



## **Report on the XXXIV Congress of the International Commission for Military History held in Trieste, Italy 31<sup>st</sup> August to 5<sup>th</sup> September 2008**

### *Military conflicts and civilian populations: total wars, limited wars, asymmetric wars*

Trieste lies at the head of the Adriatic Sea, a sole deep-water port in a region where, like Venice, land and sea intermingle rather indeterminately into each other. Like many Italian cities it had a distinguished communal history as a commercial centre in the Middle Ages, later becoming part of the Habsburg Empire and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the base for the Austro-Hungarian imperial fleet. In 1918, an Italian expeditionary force daringly seized the port in the flush of victory. In 1944-45, the claim proved harder to assert in the face of Marshal Tito's Partisans, but the Western powers ensured that it was retained in Italian hands in 1954, and has been ever since. Newly independent Slovenia might cast envious eyes on its natural outlet (which it calls Trst), but the days of *coup de main* are gone, and instead its companies are quietly buying up unused quays to profit from the economic benefits of the Eurozone.

As might be expected from a decayed (if reviving) port parts of the city are pretty industrial and run-down, but at its centre the city revels in some glorious architecture. On the hill where the original Roman town was built, with the ghostly columns of the Forum still standing, is an impressive medieval castle, 'modernised' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later to meet the requirements of gunpowder warfare. Beside it stands a magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century cathedral decked with Roman statues, Byzantine mosaics and some beautiful medieval frescoes. Below the Roman theatre has been excavated and there is a fine collection of Roman statuary, tombs and mosaic floors in the cellars of the castle. But the main impression that the city provides is of a prosperous *fin de siecle* place, in which the municipal buildings play a great role. This is a tribute both to Trieste's independent past and to more recent concerns to assert the Italian nature of its population.

The conference was formidably well organised by the Italian MoD. Representative of all three Services were easily recognisable by their khaki, blue and brilliantly white uniforms along with many other institutions unknown in the UK such as the Carabinieri and the Ministry of Finance troops. On the first, Sunday, evening the flag raising in the town square brought together an array of military and civil uniformed men and women, with the pride of place going to the Bersaglieri marching – or rather running – band. There was also a guard of honour of cavalymen, carrying lances (but on foot), which also accompanied the Deputy Minister for Defence when he opened the conference on the Monday morning. The conference had a high media profile in Italy, with its proceedings apparently being discussed on TV, although it did have to compete with the imminent collapse of Alitalia and the Republican convention for airtime. It was also very attended, with 170 delegates from all over the world, although those from the United States made up a quarter of that number.

The conference was magnificently opened by Professor Massimo de Leonardis, who gave a wide ranging introduction to attitudes on warfare from Plato, through St Augustine and Macchiavelli to Michael Howard, considering its impact upon the unfortunate civilians caught up in it. The timelessness of the issue of trying to separate warriors from the rest and the difficulty of enforcing restraints was summed up by a deathless quote from Viet Nam that: *'We had to destroy the village to save it'!*



The programme then proceeded in a roughly chronological fashion from the Ancient world to the present day, although the paucity of pre-modern material meant that some sessions were grouped by theme rather than date. Also, although there was a printed programme, and revisions to that programme, and revisions to those revisions, it is impossible to find a document that accurately records what actually took place. This was not the fault of the organising committee but rather due the vagaries of the human condition as some speakers did not attend or could not perform when originally planned (and the Turks did not turn up at all). Also, after the first two sessions (I spoke in the second) there two or even three parallel presentations going on, so one had to be quick off the mark to get to hear what one wanted to hear. This makes it difficult to give more than a partial view of the event.

The papers which made the most impression on me were as follows: Prof. Andre Wessels dealt with the long-term and formative impact of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) up South Africa as a country and a nation into the present day. This stemmed from the ruthless efficiency of Kitchener's policy of separating the Commandos from their communities and families and the use of concentration camps (in the original sense of the word); although I did remind the audience of the anti-war and charitable movements, which also took place in Britain at the time. In a similar vein, an Argentinian lawyer, Prof. Alejandro Amendolara gave a very interesting paper on the military government of the Falklands-Malvinas, stressing Brig Menendez's adherence to the Geneva Conventions during the (happily brief) occupation. Dr Geoffrey Magargee dealt, in some detail, with the order of 10<sup>th</sup> October 1941 in respect of the Wehrmacht's treatment of partisans and the wider civilian population, concluding that it entirely backfired as it encouraged the Russians to recognise that the Nazi regime was actually worse than the Soviet one, and so worth opposing. There were actually many more interesting papers which I do not have space to discuss here, but I can suggest that the proceedings will make a good read when they appear next year.

And what about the *après ski*? Well, there were two musical concerts with accompanying receptions held in Trieste. The first was very original, featuring the local wind orchestra which played a variety of very topical pieces; for example, a Plantagenet suite for the British, a piece on Joan of Arc for the French and a wonderful saxophone solo for the Americans. The second, held in the city opera house was more conventional with military bands, a local choir and a native-born tenor returned from La Scala to sing '*O sole mio*'; but none the worse for that. There was also a reception and dinner in a medieval castle held by the province of Trieste's lady president, and another by the president of Venezia-Friuli-Julia at the Villa Manin. This is now a Modern Art gallery and apparently Napoleon stayed there (which was mentioned), as did Mussolini (which wasn't). A trip out to the 'castle' of Miremare, built for Emperor Franz Josef's younger brother Maxmilian, a beautiful folly, but not nearly so daft as trying to conquer Mexico... took half a day. The full day out included watching the stunts of the *Frecce Tricolori* jet squadron, a visit to a cavalry regiment with a long history including a display of horses and more modern equipment, a huge and long meal at the Roman site of Aquilaea, followed by a somewhat truncated visit to the 6<sup>th</sup> century basilica with astounding mosaics. But this is not complain! I was royally looked after and thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere of maritime Italy.



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I am extremely grateful to the BCMH for helping to support my visit to the conference. I hope that I was able, as the sole British representative to do us proud. After my lecture, a French speaker asked how many had come from the UK. I had to admit that I was alone, adding: '*La Commission, c'est moi!*' '*Ah, oui, comme le roi soleil*' he responded and actually laughed. How's that for building international understanding?

**Matthew Bennett**

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