émigrés' writing about the Ethiopian war-related events in their journal *Istra*,¹⁷ there is no work focusing on the impact of the war in the *Venezia Giulia* region.

This thesis focuses on the regime-organized mass rallies in the Province of Istria connected to the Ethiopian War (1935-36). It explores how many events took place, the main organizational and ideological features of these events, with an emphasis on the manner in which the fascist authorities prepared these events and the way they were presented in the press. By doing that, I try to see if these events were highly centralized propagandistic celebrations, with an ideological meaning imposed from the center in Rome, or were regional events, initiated or even spontaneously improvised by local authorities. I will argue that the regime organized all these events in order to obtain constant mobilization of support from the masses towards the regime and its military endeavor in Ethiopia, as well as a useful propaganda and tool of Fascist pedagogy aiming for the total fascistization of the Istrian people.

My aim is to contribute to the existing knowledge about the Fascist regime's Ethiopian war-related consent-building operations and the war's impact on everyday life in Italy. Also, it is hoped that the thesis will contribute to the effort of reconstructing the political life in the Province of Istria and its connection to the political center in Rome. Unfortunately, due to a

¹³ Elio Apih, *Italia, fascismo e antifascismo nella Venezia Giulia (1918-1943)* [Italy, Fascism and Anti-fascism in the Julian March], Bari 1966.

¹⁴ Almerigo Apollonio, *Venezia Giulia e fascismo 1922-1935. Una società post-asburgica negli anni di consolidamento della dittatura mussoliniana* [The Julian March and Fascism 1922-1935. A post-Habsburg Society in the Years of Consolidation of Mussolini's Dictatorship], Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 2004.

¹⁵ Marta Verginella, *Granica drugih. Pitanje Julijske krajine i slovensko pamćenje* [The Border of the Others. The Julian March Question and Slovene Remembrance], Zagreb 2011.

¹⁶ Marina Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale 1866-2006* [Italy and the Eastern Border 1866-2006], Milan 2007.

¹⁷ David Orlović, *Etiopski rat 1935.-36. prema pisanju zagrebačkog emigrantskog lista Istra* [The Ethiopian War 1935-36 According to the Zagreb Emigre Journal Istra], MA thesis, Pula 2012.

lack of sources, the thesis will not explore in a comprehensive manner the real response by the Italian masses to the Fascist mass rallies, but will confine itself to the analysis of popular attitudes in official regime reports, be they confidential documents or propagandistic press reports. This is, however, an important issue that deserves further research. A secondary avenue of research will be, however, to gain as much as possible insight into the Slavic reception to these Fascist mass rallies and to the extent to which the Slavic population contributed to or voiced opposition to them.

The methodology will mostly focus on analyzing all war-related events of a propagandist nature organized by the Fascist regime in Istria, using the press, the *Corriere Istriano* and *Istra* journals, and confidential documents from the State Archive in Pazin, Croatia (*Državni arhiv u Pazinu*).

Most of the thesis will be based on the analysis of articles from the Pola daily newspaper *Corriere Istriano* published between May 1935 and May 1936, approximately three hundred issues. The newspaper started publishing in 1919 under the name of *L'Azione*, changing the name into *Corriere Istriano* in 1929. In the early period of the Fascist movement, the paper sided with Mussolini's ideology, later to become the official voice of the regime in the Province of Istria.¹⁸ The front page was usually used for publishing Italian or world news. The research will be based on the articles from the “Chronicle from the city” (pages two or three) and “News from the Province” (pages three or four) sections of this four-paged paper. Non-Italian or oppositional press able to cover the events in Istria was conspicuously absent, with the notable exception of a group of émigré Croatian and Slovene intellectuals situated in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, who ran a weekly four-paged journal covering some of the events from a different perspective. The journal included commentaries to current

¹⁸ Marcello Bogneri, *La stampa periodica italiana in Istria (1807 – 1947)* [The Periodical Italian Press in Istria (1807-1947)], Trieste: Italo Svevo, 1986., p. 111, 147.

news, as well as insights into the daily life and events related to the Slavic population in the Julian March, obtained through cross-border smuggling of information into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.¹⁹ This last group of articles will be used for this thesis.

A second source of information will be the 1935-36 material from the Prefecture in Pola fundus from the State Archive in Pazin, boxes no. 264, 280 and 281. The documents analyzed are letters and telegrams between Rome and the Prefecture in Pola, as well as between Pola and the various Istrian localities. The primary materials will be confronted with existing information encountered in the press.

The first chapter will give a theoretical framework to the thesis aiming to explain the purposes of mass rallies in totalitarian regimes in general and Fascist Italy. After giving a short outline discussing the nature of Fascist Italy as a totalitarian regime, I will put emphasis on Emilio Gentile's work in which he thoroughly explains the background of mass rallies in Italy, and their connection to the fascistization and mass consent operations in the 1930s that culminated in the Ethiopian war.

The second chapter will deal with the first mass rallies organized from May 1935 on to greet departing soldiers from the provincial capital of Pola, up to the events that marked the very start of the Ethiopian war: the “Gathering of the Regime Forces” on October 2nd and the celebration of the takeover of the historically symbolic Ethiopian town of Adua on October 6th 1935.

The third chapter will tackle the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations on Italy and how that was exploited by the regime and new mass rallies mobilizing the crowds in a campaign of victimization and need for patriotic mobilization. Similarly, it will analyze how

¹⁹ Ive Mihovilović, “List »Istra«, glasilo Saveza jugoslavenskih emigranata iz Julijske krajine od 1929. do 1940. godine“ [The Paper 'Istra', Voice of the Union of Yugoslav Emigres from the Julian March Between 1929 and 1940], in: *Pazinski memorijal*, 2 (1970), pp. 107-127.

the first news of Istrian soldiers killed in Africa was exploited for further patriotic mobilization and what kind of mass rituals were organized in that sense.

The fourth and last chapter will return to the victories that the Italians began scoring in Ethiopia and how they were celebrated, concluding with the enormous enthusiasm provoked by the end of the war, marked notably by huge mass rallies after the announcement of the fall of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa on May 5th and the proclamation of the Empire on May 9th 1936.

I. Theoretical Framework: Explaining the Mass Rallies in Fascist Italy

The Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini in Italy was organized by a military organized revolutionary movement organized into a party which, through an all-absorbing type of ideology, aimed at the monopoly of power. It was built as a single-party regime and it functioned in the direction of a total conquering of society, aiming at forging a “new man” devoted to the totalitarian and imperialist project of the governing party, and by doing that creating a new civilization.²⁰ Where does the name for the regime come from? The term “Fascist”, deriving from the word *fascio*, meaning “bundle” or “union”, has its roots in the Latin word *fasces*, designating a bundle of rods surrounding an axe existing in the ancient Roman civilization and in visual representations always shown carried by Roman *Lictors*, was a symbol of the juridical authority of the magistrates, as well as the unity and strength of a society. As a symbol and name for the movement and later regime, both these meanings were conflated, emphasizing both the connotations of “grass-roots political activism, unity and strength, and on the symbolic link with ancient Rome”.²¹ In order to make a differentiation between the word as a designation for the Italian movement or regime and a generic or universal political phenomenon, scholars spell Italian Fascism with a capital “F”, while the latter with a lower case “f”.²² This paper, dealing with the regime in Italy, falls into the first category.

The concept of “fascism” is a highly debated topic in historiography, as various explanations of the political phenomenon arose throughout the 20th century. The most influential names dealing with the topic of Italian Fascism are Renzo de Felice, Roger Griffin, Stanley Payne and Emilio Gentile. Roger Griffin saw Fascism as “a genus of political

²⁰ Cfr. Emilio Gentile, *Politics as a Religion*, Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, 46.

²¹ Constantin Iordachi, „Introduction“, in: *Comparative Fascist Studies – New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi, New York: Routledge, 2010, 16.

²² *Ibid*, 3-4.

ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism”, aiming for the rebirth of the nation and the transformation of the individual into a new man.²³ When explaining fascism as a charismatic form of politics, he notes that like National Socialism, Italian Fascism held the charismatic aspect after the revolutionary stage and during the regime period with the main symptom of it being the “oceanic assemblies”.²⁴

The topic of this chapter, these “oceanic assemblies” as events of public ritual, were most thoroughly analyzed by Gentile. Using Gentile’s and other authors’ findings, there are several problems that will be tackled in this chapter. First, can Fascist Italy be considered an experiment of totalitarianism? Second, what is the role of mass rallies in totalitarian states and inherently in Fascist Italy? Third, what is the role of emotions at rallies and the exploitation of them by the regime?

I.1. Italian Fascism: An Experiment of Totalitarian Political Religion

The term ‘totalitarianism’ is old as the term ‘fascism’ itself, and it is also a contested concept in historiography whether it applies to Fascist Italy. It was coined in the early 1920s in Italy and used by the opponents of the Fascists for purposes of denouncing the “total monopoly on power” by the movement, as well as by Mussolini and his followers in their quest of total control over the life of Italians.²⁵ The first influential analytical takes on the term occurred after the Second World War, with Hannah Arendt’s work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Carl J. Friedrich’s and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956). Arendt’s, ‘developmental’ model deals mostly with the origins of totalitarianism as a trend in politics, while Friedrich’s and Brzezinski’s, ‘operational’ or

²³ Roger Griffin, “Fascism: General Introduction”, in: *Comparative Fascist Studies – New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi, New York: Routledge, 2010, 118.

²⁴ Ibid, 120.

²⁵ Iordachi, “Introduction“, 28-29.

‘functional’ model tackles the main features of the totalitarian regimes, as well as how they function.²⁶

Both in Arendt’s and Friedrich’s and Brzezinski’s works Fascist Italy is not considered as a fully-built totalitarian regime, because only Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union are seen as such. Lack of mass terror and a small number of executions in Italy is the main evidence for the non-totalitarian nature of Fascist Italy in the views of these authors. Other scholars regard the Fascist experiment ‘imperfect’ (Renzo De Felice) or even ‘failed’ totalitarianism (Alexander de Grand), due to the regime’s compromises with the Catholic Church, monarchy and traditional bureaucracy, which led to the failure in the total mobilization of the masses. On the other hand, there were authors, headed by Emilio Gentile who argue that “even if allegedly unfulfilled at the level of state organization, the drive toward totalitarianism in inter-war Italy was genuine and should not be dismissed on the count that it was not fully implemented.”²⁷

Gentile reinforced his conviction on the totalitarian nature of Italian Fascism by identifying it as a political religion. He notes that in the period after the Enlightenment, “(b)y taking over the religious dimension and acquiring a sacred nature, politics went so far as to claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence for individuals and the collectivity, at least on this earth”.²⁸ He traces the origins of that phenomenon back to the American and French revolutions. Differently from civil religion, which he explains by the “the forms sacralization of a political system that guarantee a plurality of ideas”²⁹, Gentile regards political religion as

the sacralization of a political system founded on unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and

²⁶ Ibid, 29-32.

²⁷ Ibid, 33.

²⁸ Gentile, *Politics as a religion*, xiv.

²⁹ Ibid, xv.

the collectivity to its code of comandments. Consequently, a political religion is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual's life and of a society's collective life.³⁰

Gentile convincingly explored Italian Fascism as the first nationalist totalitarian movement and regime fully showing the characteristics of a political religion in his 1993 work *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia Fascista*, translated to English under the title *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* in 1996.³¹

This paper, in its approach to the events of public ritual as a driving force in creating a totalitarian community and the fascistization of the masses, agrees with Gentile's approach to Italian Fascism as a project of gradual process of creating a totalitarian state.

I.2. Role of the Mass Rallies in Totalitarianism

The American cultural historian George L. Mosse, stressing the mass rallies and public festivals as the instruments of popular democracy in the post-Enlightenment period argues that

Jean-Jacques Rousseau first put forward a theory of public festivals and stressed their purpose (...) as the models for uplifting public and private morals. But festivals were supposed to go beyond such moral purposes: they were designed to make people love the Republic and to ensure the maintenance of order and public peace. Festivals would be a rededication to national unity, but in order to achieve this purpose they had to be filled with symbolisms which would replace those of the Church.³²

What was present since the Enlightenment period was an idea that events of public festival were aimed at bringing the masses of people closer to the state and and thus create national unity.

Similar ideas can be translated from nations to political groups. In the view of the American social scientist and anthropologist David I. Kertzer, "(m)ass rallies are one of the

³⁰ Ibid, xv.

³¹ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996

³² George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man. Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987, 107.

most effective means to demonstrate public support (...), effective both in dramatically exhibiting a group's political strength and in fostering certain images regarding the nature of the group and its goals." He sees such rites as having "powerful effects on the participants, increasing their identification with the group (...) through the careful manipulation of symbols, combined with the emotional impact of having so many people together for a common use."³³

These "powerful effects" on masses were explored by the 19th century French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon in his 1895 work *La psychologie des foules* (The English translation *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* was published a year later). In Le Bon's view, in a crowd, the sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes". It becomes a "single being, (...) subjected to the law of the mental unity of crowds".³⁴ Le Bon noticed that that the main characteristics of crowds are "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and of the critical spirit, the exxageration of the sentiments", elements observed mainly "in women, savages, and children".³⁵ Also, he noted "excessive suggestibility (...) a fact which explains the rapid turning of the sentiments of a crowd in a definite direction".³⁶ According to Le Bon, "a crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master".³⁷ Such leaders, in his view, should "wield a very despotic authority, and this despotism indeed is a condition of their obtaining a following".³⁸ Indeed, along with the Nazi German *Führer* Adolf Hitler, the *Duce* of Italian Fascism Benito Mussolini came in contact with Le Bon's work and took an example from it for his own tactics of control over the crowds.

³³ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1988, 119.

³⁴ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, New York, The Viking Press, 1960, 23-24.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 118.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 120.

Building on Le Bon's views, Günter Berghaus argues that the totalitarian leaders "avoided the rational rhetorics typical of bourgeois politicians, and instead employed a performative language that had a captivating force unequalled by traditional means of propaganda".³⁹ Thus, we find a correlation of mass rallies to state propaganda, appealing to emotions, show of force and drawing members of a mass closer to the movement/regime. Is there something more to explain the need for such events?

Gentile argues that to look at public demonstrations and parades in Fascist Italy as a mere sideshow and result of the work of a propaganda apparatus poised for the manipulation of mass psychology is not enough.⁴⁰ In his opinion, the myth built around Fascism made the "fascists (...) first believe in the quality of their myths and the seriousness of their manifestations, considering them a coherent expression of their political vision and an essential element of mass politics in a contemporary state."⁴¹ Similarly, Berghaus states that "(t)ranslating fascist ideology into a mythical language (...) through ritual performances was a far more effective way of producing consent and approval of the presented message than rational propaganda could ever hope to achieve".⁴²

Another scholar, American sociologist Mabel Berezin sees the Italian Fascist usage of "the *piazze* for public spectacle" aiming "to create a community of feeling based on the emotion of solidarity and not a rhetoric of political persuasion".⁴³ The regime sought participation of the masses "through the organization and formation of collective spiritual

³⁹ Günter Berghaus, "The Ritual Core of Fascist Theatre. An Anthropological Perspective", in: Roger Griffin, Matthew Feldman (ed.), *Fascism. Critical Concepts in Political Science, vol. 3: Fascism and Culture*, London – New York, Routledge, 2004, 72.

⁴⁰ Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism*, Westport, Conn – London: Praeger, 2003, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 78.

⁴² Berghaus, 80.

⁴³ Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Inter-war Italy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, 249.

unity” using myths.⁴⁴ Gentile calls it the creation of the “harmonious whole” through the re-educational activities of the state.⁴⁵ It was a consensus-building propaganda operation, aiming for the masses to be perpetually mobilized in what the regime saw as an aim for the “continuous Fascist revolution”, a constant indoctrination. He argues that

(a) mass liturgy was as important as a totalitarian organization to promote the mobilization of the masses and conquer their consent – understood not as free and critical participation, but as partaking of the faith. Through ritual, constant catechetical indoctrination by the party and the state, the Fascist religion must become an essential component of the mentality and character of all Italians; it had to be transformed into tradition and custom, to arouse and give substance to the participation of the masses in the life of the regime.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Gentile finds also three main propaganda aims of these events: manifestation of an image of Italian unity with the Fascist regime, legitimacy and emphasizing the greatness of the totalitarian regime and sacralizing the image of the Duce and the Party. Overall, the chief aim was “to influence public opinion by summoning its feelings, emotions, fantasies, and enthusiasm”, especially in the times of economic crisis, to hide the problems “behind a façade of order and efficiency”.⁴⁷

To sum up, various authors agree that the events of public ritual bring about a cohesive feeling both among the individuals participating in such an event, as well as attachment of the masses towards the state. The totalitarian states used these events for purposes of creating a “collective harmony” in a state of “perpetual mobilization” in a constant education of the masses by the regimes.

⁴⁴ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 82.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

I.3. Regime Usage of the Masses' Enthusiasm

In Gentile's opinion, the Fascists were sure that the main driving force among the masses were feelings and emotions, not reason, and that they are incapable of ruling themselves.⁴⁸

The public celebrations had a considerable impact on the masses' emotions after prolonged periods of crises that provoked a sense of disorientation, such as the First World War and the subsequent period of economic hardship and threat of revolutionary activity by the Left, Berghaus argues, adding that many people "slipped back into the collective psyche of childhood and primitive society" while susceptible to the promises of the leaders and the cohesive force of the rituals.⁴⁹

Research has been done on the relationship between ecstatic emotions among the masses present at mass rallies organized by totalitarian regimes and the manipulation by the regimes themselves. For instance, Árpád von Klimó finds the concept narrowed to the case of Nazi Germany described in the word "Rausch", which expresses "enthusiasm, fanaticism, collective violence and fraternization", and, above all a state of "ecstasy believed to represent some of the unique traits of National Socialist 'spirit' and practice" during the Nazi regime festivals and mass rallies.⁵⁰ Klimó argues that only in the Nazi period did this term gain positive connotations, while in the previous periods it was an expression to describe "drunkenness" or "intoxication" as a result of alcohol or drug abuse.⁵¹ In short, the term now described the irrational enthusiasm towards the regime and fanatical devotion towards the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler.

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi applied the concept of ecstatic crowds to Fascist Italy, connecting it to the idea of manipulation by the state. In her opinion, the regime's aim of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Berghaus, 78-79, 93.

⁵⁰ Arpad von Klimó, "Nazi Discourses on 'Rausch' Before and After 1945: Codes of Emotions and Experiences", <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/6f03t43x> (accessed on March 2, 2013), 1, 3.

⁵¹ Ibid, 4.

obtaining through manipulation a state of ecstasy among the masses, as she puts it, was to reach a “communion with the leader” and for an other specific objective.⁵² For this other specific objective she is pointing out, we can deduct, in the broader sense, the aim of the fascistization of the masses and the spreading of the Fascist religion among them, and in a narrower sense, the aim of creating consent for the campaign in Ethiopia in the period 1935-36. This second deduction, useful for this research and to be more deeply analyzed later, has to be put in the perspective of fascistization of the masses deduction. Falasca-Zamponi concludes her analysis by stating that “the ecstasy that takes place in fascism is checked in and tamed”, not allowed to run wild, but channeled towards the support of the leader and his government.⁵³

Thus, we see that enthusiasm was clearly created through the events of public ritual, and it was possible to be exploited by the regime to create consent around itself, as well as to direct it in specific objectives.

I.4. State and Party Rituals

Until 1922, the only national holiday was the one honoring the Statute and Unification of Italy, which was celebrated every first Sunday in June, and included military parades and the illumination of all public buildings. However, in Gentile’s view, this and other occasional ceremonies, although with thousands of people attending them, “did not represent true collective worship: they were an occasional crowd rather than a liturgical mass”.⁵⁴ He sees a

⁵² Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, „Ecstatic Crowds, Addicted Dictators, Intoxicating Politics: Reflections on Rausch and Fascist Italy“, <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/67w279nj#page-1> (accessed on March 2, 2013), 4.

⁵³ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁴ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 11.

failure in the liberal government to achieve collective enthusiasm and mobilization of the masses due to a lack of organized exploitation of ritual and symbol.⁵⁵

A new phenomenon came with Italy's participation in the Great War, when the "prophet, bard, and high priest of a renewed 'patriotic religion'" Gabriele D'Annunzio through promoting the campaign for Italian intervention in the war made a strong contribution in creating novel national rituals through his organisation of interventionist mass meetings.⁵⁶ He implemented the same modus operandi during his brief rule in the city of Fiume (today Rijeka in Croatia) where he achieved fusion of arts and politics in a political entity called the Italian Regency of the Quarner. As is the First World War an important threshold in the political history of Europe as a whole, thus is for Italy and the development of its "patriotic religion".

In its "blackshirt era", before taking power, the Fascist movement developed a series of theatrical public martial rituals, meant to strengthen a sense of communion among its members, attract public support as well as frightening political enemies.⁵⁷ Some elements of those rituals were borrowed from Christianity and were already in use in D'Annunzio's interventionist campaign and Fiume adventure.⁵⁸ Gentile quotes the writing of Mussolini's journal *Il popolo d'Italia* in 1922 that Fascism has returned to Italian cities that art of human movement and group gathering which is referred to in the Statutes of Fiume".⁵⁹ The most important instances in Fascist liturgy were the ritual of swearing-in and funerals of fallen Fascists.⁶⁰ The ceremonies were meant to be strictly choreographically organized and a show of discipline, to make contrast with badly organized public events of other Italian political

⁵⁵ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁹ Cit. in Gentile, "The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy", 76.

⁶⁰ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 25-28.

forces.⁶¹ In Gentile's words, the sense of communion created through these ceremonies was eventually "projected onto the concept of the nation, a nation organized into a totalitarian state".⁶² Nearing the end of the 1920s, the regime disciplined all manifestations, chiefly through imposing limitation and strict control over them. Effectively, all liturgies antagonistic to the new regime and its ideology were outlawed. The Party imposed its leadership over events of public ritual, while the police apparatus' close supervision aimed at preventing any form of disturbances.⁶³

Besides paving the way for the creation of the Fascist movement, the remembrance of the war as the "rebirth of the nation" quickly became appropriated and monopolized by the Fascists after their takeover of power in October 1922.⁶⁴ The same counts for the Statute Day, and the fascistization of the Italian royal coat of arms by adding the lictorial fasces symbols to it in 1927 is a good metaphor of how pre-Fascist symbols and rituals became appropriated and fascistized by the new regime. Fascism itself began to be celebrated, and the party celebrations were soon transformed into national holidays, "setting the seal on the indissoluble union between Fascism and the state".⁶⁵ The regime implemented a calendar which set an annual rhythm of ritual ceremonies and celebrations with rallies in which the population was meant to attend.

We see that the Fascist regime gave importance and even esthetic value to the events of public ritual in Italy, exploiting the enthusiasm created by them for its purposes. The regime fascistized the already existing rituals in the process of connecting the State and the Party, and imposed strict rules on all public manifestations. The people had now a calendar of events of various genre to attend to and feel the regime's constant presence in their lives.

⁶¹ Ibid, 76.

⁶² Ibid, 28.

⁶³ Ibid, 88.

⁶⁴ See Ibid, 36-42.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 48.

I.5. Genres of rituals in Fascist Italy

We will use American sociologist Mabel Berezin's clear classification of five different genres of rituals in Fascist Italy: commemorations, celebrations, symposia, inaugurations and demonstrations.⁶⁶

In the commemorative events the nation and regime were glorified in the following events: the anniversary of the foundation of the Fascist combat groups (23 March), the Birth of Rome (21 April), entry in the Great War (24 May), the March on Rome (28 October) and the victory in the Great War (4 November).⁶⁷ Berezin puts into this category public funerals or memorial services for fallen Fascists.⁶⁸ What Mussolini and his regime took as an example, points out Gentile, were the festivities and cults of the French Revolution, as well as the May Day and October Revolution anniversary festivities in the Stalinist Soviet Union.⁶⁹

Celebrations, on the other hand, included visits of Mussolini to various parts of Italy, as well as events such as the "Calling of the Colors" (*Leva Fascista*), the celebration of conscription into the Fascist Party from the Youth organizations, which regarded as a rite of passage and celebrated with utmost solemnity.⁷⁰ Also, the traditional Feast of the Grape (*Festa dell'uva*), celebrated on the last Sunday of September, was a "joyous and solemn rite" celebrating Romanity and the taming of nature.⁷¹ In contrast with commemorations which looked at the past, "celebrations reveled in the present and in the future", argues Berezin.⁷²

Symposia involved congresses, conventions, lectures and meetings at Fascist Party premises, mainly headquarters. On the other hand, inaugurations meant the initiations of public works in the form of the opening of a new building or the laying of a memorial or

⁶⁶ Berezin, 37.

⁶⁷ Gentile, "The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy", 80.

⁶⁸ Berezin, 37.

⁶⁹ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 86.

⁷⁰ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 65-66.; Berezin, 37.

⁷¹ Gentile, "The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy", 86-87.; See also Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 90-91.

⁷² Berezin, 37.

monument. “Symposia were bound to persons; inaugurations were bound to place”, concludes Berezin.⁷³

Demonstrations represented “purely expressive events, usually rallies, held to display public emotion in support of fascism”, sums up Berezin.⁷⁴ Definitely, the best example for this last genre of ritual in Fascist Italy are the “*adunate*”, the vast popular assemblies that occurred during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935-36).

I.6. The Ethiopian War: “Relaunching the Revolution” and Apotheosis

Emilio Gentile went to claim that the “most grandiose events in the history of Fascist mass rituals were the vast assemblies which occurred during the Ethiopian campaign”.⁷⁵ The announcement of the beginning of the campaign on 2nd October 1935 was the first in a long series of events. The so-called “Day of Faith”, held on 18th December 1935 in which Italian women throughout the country gave their wedding rings to help the country pressed by the League of Nations sanctions was one such event, but the most enthusiastic mass gatherings took place throughout May 1936 to celebrate the conquest of Addis Ababa and the proclamation of the Italian Empire.

According to Alexander De Grand, “by the mid 1930s the Fascist regime was at an ideological dead-end. The corporative experiment had reached the limits of its propaganda usefulness. (...) Fascist technocrats were clearly stymied by the failure of corporatism and looked elsewhere to apply their plans for remaking society.”⁷⁶ The impending colonial endeavour in Ethiopia would be “the measure of how much fascism had succeeded in altering the character of Italians” as well as “toughen them, and in the process, restart the stalled

⁷³ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 37-38.

⁷⁵ Gentile, “The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy“, 84.

⁷⁶ Alexander De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940”, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 13, No. 02, May 2004, 136.

revolution” adds De Grand citing the writing of Giuseppe Bottai.⁷⁷ Renzo De Felice argues that the fascistization process of the 20s and early 30s failed, and that the way to achieve the totalitarian nature of the regime was now implemented through foreign policy.⁷⁸ Through war, the regime would create “organized and disciplined masses”, and in this context “Achille Starace’s endless choreographed rallies no longer appeared as stupid absurdities”,⁷⁹ but were part of an overall internal policy campaign of bringing Italians more closer to the state.

To explain the importance of the Ethiopian war in the overall fascistization process, it is worth noting that the Duce held ten out of a total of sixty four speeches he held during his leadership of the country just during the period of the Ethiopian war.⁸⁰ The Duce’s physical participation definitely was about rising the excitement of the Italians with the overall situation. Stanley Payne notes the “tremendous enthusiasm” among the public provoked by the sight of Italian soldiers leaving their towns and cities and boarding ships bound for Africa.⁸¹ He also notes clandestine communist reports acknowledging the Fascist notions of a “proletarian war” as attracting consensus among the wider public, and Communist leaders concluding that anti-nationalist rhetoric should be temporarily put off.⁸²

In De Felice’s opinion, the consent of the Italian people towards the war is evident only after the fact that the British and French will not intervene against Italy’s colonial endeavour.⁸³ Indeed, Gentile notes the initial wide scepticism and low enthusiasm with which the Italian public welcomed the start of the campaign, with fear of isolation and an evident slow progress in Ethiopia in the first couple of months. The lack of victories was filled with the regime’s usage of the League of Nations sanctions for propaganda purposes. A drive of

⁷⁷ Ibid, 137.

⁷⁸ De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo*, Michael A. Ledeen (ed.), Rome: Laterza, 1999, 69.

⁷⁹ De Grand, 138.

⁸⁰ Gentile, *9 maggio 1936: l'impero torna a Roma* [9 May 1936: The Empire Returns to Rome]

⁸¹ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, 234.

⁸² Ibid, 235.

⁸³ De Felice, 52.

collection of valuable material was organized, culminating in the so-called “Day of Faith” in late 1935. However, the culmination of events came in early May 1936, when the war’s end was announced and the proclamation of the Empire happened. The newsreels of the vast assemblies listening to Mussolini’s speeches on the 5th and 9th May 1936 show just the masses, not the Duce, like if the regime wanted to show that it was with their will to wage the war and to emphasize the unanimous consent towards it, Gentile suggests.⁸⁴ Berezin notes the same while analyzing the pictures of the adunate in the newspapers: “(t)he pictures of these events (...) are blurry and suggest a raw mass of living bodies giving consent to the regime”.⁸⁵

Gentile argues that “it was perhaps at this point that the regime and the Italian population came closest to a state of mystic communion, which Mussolini would have liked to be a permanent state of the nation’s collective life”.⁸⁶ “Maybe for the first time in their lives, Italians wore their Fascist dresses without a sense of discomfort and their acclamations were spontaneous”.⁸⁷ With these words Angelo Del Boca follows his description of the euphoria that took place in May 1936. The aim of these mobilizations was to give the people “a focus of political love and emotion”.⁸⁸ Payne notes that with the end of the war in May 1936 the “huge propaganda effort paid off, Italian public opinion generally seeing the Duce as having succeeded where his liberal successors tended to fail: Italy had won a sizeable campaign of its own”.⁸⁹ The Ethiopian war achieved the emotional solidarity of the people with the regime, added to the hate directed towards a new enemy – “the League of Nations and the liberal

⁸⁴ Gentile, *9 maggio 1936: l'impero torna a Roma* [9 May 1936: The Empire Returns to Rome] , Lecture given on March 4, 2007, audio version available at: http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com_laterza&Itemid=97&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788849100259 (accessed on March 3, 2013)

⁸⁵ Berezin, 123.

⁸⁶ Gentile, “The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy“, 84.

⁸⁷ Angelo Del Boca, *Guerra d'Etiopia. L'ultima impresa del colonialismo* [The Ethiopian War. The Last Feat of Colonialism], Milano 2010., 243.

⁸⁸ Berezin, 123.

⁸⁹ Payne, 234.

democratic regimes it represented”.⁹⁰ It was the apotheosis of the Italian Nation, and, above all, its Leader.

We see that the Ethiopian War “relaunched the revolution” with people unified by the Italian foreign policy and the regime’s exploitation of outside pressure for propaganda purposes. Throughout the war, mass rallies and events of public ritual contributed to the homogenization of the people concentrated, culminating in May 1936 with oceanic assemblies celebrating the victory, and coming to the closest state of unity with the Fascist regime.

I.7. Concluding remarks

The Italian Fascist state was built as a single-party regime functioning in the direction of a total conquering of society, aiming at forging a “new man” devoted to the totalitarian and imperialist project of the governing party. The mass rallies as events of public ritual should be seen as one of the main driving forces in the process of the creation of a totalitarian community and the fascistization of the masses, which fits into Emilio Gentile’s approach to Italian Fascism as a project of the gradual process of creating a totalitarian state.

Various 19th century thinkers and modern authors agree that the events of public ritual have the purpose to bring about a cohesive feeling both among the individuals participating in such an event, as well as from the masses directed towards the state. The totalitarian states used these events for purposes of creating a “collective harmony” in a state of “perpetual mobilization” in a constant education of the masses by the regimes, in the Italian case, a process called fascistization. The irrational state of ecstasy during events of public ritual was exacerbated and exploited by the totalitarian regimes, allowing the feelings of the masses to

⁹⁰ Berezin, 123.

be directed towards closer connection with the state, and in the Italian case the cult of the Duce and events such as the Ethiopian war of 1935-36.

The Fascist regime gave greater importance and even aesthetic value to the events of public ritual in Italy, exploiting the enthusiasm created by them and the cohesive effects for its purposes. The regime fascistized the already existing rituals in the process of connecting the State and the Party, and imposed strict rules on all public manifestations. The people were given a calendar of events of various genre, such as commemorations, celebrations, symposia, inaugurations and demonstrations to attend to.

The Ethiopian War “relaunched the revolution” with people unified by the Italian foreign policy and the regime’s exploitation of outside pressure for propaganda purposes. Throughout the war, the speeches of the Duce, mass rallies and other events of public ritual contributed to the homogenization of the people and the canalisation of their emotions towards the war in progress. A culmination occurred with the official end of the war in May 1936 with oceanic assemblies celebrating the proclaimed victory and creating, what many authors agree was the highest possible state of enthusiasm and, most importantly, attachment of the Italian people to the Fascist regime.

II. The Initial Mobilization

This chapter will deal with two categories of events that the regime organized in Istria preceding and at the very beginning of the Ethiopian War. The first group consists of mass gatherings organized from May 1935 to greet departing soldiers from the provincial capital of Pola, followed by several events in which rallies were organized in order to allow its participants to demand to be enrolled in the departing armies to the Italian colonies in Eastern Africa as volunteers. The second group of events marked the very start of the war: the “*Adunata delle Forze del Regime*” or the “Gathering of the Regime Forces” on October 2nd 1935 and the celebration of the takeover of the historically symbolic Ethiopian town of Adua on October 6th.

II.1. Greeting Istria’s Soldiers

The first divisions of the regular army for Eastern Africa were mobilized in February 1935, the *Peloritana*, stationed in Messina, and the *Gavinana*, in Florence.⁹¹ The regular soldiers were soon to be joined by the fascist blackshirt MVSN⁹², units, since Mussolini wanted to give the upcoming war a highly ideologised image, to wage a Fascist “proletarian” war. The embarking of soldiers on ships took place in the Italian ports of Naples, Messina and Genova, and the whole process of mobilization and the sending of the majority of the Italian expedition occurred between February and August 1935.⁹³ In the Province of Istria, the soldiers congregated in the bases in the provincial capital Pola, only to be sent by train to Trieste, the center of the Julian March region, and from there to the ports. Since for the purpose of this

⁹¹ Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, Oxford 2003., 46-47.

⁹² Acronym for the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*, the official name of the fascist blackshirt militia.

⁹³ See: Polson Newman, *Italy's Conquest of Abyssinia*, 62-64.

thesis no record on the events of departure were found in the archival documents, this part will be based on newspaper reports.

The first group of troops departing the Provincial capital of Pola were the blackshirts from the 60th Legion of the MVSN “*Istria*”. The departure of these soldiers from Pola opened the series of mass rituals that were to happen in the Province of Istria in the wake of Italy’s attack on Ethiopia. The *Corriere Istriano* announced their departure in advance and published dispositions for the gathering to take place in Pola upon their departure on the evening of May 22nd 1935. The announcement read that

(w)ith great pride and deep admiration all the citizens (...) will participate in the departure of the proud volunteer soldiers and will tell them what is the grateful spirit of Pola and Istria towards this first unit which, without any hesitation, but with a vision of a greater Nation in its heart, with passion chose its way of duty.⁹⁴

The Federal Secretary of the Province Francesco Bellini’s orders for the Fascist districtual groups of Pola were published in the journal, asking them to congregate at their respective headquarters. The other organizations ordered to participate were the *Fascio Giovanile* (Youth Fascio) with their fanfare, the *Fascio Femminile* (Women’s Fascio) with flowers, the GUF with their goliardic hat, as well as invitations to the *Combattenti* (Veterans) and the industry workers.⁹⁵

What happened on May 22nd was what the *Corriere Istriano* described as a “greeting of unstoppable enthusiasm” towards the “first units of Istrian soldiers that will have the high honor of binding the volunteerism traditions of the people of Istria to the new deeds that the conquest of wider dominions will ask for.” After the congregation of the soldiers in their headquarters prior to the start of the ceremony, the mass lined up along the streets, while the marching bands and the fanfare were playing patriotic songs. The ceremony, which saw the

⁹⁴ “Stasera la cittadinanza dara` il suo entusiastico salute al primo nucleo di Camicie nere istriane partenti per l’Africa Orientale”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 22nd 1935, p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

volunteer soldiers joined by members of youth organization parade through the city towards the railway station, started at 18.00 PM. According to the *Corriere Istriano*,

(a)ll the people, especially the humbler ones (...) were in the streets, because it wants to see their sons that are departing for Africa, they want to greet and bless them, and tell them that Italian and fascist Istria is proud to be represented in that far away land where Italy wants to inscribe a new page of military and civil glory.⁹⁶

Indeed, the propaganda showed to the masses that they were going to greet true heroes of the Province, role models of utmost bravery and dedication towards the Nation.

The whole procession then arrived at the railway station, where the local fascist officials were present to greet the departing soldiers, too. The people, especially relatives of the soldiers, gave numerous gifts to the soldiers, including food, cigarettes and lots of flowers. Finally, at 19.00 PM, the train departed, greeted by loud acclamations from the crowd and music played by the marching band. The journal article describing the events concludes by emphasizing Istria's role in Fascist deeds, "worthy of the millenary glorious traditions of the people of Istria".⁹⁷ Without any doubt, the writer here alluded to the continuation of the history of the Italians of Istria dating back to ancient Rome. The Fascist soldiers of Istria were shown to the mass as an indivisible part of the Fascist colonial project in a way to emphasize the local character.

Indeed, what may prove that the mass gathering of greeting the departing soldiers of the 40th blackshirt legion did really imprint an important sense of need to participate in Italy's endeavor, on the evening of May 28th, a gathering was held in the hall of the Provincial *Dopolavoro* headquarters in Pola where "around sixty" students from Istria asked to be enrolled as volunteers in the forces departing for East Africa. The *Corriere Istriano* noted that the gathering "of this new fascist generation" was spontaneous, "without previous

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

communiqués”, the result of “voices circulating in half a day”. The writer of the article underlined the fact that this act “proves that this Istria of ours (...), vibrates among the youth a ready sensibility towards the moment that the Italian people is now into”.⁹⁸

A speech by professor dr. Brunone Torcello, “one of the promoters of the gathering” led the meeting, in which he emphasized the fact that the “youth that could not participate either in the [First World] war, or in the fascist Revolution, felt the need to show what they are capable of”. The speech was followed by another one, held by the local fascist leader Giovanni Maracchi, who compared these new volunteers with the local volunteers who helped Italy’s war effort against Austria-Hungary between 1915 and 1918. The speeches were followed by processions by the volunteering youth through the city center and singing of patriotic songs. The gathering ended at Pola’s Port’Aurea Square with “hails to the King and the Duce”, the *Corriere Istriano* concludes. This mass rally, spontaneous or not, can be seen as the presentation to the wider public of the success of the Fascist drive towards the forging of a new man in Istria. The local element is emphasized in the re-evocation of the local Italian heroes of the World War, role models for the new fascist youth.

The second greetings to soldiers departing from Pola towards East Africa came on June 14th when the sailors from the “S. Marco” marine infantry battalion were departing. This time, the *Corriere Istriano* describes it in a more austere fashion. The procession through the city is repeated amid “flowers thrown from balconies and frenetic applauses”. At the railway station, the ceremony of farewell is led by the highest officials of the city, with short speeches and gifts given. Differently from the late evening departure of the blackshirts on May 22nd, this time the train departed at 16.00, with “Roman salutes and singing from the departing soldiers”

⁹⁸ “Gli studenti polesi chiedono in massa di arruolarsi per l’Africa Orientale”, *Corriere Istriano*, 29th May 1935, p. 2.

and the “Salute to the Duce” underlined by the journal.⁹⁹ Interestingly, this article does not carry that language of local heroism and gift of Istria towards the Nation as was in the case of the farewell to the fascist blackshirts, nevertheless, the citizen’s affection and emotions are present in the description of the acclamations.

At noon of September 12th, the *Corriere Istriano* reported, a similar event accompanying the departure of the second group of soldiers of the “San Marco” battalion from Pola happened in “a ritual of touching improvisation”. Again, the soldiers marched through the streets of the city amid acclamations by the people, while at the railway station leading provincial, military and fascist officials greeted them officially, amid speeches and gifts.¹⁰⁰ In this case, too, the event is missing both the local and highly ideologized elements. One possible guess would be that these two events were organized for the departure of the regular troops, and the ideology element connected to the MVSN troops lacked here. A second guess, not excluding the previous, is the high possibility that the departing soldiers of the “San Marco” were not from Istria, but from other parts of Italy and only serving their duty in Pola.

A demonstration in which volunteerism was the topic followed. Like in the case of the Istrian students, a new group asked to be enrolled as volunteers in Africa, in the Blackshirt division “*Tevere*”: the veterans from the First World War, in a new gesture of national resonance which proves that Istria is second to none in the moments (...) of new battles”. The gathering was held on the evening of August 24th in the large hall of the Federation of the *Fasci di Combattimento*, and involved a short speech, and the public reading of the telegram that the veteran organization of Pola sent to Benito Mussolini personally. The gathering ended

⁹⁹ “L’entusiastico saluto di Pola al primo scaglione di marina del ‘S. Marco’ partiti per l’Africa Orientale”, *Corriere Istriano*, 15th June 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ “Due Compagnie del glorioso Battaglione ‘San Marco’ sono partite ieri a mezzogiorno per l’Africa Orientale”, *Corriere Istriano*, September 13th 1935, p. 2.

with modules being signed by the volunteering veterans.¹⁰¹ Two motives come out of this event, the role model of the veterans, and the emphasis of the previous volunteering deeds of the already departed “*Istria*” blackshirts and the students who asked to be sent to Africa.

Indeed, a second, this time much smaller group of thirty volunteering blackshirts from the “*Istria*” Legion were greeted upon their departure on September 27th. Again, the *Corriere Istriano* described the ceremony taking place at Pola’s railway station, with leading officials, women of fascist organizations, friends and relatives present. The journal noted that the train wagons had inscriptions on them, including one “Direct Pola-Addis Ababa”.¹⁰² The description is not that of a grandiose event such as the first departure in May, and the journal underscores the fact that a smaller group of people greeted the soldiers, probably because of their much smaller number.

A third group of people departing for Africa, after the blackshirts and regular soldiers, were the workers to be employed to help the Italian war effort in the colonies. The ceremony of farewell occurred on September 30th. The group of one hundred and fifty workers congregated on Dante Alighieri Square in Pola, in front of the headquarters of the Prefecture, and marched through the city led by the marching band of the *Dopolavoro*. According to the *Corriere Istriano*, the workers “wore black shirts”. As in the case of departing soldiers, the workers were greeted by flower throwing throughout their march towards the railway station. At the station, the ceremony of farewell again included leading officials, friends and relatives. The train departed at 15.55 PM amid the playing and singing of the fascist hymn “*Giovinazza*”.¹⁰³ The workers’ departure was clearly ideologized, proof of that being their

¹⁰¹ “I reduci polesi ed istriani chiedono unanimi di essere arruolati volontari nella Divisione “Tevere””, *Corriere Istriano*, August 24th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰² “La partenza del secondo scaglione dei Volontari istriani per l’A. O.”, *Corriere Istriano*, September 28th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰³ “Gli operai partenti per l’A. O. salutati da una fervida manifestazione di popolo”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 1st 1935, p. 2.

black dress. The workers were local, which again presented to the mass that Istria had a role in the upcoming colonial campaign.

The final two departures took place after the war started on October 3rd. The students that asked to be enrolled as volunteers had their departure date set on October 18th. A notice in the *Corriere Istriano* ordered them to meet at 9.30 AM in front of the *Casa del Fascio*, from where they would make a “pilgrimage” to the tomb of local World War I hero Nazario Sauro, while at noon the ceremony at the railway station would start.¹⁰⁴

The description of the event is again described in a very detailed fashion in the journal, like on the occasion of the departure of the first blackshirt troops in May. After the visit to the Marine cemetery and a march through the city amid “fervid acclamations”, the ceremony at the station occurred with a huge mass of people present, apart from the officials and relatives of the departing volunteers. The description of the masses’ enthusiasm in the journal ends with the writer’s claim that “the Duce forged this memorable and beautiful force: and thus the Head picks the fruit of his huge work. Indeed, all Italians are with Him in order to reach all the objectives.”¹⁰⁵

The report for the first time states that gatherings also took place along the railway route, at all the stations along the route towards Trieste. The whole ceremony continued in the northern Istrian coastal towns of Pirano and Capodistria, where the volunteers honored past local heroes at their graves.¹⁰⁶ The event carries a similar note with the departure of the first blackshirts, merged with the importance of the gathering when the students asked to be enrolled. The students were presented as the result of the “new man” creation, a fruit of

¹⁰⁴ “La partenza degli studenti volontari”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 16th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ “Una commovente grandiosa manifestazione popolare ha salutato ieri gli student istriani partiti volontari per l’Africa”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 19th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Istria's dedication to the regime. Also, the link with local heroes of the war underscores the local nature of this event.

This was not the last gathering during a departure. A further one occurred on October 21st when a ceremony was prepared for the departure of the veterans. The article in the *Corriere Istriano* sums up Istria's gift in soldiers to the Nation: "Yesterday, the blackshirts of the 60th Legion who already fight in the [Ethiopian region of] Tigray with general Diamanti's group, then the students, the flower of our youth, today the volunteers of war". The ceremony closely resembled the previous ones, with a march through the city and official farewell in the station, with the enthusiastic cheering from the masses clearly emphasized.¹⁰⁷

This part of the chapter dealt with nine events happening mainly in Pola, seven of which were the mass rallies prepared for the occasion of the departure of soldiers to be sent to Eastern Africa, and the remaining two were rallies in which groups of citizens publicly expressed their desire to be enrolled as volunteers for the upcoming campaign against Ethiopia. The newspaper descriptions of the events carried the emphasis on the enthusiastic and euphoric reaction of the masses to them. The events were similar in content, as if they followed a ritualistic pattern.

The first departure, happening on May 22nd 1935, in which Istrian members of the blackshirt MVSN forces were greeted, was also the first event of public ritual related to Ethiopia that took place in the Province. The mass rally showcased and celebrated Istria's soldiers, and was a propaganda event in which the regional elements were put in the wider context of the pedagogical aims of the Fascist regime. Similarly, the subsequent rally of May 28, in which students from the Province asked to be enrolled as volunteers, was a parade of the purported Istrian results of the forging of a new Fascist man and the Province's wish to

¹⁰⁷ "Un manipolo di Volontari e di Combattenti ha partito ieri sera per l'Africa Orientale", October 22nd 1935, p. 2.

participate in the overall wishes of the regime. The main element in these first events of local character was the celebration of the role model of the local fallen heroes of the First World War, a patriotic tradition that Istria had to continue in the new colonial endeavor.

The following five departures and the rally of the volunteering veterans followed a similar pattern ushered in by the first two events. However, the regular soldiers seem to have been celebrated in a minimized fashion, probably due to the fact that they were not originally from the Province, while the departure of the volunteering students was a rehearsal of the May 22nd blackshirt troops' departure.

II.2. The *Adunata delle Forze del Regime* of October 2nd 1935

The “Gathering of the Regime Forces” was preannounced on September 10th 1935 with the “*foglio d’ordine*” (order sheet) n. 141.¹⁰⁸ In the early hours of October 2nd, Mussolini informed the King that the following day the Italian troops would start crossing the border of Italian Eritrea into the Empire of Ethiopia, and following the King’s consent, the Duce prepared the communiqué n. 10 regarding the East African affairs to be spread through newspapers the following day, announcing that the military operations started. Contemporaneously with that, the Duce worked on giving the final touches to the speech that he was meant to give in the afternoon”.¹⁰⁹ At 14.30 PM, from the microphones of the Italian radio broadcaster EIAR¹¹⁰, the Secretary of the Fascist Party Achille Starace announced that the signal for the *adunata* announced by the order sheet n. 141 would be given at 15.30 of the same day by the “sound of bells (...), siren screams and drum rolls” in various cities. In the words of the Italian historian Angelo Del Boca, after the signal was given, “in an event

¹⁰⁸ Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, p. 391.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche*.

without precedents” over “twenty million Italians, largely in uniforms, headed towards the *piazze* designated for the ‘great concentrations’”.¹¹¹

In Rome, Del Boca describes, the mass assembled at *Piazza Venezia* “in spite of bursts of rain”. The Duce appeared on the usual balcony at 18.45, and gave a speech lasting eighteen minutes summarizing Italy’s needs for colonial conquest – “to have a place under the Sun” after “thirteen years of Italy’s wait to have its legitimate demands as a victorious nation fulfilled”.¹¹² After the speech, the crowds were “too excited to abandon the *piazze* and until late night occupied them while the speakers propagated fascist and patriotic songs”. Del Boca adds that “in some cities processions marching under the lights of torches, while in others puppets resembling the *negus* were put on fire”.¹¹³ Now, the paper will touch upon the organization and the implementation of the *adunata* in the Province of Istria.

The 1935 September 21st edition of the *Corriere Istriano* announced precise arrangements coming from the provincial Federal Secretary of the PNF Francesco Bellini for the *adunata* that was due soon. The detailed 17-point disposition included that the sign for the *adunata* would be given with three cannon shots, followed by drum rolls, sirens and bells, the orders for party members to leave their work places and quickly put on their fascist uniforms and gather at the selected places, orders for all of the fascist organizations (MVSN, *Balilla*¹¹⁴, GUF¹¹⁵ etc.) to bring their pennants, as well as the order for the whole city to be wrapped in flags and illuminated.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 392.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 393.

¹¹⁴ *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, the youth organization established in 1926 responsible for the mobilization of support towards the Fascist regime of male children and adolescents. See “Youth Organizations”, in: *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Philip V. Cannistraro (ed.), Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1982., pp. 569-573.

¹¹⁵ Acronym for the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* (Fascist University Groups), the regime organization mobilizing students ages 18-28. See Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Precise disposizioni della Federazione Fascista”, *Corriere Istriano*, September 21st 1935, p. 2.

The September 22nd edition of the *Corriere Istriano* gave additional details concerning the organization of the upcoming gathering. Now, precise orders were given to the members of the various fascist syndical organizations of Pola. Again, they were obliged to leave their work places immediately after the sound signal and to gather at Dante Alighieri Square. This edition of the journal also included directives for the ex-combatants, the district group “*Vincenzo Ferrara*”, who were ordered to gather in the district headquarters in Diaz Street, while the members of that group who owned motor vehicles to be ready to participate in the *adunata* with their vehicles. Next, the members of the *Bersaglieri* units on leave were also ordered to gather at their local headquarters. Interestingly, the journal included directives for the farmers who were members of the Party. The marching band of the MVSN was asked to gather at its headquarters in Kandler Street, while the officers of the Balilla organization were specifically asked to be ready in “marching mode” with their belt and alpine hat. Concluding, the members of the *Fascio Femminile* (Women’ organization) were asked to follow the orders pertaining to the male organizations listed above. The decrees note that “justified absences” should be reported to the Provincial Secretariat of the organization in the very moment of the mobilization.¹¹⁷

Similarly, the September 24th edition published arrangements regarding Istria’s second city, Rovinj. Aside the initial signal information, which included the sounding of the bells from local churches and the civic tower and the siren from the local tobacco factory, the various regime organizations had their rendez-vous point set, like the *Casa del Fascio*, schools, a cinema etc.¹¹⁸

With the imminent beginning of the *adunata*, the daily newspaper repeated the orders in its October 2nd edition, with the addition of a text emphasizing the need for all the citizens

¹¹⁷ “Le disposizioni della Federazione Fascista per la mobilitazione delle forze del Regime”, *Corriere Istriano*, September 22nd 1935, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, September 24th 1935, p. 4.

to contribute to the event with the hanging of national flags and illumination of the houses. The text says that the gatherings throughout Italy would have more than ten million people, because

not just the members of the Party and Militia will gather (...), but all Italians although not being members of the Party and its organization will feel the obligation to be present, to give the Duce with their participation its swearing of faith, and to say to the world that all Italians, owning the *tessera* or not, are ready to follow any order of the Chief. (...) The people will be joyful because they will listen to the word so much waited for, the word which will signify the beginning of a new era for the Italian people. Citizens, on that day flag and illuminate your houses and participate – all – in the *adunata*.¹¹⁹

The public was expected to follow the calls of gathering strictly in the aim to achieve maximum participation in the *adunatas* throughout the Province. The orders were mixed with highly patriotic language that emphasized the people's participation in what was intended to be an event of greatest historical importance for the entire Nation. That is what the public was presented through the media. It is, however, interesting to see what was happening behind the scenes, in the official structures in Istria and how the government in Rome saw the situation in the provinces, including Istria.

A telegram dated on the September 18th from the Ministry of the Press and Propaganda sent to Pola asked the Prefect of Istria to request the installation of speakers connected to radio devices in all important squares and localities of the Province before the date of September 22, explaining that the date chosen is “for technical reasons, and not because it is a date already set [for the *adunata*]”.¹²⁰ An undated telegram from Rome ordered the flagging and illumination of all public offices in the Province on the occasion of the announcement of the *adunata*.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ “Cittadini, imbandierate e illuminate le case partecipando compatti all’adunata”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 2nd 1935, p. 2.

¹²⁰ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/5 (Telegram regarding the installation of speakers)

¹²¹ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/3 (Telegram regarding the flagging and illumination of public offices)

Another telegram, sent this time from the Minister of the Interior Buffarini to the Prefect of Istria on September 21st, set the guidelines for the working of the Prefecture headquarters in Pola and other public officials on the occasion of the *adunata*. The telegram obliged the presence in the headquarters of the smallest possible number of personnel needed for the regular work of the body due to the fact that most of the employees would have to participate in the gathering as members of the Fascist Party. Also, the Prefecture is ordered to “as soon as possible” telegraph to the ministry of the Interior in Rome the details about the performance of the *adunata* and the approximate number of participants, as well as to note any relevant situation of emergency.¹²² Another telegram, dated September 24th, applied the same impositions regarding the keeping of a minimum number of employees at all public offices.¹²³

The archival sources contain a document dated on September 23rd compiled by the director of the main civilian hospital of Pola, “*Santorio Santorio*”, detailing the orders of how the employees of the hospital should behave, due to the fact that all the employees of that institution were asked to attend the *adunata* on the basis of the instructions of the Federal Secretary. The orders detail the erection of a first aid tent in the proximity of the Amphitheater of Pola and the presence there of a couple of medics in case of any possible emergencies. Also, the manager of the power station of the hospital is allowed to stay at his post until his daily work ends. “To no other person working in the service of this institution will be considered justified the absence to the *adunata* (...) in conformity of the orders given by the respective hierarchies”. In addition, the decree asks the non-members of the regime organization to gather in the atrium of the hospital, while some hospital officials present at the

¹²² DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/7 (1) (Telegram regarding the work of Prefecture officials)

¹²³ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/7 (3) (Telegram regarding the work of public officials)

adunata were ordered to compile a list of the personnel present at the event before 10 AM of the day following the *adunata*.¹²⁴

A telegram dated on the September 22nd decreed the immediate closure of all the cinema halls in the Kingdom at the moment of the announcement in order to allow the public and the employees the participation in the *adunata*. The telegram specifies the venues to be closed: the theatre *Ciscutti*, and the cinemas *Umberto*, *Ideal*, *Arena*, *Garibaldi* and *Savoia*.¹²⁵

The authorities had in mind the possible disruptions of radio, telephone and telegraph operations in the Province in the event of the *adunata* and the participation of many employees in it. A message dated on September 18th from the administration of the local Post and Telegraph operator reassured the Prefecture that all the operations would continue in full swing in the event of the *adunata*.¹²⁶ A second message dated on the September 26th from the Prefecture in Pola sent to the Pola division of the Telephone Society of the Venezias (*Societa` Telefonica delle Venezie*) obliged the company that “in case of the summoning of the General Gathering out of the normal work time of the telephone offices of the Province, the employees should come immediately to the office and stay put until new orders are given”.¹²⁷

The official documents tell us that the preparations for the gathering were being taken seriously by both the central government in Rome, as well as the local authorities in the Province of Istria. The regime’s aim to bring “twenty million” Italians to the piazzas was an order that could not be overlooked in the tiniest corner of the country. One such example is the early announcement of the need for speakers and radios to be ready at public places. Also, organizations clearly had in mind the importance of the upcoming events and strictly abided by the orders of gathering, making all possible arrangements to allow the participation of its

¹²⁴ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/7 (2) (The Santorio Santorio hospital’s director’s orders)

¹²⁵ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281 f: XVII-A-5-10/8 (Telegram regarding the closure of cinema halls)

¹²⁶ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/5 (1) (Telegram regarding the work of telephone offices)

¹²⁷ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/5 (2) (Telegram regarding the work of STV telephone offices)

employees in the gatherings, as well as its continuation of work in the best possible way with minimum personnel available at the moment of the *adunata*. We may assume that the officials of lower rank wanted the organizations and bodies under their command to behave as in line as possible with the government's aims in order to show their fidelity to Fascism.

The October 3rd edition of the *Corriere Istriano* gives a detailed description of the events that took place in Pola the previous day. At 15.30 PM, cannon shots followed by church bells and the "scream" of sirens announced the beginning of the *adunata*. People of various age and gender "rushed towards their homes to wear their uniforms". The journal notes the bad weather with rain pouring the whole day, but the city was soon wrapped in Italian flags and at 16.00 PM the people were ready at places prescribed for the gathering. Although the weather changed for the worse, "the enthusiasm reached the highest point of human possibility".¹²⁸

The journal notes that at 16.45 PM the gathering was completed. The writer of the article calculated the fascists present as 25,000 of the Comune of Pola (city and surroundings) plus the thousands of citizens non-members of the various organizations who spontaneously joined the gathering. "An awesome, superb and unforgettable gathering, worthy of the Caesarian epoch", the writer concludes.¹²⁹

The journal informed its readers that the idea of having the old Roman Amphitheater of Pola as a venue for the *adunata* was dropped because of the bad weather. Accordingly, the Fascist Federation thought about that possibility, and with "truly admirable regularity" the masses could reach the following closed venues: the city theater *Politeama Ciscutti*, the *Circolo Savoia*, the *Sala Umberto*, the *Casa Balilla* and other places where the radios with loudspeakers were prepared in advance. According to the journal, all this process of gathering

¹²⁸ "Tutto il popolo di Pola inquadrato nelle organizzazioni del Regime risponde con indomita fierezza all'appello del Duce", *Corriere Istriano*, October 3rd 1935, p. 3.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

was accompanied by the playing of patriotic songs and hymns through loudspeakers, “which amalgamated hearts and spirits in a high ideal which outdid all possible estimates”.¹³⁰

With the impossibility to attend all the events at all the venues simultaneously, the editors of the journal chose to describe the events in the main venue, the *Politeama Ciscutti*. The theater is described as being totally filled by people, with the various regime organizations present identified by their pennants and flags. As the Duce’s speech was being impatiently waited, the marching band of the *Scuole CREM*¹³¹ played continuously patriotic and fascist compositions. The mass was joined by the leading fascists of the province, the Prefect Cimoroni, the Federal Consul Bellini, Senator Chersi and MPs Maracchi and Bilucaglia along with other *gerarchi*, all greeted by an applause, the journal notes.¹³²

The songs played by the orchestra alternated with the sounds the radio emitted from the main event in *Piazza Venezia* in Rome, with “invocations to the Duce resembling mighty waves of a stormy sea”. At 18.30 PM, the three trumpet sound signals announced the appearance of Mussolini at the balcony over *Piazza Venezia*. The mass in the Pola theater was able to hear Achille Starace’s scream “Salute to the Duce” and the people in the theater replied with a “To us!” (“*A noi!*”) like the ones in Rome.¹³³

The Duce’s speech was listened to with “emotion with no limit” and the people’s “soul was stretched to better hear and understand the meaning of His words”, reads the article in the *Corriere Istriano*.¹³⁴ The speech ended with invocations “Duce, Duce!” in the crowded theater.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Schools of the *Corpo Reale Equipaggi Marittimi*, the Italian navy infantry present in Pola's arsenal.

¹³² “Tutto il popolo di Pola inquadrato nelle organizzazioni del Regime risponde con indomita fierezza all’appello del Duce”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 3rd 1935, p. 3.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The gathering was followed by the masses' filling of the streets of Pola engaging in several processions with the marching bands leading them. The patriotic songs and fascist hymns were repeated in a "spectacle of fabulous beauty, causing chills". The processions went through the Sergia, Kandler, Carrara streets and the Largo Oberdan Square, to be joined at the Port'Aurea Square (Golden Gate, a Roman triumphal arch) where they slowly dispersed. Three cannon shots signaled the end of the gathering at 19.00 PM, but people continued to celebrate in the illuminated streets of the city.¹³⁵

The *Corriere Istriano* describes also the events in the military garrisons of Pola, ships and other military facilities such as the CREM schools. The radios were put in the military premises where soldiers listened to the Duce's speech. After the speech, the soldiers and sailors celebrated in the barracks courtyards by singing and hailing the Duce and the King, enabled by a "truce in the bad weather". The journal emphasizes the celebrating fascist blacksirts' visit to the military premises, and the "fascists and soldiers fraternized in a cry of passion which burst from the chest of thousands upon thousands of men in arms: 'Duce! Duce!'".¹³⁶

We see that the journal describes the *adunata* as happening in fashion of extreme order, in line with the preparations described before. The extreme euphoria is clearly emphasized in its description of the events, with the emotions of the masses directed towards the Duce in line with the cult of personality the Fascist leader had built around himself. As in line with events throughout the country, the *Corriere Istriano* wanted to show that the *adunata* of October 2nd 1935 was a high point in the history of Fascist Italy.

A short notice in the October 3rd edition of the *Corriere Istriano* claimed that from all over Istria news arrived that the gathering of the forces of the Regime was successful, "giving

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

motive to delirious manifestations of patriotism”, adding that “(a) unified and strong Istria marches on the orders of the Duce”.¹³⁷ The October 5th edition of the journal brought correspondences regarding the Gathering of the Regime Forces in the following Istrian towns: Rovigno, Pirano, and Orsera. The details about the events in each of these locations are repetitive. In Rovigno, the weather problems forced the participants to gather in several closed venues, too, like fascist premises, schools, a theatre and cinema. In this case, too, the journal underscores the enthusiasm of the masses, with singing of patriotic songs in the procession after the Duce’s speech. In Pirano, the mass ignored the bad weather and congregated in Tartini Square. In the small town of Orsera, all the gathered people filled the elementary school, where several radios were installed. The gathering ended with the mass filling the Egidio Grego main square of the small town.¹³⁸ Similar descriptions of the events for the towns of Parenzo and Valle are given in the journal edition of October 8th.¹³⁹

The descriptions of the events of October 2nd 1935 in the Province are shorter summaries of the main event described in the Province’s capital, Pola. The events in each location is described in a repetitive fashion, but again with an emphasis put on the orderly happening of the gatherings and the euphoria of the people participating in it. The Italy-wide event happening in every corner of Italy, in the smallest communities, in the absolutely same fashion, is the proof of the centrally-organized *adunata* that aimed for the presence of millions of Italians in front of the radio speakers.

In accordance with the Interior Minister’s earlier request to the Prefect to provide the details of the *adunata*, to give an approximate number of participants in it, and to note any possible disturbances,¹⁴⁰ the Prefect Cimoroni sent a telegram on the evening of October 2nd

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 5th 1935, p. 3.

¹³⁹ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 8th 1935, p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/7 (1) (Telegram regarding the work of Prefecture officials)

noting that the *adunata* occurred in Pola and the Province “in maximum order amid delirious manifestations of enthusiasm that reached its apex with the Duce’s speech”, adding that “although the bad weather raged everywhere”, the participants in the *adunata* [in the Province] number one hundred and thirty thousand along the twenty five thousand in the Capital [Pola].” The Prefect also notes that “no incident of the slightest importance occurred”.¹⁴¹ Cimoroni’s telegram completely reflects the writing of the *Corriere Istriano*. The Prefect put an emphasis on the regular happening of the gathering in Pola, and the euphoric reception of the events by the mass, with an emphasis on the adoration of the Fascist leader. A possible conclusion is that the Prefect wanted to show to his superiors the Province under his jurisdiction behaved in line with the regime’s expectations.

II.3. The Takeover of Adua

As some kind of continuation of the joy provoked by the regime during the Gathering of the Forces of the Regime, came the alleged euphoria in answer to the Italian capture of the highly symbolic Ethiopian town of Adua on October 6th, the site of the Italian military disaster at the hands of the forces of Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II during the First Italo-Ethiopian War in 1896. The *Corriere Istriano* published a two-page special edition linked to the news on October 6th, based on a telegram sent throughout the provincial capitals by the Minister of the Press and Propaganda Alfieri asking the publication of breaking news special editions of all local daily newspapers.¹⁴² Most likely, the regime wanted the wider public to hear both about the victory in Africa, as well as the propagandistic description of the celebration the event provoked.

With the arrival of the news, the communiqué N. 14 from the command in Eastern Africa, the regime organized a new event for the masses in Pola. The news was announced on

¹⁴¹ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/10 (1) (Telegram detailing the gathering on Oct. 2nd 1935)

¹⁴² DAP, PP, 1935, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/6 (Telegram regarding the special edition of local newspapers)

the radio at 20.00 PM. According to the *Corriere Istriano*, a truck with speakers owned by the Dopolavoro drove through the city announcing that the member of parliament Giovanni Maracchi and director of the *Corriere Istriano* would speak at the Port' Aurea Square at 20.30 PM. The passage of the vehicle "which played the songs of war and the Revolution contributed to the rising tension among people's souls making possible that at 20.30 Piazza Port' Aurea saw an impressive crowd gathered. Never was the square so full of people", writes the journal.¹⁴³

The event started with the reading of the communiqué N. 14 announcing the capture of Adua by the vice Federal Secretary Luigi Bilucaglia "amid indescribable enthusiasm" of the mass, which although "heard it repeated several times already, would never become tired of hearing it again in order to imprint in their soul with uneraseable characters the words that gave to the Nation the news of the victory".¹⁴⁴

Maracchi's "improvised" speech remembered the 1896 humiliation and detailed the "military, political and moral" importance of the victory that "will give to Italy the Abyssinian town forever". It was followed by the praising of the Duce, the "savior and strength giver of the Fascist Nation". The enthusiasm provoked by Maracchi's words on the Duce provoked "an outcry of enthusiasm rising to the sky" from the mass, writes the journal, adding that the subsequent shouting of the word "DUCE" by the mass is "an invocation, a mystical prayer of the people towards Him that redeemed it and will made it great".¹⁴⁵

A procession of "citizens and soldiers" was formed soon after the "brief" speech ended, and it made a circle around the city center arriving at the Palace of the Government, the seat of the Prefect Oreste Cimoroni. The participants in the procession thus "brought to

¹⁴³ "L'on. Maracchi parla a diecimila cittadini ammassati in Piazza Port' Aurea", *Corriere Istriano*, October 6th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

the Head of the Province the greeting of a joyful Pola (...) and asked the Prefect to send the Duce an expression of fidelity of all the Istrian people”, writes the journal. Moreover, the Prefect was requested to make a speech. He agreed and “raised the enthusiasm with exalting words about the great African endeavour”. After the “greeting to the Duce and the King”, the mass dispersed in smaller groups, with soldiers being constantly targeted by “demonstrations of kindness”. The journal concludes the report pointing out that the commotion continued into the late evening, with tricolors hanging from many windows and balconies embellished with flowers and illumination.¹⁴⁶

The Adua victory was celebrated across the province, too. The October 9th edition of the *Corriere Istriano* described events in the towns of Rovigno, Dignano, Portole, Pingente and Abbazia. In Rovigno, the people gathered after 20.00 PM in Vittorio Emanuele III Square and listened to a short speech by Secretary of the local *Fascio* prof. Arcidiacono. Afterwards, a procession led by the band of the Salesian order passed through the whole town center, followed by jubilation into the late evening. In Dignano, the Secretary of the local *Fascio* gave a speech at the main square of the town, too, followed by a procession. In the small town of Portole, among the events already described for other locations we find the public reading of a letter sent from Africa by a soldier originating from the town, and a telegram reply message was written to him.¹⁴⁷ The October 11th edition of the journal adds news about the jubilation from the towns of Umago, Levade, Visinada and Orsera with the same mode of celebration happening as described in the previous cases.¹⁴⁸ Again, smaller versions of the main event in Pula were happening in the smaller locations around the Province and the journal descriptions are repetitive.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 8th 1935, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, October 11th 1935, p. 4.

The celebration of the takeover of Adua on October 6th 1935 can be considered as a kind of continuation of the keeping of the level of mobilization, public euphoria and enthusiasm with the Ethiopian campaign after the initial *adunata* of October 2nd. Differently from the case of the *adunata*, the Adua-connected events were organized in a much more improvised fashion, but the event itself was rehearsed, it seems. The speeches, playing of patriotic songs and processions were thus repeated only four days after the “historical” events of October 2nd in what one may consider as an example of attempted constant mobilization. We may add here that the people had the opportunity to repeat the events this time without bad weather preventing the gathering happening in the open piazzas. As in the case of the description of the initial *adunata*, the *Corriere Istriano* emphasized the huge euphoria of the people and the adoration of the Duce.

II.4. The Slavic Reception

Since there is no mention of the Slavic response to the events of initial mobilization, and no evidence of any open rejection of these events in the archival documents, the only source is the weekly of the Slavic émigrés from the Julian March based in Zagreb, the *Istra*. However, at the time just before and immediately after the beginning of the war, the *Istra* focused on the possible danger of having thousands of Italian soldiers of Slavic ethnicity put into harms way on the first lines of combat in Africa.¹⁴⁹

The Zagreb-based journal reported on violent methods the Fascist regime used against the Slavs in the Julian March to bring them as soldiers in the various units departing for Africa. Also, according to the *Istra* railway stations across the region were scenes of constant sorrow, in which relatives had to cope with the forced departures of their young male family

¹⁴⁹ Orlović, *Etiopski rat 1935.-36. prema pisanju zagrebačkog emigrantskog lista Istra* [The Ethiopian War 1935-36 According to the Zagreb Émigré Journal *Istra*], MA thesis, Pula 2012., pp. 22-23.

members.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the Italian historian Elio Apih noted three hundred Slovene volunteers from the province of Gorizia departing voluntarily, probably because of unemployment.¹⁵¹

The editors of the *Istra* did not comment the huge gatherings of October 2nd. However, the journal does bring a short article mentioning the *adunata*-related events, in the largely-Slovenian inhabited town of Ilirska Bistrica, in the town of the Province of the Carnaro. The article points out the sirens and church bells signaling the time for the members of various fascist organizations to gather in the local *Casa del Fascio*. The article then describes how right after the start of the Duce's speech, an electrical blackout shut up the radios and speakers in the building with the officials present unable to return the current, and thus "all that pompous preparation resulted in failure".¹⁵² Reading this rather mocking description, the exiled Slavs probably did not take seriously the mass demonstrations in the Julian March and throughout Italy and regarded it as a typical example of grotesque propaganda by the Fascist regime. Of course, from the safe distance they were able to diminish the importance of the event, but one probable explanation is that the religious-like fascist belief that the Italian nation was entering a historical moment had no resonance whatsoever among the oppressed Slavs.

II.5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter dealt with two sequences of the initial phase of the mobilization of the public in the Province of Istria before and at the immediate beginning of the Ethiopian War.

The first sequence, the mass rallies organized to greet the departing soldiers from the Province and events in which various groups of citizens asked to be enrolled as volunteers in

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 32.

¹⁵¹ Apih, *Italia, fascismo e antifascismo*, pp. 325-326., f. 17.

¹⁵² "Kako so v Bistrici poslušali Mussolinijev govor", *Istra*, October 11th 1935., p. 2.

the war effort shows a largely local character. The most emphasis was given to the celebration of the Istrian Italian soldier and underlining Istria's role in the overall Fascist projects. The volunteers from the Province were presented as role models resulting from the regime's project of the creation of a "new Fascist man", building upon the myth of the local heroes of the First World War

The second sequence included the "Gathering of the Regime Forces" signaling the start of the war and the subsequent celebration of Italy's first victory in the war, the takeover of Adua. These two events were less local in character, as the regime ordered them to happen in the whole country. The country-wide preparations for the "*adunata*" were strictly implemented in the Province in line with the regime's expectations, and the general population was urged to participate in the mass demonstrations that were believed to have been marking the events of high historical significance. The preparations for the General Gathering of the Forces of the Regime went to the minimum detail, ensuring the participation of every Fascist Party member in the event, while the local daily journal *Corriere Istriano* galvanized the wide masses for this huge event. The Gathering took place in the late afternoon of October 2nd 1935, and both archival material and the press (focusing on the provincial capital of Pola) emphasize the utmost euphoria and enthusiasm that the event provoked, especially in its dimension of adoration of the Italian leader Benito Mussolini. The Gathering was soon followed by the celebration of the takeover of the highly symbolic Ethiopian town of Adua on October 6th, with events of the *adunata* being rehearsed, with profound enthusiasm again being emphasized by the press and documents.

Both of the events involved listening to speeches (Mussolini's through the radio as well as of local fascist officials), joyful singing of patriotic and fascist hymns and processions that were meant to provoke enthusiasm among the masses. Besides, Pola, the two gatherings happened throughout smaller communities in the Province, with descriptions of them in a

repetitive fashion reflecting the situation they provoked in Pola. In the end, the Slavic perception of these events mirrored in the writing in émigré circles showed a high level of disregard towards the Fascist mass rallies, partly due to the emphasis on the possibility that soldiers of Slavic ethnicity may have to fight on the Ethiopian battlefields.

III. Italy Victimized: Responding to the Sanctions and Remembering the Fallen in Ethiopia

This chapter will tackle the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations on Italy and how was that exploited by the regime and new mass rallies mobilizing the crowds in a campaign of victimization and need for patriotic mobilization. After the initial, albeit rare successes that the Italians had in Ethiopia, the war entered a phase of slow progress and even stagnation evident in the regime's decision to shift the command of the campaign from the hands of General Emilio de Bono to Marshal Pietro Badoglio. Similarly, we shall see how were the first news of Istrian soldiers killed in Africa exploited for further patriotic mobilization and what kind of mass rituals were organized in that sense.

III.1. Events Related to the League of Nations' Sanctions

This subchapter will deal with all the events which were related to the imposition of economic sanctions by the League of Nations towards Italy in the Province of Istria, culminating in the so-called "Day of Faith" on December 18th 1935. The sanctions were imposed by the international organization as a response towards Italy's aggression on Ethiopia, a sovereign nation member. The Fascist regime called the policy the "Siege by the League" (*Assedio Societario*) and aimed at rallying the Italians in a propaganda ploy alleging that the country was victim of injustice, although the sanctions proved in their early stage to be only slightly damaging.¹⁵³

The Grand Council of Fascism decreed on November 16th that the upcoming date of November 18th, when the sanctions would be put into effect by the League, would be "a date of disgrace and shame in world's history" and ordered the installment of plaques around Italy "as a sign of remembering the siege (...) a huge injustice brought upon Italy, to which all the

¹⁵³ Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, pp. 464-465.

continents owe civilization”.¹⁵⁴ What followed was the so called “anti-sanctionist” drive, in which the citizens were urged to buy only “National products” while a series of austerity measures were implemented by the state. Also, what started was the collection of gold and other valuable metals, a surprisingly popular policy according to Del Boca and other authors, who claimed it to be effectively spontaneous and marking a high point in the consensus of the Italians towards the regime.¹⁵⁵ Cleverly enough, the drive was initiated by high officials and VIPs, such as Gabriele D’Annunzio, as well as high Church prelates.¹⁵⁶

An article published in the *Corriere Istriano* on November 6th, ahead of the implementation of the sanctions, claimed that the Province of Istria was ready to sustain itself against them, and gave instruction to the owners of local businesses, emphasizing the absolute need for the ban on selling foreign goods and insistence on the buying of “national products” only.¹⁵⁷ Almost every edition of the journal started having inscriptions in black bold characters warning the readers to avoid buying foreign products.¹⁵⁸ Also, similar articles like the November 6th one were being repeated.¹⁵⁹

Surprisingly, November 18th, the day of the imposition of the sanctions on Italy, did not see any mass rally. The November 19th number of the *Corriere Istriano* in an article titled “Joyous in tricolors, Pola repeated yesterday the motto of the *squadristi*: ‘I don’t give a damn’” reported that the city of Pola greeted the November 18th implementation of the sanctions wrapped in Italian flags.¹⁶⁰ On November 21st, the journal reported similar receptions of the sanctions in the towns of Pirano and Rovigno. In Pirano, the report writes,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 465.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 467, 469.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 468.

¹⁵⁷ “Risoluta difesa contro le sanzioni”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 6th 1935, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Using the old Fascist slogan, the inscriptions often read “I don’t give a damn about...” (*Me ne frego dei...*) followed by a small list of English and French typical products. See: *Corriere Istriano*, November 7th 1935, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ See for example: “L’Istria è mobilitata contro le sanzioni”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 7th 1935, p. 3.; “La donna nella nuova missione che ad essa affida la Patria”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 9th 1935, p. 3. “La lotta antisanzionista in atto”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 12th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ “Festante di tricolori, Pola ha ripetuto ieri il motto degli squadristi: ‘Me ne frego’”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 19th 1935, p. 2.

school lectures were prepared to deal with the topic of the sanctions, while the *Fascio Femminile* started collecting gold and silver.¹⁶¹ In Portole, even the Marching Band of the *Dopolavoro* contributed with playing marches and patriotic hymns.¹⁶² Without evidence from the archival documentation, it is possible to assume that these events in Istria were organized in an improvised fashion, although the center in Rome did probably command, as on previous occasions, all the parts of Italy to install flags to mark the start of the sanctions.

The following days seem to have been marked by improvisation as well. News of spontaneous donations to the Nation started coming in soon after the implementation of the sanctions. The *Corriere Istriano* wrote on November 22nd that in the town of Rovigno in a “spontaneous gesture” a *Balilla* member offered the small amount of gold and silver “he got from his grandma”. Similarly, a girl from the *Piccole Italiane* followed with the same act, owhat the article writer commented: “Good *Piccola Italiana*, you can be certain that all the *Piccole Italiane* of Rovigno will imitate you”.¹⁶³ Initiatives to publicize the “help towards the Nation” continued. The *Corriere Istriano* continued publishing details on various organizations’ spontaneous donations of valuable material to the State. For example, the Football Club “*Grion*” of Pola, the Istrian GUF and the rowing club “*Libertas*” from Capodistria.¹⁶⁴

The usage of the sanctions for patriotic purposes started having a more organized appearance fairly soon. On November 27th, the *Corriere Istriano* published an appeal by the Federal Secretary of the PNF in the Province of Istria Bellini to the citizens to donate all the

¹⁶¹ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 21st 1935, p. 4.

¹⁶² “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 22nd 1935, p. 3.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “Manifestazioni di solidarieta` e di alta comprensione continuano a Pola ed in tutta l’Istria”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 24th 1935, p. 2.; “Fervore di iniziative e di opera per resistere alle sanzioni”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 25th 1935, p. 2.

scrap metal in their possession.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, new details on more individual gold offerings were being constantly published. On December 1st, the journal informed its readers that the leading officials of the Province, the Prefect Cimoroni, parliamentarian Maracchi and the Federal Secretary Bellini donated golden and silver objects in their possession.¹⁶⁶ In a further sign that the collection of valuable materials was becoming more organized and initiated by the regime itself, the *Corriere* announced the Federal Secretary disposition that a cart collecting scrap metal would pass through the main streets of Pola on December 2nd. Obviously, the cart would be “manned by fascists”, while the inhabitants of the surrounding homes would be alerted to its approach by the sounding of a trumpet. Interestingly, the disposition said that “all people can and all have the duty to contribute to the collection. That is how the sanctions should be fought”.¹⁶⁷

Interestingly, the writing of the daily journal of Pola about the campaign of the collection of valuable material reflects what can be found in the archival documents. A report sent from the *Podestà* of the Comune of Visinada to the Prefect of the Province of Istria Oreste Cimoroni on December 10th reported the events connected to the sanctions in the said Comune. The *Podestà* emphasized the fact that the sanctions had a “plebiscite” as an effect with enthusiastic activities occurring. In his words, the sanctions made the local people “more united, determined and vibrant”.¹⁶⁸ He notes that the collection of gold and silver is going at a regular pace: “at the *Fascio di Combattimento*, in schools and in *Dopolavoro* headquarter the citizens go and give their gift to the Nation on a daily basis.” The *Podestà* reported that the local priest, Don Emilio Zennaro, donated all the gold and silver owned by the Church and put on the church a plaque commemorating the sanctions with a biblical quotation. Also, the

¹⁶⁵ “S. E. il Prefetto presiede una riunione per il coordinamento della difesa contro le sanzioni”, *Corriere Istriano*, November 27th 1935, p. 2.

¹⁶⁶ “Oro, argento, ferro alla Patria”, *Corriere Istriano*, December 1st 1935, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ “Il carro della resistenza”, *Corriere Istriano*, December 1st 1935, p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ DAP, PP, 1935, b: 264, f: V-1/3

donation of war medals by a local World War I veteran is noted by the *Podestà*. He reports the successful nature of the gatherings on November 17th and on the following dates, concluding that he will “continue the propaganda activity of persuasion and incitement.”¹⁶⁹

So far, one can note a steady shift towards more organized anti-sanctionist propaganda, and the language both in the *Corriere Istriano* and the archival material shows words of victimization, but also defiance. Finally, the campaign of victimization and defiance had its apex on December 18th. On that day, called the “Day of Faith” (*Giornata della Fede*), mass rallies were organized throughout Italy in which “men and women were summoned by the Fascist Party to mystically unify themselves in a marriage with the regime and the nation at war by donating their wedding rings”.¹⁷⁰ The ritual in Rome, in front of the Altar of the Nation, was initiated by Queen Elena herself, the first woman to give her ring in an urn in that symbolic gesture. “For several hours, (...) a long queue of women (...) paraded in order to place their wedding rings in the urn, with columns of smoke rising from torches and accompanied by the sound of slow rhythm music”.¹⁷¹

The *Corriere Istriano* described the events of the Day of Faith happening on December 18th in a long article published the following day titled “The Wedding of Istria With the Nation”, emphasizing that “Pola and Istria proved not to be second to the other sister cities and provinces”. The journal underlines that “on the 18th of December, one month since the disgraceful Leagueist machinations, Istria gave one and only answer: of a plebiscitary love towards the Great Fascist Nation.”¹⁷²

According to the journal, Pola on December 18th “woke up covered in tricolors”. As in the case of the Gathering of the Forces of the Regime (*adunata*) on October 2nd, the weather

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, p. 121.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² “Lo spozalizio dell’Istria con la Patria”, *Corriere Istriano*, December 19th 1935, p. 2.

was again not helpful, as the strong wind persisted through the whole day. Nevertheless, the journal writes, the euphoria was strong as the deed that men and women were to make had a “fragrance of a highest poetry.”¹⁷³

The ritual had its start at 8.45 AM, with the radio broadcast of the event in Rome and the highly symbolic act of Queen Elena on the Altar of the Nation. The bell tolls and the words from the Queen touched the listeners in Pola “up to tears”. At 10.00 AM, the participants in the ceremony filled the Cathedral to assist for the “pledgeful mass”. The writer of the article underlines the fact that in a “granitic mass of people” all the important personalities of the city and Province were present along with the common people, while the ladies were “mingled in the same act of love with women of humbler origins.” After the religious ceremony, the mass proceeded in orderly fashion to donate their wedding rings.¹⁷⁴

Outside of the cathedral a large melting pot was waiting for the people to drop their golden wedding rings into, while the fire under the pot was lit by young fascists. In a symbolic fashion, the first women to offer their rings were the mothers of two local fascist martyrs, Giovanni Grion and Alfredo Sassek. They were followed by the Federal Secretary Bellini, who dropped into the pot around a hundred rings from “humble peasants from Altura who had to give up to the honor of presenting themselves at Pola due to the bad weather. The Federal Secretary himself was to follow in the offering act, “amid constant applause”. He was followed by other officials and their wives, such as the prefect Cimatori and others.¹⁷⁵ The example that the Queen gave was emulated using elements of local patriotism, evident in the fact that the first persons to commence the ceremony were the mothers of dead local heroes of the “Fascist revolution”. The local Fascist and administrative heads were the second group of people offering their rings, showing example to the rest of the gathered mass.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

What followed was a “people’s galore”, the journal continues. It “burst through the gates of the Basilica like a raging torrent”. Women came “half-crushed by the mass, almost passing out”. After their offering rite, “it is like new forces came to them and the short weakness was overcome by the joy of the sublime gift [they just made]”.¹⁷⁶ It seems like the journal wanted to individualize the victimization the country was passing through in every person that was participating in this ritual! The young consorts stayed side-by-side by their husbands and after giving their “sacred symbol” they were satisfied to get the piece of paper which would allow them to retrieve the steel rings that had been ordered to arrive in the city.¹⁷⁷ Soon afterwards, the journal writes, came a procession of “commoner women” from the city’s market in order to donate “their rings, the rings of their husbands, as well as the rings of their ancestors”. The offerings happened amid hails to the Duce and mocking of the former allied countries, the writer concludes. The journal describes several touching examples by individual women, some in their nineties, and of a woman who bought her golden ring just to give it to the nation.¹⁷⁸

At 11.00, the journal notes, after two hours of the start of the “plebiscite”, more than two thousand rings were already collected. The collection continued until the late afternoon, with a “successful outcome”: out of 7.300 couples of Pola, 6.400 participated in the event, and the 900 remaining would either do that on a new occasion or were prevented from doing so due to illnesses, temporary absence etc. “The common woman was prevalent in the mass, a sublime expression of an untameable faith, a magnificent example of the spiritual miracle that the Duce did in this Nation of ours”, concludes the *Corriere Istriano*.¹⁷⁹ The journal’s emphasis on the participation of humbler people seems wanting to emphasize the level of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

victimization Italy was going through, as the simplest women allegedly were the most enthusiastic ones in the wish to help the country.

The December 20th edition of the *Corriere Istriano* described the “Day of Faith” in several smaller Istrian cities and towns. In Capodistria, the ceremony took place after the religious mass in the Piazza sotto la Loggia. The donation of the rings was led by widows and families of fallen World War I soldiers including the family of the famous local hero Nazario Sauro (hanged as traitor by the Austro-Hungarians in 1916). There, the first golden object to be put into the melting pot was his Medal of Military Valour. In Capodistria, too, the journal notes some cases of fatigue due to the crowded situation. The journal notes the presence of a woman who was over ninety years of age, too. In Pirano, the ceremony did not take place in front of the monument to the Fallen in war due to the bad weather, so it was moved to the local *Casa del Fascio*. More events are described from Dignano and the small town of Sanvincenti, where 146 rings were collected in a helmet of a MVSN batallion.¹⁸⁰ Everywhere, the journal emphasizes the participation of widows, peasants and common citizens, eager to help the victimized country. And again, the relatives and widows of fallen local heroes were the vanguard of the “Day of Faith”, emulating Queen Elena’s symbolic gift.

All the donors of their golden wedding rings received a receipt that allowed them to receive a steel ring as a sign of gratitude by the state. The first wish of the regime was to give them immediately, but the sheer number of donors meant that the production of the “millions” of steel rings was slower than expected and had to be postponed.¹⁸¹ The authorities in the Province of Istria organized the steel ring event on February 23rd 1936. The ceremony was planned to take place in the Cathedral of Pola, where the steel rings would be blessed after a

¹⁸⁰ “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, December 20th 1935, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ “La solenne celebrazione alla cattedrale e la distribuzione al Foro delle ‘fedi’ d’acciaio”, *Corriere Istriano*, February 23rd 1936, p. 2.

religious ceremony. Afterwards, the rings would be distributed by the members of the *Fascio Femminile* to the donators at the Forum of Pola.¹⁸²

The ceremony, a “vibrant manifestation of patriotism”, started at 9.00 AM and lasted until 16.00 PM, the *Corriere Istriano* writes. After the religious ceremony a procession led by the fanfare of the Young fascists took the already blessed steel rings from the Cathedral to the Forum. For the occasion, the newspaper describes, the Forum was wrapped in Italian flags and on the building of the town hall on the square a large inscription was installed that read: “Bless, oh Lord, the symbol of love offered to the Nation. Bless the new symbol that we put on in the name of God and Italy. Bless and exalt the Nation of ours and its fighting sons: allow them glory in the battlefield and a victorious return. Bless.”¹⁸³ A line of tables awaited the rings to be distributed to the donors who had to show their receipts.¹⁸⁴ This ceremony seems nothing more than a more austere rehearsal of the “Day of Faith” event on December 18th 1935. Again, a religious ceremony was followed by a crowd gathering in an open space, this time getting rings, not giving. The newspaper description again put the emphasis on the sacrifice of the people for the country, victimized by the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations. The newspaper did not report similar activities in the rest of the Province.

To sum up, the imposition of the League of Nations sanctions in the Province of Istria on November 18th 1935 was followed with no mass rally on that date, and with improvised propaganda campaign urging the people to help the victimized nation with donations. It was, however, followed by two organized events of mass public ritual. First, the “Day of Faith” on December 18th 1935, held in Pola and around the Province, when during a solemn ceremony people emulating the main event in Rome donated their wedding rings to the country. The

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ “Le fedi d’acciaio benedette dal sacerdote distribuite solennemente al Foro romano”, *Corriere Istriano*, February 25th 1936, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

second, a rehearsal of the first, happened in Pola on February 23rd 1936 when the donors of the original wedding rings received steel rings from the State. Both official documents compiled by local officials and the press emphasize the unifying effect the sanctions had on the people, and the plebiscitary response to help the country. The “Day of Faith” included the local Istrian character, with the vanguard in the donation drive being the relatives of local fallen heroes, while the press emphasized the enthusiastic participation of the humbler and poorer part of the population, aiming to point out the level of victimization the country was going through.

III.2. Commemorating Istria’s Fallen Soldiers

The historian Angelo Del Boca puts the number of Italian soldiers who died in the Ethiopian campaign in the period from January 1st 1935 to December 31st 1936 at 4.350.¹⁸⁵ The archival material from the Prefecture of Istria contains a list of 29 soldiers from the Province of Istria who died during the war in Ethiopia.¹⁸⁶ As the war was still going on, two ceremonies commemorating the fallen soldiers were organized in Pola in February and April 1936.

The *Corriere Istriano* on February 12th announced the names of the first three soldiers from the Province of Istria that fell in the battlefields of Ethiopia. The three, all from the 60th MVSN Legion “*Istria*” were: Ferruccio Babudri from Parenzo, Otello Chieregin from Pola and Bruno Comisso from Grisignana. The newspaper article emphasized their volunteering will to be enrolled in Africa and supposed heroism in the battlefield, and even published excerpts from letters they sent to their families. The article ends with the editor’s words: “From their shining example, Istria will draw motivation for a more intense dedication to

¹⁸⁵ Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, pp. 716-717.

¹⁸⁶ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 280, f: XVII-A-5/2 (Report on the anti-sanctionist activities in the Comune of Visinada)

Fascist Italy, in order to victoriously conclude the arduous job in which it committed herself; and the sacrifice of its best sons not to be futile”.¹⁸⁷

On February 15th, Pola’s *Corriere* announced a religious ceremony to be held in the Cathedral in commemoration of three fallen soldiers from the city. In addition to the already mentioned blackshirt Chieregin, the ceremony would focus on two other soldiers from the regular army who died much earlier: Enea Tamborini and Ferruccio Di Toma. The disposition by the Federal Secretary published in the newspaper ordered the participation of various regime organizations, and soldiers from the 60th Legion were ordered to attend the mass, too.¹⁸⁸

The ceremony took place with a religious mass, Fascist rite and honorary platoon firings in the morning of Sunday May 16th. According to the *Corriere Istriano*, the event “was huge, with plebiscitary participation by authorities and citizens”. Of course, the relatives of the fallen were present, taking the first seats in the Cathedral. The mass, led by monsignor Pavan, was accompanied by the organ played by a fifteen-year old member of the young Fascist organization Gino Pangher, who played a couple of classical compositions after the religious rite. The cathedral, the journal notes, was filled with flags and pennants of various regime organizations. The religious part of the overall ceremony was followed by the Fascist rite of the fallen: the “appeal of the Fallen”. In front of the cathedral, a firing squad of blackshirts was lined up, while an official read the three names. After each name, the crowd responded with a “powerful ‘Present!’”, the *Corriere* finishes its description.¹⁸⁹

On April 8th, the *Corriere* published the list of all the deceased Italians in the war in the interval between February 27th and March 30th. With bold letters, the names of three soldiers from the Province of Istria were pointed out on that list: Teodoro Lazzarri from Pola,

¹⁸⁷ “Tre eroici istriani caduti in Africa”, *Corriere Istriano*, February 12th 1936, p. 2.

¹⁸⁸ “Una messa solenne in suffragio dei Caduti polesi in A. O.”, *Corriere Istriano*, February 15th 1936, p. 2.

¹⁸⁹ “La commemorazione dei Caduti polesi in A. O.”, *Corriere Istriano*, February 18th 1936, p. 2.

Angelo Babich from Pola and Vittorio Coslovich from Buie.¹⁹⁰ In an already pre-established pattern, the journal edition of April 12th announced a religious ceremony due to be held on Wednesday, April 14th in front of the headquarters of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* in Pola. The ceremony was planned to commemorate the fallen soldiers, as well as workers who died in Africa. Interestingly, as the notice emphasizes, it was organized mainly for the young members of regime organizations.¹⁹¹

Because of bad weather, the ceremony was held in the large gym of the *Balilla* headquarters, instead of the wide open area in front of it. An altar for the religious ceremony was assembled in the gym, with pennants and flags of Fascist organizations installed on its sides. The mass was held by the chaplain of the *Balilla* organization, don Scalco, who also emphasized to the assembled youngsters the example these fallen soldiers should give to them, the future Fascists. He “invited the youngsters to enter the Army with enthusiasm and pride and to wear the gray-green [colours] ready to emulate the deeds of their older brothers at the orders of the H. E. the King and the Duce”, the *Corriere Istriano* writes. The Fascist rite that followed included the reading of fourteen names of dead soldiers and workers (including the last three announced on April 8th) with a “Present!” shouted simultaneously by the assembled mass after each name.¹⁹²

The two events described were prepared in advance like many other mass rallies before. The dispositions published in the *Corriere Istriano* asked the members of regime organizations to participate in them. The first ceremony, held on Sunday February 18th, was an event presented to all the citizens of Pola, showcasing the sacrifice of three of its citizens for the country. It made part of the Sunday mass in Pola’s cathedral, and was followed by a

¹⁹⁰ “I nostri gloriosi Caduti in Africa Orientale dal 27 febbraio al 30 marzo”, *Corriere Istriano*, April 8th 1936, p. 1.

¹⁹¹ *Corriere Istriano*, April 12th 1936, p. 3.

¹⁹² “Rito solenne alla memoria dei Caduti in Africa Orientale”, *Corriere Istriano*, April 15th 1936, p. 2.

Fascist rite of the fallen. The second ceremony, on April 14th, did not happen on Sunday, and did not happen in a religious building, although it involved a Catholic religious ceremony. Taking place in the headquarters of the youth Balilla organization, it was meant to show the sacrifice of Istria's soldiers to the youngsters, the future Fascist generation. This second event clearly supports the notion of the regime's pedagogical aims of creating a "new Fascist man".

III.3. Concluding remarks

This chapter dealt with two categories of events that could be regarded as a form of ceremonial victimization of Italy and its people.

A period of stagnation in the campaign saw the regime using sanctions imposed by the League of Nations for propaganda purposes, rallying the masses to help the victimized country with a culmination in the "Day of Faith" on December 18th 1935, which had a rehearsal on February 23rd 1936. Both official documents compiled by local officials and the press emphasize the unifying effect the sanctions had on the people, and the plebiscitary response to help the country. The "Day of Faith" included the local Istrian character, with the vanguard in the donation drive being the relatives of local fallen heroes, while the press emphasized the enthusiastic participation of the humbler and poorer part of the population, aiming to point out the level of victimization the country was going through.

Early 1936 saw remembrance rallies celebrating the fallen soldiers from the Province in the colonial campaign with ceremonies of mostly religious character occurring on February 18th and April 14th. The two events were meant to showcase the sacrifice of Istrian men for the country, presenting them as role models as a part of the regime's pedagogical aims of creating a "new Fascist man".

IV. Apotheosis of the Nation: Celebrating Victories and the Proclamation of the Empire

This chapter will deal with the victories the Italians began scoring in Ethiopia in 1936 and how they were celebrated, concluding with the enormous enthusiasm provoked by the end of the war, marked notably by huge mass rallies after the announcement of the fall of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa on May 5th and the proclamation of the Empire on May 9th 1936.

IV.1. Victories, Finally. Celebrating the Battles in Early 1936.

After a period of stagnation in the Ethiopian war, marked by an Ethiopian counter-offensive in December 1935, Italy was again gaining the upper hand in early 1936, partly thanks to the usage of chemical weapons.¹⁹³ Three battles were decisive in crushing the Ethiopian resistance: the so-called “Battle of Endertà” in mid-February, near the Amba Aradam, the battle of Amba Alagi, in late February, and the battle of the lake Ascianghi, or Mai Ceu, in early April 1936. After these victories, the Italian army had almost no force to stop opposing it in its advance towards the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

The *Corriere Istriano* writes that after the official regime communiqués announced the victory in the battle for the Endertà, on February 17th, lorries with loudspeakers on board propagated the news through the streets of Pola. At 19.00 PM of the same day, a mass assembled at the Largo Oberdan Square, where a stand was quickly erected, from which the Secretary of the Istrian GUF dr. Arbanassi read the communiqués again to the crowd, as well as the letter of praise from the Duce to the Italian commander in Africa Pietro Badoglio. The speech, the *Corriere* writes, was constantly interrupted by applause and was followed by a loud “Salute to the Duce”. Afterwards, the Fascist leaders of Pola initiated a procession which

¹⁹³ Del Boca, *La Guerra d’Etiopia*, pp. 149-150.

the assembled crowd was invited to participate in and join with the singing of patriotic hymns.¹⁹⁴ In its edition of February 21st, the *Corriere Istriano* chose to describe the same event in the small Istrian town of Portole, where a speech was held, and the local soldier killed in the latest battles, the blackshirt Giovanni Vellini was remembered.¹⁹⁵

The subsequent celebration of the victory at the battle for the Amba Alagi was not spontaneous. A notice in the *Corriere Istriano* of February 29th asked the public to assemble in Port'Aurea Square to celebrate the event, while the Fascists were ordered to follow the decisions by their respective districtual organizations.¹⁹⁶ That evening, at 19.00 PM the crowd did gather in the prescribed place in spite of the unfavorable weather, led by soldiers and Fascists. Before the speech given by the MP Giovanni Maracchi, bands played patriotic hymns in order to galvanize the crowd's enthusiasm, the journal reported. The *Corriere* brought the entire speech he gave in a written form, as Maracchi was also its director. The speech emphasized the sacrifice of 1895, when the army led by general Toselli was defeated at the same spot by the Ethiopian forces. After that, he turned to glorify the latest victory and the commanders of the overall campaign, Pietro Badoglio and the Duce himself, of course. The *Corriere* put comments in brackets when applauses interrupted MP Maracchi's speech, as well as when booing followed his mentioning of the Ethiopians. Indeed, the speech ended with satirical remarks directed at the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and the sanctionist countries members of the League of Nations, the journal writes. In this case, too, the gathering was followed by processions that marched through the city center.¹⁹⁷ The *Corriere* described

¹⁹⁴ "L'entusiastica manifestazione popolare di ieri sera", *Corriere Istriano*, February 18th 1936, p. 2.

¹⁹⁵ "Dalla Provincia", *Corriere Istriano*, February 21st 1936, p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ *Corriere Istriano*, February 29th 1936, p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ "L'on Maracchi esalta la vittoria di Amba Alagi tra l'entusiasmo di tutta la cittadinanza adunata a Port'Aurea", *Corriere Istriano*, March 1st 1936, p. 2.

the same mode of celebration, with a speech by the local Secretary of the *Fascio*, and processions that followed, in Istria's city of Rovigno.¹⁹⁸

The further cause for celebration was the Italian victory over the Ethiopians in the battle of Mai Ceu, and the *Corriere Istriano* on April 3rd promptly announced that a gathering would be held again in Port' Aurea Square in Pola at 19.30 PM.¹⁹⁹ The report on the gathering published on April 4th said that ten thousand people assembled in the square and the adjacent Largo Oberdan. The patriotic hymns played by the marching band were followed by an improvised speech by Giovanni Maracchi glorifying the deeds of Italy's soldiers in Ethiopia. A further speech was given by the Prefect Oreste Cimoroni, who emphasized the hardships Italy went through on the march to glory in its recent history. The end of the gathering did not shift from the usual pattern: a procession led by a marching band and members of various fascist organizations passed through the city center.²⁰⁰

More or less, these celebrations mimicked the previous gatherings, the *adunata* on October 2nd 1935 and the celebration of the takeover of Adua. The mode was repeated: speeches, followed by procession through the centers of Pola and other settlements around Istria. The events seem to be locally organized, but the content of the gatherings focused on the war itself, without the emphasis of local elements. Nevertheless, the people of Pola and Istria, almost simultaneously with the commemoration of the local casualties in the ongoing war, had the opportunity to feel the regime's successes through the gathering that were organized.

¹⁹⁸ "Dalla Provincia", *Corriere Istriano*, March 3rd 1936, p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ *Corriere Istriano*, April 3rd 1936, p. 3.

²⁰⁰ "Il grande raduno del popolo di Pola per celebrare le vittorie delle nostre truppe in A. O.", *Corriere Istriano*, April 4th 1936, p. 3.

IV.2. The “Radiant May”: The Apotheosis and Creation of the Empire

The culmination of victorious events came in May 1936, called the “Radiant African May”, a play on the “Radiant May” of 1915, when Italy entered the First World War. In the late afternoon of May 5th, on the day of the capture of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, sirens and bells summoned the masses to Piazza Venezia in Rome to listen to the Duce’s speech and throughout Italy to listen to the radio broadcast of it through loudspeakers put around main squares. With the event starting at 7.45 PM, “the Duce announced to the four hundred thousand Romans under his balcony and to more than thirty million Italians listening in every Italian square that ‘Ethiopia is now Italian’”.²⁰¹ Four days later, after the Grand Council of Fascism’s decision of the granting of the title of emperor to king Vittorio Emanuele III, and ‘Founder of the Empire’ to Benito Mussolini, and thus, the creation of the Italian Empire, the events of May 5th were repeated. That evening, on 10.30 PM, Mussolini announced these decisions to an even more enthusiastic mass. The Duce’s words that the “Empire reappeared on the fateful hills of Rome” is the most well known *leit-motif* of the “Radiant May” of 1936.²⁰²

The issue of May 5th of the *Corriere Istriano* published the regime’s order sheet no. 153 containing the dispositions for a new grand *adunata*. The points included, as in the case of the October 1935 gathering, the sound signals that would announce the beginning of the event, decreed for which fascist organizations the participation in it was mandatory, and gave the Federal Secretaries the task to manage the events in their respective Provinces. The order sheet concluded that the Federal Secretaries should telegram to Rome the approximate numbers of participants.²⁰³ The Federal Secretary’s detailed dispositions for the event in Pola were published in the same issue. The members of various organizations were asked to reach their respective headquarters at the issuing of the signal, only to join in the mass gathering at

²⁰¹ Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, 124.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ “Le disposizioni per la grande adunata”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 5th 1936, p. 1.

the Roman Amphitheater of Pola, but took advance precautions in case of bad weather.²⁰⁴ The huge Roman-era monument dominating the city was planned to host the October 2nd 1935 *adunata*, but was not used on that occasion indeed because of bad weather. The May 5th gathering was the first event connected to the empire-building Ethiopian campaign that was to happen in the Amphiteatre, often cited among the Italians as the symbol of the city's Romanity and being part of the Latin culture.

The archival material shows a hasty preparation but not less efficient when compared to the *adunata* of October 2nd 1935. A telegram from the Ministry of Interior sent to all the Prefectures of the Kingdom, including the Istrian one, decreed that the public officials should respond to the call for the latest gathering, while only the smallest possible number should stay at work to secure the continuity of operations. The telegram ordered the illumination and installment of flags on public buildings, too.²⁰⁵ At the same time, a message from the Prefect to the commander of the *Carabinieri* division in the Province asked that “as soon as possible, concise news via telegraph should be report me on the proceeding of the *adunata* (...) and communicate the approximate numbers of participants, as well as the weather conditions, while noting any emergency worthy of mention.”²⁰⁶

The signal for the gathering on May 5th was given at 18.15 PM. The *Corriere Istriano* describes the quick but orderly motion of the Fascists towards their homes in order to put on their uniforms, only to reach their local headquarters. After that, the streets became full of Fascists and non-party members, aiming to reach the Amphitheater in orderly fashion:

²⁰⁴ “Le disposizioni della Federazione Fascista”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 5th 1936, p. 3.

²⁰⁵ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (3) (Telegram regarding the work of public officials on May 5th 1936)

²⁰⁶ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (5) (Prefect's letter asking Carabinieri reports from localities in the Province)

Roman and fascist Pola, confused in an unique heartbeat of brotherly affection with all our armed forces, gave way to an impetus of exaltation, (...) directed towards the Duce who is going to give to Italy and the world the awaited announcement (...) of glory and victory.²⁰⁷

Two stages were prepared in the Amphitheater in order to host the Province's leading officials and the pennants of the various fascist organizations of the city. Behind them speakers were installed. Flags were hanged inside the Amphitheater. The journal describes the joyous but orderly fashion in which the people filled the large venue. Reflectors were soon lighted, "which often highlighted the large satirical billboards held by soldiers (...) on which the *negus*, [UK Foreign Secretary] eden [sic!] and associates appear in the most appropriate expressions."²⁰⁸

The mass listened to the Duce's speech crowded inside the ancient Roman monument. After its end, "the whole Arena, fantastically illuminated by the reflectors, seemed lighting up in a fiery ray". People started leaving the venue in order to form processions holding torches and Fascist pennants, which afterwards ended at the Forum. "After the historical ceremony of redemption [after World War I], the one from last night was certainly the most spectacular and enthusiastic that Pola ever saw". The newspaper counted the participants in this *adunata* as thirty thousand.²⁰⁹ A telegram sent from the *Carabinieri* corps of Pola to the Prefect's office gave the same number of participants in this *adunata*, also noting that the process of gathering of the people "took less than one hour to happen". The report reads that "After the melting away of the gathering maximum enthusiasm was noted, later becoming delirious, and after the end of the Duce's speech an unending procession took place, with singing of the hymns of the [Fascist] revolution through the streets of the city".²¹⁰

The same event occurred all around the Province of Istria, with the sound signals announcing the *adunate*. The *Corriere* reported on May 8th that 7.000 people amassed in

²⁰⁷ "Trentamila persone hanno ieri acclamato all'Arena il Duce", *Corriere Istriano*, May 6th 1936, p. 3.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 280, f: XVII-A-5-10/1 (1) (Telegram on the *adunata* of May 5th 1936 in Pola)

Rovigno, listened to the speech, and continued celebrating late into the night. The same event, without the number of participants, is described in the cities and towns of Pirano, Portole, Visinada, and Pinguento, where a “promise made on the day of the takeover of Adua was maintained”, with people offered free wine “that was, naturally, immediately assaulted and consumed in a flash”.²¹¹ More details came in the edition of May 9th, with descriptions of the *adunate* in Dignano, Umago, Visignano and Fasana. In Umago, the event is described as having 3.600 participants, with the listening to Mussolini’s speech followed by a religious mass in the Cathedral, and feasting until late night in the town’s Riviera. Similarly, the gathering in the coastal town of Fasana was followed by a “never seen before” illumination of the houses and piers, a spectacle which “seen from the sea, took an appearance of magnificent spectacle.”²¹² Since reporting on the various gatherings started, the newspaper never brought reports from so many localities in the Province of Istria. The celebrations in these communities followed the same pattern, since the events were centrally controlled.

Indeed, the *Carabinieri* responded to the Prefect’s request to be informed about the happenings throughout the Province. The brigade in the community of Cerreto, northern Istria, reported to the Prefect the regular gathering in the headquarters of the *Dopolavoro*, with three hundred people participating in it, “almost the totality of the inhabitants”. The telegram notes the processions and illumination of buildings in the village, with “normal progress of celebration in other fractions under jurisdictions [of that unit]”.²¹³ From Antignana, the *Carabinieri* reported the “intervention of around 500 persons in ordinary manner, all enthusiastically applauding the Duce’s speech” with “normal public order”.²¹⁴ In the northern city of Capodistria, along with the emphasis of the participation of six thousand

²¹¹“La grandiosa manifestazione in Istria in occasione del raduno del popolo italiano”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 8th 1936, p. 3.

²¹² “Dalla Provincia”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 8th 1936, p. 4.

²¹³ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 280, f: XVII-A-5-10/1 (2) (Telegram on the adunata of May 5th 1936 in Cerreto)

²¹⁴ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 280, f: XVII-A-5-10/1 (3) (Telegram on the adunata of May 5th 1936 in Antignana)

individuals and their “extolling of the King, the Duce and the glorious army”, the *Carabinieri* reported “optimal weather conditions” during the *adunata*, as the Prefect had asked for in his decree.²¹⁵

A longer message dated on May 8th sent from the *Podestà* of the small locality of Portole to the Prefect Cimoroni in Pola details the events of May 5th. The sender wrote that the *adunata*, “in spite of its announcement at the last moment” resulted in the participation of 1500 persons “from the Castle and [surrounding] County”. The *Podestà* mentioned the “loud applauses” after the Duce’s speech, which was followed the performance of the *Dopolavoro*’s marching band and by a religious ceremony in the town’s church, while the windows were kept illuminated along with “fires of joy in the fields.” Also, the letter points out the fact that people from more distant villages kept arriving in Portole later in the evening, when the gathering was slowly drawing to a close.²¹⁶

Again, as in the case of the *adunata* of October 2nd 1935, both the press and the telegrams between Istrian officials do not avoid emphasizing the enthusiasm of the mass and its delirious reactions to the speech by Benito Mussolini. The regime again aimed that the event should regularly happen in the smallest fractions of the country, diligently asking for confirmation from the local authorities. Telegram reports from the smaller communities went as far as to note the participation in the gathering of people residing in surrounding villages, who probably took hours to arrive to the centres of the various *Comuni*.

Further archival material shows Rome’s aims to have the following days pass in a celebratory mode in all the Provinces of Italy, including Istria. A telegram sent from the Duce’s office on May 5th ordered the installation of Italian flags on public buildings on the days of May 6th, 7th

²¹⁵ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 280, f: XVII-A-5-10/1 (4) (Telegram on the *adunata* of May 5th 1936 in Capodistria)

²¹⁶ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (7) (Letter from the *Podestà* of Portole regarding the gathering of May 5th 1936)

and 8th “from dusk to dawn”.²¹⁷ Another telegram decreed holiday working hours for public offices on May 6th.²¹⁸

Indeed, the following day of May 6th, was marked by constant feasting. The *Corriere Istriano* writes that students from the Magisterial Institute filled the squares and streets of Pola from early morning in order to continue the celebrations. The students, soon joined by high school pupils, formed a procession that visited government buildings in the city. In elementary school, the journal writes, singing of hymns and patriotic songs was organized, followed by occasional speeches by the heads of these institutions. The “Manzoni” school organized a visit to the Marine cemetery, where flowers were laid on the tombs of local Fascist heroes and those from the First World War. In the evening of the same day, bands played fascist and patriotic songs in Port’Aurea Square, while new processions were formed that continued into late night. The description of the May 6th events ends with the note that “popular joy was spontaneous and firm, giving the best example of the Pola citizens’ sentiments that were totalitarian fascist in nature.”²¹⁹

The *Corriere Istriano* writes that jubilation continued on May 7th, too, amplified by the news of the takeover of the Ethiopian town of Jijiga by the forces of general Rodolfo Graziani and by the King’s offer to Mussolini of a high military honour, the Medal of the military order of Savoy. The new gathering, the journal writes, was quickly organized by various regime organizations in the evening in front of the *Casa del Fascio* of Pola. A procession was formed led by a marching band, and billboards were held, one of which had the inscription: “First the Austrian Empire, then the Abyssinian one... There is no two without three”. The public gathered along the streets where the procession of Fascists went,

²¹⁷ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (1) (Telegram ordering the flagging of buildings following the takeover of Addis Ababa)

²¹⁸ DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (4) (Telegram regarding the working hours of public offices following May 5th 1936)

²¹⁹ “Incontenibile esultanza della gioventu` di Pola”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 7th 1936, p. 3.

which ended at Port'Aurea Square. There, amid loud acclamations, a local official read the King's decision which honored the Duce. After the gathering melted away, the jubilation continued until late evening, the journal reports.²²⁰

The regime clearly aimed to have the people mobilized for several days after the May 5th announcement, although the preparation for the gatherings these days was left to be organized by the individual local Fascist organizations in a more improvised manner.

The May 9th edition of the *Corriere Istriano* carried a short notice calling the citizens of Pola to assemble at 22.00 PM at the Forum to listen to a new speech delivered by Mussolini. A second notice in the same issue decreed the illumination and flagging of public offices in the city.²²¹ A telegram from the Prefect to the *Podestàs* around the Province decreed the installment of loudspeakers in squares and other gathering locations for this event, too.²²² The preparation of this event was again hasty, but the various Fascist organizations should certainly have been ready after several days filled with events and gatherings.

What followed was the “most solemn” of the evenings in this week of “fascist passion”, the *Corriere* writes. Largo Oberdan was “clad in black by the crowd”, and “the families that had the privilege to own a radio, deserted their homes for the *piazza* in order to become protagonists of this highest moment that the Fascist Nation is living in”.²²³ Regarding the decision not to use the Forum or Amphiteater as a venue for this *adunata*, the journal notes that the local Fascist Federation saw the Forum as too small due to the large number of soldiers from the regular army asked to participate in the event, “representing the warrior Italy” the writer notes, while the Amphiteatre was seen as hard to properly illuminate in such

²²⁰ “Un'altra grandiosa manifestazione in onore del Duce”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 8th 1936, p. 2.

²²¹ *Corriere Istriano*, May 9th 1936, p. 3.

²²² DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (6) (Prefect's telegram asking the installment of loudspeakers for the May 9th 1936 gathering)

²²³ “40.000 cittadini salutano l'avvento dell'Impero”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 8th 1936, p. 3.

a short period of time.²²⁴ Interestingly, the symbol of Pola's Romanity was not to be used for the event celebrating the reappearance of a new Roman Empire.

The *Corriere* counted the participants in this *adunata* in Pola as 40.000, noting that "even the Largo Oberdan proved itself too narrow, because when 40.000 citizens are mobilized, it is very difficult to find a good place in Pola to contain them all". The Navy provided reflectors to be installed around the square, "illuminating the thousands of soldiers' bayonettes forming an awesome line".²²⁵

Before the speech by the Duce, the mass was able to hear both the hymns played by the orchestra, as well as the chants from the people assembled in Rome, heard through the installed speakers in Pola. At 22.15, the radio announced that the Fascist Grand Council initiated its short proceedings, while at 22.35 the speech itself was announced. His words are described in the Istrian journal as "a new Gospel, going directly to the proud heart of every Italian". His last words ("Italy finally owns its Empire!") were followed by an "explosion of joy". After the speech, an army general left the tribune of honour to order the troops the hailing of the King, now Emperor and the salute to the Duce. It was the official end of the *adunata*. It was followed by processions through the city, this time using embellished lorries owned by the various Fascist organizations of the city. The jubilation continued late into the night, the *Corriere* writes. At midnight, a new communiqué announcing the promoting of the conquering Italian general Pietro Badoglio to the title of Viceroy of Ethiopia, created further reasons for celebration, the journal notes.²²⁶

Announced on the *Corriere's* edition of May 8th, on the morning of Sunday May 10th a *Te Deum*, a mass of thanksgiving for the victory in Ethiopia was organized in Pola's Forum. The orders from the Federal Secretary asked the members of various regime organizations to

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

participate in it, while the officials representing the Armed forces would have a specially prepared “post of honour” at the ceremony.²²⁷ For the event, the journal on May 12th described, the Forum was prepared with flags and torches, with an altar erected in front of the Temple of Augustus, the ancient Roman monument dominating the piazza. Under the arches of the Town Hall, mothers and widows of the combatants both in the First World War and the latest African war assembled. With them, the high Provincial officials, including the Prefect Cimoroni were present.²²⁸

Immediately before the mass commenced, 101 cannon shots were fired. After the religious ceremony, the *parroco* of Pola, Monsignor Angeli delivered a speech praising the victory “by Italy’s soldier” in Africa in face of the economic siege by the League of Nations. The speech ended with a thanksgiving to God for allowing the victory to happen. After his speech, the local casualties in the Ethiopian campaign were remembered, The Federal Secretary read the seventeen names of the local soldiers who died, and each name was followed by a “Present!” shouted by the crowd. After the ceremony, the *Corriere* writes, all the women members of the *Fascio Femminile* formed a procession that marched to the statue of the Roman emperor August in front of the Amphitheatre, where an official placed a wreath “in homage to the founder of the Roman Empire”.²²⁹ It is interesting to see how this event had the Catholic, Fascist religious elements joined together, with the element of Romanity present in the choosing of the place for the ceremony. The altar for the mass was put in front of the Temple of Augustus, the religious ceremony was followed by the Fascist rite for the fallen, and the dedication to Augustus ended the event.

The *Corriere Istriano* edition of May 12th described how the events of May 9th happened in the Province, in the towns of Pirano, Pisino, Dignano, Rovigno and Promontore.

²²⁷ “Il ‘Te Deum’ per la vittoria in A. O.”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 8th 1936, p. 2.

²²⁸ “La solenne cerimonia religiosa al Foro Romano”, *Corriere Istriano*, May 12th 1936, p. 3.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

The events are all exactly similar: after the Duce's speech, processions amid singing and joyful acclamation are emphasized. In Pirano and Pisino the members of the armed forces were present, too. The *Corriere* described all the events after May 5th in Rovigno, where the Salesian band played every evening between May 6th and 8th. The *Te Deum* that was described in Pola on Sunday, May 10th, happened in each of these localities, too.²³⁰ As in the case of the May 5th gatherings, the *Corriere Istriano* reported a similar pattern of events occurring around the Province for the occasion of the proclamation of the Empire. Again, the events were clearly ideologically centralized, with no report of local elements included.

A further event is, however, worthy of mention due to its different nature. On May 19th the *Corriere* reported that the small eastern Istrian town of Fianona, "first among the cities and castles of Istria", had a plaque erected celebrating the birth of the "new Empire". The consecration of the monument had a gathering organized for the occasion, which was attended by the Federal Secretary Bellini arriving from Pola, as well as by local Fascist leaders and other members of Fascist organizations. The plaque, which was revealed during a short ceremony including speeches, had inscribed on it parts of the speech given by Mussolini on the evening of May 9th, when the creation of the Empire was announced. The ceremony ended with the reading of the Duce's speech again, as well as with celebratory singing of patriotic songs.²³¹

To conclude this subchapter, the long letter that the *Podestà* of the Comune of Visinada sent to the Prefecture in Pola detailing the feasting throughout early May will be useful. The May 5th celebration, the *Podestà* wrote, involved the participation of the inhabitants of many surrounding villages along the Fascists and many citizens of Visinada, in a "participation so totalitarian that did not occur neither at the time of the celebration of the

²³⁰ "Dalla Provincia", *Corriere Istriano*, May 12th 1936, p. 4.

²³¹ "La lapide che ricorda la fondazione dell'Impero inaugurate a Fianona", *Corriere Istriano*, May 19th 1936, p. 2.

annexation of this Comune to Italy [after World War I]”. He detailed the listening to the Duce’s speech in the main square, which was followed by a “mighty” procession that passed through the center of the town “amid manifestations of joy”. This gathering, the *Podestà* concludes, involved the participation of four thousand people.²³²

The description of the events follows with the mentioning of a religious ceremony which took place in the local church on the evening of May 6th. This event, too was followed by processions which lasted “until the early morning of the day 7”, the letter sender underscores.²³³

The May 9th gathering is also described, with an interesting note expressed by the *Podestà*: the event was attended by the “*allogeni* from the most distant villages with their wives and children”. This is the first time that we find the mention of the Slavic element in Istria in the official documents related to the gatherings during the war in Ethiopia. The overall gathering that had the Duce’s speech as a central point, the *Podestà* writes, was “welcomed with an enthusiasm never met before”, and was followed by huge processions that continued until 3 AM.²³⁴

The letter emphasizes the fact that every evening had some form of joyous manifestations, “culminating” with May 10th, when a gathering organized by the *Podestà* himself that afternoon had the role to “crown with a demonstration under the light of the Sun the week consecrated to Victory and the Empire.” The event involved speeches by himself and the local priest, the *Podestà* continues, while the main focus were the wives and relatives of soldiers from Visinada that were currently in Africa. A further event took place the following day, when all the schools of the Comune had the Duce’s speeches repeated by the

²³² DAP, PP, 1936, b: 281, f: XVII-A-5-10/11 (9) (Letter from the *Podestà* of Visinada regarding the patriotic manifestations)

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

teachers, with new processions following the lectures.²³⁵ The *Podestà*'s letter ends with the note that

(d)uring the period of manifestations, meaning from the 5th to the 10th [of May] all the houses were embellished with the tricolor flag, and in the evening the balconies of the houses were gorgeously illuminated. With the work of the *Fascio Giovanile* there were fires lit in the church tower, on the four columns of the communal cistern and on S. Tomaso hill.²³⁶

There is no doubt that the *Podestà* clearly wanted to show his efficient lead of the events in his Comune, clearly seen in his boasting of the event he personally organized on May 10th which involved a speech that he delivered. He detailed every single event, wanting to show it followed the same pattern as in the rest of the country, with the listening to the Duce's speech, the processions, and the constant display of flags in his Comune. The local element, involving the emphasis on the participation of the wives and relatives of soldiers sent to Africa took a prominent role only in the event organized by the *Podestà*. And again, the fact that he mentioned the participation of the Slavs arriving from distant villages is interesting in itself, although we currently cannot confirm his claims or see under which circumstances they attended, if they did: perhaps under police pressure?

The events between May 5th and May 10th 1936 in Istria marked the apex of the gatherings that happened during the war, as the literature suggests when focusing on the whole country. Similarly to the first *adunata* of October 2nd 1935, the May 1936 events were centrally organized and strictly controlled from Rome, albeit in a hastier manner, as some officials confirmed in their reports. Also, the local authorities made it so that the celebrations were strictly happening throughout the Province. The fascist organizations were constantly mobilized through several days, allowing the people to taste the apotheosis of their country through a chain of enthusiastic gatherings that were set up. Again, the regime-controlled reports in the press, and the descriptions of the gatherings in confidential documents compiled

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

by local officials match, with the emphasis of the people's enthusiasm never missing. Lastly, a document for the first time underlined the participation of the Slavic population in the events.

IV.3. The Slavic reception

The last issue pointed out brings us to the Slavic reception of the events this chapter dealt with. Again, with the lack of more in-depth sources dealing with the receptions of the Slavic population in the Province of Istria to the mass gatherings of late 1935 and first half of 1936, we will again use the writings of the émigré journal *Istra* from Zagreb.

The *Istra* was silent about the anti-sanctionist rallies including the “Day of Faith” on December 18th 1935. The same applied to the celebrations of the victories in early 1936, as there is no mention of them in the émigré journal. Regarding the commemorations for the fallen in war, there was a report dealing with the Fascist ritual in the Province of Gorizia commemorating the fallen blackshirt soldier, who the editors named as Fortunat Razpet claimed to be of Slovene ethnicity, a “renegade of the Slavic nation”. The journal report described how the members of various regime organizations were “forced” to attend the event, which ended with the local *Casa del Fascio* renamed after the fallen blackshirt.²³⁷ In all, the journal reported the deaths of 22 Slovene and 8 Croat soldiers from the Julian March region.²³⁸

Regarding the events of May 1936, the *Istra* mentioned the Fascist processions and church bells announcing the gatherings, while describing a completely different reality in the backdrop of the celebrations. In the context of narrating the Fascist repression against the Slavs in the Julian March, the journal reported that surveillance on them was heightened

²³⁷ „Fašistična proslava v čast prvemu Goričanu, ki je padel v Abesiniji, slovenskemu odpadniku Fortunatu Razpetu“ *Istra*, February 14th 1936, p. 3.

²³⁸ Orlović, pp. 56-58.

during this period and the spy network investigated what kind of behavior they had during the celebrations. According to it, villagers had to abruptly finish their work in the fields when the signal for gathering was given and forced to attend the gatherings, while some were physically assaulted for not giving importance to the celebrations.²³⁹ An article even points out the fact that some Slavs who did not attend the gatherings suffered beatings and forced drinking of castor oil, while attacks were noted on those who did not hang the Italian flags on their windows.²⁴⁰ Thus, forced participation may be the answer to the question why did the *allogeni* from “distant villages” participate in the *adunata* in Visinada mentioned in the *Podestà*'s message to the Prefecture.

IV.4. Concluding Remarks

This chapter dealt with a return of celebration for victories scored by the Italians in Ethiopia, starting in February and culminating with the euphoria in early May 1936, when the war was announced as officially over and the proclamation of the Empire happened.

The Pola celebrations of three victories in Ethiopia (two in February and one in early April) followed an already pre-established pattern of mass gathering. After a short notice in the press, people gathered in the central square, listened to speeches, and dispersed after engaging in processions through the city center.

The gatherings in the so-called “Radiant May” period in Istria formed an incessant period of mobilization and celebration from May 5th (after the announcement of the capture of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa) up to May 10th (after the proclamation of the Empire). In contrast to the initial grand *adunata* on October 2nd 1935, these gatherings were more hastily prepared but were again ideologically organized and controlled from the government's center

²³⁹ „Po zavzetju Adis Abebe“, *Istra*, May 15th 1936, p. 1.

²⁴⁰ „Prisiljena proslava ob zavzetju Adis Abebe“, *Istra*, May 22nd 1936., p. 2.

in Rome, with almost no local element included. Two main gatherings (May 5th and May 9th) involved the listening to Mussolini's speeches through speakers put in public places, one of which had the huge Roman-era Amphitheatre in Pola as a venue. Besides that, the gatherings followed an already established pattern of forming processions and playing music that held the people gathered until early morning. The events happened in the whole Province, and local police were asked to report to the Prefecture in Pola to detail about events in each locality. Press report and the content of confidential messages between provincial officials again emphasized the utmost euphoria and enthusiasm these rallies produced.

At last, the Slav émigré press gave a completely different account on these gatherings when the majority Slav population was involved. It emphasized the fact that members of the community was under strict surveillance by the regime, with cases of forced participation in the various gatherings, and harsh penalties for those Slavs who ignored the mass rallies.

Conclusion

This thesis has described and thoroughly analyzed all mass rallies that took place in the Kingdom of Italy's Province of Istria related to the 1935-36 colonial war in Ethiopia. The departure of soldiers and gatherings of people asking to be enrolled as volunteers in the campaign beginning with May 1935 kickstarted a series of mass rallies that were re-occurring right up to the apex of such events, when the official end of the war and the proclamation of the Italian Empire was marked with oceanic assemblies in early May 1936.

Between these two periods, Istria saw a chain of mass rallies, including the "Gathering of the Regime Forces" at the announcement of the start of the war on October 2nd, and the subsequent celebration of the takeover of the symbolic Ethiopian town of Adua on October 6th 1935. A period of stagnation in the campaign saw the regime using sanctions imposed by the League of Nations for propaganda purposes, rallying the masses to help the victimized country with a culmination in the "Day of Faith" on December 18th 1935, which had a rehearsal on February 23rd 1936. Early 1936 saw remembrance rallies celebrating the fallen soldiers from the Province in the colonial campaign with ceremonies of mostly religious character occurring on February 18th and April 14th. At last, the return of victories in the Ethiopian battlefields meant that new reasons for mass rallies were created, so several Italian victories were celebrated in February and April 1936. Finally, early May 1936 saw several days of constant rallying and feasting, with masses gathering incessantly from May 5th to May 10th in order to mark the fall of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and the proclamation of the Italian Empire. We see that in a space of a year, from May 1935 to May 1936, there was hardly a month in Istria passing without a mass rally related to the war in Ethiopia.

Relying on the writing of the local regime-affiliated press and confidential reports of local regime officials, I found two main divisions in the events. First, those which were highly

centralized propagandistic celebrations, with an ideological meaning imposed from the center in Rome, such as the initial gathering on October 2nd 1935, meticulously prepared and controlled from Rome for several weeks before its performance, or the May 1935 celebrations, hastily prepared but not less centralized than the first one. The second were regional events, initiated or even spontaneously improvised by local authorities, like the departure of Istrian soldiers, commemorations for the local casualties of the war, and several improvised victory celebrations. The “Day of Faith” event is somehow in the middle, imitating the main rally in Rome, but with the emphasis of mostly local elements.

An interesting, but not that surprising finding is the similarity by which both the regime press and confidential documents were describing the mass rallies. Both emphasize the enthusiasm with which the masses reacted to them, underscoring the totalitarian allegiance of the people with the country at war and its government. In contrast, the only voice of the subjugated and silenced Slav majority of Istria, the press from emigration, painted a diametrically different picture of the Fascist mass rallies in the Province. Either it ignored them, satirically mocked them, or when it mentioned them, the émigré press emphasized the fact that the Fascist authorities forced the Slavs of the Province to participate in them under threat of sanctions. We may assume that the reality stands somewhere in the middle: there were both cases of allegiance to the regime by the local Italians and their complete dedication to the regime’s actions, as well as ignoring by the Slavs and repression towards them by the authorities.

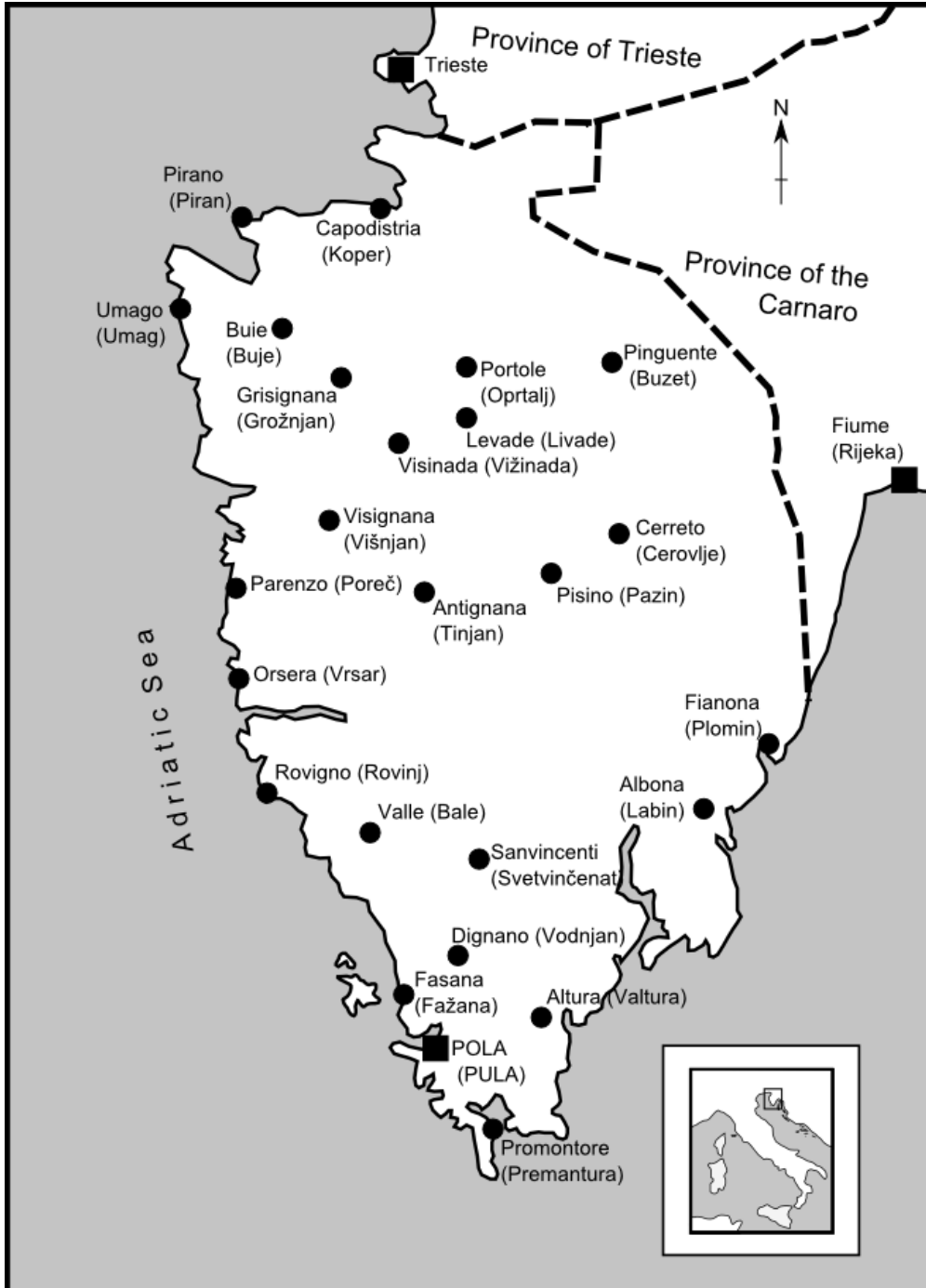
What is very important, but did not fit into this thesis’ research, is the real reception by the people towards the war-related mass rallies of 1935-6. Further work that could be based on additional archival research, insight into personal memoirs, diaries and letters, and possibly oral history, should focus on that aspect of the mass rallies analyzed in this thesis. Such an

approach would also help in better clarifying the position of the majority Slav population of Istria in regards to the mass rallies during the Ethiopian war.

These mass rallies in Istria, and thus Fascist Italy in general, should be seen as one of the main driving forces in the process of the creation of a totalitarian community and the fascistization of the masses, which fits into Emilio Gentile's approach to Italian Fascism as a project of a gradual process of creating a totalitarian state. The regime used these events for purposes of creating a "collective harmony" in a state of "perpetual mobilization" in the ongoing education of the masses. Throughout the Ethiopian war, the speeches of the Duce, mass rallies and other events of public ritual aimed at the the homogenization of the people and the canalisation of their emotions towards the war in progress. As in the whole of Italy, the war did produce a constant mobilization by the regime through mass rallies in the Italian Province of Istria in 1935 and 1936.

Appendix I

Map of the Province of Istria including locations mentioned in the thesis (Today's Croatian and Slovene official names in parenthesis).



(Created by the author)

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