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We Are the Fiumians

August 29, 2021 • By Aliza Wong



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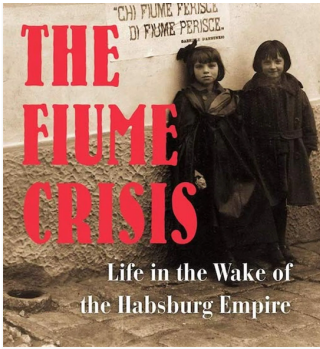


THERE ARE NOT many
people in the world who didn't



Aliza Wong

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

DOMINIQUE KIRCHNER REILL

see the terrifying images of people scaling the walls of the US Capitol building in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021. For some of us, it was a scene from a Kiefer Sutherland TV series, *Designated Survivor*. For others, people who are still fighting for representative government, and for the “unalienable rights” of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” January 6 was less a thriller and more a horror film, an unlikely invasion of nativistic zombies, some carrying Confederate battle flags, some in Viking horned hats, some draped in the Stars and Stripes, programmed to disrupt the counting of the electoral votes and to take back an election they believed had been “stolen” from them. And for still others, this mass of rioters were not insurrectionists but “true patriots,” called to action by *their* president, come to reclaim a country that was changing too fast, and represented too many.

As a historian, I watched the riot unfold, and three things kept playing in my head as I saw people climb through windows and break into offices. The first, rather inappropriate, was Eddie Izzard’s description of the making of the British Empire in *Dressed to Kill* — “We stole countries with the cunning use of flags. Just sail around the world and stick a flag in.” As the January 6 rioters flooded the Capitol, it was clear they had plenty of flags and plenty of slogans with which to (re)claim the country, from

as well as the executive producer and producer of the documentary film, *Narratives of Modern Genocide* (dir. Hunton, 2019), both generously funded by the Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission. A two-time Fulbright Award winner, Wong’s academic books include *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (2006), *The Texas Liberators: Veteran Narratives from WWII* (2017), and *Spaghetti Westerns: A Viewer’s Guide* (2018). She has also published in the online magazine founded by Umberto Eco, Gianni Riotta, and Danco Singer, *Golem L’indispensabile*.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

“America First” to “Don’t Tread on Me” to “Trump 2020.”

The second, slightly less inappropriate, mantra that kept echoing was from my favorite book, Julian Barnes’s 1989 novel, *History of the World in 10½ Chapters*: “Does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that’s too grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again that raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.” In Barnes’s 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, the onion sandwich returns. A character there, asked to explain why history is a raw onion sandwich, offers that it “just repeats, sir. It burps. We’ve seen it again and again this year. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment.”

And the third, most appropriate, was, “Fiume.” As a scholar and teacher of modern Italian history, I bring up post-World War I Fiume, and the claims by both Italy and the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on the territory, as part of the discussion on the failures of the Treaty of Versailles and the setting of the stage for the nativistic fascists who would begin their dominance over Italy in the 1920s. I even refer to Eddie Izzard when recounting the story of Gabriele D’Annunzio. Bolstered by a group of disgruntled veterans and self-designated patriots, D’Annunzio occupied Fiume (with the cunning use of a flag, we imagine) and declared himself commandant of the *Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro* (Italian Regency of Carnaro) in September 1919.

So when Dominique Kirchner Reill’s new book, *The Fiume*

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Aliza Wong reviews “The Perfect Fascist,” the new biography by Victoria de Grazia....

Dog Days in Postwar Paris: On Curzio Malaparte’s “Diary of a

Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire, arrived in my mailbox after January 6, its topic definitely brought back the raw-onion-sandwich-belchy kind of moment. However, as we have also learned from January 6 and its aftermath, it is not always the event itself but the echoes of the moment that tell us more about context, culture, and cohesion. And as Reill tells us, what is significant about the *Natale di sangue* (the Christmas of Blood), as D'Annunzio christened the attack on Fiume in 1920 that ended his occupation and resulted in Fiume being officially named a free state, besides the fact that there was relatively little bloodshed, with 30 casualties, five civilians, 10 D'Annunzio followers, and 17 Italian soldiers, is that for Italians, the moment is part of an “extensive narrative” used in schools, popular media, and historical monographs to rationalize how Italy “fell” into fascism in the 1920s. But, as Reill notes, “Christmas 1920 interrupted a world but did not transform it.” Scholars like Pankaj Mishra describe Fiume as a “watershed moment” that led to a legacy of “terroristic politics of the frustrated,” which has included Brexit, xenophobia in Europe, Donald Trump, and the rise of exclusionary politics in the name of patriotism. Other historians such as Mark Mazower examine Fiume as a charismatic, masculinist, chauvinist, and calculated primal scream “emblematic of the birth of a violent paramilitary nationalism that explains not just Mussolini’s rise but Hitler’s as well.” Sound familiar?

That is why Reill’s book is so important. As chilling as her analyses of the Great Man Theory, D'Annunzio, the occupation, the diplomatic conflict, and even the Bloody Christmas are, Reill reminds us that there were *people* involved. Real people. Some of whom may have been

Foreigner in Paris”

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On Consistency: Italo Calvino's Sixth Memo

This piece appears in the Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal: Catharsis, No.25 To receive the Quarterly Journal, become a member or purchase at our bookstore. ✕ The backstory is this: Italo Calvino ...

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moved by D'Annunzio's grandiose balcony speeches, and were bitter from the *vittoria mutilata* (mutilated victory) of World War I, wanting to redeem the *terre irredente* (unredeemed lands). But the real people who have been left out of this story, the Fiumians themselves, have been brought to the forefront by Reill. *The Fiume Crisis* reminds us that while the top-down, idealistic, romanticized vision sold by ultranationalists like D'Annunzio may dominate the historical narrative, it is the lived reality of the people present during these moments that determine the vocabulary with which we tell the story.

Reill calls out the “hijack[ing]” of the Fiume story by D'Annunzio, the deletion of the city's diversity, in language, culture, cosmopolitanism, and the overwhelmingly successful marketing campaign of Fiume as *italianissima*, “more Italian than Italy,” even when Fiume was home to more non-Italians than anywhere in Italy. This was not an erasure by physical violence, despite the occupation and the presence of veterans and soldiers. It was a cultural violence designed by city politicians that spotlighted *Italianità* to the detriment of the 50 percent of residents who did not use Italian as their first language. By focusing on the local, Reill seeks to understand why a city as diverse as Fiume with such a large non-Italian population would have bought into the “Italy First” narrative. Fiumians, whether Italian or not, sought stability, prosperity, even autonomy. Perhaps Wilson's Fourteen Points ended disastrously, but the idea of self-determination rang strongly in the city. Reill, with deftness and sensitivity, teases out the delicate workings of a city government that, having lost the complex imperial structures of Austria-Hungary, sought to replicate those

Pankaj Mishra on the Violent Transition to Modernity

Pankaj Mishra, leading global thinker, on violence and history....

systems under the Italian monarchy. As she puts it, “the Fiume Crisis was a move to continue empire under the aegis of nation.” The study of the “mundane,” as she calls her deep dive into *la vita quotidiana* of the people of Fiume, is anything but. The ways in which the multiethnic, multilingual, multicultured peoples of Fiume navigated, and worked through the structures they encountered at the municipal and national levels, underlie a rich narrative of the ways in which the communities both accepted and resisted notions of citizenship, belonging, and identity. This is as much a story of continuity through break as it is reinvention through tradition. The story of Fiume and Fiumians, as Reill tells it, is not *una fiaba italianissima* (a very Italian fable), but a European story of a world turned turtle by the (alleged) end of war and the (supposed) end of empire.

This is perhaps the most touching and compelling thing about the history that Reill weaves. In her examination of Fiume, she brings to the center the people who were most marginalized by the occupation, political machinations, policies, and military actions — again, the Fiumians themselves. Her chapters examine the ways in which extraordinary ordinary people — people from different places, who spoke different languages, and practiced different rituals and cultural habits — reconciled the realized heterogeneity in empire with the impulses of homogeneity in nation. By looking at the ways in which the grandiose D’Annunzian rhetorical flourishes were translated into pragmatic everyday life solutions, Reill opens up an important conversation on What Is History and Who Gets to Write It.

Reill decides that in this book, neither the victors nor the defeated, will get to tell their “lies” or “self-delusions.” Instead, by pushing to the spotlight neither those who created the *Impresa di Fiume* (Endeavor of Fiume) nor those who sought to defuse it nor even those who propagated the advent of fascism, she tells the story of those who had to live with the new reality, who were left to pick up the pieces, and had to find a way to narrate the story. In each section, whether examining the economy through complexities of currency, the interplay between sovereignty, agency, and allegiance, the blurring of multiple belongings, and the making of meaning, symbols, and identity, Reill weaves together a richness of documents, records, photographs. With the rigor of a scholar and the artistry of a bard, she finds not just *a* story to represent the complexities of speaking local problems into a larger global conversation. She finds *the* story, the case study, the *Martin Guerre* who articulates a worldview.

The people of Fiume faced what so many other Europeans faced — an uncertain world where their homes were no longer in the same empires nor the same nations, where the money they had earned had no currency, and their citizenship papers no longer held guarantees of protections or services or belonging, where their very histories were being written and rewritten depending on the ever-changing political context. Fiume was and is a symbol of a “Europe without continental empires.”

And perhaps that is why on January 6, as I watched people storming the Capitol, the word “Fiume” came to mind.

Because while that moment was a symbol of an angry people trying to resist their own “Europe without continental empires,” it was a reminder that, as we watched, *we are the Fiumians*. Whatever the aftermath may be, however they may tell that story or reimagine the intent, we Fiumians will be the ones who must live with the reality and pick up the pieces.

✕

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