



## The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire

by Dominique Kirchner Reill, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020, 312 pp., maps + ill., \$37.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780674244245

**Francesca Rolandi**

**To cite this article:** Francesca Rolandi (27 Nov 2023): The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire, First World War Studies, DOI: [10.1080/19475020.2023.2284506](https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2023.2284506)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2023.2284506>



Published online: 27 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire**, by Dominique Kirchner Reill, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020, 312 pp., maps + ill., \$37.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780674244245

In the decades before the First World War, Fiume was a booming industrial hub boasting regional and global connections thanks to its railway and port, and its semi-autonomous status within the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Empire. Nevertheless, few people outside of Southeast Europe would have been able to locate it on a map. Paradoxically, the city made international headlines in 1918/19, at the very moment when its economy was brought to a halt and its territorial settlement remained uncertain. Fiume dared defy the decisions passed at the Paris Peace Conference and stated its wish to join the neighbouring Kingdom of Italy. Fiume's case made even bigger headlines when Gabriele D'Annunzio seized the Adriatic port with its entourage of legionaries, only to be ousted fifteen months later by the Italian army.

Dominique K. Reill's book *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* narrates Fiume's history from 1918 to 1921, and it tackles some issues that much international and Italian-language scholarship have taken for granted: the Italianness of the former Habsburg port, the linear connection between Fiumanesimo and Fascism, the understanding of 1918 as a sharp watershed. Yet, by shifting away from simplistic interpretations, the author wonders how it was possible that the city of Fiume, the smallest of the post-Habsburg successor states, where an enduring section of the population did not identify its mother-tongue as Italian, was turned into an emblem of Italianness and strove to show the world its irrepressible will to join the Kingdom of Italy.

The answer is as simple as it is provocative. The city's elite converged around an attempt to promote annexation to Italy in order to replace the Habsburg imperial infrastructure with the fresh Italian infrastructural umbrella, thus hoping to retain the autonomy that had nurtured its good fortunes. In doing so, Reill has drawn on recent developments in the post-Habsburg scholarship challenging the prominence ascribed to nationalism in the post-1918 setting and, conversely, stressing the afterlife of imperial infrastructures and practices well into the interwar period.

The first chapter shows the multi-layered nature of Fiume's history. It reconstructs the peace negotiations at Versailles, with this small autonomous city able to oppose international decisions precisely because it kept functioning and did not sink into violence. It sketches the emergence of Fiumanesimo, a mindset that infused First World War paramilitarism and extreme nationalism with aesthetic influences stemming from its charismatic leader, D'Annunzio. Finally, it looks at the day-to-day history of Fiumians, who were busy steering the events towards annexation to Italy, preserving a certain degree of autonomy, or simply navigating the challenging circumstances. The core of the book focuses on this last thread. It shows how locals navigated the dire circumstances the city went through after 1918, when it reshaped its previous imperial loyalty into unquestionable adherence to the Italian political project. In doing so, local agency emerged both in top-down activism and bottom-up initiatives.

Chapter 2 explores how both Fiumians and outsiders learned to play with a multi-currency system: the monetary policy enacted by the Italian National Council that ruled the city was intended to facilitate future annexation to Italy, a neighbour whose

financial stability was not enviable but that was nonetheless more attractive than the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Thus, annexation became potentially profitable for many. As shown in Chapter 3, the skills required to navigate a multi-layered sovereignty, acquired by Fiumians in the Habsburg times, proved valuable after 1918, when the city authorities selectively adopted certain Italian laws to make Italian legal culture more attractive. Similarly, as highlighted in Chapter 4, the Habsburg legal tool of pertinence (a local citizenship providing access to some political and social rights) was used in post-1918 Fiume to include local supporters of Italian annexation, while keeping outsiders out, regardless of their national sentiments. Chapter 5 unveils how the propaganda efforts, which ranged from nationally coding the education system to visually conveying an unquestionable love for Italy, were designed more to play up Italianness than to truly Italianise the city, whose multi-lingual and multi-cultural qualities were tolerated behind the facade. The conclusion refers to the multi-faceted impact of the year 1918 on later periods, and it takes a long-term perspective, while avoiding any historical determinism.

Reill's elegantly written book shifts the focus from big events to ordinary people defined somewhat by their names, age, and profession. It provides a collective picture of a relatively small multi-national community eager to restore pre-First World War prosperity through annexation to Italy. This was pursued through means the locals were familiar with, perpetuating imperial practices and drawing on post-Habsburg infrastructure, despite formal opposition to anything that recalled the old times.

This book's contribution to the existing scholarship is multi-faceted. First, it explores the many, different, and often contradictory interests hidden behind the label of nationalism. Second, it is an outstanding example of how local lenses can serve to illustrate a European-wide phenomenon, such as postimperial transitions. Finally, it conveys the extent to which continuities marked the life of successor states that strove to present their establishment as a new beginning. Thus, it will be essential reading, not only for scholars of twentieth-century European history but also for a wider audience interested in issues such as nationalism, political transformations, and the history of everyday life.

Francesca Rolandi

*Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czechia*

 [rolandi@mua.cas.cz](mailto:rolandi@mua.cas.cz)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2790-9575>

© 2023 Francesca Rolandi

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2023.2284506>

