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D. Kirchner Reill: The Fiume Crisis

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Rezensiert für H-Soz-Kult von Carlo Moll, University of Cambridge

The history of Fiume (now Rijeka) has become inextricably bound up with the rise of Italian Fascism and Gabriele D'Annunzio's short-lived "regency" of the Adriatic city in which the poet transformed himself into a Duce who invented an aestheticized style of politics that became characteristic of the Mussolinian dictatorship.

As a so-called Free City, Fiume's position within the webs of multi-layered sovereignty of Austria-Hungary was perpetually shaped by the political and legislative authority over the port that nominally lay with the Imperial government in Budapest, yet which was repeatedly challenged by the city's local elites who strove for more autonomy in the application of Hungarian directives and laws.

The dissolution of Austria-Hungary consequently led to a period of civic self-organization during which a newly formed, yet internationally unrecognized Italian National Council seized governmental responsibilities vis-à-vis the stationing of Inter-Allied troops in November 1918 that should prevent inter-ethnic civil war in the city, but which were replaced in September 1919 by D'Annunzio's rag-tag militia bent on a quick Italian annexation of Fiume.

As Kirchner Reill convincingly shows, the uncertainty of Fiume's international legal status and unresolved questions of political sovereignty decisively shaped the everyday lives of its citizens in such areas as commerce, employment, money markets and the courts. Thus, in the second chapter of her book (pp. 73–107), she lays a particularly interesting focus on the flourishing of financial black markets and counterfeiting that ensued after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monetary system, in which citizens from all walks of life participated both as a daily necessity for the purchase of goods and as a speculative opportunity for personal enrichment.

By shifting the focus from D'Annunzio's proto-Fascist government to the varied everyday challenges and changes that post-Imperial life posed for Fiume, Kirchner Reill has produced an engaging, highly readable portrait of a city that became the contested object of clashing national interests and international diplomacy, yet whose citizens sought to retain a degree of agency over their lives through self-organization, scheming and improvisation.

Note: [1] See Michael Arthur Ledeen, D'Annunzio, the First Duce, London 2002; Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, I redentori della vittoria. On Fiume's Place in the Genealogy of Fascism, in: Journal of Contemporary History 3 (1996), pp. 253–272.

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