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THE CRISIS IN TRIESTE AND VENEZIA GIULIA

During the past month serious tension has developed between the Provisional Yugoslav Government and the Western Allies as a result of Yugoslav refusal to recognize the authority of Allied Military Government in the disputed border area of Venezia Giulia, which was occupied by Yugoslav Partisan forces. The USSR has taken no official stand on the problem. However, the fact that Tito's 15 April enunciation of Yugoslav claims to Trieste and Venezia Giulia was issued in Moscow has been interpreted in some quarters to indicate at least tacit Soviet support. Anglo-American statements have emphasized that the Venezia Giulia issue must be resolved in conformity with the principle of settling territorial disputes by peaceful negotiation rather than by unilateral action. Pointing out that Venezia Giulia is part of the territory surrendered to the Western Allies by the Italian armistice and citing previous agreements between Partisan and Allied military authorities, Anglo-American authorities requested that Partisan units in Venezia Giulia be withdrawn or placed under Marshal Alexander, Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean Theater. The Italian Government, suggesting eventual compromise on the division of Venezia Giulia, requested the Allies to occupy the area in accordance with the armistice terms until a general peace conference. The British and United States Governments have given no indication of altering their demands, and by 20 May there were indications that Yugoslav authorities may be prepared to compromise.

Venezia Giulia, a part of the former *Italia irredenta*, is an area of mixed population which, because of its strategic position between Italy and southeastern Europe, has been for centuries a subject of international conflict. Trieste itself, with an eighty percent Italian population, is not only the most important port on the Adriatic but also a prime outlet for the trade from southeastern and south central Europe. While the other cities of Venezia Giulia also are predominantly Italian, the peasantry of the hinterland is largely Slovene. The majority of the population is Italian in the western and Slovene in the eastern part of the disputed territory.

Italian aspirations to "redeem" Venezia Giulia go back to Italy's nineteenth-century struggle to achieve political unity and "natural" frontiers. The disappointment of Italian irredentists at their failure to obtain Venezia Giulia from Austria in the treaty of 1866 was exacerbated by a voluminous literature which appeared during the following years claiming for Italy not only Venezia Giulia but the southern Tyrol and the entire Dalmatian coast. The importance that irredentism assumed in Italian minds may be judged from the fact that during World War I

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Italy broke away from the Triple Alliance (with Germany and Austria-Hungary) and entered the war on the side of the Allies largely because the secret Pact of London (1915) promised her various territorial gains, including Venezia Giulia.

At the Versailles Conference the United States, which had not been a party to the Pact of London, opposed some of the more extreme Italian claims and proposed a new Italo-Yugoslav border known as the Wilson line. This line, which approximated the division between Italian and Slovene majority areas, ran roughly parallel to the east coast of the Istrian peninsula at a distance of six to ten miles inland, and thence north to the present Italo-Austrian border, leaving the cities of Trieste and Gorizia in Italian territory. The Wilson line, however, was never adopted, and the border, as finally determined by direct negotiation between Italy and Yugoslavia at Rapallo in 1920, gave Trieste and all of the Istrian peninsula to Italy. The port of Fiume, which lay directly on the new border, was established as an independent city. Two years later, however, the Fiume government was overthrown by a Fascist *coup*, and the city was subsequently annexed to Italy. The annexation of Fiume and Fascist maltreatment of the Slovene population of Venezia Giulia, which had been promised cultural autonomy, gave rise to an intense Slovene irredentism.

During World War II official Yugoslav spokesmen have repeatedly and emphatically announced their intention of annexing all of Venezia Giulia as far as the Isonzo River, including Trieste and Gorizia. In advancing their claims the Partisans have frequently implied that they have Soviet support. Tacit Soviet approval may indeed have been indicated by the publicity which the Moscow press and radio accorded to the statement of Marshal Tito, made during his visit to Moscow last April, that "the population of Trieste and Venezia Giulia wishes to belong to the new Yugoslavia and we [the Partisans] are certain that this desire will be achieved."

The Italian Government, on the other hand, has advocated a compromise, possibly on the basis of the Wilson line, but in any case one which would leave Trieste in Italy. The Trieste question is regarded in Italy as the most important single problem of Italian foreign affairs. With the exception of the Communists and, to a lesser degree, the Socialists, all Italian political parties have been vehement in their support of Italian claims. Early this year Italian authorities, anticipating the arrival of Yugoslav forces in Venezia Giulia before those of the Western Allies, and fearing that the Yugoslavs might annex the area outright or create conditions which would make a fair plebiscite impossible, requested that the disputed area be occupied by Anglo-American troops until the conclusion of the final peace.

The official position of the British and United States Governments has been that all territorial disputes should await the general solution of border problems at the peace conference, pending which Venezia

Giulia is legally under the control of the Western Allies as part of the territory surrendered to them under the terms of the Italian armistice.

In order to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding with the Yugoslav Partisans, the question of occupation was discussed by Marshal Alexander and Marshal Tito in July 1944 and again at Belgrade in February 1945. At the latter conference Alexander pointed out that when the Allies occupied Austria it would be necessary for purposes of supply for them to control the port of Trieste as well as communication lines from that city to the north. Tito agreed to support the August 1944 decision of the Allied Control Commission for Italy that Venezia Giulia would come under the supervision of AMG, provided that any previously established Yugoslav civil administration be allowed to continue. Alexander agreed and assured Tito that AMG supervision would not prejudice Yugoslavia's territorial claims at the peace conference. The latter assurance, however, may have been regarded with a certain amount of skepticism by the Yugoslavs, whose relations with Italy, according to Tito's former Foreign Minister Smodlaka, have made them distrustful of promises "no matter from what quarters they may come." Thus in the ensuing months, despite Tito's reported pledge not to attempt the outright annexation of Venezia Giulia before the peace conference, there were indications that such annexation may in fact have been envisaged by other Yugoslav authorities. On 26 April, soon after the entry of Partisan troops into Venezia Giulia, *Borba*, the official Yugoslav Communist newspaper, declared editorially that this territory had already been annexed by local Yugoslav authority upon the capitulation of Italy, that the annexation had been confirmed by the Yugoslav Partisan Assembly (AVNOJ), and that "there can be no doubt that the present entry of the Yugoslav Army in this area represents a final guarantee that the territory already annexed will remain so."¹

On 1 May Marshal Tito announced that Partisan troops had reached the Isonzo River on a broad front and had occupied Trieste and Gorizia. Twenty-four hours later, however, the British Eighth Army issued a statement that the same towns had been captured by New Zealand units. The Partisan High Command, clearly nettled by the British claim, which it emphatically contradicted, declared that the entry of Allied units into Trieste and Gorizia "without our permission" might have "unwished-for consequences if this difference is not immediately cleared up by mutual agreement." The local Partisan command accused the British of violating the Tito-Alexander agreement, and maintained that the military line of demarcation was to have been established wherever the two armies met (allegedly along the Isonzo River), and that the agreement provided for Yugoslav civil administration even in areas occupied by the British. Increasing tension apparently led to a formal request

¹ On 30 November 1943 AVNOJ officially "approved" the action of the Slovene National Liberation Council in including "Slovene Primorje" (Venezia Giulia) within Free Slovenia in the Federative Yugoslav State.

by Marshal Tito for the withdrawal across the Isonzo of all Eighth Army units.

In an effort to avoid any further misunderstanding over the (apparently verbal) agreement previously reached by Marshals Alexander and Tito, Alexander sent his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Morgan, to Tito on 8 May with a written memorandum of their agreement. In order to facilitate the working of the agreement he requested that Yugoslav regular forces be withdrawn from the area, and that any irregular forces either retire or hand in their arms to AMG and disband. Marshal Tito, however, replied that the situation had changed, that the problem was now political rather than military, and that he did not intend to withdraw his forces from the territory they had occupied east of the Isonzo River. Tito insisted that his civil administration remain in control as well, and added that at the peace conference he would also claim territory west of the Isonzo.

The conflict would appear to be due to the fact that while the Partisans have recognized, under pressure, that "formal annexation" must wait, they continue to regard Venezia Giulia as an integral part of Yugoslavia over which they have political as well as military jurisdiction. The Partisans also fear that the Anglo-Americans will interfere in civil affairs by hindering Partisan mobilization for the armed forces (which already has been proclaimed for all men between the ages of eighteen and fifty), for service units, and for reconstruction groups. Throughout Yugoslavia rigid control of manpower has been one of the Partisans' most effective methods of ensuring political support, or at least of preventing active opposition. In the rural areas of Venezia Giulia draft dodgers are reportedly being hunted down as "bandits," and in Trieste anti-Yugoslav Italians have been intimidated by various methods, including temporary arrest for questioning. Several hundred political prisoners, including members of the local Italian Committee of National Liberation and other known anti-Fascists, are being held by the Partisans. The arrest of the Archbishop of Gorizia, which later proved to have been temporary, and the conscription of Catholic clergy led Vatican authorities in Rome to request Anglo-American intervention.

In Trieste the Partisans proceeded to establish a political administration, though apparently without the participation of the bulk of the population. At a meeting of the "General Assembly of the City of Trieste" on 17 May the Partisan Town Commander declared that the assembly was composed of "representatives of the great majority of the people of Trieste." Although the meeting was hailed in the Yugoslav-controlled newspaper, *Nostro Avvenire*, as a historic manifestation of true democracy, American observers report that the local citizenry was totally ignorant of the fact that the meeting had been scheduled, and that almost no association has been observed between the Partisans and the inhabitants of Trieste.

Meanwhile the tension between Yugoslav and Anglo-American authorities over Venezia Giulia was aggravated by a somewhat similar

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situation which developed temporarily in the South Austrian border province of Carinthia, another mixed-population area claimed by Yugoslavia. Early in May Marshal Tito reminded Anglo-American representatives that he had received no answer from the Western Allies to his request to share in the occupation of Austria. Tito pointed out that he had received a favorable reply from Moscow, and added that, in view of the confused military situation, he planned to hold whatever Austrian territory was occupied first by his troops.

In what appears to have been a race between the British and Partisan forces, the Eighth Army occupied the Austrian border city of Klagenfurt on 9 May three hours before the arrival of the Yugoslavs. Villach, an important rail junction on the line from Trieste through Carinthia, was occupied in a similar manner. The British, however, despite their overwhelming armored strength, did not oppose the entry of Partisan forces, which proclaimed martial law and set up their own military government simultaneously and in the same areas with AMG. Considerable hostility appears to have developed between the rival occupation forces, and on 11 May Marshal Alexander requested Marshal Tito to withdraw his troops across the Austrian border.

On 12 May Acting Secretary of State Grew issued a public statement reminding Tito of his earlier acceptance of the principle that Allied Military Government be established in disputed areas within the Anglo-American theater of operations. Grew pointed out that the problem of Trieste "raises the issue of the settlement of international disputes by orderly process rather than by unilateral action." He added that the disposition of Venezia Giulia and other disputed territories must either await a general peace conference or be settled by "direct negotiations freely entered into between the parties involved." On 14 May the position of the British and the United States Governments again was outlined in parallel notes to Marshal Tito requesting that the area of Venezia Giulia which includes Gorizia, Trieste, Monfalcone, and Pola, together with their lines of communication to Austria, be placed immediately under the control of Marshal Alexander. It was suggested that Yugoslav forces in this region cooperate with Allied officers in establishing a military government under Alexander. The initial Partisan reaction was an abrupt request that the United States and British Military Missions to Yugoslavia and their field representatives leave the country.

On 19 May tension between Yugoslavia and the Western Allies appears to have reached its peak. The Yugoslav reply to the parallel notes of Britain and the United States, which was broadcast over the Belgrade radio, asserted that "the honor of our army and the honor of our country demand the presence of the Yugoslav Army in Istria, Trieste, and the Slovene coastline." On the same day Marshal Alexander stated in a public message to his forces that he had tried to come to a friendly agreement with Marshal Tito but had not succeeded. He pointed out

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that the Allies do not oppose Yugoslav territorial aspirations, but asserted that Tito apparently intends "to establish his claims by force of arms and military occupation." "Action of this kind," he stated, "would be all too reminiscent of Hitler, Mussolini, and Japan." Also on 19 May American and British diplomatic and civilian personnel in Yugoslavia were alerted to prepare for the possibility of immediate evacuation, and on the following day, according to press reports, American troops were withdrawn from Trieste to avoid supply problems in the event of hostilities with Yugoslav forces.

Up to the present time Tito's tactics in the crisis have probably added considerably to his popular support among Yugoslavs at home and abroad. Even among anti-Partisan Serbs there is widespread enthusiasm for the annexation of Trieste and Venezia Giulia. The Soviet Union too may be expected to profit in Yugoslavia from the current impression there that the Yugoslav claims have had Soviet backing.

The further course of Marshal Tito's Government will depend in large measure on the attitude of the USSR. On 20 May authoritative Partisan sources in Belgrade indicated that Tito was considering, and probably would ultimately accept, with certain provisos over which no difficulty was expected, the substance of the British and American demands. British authorities in Belgrade recommended that the United States and Great Britain should make every effort to help Tito save face if and when he agreed to back down. On the same day Partisan troops began to withdraw from Austrian territory they had occupied. By 21 May the Yugoslav Communists gave evidence of preparing for a shift in their party line with an editorial in *Borba* asserting that "Yugoslavia is not against forming a transitory military administration in these areas, but only under condition that this administration assures a bleeding people complete legal and factual protection from Fascist elements." Simultaneously reports indicated that diplomatic talks were proceeding in a friendlier atmosphere, with the probability that a compromise agreement would provide for the establishment of Allied Military Government in the disputed territory. Under such an agreement, it was anticipated, Yugoslav troops would remain as part of the occupation forces under Marshal Alexander, Yugoslav authorities would agree to cease political activity which the Allies had construed as an effort to incorporate the area immediately into the Slovene State, and the Allies would guarantee that Fascist elements would not be allowed to retain any form of control.