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Elite Nationalism and the Crumbling of Multi-Ethnic Coexistence: Habsburg Dalmatia and the Language Question in the Wake of Italian Unification

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Abstract

The emergence of Italian nationalism in general, and in Habsburg Dalmatia in particular, has escaped any systematic theorizing in the field of nationalism studies. In the 1860s, changing geopolitical scenarios, resulting from the process of Italian unification, triggered a heated debate among Italian- and Slavic-speaking Dalmatian politicians and intellectuals over the introduction of equal status for the Italian language and Slavic-Dalmatian. Although Italian-speaking Dalmatians constituted a very tiny minority of the population of the Austrian province, the Italian language had a dominant role in public life as a legacy of previous Venetian colonial rule. While the majority of the Slavic-Dalmatian intelligentsia and political elites sought rights for the local Slavic language in public life without undermining the existence of Italian, Italian-speaking elites opposed measures aimed at language equality in their attempt to maintain their privileged position within Dalmatian society. In the same period, Niccolò Tommaseo emerged as the leading figure against any concessions to Slavs, thus distancing himself from his previous “multinational” ideas and igniting anti-Slavic Italian nationalism in the region. And the nationalist tropes used by Italian-speaking Dalmatians, Tommaseo included, mirrored the very same primordialist rhetoric of modern-day nationalist leaders, from Russia to China.

Keywords: nationalism; nation building; national identity; Italy; Balkans

Introduction

The current persistence of nationalisms in the Balkans after a century of inter-ethnic conflicts and ethnic cleansings may appear to confirm that the region is indeed the classic “cauldron” of nationalisms or one of Huntington’s civilizational “fault lines.” Yet in the mid-19th century, in the Balkan periphery of Europe, Dalmatian intellectuals believed that their multi-ethnic region may offer Europe, then affected by incipient nationalist struggles, a positive example of peaceful cohabitation (Kirchner Reill 2018). The fact that this conviction was soon undermined by some of the very same intellectuals who had fostered Dalmatia’s multi-ethnic coexistence until 1848 does not prove the inevitable emergence of nationalism, but rather the fundamental role of certain political and intellectual elites in the rise and spread of nationalist ideologies. And it was not some Balkan nationalism that inflamed the region but rather Italian primordialist rhetoric on both shores of the Adriatic.

The study of the emergence of Italian nationalism in multi-ethnic Dalmatia in the 1860s, following the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, shows that inter-ethnic animosity

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was not ingrained in Dalmatian society and that nationalist sentiments were not an inevitable product of “modernity”: they were the result of the interplay between propaganda and changing geopolitical scenarios. The process of Italian unification and eastward expansion between 1861 and 1866, coupled with economic stagnation, had led sections of the affluent class of Trieste – the economic and cultural capital of the eastern Adriatic then under the Habsburgs – to vocally identify with the Italian “nation,” not only culturally but also politically (Maritan 2022a). Changing political allegiances and the rise of nationalist intolerance in Dalmatia need to be interpreted in this context of shifting geopolitics. This change in political allegiances may well be analyzed in light of Harris Mylonas’ (2012, xxi–xxii) “focus on elite perceptions and intentions,” whereby “nationalism is more a contingent outcome of a strategic response by statesmen to modern conditions of geopolitical competition than the product of industrialization or print capitalism per se” – hence the relevance of this 19th-century Dalmatian case study to recent developments in nationalism studies.

People’s indifference to nations and nationalists’ stirrings had been the torment of nationalist activists throughout the Habsburg Monarchy in the late 19th and early 20th century, as Pieter Judson (2006) showed in the context of German attempts to mobilize fellow “Germans” living in those regions of the Monarchy with a significant Slavic population. Similarly, in Habsburg Bohemia, the city of “Budweis/ Budějovice had not been first German, then more German than Czech and then more Czech than German. Rather, it had long been Budweiser, or Habsburg-loyal – and German only in the purely linguistic sense that most residents seem to have preferred to speak German until some time after the middle of the nineteenth century (King 2002, 13–14).” By the same token, in Dalmatia, people may use Italian or colonial Venetian on an everyday basis, but could nevertheless be non-Italian (Clewing 2001; Kirchner Reill 2012; Vrandečić 2000).

Until the end of the 19th century, Dalmatians were not prone to joining either the Italian or the Slavic national movement, but could rather identify with multiple causes, “as varied as [the] Dalmatian, Slavo-Dalmatian, Italo-Dalmatian, Italo-Austrian, Illyrian, Slav, Serb, Italian and Croatian (Kirchner Reill 2007, 17).” The rise of chauvinistic and divisive Italian nationalism in Dalmatia, partly ensuing Italian-speaking elites’ fear of losing their privileged position, mirrors Germans nationalists’ reactions in Bohemia against the Badeni Decree of 1897 (Deák 1990; King 2002; Scheer 2020). German nationalists opposed Austrian Prime Minister Badeni’s decree that required that provincial bureaucrats in Bohemia, including soon afterward also Moravia, should speak the two local languages, German and Czech, sparking fears also among Hungarians in the Slavic-majority Transleithania, the Hungarian half of the monarchy (King 2002; Scheer 2020).

This discussion seeks to provide an explanation for the rise of Italian exclusionary nationalism in Austrian Dalmatia as well as the prevalent attitude among Italian-speaking political figures and intellectuals in the region in the 1860s. It also offers material on the top-down formation of national identities, political ideologies, and inter-ethnic animosity, following Rogers Brubaker’s (1996) “eventful perspective” on the emergence of nationalism and Mylonas’ (2012) emphasis on the choices of political elites, their ability in seeking foreign support, and the role that international support has in boosting and legitimizing nationalist movements. To this day, the northern Adriatic rim and Dalmatia are widely seen as regions possessing well-defined national and ethnic distinctions, which have been applied to 19th-century contexts. As Pamela Ballinger (2011, 56) stressed, historiography has focused on “a reductive view of the Adriatic that sees it principally through the narrow prism of competing Italian and Slavic nationalist claims,” relegating the region at the margins of the historiographical research, while remaining the preserve of Italian and Slavic scholars and their national narratives. Notwithstanding the inter-ethnic strife of the 20th century, as Egidio Ivetic (2019, 7) put it, the “*homo adriaticus*’ [category, as] a *forma mentis* and a paradigm in the name of cultural openness,” has characterized the history of the Adriatic throughout the centuries. This article seeks to contribute to the study of nationalism at large by analyzing shifting multi-ethnic relations in the Dalmatian region, the imposition of national categories based on standardized languages, and the widespread dismissal of centuries-long traditions of multilingualism and ethnic hybridity.

The process of Italian nation building and the rise of Italian nationalism in the eastern Adriatic, from Habsburg Trieste to Dalmatia, represent a typical example of what Brubaker (1996) described as the “eventful” emergence of nationalist rhetoric and imposition of nationhood. Yet Italian national unification and nationalist ideology have escaped any systematic theorizing in the field of nationalism, notwithstanding two fundamental points: the fact that the Dalmatian region is part and parcel of the Balkans, the classic “cauldron” of nationalisms, and the fact that irredentism was an Italian “invention” (Vivante 1912). There are indeed studies on Italian “border Fascism” (see for example, Apih 2022; Bresciani 2021; Cattaruzza 2007; Rusinow 1969; Vinci 2011), yet the phenomenon of Italian nationalism, whether in its nation-building or Fascist version, has failed to be systematically included in wider theories of nationalism. Belief in the foundational myths of the Risorgimento and the idea of the appeal of the national idea are still prominent in studies of Italian nation building, although Banti (2004; 2009) did point to the violence inherent to Italian “patriotism.” And as Siniša Malešević (2019) aptly argued, even Serbian nationalism has been widely understood in these terms, with the classic trope of Serbia as the Piedmont of the Balkans, which in turn shows the persistence of national narratives rooted in the idea that national unification was inevitable. Italian nation building has been widely interpreted not as a nationalist enterprise – apart from few works in the English-speaking world, which have disentangled some of the myths underlying the phenomenon of Italian unification, among which the idea that Austrian rule in Italy was “foreign” (see Laven 1997, 2014; Maritan 2022a, 2022b; Riall 1994, 2007).

This Dalmatian case study may offer further material for arguing that, even in the Balkans, nationalism and policies of ethnic cleansing were (and are) not the result of entrenched centuries-long inter-ethnic enmities, contrary to what conventional narratives, perpetuated in influential works of comparative politics and world history, would have it (see for example Fukuyama 2018; Huntington 1996; Kaplan 1993; Kennedy 1988). Similarly to the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, which Wimmer (2013, 197) considers to have been characterized by “taken-for granted ethnic hierarchies of empire,” was not a foreign imposition on supposed national societies. And local societies did actively engage with imperial institutions and administrations, contrary to what recent histories still discuss (see for example Calic 2019; Connelly 2020).

In the field of nationalism studies, from Gellner and Anderson to Wimmer and Coakley, we either find the usual suspects, France, Germany and the Habsburg Empire, or understandings of the phenomenon of nationalism that are affected by trivializing uses of historical elements. Coakley (2004, 537–538), for example, while accurate on nationalists’ abuse of history premised on their attempt either to retain power or obtain it, provides teleological understandings of nationalism: for example, he even described Walter Scott’s historical novels as nationalist and considered the compilation of national histories in the late 18th and early 19th century as part of nationalist aspirations. For his part, Wimmer (2013) analyzes the spread of nationalism as a mass phenomenon that attracted entire populations. Notably, Anderson (1991, 7) had written that it is the national “horizontal comradeship [...] that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.” Similarly, Smith (1999, 9) emphasized “the popular roots and widespread appeal of nationalism.” Yet peoples became “national” only in the course of the 20th century. Wimmer also interprets the spread of nation states as a process of diffusion in which nationalists did not have “much help from the global system (Wimmer 2013, 6),” while dismissing the fundamental involvement of foreign actors in nurturing nation building projects abroad to destabilize rival powers or wield influence in newly born states, aspects that, on the contrary, Mylonas (2012) has emphasized, and which one may find in this Dalmatian case study. What we need then in the study of nationalism, possibly the most powerful political ideology in the present world, are historiographical understandings of the phenomenon, such as Brubaker’s and Mylonas’ works – not sociological interpretations that use historical elements selectively and inconsistently, much in line with nationalists’ uses of history.

Studying the emergence of Italian nationalism among the Italian-speaking elites of Dalmatia, notwithstanding their initial support for autonomism within the Habsburg Monarchy (Đinđić and

Cipek 2010; Vrandečić 2000), would provide further historical elements for exploring nationalism as a restricted phenomenon that jeopardized people's national indifference only through intense propaganda and foreign involvement in the late 19th century and later mass mobilization in the course of the 20th century. The emergence of nationalist tropes in the 1860s bears witness to the fact that nationalist ideology was the product and still the preserve of very restricted groups of people. While Italian nationalism has remained at the margins of studies of nationalisms, 19th-century Italy represents the trailblazer of any present-day nationalist ideology and agitation. Not only was the process of Italian unification the blueprint for Serbian and Slavic nation buildings, but Italian nationalism, in its Fascist version, was the source of inspiration for Nazism and the other military authoritarianisms of Europe and the world in the 1920s and 1930s, from Turkey's Mustafa Kemal to Persia's Reza Shah Pahlavi and Thailand's Plaek Phibunsongkhram. And the rhetoric and tropes of Italian nationalists in the 1860s, which can be easily interpreted in Ernest Renan's (1882) terms, are even mirrored in present-day nationalist rhetoric and concepts, from Putin's Russia to Xi Jinping's China. Understanding Italian nationalism, here in its Dalmatian version, represents an insightful building block in the study of contemporary nationalisms and the persistence of tropes rooted in past "national" greatness, unity, and infringed national "rights."

The discussion draws on Laven's and Kirchner Reill's understanding of the Adriatic as a non-national space. While seemingly a specialist work, this analysis does not seek to be an historiography aimed at better comprehending a certain limited period of the past targeting a limited audience of Habsburgists, Italianists or Balkanologists, but a work of history in view of better understanding present-day sociopolitical phenomena, namely nationalist rhetoric and ensuing political agitation. That is to say that, through the study of a given historical case study, its aim is possibly to offer tools for guiding present-day politics and life, in a way reminiscent of Burckhardt's (1873) and Nietzsche's (1874) Thucydidean understanding of the value, or lack thereof, of historical enquiries.

The period analyzed here is very brief, that is between the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and the aftermath of the battle of Lissa in 1866. By focusing on this limited timeframe, the discussion seeks to emphasize the fluidity of allegiances and the complex series of calculations and sentiments at stake in individuals' lifetime. It stresses the fact that Italian, South-Slav, or Venetian "nationalists" could espouse a variety of different opinions, allegiances, and visions at different times. These people, like Sebenico/Sibenik-born intellectual Niccolò Tommaseo and Antonio Bajamonti, who was first elected mayor of Spalato/Split in 1860, held different views and adopted different stances contextually, as sources from the 1861–1864 period show. The discussion first analyzes British consular reports on the Dalmatian sociopolitical situation, seeking to offer an external view on Dalmatian affairs. It then looks at the political disputes occurring in the Dalmatian Diet at Zara/Zadar over the language question between Italian-speaking Dalmatians and Slavic-Dalmatians in 1864. Eventually, the analysis focuses on Tommaseo's anti-Slavism, which informed Italian claims over Dalmatia, and reactions to it, in 1861.

The "Italians" of Dalmatia: A 19th-Century Creation

Even those works that are critical of Italian nationalist narratives are undermined by the shortcomings inherent to the Italian historiography of the region, which takes national forms of identification for granted, applies them anachronistically to "non-national" centuries, and conflates Venetian language and culture with the Italian (Ferguson 2007; Kirchner Reill 2012; Maritan 2022a). Nemeč and others (2019, 9), for example, still argue that in the eastern Adriatic "the Italian language (in its Venetian version) and Italian culture, together with the advantages related to Italianisation, have been able to assimilate the contribution coming from the eastern Mediterranean and the Slavic hinterland throughout the centuries." The authors (Nemeč et al. 2019, 54) do acknowledge the melting pot of the region stemming from the "processes of centuries-old integration of people from the Slovene and Croatian hinterland, the Italian peninsula, the eastern Mediterranean [...], Hungary and the German states." Yet they conclude that this contribution was

added to “the Italian national group that was historically settled in Venezia Giulia, Fiume, and Dalmatia, [...] [although its] Italian identity had an ethnic character only partially (represented by the settlements of the age of Romanization).” This uncritical conflation of the Italian and Venetian languages and culture – which considers Italian identity as a pre-existing category and does not understand that Venice, for centuries bound up with the eastern Adriatic and the Aegean Sea, was “nationally amorphous,” as the Triestine socialist and internationalist Angelo Vivante (1912, 46) put it – undermines the credibility of their discussion on the history of the Adriatic (Kirchner Reill 2012).

With regard to the similar context of Fiume/Rijeka, in 1919, hundreds of Italian academics would maintain that “the Italian roots of Fiume are in the early days of the Roman Empire” and that the medieval municipality of Fiume/Rijeka “always preserved its autonomy and transferred from the use of the Latin language to that of the Italian” (Professor of the University of Bologna 1919, 2–3). The Bologna academics went on arguing that “for centuries, this municipal independence and national character were not questioned notwithstanding the pressure of the neighboring Slavic peoples” (1919, 2–3). This view, while mirroring Nemeč and others’ (2019) recent work, also echoes late 19th-century Italian attempts to integrate Venetians into the new Italian polity, turning the Venetian overseas past into an Italian story. At the same time, “the Republic of Saint Mark’s experience as a major imperial power permitted Venetians [...] to reinvent themselves as integral to a new state from which they had initially felt alienated” (Laven and Damien 2015, 518).

Yet Venetian had for centuries been distinct from the Italian language. As Ronnie Ferguson put it with regard to the historical status of the Venetian language, which is indicative also of the distinct nature of Venetian history,

not only was there never to be a language policy in the Stato Veneto, but Latin itself would linger on for centuries after 1500 in legislation and official writing. And while Venetian never became a fully-fledged language, it was an exceptional dialect. The ‘bilingualism’ that characterized Venice from Renaissance to Enlightenment is only a writing-speaking dichotomy. In the oral domain *venexian* reigned supreme from 1500 to 1800 in all social contexts and among and between all social classes. (2007, 212–213)

This writing-speaking dichotomy continued once Latin was supplanted by Italian as the written language and characterized the relationship between the Italian language and Venetian in its various colonial versions. Moreover, as Ferguson again, put it, “the ‘Italian’ of the Istrian and Dalmatian coasts that flourished well into the twentieth century was essentially Venetian” (2007, 212–213). Nationalist activists, but also official Habsburg censuses, contributed to the process of nationalization of the Habsburg Monarchy by reducing vernaculars “to a set of predetermined linguistic categories [...] from among the following: ‘German, Bohemian-Moravian-Slovak, Polish, Ruthenian, Slovene, Serbian-Croat, Italian-Ladino, Romanian, and Hungarian’” and neglecting the widespread phenomenon of multilingualism (Stergar and Scheer 2018, 580).

It was this nationalization of politics that contributed to the historiographical emphasis on national groups whose relationship was supposedly based on competition, distrust, and enmity. Italian historiography has been widely influenced by the view according to which Franz Josef was strongly anti-Italian and that Habsburg policies were centered on favoring Slavs against the Italian element in Trieste and throughout Dalmatia (see for example Monzali 2009, 69). This view has been fueled by the lack of support given in Dalmatia to the Italian party in its struggles against the Yugo-Slavic counterpart, in the attempt to preserve Italian as the main language of education in the region and retain the privileged social standing of the mainly Italian-speaking elites of Zara/Zadar and Spalato/Split. The question of language use pitted Dalmatian autonomists, Slavic liberals, Pan-Slavists, and “Italianissimi” against each other; the authorities backed governor Philippovich’s support of the Slavic liberals, who had succeeded in securing rights for the Slavic language in the face of the privileges accorded to Italian (Paton 1867c). At the same time, Croatian historiography has

partly yielded to the equally nationalist view according to which Dalmatia, as a Catholic South-Slavic region, was intrinsically Croatian. Italian and Slavic nationalist historiographies have thus tended to focus on aspects of conflict and emphasized Habsburg “oppression,” which then resulted in the classic picture of the Habsburg Monarchy as the “prison of peoples.” Yet the sources do not consistently deal with well-defined nationalities or conflictual relationships between Habsburg subjects.

Andrew Archibald Paton’s observations on the region in the middle of the century reveal historical knowledge and understandings of the multi-ethnic composition of Dalmatia. Paton’s travel account is a case in point since his *Highlands and Islands of the Adriatic*, published in 1849, abounds with shrewd ethnographic remarks that picture the multi-ethnic complexity of Dalmatian society from Fiume/Rijeka to Cattaro/Kotor. On Lord Russell’s recommendation, in June 1862, Paton would be appointed British consul at the newly re-established seat of Ragusa/Dubrovnik, which had been previously abolished in 1836 (Russell 1862). His post in the cultural capital of the region offered him a privileged position from which to observe Dalmatian and Montenegrin politics, French, Russian, and Italian activity in the area, and the condition of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires in the Balkans. He discussed all these in consular reports that set them apart for their shrewdness and attention to detail from those of his counterparts, Perry at Venice and Brock in Trieste.

Paton (1867c) opened one of these reports with a comment that explains the apparent peripheral position of the eastern Adriatic, yet its significance for European politics: “at first sight the internal politics of Dalmatia have little interest for foreigners, but taken in connection with the question of Turkey in Europe and the curious transformation which the Austrian Empire is undergoing, there is much to give occupation to a reflective mind.” In his previous journey along the Dalmatian coast towards the middle of the century, which took him as far as Cattaro/Kotor, he captured the cultural and ethnic blend of Dalmatia as the “curious social marriage that carries the mind alternatively from the heights of the Balkan to the mouths of the Brenta” (Paton 1849, 6), the Venetian river so dear to European intellectuals from Pushkin to Heine. Contrary also to present-day perceptions on pre-20th-century Dalmatia, Dalmatian culture was neither Italian nor properly Venetian. “The Slaav of the Adriatic,” as Paton (1849) called Dalmatians, was “brother to the Servian [...] but while the varnish of civilisation in Servia is German and new, here it is older, and has come from Venice [Paton used the terms ‘Slaav’ and ‘Servian’ in his 1849 travelogue].”

His insights were confirmed years later, in 1861, by Dalmatian intellectuals discussing Italian and Slavic culture in Dalmatia and whether Dalmatia had to assert its autonomy, be incorporated into Croatia (as part of the Hungarian half of the Monarchy), or strive for unification to Italy. The debate had been triggered by the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy and resulted in a heated confrontation between people identifying with Italian culture and Slavic-Dalmatians. Lovro Monti (1861, 6), upholder of unification to Croatia notwithstanding his Italian heritage, noted that Croats and Dalmatians were both Slavic peoples, and that while “Croats drew on the sources of Germanic civilization, we [Dalmatians] drew on those of the Latin.” In response to the Zaratine municipal counsellor Duplancich, who had claimed that there was no Slavic civilization in Dalmatia, notwithstanding his Slavic surname, abbot Giovanni Danilo (1861, 3–5) argued that the contemporary Italian population of Dalmatia did not originate from an ancient “Italian” population, for the previous Latin population was not Italian. And Danilo’s refutation of the supposed Italian and Dalmatian ethnogenesis is still relevant today and applicable to other present-day contexts where nationalist rhetoric is steeped in distant proto-national bonds, which figure so prominently in Anthony Smith (1996). As Monti, again, put it, “in Dalmatia there [was] no other nationality but the Illyrian-Serb, although there [were] several families of Italian origins and [Dalmatia was] culturally Italian in its most affluent class” (1861, 4). However, he argued that “if the mother-tongue, if the national sentiment was not cultivated, and is still not cultivated in that class, it does not follow as a consequence that it has relinquished the nationality of its fatherland,” by which he implied

Dalmatia, wondering “who would dare claim that an immense majority sacrifice a natural right to a small privileged number” (Monti 1861, 4).

Venetian culture and language had long been present in the region, yet they had been imported to the coasts of the Balkans, where even the dress and the red fez typical of Dalmatia resembled the Turkish costume (Paton 1849, 5). It was a colonial culture that the local elites in particular at Zara/Zadar, the administrative seat of the Venetian and later Habsburg administration, adopted as their own and whose influence could be traced also in several words and expressions of the Slavic-Dalmatian spoken by the majority of the population. Even as late as the 1970s, notwithstanding the standardization of national cultures, in the Croatian dialect of Spalato/Split many nouns and adjectives were of Venetian and Triestine origin (Vidović 1974; Bezić 2016). Yet the blending of cultures and languages swiftly became a distant memory in a world that was being gradually nationalized.

Multi-Ethnic Coexistence, Cultural Hybridity, and the Venetian Colonial Legacy: Different (Ab)Uses of the Past

In March 1864, a final report of the committee for the equality between the Slavic language and Italian was read at a session of the Provincial Diet in Zara/Zadar (Klaić 1864, 19). Although Dalmatian politics would soon be polarized between the Slavic and Italian components – which tallied with the consolidation of the Italian nation state and the intensification of Croatian efforts to defy Hungary – the proposal that the Italian and Slavic languages should have equal status in public life was unanimously, if provisionally, approved. Although deputies agreed on the liberal principles underlying the need for Slavic to possess an equal status with Italian, soon the opposing parties diverged on the ways and extent to which such equality should materialize. The language question implied a power struggle between Italians and Slavs, insofar as Italian-speakers, a tiny minority of the Dalmatian population, sought to hold on to their waning privileged position in the face of the equality between the Habsburg nationalities introduced in March 1850.

As the report read by the Ragusa/Dubrovnik deputy Pulić (1864, 110) stated, in Dalmatia the Slavic and Latin elements had coexisted for centuries “led by the winged Lion [of Venice].” Pulić stressed that the two elements had been living alongside each other, without striving for power, and merged in the same people, the Dalmatian. As Kirchner Reill noted, “the majority of educated Dalmatians attempted to promote their region’s mixed cultural heritage” (2007, 31). Contrary also to the later Yugo-Slav conflation of Venetian rule with Italian annexationism, in this context Venice was not seen as an exploitative state but rather as a polity for which Slavic-Dalmatians willingly fought until the end of the Republic, also taking an active part in the Venetian revolution of 1848 (Sondhaus 1992; Vrandečić 2000).

Although Pulić had described the almost complete absence of the Slavic language from public life in conciliatory terms, others (Klaić 1864, 120), professing union with Croatia as their ultimate aspiration, emphasized “the humiliating inferiority of the Slavic population of Dalmatia” as a result of the subordinate condition of the Slavic language with respect to Italian. Yet they did not advocate the exclusion of the Italian language from public life and education. As abbot Gliubich (1861) explained, all that was asked was the equality between the two languages. However, this proposal was enough for the Italian elite to consider their language threatened of being suppressed and replaced by the Slavic, which was an idea that even an ardent upholder of the Slavic character of Dalmatia, Monti, never contemplated. As Pulić stressed, Italian culture had been necessary for the attainment of a privileged condition for Dalmatian culture (1864, 111–112). And deputy Klaić’s (1864, 117) words on the Italian language personified the feelings of Slavic elites, which regarded Italian as “the language that the Dalmatian intelligentsia calls its own, that is our, with tender veneration and with no less affection than that shown earlier on when the Committee called the Slavic language our own.”

Even Monti, a staunch supporter of the Croatian annexation of Dalmatia, did not advocate the outright exclusion of Italian from public life. The introduction of the Slavic national language in bureaucracy and administration had to be gradual. Although, eventually, “in future, the national language should be the language of instruction in every school; in Dalmatian gymnasia, though, the Italian language and literature should keep the second place,” with also one or two Italian gymnasia in place (Monti 1861, 12–13). The support of measures that would cater for “the insuppressible rights of nationality” by an upholder of union with Croatia at the same time meant that unification with Croatia, which would guarantee a Slavic future for the Adriatic coasts of the Balkans, did not imply the loss of Dalmatian autonomy (Monti 1861, 6). Monti also argued that Croatian claims over Dalmatia were not grounded in reality, stating that “Dalmatia cannot be deprived of its autonomy without its consent” (1861, 13–14). The new united kingdom under the Habsburgs should be composed of the three provinces of Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia, with none subordinated to the other (1861, 11).

Monti’s political program for Dalmatia was based on the conviction that “the only guarantee today, against external and internal dangers, is union with Croatia,” an idea that he shared with other politicians such as Klaić and Paulinović (Monti 1861, 6). However, as Monti explained, “the historical rights advanced by Croatia with regard to Dalmatia are unfounded and false are the grounds on which they base their claims for [its] annexation” (1861, 11–13). He favored the formation of a federal triune kingdom in which its provinces would enjoy equal status (Monti 1861). The final unification of Croatia into its modern-day configuration has legitimized the claim of the historicity of the Dalmatia union with Croatia, harking back to medieval times. Yet, as Sirotković (1975, 470) noted, although Croatian nationalists were much concerned with “the territorial integrity of the kingdom,” the formula they used, the *Triregnum*, as they conceived it, had never actually existed. As it stood, it was only an aspiration that did not materialize until 1918, in that Dalmatia had never been part of a Kingdom of Croatia apart from a brief period in the Middle Ages.

Klaić argued that annexation to Croatia would boost the Slavic character of Dalmatia (1864, 117). Similarly, Monti had hoped that, by joining Croatia, Dalmatia would not Croatize itself but rather “acquire moral supremacy over Croats and perhaps over the other South Slavs” (1861, 13). As Paulinović a vocal annexationist, put it in the Slavic language, “nobody will deny my affection for my language; but for this reason never thought I about opposing the Italian language, which after mine I love the most, as all my fellow countrymen love it” (1864, 137). Monti and Paulinović, who like several others in the Dalmatian Diet preferred using Slavic-Dalmatian instead of Italian, exemplify Dalmatians’ push toward a Dalmatian national identity and their eagerness to unite with Croatia while maintaining the distinctiveness of Dalmatian culture and respecting the Italian element of the region. Their words embodied the willingness of Slavic-Dalmatian politicians to preserve Italian, although as a minority language. It was not opposition to Italian that drove them, but the preeminent role it enjoyed, when the majority of the population used another language as their own.

The paradox was that at the same time local Italian speakers could do without knowing the Slavic language and “wish to judge about its completeness” as opposed to the “perfection” of Italian (Paulinović 1864, 137). Italian Dalmatians acknowledged this deficiency. Deputy Filippi granted that he did “not grasp the Slavic language to the point of understanding all that [Paulinović had] said” (1864, 123) in his speech, something the very same Bajamonti (1864, 124), major of Spalato/Split and towards the end of the century one of the most prominent Italian nationalists, admitted too. Their admissions not only testify to the rift existing between the Italian-speaking part of the elite and the Slavic population, whose needs they could not interpret, but is also evidence for the attitude of Italian speakers, whether Italian nationalist or autonomist – and loyal to the Habsburgs – which clung to the advantages deriving from belonging to a hegemonic culture (Culisić 1864, 129). The Italian deputies raised difficulties on the way in which to implement the equality of languages. Although he had acceded to the Slavs’ requests in the morning, Bajamonti “did not intend to destroy a real condition recognized by everybody, that is the existence of a minority of our population,

significant in number and all the more for its civilization” (1864, 143). With his words Bajamonti professed his unconditional attachment to Italian culture. Bajamonti’s and other autonomists’ stance does not appear to reflect the long-held perception of Dalmatian autonomism, expressed by Miculian (2001, 41), as the attempt to preserve the Venetian legacy of Dalmatia – which the majority of Slavic deputies did not wish to undermine – but rather the desire to maintain the Italian-speaking hegemonic status in Dalmatian society.

Although they had all agreed in principle that the language of the population had to be the language of instruction in schools, “when, in order to apply this principle, it had to be determined what concrete way [...] to implement this regulation, then in the committee difficulties arose that were reported to be unsurmountable (Pulić 1864, 129).” Pulić further discussed the question in the following terms, praising the Italian language in a way that resembles what Alexander Maxwell (2018) calls “suppliant nationalism”:

It is true that through trade and studies the Italian language had huge part of our education and civilization; this is undoubted [...] as it is verified and undoubted that a part of the country is purely Slavic in every respect. [...] If the Slavs in Dalmatia are 400,000, how is it possible that by adopting their mother-tongue as language of instruction in primary schools we would not abide by the natural condition of this province? [...] We have declared that it was [...] a calumny to suspect even that we opposed Italian culture and civilization, that we disowned ungratefully the good Italian education has produced in our country. (Pulić 1864, 130)

Italian historiography has regarded use of Italian in the public sphere in Dalmatia as evidence of the original *Italianità* of Dalmatia. Quite the contrary, it reflected the hegemonic role of the Italian language as a legacy of Venetian rule, which nevertheless did not imply an Italian character of Dalmatia. As Paulinović acknowledged, throughout Dalmatia “only at Zara [Zadar] it [could] be said that Italian [was] the family language of the majority of the population” (1864, 137).

What transpires from these minutes, which is also confirmed by the contemporary pamphlets here discussed, is the cultural exclusivity of Italian speakers as opposed to Slavic-Dalmatian elite’s acknowledgment of the fundamental contribution of the Venetian and Italian cultures to their own, which the prospect of union with Croatia did not undermine, in their hope of a future equal status of Dalmatia with Croatia. As a contributor to the *Nazionale* – the Italian-speaking paper of the Slavic party in Dalmatia – wrote from Fiume/Rijeka, it was necessary to give voice “to the national sentiments and tendencies in a language [namely Italian] that is more accessible to those who oppose them” (March 5, 1862). From 1848, when Kaznačić founded his paper in Ragusa, to Vojnović at Zara/Zadar until the 1870s, Slavic publicists endeavored to “rehabilitate the Croat name whereof there existed an ill-founded aversion against it” (*Il Nazionale*, March 5, 1862), given that previous attempts to address a Slavic audience in “Illyrian” as early as the 1830s had proved to be unsuccessful (Judson 2016, 147). Their work shows a clear example of the use of Italian in Dalmatia as the medium of expression shared by the elites, whether Slavic- or Italian-speaking, since, to their own admission, Italian speakers did not have an excellent grasp of the Slavic language (Bajamonti 1864, 123–124).

Notwithstanding their conviction that Dalmatia was a Slavic province, Slavic elites in the region were well versed in Italian culture, as is also proved by the number of publications that Slavic-Dalmatians wrote in Italian. As late as 1867, notwithstanding the surge of annexationists to Croatia in the Dalmatian Diet and the growing popularity of union with Zagreb, Paton (1867a) saw “the maritime calling of Dalmatia” as a guarantee for the conservation of cultural ties with the Italian peninsula. “But this [did] not imply a desire for political union with Italy,” for apart from a few “Italianissimi,” that is the upholders of Dalmatian unification to Italy, Dalmatians considered “the affairs of Italy and Austria as wound up and terminated.” Nor was the calling of Pan-Slavism as popular in Dalmatia as the Austrian and Magyar press feared. For, if Russian and Serb propaganda

had a resonance amongst fellow Orthodox Slavs, it did not breach among Catholic Slavs, who constituted the majority of the population of the eastern Adriatic. As Paton (1867b) observed, “the natural head of the Catholic Slavs whether Czech, Carnic [that is Carinthian], Croat or Dalmatian is the Emperor of Austria.” This, notwithstanding the dissatisfaction that the introduction of Dualism had triggered amongst the South Slavs of the Monarchy, who had been instrumental in the preservation of the dynasty in 1848 (Deák 1979; Newman and Scheer 2018).

The Rise of Italian Nationalism in Dalmatia: Seeds of Sectarianism

Nevertheless, a few weeks later, Paton (1867c) noted that the Austrian military defeat to the Prussians in 1866 had fuelled “a recrudescence of Italian fanaticism all along the coast from Trieste to Spalato.” In the face of the struggle between the Yugo-Slav and Italian parties, the Emperor favored Governor Philippovich’s support of the moderate Slavs, who opposed both Italian and Pan-Slavist chauvinism. Hence, the trope whereby the Habsburgs supported the Slavic element against the Italian does not capture the actual situation of the eastern Adriatic. The concessions made by Philippovich to the moderate Slavs in the field of education triggered a fierce reaction on the part of the centralist and Italian parties, which sought to have him removed from office (Paton 1867c). Paton emphasized the paradox by which the Italian element, although constituting a minority of the Dalmatian population, had succeeded in securing a majority in the provincial diet since the Italian “liberals” and centralists shared in the mutual Slavophobia (1867c). Italian activists conflated Pan-Slavist aspirations with those of Slavic-Dalmatians, which were actually very different. While Pan-Slavists looked at Serbia for the formation of an independent South-Slavic kingdom, this project did not tally either with Croat or Dalmatian aims. And Slavic-Dalmatians did not question the contribution of Italian culture to their own (thus conflating the Italian and Venetian cultures as Italian nationalist activists would do).

Paton underpinned the different feelings present within Dalmatian society, while also taking into account the existence of nationalist ferment and its destabilizing role. A few months earlier, in 1866, Paton even stated that “with regard to the sentiments of the population, there is not at the present time the slightest agitation or discontent, and I can conscientiously say that I firmly believe that Dalmatia never had a more mild or tolerant government than the present one, at any period of her history. Austria and Turkey can easily deal with their internal enemies,” he noted, “but if powerful foreign states join themselves to populations bitten by the nationality-mania, no one can predict where the catastrophe may terminate, or the area and duration of the struggle” (Paton 1866a), proving that external observers already had a clear understanding of how nationalist agitation worked and how it could infect society. More importantly, Paton explicitly touched upon the question of allegiances and “national” sentiments in what appears to bear witness not only to the limited extent of the Italian element in Dalmatia but also to the absence of actual support for the Italian cause in the eastern Adriatic, in what is a passage that is worth quoting in full:

No signs of disaffection are visible in this part of Dalmatia. The authorities are for the present in no apprehension as to the sentiments of the population, but the inhabitants are not without apprehensions of pillage during volunteer Italian expeditions. In Zara, Sebenico and Spalato there appears to be more apprehensions of a hostile visit after the commencement of the Italian war than here. But even there many persons of Italian name and race belong to the Dalmatian autonomic party, and not to the Italian revolutionary party. The real Italianissimi in these three towns sulk but do not act. The Slavic rural population inland lends itself with alacrity to the military organisation instituted by the Government: the understanding between Governor Philippovich and the moderate section of the national Slavic party being excellent. (Paton 1866b)

By contrast, on the same subject Perry (1864), British consul in Venice, reported that the Austrians had “great difficulty in arming their ships, and several of their best officers [were] Swedes and Danes.” Events would soon prove Perry’s comments groundless, contrary to the reliability and competence displayed in Paton’s reports, which also showed knowledge of the ethnography and the ethno-cultural diversities of the region. In the wake of the victorious sea battle of Lissa in July 1866, when the Habsburg fleet under admiral von Tegetthoff defeated the Italian navy, Paton wrote that “the result [of the victory at Lissa] has given great satisfaction to the population of this place for several reasons. Officers chiefly Germans and partly Danish have occupied the place of the extruded and unreliable Italians in the Austrian fleet since 1848, the crews are as heretofore Dalmatian, Ragusan, Istrian, and Bocchese, and the success is felt to be a national one” (1866c). A few months later, on November 26, 1866, the various delegates to the Dalmatian diet at Zara/Zadar (1866, 314) issued a proposal that read:

Given that in the battle of Lissa on 20 July the ancient loyalty of Dalmatians to the Emperor and King was splendidly confirmed; that with the valour there deployed by our brave sailors and their valiant commander [...] to consider the [...] patriotism [...] that the communes of the province [of Dalmatia] ... and the remembrance of the valorous of Lissa while silence of others who, unfortunate and without fault, valiantly fought and shed their blood at König-gratz and elsewhere, would be an injustice.

Deputy Filippi (1866, 314), perhaps with the aim of belittling the Dalmatian role in the fight against Italy, retorted that

sticking to the literal sense of the proposal [for celebrating the victory], [...] [it had]] two aims, the first to confirm fealty to the august Monarch, the other to pay homage to those who fought under the banner of the Empire. As to the first, [...] I believe it superfluous to take a new occasion to say to His Majesty what he, we hope, is persuaded. As to the second point, I do not believe it exhaustive. As a matter of fact, there is no mention either of Archduke Albert or the battle of Custoza. In the material and political consequences I retain the battle of Custoza more important than that of Lissa and I retain that it was the first that stopped the Prussian army and led to the peace of Prague.

Monti (1866, 314) replied to these remarks in Slavic-Dalmatian, arguing that

since the proposal we are discussing vividly touches our national sentiments, I will talk about it in our national language. [...] Not only Lissa, but all our coasts, all of Dalmatia, with that victory were saved from hostile assaults and the travesties that war brings with itself. [...] Gentlemen, I appreciate and love the Italians, appreciate and love Italy, this mother of arts and civilization, to which many of us have rightly feel particularly grateful; and I shared in its pain at the time of its sorrows, as I rejoiced in its fortune. Yet we do not have to sacrifice our nationality. [...] Dalmatia has never been an Italian land.

Deputy Ponte (1866, 314) replied that Monti had said “to wish to talk in the Slavic language, because the proposal concerned the Dalmatians who had fought at Lissa,” misinterpreting Monti’s words and arguing that “his premise was useless because I will reply that Dalmatians who speak the Slavic language and Dalmatians who speak the Italian language fought there.” Although the Italian-speaking deputies committed to the Austrian cause, their tokens of loyalty appeared to be lukewarm; moreover, their main intent was premised on emphasizing the importance of the Italian element of Dalmatia while reducing the relevance of the prevailing Slavic component, by focusing on Prussia as the enemy and belittling the role of the battle of Lissa, which had been a crushing defeat for Italy. In the attempt to emphasize the role of Italian Dalmatians the intentions of Italian-speaking deputies appeared contradictory, possibly because of the more distinctively Germanic and

Slavic nature of the army as opposed to the Latin and Slavic character of the navy. To portray Habsburg Italians as active contributors to an Italian defeat alongside Slavic crew members might well have represented an uncomfortable reality to face.

And the fact of Dalmatian loyalty to the Habsburgs was difficult to refute. Showing his excellent anthropological understanding that defied the soon-to-be prevalent national categorizations that have obtained to this day, Paton (1866a), while aware that “the glowing and concentrated Austrian patriotism of the Tyrol and Styria is not to be expected in Dalmatia [...] retain[ed] the impression [...] that the people of this province [we]re as well disposed to Austria as it is possible for a population of hybrid culture to be, towards a heterogeneous and artificially compacted Empire.”

Thus, he underpinned both the ethnic and cultural hybridity of Dalmatia and the fact that attachment to a multi-ethnic and diverse polity was not only possible but also a reality. Dalmatians, wishing to have an outlet in the interior of the Balkans, had long been coveting the Herzegovina and had “very little respect for the legitimate rights of the Sultan but they d[id] not wish to be a dependency of Italy” (Paton 1866a). Paton (1866a) then concluded the report summarizing the differing roles of Austria, Italy, and Serbia in the Balkans. Notwithstanding the dreadful state of Austrian finances and the limited investment in the region, “Austria as a Slavic and Roman Catholic power suit[ed] their purpose better than either an enlarged Serbia with Oriental Church ascendancy or an Italian Kingdom with so powerful an obstruction of Jugo-Slavic nationality as Italy’s brilliant art and literature; social and political propaganda; and eventually culminating trade would infallibly become” (Paton 1866b). Neither Italian nor Serbian claims over the Balkans were perceived to be legitimate by Slavic Dalmatian elites, who found in the Habsburg Monarchy both an ethnic and religious accommodation that they could not find either in Orthodox Serbia or in a non-Slavic country like Italy.

Niccolò Tommaseo and Nationalist Opportunism

For his part, Tommaseo’s federalist and republican tendencies, as well as his Slavic origins, had prevented him from joining Italian anti-Slavic chauvinism well into the 1850s (Kirchner Reill 2011a). Until 1848, the Dalmatian Tommaseo had been a key figure in the cultural landscape of Trieste. In the Habsburg multi-ethnic port city, he had led a group of publicists and intellectuals who, in the name of “Adriatic multinationalism,” strived to construct a common Adriatic identity under Habsburg aegis and thus bridge the gap between Italian and Slavic cultures (Kirchner Reill 2012). In 1848, at the outbreak of the revolution in Venice against Habsburg rule, he joined Daniele Manin to become one of the leaders of the short-lived Venetian republic (Kirchner Reill 2012). As part of these changing political allegiances, which saw him transition from Habsburg loyalty and “Adriatic multinationalism” to Venetian patriotism and, eventually, Italian irredentism, Tommaseo was initially drawn into the Illyrian movement (Milutinović 1960, 121; Stojan 1998).

Whereas the idea of an Illyrian “nation” comprising all South Slavs had existed as a literary phenomenon since the 15th century (Stergar 2017), the idea of a Croatian state under Habsburg rule had emerged amongst Croatian elites in the late 18th century (Drakulic 2008). The aspirations of the Illyrian movement in the mid-19th century were premised on the preservation of Croatia-Slavonia’s autonomy within the Habsburg Empire and the dream of a South Slav state under the Habsburgs (Greenberg 2011). The revolutions of 1848 boosted the popularity of the Illyrian movement, which had emerged in the previous decades, laying the foundations for Croatian national aspirations. The dominant current, advocating union with Austria, was opposed by the Party of Right, which, championing the historicity of Croatia’s rights to nationhood, fought for Croatian independence not only from Hungary but also Habsburg rule (Gross 1973). In his anti-Austrian tendencies, Tommaseo came into direct contact with the main ideologue of the Party of Right, Eugen Kvaternik, who was living as an exile in Turin in 1859–1860 (Milutinović 1960; Miculian 2001). However, their collaboration did not last long given Kvaternik’s dream of a greater Croatia comprising Dalmatia and Istria, which also coincided with Tommaseo’s final adhesion to

the Italian national cause (Milutinović 1960, 147). This shift can be detected in his works appearing immediately after the end of his association with Kvaternik.

In a pamphlet addressing Vojnović's and Gliubich's stances on the language question, Tommaseo attacked them for being, so he believed, against Italian culture. Yet Gliubich had not alluded whatsoever to "the expulsion of Italian from [Dalmatia]; [he] only asked that the Slavic language become equal in rights to the Italian" (1861, 4). Tommaseo set the tone for subsequent anti-Slavic Italian discourse. Although he had been an early and perhaps the most authoritative proponent of Adriatic multinationalism (Kirchner Reill 2012), he had also been a strenuous opponent of Habsburg rule, which Croats had fully endorsed in 1848. Yet the paradox of his "multinational" project lies in the fact that, by discussing the need for a rapprochement between the Italian and Slavic nations, he implied that the relationship between the two nations was conflictual. Therefore, his idea of the moral superiority of Italian culture over the "barbarian" Slavic and the natural opposition of the two was a logical consequence of his previous "multinationalism." For, at the same time, "multinationalism" was premised on the existence of pre-given nations, and therefore did not leave space for the hybridity that centuries of exchanges across the Adriatic had produced before the onset of standardized national cultures. As Judson put it, "most inhabitants of such [border] regions rarely viewed themselves specifically as 'frontier people' or their regions as frontiers between nations" (2016, 3). On the contrary, Pacifico Valussi, among Tommaseo's early disciples since the days of the Triestine paper *La Favilla* in the 1840s (Kirchner Reill 2011b), considered the region of Trieste as one of the "rings of nations," but not binding and comprising different cultures in their mutual respect, rather as contended land. For, as he put it, "either there is conquest through arms, or peaceful colonization, or that tranquil expansion that is conducted through the assimilatory force of a dominant civilization over neighbouring nationalities" (Valussi 1861, 7). Valussi's view on the future of Italo-Slavic relations radically changed in 1861 (Maritan 2022a), from his previous support for amicable relations between the different ethnicities of the north-eastern Adriatic, which he promoted as editor of the Triestine *La Favilla* in the 1840s and publisher of *Il Precursore* in Venice in 1848–1849 (Kirchner Reill 2012).

In 1861, Tommaseo's positions with regards to Dalmatia already presented similar primordialist arguments, which would be a classic tenet of Fascist and present-day right-wing discourse, namely, the thousand-year-old *Italianità* of Dalmatia. He maintained that "not only there has always been an Italian Dalmatia also after the Avars [in the seventh century], but the religious, civic, and intellectual traditions of Dalmatia and Italy and their bonds of consanguinity were renewed through migrations and exiles" (Tommaseo 1861, 27). In the same year, Abbot Danilo opposed this simplistic reading of Dalmatian history, when he replied to Vincenzo Duplancich's bold claims that there was no Slavic civilization in Dalmatia and that "the Italian race [...] was the first to inhabit the country" (1861, 4–5). Danilo noted that Duplancich considered as Italian not only Roman civilization but also the pre-Roman peoples of the Italian peninsula, such as the Etruscans. Yet he too transplanted contemporary categories of "nation" to the past by arguing that Slavic Dalmatians descended from the original Illyric population of the region, pre-dating the Roman conquest (Danilo 1861, 9).

It was amid these essentialist notions of ethnicity and culture that nationalist ideologies eventually gained traction, proving to be a fertile soil for the final takeover of aggressive nationalisms. Yet there were still several local intellectuals who raised the level of the debate, such as abbot Gliubich, whose non-essentialist understanding of ethnicities and cultural exchanges drew Tommaseo's harsh criticisms. The more nuanced understandings of history and culture offered by several Slavic-Dalmatian intellectuals not only failed to obtain among Italian speakers of the time, but also struggle to be integral part of historiographical research nowadays. For the trope of Slavic-Italian enmity and the centuries-old Italian presence in Dalmatia originating from Roman times and perpetuated by Venetian domination, views that Tommaseo's fame was instrumental in legitimizing still dominate.

It was Italian publicists such as Tommaseo who fueled animosity by accusing Slavs of what they had no intention of doing. “Quash the Italians,” he warned Slavic-Dalmatians, “and you will do no harm to Italy but to yourselves” (Tommaseo 1861, 34). In a sectarian verve that one seldom finds in Slavic-Dalmatian papers of the 1860s, Tommaseo went on in the glorification of Italian culture, on the basis of which all European culture originated and without which, he stressed, the Dalmatian would not exist (1861). Yet value was not a question put forward by Slavic intellectuals and politicians, for they were not against Italian culture *per se* but its hegemonic role in public life. Part and parcel of Tommaseo’s rhetoric was what Antonio Gramsci, during Italy’s Fascist period, described as the Italian nationalist “desire to appear as heir to the ancient world” (1967, 30). Tommaseo’s pamphlet was characterized by the defining features of the Italian nationalist mentality analyzed by Gramsci, that is “that particular sectarianism [...] which manifests itself in a certain mania of persecution, in thinking to be always ill-judged [...], to be victims of international plots, to have particular historical rights unrecognized and infringed upon” (1967, 58). And these features can be taken as exemplifying the phenomenon of nationalism across time and space, from Kemalist Turkey and Nazi Germany to Xi Jinping’s China and Putin’s Russia; hence the comparative relevance that Italian nationalism and its claims over the eastern Adriatic have for the study of nationalist politics today, in particular in the context of the convergence of nationalist ideologies and real or supposed “fifth columns” (Mylonas and Radnitz 2022a, 2022b).

Conclusion

That figures like Tommaseo and Valussi could change sides so drastically and so promptly once the process of Italian unification had become real shows how nationalist ideas are entrenched in political opportunism and are not ingrained in multi-ethnic societies, as conventional national narratives would have it. The process – whereby these publicists became staunch supporters of “the nation” in opposition to other ethnic groups and irrespective of their previous endorsement of multi-ethnic coexistence – reflects the opportunistic nature of national allegiances, which in this context was triggered by changing geopolitical configurations ensuing the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 (Maritan 2022a). The sudden shift in political allegiances and convictions bears evidence to the haphazard nature of nationalism as a tool to capture the body politic and legitimize power, while for men of letters it was a means, then as now, to reap the benefits of associating themselves with power.

The Italian-speaking elite of Dalmatia portrayed Slavic Dalmatians’ push for the equality between the Italian and Slavic-Dalmatian languages as the attempt to oust Italian speakers from Dalmatia. Yet at stake was the primacy, not the preservation, of the Italian language, which was a legacy of Venetian colonial rule. The privileged position of Italian speakers rested on the preeminence accorded to their language in public life, bureaucracy, and education in the face of a population the majority of which was Slavic. The study of languages and identities in Dalmatia offers material for further conceptualizing the fluidity of ethnicities, cultures, and allegiances through time and is testimony to the “eventful” emergence of nationhood and nationalism, to apply Brubaker’s insights. While the majority of Slavic-Dalmatian intellectuals and politicians, as multi-nationals, appeared to appreciate the contribution of Venetian and Italian culture to Dalmatia, local Italian-speaking elites espoused Tommaseo’s views entrenched in the supposed superiority of Italian culture over the Slavic. Thus, Italian nationalism in Dalmatia, triggered by the threat posed to the privileged standing of the Italian language and fueled by Italian expansionist aims in the region, was instrumental in the gradual polarization of Dalmatian society along ethno-national lines. The foundations for inter-ethnic animosity, which the Habsburgs had been trying to keep in check through their supranational mediation, were thus laid by Tommaseo and his disciples. This process led to the subsequent disappearance of the hybrid multi-national identities of the eastern Adriatic, which had been in existence for centuries, and of which Tommaseo himself was a product.

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