

Europäische Geschichte /

D. Kirchner Reill: The Fiume Crisis

/ Buchrezensionen

Info Drucken PDF

	Titel	The Fiume Crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire
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	Erschienen	Cambridge, MA 2020: Harvard University Press
	Anzahl Seiten	290 S.
	Preis	\$ 35.00
	ISBN	978-0-674-24424-5

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.^[1] Indeed, scholars of Fiume’s turbulent post-war history have often approached the city solely through the prism of the short D’Annunzian episode and thereby missed its less appreciated role as an important centre of international trade that connected the Western Balkans with world markets, as well as being a vibrant melting pot of different nationalities, religions, cultural experiences and political philosophies. As Dominique Kirchner Reill argues in her monograph, due to Fascist efforts to integrate Fiume into a historical timeline leading to the March on Rome, the city has too often been viewed solely as an example of the “primacy of nationalism” (p. 106) after the First World War. Instead, she follows an altogether different approach than that chosen by previous scholars of Fiume, by going beyond the brief D’Annunzian episode and focusing instead on the city’s complex, transient character as a post-Imperial, Wilsonian conundrum that was stuck between a halcyon past as one of the most important overseas-trading centres of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a future that was shaped by the clashing interests of external powers like Italy, Yugoslavia, France, Britain and the United States on the one hand, and Fiumian self-determination, as well as D’Annunzio’s maverick self-styled band of ‘legionnaires’ on the other. As Kirchner Reill notes, to the Kingdom of Italy, Fiume was a vital target in the expansion of the nation’s trade and political influence in the Mediterranean which was an ambition that was especially feared by France.

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. Essentially, Fiume was to Hungary what the port of Trieste was to Austria, meaning a strategically important gateway for commercial, financial, and migratory flows that passed in and out of the Habsburg Empire and which generated considerable profits for the city’s predominantly Italian elites.

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 forging stamps used in the makeshift conversion of Austrian *Kronen* into new currencies and exchanging cash below official market rates, Fiumians navigated an environment of high political and economic risk and uncertainty, with a remarkable pragmatism regarding ideological imperatives and national allegiances. Indeed, as Kirchner Reill shows in one of her most interesting anecdotal asides, even D’Annunzio’s legionnaires participated in the free-wheeling currency market of the city, making a handsome profit in the process. Thus, economic considerations frequently trumped nationalist aspirations, while Fiume’s elites sought to put their city on a path towards joining Italy in a political, economic and monetary union which would nonetheless safeguard the numerous benefits and privileges the port had enjoyed under Hungarian rule. In the third chapter (pp. 108–133), Kirchner Reill documents how Fiume’s municipal administration sought to navigate the post-Imperial vacuum of power through the picking and choosing of Italian laws, the selective retainment of Hungarian ones for example pertaining to divorce and the creation of new distinctly Fiumian legislation. The ultimate, unrealized goal of Fiume’s elites was to retain its status as a city-state with special privileges and rights in a new arrangement of layered sovereignty with Italy. As Kirchner Reill argues, if such a scenario had been realized, Fiume could have conceivably followed San Marino’s path of retaining considerable sovereignty in its internal affairs, while also enjoying the protection of the Kingdom of Italy (pp. 131–132).

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. Therefore, her book could serve as a model for future studies of similar, contemporary cases of semi-autonomy during the interwar period, such as the Saar territory, the Rhineland and Danzig, because it provides valuable insights into the ways local populations negotiated and managed the consequences of Imperial disintegration after the First World War.

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.

Zitation

Carlo Moll: Rezension zu: Kirchner Reill, Dominique: *The Fiume Crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*. Cambridge, MA 2020. ISBN 978-0-674-24424-5, in: H-Soz-Kult, 01.02.2022, <www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-97808>.

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Redaktion

Veröffentlicht am
01.02.2022

Beiträger
Carlo Moll

Redaktionell betreut durch
Manuel Borutta

Zitation

Klassifikation

Epoche(n)
1918-1933

Region(en)
Südosteuropa

Thema
Imperien-geschichte, Kolonial-geschichte und Dekolonisation, Materielle Kultur, Mentalitätsgeschichte, Mikro-, Lokal- oder Alltags-geschichte, Militär- und Gewalt-geschichte, NS / Faschismus-geschichte, Nationalismus-geschichte / Nationalisierung, Politik-geschichte und -wissenschaft, Stadt- und Metropolengeschichte, Transnationale Geschichte, Wirtschaftsgeschichte und -wissenschaften

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Inhalte und Rezensionen
978-0-674-24424-5

Verfügbarkeit
978-0-674-24424-5

Weitere Informationen

Typ
Monografie

Sprache Publikation
Englisch

Land
United States

Sprache Beitrag
Englisch

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