

The Silos of Trieste

A Human Hub at the Border Between Conflicting Memories, Displacement and Heritage

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Abstract *After World War I, Trieste's port buildings were used by fascist and Nazi authorities to process refugees, emigrants, and deportees. During the Nazi occupation, the site housed partisans and Jews, many of whom were deported to Auschwitz. After the war, it became a refugee camp for exiles from Istria and Dalmatia. Over time, the Silos faded in the city's memory. Today, it is protected as industrial heritage and serves as an informal shelter for asylum seekers and a space for civic activism. Given its historical significance, the Silos stands as a key example of cross-border heritage, where the struggle for memory—often contested—remains a central element in contemporary societies.*

*Die unter der Habsburger Herrschaft entstandenen Hafengebäude von Triest, besonders das Silos, haben eine bewegte Geschichte: Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg zur Abfertigung von Emigrierenden, während der Nazi-Besatzung als Zwischenstation für Partisan*innen und Jüd*innen vor der Deportation und nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg als Flüchtlingslager für Vertriebene aus Istrien und Dalmatien genutzt, gerät der Gebäudekomplex über die Jahre in Vergessenheit. Der Artikel beleuchtet dieses Schlüsselbeispiel für grenzüberschreitendes Kulturerbe, erhält das Silos doch seit seiner Besetzung durch Geflüchtete ab 2015 eine neue Bedeutung als Ort zivilgesellschaftlichen Engagements.*

Après la Première Guerre mondiale, les bâtiments du port de Trieste ont été utilisés par les autorités fascistes et nazies pour la prise en charge des réfugié-e-s, des immigré-e-s et des expulsé-e-s. Durant l'occupation nazie, le site hébergeait des partisan-e-s et des juif-ve-s, dont de nombreux-se-s ont été déporté-e-s à Auschwitz. Après la guerre, ce site est devenu un camp de réfugié-e-s pour les exilé-e-s d'Istrie et de Dalmatie. Au fil du temps, le Silos a été effacé de la mémoire de la ville. Aujourd'hui, il est protégé en tant qu'héritage industriel et sert de refuge informel pour les demandeur-euse-s d'asile et de lieu d'engagement civique. Compte tenu de son importance historique, le Silos représente un exemple emblématique d'héritage transfrontalier, où la lutte pour la mémoire – souvent contestée – demeure un enjeu majeur dans les sociétés contemporaines.

In a border area more than elsewhere, urban spaces and large public buildings, especially those in the center of a city, are often reused and recontextualized for purposes different from those for which they were originally built, depending on the policies of those in power.¹ Processes of rethinking and reorganizing the use of monumental and highly visible buildings marked the history of Trieste throughout the twentieth century, a period in which the city was politically contested—first over many years between Austria and Italy, and later between Italy and Yugoslavia. In the Upper Adriatic area, the collective memory of Trieste, deeply scarred by the events of the two World Wars, has not always been able to recall the various uses of a public building, especially when they are linked to traumatic events for the population, events which have caused “fractured memories.”²

The collective memory of this border area has thus become stratified, constantly being reshaped by changes in government, and in some cases, crystallized, often erasing earlier memories, some of which were considered too traumatic and contradictory to be addressed.³ In the Upper Adriatic, the politics of so-called ‘border fascism’ were marked by fierce clashes between Italians and Slovenes: a national struggle exacerbated by fascist racism and the violence of Nazi and then Yugoslav occupation, marked by mass killings along the border during and after the Second World War, which created deep rifts in local society that continue to this day.⁴ The case study of the Silos, which we are going to analyze in depth from both a historical and anthropological perspective, can be considered as a ‘critical heritage’ for Trieste, and for this reason, it is useful to reconstruct the main events that made it so.

The huge granary, now dilapidated compared to the past, is a concrete example of the practices of political use of space by local governments of different political orientations that alternated in power during the twentieth century. Its current dilapidation is also highly symbolic of the city’s difficulty to reframe past events through a narrative that respects minority memories and not just the Italian national one. Since the 1960s, the city has chosen oblivion for decades in order to avoid discussing the intertwined and transnational long-term histories that are characteristic of a border area. The repression of the most critical events of the Second World War from the public narrative of Trieste’s history and the policy of reconciliation of memories supported by the Presidency of the Republic reveal a local political leadership reluctant to address the causes of the traumas inflicted by the wars of the

1 On the relationship between spaces and places, see Tuan, Y. (2001). *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

2 Gribaudo, G. (2020). *La Memoria, i Traumi, la Storia. La Guerra e le Catastrofi del Novecento*. Viella, 167–216.

3 For a bibliography on the subject cf. Klabjan, B. (Ed.) (2019). *Borderlands of Memory. Adriatic and Central European Perspectives*. Peter Lang.

4 Cf. Wörsdörfer, R. (2004). *Krisenherd Adria, 1915–1955. Konstruktion und Artikulation des Nationalen im Italienisch-Jugoslawischen Grenzraum*. Schöningh.

twentieth century in this border area. They are still considered to be an element of political and national division.⁵ Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, certain interpretations of the most tragic events of the past continue to be the subject of clashes between the right and the left in the town, with a great deal of public involvement. These events include the Nazi occupation and local collaboration with the Germans, the Foibe massacres in Istria in 1943 and in the Trieste Karst in 1945 by Yugoslav partisans, and the tragedy of Istrian and Dalmatian refugees.

The history of the Silos, a huge building situated between land and sea next to Trieste's main railway station, is a litmus test for the complexities faced by a border city in coming to terms with its past. After serving as a grain warehouse during the Habsburg era and a temporary baggage depot for Jewish emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe passing through the Adriatic port in the 1920s and 1930s, in 1943, during the Nazi occupation of Trieste, the Silos became a warehouse for the gathering of deportees sent to extermination and labor camps in Germany and Poland. At the end of the Second World War, it became a temporary asylum for Istrian and Dalmatian refugees from Yugoslavia. The following decades are then shaped by neglect and finally oblivion, and most recently a devastating fire.

In 2014, refugees from the Balkan route began to flow into the city, and the Silos once again became a hub for migrants passing through the city. Meanwhile, the history of all the people who had passed through there before was now forgotten, as it potentially conflicted with the myth of Trieste as an inclusive and tolerant city.⁶

1. A Building in the Service of Power: From the Habsburg Empire to the Allied Military Government

In 1719, Trieste became the free port of the Habsburg Empire. With the steady economic growth and urban expansion of the city, Trieste became the Empire's leading port in less than a century.⁷ By the middle of the nineteenth century, the urban landscape had been completely transformed, also due to the rapid increase in traffic and the subsequent arrival of people and capital, making it necessary to connect the city to Vienna by rail. This was the birth of the *Südbahn* (South Railway), which was completed in 1859 and ended at what is now the city's main railway station (*Stazione di Trieste Centrale*). Shortly afterwards, in order to optimize the transport of the goods that arrived daily by train to be loaded onto ships, large warehouses were built next

5 Cf. Focardi, F. (2020). *Nel Cantiere della Memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe*. Viella.

6 Cf. Baioni, M. (2023). Trento e Trieste: Parabola di una Endiadi Patriottica. In M. Baioni (Ed.), *Città Mito. Luoghi del Novecento Politico Italiano* (pp. 40–53). Carocci.

7 Cf. Andreozzi, D., & Gatti, C. (Eds.) (2006). *Trieste e l'Adriatico. Uomini, Mercè, Conflitti*. EUT.

to the station, mainly for the storage of grain, including two parallel two-story buildings, each measuring 290 meters by 26 meters. Their architecture was inspired by the large Baltic ports and was almost futuristic in terms of the materials used (concrete), but also in terms of the organization of the loading and unloading of the goods, which was carried out by means of an elevated track that passed over the Silos (as the grain storage buildings were called). This made it possible to store goods directly in the multi-story warehouses, which were extended in 1865.⁸ However, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the change of markets, they “soon lost their importance and after a few years were completely abandoned, the grain trade in Trieste having almost died out.”⁹ The large Silos complex, between the central station and the sea, remained empty. After the First World War and the annexation of Trieste by Italy, it was used as a temporary depot for the luggage and household goods of migrants passing through while waiting to embark for the Americas and Palestine.

During the Fascist period, the port of Trieste saw an increase in the number of maritime routes, and from the 1920s until Italy’s entry into the war in 1940, thousands of Jewish emigrants, fleeing the growing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and the rise of Nazism and European Fascism, chose Trieste as their way to freedom. Trieste was thus called “The Gateway to Zion” and, thanks to the activities of the Jewish Agency in the city, its port soon became the main destination for Zionist Jews from Eastern Europe.¹⁰ From 1933 onwards, with the spread of Nazism, German and Austrian Jews also chose Trieste as their port of departure: for many of these Jewish refugees, the Silos was one of the first buildings they saw in the city as they disembarked from the trains. Some even immortalized it in photographs taken in the city before leaving on the ship.¹¹

8 Cf. De Rosa, D. (1989). *I Monumenti del Lavoro: Aspetti dell’Archeologia Industriale a Trieste e Monfalcone*. Villaggio del fanciullo, 52.

9 Borgatti, E. (1888). Trieste e il suo Porto, *Rivista Marittima*, 3, 66.

10 Cf. Hametz, M. (2007). Zionism, Emigration, and Antisemitism in Trieste: Central Europe’s ‘Gateway to Zion’ 1896–1943. *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 13(3), 103–134. See also: Catalan, T. (2022). L’Emigrazione Ebraica attraverso il Porto di Trieste tra Ottocento e Novecento. Spazi, Pratiche, Organizzazioni Assistenziali, Memorie. *Storia Urbana*, 172, 37–57.

11 See the Exhibition Catalog: *Trieste la Porta di Sion. Storia dell’Emigrazione Ebraica verso la Terra d’Israele, 1921–1940*. Alinari [Museo della Comunità ebraica di Trieste Carlo e Vera Wagner, 1998].

Fig. 1: *The Silos around 1890* (© Wiki Commons) and *in 1939* (© Archivio Fotografico su Trieste)



The household goods of the Jews in transit were stored in the hangars of the General Warehouses in the port, to be shipped to their rightful owners once they reached their destination overseas—a system that successfully operated until the Nazi occupation of the city.¹² With Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, the flow of emigrants dried up and the Silos came into use again with the arrival of the Nazis in the city: In the first months of the German occupation (between September 1943 and January 1944), due to its size and proximity to the central railway station, it was turned into a gathering point where members of the *Einsatzkommando Reinhardt* assembled all the prisoners destined for deportation to concentration camps in Eastern Europe and Germany.¹³ The *Risiera di San Sabba* camp, a former rice-husking and drying factory which, at the beginning of 1944, became a camp for the systematic concentration, selection and liquidation of prisoners, especially partisans, was not yet functioning.¹⁴ Until then, all deportees were concentrated in the Silos before their departure in cattle cars. According to the testimony of camp survivors, the Silos was used throughout the occupation as a temporary sorting place for prisoners on the various trains. The historian Marco Coslovich remembers the deportees as follows: “The women who left the Silos always showed extraordinary courage: they often sang as they closed the doors of the cattle car and always encouraged those who had managed to come to greet them at dawn.”¹⁵ Despite the fact that it had been a place of

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- 12 Cf. Brasca, D. (2022). The Goods of Jewish Emigrants in the Trieste Free Port during the Second World War. In C. Fuhrmeister & B. Murovec (Eds.), *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century*, 189–233. Böhlau.
- 13 Cf. Di Fant, A., & Kreckic, A., & Perissinotto, M. (Eds.) (2024). *7 Dicembre 1943: Destinazione Lager*. Edizioni Comune di Trieste. [https://risierasansabba.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Catalogo-o-Destinazione-lager-_-WEB.pdf](https://risierasansabba.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Catalogo-Destinazione-lager-_-WEB.pdf) [May 15, 2025].
- 14 Today the former *Polizeihaftlager* has become an important national monument for Italy, as it was the only Nazi camp on the peninsula with a crematorium. See: Matta, T. (2023). *Il Lager di San Sabba. Dall'Occupazione Nazista al Processo di Trieste*. Battello stampatore.
- 15 Coslovich, M. (2000). Conservare la Memoria. *Qualestoria*, 28(2), 5–7, here 6.

suffering throughout the Nazi occupation, the Allies decided in the immediate post-war period to repurpose the large spaces of the old Habsburg granary. In doing so, they contributed to the further stratification of the events and memories associated with it.

“In this Silos passed thousands of Italian brothers and sisters in exile from Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia, welcomed in Trieste since 1947 after the dramatic abandonment of their beloved homeland.” — This is the inscription on the commemorative plaque on the wall of the Silos in front of Trieste’s Central Station, commissioned by the City Council of Trieste and dated 10 February 2004. The date marks the anniversary of the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, which assigned Zone B—Istria and the towns of Zara/Zadar and Fiume/Rjeka—to Yugoslav administration, which was also inhabited by a population of Italian language and culture, most of whom chose to leave Yugoslav territory, intimidated by the socialist policies and the authoritarian government of Tito. As early as 1945, the first phase of the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus to Italy began, characterized by several waves of migration. Trieste, administered by the Allied Military Government until 1954, became the final destination for many, while also serving as a transit point for others on their way to other regions of Italy. More than 300,000 refugees arrived in the city in those years, and during the sorting operation carried out by the Allies, the Silos became a refugee center. Initially intended as a temporary shelter, many families lived there for years because they had no other housing options.¹⁶

The many collected testimonies and autobiographical narratives about everyday life in the Silos help us to understand how the Allies transformed the old warehouse, described in a Dantean metaphor as “a smoky, nocturnal purgatory.”¹⁷ The large, high rooms were divided into small boxes with sheetrock, and families used blankets for their privacy. All witnesses agree in describing it as an oppressive, dangerously promiscuous place. The writer and refugee Marisa Madieri recalls that “cooking fumes and different odors rose from the boxes and combined to form an intense, typical, indescribable, sweet, stale mixture of soup, cabbage, fried food, sweat and hospital.”¹⁸ The reception center for Istrian and Dalmatian exiles was closed at the end of the 1950s, and from then on began its long period of neglect and oblivion in the official memory of the city. The Silos hence remained in individual memories: those of the deportees who survived the camp and those of the refugees from Istria

16 The bibliography is vast, see: Ballinger, P. (2003). *History in Exile. Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton University Press; Pupo, R. (2005). *Il Lungo Esodo. Istria, le Persecuzioni, le Foibe, l'Esilio*. Rizzoli; Hrobat Virgolet, K. (2023). *Silences and Divided Memories. The Exodus and its Legacy in Post-War Istrian Society*. Berghahn.

17 Magris, C. (2005). *Alla Cieca*. Garzanti, 64.

18 Madieri, M. (1987). *Verde Acqua*. Einaudi, 68.

and Dalmatia, but in post-war Italy both were considered unpleasant memories, belonging to a dark period for the nation the public would prefer to forget.

On 7 April 1994, a huge fire destroyed the building, which was later minimally renovated to house the bus station. The rest of the decaying and ghostly warehouse, however, became the destination for another generation of refugees, those from the Balkan route.

2. The Human Hub of the Silos after 2014

The huge Silos building is currently privately owned and largely abandoned, except for a small area inside the building that is used as a paid car park and bus stop, opposite the railway station which is the last stop on Italian territory. More than half of it is in ruins after the fire in 1994 and several years of neglect, but it still remains an impressive building. Indeed, the warehouses and former Silos have been listed in the General Catalogue of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage accompanied by magnificent historical photos dating from 1850 to 1985, documenting the need for protection and valorization as a collective heritage recognized by the Archaeological and Fine Arts Superintendency of the border region, Friuli Venezia Giulia.

After many years of abandonment and decline, the Silos building gained a new function in 2014/2015, once again in the context of migration: the year 2015 was called “the long summer of migration,” when around 850,000 asylum seekers fleeing war arrived in Italy by land, walking in groups along the Balkan route. Within only a few months, Trieste had become a major gateway into Europe for migrants: By the end of 2016, around 950 asylum seekers were hosted in Trieste, with another 150–200 refugees, who had not found any form of formal hospitality, starting to camp in the Silos.

In this article, our intention is to use the city as an archive of spatial and political memories in order to interrogate the symbolic role of the Silos as a refugee space in Trieste.¹⁹ To this end, we illustrate the ways in which migrants use both humanitarian shelters and squatter settlements as means of escape or permanence through informal practices, refining daily settlement tactics, and solidarity networks.

Arriving in Trieste along the Balkan route is by no means a new phenomenon, since migrants and refugees were already walking across Yugoslavia to reach the city in the 1970s. Since the 1985 Schengen Agreement, there have been constant irregular migrant crossings of the ‘open’ border with Slovenia, on foot, in lorries or minibuses, but always in small numbers. Following the war in Syria and the Arab

19 Cf. Buhr, F. (2018). Using the City: Migrant Spatial Integration as Urban Practice. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 307–320.

Spring, overland mobility increased significantly, with arrivals peaking in the winter months of 2015/2016, as large numbers entered Europe on foot or using improvised transport through Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Many refugees, once they arrived in Trieste, found that many of the first and second reception centers used in the region, such as military barracks and former refugee camps, were full, forcing many to seek shelter in abandoned places. Migration was curbed by the European Union agreement with Turkey, signed by Angela Merkel and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 16 March 2016, in which Turkey agreed to manage the refugees by hosting them on its territory in return for financial support from Brussels. For another month or two, migrants who had already passed through Turkey continued to arrive in Trieste. Transit then slowed down drastically, only to resume more slowly along several underground routes, which became a Balkan circuit rather than a one-way passage.

Today, migrants arriving from the Karst Plateau, head straight to the central station in Piazza Libertà, alias *Piazza del Mondo*, where they know that even if it is late or the reception system is overcrowded, they will find a makeshift bed in the adjacent Silos. Only a few feet separate the informal camp in the Silos from the tracks of the high-speed trains in a central area of the city, near the port of Trieste. Indeed, this place has long been associated with passing goods and displaced people. The word *silos* literally means “grain store” or “military installation,” and today it functions as a place of transit in a strategic spot: this large, abandoned building, close to public transport and the port, is only a short walk from the soup kitchen, the hospital, and the social services of various NGOs. Like the many ‘jungles’ scattered throughout Europe, especially in border areas, it is a place in the city close to infrastructures (buses, trains, ports) where the homeless mix with those waiting for a response to their request for international protection or simply wanting to stop and continue their journey without leaving a trace.²⁰

Inside, in the area on the first floor that once served as a granary, refugees have built real huts out of cardboard, plastic sheeting, and bricks or makeshift materials; more than a hundred people, mainly young Afghans and Pakistanis, have been living here for many months, lighting fires, cooking, praying, and positioning themselves in liminal forms of social life, on the margins, waiting. Most of them have settled in this ‘no-man’s-land’ because they have applied for international protection at the police headquarters, but the available places in shelters are currently at full capacity: There are refugees from the Balkan route who have been repeatedly detained in migrant detention centers in Hungary and Bulgaria, who are scared and no longer ‘trust’ institutions; there are economic migrants who have been ruined by the financial downturn and are seeking refuge; and there are ‘regular’ refugees who have been granted protection documents in a short time and do not know where to go without assistance. Since the waiting time for a hearing before the *Commissione Territoriale per*

20 Cf. Hicks, D., & Mallet, S. (2019). *Lande. The Calais 'Jungle' and Beyond*. Bristol University Press.

il Riconoscimento di Protezione Internazionale has been reduced to less than six months, asylum seekers often prefer to have their applications rejected and to appeal, so that they can extend the time they have to learn the Italian language and way of life, making them more autonomous and less dependent on assistance. Located in the heart of the city, yet not too visible, the Silos also functions as a kind of informal hub, playing a role of mediation and negotiation in the process of migrant's settlement within public space and local everyday life.²¹

Fig. 2: The occupied Silos in 2024



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In recent years, the number of refugees at the Silos has remained steady, though their composition has varied, with notable increases toward the end of 2015 and in 2024 (with over 150 people). This period has been marked by partial evictions by the police, particularly when political voices of protest or controversy have arisen in connection with visits from human rights delegations. We use the term ‘encampment’ to describe this semi-invisible world of shacks, tents, and bonfires, accessible through gaps in the simple wooden barrier near the railway tracks, only about thirty feet from the high-speed rail line. However, the Silos also serves different functions for migrants: not only as shelter for those without international protection (due to rejection or because they have just arrived), but also as a place of socialization for

21 Cf. Fontanari, E., & Ambrosini, M. (2018). Into the Interstices: Everyday Practices of Refugees and their Supporters in Europe’s Migration ‘Crisis.’ *Sociology*, 53(3), 587–603.

those staying in other facilities, or for travelers along the Balkan route who are simply looking for a place to rest temporarily. The Silos' central location allows migrants to move freely between the dormitory, canteen, social services, and a small backyard where they play cricket, while also visiting friends hosted in the city's widespread reception network. Many arrive after spending one or more years in the Balkan circuit, marked by rejections, route changes, and violence at the hands of police and traffickers. For many, arriving at a space like the Silos offers a chance to reposition themselves and reflect on their uncertain migratory path, which is often unplanned. It is a stopover, sometimes forced, sometimes chosen.

Fig. 3: Inside the occupied Silos in 2024



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Trieste's widespread reception system prevents the creation of ghettos and camps but is unable to accommodate large numbers of people in a short period. In these cases, the Silos becomes a temporary refuge for those waiting for a bed or other forms of care. It serves as a decompression space, tolerated by the authorities during a sudden influx of refugees, primarily from the Balkan route. The advantage of the Silos as a shelter is its roof and walls, even though dilapidated, offering partial protection from the winter weather. Today, the Silos is a semi-abandoned area where refugees and irregular migrants find shelter, an urban flaw that leaves room for infiltration. It is both a place of protection and abandonment. However, it should also be recognized as an autonomously managed space of socialization and exchange, responding to migrants' needs, not only in linguistic terms. It is one of

the few areas in the city not ‘governed’ by formal control systems or humanitarian practices.²² Surrounded by an efficient network of local services and international connections (railway, port, and bus station), it is a prime hub for those migrating to Europe via the Balkans.²³ Like other informal camps, it also represents a clear space of social marginality, a grey zone in the heart of the city. As a border buffer zone, it acts both as a decompression space and a form of social cushioning.

The presence of migrants is semi-invisible due to the abandoned structure, which, while offering them protection, also shields their bodies and the site’s degradation from public view. At the same time, it has accustomed local residents to their daily presence, while forcing refugees to immerse themselves in the local way of life, gradually learning its rhythms and dynamics. The ‘vacancy’ of this disused space allows for reciprocal tactics and positioning, softening the rigid in-or-out dichotomy. It creates room for integration rituals while infiltrating the various urban fabrics, on the migrants’ own self-managed terms and within their own spaces. It is “like a matrix where novel links are created, a sorting station, but also a crucible—for severe constraints, to be sure—for the recomposition of social relations.”²⁴

The multilayered connectivity of Trieste’s borderlands extends beyond refugee camps and reception centers. These spaces, both historical and contemporary, do not remain isolated for long; over time they inevitably interact with the public spaces of everyday life, particularly evident in local neighborhoods, squares, markets, and bars, where migrants and locals coexist in sync. What we can observe is that social migration processes are never confined by national borders, nor limited to spaces that enclose homogeneous communities. Instead, they are complex networks containing heterogeneities, shaped by spatial co-presences connected to both transnational spaces and different historical times, with ties to past memories and connections.²⁵

The square in front of the central station serves as a large decompression space for the arrival and transit of refugees, asylum seekers, travelers, and citizens using buses and trains. It intertwines with the activities of solidarity volunteers and activists providing care to migrants in transit.²⁶ Similarly, in the 1950s, the area near

22 Verdirame, G. et al. (2005). *Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism*. Berghahn.

23 Cf. Sardelić, J. (2017). Managing the Balkan Route: The 2015/16 Refugee Crisis. In S. Lange & Z. Nechev & F. Trauner (Eds.), *Resilience in the Western Balkans* (pp. 99–104). EU Institute for Security Studies.

24 Monsutti, A. (2021). *Homo Itinerans. Toward a Global Ethnography of Afghanistan*. Berghahn, 99.

25 Cf. Altin, R. (2024). Displaced Memories in the Trieste Border Area: A Never-ending Historical Entanglement. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2024.2444789>, 1–18.

26 Cf. Khamsy, N. (2022). Mobile Phones on Mobile Fields: Co-Producing Knowledge about Migration and Violence. *Antropologia Publica*, 8(1), 261–268.

the Silos acted as a social space where the children of Istrian refugees would play.²⁷ In both cases, these spaces function as ‘grey areas’—neither fully integrated into urban life nor entirely excluded from it. Grey spaces like the Silos and *Piazza del Mondo* are characterized by their ambiguity: They resist clear definitions, operating at the margins of urban planning and state control. These informal spaces exploit ‘cracks’ in repressive systems, creating opportunities for small-scale disruptions of dominant urban structures.²⁸ They are often considered ‘abusive’ or ‘intrusive’ within the rigid dichotomy of ‘inside or outside’ imposed by securitarian border regimes. However, these spaces allow for vital, albeit temporary, forms of inclusion and agency for marginalized groups, such as migrants. The assemblage of the Silos and the square, animated by the presence of volunteers, offers migrants a crucial pause—a place to receive assistance, gather information, and establish connections as they navigate their journeys.²⁹ This intermediate space, positioned between structured humanitarian centers and systematic institutional neglect, embodies a fluid and contested form of urban spatialization. Rather than producing fixed agendas or cohesive systems, grey spaces highlight the dynamic interplay between mobility, informality, and marginalization, challenging the rigid frameworks of modern border politics. The adoption of the term ‘emplacement’ deliberately avoids talking about integration or assimilation, because the aim is not to look for abstract, cohesive, and uniform communities with a common heritage, but to analyze the sense of “place-making” that allows a “focus on a set of experiences shared by people who are generally differentiated by scholars and policy makers as either migrants or natives.”³⁰ Behind this complexity, which is not easy to synthesize, the public spaces of Trieste are made up of people who become entangled in this borderscape, in concrete and imaginary ways, in a temporary transit that can become permanent if we observe the various migratory passages. The final epilogue of the long history of the Silos as a container for goods or people seems to confirm the myth of the eternal return: the Municipality of Trieste has announced the sale for 20 million euros to an Austrian real estate company,³¹ and, in September 2024, the Silos was ‘reclaimed’ and ready for sale after taking away 160 tons of rubbish in 22 lorries. But is it really ‘rubbish,’ or

27 Cf. Zennaro Marsi, A. (2021). *Vita a Palazzo Silos*. Bora.La.

28 Cf. Sanyal, R. (2014). Urbanizing Refugee Spaces. *International Journal Urban Regional Research*, 38, 558–572.

29 Cf. Collier, S. J., & Ong, A. (Eds.) (2005). *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Blackwell.

30 Çaglar, A., & Glick Schiller, N. (2018). *Migrants and City-Making. Dispossession, Displacement & Urban Regeneration*. Duke University Press, 21.

31 Cf. Tonero, L. (2024, September 14). Firmato il Preliminare per la Vendita del Silos: ad Acquistarlo è una Società Austriaca. *Il Piccolo*. <https://www.ilpiccolo.it/cronaca/firmato-il-preliminare-per-la-vendita-del-silos-di-trieste-ad-acquistarlo-e-una-societa-austriaca-igvpj5by> [May 2, 2025].

are these 'residues' not rather historical traces of the last migratory passage, which (being heterogeneous) does not find a container of national memories in which to be placed?

3. Conclusion

Using the case study of the Silos, we attempt to interweave the methodologies of Migration, History, Heritage, and Memory Studies to explore how perceptions of the past shape dynamics with 'new' migrants,³² without confining them to ethno-national categories. The struggle over memory is a key structural element of contemporary societies, especially when different actors remember the past in different ways.³³ Moving beyond the humanitarian/securitarian approach, we emphasize the importance of considering both the mobility and immobility of migrants as they navigate their agency in specific contexts, and how memories of past displacements influence the reception and integration of migrants in the present. The Silos container aptly testifies to Trieste's role as a frontier city and trade hub, but even more important—although not protected by the *Soprintendenza Belle Arti*—is its historical role as a container of people in transit and, therefore, of memories of displaced persons, often traumatic or at least linked to liminal spaces of passage. The recognition of mobility in transit, however, is only granted on the condition that this mobility finds an ethno-national container capable of collecting and containing those memories. Otherwise, the presence or transnational testimonies are expelled or forgotten in oblivion.

Both public awareness and critical studies are a first step toward recognition of a composite heritage of those subaltern memories of migrants that do not have the power to enter the official frame due to their mobility that undermines the "national order of things."³⁴ In a borderland, memories, identities, and legacies intertwine and overlap, but they are not 'contained' in a homogeneous agglomerate. We have analyzed the Silos with its historical layers and progressive changes over a century: from being a granary to becoming the gathering center for deportations to Auschwitz, from the first reception for refugees to their informal shelter: the Silos symbolizes a provocative case study of border heritage and a challenge for critical thought for the European community.

32 Cf. Kleist, J. O., & Glynn, I. (Eds.) (2012). *History, Memory and Migration. Perceptions of the Past and the Politics of Incorporation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

33 Cf. Lowenthal, D. (1985). *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press.

34 Malkki, L. (1995). Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 495–546.

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