Introduction

After the Second World War, political and diplomatic relations between Italy and Yugoslavia were characterized by misunderstandings, polemics and hostility, which were mainly, though not exclusively, due to the Trieste question, a territorial dispute that had divided the two Adriatic countries for decades. After Italy’s defeat in the Second World War and Yugoslavia’s attempt to take possession of Trieste and most of Venezia Giulia, the Peace Treaty of 10 February 1947 assigned the whole Italian territory to the east of the Tarvisio-Monfalcone line to Yugoslavia, with the exception of a narrow coastal belt which included Trieste (Zone A), occupied by the Anglo-Americans, and Koper (Zone B), under Yugoslav occupation. Under the Peace Treaty this coastal area was envisaged as a buffer state, the Free Territory of Trieste, which was to be formally built through the appointment of a governor by the UN Security Council.

As a consequence of the war, Italy passed from the status of an imperial power to that of a mere object of international policy, searching in vain to influence the fate of the border areas. Instead, Yugoslavia was in a position of strength. As a victorious country that had been attacked by Italy, Yugoslavia could legitimately sue for reparations, and it would try to devise a grand foreign policy design to create a regional scenario which would avert the danger of finding itself encircled by hostile powers one more time in the post-war period. However, the division of Europe into opposing political and ideological blocs made the establishment of FTT impossible. Cold War and bipolar logic turned the Trieste question from a local problem into the Adriatic version of the Iron Curtain. In the light of containment policy adopted by the US government in response to the power policy of the Soviets and to the expansion of the communist movement, the defense of Trieste took on a new importance: the Adriatic city became a sort of a Western shield intended to contain any communist infiltration into Northern Italy. It was for this purpose that the governments in London and Washington postponed the appointment of the governor of the FTT by the UN and preferred to wait for an agreement between Rome and Belgrade, a hypothesis which was virtually impossible at that time.

However, a few months after the ratification of the Peace Treaty, a new variable was added to the already complicated framework of Italian-Yugoslav relations: during 1948 a political, more than ideological, breakup occurred within the communist world. Following the Tito – Stalin split, Yugoslavia moved away from the Soviet orbit and subsequently closer
to the Western bloc, which from that moment became the main source of economic and military aid to Tito’s regime. The realignment of Yugoslav policy affected the evolution of the Trieste question. Given the importance of Belgrade for the political and military strategies of Washington and London and due to the impossibility to create the FTT because of unbridgeable differences between Italy and Yugoslavia, the Anglo-Americans favored a compromise: the London Memorandum of 5 October 1954. By the terms of the agreement, Italian officials replaced British and American authorities in the administration of Zone A of the FTT, while in Zone B Yugoslav military administration had to be replaced with a civil administration. It was the de facto partition of the FTT, which was intended to eliminate a dispute considered harmful for the Western bloc. Despite the normalization of the bilateral relations that followed the signature of the Memorandum, Italy and Yugoslavia failed to establish an atmosphere of cordiality and friendly collaboration essential for the solution of the Trieste question. The government in Belgrade expected Italy to formally recognize the extension of Yugoslav sovereignty over Zone B of the still-born FTT. Italy’s government, instead, reaffirmed the practical and provisional nature of the Memorandum, aiming at launching new negotiations in order to get further territorial acquisitions in addition to Trieste and Zone A.

It was only due to crucial domestic changes in Italian politics and to dramatic international events in Eastern Europe during the 1960s that the Italian-Yugoslav rapprochement, which led to the settlement of the Trieste question in 1975, became possible. Following the formation of a center-left cabinet in Italy in 1963 – a coalition consisting of Christian Democratic Party and Socialist Party – Italy and Yugoslavia made a new effort to break the deadlock reached not just in the solution of the territorial dispute, but also in their political collaboration on the international stage. As a consequence of the violent solution to the communist crisis in Czechoslovakia and to the Prague Spring of 1968, the center-left government in Rome was increasingly interested in preserving and consolidating the role of Tito’s Yugoslavia as a necessary territorial and ideological buffer between Italy and countries of the Warsaw Pact. Soviet aggression to Czechoslovakia and the enunciation of the “Brežnjev doctrine” put the Belgrade government on alert as it was concerned about the possible application of this doctrine in the case of Yugoslavia, which was struggling with the re-emergence of national and internal problems. Until then, Tito had been able to maintain an independent policy between the blocs, due to the special relationship with the West and the parallel rapprochement with the East that followed Stalin’s death, also opening to economically underdeveloped but politically important countries of the “Third world”. However, all of these accomplishments were not enough to keep the country out of a major international crisis.
Facing the instability of the neighboring Yugoslav Federation, Italy was obviously concerned about the possibility of seeing Warsaw Pact troops enter Yugoslav territory under the “Brežnev doctrine” and of finding itself directly neighboring the Soviet bloc, bringing again the Iron Curtain near Gorizia and Trieste. As for the bilateral dimension of Italian-Yugoslav relations, the center-left leaders were convinced that it was impossible to modify the territorial settlement established by the London Memorandum. The overall situation created by the Memorandum was supposed to be respected without bringing in any changes. The missing step for stabilization of the border was the transformation of the demarcation line between Zone A and Zone B of the unborn FTT into a state borderline. This solution had to be presented to Italy’s public opinion as a final agreement that would lead to territorial benefits such as the Zone A with Trieste which the Peace Treaty of 1947 had left outside of the national borders as well as political and economic benefits through the revival of the Italian-Yugoslav friendship.

Also Tito and his entourage were interested in settling the long standing dispute with Italy and favoring a sort of Adriatic Détente. At that time, Yugoslavia was facing serious internal problems; nationalistic ideas and ethnic divisions surfaced again inside the country and exposed the political weakness of the Federation. Political instability was also exacerbated by economic difficulties caused by the early failures of the Yugoslav socio-economic model that had been based on self-management and local autonomies. The Yugoslav road to socialism ended up deepening economic differences and political divisions between Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and the other Yugoslav Republics. Between 1969 and 1971, growing domestic dissensions shook up the internal cohesion of the country to the point that the affirmation and development of Yugoslavia as a socialist regime seemed to be called into question. Tito and his closest associates, fearing the re-emergence of internal national conflicts, wanted at least the Adriatic border to be formally recognized and pressed for the quick closure of the territorial issue with the hope to regain Slovenian and Croatian support, increasingly uncertain and wavering.

The Osimo agreements had a positive impact on political and economic interests of both Italy and Yugoslavia, and contributed to greatly improve bilateral relations between Rome and Belgrade. For the first time in the history of Italian-Yugoslav relations, a true friendship was attained, followed by several important economic, commercial and financial agreements. As a consequence of the Adriatic détente, it became customary to define Italian-Yugoslav relations as a model of peaceful cooperation between two countries that were governed by different social and political systems and belonged to the same geographical area. Furthermore, the Italian-Yugoslav border was presented as the most open border in the world. The presence of
an Italian national minority on Yugoslav territory was no longer considered a source of tension and worries; rather, it was publicly portrayed as a political opportunity and a real bridge between the two peoples.

The settlement of the Trieste question and the normalization of bilateral relationship were also crucial factors in the making of the foreign policies of both countries. For Rome, overcoming the territorial and political disputes with Yugoslavia strengthened Italy’s international role, making it more autonomous. For Belgrade, the Italian acceptance of the existence of Communist Yugoslavia had a profound impact on the stability of Tito’s regime, undercutting external support to anticommunist opposition. Italy and Yugoslavia started playing a crucial role for the achievement of their respective international goals. Indeed, Belgrade became an important asset in Italy’s Balkan and Adriatic strategy, while Rome was a sort of bridge between Socialist Yugoslavia and Western Europe.

This book is intended to shed light on the process of Italian-Yugoslav normalization and rapprochement, which ultimately brought to the Osimo agreements of 1975. This volume is based on a wide collection of primary sources and includes relevant scholarly literature on the subject. It aims to contribute to a better understanding of the history of the Adriatic region, a conflicted European space that had been affected by border disputes and ethnic strife for decades during the 20th century. As it has been recalled, the settlements after the Second World War, as well as the Cold War, redefined the borders and reshaped the national frontiers between Italy and Yugoslavia; as a result, major quarrels and disputes arose over territorial claims, demarcation of State borders, national minorities, expulsion of ethnic groups and other acts of violence committed by members of one national group against members of another.

Thus, the editors of this volume have decided to focus not only on the bilateral and diplomatic dimensions of the Adriatic question and détente, but also on the different local reactions and perceptions inside Italy and Yugoslavia, among political parties, public opinions and ethnic groups. Italy and Yugoslavia were both fragile countries, economically weak and with unstable domestic political situation. Italy’s ruling party, the Christian Democratic Party, had to face tough far left and far right opposition. This was led by the Communist Party, which was the strongest in Western Europe, as well as by Movimento Sociale Italiano, seen as the principal extreme right party, and neo-fascist party in Italy. Likewise, Tito’s communist regime had to rule a country deeply divided in conflicting ethnic groups, and the political opposition was lead both by the Catholic Church and nationalist movements. Even though they had been gruesomely crushed and silenced after the War, they had not disappeared. Thus, this project not only explores bilateral affairs but also evaluates the connection between political decisions on a national scale.
and their consequences on a regional and international level in order to provide the reader a better understanding of regional conflicts and their solutions inside the Adriatic region.

Moreover, this volume explores the views and strategies of both eastern and western powers toward the region in order to illuminate the broader international political context within which Italian-Yugoslav rapprochement and détente took place. It suggests that Italy’s and Yugoslavia’s foreign policies during the Cold War held significant similarities. They were both positioned at the borderlines of the two blocs and such strategic positions enhanced their political importance for the United States and the Soviet Union. Both Rome and Belgrade tried to exploit their position to develop an international policy in search of partial autonomy and tried to play a role as mediator between the blocs. While Italian-Yugoslav détente deeply affected Italian and Yugoslav foreign policies and resulted in the solution of the long standing territorial dispute over Trieste and Istria, it also significantly affected the lives of their local communities across the Adriatic border. Indeed, the rapprochement between Rome and Belgrade was a turning point in the recent history of the Adriatic region. From that moment, Italy and Yugoslavia inaugurated a strategy of close political, economic and cultural cooperation which resulted in great mutual advantage even after the collapse of the Yugoslav State.