

2. Places of Passage or Precarious Sanctuaries? The Negotiations between Refugees and State Authorities in an Upper Adriatic Borderland¹

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Abstract: This chapter looks at the role of the border cities of Sušak and Fiume, located in Yugoslavia and Italy, respectively, as pathways for refugees from the neighboring country in the inter-war period. Sušak and Fiume acted as transit spots for many escapees who were swiftly removed from the sensitive border area. Yet, the two cities were also conditional havens for a certain number of fugitives, whose presence along the border was deemed strategic for the national interests of the host country. The chapter explores the negotiations over matters of space and time that unfolded between refugees, on the one hand, and state authorities of both the host country and the country of origin on the other.

Keywords: Upper Adriatic; transit; Yugoslavia; Italy; refugees

It was a spring night in May 1930 when the Fiume-born Angelo Adam was spotted by an informant of the Italian police while seemingly plotting with the chief of the Yugoslav border police, Franjo Ujčić, and one unidentified interlocutor in the backroom of the Kauzlarić bar in Sušak, a city just a

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few steps away from the border with Italian Fiume.² The bar was known as a meeting place for opponents of the Italian government as well as a distribution point for anti-fascist press.³ Franjo Ujčić was not only in charge of ordinary matters. He was also the main organizer of the local branch of the counterintelligence, and he nurtured a cluster of informers that encompassed members of the pro-Yugoslav irredentist associations and other anti-fascist refugees. Angelo Adam had found himself at odds with the fascist authorities for his political commitment in support of the establishment of the Free State of Fiume.⁴ In 1926, he resettled across the border, in Sušak, where his political work unfolded on two levels. While building alliances with all the local stakeholders opposing the Italian government, he cultivated tight relationships with the Italian anti-fascists in France. It was also his efforts that made Fiume a transit spot for those escaping Italy through Yugoslavia.⁵

In 1932, Vjekoslav Servatzy resided together in Fiume with his wife and a maid in a house located in a steep street off what was then called Gabriele D'Annunzio Square. Servatzy officially made his living as a trader. When informed that two men would be waiting for him at noon at the bridge between Fiume and Sušak, he prudently decided not to show up.⁶ He reasonably feared that the appointment could turn into one of the ambushes organized by the Yugoslav authorities to eliminate the most wanted representatives of the Ustaša emigration abroad, those ready to resort to terrorism in the fight for Croatian independence against the Yugoslav state. The Sušak-based newspaper *Novi List* repeatedly reported on how Italian authorities were protecting the Ustaša and published a set of iconic images. One of these depicted Servatzy and Ante Pavelić, the future *poglavnik* (leader) of the quisling Independent State of Croatia, at a dinner table in Fiume alongside members of the Italian police and the local fascist party.⁷ Servatzy, like other members of the Ustaša movement, was not only busy smuggling anti-Yugoslav newspapers, but he also served as a contact for the Croatian separatists who made their way into Italy.

2 Državni arhiv u Rijeci (State Archives in Rijeka, henceforth DARI), Riječka Kvestura (53), A8, box 335, folder Prossen Vladimiro.

3 DARI, 53, A8, box 337, folder Radman Lucia.

4 The Free State of Fiume was established *de jure* in 1920 with the Rapallo Treaty to settle the territorial controversy over the city of Fiume, claimed by both Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and occupied by Gabriele D'Annunzio's legionnaires. It held the reins of power for less than one year in 1921–22, before being overthrown by a nationalist coup d'état.

5 DARI, 53, A8, box 218, folder Adam Angelo.

6 DARI, 53, A8, box 251, folder Devjak Dragica.

7 "Jedna večera u prefekturi na Rijeci," 1.

In the interwar period, Sušak and Fiume⁸ were home to a relatively small number of refugees, while also serving as transit spots for fugitives and migrants who crossed into the neighboring country. This chapter examines the negotiations between refugees from the neighboring country, the host states, and the country of origin, Yugoslavia and Italy respectively, over the length of time to be spent in the border area, in order to reflect upon the entanglement of the spatial and temporal dimensions of transit.

Space provides an ideal lens to explore the ambivalent relationship between Sušak and Fiume. The two cities were closely interconnected urban centers in the Habsburg Empire, developing as an integrated space in which individuals, trends, and goods circulated. The two urban areas were divided only by the Rječina/Eneo river, which flowed a few meters away from their main avenues. Mutual relations that had flourished before 1918 outlived the fragmentation of the post-Habsburg space and resulted in a myriad of cross-border practices. In the aftermath of the First World War, Sušak and Fiume were occupied first by an inter-Allied contingent, then the Italian army, and finally Gabriele D'Annunzio's legionnaires (in the case of Fiume) before being annexed in the end by two conflicting nation-states. In 1923, Sušak was allocated to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (from 1929 on, Yugoslavia), while Fiume officially became part of Italy in 1924.

Despite the establishment of an international border, the entire area remained a permeable space in which not only individuals and goods circulated but also ideas. Cigarettes, meat, and milk were imported into the neighboring state, as well as political leaflets and other media. Some of these imports escaped police control. Although international mobility necessitated the possession of permits to cross the border, the majority of the residents of the two cities could easily access these. People from both sides crossed the border on a daily basis to shop, relax, attend schools, and attend their workplaces, as well as to visit relatives and friends who lived on the other side. In 1923, between six and seven thousand individuals crossed the border daily, a testament to its permeability which did not change significantly in the years to come.⁹

After 1918, the two cities turned into poles of conflicting nationalisms. Sušak was a hotbed of anti-Italian organizations and a northwestern outpost of the central state. While the Yugoslav state in general was weakened by tensions between centralists (mainly, but not exclusively, represented by Serbs) and the Croatian parties advocating autonomy, Sušak stood out

8 In 1947, both urban centers were merged into what is the current city of Rijeka.

9 "Mjesne i društvene vijesti," 3.

within the territory predominantly inhabited by Croats because, until the late 1930s, the city maintained an overarching pro-Yugoslav orientation. Most of the local political forces believed that a border city needed the protection of a strong state and that the Karađorđević dynasty had the merit of having secured the city for the Yugoslav state.¹⁰ Similarly, Fiume had come to symbolize Italian irredentism after nationalists ardently claimed the city at the end of the First World War. As in the rest of the peninsula, the establishment of the fascist regime led to the outlawing of all political parties except for the fascist one. Additionally, “border fascism” was characterized by a strong anti-Slavic attitude which even went so far as to launch a ban on the use of Slavic languages.¹¹

The rise of nationalism made its way into the public space. On both sides, the urban landscape was strongly politicized and nationally coded, as epitomized by the proliferation of flags and uniforms. Political rallies, manifestations, and marches often took place in the proximity of the border. The simultaneous aspect of separation and integration of Sušak and Fiume became commonplace in the Yugoslav narrative, which used to refer to them as a brother and sister unnaturally divided by the frontier.¹² While Yugoslavia claimed sovereignty over Fiume, Italy wanted to use the city as a bridgehead for its imperialistic plans. These conflicting features were symbolically epitomized by the fact that the border coincided with a river that was nonetheless easy to cross.

The Sušak–Fiume borderscape¹³ was characterized by the entanglement of these two, only apparently conflicting, tensions: political strife on one hand, mundane interdependence on the other. This precarious balance reproduced on a smaller scale the course of relations between Yugoslavia and Italy, two neighbors divided by competing claims over the Adriatic area, which from time to time engaged in a search for a *modus vivendi*.

Hardly the consequence of good neighborly relations, the border's porousness went unchallenged for pragmatic reasons: the economic, cultural, and everyday life of the two cities strongly depended on the smoothness of border crossing. Nonetheless, the close proximity of the two urban centers often fueled political tensions, as nationalist demonstrations could be employed

10 Antić, *Povijest Rijeke*, 301.

11 Vinci, *Sentinelle della patria*.

12 “Sušak,” 15.

13 The definition of “borderscape” promises to capture the two antithetical features that characterize this case study: that of a territory shaped by the presence of a political barrier, with all the implications in terms of sovereignty, but also constructed by transnational flows. For a critical reading of the concept, see Dell’Agnese and Szary, “Borderscapes,” 4–13.



Fig. 2.1: An aerial view of Sušak and Fiume, 1931. Postcard showing the border between the two municipalities, as well as Yugoslavia and Italy. Copyright: Rijeka State Archives, RI-173.

as a strong-arm tactic directed toward the neighbors, who could clearly follow what was going on across the bridge. These conflicting practices were not only embedded in space but contributed to its construction as well, to the perceptions and lived experience of the individuals who occupied it or gravitated toward certain locations. The border area stood out as both a place of encounter and a site of conflict between the Italian and the Yugoslav states. On both sides, the fluidity created by the porous border was a constant challenge to the sovereignty of the nation-state. The provocative potential of proximity did not end there, though. The permeability of the border made Sušak and Fiume a center of infiltration by agents and informers and hubs for intelligence networks. Both cities established themselves as havens for their enemy's opponents, who could coordinate their political activities just a few hundred meters away from their country of origin under the protection of the host state.¹⁴

Between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s, both Sušak and Fiume hosted political refugees from Italy and Yugoslavia, respectively. In the first case, this entailed ethnic Slovenes and Croats from Fiume and Istria, who were involved in a myriad of irredentist organizations opposing the Italian state, but also former supporters of the Autonomist Party advocating for the re-establishment of the Free State of Fiume. Although on a smaller scale, as

14 Wille and Reckinger, "Exploring Constructions."

soon as domestic political conflicts escalated in Yugoslavia, Fiume hosted Croatian separatists, in particular members of the newly born movement of the Ustaša, which from its infancy enjoyed the protection and financial support of the Italian government. Besides acting as havens for the few, Sušak and Fiume were transit spots along the route as fugitives and migrants sought protection and a better life in the interior of the neighboring state. In other cases, Yugoslavia and Italy served as springboards to reach a third country. In particular, Austria was often the final destination of a planned escape route, with Italian anti-fascists crossing through Yugoslav territory and Croatian separatists fleeing via Italy.

Yet what made Sušak and Fiume peculiar places of passages was the fact that they were highly sought after by most refugees. The combination of proximity and separation described above allowed political refugees to continue taking part in the struggles in their country of origin while also benefiting from the protection of the host state. Nonetheless, the other side of the coin was tight control. The authorities of both countries tended to allow resettlement in the sensitive border area only to individuals whose presence was deemed strategically advantageous for national interests. Refugees were therefore compelled not only to display their loyalty but often tasked with intelligence missions, ranging from political propaganda to espionage. As witnessed in the cases of Adam and Servatzy, they also happened to be key figures in the infrastructure set up to facilitate the welcoming of refugees from the neighboring country.

Proximity was not only advantageous for political activists. For most refugees from the border area, Sušak and Fiume were perceived as part of a familiar environment, in which they could maintain social capital in the form of a network of acquaintances, keep using the language they felt most comfortable with—for Istrians, often a local dialect quite distinct from standard Croatian—and preserve close ties with loved ones who remained at home. Fugitives themselves were sometimes puzzled by the entanglement of proximity and separation that marked the border area. The writer Zvane Črnja captured this feature in his memoirs, recalling that one of the first things his family did after reaching Sušak and registering as refugees was to sit at a tavern along the border fence and look at the crowd on the Italian side. While enjoying the protection of Yugoslav sovereignty, they allegedly speculated on how the countries got close to each other in that particular place.¹⁵

The privileged position of going into exile “across the bridge” was not, however, within everyone’s reach. Of the many individuals in transit, only

15 Črnja, *Život u žrvnju*, 67.

a few were allowed to resettle in the border area; most were compelled to travel further. As we will see, whether Sušak and Fiume were merely stops along a flight route or became havens depended largely on the interactions between the refugees and the state authorities who could afford protection. Yet, the authorities of the country of origin also entered into those negotiations, in particular advocating the removal of refugees or attempting to bring them to their side.

This chapter is based on archival sources produced in Italy and Yugoslavia and currently located in the archives of Rijeka and Zagreb. Additionally, it engages with press sources, memoirs, and secondary literature. The case of refugees in both Sušak and Fiume allows for a joint investigation of two different national contexts, deeply interconnected through mobility but also divided by conflicting political aspirations. It thus transcends the nation-state framework that has characterized the majority of local historiography to examine two national cases in the place of their encounter, highlighting their mutual interdependence and the existence of similar patterns.

The chapter will offer an overview of scholarship that tackles the issue of transit in history, with a specific focus on the places of passage that were deeply informed by their nature of being temporary hubs along established migration routes. The second part will explore the interaction between authorities of both Sušak and Fiume and the majority of fugitives that went through them, who were swiftly relocated to the interior of the country or abroad. The following part will focus on those refugees who were allowed to remain in the border area, shedding light on the tasks the host state ascribed to them, and the conditional nature of the hospitality received. Subsequently, the chapter will show how the space of maneuver that refugees had gained by drawing on the conflicting relations between Italy and Yugoslavia gradually narrowed as a consequence of the appeasement between the two countries, thus downsizing the feature of transit spots that Sušak and Fiume had acquired.

State of the Field

Scholars have been inspired by the so-called spatial turn to contribute to migration and refugee studies by challenging the role of borders, highlighting continuities and liminal zones, and exploring the local implementation of national or international norms and regulations. In addition, focused micro-studies have shown the potential of investigating local processes of

decision-making.¹⁶ More recently, scholars have explored temporal dimensions to add a new level to their analysis of migration trajectories, ranging from objective temporal norms that institutional actors impose on those on the move to individual perceptions of time by migrants and refugees.¹⁷ As I argue in this chapter, the concept of “transit” provides a fruitful perspective to reflect on the intersection between the spatial and temporal dimensions. In particular, transit spots are places where authorities often force spatial and temporal constraints on people on the move, but they are also the site of struggle as refugees and migrants strive to resist these impositions.

Scholarship has sporadically explored transit as an intermediary phase between mobility and resettlement and a transient stage in long migration trajectories. A first call for an investigation dating back to the late 1990s brought into question a set of practices related to the condition of being in transit, which spanned from the circumstances of border crossing to the material culture of migrants who had left their country and found themselves in a location they regard as temporary.¹⁸ Some of the historical contexts explored are places of passage situated along well-established migration paths, which witnessed the stratification of different instances of voluntary and forced migration. Scholars have studied the port city of Marseille, which acted as a gate for both those entering France and those embarking to reach other locations. An entire economic system based on the needs of migrants in transit developed in the city.¹⁹ As scholarship has shown, starting in the late nineteenth century, big hubs in Central Europe became transit spots for Jewish refugees, who had to cope with the restrictive migration policies implemented in several countries.²⁰ In other cases, cities or countries played the role of transit hubs for a limited period under specific circumstances. Some Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany ended up stranded in Portugal, waiting to reach the Americas. This has allowed a thorough investigation of the “emotional geographies” connected to the universality of “being in transit.”²¹ As transient spaces where plans for the future were pondered, transit areas often represented turning points where migration trajectories

16 Pott, “Migrationsregime,” 107–34; Wille, *Spaces and Identities in Border Regions*; Langrogniet, *Neighbours of Passage*.

17 Cwerner, “The Times of Migration,” 7–36; Griffiths, Roger, and Anderson, “Migration, Time and Temporalities”; Baas and Sa Yeoh, “Introduction,” 161–68.

18 Green, “Trans-frontieres.”

19 Temime, *Marseille transit*; Regnard, “The Transit Stage,” 107–24.

20 Dohrn and Pickhan, *Transit und Transformation*; Brinkmann, “From Immigrants,” 47–57; Brinkmann, *Points of Passage*; Schmidt, “The Long March through Leipzig,” 307–29.

21 Kaplan, *Hitler's Jewish Refugees*.

were renegotiated. Additionally, scholars have investigated specific sites or facilities deployed as transit hubs, drawing particular attention to the stratification of uses and their role as *lieux de mémoire*.²²

Although historians have recently begun addressing the complexity and nonlinearity of the migration trajectories in Eastern Europe,²³ they have paid considerably less attention to transit countries or places of passage. One outstanding exception to this trend is research on Jewish refugees fleeing persecution and extermination in countries of Central Europe through Yugoslavia. There have been systematic studies of the attitudes of the Yugoslav authorities—who were eager to keep these unwanted guests from becoming a burden to the country—and the role of transnational networks to facilitate emigration, as well as of the strategies refugees used to respond to the increasing restrictions in almost all European countries.²⁴ Nonetheless, a comprehensive review of the various cases involving the concept of transit remains a lacuna in the field.

The peculiar spatial dimension that marks this case study stems from the fact that remaining in the border area was the favorite option of those who fled.²⁵ Although in many cases of transit in history (for example, that of the Jews in the 1930s and present-day migrants and refugees) temporary settlement in the border area was a condition imposed on refugees by norms and regulations shaped to prevent the migrants' entry into specific countries, in the case of refugees in Sušak and Fiume, this had a more ambivalent meaning. While mobility initially endowed refugees who left their homes with room to maneuver, the opportunity to remain in the places of passage was regarded as more desirable than resettlement to other, more faraway locations. Stability was, however, never permanently gained, for refugees who inhabited the border area were under the constant threat of being removed.

The gap in historiography stands in stark contrast with public discourse in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which frames those countries exclusively as a transit space for individuals eager to reach the western half of the continent. With the springing up of different cul-de-sacs where migrants are stranded at the periphery of Europe in the last twenty years, social scientists have elaborated extensively on transit zones, acknowledging the crucial role such places played in migration paths.²⁶ The concept of

22 Cassani, Simonetti, and Mira, *Camps of Transit*.

23 Steidl, *On Many Routes*; Zahra, "Migration," 142–54.

24 Ristović, "Jugoslavija," 21–43; Vulesica, "Yugoslavia," 199–220.

25 On considerations on immobility see Schewel, "Understanding Immobility," 328–55.

26 Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, *Transit Migration*.

transit has been critically examined as a politically constructed tool that tends to frame what is often a permanent, albeit precarious, condition as a temporary status.²⁷ Nevertheless, the set of negotiations taking place in transit zones—which potentially imply a different outcome of the original migration trajectory—still need to be examined in its historical context.

A Place of Passage for Many

Italy's annexation of the Julian March in 1918 triggered the flight of many Slovenes and Croats to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In the very aftermath of the war, the intense militarization of the border between Sušak and Fiume made other points along the border more attractive for illegal border crossings, but once the situation normalized, Sušak became one of the most popular gates for entering the Yugoslav state.²⁸ Once refugees crossed the border, they could count on a network of irredentist organizations that offered logistic support, certified the nationality of escapees, and managed their resettlement.²⁹ This system was embodied on the ground by the police commissioner Frane Ujčić,³⁰ who provided refugees with train tickets to reach the interior of Yugoslavia. State support was available to a wide range of social groups, not only to political activists—from intellectuals prevented from performing their jobs in Italy to unemployed workers and peasants affected by the post-1929 economic crisis and students from rural areas who sought an education across the border.

Although many refugees would have preferred to stay in Sušak, the local authorities usually tried to remove them as soon as possible. The length of time spent along the border varied according to their position in the hierarchies of belonging in the host state. According to the testimony of a former policeman, while Slovenes and Croatian refugees customarily stayed a few days in Sušak before being escorted to Zagreb, ethnic Italians regarded as political refugees never spent more than twenty-four hours in the city.³¹ In the case of fugitives who were other than ethnic Serbs, Croats, or Slovenes, not just the city of Sušak but all of Yugoslavia was meant to be

27 Düvell, Molodikova, and Collyer, *Transit Migration in Europe*; Fontanari, *Lives in Transit*.

28 "Iz Saveza emigrantskih društava," 5; Giron, "Prilike na riječkom području," 237.

29 DARI, 53, A3, box 197, folder 52; "Osnivanje Jugoslavenske matice na Sušaku," *Istra*, July 1, 1932, 5.

30 DARI, Riječka prefektura (8), box 136, *Fuoriusciti e propaganda slava in Patria*, February 4, 1929.

31 DARI, 53, A9, box 461, folder Srdoc Ermenegildo.

a springboard to reach other countries. The escape route through Fiume and Sušak was popular among Italian anti-fascists who then headed to France through Austria.³² The Yugoslav authorities often provided them with forged documents to facilitate their departure from the country.³³

Nonetheless, refugees who lived further away also returned repeatedly to the border area to meet their loved ones. Giulio Cherbavic, who had moved to Belgrade, took advantage of a trip to Sušak to talk with his mother across the border gate.³⁴ Refugees who were prevented from returning to the Italian territory used the border area as a place of encounter with their family members, who would join on the Italian side and converse through a barbed wire fence. Such scenes have been captured in memoirs, short stories, and poems. These encounters happened in the middle of a crowded square dominated on one side by Sušak's main hotel and meeting place, the Hotel Continental. In his poem *Prid Kontinentalom*, the poet Mate Balota (pseudonym for Mijo Mirković) recounts an encounter with his mother, describing himself "along the barbed wire fence, looking for her, with a scarf on her head."³⁵ Perhaps the most iconic place for rendezvous was the chapel of Ivan Nepomuk (John of Nepomuk),³⁶ built on the bridge connecting the two cities. After the border was set to run through it, it became accessible from both sides.³⁷ Another opportunity for refugees to meet their families opened up on the feast day of the Assumption of Mary (August 15), celebrated at the nearby Trsat sanctuary, when, for several years, border controls were lifted.³⁸

In many cases, migration trajectories were not one-directional. The border was permeable to such an extent that the less politicized refugees flowed back and forth between Italy and Yugoslavia for fairly mundane reasons—for example, pupils attending Yugoslav schools visited their families in Italian areas during the summer holidays. They either crossed the border undetected or bribed the Italian guards.³⁹

32 DARI, 53, A9, box 461, folder Srdoc Ermenegildo; DARI, 53, A8, folder Cimadori Alfredo.

33 DARI, 8, box 136, Propaganda ed attività antifascista, July 1, 1929; Fiduciari in Italia della Concentrazione antifascista, February 13, 1929; Apih, *Italia*, 33.

34 DARI, 53, A8, box 241, folder Cherbavic Giulio.

35 For the poem *Prid Kontinentalom* by Mate Balota, see Šetić, *Istra*, 131–33; see also Car Emin, "Bjeganac," 20.

36 John of Nepomuk, a saint venerated primarily in East-Central Europe, is often to be found in the proximity of bridges and rivers, as he was thought to protect from disastrous events such as floodings. I thank Michal Frankl for drawing my attention to this.

37 Moravček, "Jedan grad u devet država."

38 Tumpić, *Istarska emigracija*, 36–39; Šetić, *Istra*, 122–33.

39 Šetić, *Istra*, 152; Cerovac, *Antun Cerovac Tončić*, 96–97.



Fig. 2.2: The new bridge over the river Rječina/Eneo separating Fiume and Sušak, 1929. The right side of the photograph features Hotel Continental. Copyright Rijeka State Archives, RI-131.

While the Yugoslav state deemed some refugees politically harmless, it was suspicious in other instances due to the refugees' political orientation. This was the case of communists in a country such as interwar Yugoslavia, which had banned the local communist party in 1921 and reframed itself as a bulwark of anti-communism. All around Europe, communist activists learned to count on transnational networks and became used to living under the threat of expulsion. Foreign communists on the run had to negotiate much harder than other refugees with the Yugoslav authorities to obtain the green light to reach other countries. In some instances, the Yugoslav police attempted to exploit their vulnerable position to extort information on their Yugoslav comrades. This was the case of the unorthodox communist Carlo Godina, born in Trieste, who had spent half of his life wandering around Europe. Although his request to stay in Yugoslavia was rejected, he was finally allowed to reach Austria. Both his sisters were Yugoslav nationalists residing in Sušak.⁴⁰ Similarly, thanks to his contacts on the ground, the Trieste-born communist Giorgio Jaksetich was sent to Austria rather than being repatriated to Italy, as required by

40 Hrvatski državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives, henceforth HDA), Savska Banovina. Odjeljak upravnog odjeljenja za državnu zaštitu (145), box 103, 32652.

the Italian authorities.⁴¹ In 1927, the Fiume-born communist Antun Ongaro was allowed to reach Austria through Yugoslavia, but he was barred from returning to Yugoslavia.⁴²

The oscillating bilateral relations opened up narrow windows of opportunity for political activists who were able to sneak through the cracks of two radically anti-communist systems. Personal connections often played a crucial role. The Fiume communists Mario Cettina and Maria Coholj were allowed to resettle in the interior of Yugoslavia, a move that was perhaps facilitated by Coholj's brother, Rodolfo, a member of the organization Narodna Odbrana (National Defense) and a collaborator with the Yugoslav police.⁴³ Narodna Odbrana was one of several nationalist organizations that developed a tight relation with the interwar Yugoslav state and acted on its behalf in setting up intelligence networks, intimidating political opponents, and planning attacks against Italy.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it seems likely that the terms for the resettlement of Cettina and Coholj required them to abstain from any political engagement and present themselves as generically anti-Italian—although they still appeared, according to an Italian diplomatic source, “as revolutionaries rather than nationalists.”⁴⁵ Although the course of international relations provided refugees with some space to maneuver, it is also true that the conditional hospitality they enjoyed in Yugoslavia depended on ups and downs in the relations between the two countries. While the Italian and Yugoslav police occasionally took joint action against communist cells,⁴⁶ it also happened that communists from Fiume were allowed to reside in Sušak because the potential harm they represented for Italian interests was seen to outweigh any risk that they might spread pernicious ideas within the host country.⁴⁷

Negotiations similar to those described above in Sušak happened on the other side of the border as well. Italian authorities in Fiume granted passage to opponents of the Yugoslav regime, namely Ustaša supporters and individuals labeled as Croatian separatists.⁴⁸ The latter were in most cases

41 Diminić, *Sjećanja*, 47.

42 HDA, Zbirka spijunaža i peta kolona (Grupa XI) 1358, folder 1064.

43 DARI, 53, A8, box 244, folder Cohilj Rodolfo; Sobolevski and Giuricin, *Il partito comunista*, 245.

44 Giomi and Petrunaro, “Voluntary Associations.”

45 DARI, 53, A8, box 241, folder Cettina Mario; DARI, 53, A8, box 244, folder Coholj Maria and folder Coholj Rodolfo.

46 Antić, *Povijest Rijeke*, 301; Lompar, “‘The Red Scare’ in Yugoslavia,” 117–24.

47 DARI, 8, box 1; box 104, Moretti Giuseppe zanelliano, R. vice consolato d'Italia in Susak, April 30, 1930; box 136, Appunto del R. vice console in Sussak, March 27, 1929.

48 Diminić, *Sjećanja*, 19.

supporters of the Croatian Peasant Party who were at odds with the Yugoslav regime for advocating autonomy for the regions with a predominantly Croatian population.

In most cases, refugees from Yugoslavia were allowed to reach Austria or dispatched to other Italian locations.⁴⁹ In the autumn of 1932, Antonio Potočnik,⁵⁰ a supporter of the Croatian Peasant Party who found refuge in Italy, was banned from remaining in Fiume as this would have provided a reason for the Yugoslav police to surveil him, but he received permission to reach Austria.⁵¹ The former soldier Osman Imamović, who defected from the Yugoslav army and reached Fiume, asked to be put in contact with the Ustaša, but he was instead sent to Austria.⁵² After assassinating a gendarme who allegedly persecuted him because of his pro-Croatian orientation, Peter⁵³ Šarlja crossed the border into the Zadar enclave and then reached Fiume, where he was hosted by the Ustaša leader Mate Devčić. Officials of the Italian Ministry of the Interior wondered whether to resettle him in Italy or allow him to emigrate.⁵⁴ The police defector Gavriilo Šćekić asked to be sent to Austria if staying in Italy was not possible.⁵⁵ Similarly, Milan Kalafatić, who was in contact with some Croatian nationalists, agreed to be sent to Austria.⁵⁶

In other cases, resettlement in the proximity of the border was tolerated, provided that refugees were ready to refrain from any political activity. This was the case of Rodolfo Antonio Sersich, a Fiume-born Yugoslav citizen who came to the attention of the Yugoslav police due to his contact with Pavelić; in Fiume, he could draw on the support of his uncle, who was willing to provide for him.⁵⁷ Political activism was allowed and even encouraged only when deemed useful for the host country's interests.

49 DARI, 53, A8, box 354, folder Sersich Rodolfo Antonio.

50 Both Italian and Croatian sources tend to, respectively, Italianize and Croatize personal names regardless of their original version. Furthermore, individuals from the border area were used to drawing on multiple versions of their personal names according to circumstances. Therefore, the author has decided to maintain the version as reported in the sources for individuals from the multilingual border area and restore the Croatian version for individuals from other Yugoslav areas, where the use of an Italianized version was unlikely.

51 DARI, 53, A9, box 453, folder Potocnik Antonio.

52 DARI, 53, A9, box 430, folder Imamovic Osman.

53 The personal name Peter, mentioned by Italian sources, is possibly a mistranscription of the name Petar.

54 DARI, 53, A9, box 463, folder Šarlija Petar.

55 DARI, 53, A9, box 463, folder Scekcic Gavriilo.

56 DARI, 53, A9, box 432, folder Kalafatic Milan.

57 DARI, 53, A8, box 354, folder Sersich Rodolfo Antonio,

A Conditional Refuge for Few

The tense relations between Yugoslavia and Italy proved fertile ground for the proliferation of irredentist circles, which were particularly dense in the border area. Political refugees often stood out as key figures. Many of them had been approached by the intelligence agencies of their host countries, and a few of them found a profitable way to cooperate. Both those with strong political capital and those who used the border area as a springboard to undertake missions into the neighboring countries managed to negotiate their resettlement in the proximity of the border.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Sušak had already hosted some Fiumian refugees who escaped the city after D'Annunzio's takeover in September 1919. Among them, the most politicized were more likely to remain in Sušak, while all the others were relocated in the interior of the country. After 1922, Riccardo Zanella, the legitimate president of the Free State of Fiume who was overthrown in a nationalist coup d'état, found refuge in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. A number of supporters followed him there, including hundreds of policemen recently hired by his government. Zanella settled in Zagreb first, and then, in 1924, he moved to Belgrade.⁵⁸ The collaborative climate allowed by the Treaty of Rome signed in 1924 between Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes temporarily resulted in the Yugoslav decision to stop welcoming new refugees from the neighboring country. Zanella and his entourage were tolerated but not encouraged to undertake any action.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the truce did not last long.

From 1927, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes strengthened its ties with France, which fueled hostility against neighboring Italy.⁶⁰ These tensions erupted in the border area, as Sušak renewed its role as a haven for political opponents of the fascist regime, thus becoming a thorn in the side of the Italian government.⁶¹ This coincided with Zanella's attempt at carving out a niche for himself as a mediator between the Italian anti-fascists in France and the Yugoslav authorities. Against the backdrop of a renewed irredentist climate in Yugoslavia, the central government in Belgrade eagerly supported Autonomist refugees in the country, thus making their presence in Sušak visible. In 1930, Zanella opened an office in Sušak to distribute economic

58 Toševa Karpowicz, "Riccardo Zanella," 41–53; see also Dalma, "Svjedočastvo," 48.

59 DARI, Privremene vlade u Rijeci (3), box 46.

60 Bucarelli, "Momenti e problemi," 51.

61 Parlato, *Mezzo secolo di Fiume*, 115.

subsidies to refugees and pay off debts to the former employees of the Free State of Fiume.⁶² Sušak became the epicenter of a far-reaching network of pro-Autonomist refugees in the orbit of Angelo Adam. Some of them regarded the Fiumian regional background as their main feature of identity. Some others shared Adam's profile of a republican who had gone through pro-Italian engagement—in some cases as D'Annunzio's legionnaires—and later joined the Autonomist movement. However, this did not prevent them from collaborating with Yugoslav state actors nurturing anti-Italian nationalism.

In the framework of the authoritarian turn that swept Yugoslavia after 1929 with the establishment of the king's dictatorship, the fear of Italian imperialism was deployed to promote an "integral" Yugoslav identity that obscured other national affiliations to reinforce the concept of a uniform Yugoslav nation.⁶³ At the same time, the crackdown on political opponents particularly targeted the Ustaša supporters, who started drawing on financial support and protection from Italy. Support for the enemies of the enemy developed in parallel in both countries and fueled the two counter-movements. The peculiar geography of both Sušak and Fiume provided refugees with the protection of the neighboring state while the permeability of the border allowed them to actively participate in the political life of their former hometowns. While their political activities at home went underground, their presence remained tangible not least because they were still visible from across the bridge.

A number of personalities whose presence along the border was deemed to be strategic for national interests were allowed to reside in Sušak. The renowned intellectual Viktor Car Emin was not only a member of the most prominent refugee organization, Istra, and a pro-Yugoslav propagandist, but he was also involved in nationalist organizing. In 1932, together with other members of the Sušak establishment, he founded the organization Iron Guard, aimed at fighting against the enemies of "Yugoslav unity."⁶⁴ Collaboration with Yugoslav intelligence services often provided refugees with employment in workplaces framed as part of a patriotic infrastructure. Thanks to Ujčić's recommendation, the Istrian Emilio Poplatnik obtained a job at Jadranska Plovidba, the main shipping company endowed with a state-building purpose centered on the strengthening of the ties between Yugoslavia's coastal towns.⁶⁵ Similarly, Giuseppe Frol served as a contact

62 DARI, 53, A8, box 249, folder Declich Antonio; DARI, 53, A8, box 293, folder Lasciak Luigi.

63 Zobec, "Salvaging the 'Unredeemed' in Italy," 58.

64 DARI, 53, A3, box 200, folder 180.

65 DARI, 53, A8, box 332, folder Poplatnik Emilio.

for other refugees passing through Sušak on their way to the interior of Yugoslavia. He was employed as a treasurer at the Martinšćica summer camp, run by the irredentist organization *Jadranska Straža*,⁶⁶ which provided the stage for initiatives promoting pan-Yugoslav sentiments. Angelo Adam, a contact for both Poplatnik and Frol, had himself been employed at the Martinšćica camp for a time.⁶⁷

Collaboration with the intelligence services could pay off financially, but it also made informers vulnerable and liable to be blackmailed. When Frol provided shelter for his brother, suspected of being a Croatian separatist, Yugoslav police threatened his dismissal and relocation.⁶⁸ Refugees were subjected to police control, and they could be removed from Sušak if their loyalty to the Yugoslav authorities seemed to waver. Giuseppe Moretti, a Zanella supporter, was transferred to Split because he was suspected of collaborating with the Italian police.⁶⁹

The refugees' right to reside along the border was constantly under scrutiny. Both cities were precarious sanctuaries where refugees lived conditionally, aware that any misstep could result in their removal. This is best illustrated by a sensationalist case that made the headlines of Yugoslav newspapers in 1926. Alfredo Sirica, a political refugee born in Southern Italy but residing in Sušak, was caught in the middle of an obscure affair. Two other Sušak-based refugees, Francesco Codrich and Celso Galliani, allegedly tried to kidnap and dispatch him to Italy, a plot that ended in failure. Sirica accused them of being on the payroll of the Italian police, while Galliani and Codrich turned this allegation against Sirica. Codrich and Galliani, who had reached Yugoslavia after killing a fascist and two Italian border guards, respectively, were regarded as political refugees.⁷⁰ Arguably, their political status protected them from extradition, but the murky circumstances in which they had become involved cost them their right to stay. Although both men were acquitted in a Yugoslav court, they were compelled to relocate to Serbia.⁷¹ Similarly, Sirica ended up residing in Zagreb under strict surveillance. Perhaps in an attempt to improve his position, he stressed both his anti-fascist and anti-communist credentials in an interview to the Zagreb-based daily *Jutarnji list*.⁷²

66 "Ferijalna kolonija je oživjela," 5.

67 DARI, 53, A8, box 218, folder Adam Angelo.

68 DARI, 53, A8, box 261, folder Frol Giuseppe.

69 DARI, 53, A8, box 317, folder Moretti Giuseppe.

70 DARI, 53, A8, box 270, folder Grohovac Fanny (Francesca).

71 DARI, 53, A8, box 244, folder Codrich Francesco; box 262, folder Galliani Celso.

72 DARI, 8, box 2; "Spiunaška afera na Sušaku," 5.

The variety of actors involved certainly endowed refugees with some room for maneuver. In 1929, Adam positioned himself at the center of a transnational network including all the local stakeholders whose common interest was opposition to the Italian fascist regime—from Autonomists and French-based Italian anti-fascists to pro-Yugoslav irredentists from the Julian March and the Yugoslav police.⁷³ The anti-Italian platform and spatial proximity fostered an odd collaboration between progressive forces on the one hand and organizations financed by the Yugoslav state and inspired by authoritarian tendencies on the other. Adam and other Autonomists cultivated contacts with members of the most extreme pro-Yugoslav nationalist organizations such as Orjuna, characterized by fascist methods and involved in sabotage activities in Italy. According to a source, Adam's contacts with Orjuna were key in acquiring him the right to stay in Sušak.⁷⁴ Italian anti-fascists willing to expatriate also relied on the support of nationalist organizations, which were under the influence of the Yugoslav intelligence services.⁷⁵

Refugees' political capital was weighted against the ups and downs of relations between Italy and Yugoslavia. In 1931, when the Yugoslav government started pursuing a compromise with Italy, Adam was removed from Sušak and sent to Zagreb as a sign of goodwill toward the Italian government.⁷⁶ Within a couple of months, however, Adam was able to return to Sušak and resume his previous activities, drawing on the support of some of his institutional protectors. Arguably, a change in the course of bilateral relations allowed him to negotiate his way back into the border area.

What emerges from the sources on Sušak is the atmosphere of a border town where the ambiguous boundaries between anti-fascist and anti-Italian sentiments allowed the temporary establishment of a platform featuring actors of differing political orientation. This was the case of the ambivalent relationship between Autonomists and other anti-fascists, on one hand, and the Yugoslav police, on the other. Likewise, rumors circulated about possible contacts between Croatian separatists and communists against the Yugoslav state. While perhaps not openly cooperating, these different actors in Fiume

73 DARI, 53, A3, box 197, folder 52; DARI, 8, box 136, Fuoriusciti. Appunti del console italiano a Susak, February 4, 1929. For a detailed reconstruction of Adam's political networks, see Mantelli, "Galahad in Carnaro," 179–88.

74 DARI, 53, A9, box 444, folder Melada Antonio.

75 Kalc, "L'emigrazione," 42–45.

76 *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, 320. Other sources mention his removal to Zagreb as a consequence of his having organized a strike at the paper factory. See DARI, 53, A8, box 217, folder Adam Angelo. See also Dassovich, *I treni*, 119.

who opposed the centralist government were temporarily drawn together by their common political interests and attempts in resisting the repressive measures taken against them.⁷⁷ The Yugoslav government perceived its various opponents as part of the same threat, as was emphasized when Ujčić was summoned to Belgrade in 1932 to report on the situation on the border. He received new instructions on measures to be taken against “emigrants” and communists.⁷⁸

To some extent, Fiume played a role comparable to that of Sušak as a haven for Ustaša refugees. As the authorities cracked down on Croatian separatism in the late 1920s, fugitives started to seek support in Italy and Hungary, the two neighboring states opposing Yugoslavia's territorial claims.⁷⁹ It was in this context that Italy began not only allowing Ustaša political refugees into the country but also providing financial aid for initiatives meant at destabilizing Yugoslavia.⁸⁰ Thanks to the connivance of the Italian authorities with some well-established emigrants, the Italian enclaves of Zadar and Fiume, strategically positioned as bridgeheads for defense from Yugoslavia, became transit spots for both propaganda materials and weapons and explosives.⁸¹ In particular, Vjekoslav Servatzky's presence in Fiume was of concern to the Yugoslav authorities, who repeatedly tried to infiltrate his entourage.⁸²

The year 1932 witnessed a low point in relations between Italy and Yugoslavia. It is clearly not a coincidence that this year also saw the first meeting between Mussolini and Pavelić and the formal establishment of an office in charge of providing support for the Ustaša within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸³ This tactical rapprochement made its way into the local debate; the Fiume-based newspaper *La Vedetta d'Italia*, for example, featured articles by Ante Pavelić on the geopolitical implications of an upcoming Croatian independence.⁸⁴

In May 1932, the Ustaša were held responsible for a bombing in Sušak in the wake of a pro-Yugoslav meeting.⁸⁵ In August 1932, *Novi List* reported

77 HDA, 145, box 107, Grzetić Ivan, hrvatski emigrant, boravak na Rijeci.

78 HDA, 145, box 79, Izvještaj sa Sušaka o sve jaćoj akciji emigranata i komunista.

79 Hamerli, “Croatian Political Refugees,” 624–46.

80 Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 33–34, 158.

81 HDA, 145, box 79, Izvještaj sa Sušaka o sve jaćoj akciji emigranata i komunista; box 84, Separatistički antidržavni letki u Rijeci, Kretanje emigranata.

82 Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 35; DARI, 53, A9, box 448, folder Marco Ostric.

83 Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 4.

84 “Il disarmo, Belgrado e la Croazia,” 1; “La Croazia e i paesi danubiani,” 3.

85 See “Un attentato a Sussak,” 1; “La ‘Pravda’ furibonda,” 1.

on the arrest of two workers accused of smuggling weapons and separatist press from Fiume. The instigators, Servatzy and Devčić, had allegedly told the smugglers not to be scared of the Italian police when crossing the border illegally.⁸⁶ During those months, several Ustaša leaders, ranging from Pavelić to Gustav Perčec and Andrija Artuković, visited Fiume.⁸⁷ Servatzy served as the man on the ground, maintaining contacts with the Italian police.⁸⁸ The scheming in the border area culminated in September 1932 with an attempt to provoke an unsuccessful armed uprising in the Yugoslav region of Lika. This, as well as other plots meant to destabilize the Yugoslav state, were planned in Fiume and Zadar, where the infiltrators found a haven. *La Vedetta* described the raid as evidence of Yugoslavia's fragility while praising "the noble Lika mountain people" for setting the example of a future uprising.⁸⁹ An article in *Novi List* complained about the hospitality of Fiumian authorities toward the opponents of the Yugoslav government by reporting on the case of a Yugoslav fugitive whom Fiumian fascists had welcomed as a political emigrant, only to eventually realize that he was an ordinary fraudster.⁹⁰

The peculiar combination of interdependence of Sušak and Fiume allowed political refugees to live transnationally: they took part in the political struggles of both countries, enjoying the protection of the host states while maintaining their influence in the political life of their country of origin. Their role in exerting pressure on the neighboring country led to their being permitted to position themselves along the border, although this was generally denied other fugitives, but it also made them more vulnerable to and dependent on the shifting interests of the two hosting countries. On both Italian and Yugoslav soil, refugees worked hard to comply with the conditions authorities set, but, from time to time, they were also able to impose their own agendas. Both states attempted to infiltrate the communities of political refugees across the border,⁹¹ but it was also refugees who were able to penetrate the institutional circles in the neighboring country.⁹² In some cases, refugees even allegedly tried to make the most of their situation by playing a double game and collaborating with the intelligence of both countries.⁹³

86 "Kako Talijani favoriziraju krijumčarenje oružja," 1; *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, 226.

87 Krizman, *Ante Pavelić*, 96, 101, 186; Ferrara, "Il separatismo croato," 470.

88 M. Hr., "Na Rijeci se priprema oružje," 1.

89 "La situazione interna in Jugoslavia," 1.

90 "Pobjegao iz Sušaka na Rijeku," 1.

91 See HDA, 1358, box 69, 1064; DARI, box 437, folder Beslic Stefano.

92 See DARI, 53, A8, box 217, folder Adam Angelo.

93 DARI, 53, A8, box 354, folder Sgardelli Iginio.

The Twilight of Sušak and Fiume as Transit Spots

Already in 1933, a cautious thaw in relations between Italy and Yugoslavia started affecting the attitude of both countries toward refugees. After the Lika incursion, the Ustaša movement focused its activities on the Italian peninsula, and its key personalities left Rijeka.⁹⁴ In the same year, Adam was reported to be experiencing financial difficulties, and he ultimately left for France.⁹⁵ From 1934, when Italy started seeking a rapprochement with the French government against Germany, the preconditions for a détente in the Adriatic area were set.⁹⁶ The thaw between Italy and Yugoslavia was fostered by the appointment of the pro-Axis prime minister Milan Stojadinović in Yugoslavia.⁹⁷ As a consequence, the activities of the political refugees in both Sušak and Fiume were nearly brought to a halt. The shift in the geopolitical constellation greatly reduced the space in which refugees could maneuver. Although groups of Ustašas remained in Italy until 1937, they were no longer a tool of pressure in the border area, while international pressure led to Pavelić's detention in Italy. In the same years, Zanella, the refugee leader who had once drawn on the consistent financial support of Yugoslavia, moved to France.⁹⁸

The Adriatic appeasement led to reinforced mutual cooperation against common targets of repression other than communists. In 1936, one of the first occurrences of open collaboration between the Italian and Yugoslav authorities was reported with dismay by the Italian anti-fascist press. Following a raid on over one hundred anti-fascists in Fiume, the Sušak police arrested an individual suspected of facilitating illegal border crossings and the distribution of anti-fascist press.⁹⁹ While open protection for political refugees was brought to a halt, they could still count on some patronage from the neighboring state, which granted them a sort of amnesty or milder punishments. In 1937, the Italian police repatriated ten emigrants to the Yugoslav authorities, who gave assurances they would not be persecuted. In

94 HDA, 145, box 115, Hrvatski emigranti na Rijeci; box 118, Vrbovanje ljudi u Italiji da izvrše neredu u Jugoslaviji; box 126, Podaci o ustaškoj akciji u Rijeci; Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 43, 46, 47, 55; Krizman, *Ante Pavelić*, 136.

95 Dassovich, *I treni*, 248–49.

96 Although historians still debate the question of Italian responsibility in the assassination of King Alexander in Marseille in 1934, that year certainly marked the beginning of a détente between the two countries. See Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 72; and Iuso, *Il fascismo*, 75–76.

97 Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 68.

98 Dassovich, *I treni*, 133.

99 "Arresti in massa a Fiume," 2.

the same year, the Croatian separatist Andrea¹⁰⁰ Luetić was handed over to the Sušak authorities. He returned to his hometown, Šibenik, where the sources suggest he was reinstated in his job on condition of forgoing any political activity.¹⁰¹ Refugees were no longer pawns in an underground intelligence war waged across the Rječina border. With the Belgrade Pact in 1937, Italy agreed to suppress Ustaša activity in the country.¹⁰² Similarly, the Yugoslav government gradually neutralized the organizations of the Istrian emigrants.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the shape of negotiations between refugees and state authorities over space and time in the border area. While many refugees were able to spend only a limited amount of time in the places of passage before being relocated somewhere else, a handful of them were allowed to resettle in the border area. The right to reside near the border paid off politically, but it could be revoked if refugees failed to comply with the host country's expectations or events unfolded in such a way that their presence became inconvenient. The length of the refugees' stay in transit spots was initially conditioned by their political capital, but it was further negotiated later, both as a consequence of their behavior and perceived loyalty but also due to external circumstances. While a stable presence along the border was never gained once and for all for refugees, they kept inhabiting the border area conditionally, under the constant threat of removal.

Investigation into the role of Sušak and Fiume as places of passage or precarious sanctuaries shows how refugees' paths were shaped by the course of the relationships between their former and new home. From time to time, Yugoslavia and Italy staged irredentist campaigns and raised tensions, while keeping an eye on the possibility of a rapprochement. This created some room for certain political groups or individuals to maneuver, but it also made it more difficult for them to foresee future developments and their potential repercussions.

The case study of Fiume and Sušak also allows a broader reflection on transit spots located in borderlands along well-established migration

100 The personal name Andrea, mentioned by Italian sources, is possibly an Italianized version of the name Andrej or Andrija.

101 DARI, 53, A9, box 440, folder Luetić Andrea.

102 Gobetti, *Dittatore per caso*, 105.

103 Kalc, "L'emigrazione," 21; Zobec, "Salvaging the 'Unredeemed' in Italy," 60.

routes. The nature of refugees' stay in those places—either final settlement or a transient phase in a longer migration path—was the outcome of a constant interaction between state actors and refugees. It was undoubtedly the host state that decided whether refugees were deserving enough to stay. Yet, from time to time, the countries of origin were able to influence the attitude of the neighbors towards refugees. Thus, the peculiar in-betweenness of the transit spots such as Sušak and Fiume implied a twofold negotiation between refugees, on the one hand, and the authorities of both the host country and the country of origin, on the other.

Finally, refugees not only used to engage in negotiations with the two authorities to achieve their aims. They also contributed to setting up the political and logistical infrastructure that ensured a safe passage or a more extended stay. Space and time along the border never ceased to be matters of negotiation. Rather, transit spots were co-constructed by states and refugees that determined the length of stay, its stable or transient nature, and the extent of conditionality that refugees had to endure.

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