

## FASCIST ITALY AND INDEPENDENT CROATIA: A DIFFICULT ALLIANCE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper tries to analyze the most important moments and problems in the diplomatic relations between Fascist Italy and Ustasha Croatia from the establishment of the Croatian State to the Italian Armistice of 1943. Despite the ideological similarities, the two States were never able to develop an effective and friendly political collaboration and alliance.*

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Political relations with the Yugoslav State and the Croatian question were important aspects of Mussolini's foreign policy during the Twenties and the Thirties. Despite the strength of anti-Yugoslav feeling in Fascist circles, Mussolini's attitude toward Belgrade was opportunistic and pragmatic: he was ready to accept the existence of a unitary Yugoslav State dominated by the Serbs if the latter recognized Italian political hegemony and leadership in the Balkans. The treaties of 1924 and 1937 confirmed this open and flexible attitude of the Italian dictator toward Yugoslavia. Only when Italian-Yugoslav relations deteriorated, did Italian fascism choose to play the Croatian card, supporting Croatian nationalism and separatism and trying to dislocate the Yugoslav State.<sup>1</sup> In 1939 the fall of Stojadinović and the pro-British diplomacy of Prince Paul paved the way for

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<sup>1</sup> On Italian-Yugoslav political relations and on the contacts between Fascist Italy and Croatian nationalists during the twenties and the thirties BOGDAN KRIZMAN, *Pavelić i ustaše*, Zagreb, 1978; IVO PETRINOVIĆ, *Mile Budak. Portret jednog političara*, Split, 2002; JAMES J. SADKOVICH, *Italian Support for Croatian Separatism 1927–1937*, New York, 1987; PASQUALE JUSO, *Il fascismo e gli Ustascia 1929–1941. Il separatismo croato in Italia*, Roma, 1998; GIAMPIERO CAROCCI, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista (1925–1928)*, Bari, 1969, p. 168 *et sqq.*; JACOB B. HOPTNER, *Yugoslavia in Crisis 1934–1941*, New York, 1962; ALFREDO BRECCIA, *Jugoslavia 1939–1941. Diplomazia della neutralità*, Milano, 1978; H.

a final twist in Italian foreign policy toward Croatian nationalism. Intent on conquering new territories, Mussolini chose to act in order to destroy the government of Belgrade and to support the creation of an independent Croatian State.

The coup d'Etat of Belgrade at the end of March 1941<sup>2</sup> and the decision of Hitler<sup>3</sup> to punish the Serbian betrayal by invading Yugoslavia (April 6, 1941) offered the chance to Italy to participate in the political reorganization of the Balkans. The refusal of Maček and of the Croatian Peasants Party to lead the resurrection of the Croatian State under the patronage of Hitler and Mussolini,<sup>4</sup> provided Fascist Italy the chance to offer the leadership of the new Croatia to Ante Pavelić, a political exile in Italy and leader of the *Ustaša* party – a tiny extreme nationalist political movement supported by Rome since the end of the Twenties.<sup>5</sup> The independence of Croatia was proclaimed on April 10 and recognized by Italy and Germany in the following days.<sup>6</sup>

The collapse of Yugoslavia in 1941 seemed to open to Fascist Italy a new era of political hegemony in the Western Balkans.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the political ambitions of Mussolini would clash against several unforeseen obstacles. The greatest one was clearly the intention of Nazi Germany to protect its own interests in Croatia. The meetings of Vienna between Ciano and Ribbentrop (April 20 and 21, 1941) clearly illustrated the growing weakness of Italian diplomacy *vis-à-vis* the Germans.<sup>8</sup> The most important decisions concerning the boundaries of

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JAMES BURGWYN, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period 1918–1940*, London – Westport, 1997, p. 24 *et sqq.*; MASSIMO BUCARELLI, „Manicomio jugoslavo. L'ambasciatore Carlo Galli e le relazioni italo-jugoslave tra le due guerre mondiali, *Clio*, 2002, n. 3, p. 467 *et sqq.*; ID., *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia (1922–1939)*, Bari, 2006; LUCIANO MONZALI, „La questione jugoslava nella politica estera italiana dalla prima guerra mondiale ai trattati di Osimo (1914–75)”, in FRANCO BOTTA, ITALO GARZIA (edited by), *Europa adriatica. Storia, relazioni, economia*, Roma-Bari, 2004, p. 15 *et sqq.*

<sup>2</sup> BRECCIA, *Jugoslavia 1939-1941. Diplomazia della neutralità*, Milano, 1978; ELISABETH BARKER, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, London, 1976, p. 78 *et sqq.*

<sup>3</sup> *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik* (from now ADAP), series D, volume XII, 1, doc. 221, 224, 234, 235.

<sup>4</sup> VLADKO MAČEK, *In the Struggle for Freedom*, New York, 1957; ADAP, D, XII, 1, doc. 241, 246, 251, 262.

<sup>5</sup> On the Independent Croatian State, BOGDAN KRIZMAN, *Pavelić između Hitlera i Mussolinija*, Zagreb, 1980; ID., *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, Zagreb, 1986; LADISLAUS HORY, MARTIN BROSZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, Stuttgart 1964; JURE KRISTO, *Sukob simbola. Politika, vjere i ideologije u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, 2001; HRVOJE MATKOVIĆ, *Povijest Nezavisne države Hrvatske*, Zagreb, 1994; IVO GOLDSTEIN, SLAVKO GOLDSTEIN, *Holocaust u Zagrebu*, Zagreb, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> ADAP, D, XII, 2, d. 311, 324, 331, 341, 356.

<sup>7</sup> For an overall analysis of fascist Italy's foreign policy: RENZO DE FELICE, *Mussolini l'alleato. I. L'Italia in Guerra 1940–1943*, Torino, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> ADAP, D, XII, 2, doc. 378; *I Documenti diplomatici italiani* (since now DDI), Roma, 1952, IX, 6, docs. 931, 956; KRIZMAN, *Pavelić i Ustaše*, p. 445 *et sqq.*; NADA KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *NDH i Italija. Političke veze i diplomatski odnosi*, Zagreb, 2001, p. 85 *et sqq.*

the former Yugoslavia were taken by Hitler and imposed to the Italian Government. In 1941 Berlin's interest towards Croatia was primarily economic and the Germans were ready to accept Italian political preponderance in that State. Nevertheless, despite Italian requests, Hitler and Ribbentrop refused to intervene directly in the Italian-Croatian negotiations for the new boundaries between the two States, confining themselves to advising a wise and moderate agreement, which would be satisfactory to both sides.<sup>9</sup> Another obstacle for Mussolini's ambitions was the difficulty in reaching an acceptable compromise on boundaries with the new Croatian State. As soon as Italian troops occupied southern Croatia, therefore gaining control of most of Dalmatia, political tensions rose swiftly between Rome and Zagreb. In Split *Ustaša* militants protested against and objected to Italian annexation.<sup>10</sup> Pavelić attempted to prolong the negotiations on boundaries to stave off the transfer of Croatian territories to Italy; moreover he had the idea to offer the crown of Croatia to a member of the Savoy family, hoping to diminish Italian territorial claims.<sup>11</sup>

Within the Italian government and the Fascist political elite existed different opinions on the attitude to adopt toward Croatia. A small group of civil servants and diplomats (Donato Menichella, Carlo Galli) thought Italy should create an economic union and a strong alliance with Croatia: therefore it was better to give up territorial claims in Croatia in order to foster close relations between Rome and Zagreb.<sup>12</sup> However, for the vast majority of Italian Fascist elites the break-up of Yugoslavia was the great chance to avenge the „Mutilated Victory” in the Adriatic Sea after the First World War, when Italy had not been able to annex Dalmatia because of American and Anglo-French opposition. The most nationalist Italian politicians (the so called *Dalmatomani* that is crazy for Dalmatia)<sup>13</sup> called for the annexation of the whole Eastern Adriatic Coast, reducing the Adriatic Sea to an Italian lake.<sup>14</sup> Initially, Mussolini, wishing to placate internal public opinion, favoured plans for a complete Italian control of the

<sup>9</sup> DDI, IX, 7, doc. 6.

<sup>10</sup> ODDONE TALPO, *Dalmazia. Una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, Roma, 1985, p. 156–157.

<sup>11</sup> KRIZMAN, *Pavelić i Ustaše*, p. 456 *et sqq.*; DDI, IX, 7, doc. 22, 23.

<sup>12</sup> BUCARELLI, „*Manicomio jugoslavo. L'ambasciatore Carlo Galli e le relazioni italo-jugoslave tra le due guerre mondiali*”, p. 505 *et sqq.*; DDI, IX, 7, doc. 131, Menichella to Mussolini, May 17, 1941.

<sup>13</sup> FILIPPO ANFUSO, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda 1936–1945*, Bologna 1957, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Tacconi, Appunto, April 13, 1941, annex to Salata to Anfuso, Easter 1941, Archivio storico del Ministero degli Esteri (from now ASMAE), Gabinetto e Segreteria generale (from now GAB) 1923–43, Ufficio Armistizio Pace (from now AP) b. 35; Alessandro Dudan and Antonio Tacconi, Dell'estensione delle occupazioni in Dalmazia, annex I to Salata to Anfuso, April 15, 1941, DDI, IX, 6, doc. 914; Dudan to Mussolini, May 4, 1941, DDI, IX, 7, doc. 53; LUCIANO MONZALI, „La questione della Dalmazia e la politica estera italiana nella primavera del 1941”, *La Rivista dalmatica*, 1998, n. 1, p. 31 *et sqq.*; LUCA RICCARDI, *Per una biografia di Francesco Salata*, <<Clio>>, 1991, n. 4, p. 647–669; ID., *Francesco Salata tra storia, politica e diplomazia*, Udine, 2001, p. 406 *et sqq.*

Eastern Adriatic shores.<sup>15</sup> Then, in response to Croatian protests and opposition, he realized that it was necessary to seek for a compromise:

„Mussolini – wrote Ciano in his Diary on April 26 1941 – [...] rightly thinks more useful to attract Croatia in our political sphere rather than taking a little more land populated by hostile Croats”.<sup>16</sup>

On May 7, 1941, Mussolini and Pavelić met in Monfalcone and reached an agreement on the main problems relating to the boundaries. The Duce agreed to leave Ragusa/Dubrovnik and most of southern Dalmatia under Croatian sovereignty, but imposed Italian annexation of Spalato/Split, the biggest Dalmatian town with an Italian minority. As another concession, Italy abandoned its plans for an economic and monetary union with Croatia.<sup>17</sup>

The treaties signed in Rome (May 18, 1941) attempted to reach a compromise between Italian and Croatian political interests.<sup>18</sup> With the agreement for the delimitation of the boundaries the new Italian-Croatian borders were arranged as follows: Dalmatia was partitioned, but, in exchange for its territorial losses in the Adriatic, Italy had to consent to the annexation of the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia. To assuage Croatian sensibilities concerning Dalmatia, the Italians envisioned the future signing of a special treaty concerning the administrative status of Spalato and Curzola/Korčula, one that would protect the cultural and national rights of the Croatian population in those areas. A treaty on the military aspects relating to the coastal areas of Dalmatia imposed on Croatia the demilitarization of the coasts and of the islands and forced the government in Zagreb to abandon any projects for developing a war fleet. The agreement of guarantee and collaboration between Italy and Croatia established the Italian engagement to respect and protect the political independence and the territorial integrity of the Croatian kingdom; Zagreb, on the other side, promised not to take international commitments incompatible with the alliance with the Italian State. Furthermore the future possibility of deeper customs and monetary relations between the two States was foreseen. Also on May 18, the *Ustaša* Government offered the crown of Croatia to the Savoy Family. The King of Italy

<sup>15</sup> Progetto nuove delimitazioni confinarie dell'Italia ad Est, in Mussolini to Ciano, April 17, 1941, DDI, IX, 6, doc. 923.

<sup>16</sup> GALEAZZO CIANO, *Diario 1936–1943*, Milano, 1990, p. 505.

<sup>17</sup> DDI, IX, 7, doc. 72; KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *NDH i Italija*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>18</sup> On the treaties of Rome PIETRO PASTORELLI, *L'esaurimento dell'iniziativa dell'Asse. Parte I. L'estensione del conflitto (giugno-dicembre 1941)*, Milano, 1967, p. 171 et sqq.; TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, p. 327 et sqq.; MONZALI, *La questione della Dalmazia e la politica estera italiana nella primavera del 1941*, p. 31 et sqq.; DAVIDE RODOGNO, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa (1940–1943)*, Torino, 2003, p. 124 et sqq.; KRIZMAN, *Pavelić i ustaše*, p. 468 et sqq.; KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *NDH i Italija*; TOMISLAV JONJIĆ, *Hrvatska vanjska politika 1939–1942.*, Zagreb, 2000, p. 389 et sqq.

accepted the Croatian offer and chose his nephew, Ajmone of Savoy-Aosta, Duke of Spoleto, as future King of Croatia.<sup>19</sup>

The foundation of the Independent State of Croatia and the treaties of May 18 seemed to offer to the Government in Rome the chance to annex most of the Adriatic coast and to assert his preponderance in that geographical area. The Rome treaties were advantageous for Pavelić, because they granted Italian protection to the politically weak *Ustaša* (a radical nationalist party which, according to Italian diplomats, was without strong popular support in Croatia), and helped them to fulfil the dream of „Greater Croatia”.

Already in summer 1941, however, political relations between Italy and Croatia worsened, making impossible a complete and accurate application of the Rome agreements.

The content of the treaties of Rome disappointed large sectors of the Croatian and Italian political and military elites. On the one hand, in Croatia the abandonment of part of Dalmatia nurtured dissatisfaction and animosity against the Italians. On the other, many Italian military and political leaders thought that the Rome treaties did not assure complete strategic security for Italy. Moreover, the most important economic and mining resources of Dalmatia were left in Croatia. The commanders of the Italian Armies, that occupied southern Croatia, considered with anxiety the strong German influence in the new Croatian State and were determined to oppose it and to block it. Despite the existence of the Axis Alliance, anti-German feeling was strong in the Italian military. Many generals feared German hegemony in Europe and in the Balkans and considered the birth of a pro-German Croatian state a further step toward the weakening of Italy and its encirclement by the Germans.<sup>20</sup> To block the German penetration in the Italian sphere of influence, Ambrosio, Dalmazzo and other Italian generals thought it convenient to oppose the strengthening of the Croatian State.

Another cause of disagreement between Italy and Croatia was the treatment of the Croatian population in the territories annexed to the Kingdom of Italy. The refusal to guarantee basic national and cultural rights for the Dalmatian Croats and the attempts to italianize them, the establishment of Fascist institutions and organizations in the new territories, provoked sharp protests in Zagreb<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Relazioni Internazionali*, May 24, 1941.

<sup>20</sup> GIACOMO ZANUSSI, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia. Giugno 1940-Giugno 1943*, Roma, 1945, I; MARIO ROATTA, *Otto milioni di baionette. L'esercito italiano in guerra dal 1940 al 1944*, Verona, 1946, p. 161 *et seq.*; MENACHEM SHELAH, *Un debito di gratitudine. Storia dei rapporti tra l'Esercito italiano e gli Ebrei in Dalmazia (1941-1943)*, Roma, 1991; H. JAMES BURGWIN, *L'Impero sull'Adriatico. Mussolini e la conquista della Jugoslavia 1941-1943*, Gorizia, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Hrvatski državni arhiv (from now HAD), Zagreb, Ministarstva vanjskih poslova Nezavisne države Hrvatske (from now MVP NDH), *Politički odjel, Odsjek za romanske zemlje*, b. 4, Stanojević to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2 and 3, 1941; *ibidem*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Croatian Legation in Rome, September 10, 1941.

and nurtured an armed resistance movement in Italian Dalmatia, which was to be dominated the Communists.<sup>22</sup>

The *Ustaša* themselves contributed to the weakening of the Croatian State. As soon as they conquered the government, the *Ustaša* – strongly influenced by their anti-Semite and totalitarian National-Socialist ideology – unleashed violent persecutions against political opponents and members of non Croatian nationalities. The Jews and the Serbs were the primary targets of pitiless *Ustaša* violence.<sup>23</sup> To escape death many Croatian Jews fled toward Italian territories, while Serb guerrilla units reacted to Croatian violence organizing a revolt in Bosnia and southern Croatia in June 1941. From the beginning of July, also in Serbia, Montenegro and Dalmatia a Partisan movement – led by the Yugoslav communist party – developed, rapidly displaying a strong military capability.<sup>24</sup> The result of all these events was political chaos and instability in Croatia. Italian critics of the Rome treaties were quick to exploit this opportunity to pursue their own political goals. On August 1941 they convinced Mussolini to allow Italian troops to reoccupy all of the Croatian territories which had been relinquished to Zagreb two months before: in this way Italy assumed military

<sup>22</sup> On the national and political struggles in Dalmatia during the Second World War it is still absent a balanced and objective analysis. See anyway TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1941)*; ODDONE TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1942)*, Roma, 1990; DRAGOVAN ŠEPIĆ, „Politique italienne d’occupation en Dalmatie 1941–1943”, in *Les systèmes d’occupation en Yougoslavie 1941–1945*, Beograd, 1963, pp. 377–424; NEVA ŽURIC-SCOTTI, *Talijanska okupacija Dalmacije 1941–1943. godine*, Split, 1979, p. 184 et sqq; RODOGNO, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell’Italia fascista in Europa (1940–1943)*, p. 124 et sqq.

<sup>23</sup> In Italian archives there are many documents on Croatian violence against the Jews in spring and summer 1941. See for instance ASMAE, GAB 1923–1943, AP, b. 28, Eugenio Coselschi, Osservazioni sull’attuale situazione in Croazia, 4 giugno 1941. Read as well SHELAH, *Un debito di gratitudine. Storia dei rapporti tra l’Esercito italiano e gli Ebrei in Dalmazia (1941–1943)*; ID., „Kroatische Juden zwischen Deutschland und Italien. Die Rolle der italienischen Armee am Beispiel des Generals Giuseppe Amico 1941–1943”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 1993, n.2, p. 175–195; IVO GOLDSTEIN, SLAVKO GOLDSTEIN, *Holocaust u Zagrebu*; RAUL HILBERG, *La distruzione degli Ebrei d’Europa*, Torino, 1995, p. 705 et sqq. On violence against the Serbs STEFANO FABEL, *I cetnici nella seconda Guerra mondiale*, Gorizia, 2006, p. 50 et sqq.; *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, Roma, 1965–1981, V, doc. 20.

<sup>24</sup> On Tito and the Yugoslav communist movement there are rich collections of documents: *Zbornik dokumenata I podataka o Narodno-oslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda*, Beograd, 1952–1985: on struggles in Croatia, V, 1–4; *Narodnooslobodilačka Borba u Dalmaciji 1941–1945*, Split, 1981–1989, 9 volumes. Read as well JOŽE PIRJEVEC, *Il giorno di San Vito. Jugoslavia 1918–1992. Storia di una tragedia*, Torino, 1993; SIBE KVESIĆ, *Dalmacija u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi*, Split, 1979; *Split u Narodnooslobodilačkoj Borbi i socijalističkoj Revoluciji 1941–1945*, Split, 1981; JILL A. IRVINE, *The Croat Question. Partisan Politics in the Formation of the Yugoslav Socialist State*, Boulder, 1993; MILOVAN ĐILAS, *Tito. The Story from Inside*, London, 2000; NORA BELOFF, *Tito’s Flawed Legacy. Yugoslavia and the West 1939–1984*, London, 1985; FITZROY MACLEAN, *Disputed Barricade. The Life and Times of Josip Broz – Tito Marshal of Yugoslavia*, London, 1957.

control of all coastal Croatia (Gorski Kotar, Lika, Dalmatia, Herzegovina), eliminating German influence in the Adriatic region.<sup>25</sup> To consolidate Italian influence in those areas, the Italian military started to collaborate with local Serbian politicians and guerrilla units (the so-called *Četnici*)<sup>26</sup> and, despite the anti-Semitic ideology of Italian Fascism, decided to protect Croatian and Serbian Jews from deportation and extermination.<sup>27</sup> The Croatian government was harshly opposed to these Italian initiatives, but could do little to stop them.<sup>28</sup> German militaries and diplomats were also strongly opposed to Italian initiatives and harshly condemned Italian protection of the Jews; but in 1941 and 1942 the German government preferred not to create new sources of conflict and friction with the ally.<sup>29</sup>

Other signs of crisis in Italian-Croatian relations in the summer and autumn of 1941 were the dynastic question and the lack of economic cooperation. Ajmone, scared by the dangerous internal situation in Croatia, refused to move to Zagreb. On November 27, 1941, Mussolini, considering the bad state of bilateral relations, ordered the Italian representative in Zagreb, Casertano, to consider the question of the monarchy as set aside for the length of the war. As time went by, Pavelić cooled toward the idea of creating a monarchy in Croatia: at a meeting in Venice in December 1941, the *Poglavnik* declared to Ciano that Ajmone could come to Croatia only when the Croatian State would be functioning normally, perhaps at the moment of peace, when the Axis would win the war.<sup>30</sup> Despite Italian efforts, economic and commercial cooperation with Croa-

<sup>25</sup> DDI, IX, 7, Pietromarchi to Ciano, August 2, 1941, doc. 448; DDI, IX, 7, doc. 458, Mussolini to Pavelić, August 5, 1941; DDI, IX, 7, doc. 479, Mussolini to Casertano, August 14, 1941; DDI, IX, 7, docs. 487, 488, 492, 496; TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, p. 519 *et sqq.*

<sup>26</sup> HDA, MVP NDH, *Politički odjel, Odsjek za romanske zemlje*, b. 5, Ministry of Internal Affairs to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 15 and 24, 1941; *ibidem*, Ministry of Internal Affairs to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 18, 1941; JOZO TOMASEVICH, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941–1945: I, The Chetniks*, Stanford, 1975; FIKRETA JELIC BULIC, *Četnici u Hrvatskoj 1941–1945*, Zagreb, 1986, p. 32 *et sqq.*; STEPHEN CLISSOLD, *La Jugoslavia nella tempesta*, Milano, 1950; COSTANTIN FOTITCH, *The War We Lost. Yugoslavia's Tragedy and the Failure of the West*, New York, 1948, p. 75 *et sqq.*; MATTEO J. MILAZZO, *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance*, Baltimore-London, 1975; FABELI, *I cetnici nella seconda Guerra mondiale*.

<sup>27</sup> SHELAH, *Un debito di gratitudine. Storia dei rapporti tra l'Esercito italiano e gli Ebrei in Dalmazia (1941–1943)*; KLAUS VOIGT, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, Firenze, 1996, II, p. 241 *et sqq.*; JONATHAN STEINBERG, *Tutto o niente. L'Asse e gli Ebrei nei territori occupati 1941–1943*, Milano, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> HDA, MVP NDH, *Politički Odjel, Odsjek za romanske zemlje*, b. 6, *Prilike u anektiranoj/talijanskoj Dalmaciji i ne granicama ove*, [1941]; HDA, MVP NDH, *Politički Odjel, Odsjek za romanske zemlje*, b. 4, Žubričić to Glavni Ustaški Stan, April 27, 1943; HDA, MVP NDH, *Vrlo Tajni Spisi*, b. 1, Bulat to Lorković, October 26, 1941; NADA KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *Mladen Lorković ministar urotnik*, Zagreb, 1998, p. 121 *et sqq.*

<sup>29</sup> ADAP, D, XIII, 2, docs. 501, 511, 517; ADAP, E, I, docs. 286, 296.

<sup>30</sup> DDI, IX, 8, doc. 26, Conversation between Ciano and Pavelić, December 15, 1941.

tia did not develop well. Italy wanted to take hold of the most important agricultural, natural and mining resources of Croatia, but Zagreb was reluctant to give in to Italian requests: the Italian ambition to forge an economic union with Croatia never materialized.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the *Ustaša* government had signed since May 16, 1941, an economic agreement with the Germans which guaranteed them easy access to Croatian raw materials.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of 1941 it had become clear that Mussolini and Italian Fascists considered the political set-up created by the Rome treaties as something transitory, to be changed to the advantage of Italy at the end of the war, at the moment of the victory of the Axis powers. In this regard, it was telling that the Italian Government did not fully ratify the Rome treaties. The negotiations on the administrative status of Spalato and Curzola were never even initiated. The Italian-Croatian agreements of May 1941 were never presented to Italian Parliament and never ratified. The Chambers voted the annexation of Dalmatia, but without a precise definition of the borders, which was deferred to a map, that was never published. The boundaries of Italian Dalmatia had a simple *de facto* delimitation, which had been drafted by Italian troops on the ground, without legal international recognition.<sup>33</sup>

The deterioration of Italian and Croatian relations was clearly illustrated by the inability to organize a meeting between Mussolini and Pavelić after May 1941. While Pavelić went numerous times to Germany to meet Hitler, after May 1941 there would be never again a meeting between the Duce and the Poglavnik, despite several Croatian requests. Indeed the Croatian government believed that Mussolini was more pro-Croatian than the vast majority of the Italian civilian and military leadership and hoped that his intervention would solve the differences between the two countries.

The spreading and strengthening of the Partisan movement in Croatia and in Dalmatia during 1942 obliged the Italian government to rethink its Croatian policy. The activity of the Partisans threatened the security of the Italian possessions on the Eastern Adriatic shore; the weakening of the *Ustaša* regime and the possible fall of Pavelić could damage Italian interests in the Balkans and facilitate the spread of German military and political presence in Italy's *Lebensraum* (*spazio vitale*). Pavelić's political survival, after all, was in Mussolini's and Fascist Italy's interest. The Italian minister in Zagreb, Casertano, tried on numerous occasions to convince the *Ustaša* leaders to pursue a policy of national, racial and religious pacification and reconciliation, by stopping persecution of the Serbs in Croatia and by enlarging the political consensus

<sup>31</sup> TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, p. 324 *et sqq.*; KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *NDH i Italija*, p. 235 *et sqq.*

<sup>32</sup> ADAP, D, XII, 2, doc. 526; HORY, BROSZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> TALPO, *Dalmazia una cronaca per la storia (1941)*, pp. 329–337.



around the government.<sup>34</sup> In Casertano's opinion, the inclusion of the followers of Maček in the government was crucial; another fundamental issue was the respect for the views of the Catholic high clergy, led by Archbishop Stepinac, who, in Casertano's view, was hostile to the Ustaša ideology and political methods. In April 1942 Casertano perceived a new will by the Government in Zagreb to improve relations with Rome and advised Mussolini and Ciano to take advantage of this atmosphere; nevertheless, he believed that to improve genuinely bilateral relations it would be necessary for some Italian political and military authorities (the Italian Second Army, the Governorship of Dalmatia, the High Commissioner of Fiume/Rijeka) to display better comprehension and more willingness to collaborate with Zagreb.<sup>35</sup> In May 1942 the Croatian Finances Minister, Vladimir Košak, came to Italy and asked the Italian Government to assist the Ustaša regime. He urged the abandonment by the Italian Second Army of the Third and the Second Occupation Zones and their return to Croatian control. Furthermore, the Croatian finances and economy could not bear the financial and material costs of the maintenance of a huge Italian army in Croatia: therefore, it was urgent to reduce Croatian payments to the Italian Army.<sup>36</sup>

If the generals of the Second Army were reserved about accepting these requests, Mussolini and Ugo Cavallero, Chief of the Italian Supreme Command, believe it necessary to meet some of the Croatian claims.<sup>37</sup> After all, it was better not to choke the Croatian State, which owed its birth to Italy.<sup>38</sup> All of the efforts to improve bilateral relations resulted in the agreement signed in Zagreb on June 19, 1942, which granted the restitution of large parts of Southern Croatia to the control of the Croatian Government.<sup>39</sup> The June 19 agreement provided for a new *modus vivendi* between the Italian Second Army and the Croatian State. The Italian Army abandoned large parts of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Lika, but it preserved the right to reoccupy and to intervene in those territories if it was deemed necessary. The Croats promised not to make reprisals against the local population and to respect Italian engagements. The Italian Government promised to reduce the financial contribution that Croatia had to pay for the occupation. The Second Army obtained the Croatian recognition of the right to organize „armed anti-Communist groups” in the remaining occupied territories, which meant the freedom of using the Serbian Chetniks to fight the Partisans and maintain control of some Serbian-populated regions. Enclosed with the agreement

<sup>34</sup> ASMAE, GAB 1923–1943, AP, b. 35, Casertano to Pietromarchi, January 26, 1942.

<sup>35</sup> DDI, IX, 8, doc. 457.

<sup>36</sup> DDI, IX, 8, doc. 550, 557.

<sup>37</sup> DDI, IX, 8, Cavallero a Ciano, May 22, 1942, enclosure to doc. 557.

<sup>38</sup> DDI, IX, 8, doc. 494.

<sup>39</sup> The texts of the agreement and of the declaration are printed in *Diario storico del Comando Supremo*, Roma, 1997, VII, 2, p. 202 *et sq.*; TALPO, *Dalmazia. Una cronaca per la storia (1942)*, pp. 533–541.

was a declaration signed by Pavelić which reiterated the Croatian engagement not to have a war fleet.

The enforcement of the agreement proved to be difficult. As soon as the Italian troops left the occupied territories, violence broke out again. The Partisans exploited the Italian withdrawal to strengthen their military presence in Croatia. In some areas, contrary to the promises made to the Italians, the *Ustaša* troops took gruesome revenge against political opponents, especially Serbs.<sup>40</sup> The Chetniks were ruthless in their interventions to defend the Serbian population: in the town of Foča, in the summer of 1942, they killed 1300 Croats and Muslims, mostly women and children.<sup>41</sup>

The Italian Second Army decided not to abandon some territories and to enforce partly and freely the June 19 agreement. To face the growing menace of the Partisans and to fight it, Italian generals hardened their counter-guerrilla tactics and increasingly used the Chetniks. The Croatian government reacted harshly to the strengthening of Italian-Chetnik collaboration, in which it perceived the will to undermine the political legitimacy and stability of the Croatian State.<sup>42</sup>

From the autumn of 1942 Germany started to support more actively the Croatian State and became more hostile toward the Italian collaboration with the Chetniks. During 1942 the Germans criticized the excessive pro-Serbian and pro-Jewish feeling existing in the Italian Army in Croatia and in Montenegro. Kasche, the German minister in Zagreb, on various occasions accused the Italian Second Army of anti-Croatian designs: the vast use of Serb guerrilla forces by the Italian army in order to control the occupied territory and to fight the Partisans in Croatia, Dalmatia, Herzegovina and Montenegro was interpreted as a proof of the existence of an Italian plan to rebuild a strong Serbian national State at the end of the war.<sup>43</sup> These warnings did not have special effects during 1941 and most of 1942 because at the time Germany considered the Balkans a secondary political setting.<sup>44</sup> Following the landings of American troops in Northern Africa and the defeat of the Italian-German armies in Egypt, however, the Balkan front became increasingly important for Hitler, who strongly feared that the Anglo-American forces could try to land on the Adriatic coast with the help of the Partisans and of the Chetniks led by Mihailović.<sup>45</sup> The Germans

<sup>40</sup> Mammarella to Casertano and Ciano, August 1, 1942, printed in TALPO, *Dalmazia. Una cronaca per la storia (1942)*, pp. 546–548.

<sup>41</sup> HORY, BROZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, p. 132.

<sup>42</sup> Read for instance the Note of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, October 10, 1942, printed in TALPO, *Dalmazia. Una cronaca per la storia (1942)*, pp. 859–862.

<sup>43</sup> HORY, BROZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, p. 124 *et sqq.*; ADAP, E, II, docs. 58, 164, 170; ADAP, E, III, docs. 190, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Read ADAP, D, XIII, 2, docs. 501, 517; HORY, BROZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, p. 74, 122 *et sqq.*

<sup>45</sup> ADAP, E, IV, docs. 82, 98, 165.

began to send more troops to Croatia and to take control of the military and political administration of those territories.<sup>46</sup> From October 1942 to March 1943 an harsh diplomatic discussion arose between Italy and Germany about the Chetniks. In various occasions Hitler and Ribbentrop asked the Italians to cease all cooperation with the Serbian paramilitaries, which they considered as possible allies of the British; instead the Italian Second Army should destroy them and concentrate actively in the fight against the Partisans.<sup>47</sup> The German and Croatian requests met stiff resistance from the Italian military. Because of the Allied invasion of Northern Africa, Italy had to withdraw some troops from the Balkans to defend its own territory: in this new military context the use of the Chetniks was fundamental to defending Italian positions in Croatia, Dalmatia and Montenegro. Moreover, it is probable that some Italian generals – who started planning the break-up of the alliance with Germany and the future signing of a separate peace with the Anglo-Americans at the end of 1942 – believed it politically useful to continue collaborating with some Serbian military forces connected with Mihailović.

In the conversations with Ribbentrop in Rome at the end of February 1943, Mussolini politically weakened and more and more subordinate to Hitler, gave in to German demands.<sup>48</sup> From March 1943 onward the Italian-Chetnik collaboration collapsed: the main reason for this was the growing political and military weakness of the Italian State in Croatia and in Montenegro. In fact, from the end of 1942 more German troops were sent to Croatia and they exploited the war against the Partisans to occupy territories until that moment controlled by Italian Armies. If Croatia was a German economic protectorate since May 1941, after the end of 1942 it became a political one as well: Independent Croatia, fearful of Italy and of the Chetniks, was increasingly subdued by the German Reich, hoping to find in Berlin a benign and friendly protector and to become a sort of second Slovakia.

Faced with the growing German influence in Croatia and with the military collapse of the Fascist Regime, Mussolini still hoped to be able to save the Italian positions in the Balkans. His irritation with the Croats increased. When Casertano came to Rome to meet him on February 12 and 13, 1943, Mussolini told him that Pavelić was very much in debt to Fascist Italy for the support and the protection he had received for many years.<sup>49</sup> The *Poglavnik* should stop supporting Croatian political irredentism in Dalmatia and to persecute Orthodox

<sup>46</sup> ADAP, E, IV, doc. 244; ADAP, E, V, docs. 49, 57, 96; DDI, IX, 9, doc. 467; HORY, BROSZAT, *Der Kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, p. 133 et sqq.; KRIZMAN, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija*, Zagreb, 1980, p. 441 et sqq.

<sup>47</sup> DDI, IX, 9, doc. 430; *Diario storico del Comando Supremo*, VIII, 1, p. 1077 et sqq.; ADAP, E, IV, docs. 98, 303, 306, 309.

<sup>48</sup> DDI, IX, 10, docs. 61, 64; ADAP, E, V, docs. 158, 163.

<sup>49</sup> DDI, IX, 10, doc. 23, Casertano to Bastianini, February 15, 1943.

Serbs; it should also cease to oscillate between Rome and Berlin. Regardless, at the end of the war, Italy would change the Croatian boundaries to its advantage, because Dalmatia needed to be reunited economically and politically.<sup>50</sup>

Back in Zagreb, Casertano adopted a harsh policy of contrasting pro-German influence and anti-Italian attitudes inside the Croatian Government. In April 1942 he had succeeded in convincing Pavelić to substitute at the head of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mladen Lorković, accused of being anti-Italian, with Mile Budak.<sup>51</sup> However, personal relations between Casertano and the *Ustaša* leaders deteriorated strongly, and the Italian representative was replaced by Petrucci on June 1943.<sup>52</sup>

In Rome Bastianini, new undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and successor of Ciano since February 1943, sought to convince the German Government to recognize formally Italian supremacy in Croatia. On April 1943, Bastianini met Ribbentrop in Klessheim and complained about the anti-Italian activity of some German representatives in Croatia, citing the case of Glaise Horstenau, the political representative of the German military in Zagreb. Ribbentrop promised to harmonize the attitude of the German Legation in Zagreb with that of the Italians „on the basis of the recognition of the prominent Italian interest in Croatia”.<sup>53</sup> Despite these promises, German influence in Croatia kept growing. On May 17 Bastianini wrote to Alfieri, the Italian ambassador in Germany, and asked him to discuss the Croatian question with the German Government. A satisfactory explanation was necessary to put an end to a situation unfavourable for Italy.<sup>54</sup> Bastianini wanted „written assurances” from Germany relating Croatia. This German-Italian agreement should confirm Germany’s lack of interest toward the political and territorial status of Croatia and the „provisionality” of the German military occupation that should cease as soon as the military situation would allow it.<sup>55</sup>

However, the desired agreement never materialized. The worsening of Italy’s military situation made impossible for Fascist leaders to defend the Italian interests in Croatia. From June onward Bastianini himself abandoned his loyalty to Mussolini and began supporting the idea of a separate peace with the Anglo-Americans. In July, with the fall of Mussolini and the appointment of the Badoglio Government, Italy clearly started to look for a way out of the German

<sup>50</sup> DDI, IX, 10, doc. 24, Casertano to Bastianini, February 15, 1943.

<sup>51</sup> IVO PETRINOVIĆ, *Mile Budak – portret jednog političara*, Split, 2003, p. 115; KRIZMAN, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija*, Zagreb, 1980, p. 562 *et seq.*

<sup>52</sup> KISIĆ KOLANOVIĆ, *NDH i Italija*, p. 347 *et seq.*; KRIZMAN, *NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija*, Zagreb, 1980, p. 588 *et seq.*

<sup>53</sup> DDI, IX, 10, doc. 237. See also ADAP, E, V, docs. 286, p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> DDI, IX, 10, doc. 331.

<sup>55</sup> DDI, IX, 10, doc. 429, Bastianini to Alfieri, June 17, 1943; ADAP, E, VI, doc. 70.

alliance.<sup>56</sup> In Croatia the end of the Fascist regime was seen as a prelude to the Italian disengagement from the war: Croatian Ustashas started thinking of reconquering Italian Dalmatia with German support.<sup>57</sup> The end of the difficult alliance between *Ustaša* Croatia and Fascist Italy had come.

The fall of the Fascist government and the successive Italian separate armistice of September 3, 1943, had deep political and military repercussions in the Balkans. The Italian armistice weakened both the Croatian State, bereft of one of its main allies, and the Serbian Chetniks, whose opposition to the Partisans had been successful largely to Italian help and support. Instead, the Italian change of front strengthened the Partisan movement led by Tito. Following the armistice, the Italian armies, one of its toughest opponents, disbanded or sided with the Partisans to fight against the Germans; moreover, many Italian weapons were given to or taken by the Partisans. The Italian armistice and the end of the Croatian-Italian alliance changed decisively the balance of power in Croatia and Bosnia in favour of the Partisans,<sup>58</sup> who became the strongest political and military force in the Yugoslav territories.

<sup>56</sup> MARIO TOSCANO, *Dal 25 luglio all'8 settembre. Nuove rivelazioni sugli armistizi fra l'Italia e le Nazioni Unite*, Firenze, 1966; RENZO DE FELICE, *Mussolini l'alleato. I. L'Italia in Guerra 1940-1943*, 2, p. 1089 et sqq.; ELENA AGA ROSSI, *Una nazione allo sbando. L'armistizio italiano del settembre 1943*, Bologna, 1993; ENNIO DI NOLFO, „La politica estera di Badoglio dopo l'8 settembre 1943”, *Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali*, 1996/1997, n. 2, p. 85 e ss.; ID., *La Repubblica delle speranze e degli inganni. L'Italia dalla caduta del fascismo al crollo della Democrazia cristiana*, Firenze, 1996, pp. 31-56; ID., *Vaticano e Stati Uniti 1939-1952 (Dalle carte di Myron C. Taylor)*, Milano, 1978, p. 50 et sqq.; ITALO GARZIA, *Pio XII e l'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Brescia, 1988; ANTONIO VARSORI, *L'Italia nelle relazioni internazionali dal 1943 al 1992*, Roma-Bari, 1998, p. 3 et sqq.; NORMAN KOGAN, *L'Italia e gli Alleati. 8 settembre 1943*, Milano, 1963; ROBERTO GAJA, *L'Italia nel mondo bipolare. Per una storia della politica estera italiana (1943-1991)*, Bologna, 1995, p. 49 e ss.

<sup>57</sup> TALPO, *Dalmazia. Una cronaca per la storia (1943-1944)*, Roma, 1994, p. 824 et sqq.; KISIĆ KOLANOVIC, *NDH i Italija*, p. 365 et sqq.; BOGDAN KRIZMAN, *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, Zagreb, 1986, 1, p. 52 et sqq.; DDI, IX, 10, doc. 553.

<sup>58</sup> HDA, MVP NDH, *Politički odjel, Odsjek za romanske zemlje*, b. 4, Luetić to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to Ministry of Internal Affairs, October 12, 1943.

## Summary

### Fašistička Italija i Nezavisna Hrvatska: teškoće savezništva

Čini se da je slom Jugoslavije 1941. za fašističku Italiju značio početak novog doba političke hegemonije na zapadnom Balkanu. Ali, prepreku Musolinijevim ambicijama predstavljale su teškoće vezane za ostvarenje prihvatljivog kompromisa o granicama nove hrvatske države. Sporazumi potpisani u Rimu (18. maja 1941) bili su pokušaji da se postigne takav kompromis, ali je njihov sadržaj razočarao veliki deo hrvatske i italijanske političke i vojne elite. S jedne strane, u Hrvatskoj je napuštanje dela Dalmacije pothranjivalo nezadovoljstvo i neprijateljstvo prema Italijanima. S druge strane, mnogi italijanski vojni i politički lideri smatrali su da Rimski sporazumi ne obezbeđuju potpunu strategijsku bezbednost Italije, kao i da se njima napuštaju najznačajniji ekonomski i rudnički resursi Dalmacije i Hrvatske. Komandanti italijanskih armija su sa zebnjom razmatrali snažan nemački uticaj u novoj hrvatskoj državi i bili spremni da mu se suprotstave i da ga zaustave. Još jedan razlog neslaganja između Italije i Hrvatske bilo je postupanje prema hrvatskom stanovništvu na teritorijama koje je anektirala Kraljevina Italija. Odbijanje da se dalmatinskim Hrvatima garantuju osnovna nacionalna prava i prava u oblasti kulture, pokušaji da se oni italijanizuju i osnivanje fašističkih institucija i organizacija na tim novim teritorijama, izazvali su oštre proteste u Zagrebu. Do kraja 1941. bilo je jasno da Musolini i italijanski fašisti politički dogovor zaključen Rimskim sporazumima smatraju nečim prelaznim, nečim što će biti promenjeno u korist Italije na kraju rata, u trenutku pobeđe Sila osovine. S obzirom na to, govorkalo se da italijanska vlada nije u potpunosti ratifikovala Rimske sporazume. Dobra ilustracija pogoršanja odnosa između Italije i Hrvatske je nemogućnost da se organizuje sastanak Pavelića i Musolinija posle maja 1941. Nemačka je od jeseni 1942. počela aktivnije da podržava hrvatsku državu i da se u još većoj meri drži neprijateljski prema italijanskoj saradnji sa četnicima. Posle iskrcavanja američke vojske u Severnoj Africi i poraza italijansko-nemačke vojske u Egiptu, balkanski front je postajao sve značajniji Hitleru koji je veoma strahovao da bi anglo-američke snage mogle da pokušaju da se iskrcaju na jadransku obalu uz pomoć partizana, kao i četnika na čijem je čelu bio Mihailović. Nemci su počeli da šalju sve više vojske u Hrvatsku i da preuzimaju kontrolu nad vojnom i političkom upravom na tim teritorijama. Ako je Hrvatska bila nemački ekonomski protektorat od maja 1941, posle 1942. je postala i njen politički protektorat: Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, u strahu od Italije i od četnika, sve više se potčinjavala nemačkom Rajhu u nadi da će u Berlinu da nađe bezopasnog prijateljskog zaštitnika i da će da postane neka vrsta druge Slovačke.