

BOOK REVIEW

History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans.**Pamela Ballinger. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2003. 328 pgs.**

Jerry Lord

At its most effective, *History in Exile* is an ambitious and lucid multi-sited ethnographic meditation on the converging and conflicting articulations of historical consciousness amongst two mutually identified groups of “ethnic” Italians irrevocably displaced by the 1954 border partition between Italy and the former Yugoslavia. More specifically, Pamela Ballinger trains her ethnographic gaze upon the at once unifying and dividing memory practices of the *esuli* (those who left the Istrian Peninsula for the border city of Trieste after the U.N-backed partition) and the *rimasti* (those who remained as Italian minorities in the Tito-led socialist federation). In doing so, she fashions a vigorously meticulous though highly readable study that convincingly locates the discursive constellations informing not only the poetics of memory, but also the contemporary politics of identity within and between the *esuli* and *rimasti*. As Ballinger demonstrates in the final chapters, these remain salient features of social and cultural life because they continue to inform contemporary political contestations over the geopolitical future of the Istrian Peninsula.

The author situates a productive, if sometimes frustrating, tension in her work by resisting a framework that would privilege the metanarrative of Western Marxist historical materialism, the triumphalism of liberal multiculturalism, or the free-floating contingencies of French post-structuralism. Instead she draws upon a broad range of social theory, stating in the introduction that her analysis is concerned not with forging a counter-narrative to the dispersed truth claims of either her informants or the state-sanctioned historiographies of the region, so much as it is with identifying the patterned discursive underpinnings of historical consciousness and their relation to reasonably identifiable historical-material processes located in geopolitical maneuvering and state-sponsored exile. Ballinger usefully undertakes this task by juxtaposing political historiography with voluminous archives of interview data: from life histories, to recurring biblical tropes and Italian literary references. Because Ballinger consciously limits her study to examining the political and cultural dynamics that help shape patterns of historical consciousness—demonstrating where and how they are formed, reproduced, altered, and articulated—she has much to say on this necessarily messy topic. Yet while the book represents an enormous scholarly endeavor that should earn the respect of the ethnographically initiated, the author’s steadfastly ambivalent stance towards competing historical truth claims and the asserted implications for social theory and fieldwork methodology may ultimately gain it a lukewarm reception for readers more assured of their own theoretical and ideological presumptions.

The book’s ethnographic material is drawn from two primary field sites: (Italian) Trieste, the once powerful Hapsburg-era seaport with a significant central

European architectural influence that has slipped into severe economic decline during the past thirty years (17-18), and Risorgnio, “A typical Venetian town” (ibid.) in contemporary Croatia that, while much smaller in size than Trieste, has grown considerably since the 1960s through mass tourism and remains the key *rimasti* stronghold (19). These sites provide the setting for an exegesis on the shifting and contested meanings of place. Ballinger notes the general social and ethnic characteristics of the cities through time and begins to elaborate on the institutional frameworks within which history making occurs. Whereas Part I of the book can prove particularly challenging for the reader, as Ballinger’s framework oscillates between forging a coherent understanding of how Trieste and the rest of the Istrian Peninsula emerged as key strategic sites in the then-nebulous Cold War and depicting how key events are understood and interpreted differently by various actors, Part II delves more thoroughly into the narratives. With particular detail, the author attends to the *esuli* memories of the “*foibe*,” the karstic pits in which Yugoslavian partisans summarily executed up to 50,000 Italians (and dissident Slovenes) in 1943 and 1945. Further, she shows their relationship to a more socially enveloping moral economy used to buttress contemporary land and remittance claims. Ballinger offers both supplemental and competing *rimasti* accounts of those perilous times in the latter chapters, from the life-and-death decisions to stay or remain that irrevocably divided kin networks to the free choices made by committed Italian socialists to work with the Yugoslavian government. In the concluding chapter, “Balkan Shadows, Balkan Mirrors,” Ballinger brings these recurrent issues to an ambivalent though satisfying conclusion by analyzing how they inform active, contemporary identity politics in the Istrian Peninsula. Here, she considers the emergent discourses of Istrian “hybridity” and their simultaneous deployment and rejection within the various political claims of Italians, Slovenes and Croats. For example, *esuli* point to the horrors of the *foibe* as a key catalyst for the exodus and many right-wing exile groups use these politicized experiences (whether direct or vicarious) to define themselves as the only “true” Istrians and thus gain a more favorable lobbying position with respect to local, national and supranational politics.

Although Ballinger productively traces the textual construction of the Istrian landscape through time and across space, she may overstate the theoretical and methodological importance of a study predominantly centered in an aging, economically depressed field site that she learned of only by happenstance and good fortunes (see the preface). In her epilogue, she claims to have “drawn on histories of displacement in Istria to urge a rethinking of scholarly conceptualizations of ‘fluid’ or deterritorialized identities” in a globalizing world (269), yet one cannot help but assess this ambitious claim with a bit of skepticism when considering that the evidencing material comes primarily from the narratives of elderly political actors. Only in the book’s final stanzas does the author directly discuss the young persons, State agents and local business leaders who critique the nostalgic ruminations of the elderly, politically involved *esuli* for their backward-looking character. Given that she notes her relative youth several times throughout and that the thrust of her argument gets a bit repetitive, one wonders

why Ballinger chose not to pursue an ethnography of, say, these generational social tensions within a context born of post-Fordist era socio-economic restructuring and a complicated placement within the European Union. Nevertheless, *History and Exile* is a notable achievement that evidences a hard-won knowledge of how “History” interacts dialectically with socio-political subjectivities: through time and in place.



Jerry Lord, M.A.
Program in Folklore, Public Culture and Cultural Studies
Department of Anthropology
University of Texas at Austin
jlord@mail.utexas.edu