

Eric Gobetti, 2021. E allora le foibe? Rome, Bari: Editori Laterza (I Robinson. Fact checking). 136 pp., ISBN 978-88-581-4112-0 (Softcover), ISBN 978-88-581-4197-7 (eBook), € 13/€ 9.99.

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The author of the short book reviewed here, historian and journalist *Eric Gobetti* from Turin, has a feel for unusual or provocative titles. For instance, he entitled his book about the Italian occupation of large parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia since April 1941 “The cheerful occupation” (*L’occupazione allegra*). Normally, we would not expect even the worst cynics to refer to the burning down of villages, the establishment of concentration camps, the taking of hostages, and mass executions during the two-year Italian occupation of parts of Yugoslavia as “cheerful.” Nor can the failure to mention these war crimes during the peace negotiations between the allied powers and Italy be described as “cheerful” either. In fact, the use of the adjective refers to the subsequent denial of the crimes committed during the Italian occupation, which was reinforced with the help of the myth of the “good Italian,” who never harmed anyone but, on the contrary, was always the victim of violence inflicted by others: victims of the German *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS*, when, in 1943, the Italian occupation troops in the area from the Greek islands to the Rhône Valley were disarmed and taken into captivity and/or subjected to forced labour, and victims of the Yugoslav partisans, who were responsible for killing civilians in Italy’s eastern border regions in September 1943 and again in May 1945.

With the title of his new book “But what about the *foibe*?” Gobetti recalls a familiar question with which the Italian left, but also the governments of the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia, have been repeatedly confronted for almost three decades—much like the West German left were repeatedly faced with the question “And what about the Wall?” before 1989. The geological phenomenon of the *foibe*, deep sinkholes in the karstic landscape near Gorizia, Trieste and on the Istrian peninsula, sometimes reaching down to sea level, is associated with the revenge of the partisans who briefly liberated the above-mentioned cities and regions from the Italian fascists in 1943 and finally in 1945 from the German *Wehrmacht*—causing “new suffering,” as Fulvio Tomizza famously wrote in the opening sentence of his novel *Materada*. Between these two liberations, Hitler created the Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*, OZAK), a variant of Nazi tyranny with an

additional twist of Habsburg nostalgia, epitomised by the concentration camp in the former rice mill of San Sabba in Trieste, euphemistically known as a “police detention camp.” If it is true that Tito’s secret police of the immediate postwar period acted on the instruction of Soviet Stalinists, a topic Gobetti does not address, it is equally true that the OZAK police personnel came from German-occupied Poland—among them several of the worst criminals against humanity of the 20th century.

Gobetti rightly highlights the nationalist narrow-mindedness of authors who want to see the *foibe* massacres as a kind of a “Holocaust against Italians.” He frequently refers to the suffering of innocent people in Germany due to the revengeful actions of those who liberated the country from the National Socialist regime. In the contemporary historiographical debate, the term “victim competition” has already been established for some time, recently being expanded to include the “competition of coming to terms with the past.” A vivid illustration of this would be a Nazi concentration camp which, after the liberation of those wrongly imprisoned and tortured, in spring/summer 1945 was reopened, soon to be filled with both innocent victims and Nazi perpetrators, with the latter undoubtedly deserving to be detained. Gobetti does not explicitly mention this “victim competition” in his book, but his endeavour to contextualise the events of September 1943 and May 1945 amounts to a very similar figure of thought, with dramatic consequences for the author. Shortly after the book came out, the Italian Society for the Study of Contemporary History (*Società Italiana per lo Studio della Storia Contemporanea*, SISSCO) published a letter of support speaking out against the threats and attacks Gobetti was receiving from Italian neofascists. Conservative newspapers accused him of mocking the *foibe* victims. In response to such allegations, it can be argued that anyone who claims Eric Gobetti is a “negationist,” who denies the partisans carried out the aforementioned attacks on parts of the civilian population in the border region, is misguided. As if these consequences are not enough, the extreme right has threatened any of these so-called “negationists” employed in public service with a professional ban—this particularly applies to teachers, but also journalists and scholars who, like Gobetti, work with the state broadcasting company RAI.

In his book, Gobetti does exactly the opposite to what his opponents accuse him of. He makes frequent reference to the scholarly literature of the past 25 years, seeks maximum clarity in a context that is no stranger to exaggeration and hysteria. *E allora le foibe?* is not written for expert historians (*storici di mestiere*), but rather for readers who know little about the *foibe* and for those who have some knowledge but have never systematically deepened it. The book does contain a bibliography, but no footnotes.

The author's starting point is the increasingly grotesque forms that the public—and in part also state—handling of the *foibe* topic has taken in Italy. This is best illustrated with two feature films produced in 2005 and 2018, which are possibly the main source of information on the subject for many Italians, not least because they have been broadcast repeatedly on television. The first, *Il cuore nel pozzo* (The Heart in the Well) shows a group of innocent Italians living in the border region who suddenly become victims of violence, a violence that is depicted as unmotivated and incomprehensible. The Yugoslav perpetrators, clearly negatively characterised as *titini* (Tito followers), are portrayed as bloodthirsty criminals, devoid of any humanity. A third group of actors comprises the few Italians who support the resistance out of fear, ideological delusion, or naivety.

The second film, *Rosso Istria* (Red Istria), released in 2018, is a variation of the friend-foe scheme. Here, simple Istrian civilians mistreated by the partisans are replaced by a group of uniformed fascists who are also depicted as innocent. As if that were not enough, German soldiers are portrayed as the rescuers of the Mussolini supporters who celebrate their *Duce*. Violence, once again, seems to emanate only from the Yugoslav partisans, while the fascists and members of the German *Wehrmacht* epitomise “law and order.” According to Gobetti, there are significant differences between the 2005 and the 2018 films. While, in the first case, viewers are supposed to identify with a group of simple Italians, in the second, they are encouraged to see the fascists and the German occupiers as the “good guys.” In both films, the disgust is reserved for the partisans.

This example alone may suffice to make clear how important Gobetti's book is. The urgent need for such information is evidenced, not least, by the fact that within less than a year, the book has already been reprinted six times. Importantly, Gobetti provides comprehensive evidence on how the *foibe* discourse has been instrumentalised, even escalated, by the political right and also—depending on election results and majority conditions—by the Italian state. Gobetti's scholarly and journalistic work has gained recognition precisely because it is partial and clearly illuminates the long history of difficult relations between Italy and Yugoslavia/Slovenia/Croatia, instead of sweeping them under the carpet. I have extensively used Gobetti's books in my teaching in the past and will continue to do so in the future. I thoroughly recommend them—not only the booklet under scrutiny here would merit a translation into English, but Gobetti's other works too.