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International: Danger in Trieste

In Trieste last week U.S. and New Zealand troops played soccer with their Yugoslav comrades-in-arms, swam with them in the warm Adriatic, laughed together at British films shown through Yugoslav projectors.

But of all the spots in Europe where trouble between allies brewed, Trieste for a time was closest to actual battle. After Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander issued a blistering statement denouncing Marshal Tito's occupation of the city, New Zealand troops followed the Yugoslav example and went about the streets with automatic rifles. North of Trieste Tito withdrew some troops to the defensible line of the Isonzo river (see map). The Yugoslavs moved their main headquarters back from Trieste, but showed no sign of relaxing their grip on the city. Lest it be cut off in case of fighting, the one U.S. battalion in the city withdrew toward the main U.S. force at Gorizia. The New Zealanders remained, their tanks patrolling streets commanded by Yugoslav artillery. In the harbor lay three British warships.

The show of force gave Tito pause. This week he conceded the main point of the Allies—that title to Trieste must be settled at the European peace conference, not by seizure. His protector in the Kremlin, his disturbed Allies in London and Washington breathed a little easier. None of them had wanted battle at Trieste; yet all had risked it. In Trieste was nothing else, it was a study in the power-political hazards of the Big Three's world.

The Prize. In the European power game Trieste was more than a pawn to be attached to Italy or Yugoslavia. It had long been an important link between central Europe and the Mediterranean. Now it lay at the southwestern end of Russia's new area of power, 1,700 miles across Europe from the northernmost end in Norway's Finnmark. Most of the 250,000 Triestinos think of themselves as Italian, but the Slav tide—Slovenes to the north, Croats to the east—washes into the city's suburbs. To the northeast lies D'Annunzio's Fiume. Italy after the last war presented the peacemakers with a fait accompli by seizing Fiume. Tito last week followed D'Annunzio's gaudy example and bid for permanent possession of Trieste and all Istria, which would greatly enhance the Mediterranean position of the states grouped around Russia. Britain reacted as she must wherever her Mediterranean control is threatened. The U.S. Government, acknowledging its common interest, reacted with Britain.

Shadows Before. Trieste trouble had been coming a long time. Some Italian Communists and non-Communists in the Trieste underground broke with Tito's Partisans as early as last September, rather than fall in with Partisan plans to include Trieste in a Yugoslav federation. Britain and the U.S. were committed when they signed the Italian armistice: that document bound them and Italy to postpone the Trieste issue until the peace conference.

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Russia, signing later, legally accepted the same understanding.

Last fall, foreseeing trouble, Allied headquarters in Italy designated a New Zealand division to take over Trieste at the first opportunity and hold it under neutral rule pending negotiation.

On April 29 the Allied armies, closing in, demanded through Bishop Antonio Santini the surrender of the German garrison. The Germans refused to surrender to the Partisans, took a strong position near the harbor, said they would surrender only to the British. Italian and Slav Partisans controlled most of the town when the New Zealanders under Major General Sir Bernard Cyril ("Tiny") Freyburg arrived, after a forced march, to receive the German surrender. Since then the Yugoslavs have controlled the public buildings, the newspapers and such civil administration as exists in the city and the area north and east of it.

The British and American Governments sent identical notes to Tito, asking him to withdraw. Alexander's headquarters opened negotiations with Belgrade. When these broke down, Alexander issued a statement to his troops saying that Tito's occupation of Trieste was "all too reminiscent of Hitler, Mussolini and Japan." As if this were not strong enough, Alexander told his troops:

"It has always been my policy to keep you all, whatever your rank, fully informed about the general situation and the objects for which you have fought. I send you this message so that you may know the issues which are now at stake."

Outraged by Alexander's statement, Tito replied that he was willing to submit the final settlement of Istria to the peace conference, but meanwhile would continue to occupy it as any other Allied army occupied territory it had conquered. Washington and London pondered the note, let Tito know that it was "unsatisfactory."

What Will Russia Do? One hopeful note was the settlement in Carinthia, a province which had voted after the last war to stay with Austria. Tito moved in there, too, but last weekend moved out (in British-loaned Army trucks). Most ominous note was struck by the Yugoslav Ambassador to Russia, Vladimir Popovich, who said: "I believe that we shall meet with full understanding in official circles in Moscow and that the U.S.S.R. will support all our justified aspirations." London half believed and devoutly hoped that Popovich was wrong.

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