


[Bresciani on Reill, 'The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire'](#)

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Dominique Kirchner Reill. *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. Illustrations, maps. 312 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

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Beyond D'Annunzio: Crisis and Survival in Post-Habsburg Fiume (1918-21)

On the centennial of 1918, research has focused on the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and its aftershock in Central Europe (and beyond). Dominique Kirchner Reill's book, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*, represents an important addition to a hitherto neglected area of Habsburg studies, by helping to disrupt the common wisdom concerning the northern Adriatic port town as the setting of the takeover between September 1919 and January 1921 by Gabriele D'Annunzio and his supporters.

Reill aims to disentangle the Fiume crisis of 1919-21 from direct links with the ascent of paramilitarism and (proto)fascism. As she states, "The real story of postwar Fiume is not how bodily violence destroyed the city's 'others,' but how city policies engineered a vision of 'Italian Fiume' that obligated locals to play up Italianness and downplay everything else" (p. 15). Her starting point is a critical review of the main national narratives on D'Annunzio's takeover of Fiume, placing an emphasis on how Fiume in these stories "is not a place but a moment" (p. 12). Reill describes the 1918-21 crisis as "a move to continue empire under the aegis of the nation" carried out by the "smallest of the successor states" (pp. 17, 22). Indeed, the local elites resorted to the "older Habsburg state infrastructures" to run the currency, to administer justice, and to reframe sovereignty and citizenship (p. 18). Moreover, they resumed the autonomist tradition developed under the Kingdom of Hungary and translated the practice of a "multi-sovereignty" state by negotiating powers and prerogatives with the new authorities at different levels (p. 110). On the macro level, there were the diplomatic networks of the great powers in Paris as well as the micro and local in the form of the interallied troops on the ground and the neighboring Kingdom of Italy and Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Italian National Council also manipulated the Habsburg juridical instrument of the pertinency (*pertinenza* or *Heimatrecht*) to provide "the marker of full, legal membership in the Fiume body politic" (p. 137). This did not prevent the Fiume government from requiring "all the traces of non-Italianness to be erased" (p. 178). They attempted to do so by destroying the symbols of the past regime, in a period when the multilingual practices still existed in everyday life. In particular, the display of Italian flags, the Italianization of names, and the adoption of school programs in agreement with those of the Kingdom of Italy combined to produce "a national sense of 'we-dom' with the

political push to be annexed themselves” (p. 185). Whereas concepts of nation-building are typically understood as a top-down process, post-1918 Fiume was reshaped by “a self-propelled Italianization campaign,” which aimed to mobilize all those citizens from Fiume who did not openly reject it (p. 222).

Reill’s book, brilliantly written and accurately researched using several archives in Italy, Croatia, and the United States, aims to “de-pathologize” Fiume’s “paradoxical” postwar history (p. 149). Accordingly, this approach is based on a radical anti-determinism, one that is sensitive to contingency and to the plurality of alternatives in the historical process. Surely, a focus on the wartime everyday life could contribute to highlighting the postwar dynamics in terms of both strategies of survival and tendencies toward intolerance. Or the interpretation of the post-Habsburg continuities might change if Reill’s book did not stop at 1921, thus excluding the subsequent stages leading to the free city-state or to the fascist coup of March 1922, and eventually to the actual Italian annexation in January 1924. This approach, however, still allows for a reassessment of recent works emphasizing violence as a distinctive feature of the post-1918 period. If one looks at the Baltics, or Galicia, or Anatolia, it is evident that the war did not come to an end in November 1918. Likewise, waves of violence were a continual feature of the postimperial lands of East-Central and Southeastern Europe. Nevertheless, in this regard post-Habsburg Fiume was different. In spite of all the given preconditions for violence (nationalism, paramilitarism, socioeconomic and institutional instability), the Fiume crisis did not turn dramatically violent.

Reill’s approach investigates how specific financial, economic, and legal forms and material infrastructures worked to handle the transition itself to another imperial order. Recent scholarship has insisted on the imperial continuities in interwar Central Europe by questioning the straightforward transition from the Habsburg Empire to the successor states as nation-states. Nevertheless, as Reill shows, the Italian nationalism in Fiume contributed—by way of unintended consequences—to the persistence of the imperial practices and cultures that continued to affect the successor states. Within this perspective, nationalism can be consistent, even entangled, with pluralism and cosmopolitanism, as well as with localism and fascism. The Italian-speaking nationalism in Fiume tended to assert “Italianness” as a choice rather than as an identity, and these claims, while providing sources of self-identification, also had an instrumental scope in the resettlement of everyday social and cultural relations within postwar Fiume. At the same time, the case study of post-1918 Fiume encourages us to indirectly shed new light on the connections between Italian nation- and empire-building projects in the aftermaths of the Great War and to reframe the discussion about the new Mediterranean order as a product of the Second World War. More than it has been usually argued, fascist ideas of empire flourished and resonated in the power void opened up by the collapse of the continental empires after 1918.

More broadly, *The Fiume Crisis* offers a path-breaking contribution in reconsidering the imperial transitions in twentieth-century Europe. Reill clearly departs from the post-1989 research agenda, shaped by the historical narratives focused on the decline of liberal democracy, totalitarianism, and mass violence. Her book effectively contributes toward paving the way to a different research agenda—one inspired by the financial and economic crisis of 2008 and by the subsequent dynamics of political and geopolitical instability within the Western world. Hence a more general question emerges well beyond the 1918-21 crisis—one concerning what politics is in contingencies of extreme uncertainty and unpredictability, when individuals’ and institutions’ survival is at stake and when the

state/civil society relationship breaks down or is on the way to redefinition.

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