

Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 289pp. \$35 USD. ISBN 9780674244245.

In 1920, Béla Szécsey, an accountant in the multi-ethnic Adriatic port city of Fiume (today Rijeka), ordered Italian propaganda materials for his company, but wrote the purchase order in Hungarian. This apparently contradictory act, Dominique Reill suggests, was very normal for post-war Fiume. Szécsey was one of many non-Italian Fiumians who worked to convince the world that their former Habsburg city was Italian and should become part of Italy. From 1918 through December 1920, when the Italian army invaded to end annexation demands, Fiume was festooned with Italian flags and schoolchildren of all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds wore cockades in the Italian national colors. Why? As Reill tells us in this engaging book, the standard understanding of Fiume as a hotbed of Italian nationalism and proto-fascism after World War I fails to explain the actual experiences and motivations of Fiumians in the period between 1918 and 1921. She asks, how, in a moment associated with divisive nationalism, the Fiume city government managed to convince its diverse Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, Italian-speaking population to embrace the trappings of Italian national identity and the goal of political incorporation into the Italian state. She argues that the city and its residents engineered a vision of “Italian” Fiume, an attempt to preserve imperial structures and a heterogeneous society that the new post-war order threatened to destroy. Thus, the answer to explaining the first years after World War I in Fiume, and in much of Europe, lies as much in the end of Empire as in the advent of Wilsonian national states.

Before World War I, Fiume had been a booming Habsburg port city made prosperous by trade and emigration. As Reill explains, the city had cut a good deal for itself within the Habsburg Empire. It had access to the protection and markets of a large metropolis, while simultaneously enjoying an official semi-autonomous status that granted a high degree of local sovereignty. When the Habsburg Empire collapsed in 1918, Fiume, like many other former Habsburg territories, found itself in a quandary. When the Great Powers divvied up ex-Habsburg territories at the Paris Peace Conference, they weighed claims by Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and then dodged those countries’ competing national, territorial, and historical claims by declaring Fiume an independent city state. Yet far from celebrating independence as “liberation” from the old Empire, Fiumians recognized that it threatened their city with isolation and economic decline.

Fiume’s post-war government and many of its citizens objected to the Great Powers’ decision, demanding Italian annexation. In 1919 the Italian nationalist

poet Gabrielle D'Annunzio seized control of the city government, declaring it a part of the Kingdom of Italy with a populist swagger presaging Mussolini's style a few years later. Yet Reill argues that Fiumians adopted an Italianate posture, not out of exclusionary nationalist fervor, but in an attempt to manage the fallout of imperial dissolution, and to recreate the kind of semi-autonomous status the city had enjoyed in the Habsburg Monarchy as part of post-war Italy. Fiume's government emphasized the city's right to self-determination, adapting the Wilsonian terms of the time. Given the choice among status as an independent city state cut off from trade and influence, affiliation with the relatively poor new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, or inclusion in richer more established Italy, Fiume sought affiliation with Italy.

World War I left European populations, economies, and legal systems in disarray. Reill argues that it was surviving post-war upheaval, rather than nationalist activism, that occupied the daily lives of post-war Fiumians. Their embrace of Italianness was, she argues, a way to maintain local access to resources and power. She illustrates her argument by examining how Fiume's government and residents used money and the law to achieve self-determination. Reill traces the circulation of old Habsburg currency, both the officially validated and the counterfeit, to regulate trade, access food from the Slavic hinterlands, and pave the way (the city government hoped) to joining Italy. She examines how the city government and its residents used legal pertinancy (legal residence rights), to shape the population, the voting public, and access to social welfare. And she shows that Fiume's government used its own power to legislate, rather than recognition from the Great Powers, to assert self-determination. The city government used that legislative power to create a multi-layered sovereignty, blending old Habsburg legal codes, Italian law, and new legislation to make the most of imperial traditions and assert its own self-determination in the face of Great Power dictates. It created defacto legal unification with Italy (on the Fiumian side) and won popular support for unification in both Fiume and Italy.

This excellent book will be of interest to scholars of Modern Italy, Eastern Europe, European nationalism, and interwar Europe among others. Readers will finish this book enthusiastic about Fiume. But they will also come away with new insights into the creative ways that Europeans tackled the aftermath of World War I on the ground. Reill joins a number of recent scholars of Central and Eastern Europe in challenging the narrative that nationalism was the defining force reshaping Europe after World War I. Nationalism is still an important part of this story, but Reill shows that it jostled for position with a variety of other forces. These pages make the scramble to find food, clothe and educate one's children, and win residence rights and government protections palpable.

This book also reframes our understanding of post-World War I self-determination. As Reill shows, although many Europeans embraced the language and the principle of self-determination as they grappled with the challenges of post-war imperial collapse, they did not necessarily do so in Wilsonian terms. Not all self-determination was national, it did not necessarily align with the goals of the Great Powers, nor did it always succeed.

Reill highlights the importance of considering both the imperial and the local if we want to understand the end of World War I or the mapping of interwar Europe. She illustrates how Habsburg currency, administrative structures, legal codes, and community norms lived on after the collapse of the Empire. She shows us how press coverage of local events in Fiume helped drive international politics by creating a narrative of nationalist crisis. And she plunges us into an on-the-ground tour of colorful, scrappy, resourceful, everyday Fiume to show how those nationalist narratives obscured essential truths about interwar Europe for a century.

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