Post-Imperial Europe: When Comparison Threatened, Empowered, and Was Omnipresent

Dominique Kirchner Reill

The 1920 Fiume Office of Foreign Relations was much less grand than it sounded. Far from the aisles of white-collar workers one would imagine busily drafting reports on the evolving League of Nations, the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, the Mexican Revolution, or the continued fighting in Anatolia, only four men were assigned to cover the world at large and, much to their dismay, they were given only three tables over which to do it. Four men to cover the world meant much of the world went un-analyzed in the Office of Foreign Relations. But one part of the world was never overlooked: the neighboring, newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (soon to be re-baptized Yugoslavia). Fiume (today known by its Croatian name, Rijeka) was continental Europe's ninth largest industrial port and after the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy it became a tiny, 50,000-person city-state nestled in the northeastern Adriatic, in between the Kingdom of Italy to its west and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes to its east. Fiume's status was not stable, as many of us know. Both neighboring kingdoms were busy pushing to annex the once booming transport hub into their own territories. Like so much of post-Habsburg Europe, the city itself was so ethnically diverse that nationality figures only heightened the tension around its status, instead of giving any clear indication of what "national self-determination" should or could be. In the meantime, since September 1919 the Italian nationalist poet-soldier Gabriele D'Annunzio had brought a motley crew of Italian followers to the town to help push for its future incorporation into the Kingdom of Italy.[1] Those four men in the Office of Foreign Relations (mostly veterans of Italy's armed forces in World War I) struggled in their cramped space to inform their superiors on everything they thought was necessary to offset the "Slavic threat" that they perceived everywhere: within Fiume itself, as well as in the lands to the immediate east and south. Most had lived in the northeastern

1. Fiume functioned as a provisionally independent city-state from November 1918 to January 1921. Its provisional government was made up of the Italian National Council until August 1920, which pushed for annexation to the Kingdom of Italy instead of independence or annexation to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In August 1920, Gabriele D'Annunzio pushed the National Council out of power and formed his own authoritarian Regency of Carnaro, which functioned much as the prior National Council state had, as there was never enough time to enact the new constitution. In November 1920, the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes finally agreed on a post-WWI border between the two states and decided to make Fiume an independent city-state under League of Nations and Italian protection. D'Annunzio refused to recognize this treaty in hopes Italy could still annex Fiume. In December 1920, Italian forces bombed Fiume to expel D'Annunzio and to compel the town to submit to its independence. In 1924, Mussolini signed a new treaty with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, annexing Fiume to Italy. In 1947, after the devastations of WWII, Tito annexed Fiume along with Istria to Yugoslavia, changing its name officially to the Croatian-language version, Rijeka. Today Rijeka is the third largest city in the Republic of Croatia.

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Adriatic long enough to learn the languages necessary to read the newspapers from Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana.[2] The work they performed echoed the concision their former wartime service had demanded: instead of long translations, they gave sharp, short syntheses to alert their superiors about what they saw as important and most threatening.

The goal of the Foreign Relations Office was not to give a thorough impression of what was really happening. Instead they scanned the presses to see what information was being distributed publicly that could adversely affect their cherished cause, the annexation of Fiume to the Kingdom of Italy. In essence they were the hundred-years-ago equivalent of a public relations machine. Fascinating is how these ur-Italian nationalists believed that peoples' loyalties were up for grabs, whether they preferred to speak Italian, Croatian, Slovene, Hungarian, German, Czech, Yiddish, English, or Romanian. Far from trusting their Comandante D'Annunzio's words that Fiume was "italianissima," they (and the rest of their colleagues in the "Information Department") regularly suggested that free food, wood, and medicines be supplied, especially in the hinterland and amongst Slavic-speaking communities, "to prepare the terrain for our propaganda."[3] When things looked particularly bad in Croatian-controlled Sušak—the town just across the river from Fiume whose economy and infrastructures were deeply intertwined with Fiume's own—Information Department employees exhibited something close to glee in their terse summaries. Things looked hopeful to them when they informed their superiors of intercepted messages from Sušak residents who wrote "now we wait to be occupied by d'Annunzio. And we would be happy for it, because we have no gas and even water is closed off during the day, open only in the morning and the evening for 2 hours."[4] Just as Andres Kasekamp has described in this forum in the case of the Baltic states, Italian nationalists in Fiume believed city services and state-organized welfare initiatives could convert peasants, workers, veterans, widows, and the ever-increasing number of unemployed to their cause, whatever their national affiliations or backgrounds. In essence, their working model was that good news could create good loyalists for an Italian-oriented state in Fiume, while bad news for adversaries could disaffect people in their cause against them.

But the Foreign Relations Office's main task was not to encourage loyalty; the heart of their job was to forestall the sting of disfavor or insurrection that negative information could have amongst Fiume's diverse populace. Sometimes the news stories that their office flagged were reports of violence (sexual and otherwise) perpetrated by D'Annunzio's men against locals.

2. For a list of the newspapers they consulted, see: Comando dell'esercito italiano in Fiume d'Italia, January 8, 1920, cass. 248- Uff. stampa, 8 gen. 1920, prot. 518, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano. (This is from the D'Annunzio regime's military archive and contains summaries of all the work produced by the Foreign Relations Office).

3. Comando dell'Esercito italiano in Fiume d'Italia. Ufficio Informazioni, August 4, 1920, cass. 249 Uff. info. Reg., 4 ago. 1920, Prot. 2347, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

4. Ufficio Informazioni, September 7, 1920, cass. 249, Uff. info. Reg. 7 sett. 1920, Prot. 2688, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano. (These files contain summaries of all intercepted postal, telegraphic, and telephonic communications D'Annunzio's followers collected from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, mostly pertaining to Sušak)

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Sometimes they warned their superiors of corruption rumors implicating Fiume's local government. But by far the overwhelming majority of their reports focused on one thing: money. These reports were not about military budgets, banking contracts, or foreign loans. Instead they were about something very specific and infuriatingly volatile: currency conversion. Fiume's Office of Foreign Relations was obsessed with how the former Habsburg-wide currency, the Krone, was being re-valued, converted, and counterfeited throughout post-Habsburg Europe, especially in the lands closest to them.

The Foreign Relations Office's manic attention to the Krone currency crisis was linked to the question of potential annexation of Fiume to Italy for two reasons. First, both D'Annunzio's military command and Fiume's local government were convinced that Italy would be more willing to incorporate the city-state if Fiume's economic indicators of value mirrored that of Italy. The inflation crisis pummeling a state like post-Habsburg Austria (which printed money willy nilly) scared Fiume's leadership: they wanted their savings, their deeds, their pensions, and their contracts to be worth something. The most likely solution to avoid Austria's problems they could imagine was to be joined to Italy with a 1 Krone–1 Lira exchange rate (the prewar rate their past economic prowess had been based on, a postwar rate they strived for but unluckily did not enjoy). Just as was happening in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Fiume government offices supervised which Habsburg-printed Krone could circulate in their territory by adding a local stamp on top of every bill. Although never the reality, *ideally* only Habsburg Krone with a national stamp could circulate in said "national" community, and so, for Fiume, only Fiume-stamped Krone were to circulate in the city-state. The idea behind the initiative was to limit inflation, to limit economic responsibility for Habsburg reparations debt, and to delimit where a "national" community began and ended. News about how stamping campaigns of the Habsburg Krone were faring in neighboring territories influenced the relative value of the Fiume Krone. News of mass counterfeiting attempts on the different national stamps applied to the Krone indicated the potential problems that Krone conversion would (and did) have in Fiume. To try to keep the Fiume Krone anywhere close to the value of the Italian Lira, the Foreign Relations Office kept their eyes on the curve balls hitting their neighboring Krone markets.

The threat of comparison was the second main reason why the Foreign Relations Office daily synthesized what Serb, Croat, and Slovene newspapers reported about all-things-Krone conversion. Comparison was a compelling thing in the immediate postwar years because people living in the new successor states easily looked over their porous political borders and assessed their own lot with that of their former Habsburg co-subjects. Comparison could cause change. For example, in 1919, Fiume's Finance Office complained that Fiumians were not receiving their due subsidies, something rendered even more intolerable, as in "Austria and nearby Yugoslavia" subsidies had been reinstated as early as January 1.[5] In response, Fiume's government immediately

5. Direzione di Finanza, January 2, 1919, cass. 29, Prot. 6, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano. (These files contain reports from Fiume's provisional government's Finance Office)

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followed their neighboring successor states' suit. Impelling comparisons could be enacted even lower down the totem pole. In February 1919, for example, Fiume war veterans working in the Post Office demanded extra subsidies for the purchase of uniforms, explaining that is what their equivalents in Hungary were receiving.[6] Fiume's government immediately complied with the postal workers' logic and replicated Hungary's example. Civil servants were not the only ones who knew how to look beyond the new borders to demand what they felt was right. In December 1918, Maria Viaggio, Luigia Durman, Cornelia Valenich, Giovana Mandich, and Maria Lenaz appealed to the government on the part of all female workers at Fiume's tobacco factory for an increase in their salaries by pointing out how all tobacco workers in Hungary were already receiving a 50% increase in pay to offset inflation and the high cost of living, while Fiume tobacco workers' "pay has remained much less than what is necessary to survive even for the most modest of means."[7] The state immediately conceded to the tobacco workers' demands; their pay was set 50% higher, but with a one-time bonus of 200 Krone instead of the 300 they had demanded.

Interstate comparison was a constant activity for the people living within a successor state like Fiume because until the recent end of the war, territories from as far north as L'viv (Galicia in the Republic of Poland) to as far south as Dubrovnik (Dalmatia in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) had all been ruled by similar governmental principles. Differences in laws and rights between successor states could quickly snowball into local dissidence, and nothing was as potentially incendiary (as far as the Foreign Relations Office was concerned) as comparing how the same currency—the same Krone that millions of people had been earning, saving, borrowing, lending, and trading with since the 1890s—took on different values depending on whatever government ruled. The Fiume Foreign Relations Office was well aware of what Maciej Górny has pointed out in his contribution to this forum focusing on Poland: after the war, what many people longed for most was a functioning state. If a neighboring state using the same base currency was doing a better job at securing that money's value, why stick with a state that was doing a worse job?

The Foreign Relations Office's fear of what the comparison of Krone currency conversion policies could incite was well-placed. As mentioned above, Fiume officials regularly promised city inhabitants that annexation to Italy would guarantee a 1 Lira–1 Krone exchange rate (instead of the 1 Lira–5 Krone exchange rate that most suffered). This incentive for annexation was so compelling that some Fiumians even requested that salaries and pensions be paid out only once annexation had been achieved, so that they could be paid in the higher-valued Lira.[8] On the opposite side of

6. Direzione delle Poste, telegrafi, e telefoni, February 22, 1919, cass. 30, Prot. 1400, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano. (Files from the Fiume provisional government's Communication Services)

7. Operaie della fabbrica di tobacchi, December 11, 1918, cass. 28, Prot. 242, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano. (Files from Fiume's provisional government relating to workers' demands)

8. For one of numerous examples see: Bombig, Enrico, May 20, 1919, 541 Općina Rijeka 1918–1945, D68/1901, Opći spisi 12445, Državni Arhiv u Rijeci. (These files contain communications between Fiume's provisional government and state employees)

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the spectrum, and directly tied to the "social energy" that Maciej Górny described as leading every employee in Poland to have participated in some sort of strike during the immediate postwar period, Fiume factory workers, too, tried to use the threat of strikes to demand payment in Lira instead of the consistently devalued Krone.[9] In March 1920, even *New York Times* readers learned that Fiume's business sectors were deserting the pro-Italy campaign that the Foreign Relations Office was trying so hard to bolster in favor of what international diplomats decreed because, as one businessman told a reporter: "[o]ur money situation is appalling. . .. [W]e must have a new money that is stable."[10] When in June 1920 Krone stamped in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes rose briefly in value versus the Fiume Krone, Fiume government officials feared that this was the work of "anti-Italian agitators . . . aided by American and French gold."[11] By October 1920, when still Fiume's Krone situation had not been regulated as promised, the police reported ever-increasing sectors of the city-state seemed interested in "a change."[12] As the Foreign Relations Office correctly imagined, the political consequences of Fiume's unstable currency crisis could be grave indeed.

But beyond the Fiume-specific question of annexation, the day-to-day consequences of postwar Krone circulation threatened something much deeper, something that in some ways the Foreign Relations Office feared more. Living in a world where the same money lost value in some places more than in others because of the political aims of the state encouraged locals to distrust what their governments dictated and to judge the situation on their own, regardless of what was legal. The viral counterfeiting phenomenon besetting all the successor states was partially a product of this. In February 1919, officials reported in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes that out of the thirty-seven billion Krone circulating in their territories at least seven billion were considered counterfeit.[13] In Czechoslovakia, it was estimated that between February and November 1919 at least one billion fraudulently stamped notes were introduced.[14] In November 1919, it was found that about 60% of the Fiume-Krone circulating in the city were marked with forged stamps.[15] Counterfeiting grew in such proportions because none of the successor states had the technical

9. Comando dell'Esercito italiano in Fiume d'Italia. Ufficio Informazioni, April 6, 1920, cass. 249, Uff. info. Com. Esercito It. 6 apr. 1920, Prot. 1091, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

10. Associated Press, "Fiume Blockade Ordered by Italy," *New York Times*, March 1, 1920.

11. Comando di Fiume d'Italia. Ufficio nformazioni, June 12, 1920, cass. 249 Uff. info. Com. Esercito It., 12 giu. 1920 Prot. 1633, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

12. October 29, 1920, cass. 249 Uff. info. Reg., 29 ott. 1920, Prot. 3178, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

13. Karl Schlesinger, "The Disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Currency," *The Economic Journal* 30, no. 117 (March 1920): 26–38. See in particular pages 27–29.

14. Ibid., 30–31.

15. Radmila Matejčić, "Krune Citta di Fiume i problemi valute u Rijeci od godine 1918–1924," *Numizmatičke vijesti* 20 (1963): 54–71. In April 1919, on the first round of stamping, the Fiume provisional government had stamped 47,743,190 Fiume Krone. In October 1919, 120,094,240 Fiume Krone were submitted for re-stamping. During the re-stamping drive, forged stamps were accepted at face value by the government and individuals received newly stamped krone to replace their forged Krone, at no loss.

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know-how or machinery to produce the kind of stamps that would be difficult to forge. But something else was at play. Everywhere Krone bills were available for forged stamping because so many locals hoarded their unstamped bills "just in case," submitting them to stamping (whether legal or covert) only when necessary. Participation in this criminal cycle did not have the same stigmatism that complicity in other crimes could instill because the base money involved was real, it was theirs, and it followed all the inflows and outflows of trade still existent regardless of where the new political borders of the region might have been placed. Everywhere throughout the former Dual Monarchy people traded in the Krone, whether it was stamped by their new government or someone else's. The Foreign Relations Office reported on Serb, Croat, and Slovene currency crises well aware that what touched their neighbors could not be stopped from touching them. In fact, by mid-1920 Fiume Krone and Italian Lire had been so overvalued that Krone stamped with the Serb-Croat-Slovene insignia were the only currency that Fiume fishmongers and fruit sellers would accept in their marketplace, regardless if stamped illicitly or not.

The viral counterfeiting crisis undoubtedly threatened the 1 Lira–1 Krone exchange scheme that Fiume's government was trying to render viable. But the Foreign Relations Office followed the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes' counterfeiting debacles so anxiously for a bigger reason, one best understood by listening to the complaints of the 32-year-old head of the local linoleum company, Giuseppe Post. Post was informed by the Fiume government that two 1,000 Krone bills deposited into his company's bank account were found to have falsified stamps on them and, thus, they were returned to him with "annulled" printed on top to indicate their illicit nature. Post wrote to the government, demanding plainly: "What am I supposed to do with these two notes?"[16] Was his money just gone, even though it was still money, and returned to his hands? He, like the tens of thousands of his fellow Fiumians, received no clear answer about what they were supposed to do with the forged-stamped bills, which was a dangerous frustration, indeed. Fiume's Finance Office was on the frontline of the desperate complaints levied by people from all levels of society who found themselves left money-less because the stamps on their bills were judged falsified. According to the Finance Office, among the gravest concerns was the great inflows of forged currency that were making its way to Fiume from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes because not only would this be hard to control, but "public opinion holds that Yugoslav currency held by Fiume citizens, which was not stamped by the Yugoslav government because [they were] forged, should be taken up by the National Council of Fiume."[17] In short, the Finance Office informed the higher ups of Fiume's provisional government and D'Annunzio's military command that people had pretty clear ideas about how the state should be protecting them and their future. Foreign Relations Office syntheses of Serb-Croat-Slovene news reports on the currency crisis let Fiume superiors know how, when, and

16. Giuseppe Post, December 13, 1919, cass. 36, Prot. 7464, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

17. Direzione di Finanza, November 28, 1919, cass. 36, Prot. 7184, Vittoriale-Archivio Fiumano.

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how much more Fiumians would demand from them, things they most likely would not (and probably could not) provide.

There is so much more to discuss about the political, social, economic, and cultural implications of what the Krone currency crisis had for those living in Fiume specifically, and the peoples of the postwar successor states in general, although no space exists here to enjoy delving into it. But I believe the most important point to be taken from it is something that L. B. Namier pointed to in a newspaper article he published in 1922 on the subject of post-Habsburg Galician peasants and their relationship to money.[18] Namier spoke of how before the war there was one "caesar" for the Galician peasant, the Habsburg emperor, whose offices printed all the money they dreamed of accumulating so as to live their lives with more ease. With all the changing regimes the war inflicted on them (Russian, Habsburg again, Polish, Ukrainian), according to Namier the Galician peasant lost his awe for authority, a process accelerated with the introduction of so many new and ever-fluctuating currencies. That did not mean, however, that Galician peasants thought they should let their lives dangle in the wind. Instead, a heightened sense of global money markets took root even in the remotest of villages. Namier ended his eccentric piece by insinuating that in order to protect himself (and profit) the Galician peasant did not look to the government, but instead followed the daily exchange rates among the world's many currencies better than a Swiss stock broker.

Like so much of Namier's journalistic work at the time, his claims were based much more on impressions than carefully researched facts. But something in his article rings true when analyzing the local archives of another, absolutely different post-Habsburg world than rural Galicia: with the Empire gone, people in the new successor states scrambled to arm themselves with comparisons in a way we often overlook. A Foreign Relations Office, like the Fiume one here briefly described, was as much about pinpointing what relations with outside states could be as it was a way of tracking what different options "national" insiders might come to know, what they could use in order to get what they wanted, or against what they needed to demand protection. To date, most histories of the making of the post-imperial states have been told as a clash for dominance between different ideologies, classes, leaders, or identities (ethnic or otherwise), with all eyes looking inward on how to wrest power away from supposed adversaries or outward to expand borders.[19] Something else was going on, however, something that should tempt historians of the postwar era not just to write comparative histories of all the different states, but also to think about those same states as being filled with comparative actors. Money is just one of the easiest places to start, of course, but the power of comparison in the post-imperial world threatened and promised much

18. L. B. Namier, "Currencies and Exchanges in an East Galician Village," in *Skyscrapers, and Other Essays* (London, 1931), 163–80.

19. A new wave of post-Habsburg scholarship is underway throughout the lands of the successor states focusing specifically on imperial continuities, which will undoubtedly lead to a host of fascinating new interpretations of the interwar period. One of the first of its kind is the exceptional Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York, 2018). See especially the contribution by Gábor Egry.

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insight into how one could and did relate to the state. Miller's piece in this forum on anti-Semitic violence in the immediate postwar years gives us an even more chilling example of this when he cites the December 1918 Prague rioters yelling: "Thrash the Jews! Give them what they got in Lwów!"[20] This comparative—sometimes calculating, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes brutal—practice calls attention to how much the crossover structures of empire still reverberated even though the imperial state had dissolved. It also serves as an important reminder of how deeply international (or "beyond national" to use István Deák's formulation) these nation-states' histories were at their beginning.

20. Quoted from Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews?: National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia* (New York, 2012), 111.

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