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EMPIRE IN CRUMBS

Dominique Kirchner Reill's new book *The Fiume Crisis* takes an iconoclastic new look at the history of Rijeka after World War I

The price of sugar and the scarcity of cakes were more important than radical ideologies

It takes a brave historian to start a book with an account of the kind of food their subjects were dreaming of eating. A combination of roast goose, fried eels and sarma (the stuffed cabbage leaves eaten with relish by many in Central and Eastern Europe) provide the succulent opening to Professor Dominique Kirchner Reill's *The Fiume Crisis* (Harvard University Press), a boldly original take on the political drama that overtook the Adriatic city of Rijeka (Fiume in Italian) in the years immediately after World War I.

It is a period most usually associated with Italian poet and adventurer Gabriele D'Annunzio, who marched into town in September 1919 and made a failed attempt to guide Rijeka's destiny before being forced out by the Italian army during the so-called Christmas of Blood in December 1920. Reill's roll call of food is a reference to the seasonal delicacies Rijekans might have been looking forward to eating that Christmas, had their city not been bombarded by Italian naval shells.

Agreements between the Entente powers suggested that Rijeka had been earmarked to become part of a new Yugoslav state at the end of World War I. As a cosmopolitan city with an Italian-speaking majority in the central districts and a Croatian majority in the suburbs, however, things were never going to be that simple. A fledgling Serb-Croat-Slovene authority attempted to establish control over the city in autumn 1918, but was outmanoeuvred by the local Italian National Council, who enjoyed the protection of the Italian armed forces and began to campaign for Rijeka's inclusion in the Kingdom of Italy. With peace negotiations in Paris dragging on, activists of the Italian National Council invited Gabriele D'Annunzio to march into the city and present the international community with a fait accompli. Far from securing union with Italy, D'Annunzio's rule led

to Rijeka's isolation and economic ruin. He was eventually kicked out of the city by the Italian government, who considered the political maverick a threat to their own Adriatic designs. Rijeka was internationally recognized as a free state, until an Italy now under the control of Mussolini's fascists took it over in February 1924.

The tendency of historians to focus on D'Annunzio – whether as the key figure in the early development of Fascism or as a jolly libertarian who presided over some kind of political fancy-dress party – is something that Professor Reill has never found entirely convincing. The daily lives of Rijeka folk were driven not so much by radical ideology, she maintains, as by the need to put food on the table.

It was to liberate Rijeka's historiography from D'Annunzio and hand the narrative back to the city's inhabitants that inspired Professor Reill to write *The Fiume Crisis*. And it was a chance discovery in the Rijeka archives that pointed the way towards how it should be written. Dismayed to be told that there weren't many documents relating to the D'Annunzio period left in the city, Reill was handed a thin folder containing details of a few laws passed just after World War I. "And inside the folder was a law about sugar rationing that meant that people couldn't make desserts any more" says Reill. "And I thought it was fascinating!. I mean I knew that rationing was common after World War I, but what would a Central European town like Fiume do without its cakes?"

Pandora's box

Raised in California and Germany, Reill studied at Berkely and Columbia universities before becoming Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Miami. Her first book *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste and Venice* (2012) was in itself something of an iconoclastic text, arguing that the 19th-century struggle for Italian and Croatian national rights did not always pit nationalists against each other, and did not fundamentally call into question the multicultural nature of the world they inhabited. "I studied Croatian in New York for two years and then studied in Zagreb", Reill explains. "And in the afternoon there was nothing to do, so I would just go to the university library and read things in Croatian to practice. I found this article written by a Dubrovnik historian in the late Fifties about these Slavic nationalists who had worked with Italian nationalists in the 19th century. I had been so trained to think of the Adriatic as a place of division and [reading this article] changed all my plans."

What attracted Reill towards the study of post-World War I Rijeka was her anger at the way the D'Annunzio episode was shoehorned into every historical account of Europe in the twentieth century, very often by historians who were not regional specialists. As a consequence Rijeka's history has frequently been told by those who go there looking for D'Annunzio and a big story about the birth of Fascism, leaving Rijeka's inhabitants out of the picture.

"I get really bored when I read history books about Poland, Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia after 1918, "she says. "Most of those stories are told around political parties, leaders and nationalism. It's like reading the business section of the Wall Street Journal. And so I thought, why don't I write a history that opens the Pandora's Box a little bit, and starts talking about why people are making these choices instead about what their leaders are telling them their choices should be."

When the Habsburg Empire broke down in the autumn of 1918, many Rijeka inhabitants believed that the key to their continuing prosperity was to either remain an autonomous unit under someone's protection or join the Kingdom of Italy (a stable, existing state) as soon as possible, rather than run the risk of being absorbed by a Yugoslav entity which as yet had no constitution, no citizenship laws and no currency.

Reill's main argument is that while Rijeka had all the appearances of a city undergoing some kind of national revolution (with the Italian National Council taking over affairs in October1918 and Gabriele D'Annunzio driving into the city 11 months later), shrill ethnic nationalism remained largely on the surface of society. Most people wanted their lives to carry on as before, and simply chose the political options that appeared to offer more security, and less chaos. The price of sugar and the scarcity of cakes were more important than radical ideologies to the people who actually lived here; and such existential uncertainties help to explain why many of them went along with Italian national options, but displayed no great enthusiasm for D'Annunzio's project once the excitement of his entry into town had passed.

Crinkled currencies

Most importantly, the book sets aside black-and-white definitions of who was Italian and who was a Croat, and delves instead into the daily ambiguities of an environment in which ethnic identity could be traded in exchange for work, social advancement, or simply a local-patriotic sense of loyalty to one's own city.

Many parts of Europe finished the year 1918 without any functioning central authority, their economies in ruins, peoples' wallets filled, as Reill writes, "with the crinkled currencies of states that no longer existed." By re-telling the story of Rijeka from a street-level perspective, Reill shows us how the whole of Central Europe felt – and why populations were manoeuvered into accepting new situations. Especially in the eastern Adriatic, where absorption into either the Kingdom of Italy or the new Yugoslav state were seen as political imperatives by anxious populations in 1918, but may have begun to look slightly less attractive as the years passed by.

As the virtuoso opening paragraph about food demonstrates, *The Fiume Crisis* is a thrillingly well-written book. We learn about the dizzying number of currencies with which people were expected to do business – Italian lire, old Habsburg crowns, old Habsburg crowns overprinted with the symbols of the empire's successor states, and of course old Habsburg crowns with fake over-printings concocted by wily forgers. No wonder many local businessmen supported the idea of Rijeka's absorption into Italy, if only to put an end to this financial chaos. We meet illegal flag dealers who stole Italian flags from government offices and army barracks before selling them on to local shopkeepers who felt obliged to hang them above their premises.

Reill is under no illusion that it was the gradual rise of ethnic national agendas, which predated 1918 by several decades, that eventually squeezed the easy-going cosmopolitanism out of the Adriatic port city. "The story is not D'Annunzio, his legionnaires, or the Christmas of Blood" she says, "but instead the long-term Italian nationalist forces that eradicated the multicultural world"

What becomes apparent in her book however is that Rijeka's Italian National Council combined a nationalistic policy of Italianization after 1918 with day-to-day compromises

about the way it was carried out. Local non-Italian schoolteachers, for example, were simply retrained to teach in Italian rather than laid off and replaced with teachers from outside.

Reill deploys considerable literary skill in developing a cluster of narratives that have not been told in quite the same way before. Arranged in chapters which are thematic as well as chronological, *The Fiume Crisis* is rather like a short story collection that can be devoured one chapter at a time.

A lot of this is due to her luck in locating a treasure-trove of local documents. “ I have to admit that I didn't know what I was going to find in the Rijeka City Archives and had no idea at the outset what the argument of the book was actually going to be. The only initial goal of the book was to re-people the city with its own inhabitants – and not just D’Annunzio’s legionnaires”. Reill was initially told that everything to do with the post-1918 period had been moved to Italy, save for a small folder of documents (and it was here that she made her discovery about sugar). However it soon became apparent that it was mostly the D’Annunzio-related documents that had been sent to Italy in 1924, and that many of the municipal archives were still here. Head archivist Boris Zakošek (“one of the most generous and wonderful human beings on this planet”) together with other colleagues directed her towards what she needed. Court, police and local government files had been particularly well maintained. “Local officials didn't know what was going to happen to the state in 1918 so they just kept on archiving everything the way they’d always done before.”

The reason why historians haven't been using this material is because they have been focusing on D’Annunzio, not daily life. “It's always been there right in front of our faces, it just didn’t seem to be about politics”.

Science fiction

Professor Reill points to the huge amount of work on Rijeka that has been done by Croatian scholars in recent years. “It’s not as if I'm the first person to write about the city and to use local actors; maybe the difference is that I didn't set out to write a traditional political history”. She makes particular mention of local scholar Ivan Jeličić, whose work on early 20th-century social history looks set to find a wider audience in future.

Noticeably absent from Reill’s research are the memoirs written by those who joined D’Annunzio in Rijeka: people like Italian soldier and bohemian Giovanni Commisso, Futurist writer Mario Carli, or Belgian poet Leon Kochnitsky. Memoirs like these have formed the backbone of the D’Annunzio-centric accounts written by other historians attracted to Rijeka, but seemed too overworked and self-serving for Reill. “I hate those books. They were all written during Fascism or after Fascism. I also barely use the newspapers published at that time because I just don't trust them. You have to be really careful with memoirs and newspapers of that period; they are more science fiction than real.”

Indeed it is a common misapprehension to assume that Gabriele D’Annunzio ever imposed a functioning government over the city of Rijeka. He mostly relied on the National Council and the municipal officials installed during the Habsburg period to run day-to-day affairs. D’Annunzio’s famous Charter of Carnaro, proclaimed in September 1920 and hailed by both the libertarian left and the radical right as a ground-breaking

anarcho-corporate constitution, is rightly dismissed by Reill as a worthless piece of paper that was never actually enacted.

By showing how robust Habsburg institutions were, even in the post-war period, Reill's book raises a question very popular among Habsburg historians today: was the Austro-Hungarian Empire really doomed in 1914, or would it, as many leading Habsburgologists have claimed, carried on for several decades had it not been for the outbreak of World War I?

Reill is keen to point out that political processes in the Austrian and Hungarian halves of the Empire were very different, and that the centralizing dynamic of Hungarian politics did not bode well for the cohesiveness of the Empire as a whole. "Looking at the Kingdom of Hungary [in whose territory Rijeka was situated before World War I], and how it was pushing at the system, makes it very hard for me to imagine that the Empire could have stayed the way it was. So I don't think that a status quo had been arrived at by 1914 that could have kept on going. But it was a constantly changing Empire; it changed its entire constitution almost every 30 years. And if we think of the Habsburg Empire as an empire that was destined to disappear, then we don't always see everything that the empire did well. And if we look at a place like Rijeka before 1914, we're not going to think of the Habsburg Empire is doomed, because Rijeka was a boom town, one of Europe's most modern cities."

And according to Reill's telling, it was the desire to remain one of Europe's most modern cities that guided Rijekan aspirations after 1918. The fall of the Habsburg Empire was sudden and unnerving, and for many Rijekan citizens the appeal of Italian nationalism lay in the fact that it offered the quickest and most obvious solution to the empire's fall. Some of Reill's fellow historians may feel that she has placed the political trajectories of radical Italian nationalism a little too far out of the picture. But, as Reill herself says, "every book, if it's a good book, creates an appetite for more books".

The Fiume Crisis *by Dominique Kirchner Reill is published by Harvard University Press*

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