



# ACTA HISTRIAE

30, 2022, 2



UDK/UDC 94(05)

ISSN 1318-0185  
e-ISSN 2591-1767



Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper  
Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria

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KOPER 2022

ISSN 1318-0185  
e-ISSN 2591-1767

UDK/UDC 94(05)

Letnik 30, leto 2022, številka 2

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Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria® / Institut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment / Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente®

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Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko, SI-6000, Koper-Capodistria, Garibaldijeva 18 / Via Garibaldi 18, e-mail: actahistriae@gmail.com; https://zdpj.si/

**Tisk/Stampa/Print:**

Založništvo PADRE d.o.o.

**Naklada/Tiratura/Copies:**

300 izvodov/copie/copies

**Finančna podpora/**

**Supporto finanziario/**

**Financially supported by:**

Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije / Slovenian Research Agency, Mestna občina Koper

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**Foto di copertina/**

**Picture on the cover:**

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Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 30. junija 2022.

Revija Acta Histriae je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / Gli articoli pubblicati in questa rivista sono inclusi nei seguenti indici di citazione / Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in: CLARIVATE ANALYTICS (USA): Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Social Scisearch, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Journal Citation Reports / Social Sciences Edition (USA); IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) (UK); Referativnyi Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); DOAJ.

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# *I MIGLIORI ELEMENTI D'ITALIANITÀ. LOCAL POLITICAL POWER ASCENSION AND ITALIANIZATION DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF POST-WORLD WAR I IN VOLOSCA-ABBAZIA, 1918-1920*

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## ABSTRACT

*This article analyses the rise of local Italian nationalists to power in the Istrian municipality of Volosko–Opatija/Volosca–Abbazia in the immediate post-World War I period. Through the activity of the Circolo 3 Novembre association, this case study displays how local Italian national activists affirmed themselves and were recognized as a privileged counterpart by Italian occupational authorities. Further, this article displays how a segment of the local nationalists became radicalized, contributing to the rise of political violence in the area, as well as supporting D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume/Rijeka.*

*Keywords: Julian March, Nationalization, Italianization, Volosko–Opatija/Volosca–Abbazia, Circolo 3 Novembre, Political Radicalization*

# *I MIGLIORI ELEMENTI D'ITALIANITÀ. L'ASCESA AL POTERE LOCALE E L'ITALIANIZZAZIONE NEI PRIMI ANNI DEL PRIMO DOPOGUERRA A VOLOSCA-ABBAZIA, 1918-1920*

## SINTESI

*L'articolo analizza l'ascesa al potere dei locali nazionalisti italiani nel municipio istriano di Volosca–Abbazia nel periodo immediatamente successivo alla Prima guerra mondiale. Il caso studio dimostra come, tramite l'attività dell'associazione Circolo 3 Novembre, i locali nazionalisti italiani si affermarono e furono riconosciuti come interlocutori privilegiati delle autorità occupazionali italiane. Inoltre, l'articolo dimostra come una parte dei nazionalisti locali divenne un elemento di radicalizzazione contribuendo alla crescita della violenza politica nell'area, sostenendo l'occupazione dannunziana di Fiume.*

*Parole chiave: Venezia Giulia, nazionalizzazione, italianizzazione, Volosca–Abbazia, Circolo 3 Novembre, radicalizzazione politica*



INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The municipality of Volosca/Volosko<sup>2</sup> owed its fortune to the *Südbahn*'s large investments that shaped the once uninhabited Abbazia/Opatija into a picturesque tourist resort. The growth and fame of Istria's northeastern seashore became so renowned that even the municipality was renamed Volosca-Abbazia/Volosko-Opatija. From the end of the nineteenth century, the flourishing touristic resort was an Istrian Croatian national and cultural stronghold at the local and regional political level. Already in 1895, Croatian nationalists oversaw the municipality, established a *Narodni dom* (1904), a Croatian-language lower gymnasium (1909), and various nation-oriented Croatian associations. These Croatian nationalists did not just dominate administrative power within the borders of the town; they also succeeded in electing candidates to the Istrian provincial diet. Their political rivals, the Italian nationalists, had limited appeal in the area. Volosko had only two registered Italian associations: the *Gabinetto di Lettura*, a declining reading club, and a cycling association, the *Club ciclistico Voloscano*, founded in 1902. Liburnia – the traditional name for the northeastern coastal part of Istria where Volosko-Opatija is located – was not a very fertile ground for Italian nationalism compared to nearby Trieste/Trst and to former Venetian-ruled areas of Istria like Rovigno/Rovinj or Parenzo/Poreč.<sup>3</sup> Exceptions were the municipalities of Laurana/Lovran and Moschienze/Mošćenice (in the Italian period later renamed Moschiena), the only two localities in Liburnia controlled in the late Habsburg period by Italian nationalists. The political contention between Croatian and Italian nationalists was spiced up by the presence of Hungarian- and German-speakers as well. The latter were a more imposing factor on communal life thanks to the blossoming of a private German-language elementary and middle school, aided by local German-language associations. Yet, some of these German associations epitomized social rather than national affiliations (Muzur, 1998, 99–114; Zakošek, 2005, 9–110; D'Alessio, 2008, 245–247).

Despite Croatian political dominance and a considerable pinch of *Mitteuropa* on the Adriatic shores, after 1918 things shifted quickly and Italian nationalists quickly prevailed where before they had not. The rise of local Italian nationalists was a direct result of regime change in this corner of the dissolving Habsburg Empire. In the former Austrian Littoral, the power transition was influenced – and the outcomes were directed – by the occupational presence of the Italian state. The administrations that oversaw

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- 1 This article was written under the auspices of the project NEPOSTRANS, "Negotiating post-imperial transitions: from remobilization to nation-state consolidation. A comparative study of local and regional transitions in post-Habsburg East and Central Europe," financed by the European Research Council (ERC) under Consolidator Grant agreement no. 772264. I would like to thank Vanni D'Alessio and the NEPOSTRANS team members for comments on the previous version of the text. Particular gratitude goes to Cody J. Inglis for language editing.
  - 2 When a locality is first mentioned, I deploy the prevailing Italian and Croatian forms. For the sake of simplicity, I later employ the most common form used today, with the partial exception of Fiume/Rijeka given its specificity.
  - 3 For a recent synthesis on the politics in Istria in the late Habsburg period cf. Žitko, 2016.

this transition were not stable: they were overseen by the Italian military (November 1918–July 1919) and then an Italian-organized civil administration was installed that lasted even after annexation to Italy with the Treaty of Rapallo in November 1920. In the first transition months, the Italian army eagerly supported Italian nationalist groups which undermined, marginalized, and contrasted potential or imagined opponents to Italian annexation (Mondini, 2006, 55). Likewise, some of these emergent Italian nationalistic groups were revealed to be problematic once they started to threaten the Italian liberal state, aligning rather with D'Annunzio and constituting or joining the nascent fascist movement (Vinci, 2011, 42–59). The ascension of Italian nationalists to political control in Volosko-Opatija was, in this regard, a local modality of the transition to a new state.

Studies on the establishment of the Italian military and civil administration in what became *Venezia Giulia* – and the political radicalization that led to the rise of the fascist movement in the region – are mainly focused on Trieste, Gorizia/Gorica, and the Isonzo/Soča area (Apih, 1966; Visintin, 1998; Visintin, 2000; Kacin–Wohinz, 2010; Apollonio, 2011; Klabjan & Bajc, 2021, 82–305), while research on the Istrian region is foremost centered on the fascist movement and the fascist period (Bon Gherardi, 1985; Dukovski, 1998). In recent years, studies have focused on some aspects of the transition of these areas to the Italian state by examining internments (Bajc, 2012; Bajc, 2018) and the position of women in specific professional categories (Verginella, 2021; Testen Koren & Cergol Paradiž, 2022). However, analyses of how the Italian occupation-administered regime changed, and how nationalist principles after World War I were implemented on the local scale in peripheral areas of *Venezia Giulia*, are still scarcely present. Attention to the Istrian local postwar dimension is limited to Isola/Izola (Kramar, 1987, 367–376), Pisino/Pazin (D'Alessio, 2001; D'Alessio, 2007), and Capodistria/Koper (Bon, 2017), as well as an overview on Rovinj (Han, 2016) and an insight into Dignano/Vodnjan (Delton, 2016).

By focusing on the Volosko-Opatija municipality, this article examines the establishment and presence of the Italian state at the local level and the process by which the *status quo ante* power balance was overturned in favor of local Italian nationalists. Specific attention will be devoted to local Italian national activists and the practices they pursued in the postwar period to obtain power and ensure the triumph of Italian nationalism in the municipality. A central aspect will be research on the *Circolo 3 Novembre*, a cultural association founded after the war which informally acted as a local interest group, whose existence was known but not systematically researched (Dukovski, 1998, 44). Finally, the article will display how the nationalists, supported by the Italian occupational authorities, organized a paramilitary group and became an element in catalyzing violence, fostering the organization of radical elements that laid the basis for the local fascist movement.

This article is based mainly on archival documentation held in the State Archives in Rijeka in the fonds of the political district and municipality of Volosko-Opatija, combined with personal data stored in the residential records collection for the interwar period held in the same archive. These administrative local sources have rarely been

used in historical research, and given the very dubious preservation or at least hardly traceable original documentation on the *Circolo 3 Novembre* group and its leading members, these sources present an essential source base for reconstructing the association's activity. By analyzing these sources, this article provides original insight into the leading figures of local Italian nationalism in a less-studied area of Istria during the first postwar years, thus contributing to our understanding of the area's transition to the Italian state at the local level.

## FROM THE HABSBURG EMPIRE TO ITALY

In the Volosko-Opatija political district, the transition of bureaucratic power from Habsburg officials to new, self-proclaimed national authorities happened without radical or violent upheavals. By the end of October 1918, the Austrian district captain was replaced by a district chief appointed by a district committee of the National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs (hereafter SCS National Council). Effective control by new national authorities was almost only restricted to the district's seat, and the mere existence of the local SCS National Council was soon proven to be ephemeral. A few days after the discharge of the former captain, on November 4 a small Italian naval fleet reached Opatija, recognizing the SCS National Council at first. But when the armed Italian presence was consolidated, it was dismissed on November 13 (Šepić, 1961, 350, 358). The removal of the SCS National Council closed the short parentheses of South Slav authority and the beginning of the establishment of Italian sovereignty over the Volosko-Opatija district and municipality. Though nearly the entire district was part of territories assigned to Italy by the 1915 London Memorandum – better known as the Treaty of London (Bajc, 2017) – the area was not instantly annexed to Italy. The military occupied the Austrian Littoral – now *Venezia Giulia* – and a military governor oversaw its administration. While the occupational authorities maintained the previous administrative divisions, new military legislation alongside Austrian civil law were introduced (Capuzzo, 1992). The situation on the ground was more contingent, however. The Italian military officer appointed as Volosko-Opatija's civil district commissioner (replacing the position of district captain) took his office only in January 1919, while Captain Umberto Sala, appointed civil commissioner of Kastav municipality in November 1918, started gathering information on parts of the district, exercising duties beyond a municipal commissioner (Jeličić, 2020, 102–103).

Unlike Kastav, the Volosko-Opatija municipality was commissioned only in January 1919. On January 4, 1919, a special commissioner – an Italian military officer with no links to the local environment – took the municipality from the previous office holder, Andrija Stanger. It was a considerable symbolic turning point, since Stanger (1853–1934), the prewar mayor and local lawyer, had held this position uninterrupted since 1895 as a representative of the strongest local political group, the Croatian nationalists (Szabo, 2007–2008). While the SCS National Council was disbanded shortly after the war to open the road for the establishment of Italian sovereignty, Stanger's removal proved to be the next logical step towards the Italianization of the district's most

important municipality. Apart from the weight this change held on the national symbolical level, the introduction of a special commissioner to the municipality triggered a loss of political representation that would last for years to come. This deficiency of representation was solved only when the area was annexed to Italy and a new municipal board was appointed. Most members of the new municipal board were members of a new postwar association, the *Circolo 3 Novembre*. In studying this crucial organization, one comes to understand how local Italian nationalists obtained influence well before these territories became official parts of the Kingdom of Italy.

“THERE IS ALWAYS A NEW CITIZEN ENROLLING  
IN THE ITALIAN LOCAL ASSOCIATION”<sup>4</sup>

At the end of World War One, in the costal part of the district of Volosko-Opatija, Italian-oriented associationism was in a deplorable state. In a report from the Kastav civil commissioner to the *Venezia Giulia* Governor, written around December 1918, a section of the Dante Alighieri Society existed in the municipality of Lovran, while sections of the same society, or the *Lega Nazionale*, were not to be found in Volosko-Opatija. Although some individuals were members of these associations, the main district's municipality was without cornerstone Italian organizations. The late-Habsburg Italian school association *Lega Nazionale*, disbanded by the authorities during the war, and the Dante Alighieri Society, a group aiming to spread and defend Italianity abroad and after the war in newly occupied territories (Wörsdorfer, 2009, 68–73), were missing from Volosko-Opatija. Yet, the civil commissioner of Kastav indicated a notable exception: “*The only Italian organization with a political and irredentist profile (even though in a latent state) was the ‘Volosca Cycling Club’ now resurrected with a new life under the banner ‘Circolo 3 Novembre’ including around 80 members.*”<sup>5</sup>

The *Circolo 3 Novembre* was officially founded at the end of January 1919, but, as mentioned in Sala's report, the preparations were already made in December 1918. Formally, the circle—which bore the date of the Armistice of Villa Giusti—was an association with cultural aims. It was founded to organize conferences and festivities, and aimed “to carry out activity of national education (*svolgere opera di educazione nazionale*).”<sup>6</sup> While for the Kastav civil commissioner, and according to a later published fascist-era local publication the *Circolo 3 Novembre* grew out of the local

4 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, R. Governatorato di Trieste, Ufficio I.T.O. Centro I.P. Volosca, Situazione generale, Volosca, 13.7.1919. “Nelle società italiane locali c'è sempre qualche nuovo cittadino che si iscrive...”.

5 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 42 (new signature), 1–I–1919, Amministrazioni comunali, Comune di Castua, Regio Commissario Civile di Castua, Relazione politica ed amministrativa del comune di Castua, N. 2 [s.a.], Nozioni varie sulle condizioni del comune di Abbazia–Volosca, nei riguardi dell'amministrazione comunale, delle organizzazioni periodiche, economiche e religiose e degli istituti d'istruzione, 2) L'organizzazioni politiche, 30. “L'unica organizzazione Italiana con carattere politico e irredentista (benché larvato) era il “CLUB CICLISTICO VOLOSCANO” ora risorto a nuova vita col titolo di “CIRCOLO TRE NOVEMBRE” conta un'ottantina di soci”.

6 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di cultura nella V.G., Volosca, Statuto del “Circolo 3 novembre”.

prewar irredentist cycling association (Costantino, 1936, 12–13). As the civil commissioner of the Volosko-Opatija political district noted, the circle provided a place of “sure confidence for patriotic ideas (*sicuro affidamento per idee patriottiche*),” and was also worthy of financial support, since the association was made up of the “best elements of Italianness (*i migliori elementi d'italianità*).”<sup>7</sup> The patriotic association was thus smoothly recognized by the military governor of *Venezia Giulia* and enjoyed institutional support and appreciation by the military authorities. For instance, the municipal commissioner retroactively asked for the cancellation of the electricity bill for the *Circolo 3 Novembre*'s charity festivity in December 1918,<sup>8</sup> while in April 1919 the local Italian military intelligence office—the *Informazioni Truppe Operanti* (ITO)—reported that the circle needed around one thousand candles to illuminate the coast on the occasion of the expected annexation.<sup>9</sup> Predictably, in the following months, the *Circolo 3 Novembre*, and the recently created branch of the Dante Alighieri Society, rallied further supporters. As the Volosca ITO office reported in July: “There is always a new citizen enrolling in local Italian associations (*Nelle società italiane locali c'è sempre qualche nuovo cittadino che si iscrive (...)*,” estimating 170 members for the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and 120 members for the local committee of Dante Alighieri Society.<sup>10</sup> While it is not easy to evaluate how many members were active inside the society, nor possible to find out individuals' reasons for joining the associations, the membership roster certainly grew.

In August 1919, the *carabinieri* and the ITO office delivered detailed reports on the *Circolo 3 Novembre*, estimating membership and identifying and evaluating their executive board. For the *carabinieri*, the circle performed activities of national and patriotic propaganda, organizing public festivities with charitable purposes. However, the propaganda activity could not be considered highly fruitful. The activities were organized thanks to donations, but the monthly fees were insufficient for the circle's propaganda activity to function properly.<sup>11</sup> The *carabinieri*'s disenchanted description was counterpoised by the ITO office, which added a pompous adjective to its description of the circle, which they said carried out “very useful activity in favor of Italianness (*opera utilissima d'italianità*).”<sup>12</sup> The *Circolo 3 Novembre* was estimated at being somewhere between 160 and 170 members, with the military intelligence

7 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di Cultura nella V.G., Volosca, Il Commissario distrettuale al Governatorato, 9 febbraio 1919.

8 DARI 472, CVA, b. 143, Anno 1919, N. 736, Il Circolo 3 Novembre al commissario straordinario di Volosca, Volosca, 20.2.1919.

9 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, Appunti del C.I.P., 13.4.1919.

10 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, R. Governatorato di Trieste, Ufficio I.T.O. Centro I.P. Volosca, Situazione generale, Volosca, 13.7.1919.

11 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di Cultura nella V.G., Volosca, Legione Carabinieri Reali, Oggetto: Circoli di Cultura, 2.8.1919.

12 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di Cultura nella V.G., Volosca, R. Governatorato della Venezia Giulia. Stato Maggiore – Ufficio I.T.O. Oggetto: Circoli di Cultura, 11.8.1919, 2.



service providing the higher number.<sup>13</sup> Despite these small numerical and descriptive differences – which display the military intelligence service's sympathies towards the Italian nationalistic association – both institutions mostly agreed on who were the “best elements of Italianness” which composed the association's executive board.<sup>14</sup>

The president of the *Circolo 3 Novembre* was the lawyer Noè Percich (Opatija, 1879–1951)<sup>15</sup>; the vice president was Ettore Costantini (Pazin, 1868–Asolo, 1949), also a lawyer<sup>16</sup>; the secretary was the chief of the post office Nicolò Bracco (Neresine/Nerezine, 1887–Opatija, 1930)<sup>17</sup>; the treasurer was the tax office clerk Ramiro Voncina (Opatija, 1895–L'Aquila, 1946)<sup>18</sup>; while the law student and supply office employee Lidio Vladiscovich (Volosko, 1897–Italy, ?) –later Valdini<sup>19</sup> – was the society librarian. The district physician Pietro Coporcich (Spalato/Split, 1869–Bolognano d'Arco, 1955),<sup>20</sup> the supply office employee Oscarre Suban (Trieste, 1875–Fiume, 1935),<sup>21</sup> and the municipal secretary Rodolfo Treo (Volosko, 1878–?, emigrated to Argentina in 1922)<sup>22</sup> were councilors or members of the executive board. Between January and August 1919, a change to the *Circolo*'s presidency structure should be noted. In January Pietro Coporcich was listed as president of the association, while the teacher Giuseppe Tomsich (Pula/Pola, 1890–Opatija, 1945)<sup>23</sup> – later Tosi – was listed as secretary (Micich, 2013)<sup>24</sup>. The declassing of those two was probably not the result of internal conflicts inside the association, since the figures composing the Italian nationalist leadership seemed at that time rather stable. Such an impression is proven by considering another association founded the same year.

Almost half a year after the *Circolo 3 Novembre*'s foundation, in June 1919, the Volosko-Opatija committee of the Dante Alighieri Society was established. At the beginning, the local branch of Dante counted 70 members; a month later, about 120.<sup>25</sup> The same month, the *Circolo 3 Novembre* was registered as a permanent member

13 Compare ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di Cultura nella V.G., Volosca, Legione Carabinieri Reali, Oggetto: Circoli di cultura, 2.8.1919 and R. Governatorato della Venezia Giulia. Stato Maggiore – Ufficio I.T.O. Oggetto: Circoli di Cultura, 11.8.1919, 2–3.

14 Unlike the ITO, the carabinieri noted Guido Ghergorina (Volosca, 1886–?), a state employee, as a society librarian. DARI 536, Az, CA, C, Ghergorina Guido.

15 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Percich dott. Noè.

16 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Costantini Ettore and L'Arena di Pola, 23.3.1949: Necrologio di Costantini Ettore, 4.

17 DARI 536, Az, C Bracco Nicolò.

18 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Voncina Ramiro.

19 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Valdini Lidio (già Vladiscovich). The notary Valdini is reported in Padova in 1966 among the founders of the association “Free Municipality of Fiume in Exile.” L'Arena di Pola, 12.4.1966: Libero Comune di Fiume in esilio. Vuole seguire le orme del confratello zaratino, 1.

20 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Coporcich dott. Pietro and L'Arena di Pola, 27.6.1954: Ricerca, 2.

21 DARI 536, Az, CA, S Suban Oscarre and CF, IRP, Suban Oscarre.

22 DARI 536, Az, S Rodolfo Treo.

23 DARI 536, Az, Ca, Si. Tosi Giuseppe già Tomsich.

24 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, La Direzione del Circolo 3 Novembre al Regio Commissario civile distrettuale Volosca–Abbazia per il Regio Governatorato della Venezia–Giulia (Sezione affari civili), Volosca, 28 gennaio 1919.

25 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, R. Governa torato di Trieste, Ufficio I.T.O. Centro I.P. Volosca, Situazione generale, Volosca, 13.7.1919

of the Dante Alighieri Society. Such a registration displays the ties between Italian associations, an overlap evinced by the members of the executive board. The president of the local Dante Alighieri branch was Ettore Costantini; its vice president, Pietro Coporicich; secretary, Giuseppe Tomsich. The treasurer was the district tax office clerk Enea Tomassich (Opatija, 1883–?, still alive in 1945)<sup>26</sup>. The last two, along with Nicolò Bracco, the pharmacist Ernesto Ghersettich (Pazin, 1864–Padova, 1920),<sup>27</sup> the lawyer to the district commissioner's office, Demetrio Medeot (San Lorenzo di Mossa, today San Lorenzo Isontino, 1888–Trieste, 1919),<sup>28</sup> the maritime commissioner Gualtiero Tonicich (Opatija, 1882–?, in Italy after 1945),<sup>29</sup> and the tax office clerk Oliviero Voncina (Prelucca/Preluk (Volosko), 1885–Opatija, 1946)<sup>30</sup> were the association's councilors.

The figures inside executive boards of the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and the local *Dante Alighieri* branch lead one to conclude that the predominant roles in local Italian national associations were held by individuals born in the district or former Austrian citizens who settled in Volosko-Opatija years before the war.<sup>31</sup> On the executive boards of both associations, those born in the 1860s and 1870s predominated over those born in 1890s.<sup>32</sup> The presence of several age groups suggests that the association was a reference point and an interest group for the local, nationally affiliated Italian community. That is not to say that this Italian irredentist association was inclusive. Women did not enjoy the privilege of being appointed as members of the directory of the association, though by the *Circolo 3 Novembre*'s statute their participation was not precluded. Profession and workplace are also two valuable features to understand the composition of associations. In the *Circolo*, liberal professions (two lawyers and a pharmacist) were outnumbered by civil servants (two tax office employees, a post office employee, a teacher, a supply office employee, a municipal secretary, a district commissioner employee, a district physician, and a maritime commission employee), with a borderline case of a law student employed at the supply office. While some had been appointed to their office by Italian authorities (Treo,<sup>33</sup> Suban,<sup>34</sup> and probably Valdini), many were public servants

26 DARI 536, AZ, Comune di Abbazia, Si Tomassich Enea.

27 La Voce dell'Istria, 26.6.1920: Decesso, 1.

28 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 48, 7–I, Personale del Capitanato, 1919, 7–I–a, Personale del Capitanato a) Civili, Atti relativi al sussidio alla famiglia del dott. Medeot Demetrio e minuta del Telegramma all'Ospedale Civico a Trieste.

29 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Tonicich Gualtiero.

30 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Voncina Oliviero.

31 Typical examples include Costantini, Coporicich, Ghersettich and Suban. The only two exceptions were Bracco and Medeot, both resident in the municipality since 1919, but who were also former Austrian citizens from prewar times. DARI 536, Az, CA, C Bracco Nicolò. Annotazioni: Residente nel Comune dal 1919.

32 Those born in the 1860s–1870s include Costantini, Coporicich, Ghersettich, Suban, and Percich, while those born in the 1880s include: Bracco, Ghergorina, Treo, Tomassich, Medeot, Tonicich, and O. Voncina. R. Voncina, Vladiscovich, and Tomsich were born in the 1890s.

33 DARI 472, CVA, AR, 1921, b. 2, Ad 201/21 ris., allegato.

34 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 45, 1920, 2–C–I, Consorzio Provinciale per l'Approvvigionamento per l'Istria. Ufficio di Volosca al Commissario civile del distretto politico di Volosca, 26.6.1920.

of the former Habsburg state. Hardly of extraction from lower social strata, the two associations' leading figures thus represented a continuity of Habsburg-period, middle-class Italian national leadership.

There is one additional figure that should not be underestimated—although he was not the member of the first board of *Circolo 3 Novembre* or *Dante Alighieri*—the lawyer Ruggero Sandri (Pula, 1881–Staranzano, 1985).<sup>35</sup> Sandri's initial absence originates from his different residency. Before the war, Sandri was a resident and active in the Italian associations of the nearby municipality of Lovran (namely in the *Lega Nazionale* and *Filodrammatica*); after the Italian military occupation, he was appointed as a member of the town's municipal board.<sup>36</sup> That Sandri – whose name was among the prominent local Italian figures in Sala's report – had a certain influence is evident from Sandri's February 1919 suggestion that the authorities intern a few Croatian notables from Lovran on Sardinia (Klen, 1955, 10). In November 1919, Sandri moved to Volosko-Opatija; his name is first mentioned as member of the executive board of the *Circolo 3 Novembre* in 1921.<sup>37</sup> Sandri's passage, the transfer of a figure of particular importance for the local Italian national movement before the war,<sup>38</sup> depicts the symbolic reconfiguration of the area: the smaller and already Italian-oriented Lovran was abandoned in favor of the larger and economically prominent – and now Italianizing – Volosko-Opatija.

Although the *Circolo 3 Novembre* was formally a cultural association, it pursued larger objectives of nationalization, aiming to politically affirm its leaders and gather supporters. Already in April 1919 the *Circolo* wrote to the municipal commissioner of Volosko-Opatija, advocating the desire of residents to rename the streets, and proposed three leading figures from their association to assist the commissioner.<sup>39</sup> It was not only symbolic Italianization that the circle pursued. A year later, the *Circolo 3 Novembre* protested the recent employment of a “lady of nonitalian nationality” in the municipal supply office while local Italians were jobless. In the protest to the municipal commissioner, the *Circolo* even recommended some names, displaying its nature as an interest group.<sup>40</sup> However, events did not evolve as the local Italian nationalists desired. Despite the municipal commissioner's promise to discharge the woman, she remained in office. Three months later, the *Circolo* even claimed that the

35 DARI 536, Az, CA, Si Sandri Ruggero and L'Arena di Pola, 10.8.1985: Elargizioni, 8.

36 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 42 (new signature), 1–I–1919, Amministrazioni comunali, Comune di Laurana, Il sindaco di Laurana al Regio commissario civile del distretto politico Volosca, Laurana, 6.11.1919 e Protocollo della Giunta comunale amministrativa, 9.12.1918.

37 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 82, Il Municipio di Volosca–Abbazia al Commissario Civile Distrettuale, Volosca 26 agosto 1921, con allegato l'Elenco delle società sportive–politiche, di ritrovo e simili esistenti nel Comune di Volosca–Abbazia.

38 In 1914 Ruggero Sandri was the local Italian candidate for the Istrian Diet, cf. Il Giornaletto di Pola, 5. 6. 1914: Nel settimo distretto, 1.

39 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 42 (new signature), Comune di Volosco–Abbazia, Copia. Circolo 3 Novembre–Volosca. No. 31/1919, li 4 aprile 1919, Al Commissario straordinario Sig. Maggiore Cav. de Stadler Reggente il Municipio di Volosca.

40 DARI 472, CVA, AR, 1920, b. 2, Circolo 3 novembre al commissario straordinario, 11.4.1920.

supply office was nationally transforming as, allegedly, the Croatian language was used by those employed.<sup>41</sup> In October 1920, the circle again urged for changes in the municipal supply office, now also requesting that shopkeepers' signs in the municipality should be written in Italian first, according to the desire of local Italians.<sup>42</sup> And while the *Circolo* and the municipal commissioner had diverging views on the issue of the municipal supply office, the municipal commissioner positively replied to the association's request to obtain and distribute supplies for poor children who attended the local Italian school.<sup>43</sup>

The *Circolo 3 Novembre*'s leaders did not limit themselves to the successful presentation of the association's and its membership's interests as representative of local Italians. In 1920, the *Circolo* decided to buy a local typographic shop owned by Croatian-affiliated figures, allegedly to oppose its potential purchase by socialists and contain the damage it could cause to national propaganda. The initiative to obtain the propriety by "Italians of Liburnia" was considered favorably by the district commissioner, who hoped that such a purchase would be realized given its "eminently patriotic purpose (*scopo eminentemente patrio[ttico]*)."<sup>44</sup> The same year, the *Circolo*'s executive board took the liberty to demand that the district commissioner, after the suspension of a court advisor in Volosko, do everything possible so that the former court advisor office was assigned to an

*individual of Italian faith, that could hold up the dignity of justice and, at the same time, end the political harm the Croatian employees performed in that office to complete detriment of our nation (il posto venga coperto quanto prima da persona di fede italiana, la quale possa tenere alto il decoro della giustizia e por fine nello stesso tempo alle mene politiche che impiegati croati esplicano in quell'ufficio a tutto danno della nazione nostra).*<sup>45</sup>

As is clear from the aforementioned events, the *Circolo 3 Novembre* became – if it was not imagined as such from the beginning – a society functioning as a lobbying device for local Italian nationalists and their supporters in the immediate postwar period, expressing opinions and providing advice to municipal and district authorities. The association had only an advisory and not a decisional role, however, and the quoted examples show that the Italian authorities regarded the *Circolo 3 Novembre*

41 DARI 472, CVA, AR, 1920, b. 2, Circolo 3 novembre al commissario straordinario, 5.7.1920.

42 DARI 472, CVA, AR, 1920, b. 2, Circolo 3 novembre al commissario straordinario, 16.10.1920.

43 DARI 472, CVA, AR, 1920, b. 2, Circolo 3 novembre al municipio, 17.11.1920, Il commissario straordinario al Consiglio direttivo del Circolo 3 novembre, 18.12.1920..

44 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 42 (old signature), Circolo 3 novembre, Al Sig. Cav. Guido Farello Commissario Civile di Volosca, Volosca, 24 novembre 1920, N.3984, Commissariato civile del distretto politico di Volosca–Abbazia, Volosca, 28.10.1920. Oggetto: Acquisto della Tipografia Tomicic. Minuta della risposta del commissario al presidente del Circolo 3 novembre.

45 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 49, Personale dei giudizi e degli uffici Imposte distrettuali, 7–II (1920), Circolo 3 novembre al Commissario civile del distretto politico di Volosca, Volosca, 3.7.1920. Documento allegato alle pratiche Consigliere Guzeli sig. Giovanni: inchiesta.

rather as a privileged partner. Yet, before the Treaty of Rapallo and the district's official annexation to Italy, this privileged partner was revealed to be problematic. The unstable Italian postwar political environment, the border dispute with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and Gabriele D'Annunzio's entrance into Fiume/Rijeka in September 1919 complicated relations inside the Italian nationalist camp.

## FROM VOLUNTARY DEFENDERS OF THE HOMELAND TO EXALTED ELEMENTS

According to an ITO office report from August 1919, the *Circolo* patronaged the creation of a Legion of Liburnian Volunteers (*Legione Volontari Liburnici*) and a group of young scouts.<sup>46</sup> The existence of this paramilitary group was not secret: it was of public domain, accepted and supported by the military authorities, displaying and enhancing the authorities' desired loyalty of the locals to the Kingdom of Italy.

Already in May, a recently established local pro-Italian weekly reported on the organization of a *fascio dei combattenti* in Liburnia. Allegedly, in Lovran, following the rest of Italy, "the youth" decided to organize "for all eventualities," establishing a *fascio*.<sup>47</sup> The same source reported that it had around hundred followers, willing to put themselves at the *fascio*'s service for the homeland. The initiative was not restricted to Lovran. The same month, the local ITO office enthusiastically reported about a private initiative of enlisted volunteers who planned to take up weapons to defend the "right cause" in case President Wilson's April 1919 proposal – the partition of Istria with Volosko-Opatija to become part of the South Slav State (Cattaruzza, 2007, 117–119, 124) – would materialize. For the military intelligence service, the existence of this group of allegedly over 200 volunteers from Volosko to Lovran was regarded as a positive sign, suggesting the firm will of Liburnians to be part of Italy,<sup>48</sup> while potentially armed South Slav groups were not reported, and indeed seemed highly improbable (Dubrović, 2020).

That the *fascio* and the legion were the same group is evident by another ITO report. Two weeks after the news about the *fascio* broke, "some Liburnian volunteers belonging to 'fascio combattenti' (*alcuni volontari liburnici appartenenti al fascio combattenti*)" were mentioned during a training march in Mošćenice promoted by the *Circolo 3 Novembre* (Klen, 1978, 73).<sup>49</sup> The training march—actually a procession of armed men through the Liburnian coast – offered an opportunity to see in practice how the promotion and defense of Italian nationalism was understood by the paramilitary group. Passing through Medea/Medveja, the march participants were involved in a "scuffle" caused by shouts of "Long live Wilson!" from a nearby osteria (Klen, 1978, 73).

46 ASTs, CGC VG, Gabinetto, b. 52, 24/1 Circoli di Cultura nella V.G., Volosca, R. Governatorato della Venezia Giulia. Stato Maggiore – Ufficio I.T.O. Oggetto: Circoli di Cultura, 11.8.1919, 2.

47 La Voce dell'Istria, 10.5.1919: Il fascio dei combattenti, 1.

48 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, Ufficio I.T.O. Centro I.P.Volosca, Relazione quindicinale sullo spirito della popolazione e sulla situazione, Volosca, 13.5.1919.

49 La Voce dell'Istria, 24.5.1919: "Legione Liburnica", 2.

This incident was not the first one, and the march was not the first action of that kind. On May 19, 1919, the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and the same paramilitary legionnaire group organized an excursion to Mount Maggiore/Učka to inaugurate a shelter named symbolically after the Duchess of Aosta – wife of the Italian 3rd Army commander, General Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta – to whom a telegram was sent on the occasion (Klen, 1978, 73). Alongside participants from Opatija and Lovran, 40 figures from Fiume were present, a detail that should not be neglected.<sup>50</sup> As in the case of Medveja, the legionnaires' Italian patriotic devotion was not shared by a local Croatian teacher and some children who, during their passage through Veprinac/Apriano, shouted against Italy (Klen, 1978, 73). These circumscribed, and fortunately not particularly violent, incidents were symptoms of the contestation of Italian sovereignty, of nationalists' intransigence, but even more were signs of authorities' support for the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and local paramilitary units. All the municipal, village, and military authorities mentioned during the march enthusiastically welcomed the legionnaires, while the legionnaires' contesters were imprisoned or had to deal with the Italian authorities, as the osteria owner in Medveja did. The name of the shelter on Mount Maggiore and the telegram make crystal clear the support the paramilitary group enjoyed. One question remains, however: Who were these nameless Liburnian volunteers and their Fiumian associates?

After the testimony of the osteria owner, the Medveja incident was clarified by Captain Giorgio Conighi, attached to Volosko ITO office under the XXVI Army Corps. Conighi declared that he was in charge of the volunteers' legion, that with volunteers of Volosko–Opatija, lined up by training officers, Lovran and Fiume volunteers, and guests belonging to *Sursum Corda* – a prewar irredentists' fight training organization (Pupo, 2014, 110) – arranged for a training walk with patriotic propaganda purposes.<sup>51</sup> Captain Giorgio Conighi's (Fiume, 1892–Trento, 1977) presence in Liburnia and his nationalistic activities are easy to disclose. Conighi was the son of the engineer Carlo Conighi, owner of a construction company active in Fiume and Volosko–Opatija before World War One. Carlo Conighi was active in Fiumian society, president of the local Chamber of Trade and Commerce, was interned by Hungarian authorities during the war, and advocated for the city's annexation to Italy after 1918 (Varutti, 2005, 149). In the late Habsburg period, his son Giorgio was member of the Fiumian youth irredentist association *Giovine Fiume*, and during the war was a volunteer in the Italian army, obtaining a war decoration (Varutti, 2005, 150–151). The young Conighi was a typical example of ITO officers' extraction (Pupo, 2014, 109): a local irredentist with needed language

50 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Ufficio I.T.O. e Centri I.P., Appunti del C.I.P. di Volosca, Appunti del C.I.P., 17.5.1919.

51 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 42 (old signature), Comando della 3a Armata, Ufficio C.R.I.T.O. presso il XXVI° Corpo d'Armata, Al Comando XXVI° Corpo d'Armata, Ufficio Affari Generali, Oggetto: Schiarimenti circa il fatto di Medveja, 7 luglio 1919. Document signed by captain Giorgio Conighi.



expertise, knowledge of the region and, most of all, a passionate nationalist. Yet, Conighi, as a military officer with ties to local society, was not the only one with such a résumé in Liburnia.

In June 1919, at the inauguration of new Italian national street names in Volosko-Opatija, legionnaires appeared for the first time in a uniform, instructed by Conighi and four other Italian officers. Of the four, at least two were native to the Quarnero/Kvarner region: Lieutenants Perugini and d'Alloris.<sup>52</sup> Antonio d'Alloris was the pseudonym and battle name of Antonio Sirola (Fiume, 1891–?), assigned to the Volosko ITO office (Klinger, 2013, 193; Klen, 1978, 77), revealing once more the connections between the Italian military intelligence service and radical nationalists. Nicola Perugini (Opatija, 1885–Fiume, 1936),<sup>53</sup> on the other hand, embodies another common background of the more radicalized Italian nationalists in the region: the *regnicoli* (Italian citizens living in Austria–Hungary). Perugini lived in Opatija before World War One, working there as a civil engineer. However, Perugini was not Austrian; he was an Italian citizen living in Austria. At the outbreak of the war, Perugini left Opatija and enlisted in the Italian army. At the end of the war, he returned to Opatija, where, according to his obituary, he was among the founders of the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and the local Dante Alighieri Society committee.<sup>54</sup> Finally, there was also the name of a civilian mentioned as a legionnaire in the newspaper, the postman Nicolò Bracco, councilor of the recently founded Dante Alighieri Society branch and, in April 1919, listed as secretary of the *Circolo 3 Novembre*.

It is evident that membership in local Italian associations and paramilitary formations at least partially overlapped. Furthermore, for the Italian nationalists of Liburnia, the close organizational and ideological relations with Fiume were crucial, as well as—directly or through Fiume—contact with the Trieste-based nationalistic association *Sursum Corda*. The presence of Conighi and the recurring participation of Fiumian volunteers coincides with the formation of paramilitary units in Fiume (Klinger, 2011, 29–30; Longo, 1996, 82–84) and points out how these connections are a key to understand radicalization in this area and in *Venezia Giulia*. In addition, there is another common feature Fiume and Liburnia shared: the contested post-war status. Unlike Fiume, under interallied occupation (Kirchner Reill, 2020, 41–54), the Liburnian coast was exclusively under Italian military occupation. However, for Volosko-Opatija, like Fiume, it was still uncertain whether it would be annexed to the Kingdom of Italy. At the Paris Peace Conference in April and May 1919, US-American President Wilson and French Foreign Minister Tardieu suggested that eastern Istria, including Volosko-Opatija, not be ceded to Italy (Lederer, 1966, 226, 246–247). The undefined border issue translated into a sense of insecurity and fluctuating emotions for the local

52 La Voce dell'Istria, 28.6.1919: Volosca Redenta!, 1.

53 DARI 536, Az, C Perugini Nicola.

54 La Vedetta d'Italia, 6.3.1936: La morte di un patriota, 4.

population. According to the ITO office, in March and April 1919 local Yugoslav-oriented figures spread rumors of a territorial outcome unfavorable to Italy (Klen, 1977, 151, 167–168). At the beginning of July, the population worried about the results of the Paris Peace Conference, while at the end of the same month local Italians were sure that they would never be torn from the motherland (Klen, 1978, 86, 93). Until the Treaty of Rapallo, the Wilson line—or at least bargaining over parts of Liburnia—was still on the table during the border negotiations between Italy and the SCS Kingdom (Lederer, 1966, 256–351). It is no surprise, then, that in June 1920 *carabinieri* noticed again how pro-Italian local associations in Volosko-Opatija were easily impressionable, switching from fear of abandonment and Yugoslav vengeance to the lively hope of remaining under Italy.<sup>55</sup> In the same June report, the description of *Circolo 3 Novembre* members as “exalted elements capable of causing unrest due to their intransigence” was symptomatic. This harsh judgement was grounded in a specific threat, namely the destruction of a local Croatian lawyer’s house if he returned to Volosko.

Recent research has underlined the significance of economic and political insecurity in the rise of violence and the fascist movement in the *Venezia Giulia* (Klabjan, 2018; Bresciani, 2019). In Volosko-Opatija, the chances of another transition of sovereignty, now to the SCS Kingdom, were even higher. The menace for local Italian nationalists was the loss of their recently acquired influence, to be defeated by the peace treaty – an important element in mobilizing a paramilitary group (Gerwarth & Horne, 2012, 3) – and, for some of them, the Italian state was not doing enough to ensure the annexation. In this regard, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s entrance into Fiume was a realization of some of their hopes, triggering further radicalization.

A few days after D’Annunzio arrival in Fiume, Leo Stirn (Volosko, 1898–?), a member of the *Circolo 3 Novembre*, was walking on the local promenade with an Italian tricolor ribbon bearing text “With D’Annunzio for Fiume” when he encountered three Italian army officers. One of the officers said to Stirn “scoundrel,” while Stirn replied “Lieutenant, sir, the scoundrel is probably you, and believe me that only the uniform you wear saves you from well-deserved back-handed blows.”<sup>56</sup> This case of a young, local D’Annunzio sympathizer – and soon his follower – facing down hostile military officers could serve as a useful depiction of the divergent attitudes toward D’Annunzio’s venture: there were those who fought in the war as professional soldiers, and there were the young nationalists who did not fight at all, but aspired to engage in conflict (Mondini, 2019, 55–97). The point here is that the *Circolo 3 Novembre* and its armed volunteers became a problem for Italian state authorities and even for the military that supported them. On September 6, 1919, the Governor ordered the district commissioner to conduct strict surveillance on

55 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 55, N.40/2, Riservata del Comando del corpo d’armata, Compagnia CC.RR. Volosca al Commissario civile di Volosca, Oggetto: Relazione sullo spirito pubblico. Volosca, 2.6.1920.

56 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Verbale di Rodolfo Treo, 18.9.1919.

Liburnian legionnaires: they should not join the legionnaires in Fiume and those without pertinency (in German *Heimatrecht* or in Italian *pertinenza*)<sup>57</sup> should be evicted from Volosko-Opatija. In an exchange of telegrams, the district commissariat provided further information on the legionnaires, assuring the Governor that they were not a threat. Formed at the beginning of June, unarmed Liburnian volunteers were helped by Italian military authorities and followed directives from Fiume, but where without documents to cross the armistice line between the *Venezia Giulia* and Fiume. Furthermore, around August the legionnaires suspended exercises due to internal dissent. The group, now reduced to 30 individuals, was incapable of violent action.<sup>58</sup> As a local, triumphantly fascist work later stated, the district commissioner supported the volunteers (Costantino, 1936, 15), though at the time of the mentioned telegram exchanges the district commissioner was absent, so it was his substitute that was at least diminishing the potential risk (Apollonio, 2011, 182). Yet, the allegedly “harmless” Liburnian volunteers without needed documents were still involved in D’Annunzio’s occupation of Fiume.

Besides Florio and his brother Floriano Stirn (Opatija, 1894), the brothers Ramiro and Oliviero Voncina, Nicolò Bracco, Giuseppe Tomsich (Tosi), Gualtiero Toncich, and Lidio Vladiscovich, figures we saw as members of the boards of Volosko-Opatija Italian associations, appear on the legionnaires’ list.<sup>59</sup> However, the title of ‘legionnaire’ does not mean they were in Fiume, but rather that they aided D’Annunzio’s followers from Volosko-Opatija, as the Giuseppe Tosi folder held at the Vittoriale seems to indicate.<sup>60</sup> In any case, the age of the seven Liburnian legionnaires reveals that they were relatively young (the oldest one born in 1882 and the youngest born in 1898), a feature that was not shared by Oscarre Suban. The last figure, celebrated later as the “peerless leader of the *Circolo 3 Novembre*” (Costantino, 1936, 24), was a Trieste-born Italian nationalist engaged in violent prewar activities, such as attacks on German national organizations in Trieste (Klabjan, 2018, 994). Suban, however, had settled in Liburnia in 1907,<sup>61</sup> and came to be considered a key figure for connections between Fiume and Volosko. The other figure organizing those contacts was Nicola Perugini, again member of the *Circolo 3 Novembre*, mentioned alongside Suban as commanding the legionnaires that welcomed D’Annunzio and his troops in Fiume. Clearly a portion of local Italian nationalists radicalized, but this resulted with evident disagreements inside the Italian leadership.

57 For pertinency cf. Reill et al., 2022.

58 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Volontari Liburnici, Minute dei telegrammi.

59 <https://fiume.vittoriale.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/archivi-elenco-dei-legionari.pdf> (last access: 2022-06-05). Valdini’s name does not appear on the list, as he requested the status in 1940. Cf. AGE, S. III, Legionari e legionarie, fascicolo Valdini Livio.

60 AGE, S. III, Legionari e legionarie, fascicolo Tosi Giuseppe.

61 DARI 536, AZ, Scheda per il comune di Volosca–Abbazia di Suban Oscarre, Residente nel Comune di Volosca–Abbazia dall’anno 1907, e Scheda individuale per il comune di Fiume di Suban Oscarre, provenienza e data d’iscrizione: Volosca Abbazia im. 126/1927. Da 8/IV/1927.

At the end of December 1920, on the beginning of the open conflict between D'Annunzio's legionnaires and the Italian army, at an extraordinary *Circolo* congress – attended by only 43 individuals – the entire executive board resigned.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, a few days before, at the *Circolo*'s ordinary congress, the Volosca Fascist Party was established.<sup>63</sup> It would not come as a surprise if the *Circolo*'s members enthusiastically enlisted in the fascist movement, but the *fascio*'s own executive board seems rather to show a change in the leadership rather than a continuity with the immediate postwar associations (Costantino, 1936, 25–26). The *Circolo*'s same executive board experienced some changes, noticeable from July 1920 when Suban signed on as president and Tomassich as secretary, while in December of the same year Nicola Perugini is reported as the vice president and Oliviero Vocina as member of the board. As shown, all four D'Annunzio supporters. An evident radicalization continued with the constitution of the Fascist Party, and violent actions against political opponents from the end of 1920 increased as Domenico Costantino's *Abbazia e la riviera nella prima ora* (*Abbazia and the Riviera in the First Hour*, 1936), fascist publication celebratory of violence, testifies. It could be argued that this outcome was a legacy and a side effect of Italian military support for nationalist groups combined with existing local violent elements (Suban) and the engagement of a young generation, eager to embrace radical nationalist solutions (Klabjan, 2018, 994). Besides or rather simultaneously to the story of radicalization, Volosko-Opatija's post-Habsburg transition to the Italian state is a successful account of ascension to power of local Italian nationalists.

## CONCLUSION: THE BEST ELEMENTS OF ITALIANNESS INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

As we saw, in January 1919, the municipality of Volosko-Opatija was commissioned. A year later, the municipality was still under the supervision of a civil commissioner, the third in a row. By June 1920 the commissioner of the provincial board of Istria suggested to the district commissioner to appoint a municipal board to assist the special commissioner of the municipality. Given the local political situation – in June 1920 the state belonging of the district was still not settled by a peace treaty – the proposal was discharged by the district commissioner. Finally, almost a month after the Treaty of Rapallo was signed, district and provincial authorities exchanged correspondence on the regularization of the municipal administration of Volosko-Opatija. On February 2, 1921, the first post-war municipal board of Volosko-Opatija was definitely appointed by the Venezia Giulia Governor. However, it was not a manifestation of a popular vote: the board's composition was suggested by the district commissioner and relevant Croatian politicians were

62 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 54, Verbale dell'assemblea straordinaria tenutasi d'urgenza la sera del 26 dicembre 1920 alle 17:30.

63 La Voce dell'Istria, 18.12.1920: Da Volosca. La costituzione del fascio di combattimento nella Liburnia, 1.

excluded from the new board since they demanded a greater number of total board representatives and the election of the commissioner.<sup>64</sup> The seven postwar board members – without the commissioner serving as the eighth member – was made up of four Italian national representatives (Nicola Perugini, Giuseppe Tomsich, Ruggero Sandri, and Noè Percich) alongside three politically unengaged figures (Edmondo Jelusich [Edmond Jelušić], a photographer, Rodolfo Conrad [Rudolph Conrad], a tax officer, and Giuseppe [Josef] Lokey, a hotel owner). The Italian preponderance was evident; Ruggero Sandri was appointed as the commissioner's substitute, while Lokey, Conrad, and Jelusich all resigned in a few months.<sup>65</sup> In practical terms, the Volosko-Opatija municipality was reduced to four deputies, all members of the *Circolo 3 Novembre*. It was the formal recognition of the successful rise of local Italian nationalists to power.

The Italian military occupation of the district was indeed a turning point for the political life of Volosko-Opatija. The occupation was not merely the first stage towards the establishment of Italian sovereignty, but also a moment of Italianization and the slow rise to power of the local Italian nationalists. From the end of 1918, local leading Italian nationalist figures quickly organized an association – the *Circolo 3 Novembre* – immediately becoming the privileged interlocutor of the Italian occupational authorities. This society enjoyed financial and moral support, influenced authorities' decisions, and reversed the local political balance in their favor. There was also a side effect of this form of power transition. The Italian military support for nationalists in an officially still unsettled area proved to be an incentive for political radicalization. The encouragement of paramilitary formations guided by nationalists was a step towards a larger deployment of violence, fomenting solutions contrary to the liberal state, and thus creating favorable conditions for the nascent fascist movement. While the case study of Volosko-Opatija confirms, at the local scale, the entangled political dynamics typical for the transition from the Habsburg Empire to the Italian state at the regional level, it underlines the agency of certain locals in the transition process. The analyzed case of the *Circolo 3 Novembre* association demonstrates how transition was an opportunity for local Italian national activists to successfully present themselves to the receptive authorities as representatives of a “national community” at the local level, strengthening their Habsburg-period positions of power. At least until the rise and consolidation of the fascist regime, it can be argued that local Italian nationalists were able to expand their positions of power in the new, local postwar Italian context.

64 DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 57, N. 232/658, Decreto di nomina della Giunta comunale del Commissario generale civile per la Venezia Giulia, Trieste, 2.2.1921.

65 Lokey, for flawed Italian language knowledge, resigned in May. Conrad, for reasons of service and multiple commitments, and Jelusich, for disagreements on administrative questions and issues regarding supplies, both resigned in June 1921. DARI 616, CDVo, AG, b. 57, Commissario straordinario per il Comune di Volosca–Abbazia al Commissario Generale Civile in Trieste e per tramite del Commissariato Civile distrettuale in Volosca, Dimissioni di Lokey Giuseppe, Volosca, 26.5.1921, Copia delle dimissioni di Conrad Rodolfo, Volosca, 17.6.1921 and Copia delle dimissioni di E. Jelussich, Volosca, 17.6.1921.

# **I MIGLIORI ELEMENTI D'ITALIANITÀ. VZPON LOKALNE POLITIČNE MOČI IN ITALIJANIZACIJA V PRVIH LETIH PO PRVI SVETOVNI VOJNI V VOLOSKO–OPATIJI, 1918–1920**

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## **POVZETEK**

*Članek analizira naraščanje moči lokalne italijanske politične skupine v istrski občini Volosko–Opatija/Volosca–Abbazia. Študija primera kaže kako so v obdobju, ki je sledilo vojni, lokalni italijanski nacionalisti s pomočjo društva Circolo 3 Novembre vplivali na odločitve občinskih in okrožnih oblasti in postajali privilegiran partner in pritiskali na oblast. Njihov trud so simbolično in materialno podpirale italijanske okupacijske oblasti in su članovi društva obrnuli lokalno politično ravnanje v svojo korist. Neglede na to so se odnosi z nekaterimi lokalnimi italijanskimi nacionalisti skozi čas slabšali. Podpora, ki so jo vojaške oblasti zagotavljale nacionalistom je bila v tej sporni regiji in ob nestabilni italijanski politični situaciji vzvod za politično radikalizacijo. Paravojaška skupina nacionalistov, ki je imela podporo vojske, pomagala je v D'Annunziovom okupaciji Reke in imela ulogo v ustvarjanju lokalne fašistične organizacije. Vendar so najuglednejši predstavniki lokalne italijanske skupine nacionalistov uspele pridobiti institucionalno prepoznavnost, saj so bili delegirani kot člani novega mestnega sveta in s tem na glavo postavili razmerja moči v prejšnjem, habsburškem obdobju.*

*Ključne besede: Julijska krajina, nacionalizacija, italijanizacija, Volosko–Opatija/Volosca–Abbazia, Circolo 3 Novembre, politična radikalizacija*



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