

Redefining Fiumians: Flag Usage and the Ambiguities of the Nation-Building Process in the Former Habsburg-Hungarian *corpus separatum*, 1914–1924.

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Abstract

In the late Habsburg period, Fiume's municipal flag became the representative symbol of local patriotism. This article argues that local patriotism in Fiume was a form of identification that combined features of modern nationalism with loyalties to the Habsburg Empire. With the disappearance of the Dual Monarchy and the subsequent transition period (1918—1924) the Fiumian flag was redefined and contested both as a symbol of Italian irredentism realized through annexation and of Fiume's independence by local autonomists. Thus, the article demonstrates how local patriotism survived the Empire's dissolution and how attachment to a locality was a significant feature of European political life in general during that period.

Introduction

Fiume (known today as Rijeka)¹ was the only territory in the Kingdom of Hungary with Italian as the official language of municipal institutions. Officially, the city was a *corpus separatum* – an administrative unit confined almost exclusively to the city of Fiume – of the Kingdom of Hungary, not subject to neighboring Croatia-Slavonia, which also enjoyed a remarkable degree of local autonomy within the Hungarian Kingdom of Saint Stephen.² In Fiume, the local elite conceived, developed and promoted local patriotism through practices usually associated with modern nationalism. The main feature of this form of self-identification was the maintenance of the city's self-government or semi-autonomous character within the Kingdom of Hungary, combined with a defense of its Italian linguistic

¹ Before 1918, the territory of today's Rijeka was part of different administrative and state units and I use Fiume to indicate this difference, despite Croatian speakers referred to the town as Rijeka even before 1918.

² W. Klinger, 'Negotiating the Nation. Fiume: from Autonomism to State Making (1848-1924)', PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2007.

and cultural specificity which was not *per se* inconsistent or in conflict with loyalty to the Kingdom of Hungary. Local patriotism was interpreted, understood and promoted by diverse and conflicting political actors as well as the local population. The features of this form of self-identification were not fixed, but changed over time. During the transition period (1918-1924), in which sovereignty over the city was transferred from the Kingdom of Hungary to the Kingdom of Italy, the same concept of local patriotism and the varying loyalties associated with it were redefined.³

The aim of this article is to discuss local patriotism as a form of self-identification from a symbolic perspective from the eve of the First World War and ending with the establishment of the Free State of Fiume (1921-1923). By first focusing on the usage of the city's flag and related symbols, I will display how, in Fiume, the process of nationalization prior to 1918 was heavily influenced by local patriotism, an ideology that aimed to create attachment to a Fiumian 'imagined community'.⁴ Autonomists imagined their modern Fiumian political community as having certain ambitions to sovereignty, but ultimately within the Kingdom of Hungary, claiming that Fiume had historical rights as a *pars adnexa* of the Crown of Saint Stephen.⁵ Second, I will discuss how, following the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was an active attempt to reshape and channel Fiumian identification into 'natural' Italian national loyalty. However, such a redefinition – the 'invention of a tradition'⁶ – was not unconditionally shared by the entire population, by Italian soldiers who arrived in the city in the immediate post-war period, or by D'Annunzio and his legionnaires who arrived in Fiume in September 1919. Resistance to the Italian national redefinition of symbols suggests that Fiumians before 1918 were influenced by their own 'different path to the nation'.⁷ In fact, such a form of municipal-level self-identification was exploited quite successfully by political actors who opposed the city's annexation to Italy and demanded its independence instead.

In discussing a specific micro-case, this article employs theoretical approaches for the study of nationalism, avoiding a focus on D'Annunzio's legionnaires' emotional community

³ For the social, legal, and economic aspects of Fiume's postimperial transition, including the usage of national symbols, see Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 5–7.

⁵ On concept of Fiume as a nation see William Klinger, 'Quando è nazione? Una rivisitazione critica delle teorie sul nazionalismo', *Quaderni*, Centro ricerche storiche Rovigno, 17, (2006), 399-420.

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 1983).

⁷ Laurence Cole, ed., *Different Paths to the Nation. Regional and National Identities in Central Europe and Italy, 1830-70* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

or the importance of Fiume for the construction of Italian nationalism.⁸ Discussed here is Fiumian identification as local patriotism: a form of regionalism and a patriotic devotion to a locality that, in this particular case corresponded with a municipality.⁹ Such a form of self-identification shared the modern features of national movements but did not consistently or intrinsically obstruct pathways to larger (nation-)state patriotisms, whether Habsburg, Hungarian, and/or Italian. Fiumian local patriotism was used as both municipalism, advocating just self-government, and regionalism, advocating legal rights for a subnational territory and its inhabitants.

Fiumian local patriotism was not the manifestation of an inherent, centuries-old, specific self-identification, or the embryonic stage of an inbred Italian nationalism that the First World War channeled into a ‘natural’ direction.¹⁰ Local patriotism was one among other modern forms of collective identifications available to citizens of Fiume, one which combined belonging to an imagined Italian cultural and linguistic space with loyalty to the Hungarian state and fidelity to the Habsburgs, i.e. through the person of the King, in this case Franz Josef. While it could be understood as an example of the mutual constitution of multiple loyalties, it was rather a manifestation of one conceivable and plausible local form of Habsburg-Hungarian loyalty. Obviously, local patriotism was not monolithic; it could assume different meanings for different social actors and people could be indifferent to it or use it for their personal goals.¹¹ Yet, the point here is that devotion and attachment to the Fiumian flag was an example of a secular religion, with its own symbols, rituals, and myths typical for a nation-state.¹²

Fiume’s case thus raises the question of the teleological interpretation of nationalism as the only genuine possibility of modern identification and investigates other self-

⁸ Thomas Blanck, ‘In Search of the True Italy: Emotional Practices and the Nation in Fiume 1919/1920’, in Andreas Stynen, Maarten Van Ginderachter, Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, eds., *Emotions and Everyday Nationalism in Modern European History*, (London: Routledge, 2020) 107-133 and Milou van Hout, ‘In search of the nation in Fiume: Irredentism, cultural nationalism, borderlands’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 26, 3, (2020), 660-676.

⁹ For a discussion on regionalism see Xosé-Manoel Núñez, ‘Historiographical Approaches to Sub-national Identities in Europe: A Reappraisal and Some Suggestions’, in Joost Augusteyn and Eric Storm, ed., *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe Nation-Building, Regional Identities and Separatism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13-35.

¹⁰ Riccardo Gigante, *Fiume e il nuovo confine memorie e presagi*, (Milano: Ispi, 1943) 18-19. For a recent discussion on Fiume's regional identification before Dualism see Mario Maritan, ‘National indeterminacies at the periphery of the Habsburg Monarchy: Nationalisms versus multi-ethnic identities in Fiume/Rijeka and Trieste, 1848–1867’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 27, 1 (2020), 1-15.

¹¹ Tara Zahra, ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’, *Slavic Review*, 69, 1 (2010), 93-119 and Tara Zahra and Pieter M. Judson, ‘Sites of Indifference to Nationhood’, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 43 (2012), 21-27.

¹² Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

identifications without assuming Italian and Croatian/Yugoslav nationalisms as the triumphant and expected outcomes in the post-1918 world. This study shows the continuity of identification practices within and without the Habsburg Empire, but also the transformations, adaptations and contingencies related to this form of identification.

As such, Fiume is not an exception. Forms of local or regional collective identification that survived and challenged nationalization during the twentieth century in Europe and in particular the Austro-Hungarian Empire, are well documented. Even in the twentieth century, in economically developed Upper Silesia, many Upper Silesians refused to self-identify nationally, preferring alternative regional, local, religious and other non-national forms of collective identification¹³. In postwar Prekmurje a territory inhabited by Slavophones in the southwestern reaches of the Kingdom of Hungary and ceded to the Slovene part of the South Slav state after 1918, Slavophone locals considered Slovenes from across the Mur/Mura river as belonging to another ethnic group entirely.¹⁴ In Transylvania, formally annexed to the Kingdom of Romania in 1920, local and regional differences in collective identification between Old Kingdom Romanians and Transylvanian Romanians – not to mention Hungarian- and German-speakers – persisted.¹⁵ In Western Europe, postwar Alsatians returning to France maintained and created a sense of their local particularity.¹⁶ These cases point out how identification with modern and uniform nationalisms was neither inevitable nor accepted passively and thus ought not be expected as outcomes of, nor the main reasons to, the Empire's dissolution.

The emergence of a modern symbol

¹³ For Upper Silesia see Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland. Upper Silesia, 1848-1960*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and Kamusella, et. al, *Creating Nationality in Central Europe, 1880-1950. Modernity, Violence and (Be)Longing in Upper Silesia* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016). In general for a European approach see Joost Augusteijn and Eric Storm, ed., *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe Nation-Building, Regional Identities and Separatism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁴ Jernej Kosi, 'The Imagined Slovene Nation and Local Categories of Identification: "Slovenes" in the Kingdom of Hungary and Postwar Prekmurje', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 49 (2018), 87-102 and Kosi, 'Summer of 1919: Radical, Irreversible, Liberating Break in Prekmurje/Muravidék? Hungarian, Historical Review', 9, 1 (2020), 51–68.

¹⁵ Gábor Egry, 'Unruly borderlands: border-making, peripheralization and layered regionalism in post-First World War Maramureş and the Banat', *European Review of History*, 27, 6 (2020), 709-731 and Egry, 'Unholy alliances? Language exams, loyalty, and identification in interwar Romania', *Slavic Review*, 76, 4 (2017), 959-982.

¹⁶ Alison Carrol, *The Return of Alsace to France, 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The city of Fiume received its coat of arms from Emperor Leopold I in 1659, featuring a double-headed eagle, with both heads looking in the same direction, under the Habsburg imperial crown, perched atop a pot wedged between a rock formation, out of which water flows. At the base, the inscription reads ‘*Indeficienter*,’ that is, ‘Unending.’ Though this coat of arms was an invention of the seventeenth century, the history of the municipal flag is more recent, dating back to the beginning of the so-called Springtime of Nations. In 1846, the civic municipal magistrate of Fiume, following the example of other Hungarian committees, proposed to use the colors of the city’s coat of arms (deep red-yellow-violet) instead of the Hungarian colors (green-white-red) in the fashioning of their police uniforms. Despite the patrician municipal council’s rejection of the proposal – for fear it would provoke a negative response in the rest of Hungary – Fiume’s local population started to wear cockades with the city’s colors in 1848 when the Springtime of Nations knocked on Fiume’s door. With Milan, Venice, and Pest in revolt against the Habsburg Empire, but with Croatia-Slavonia remaining loyal to Vienna in opposition to Hungary, the power structures of the Habsburg lands changed, and Fiume found itself under Croatian control. That year, the municipal council was ordered by the new superior Croatian authorities to change the Hungarian-color police uniforms. As a response, the councilors decided that the new police uniforms and pom-poms adorning the policemen’s hats would employ the municipal colors. The superior Croatian authorities then overruled the city council’s decision and made the police wear the Croatian national colors (red-white-blue). The Croatian administration decided that the city must use the Croatian tricolor, including the city’s coat of arms, as its official flag.¹⁷

The municipal council’s attempt to adopt the municipal colors, instead of the previously-used Hungarian colors, was made to mark the distinctiveness of the city from the Croatian crownland and to oppose symbolically the Croatian national movement. It was a symbolic struggle between a local elite that wanted to maintain civic privileges against another elite that viewed the city as its integral historical and national part.

The Empire’s war effort against Prussia and Italy in 1866 again reshuffled the balance of power inside the Habsburg lands, providing the Hungarian elite with a stronger negotiating

¹⁷ Giovanni Kobler, *Memorie per la storia della liburnica città di Fiume*, (Trieste: reprint 1978), Vol. 3, 129-130, 135. For the history of Fiume’s flags see Aldo Ziggliolo, ‘Le bandiere degli stati italiani 3 Fiume’, *Armi Antiche*, 16 (1969), 129-142; Ibid, ‘Le bandiere degli antichi stati italiani aggiornamento Fiume’, *Vexilla Italica*, 10 (1978), 1-8 and Ibid, ‘Le bandiere degli antichi stati italiani aggiornamento Fiume’, *Vexilla Italica*, 11 (1978), 21-28. For a recent overview of Fiume’s and Rijeka’s flags see Željko Heimer, *Zastave Rijeke. Monografija dva stoljeća borbe grada za parvo na svoju zastavu* (Rijeka: Slobodna država Rijeka, 2022).

position against the Habsburgs. The Austro-Hungarian (1867) Compromise gave the Kingdom of Hungary semi-independence, while Croatia-Slavonia could only negotiate its position inside Hungary. With the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement (1868) Croatia-Slavonia achieved a considerable degree of autonomy, while Fiume's elite obtained its detachment from the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia and direct connection to the Kingdom of Hungary as a *corpus separatum*. Obviously, this meant that symbols were changed. From 1870 onward, the deep red-yellow-violet tricolor became the Fiume municipality's official flag. Its use was limited to official local and state ceremonies, such as the visit of King Franz Josef to Fiume in 1875,¹⁸ or the Hungarian Millennium celebrations in the city in 1896.¹⁹ When the King-Emperor visited the city, the Fiumian flag waved alongside the black-yellow imperial and red-white-green Hungarian flags; when the Millennium was celebrated the same flag hanged alongside the state (i.e., Hungarian) flags on governmental, municipal, associational, as well as private buildings.

Along with the flag, another widely deployed symbol became the Fiume's coat of arms, sanctioned in numerous municipal buildings commissioned and owned by the economic and demographically expanding city, such as the municipal theater, the entrance to the city park, a municipal boys' school, and the fish market.²⁰ The double-headed eagle and the flag became the symbolic elements of a 'banal nationalism'²¹, or, more precisely in this case, a banal local patriotism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new political generation transformed this civic-municipal symbol into that of an imagined political community. The city's symbols were displayed on almost all public municipal notifications, on city offices' stamps – ranging from the municipal police to the local hospital – and even at the highest level as part of the extended Hungarian coat of arms.²² The coat of arms was also used for advertisements, for instance on the cover of the *Guida di Fiume* from 1898 (**figure 1**), which was a collection of all the city's institutions and businesses, and then inside the same edition, by the local

¹⁸ Dalibor Prančević, 'Slavoluci i(li) spomenici. Načini obilježavanja prisutnosti cara i kralja Franje Josipa I. u javnom prostoru Dalmacije i Kvarnera u drugoj polovini 19. stoljeća', *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, 44, 1 (2020), 139-140. See also 'Notizie locali', *La Bilancia* (Fiume), 14.05.1875, 3.

¹⁹ 'Le feste odierne', *La Bilancia* (Fiume), 8.06.1896, 2.

²⁰ Radmila Matejčić, *Kako čitati grad. Rijeka jučer, danas* (Rijeka: Adamić, 2007), 206, 214, 224, 266-268 and 286.

²¹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications), 1995.

²² Ladislao de Lászlóczky, 'Stemmi, bandiere e sigilli della città di Fiume', *Archives héraldiques suisses = Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik = Archivio araldico svizzero : Archivum heraldicum*, 106, 1 (1992), 9.

chocolate factory and a local pasta company.²³ It was a symbol ready to be used, and its presence became ubiquitous.

As an everyday civic symbol, the coat of arms became an imperceptible element of local patriotism, pushing locals to internalize the fact that they lived in a world of imperial, national, regional and local loyalties. As such, the coat of arms was reconfigured into a political symbol for and of the masses. In a local Habsburg society that was industrializing, and with an increasing number of immigrants and consequently an increasing number of potential voters – or at least politically and socially active individuals – the political elite found it necessary to construct and obtain the consent of wider social strata.²⁴ This role was fulfilled by the Autonomist Party.

The Autonomist Party was established at the end of the nineteenth century, when Fiume's elite was set on a collision course with the central state authorities in Budapest on issues regarding the degree of the city's self-government. It was not a conflict against the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hungary, but rather a contention about how institutionally homogenized and autonomous Fiume should be.²⁵ One of the issues concerned was the usage of the Italian language by state authorities, an element which became the battle horse of Fiumian autonomism. To obtain support from locals, the autonomists had to explain what the 'Italian character' was and who might be a threat to it. The 'Italian character' referred to the privileged position of the Italian language at local level, and it implied opposition to Croatian historical and national claims on Fiume. By the late nineteenth century it included resistance to the Hungarian government's attempts to make the city's administration uniform with the rest of Hungary. In this economically and demographically expanding city, the need to create consensus with a larger public at the local level increased rapidly. By 1900, Fiume was the second-fastest growing city in the Kingdom of Hungary. As more people moved to and got engaged in local Fiumian society, they also required a greater amount of service from the city administration. To maintain their special administrative and legal situation as a *corpus separatum*, Fiume's elite needed to include these wider social strata and convince them of

²³ *Guida di Fiume 1898* (Fiume: Premiata Libreria Editrice M. Polonio-Balbi), VI and XV.

²⁴ For a new synthesis of this period see Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2016), in particular 333-384. The number of voters in Fiume, as well as in Hungary was quite limited. In 1911 around 2.400 (out of almost 50.000 inhabitants) had the right to vote for municipal elections, a similar number to those who had that right for the political elections. La giornata elettorale, in *La Bilancia* (Fiume), 15.5.1911,2.

²⁵ Ágnes Ordasi, *Társadalom és állam viszonya Fiumében a Dualizmus korában. A magyar állami hatalomgyakorlás lehetőségei, eszközei és korlátai Fiumébe*, PhD thesis 2022, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem.

their alleged specificity by political propaganda that emulated other nationalist movements, giving a sense of sacredness and unity to their cause.

The Autonomists functioned as a local mass party and spread the colours of the Fiumian flag on promotional material – in one instance even on the covers of their own matchbooks (**figure 2**) – just as other modern nationalist and workers’ parties deployed their political symbols in Austria-Hungary and in Europe in general.²⁶ In another case, the Autonomists’ followers distributed the city’s flags during the festivity of the city’s patron saints, Vitus and Modestus, in 1902. Furthermore, the Autonomists promoted the construction of a double-headed eagle statue to be placed on the City Tower – the town’s former main gate – so that the Hungarian state flag would not be placed there. The event was memorialized by the publication of a postcard with the Fiumian tricolor and the double-headed eagle.²⁷ Finally, the 1913 song contest organized by the local Literature Circle deemed the composition *La mia bandiera* (My Flag) the winner. The flag for whom the ‘soul was proud, made the heart beat strongly, resisting the worst of times’ was not a national, Hungarian, or Italian flag, but the Fiumian tricolor.²⁸

By making these symbols almost constantly visible and available for the public to discuss, choose, perform, consume, or dislike, the Autonomists had created an ‘everyday local patriotism’²⁹ among the Fiumian Italian cultural and linguistic community. A consequence of this expansion of local patriotic sentiment was the potential for ambivalence toward the Hungarian state itself, which manifested itself in the hierarchy of self-identifications among Fiumians during the First World War.

Fighting for our beloved homeland

During World War One, young Hungarian citizens, mainly with pertinency (*Heimatrecht*)³⁰ in Fiume, were enrolled in the 4th Fiume Battalion, part of the 19th Honvéd (Territorial Army of the Kingdom of Hungary) Infantry Regiment. In September 1914, the

²⁶ For Europe, in general, Jonathan Sperber, *Bourgeois Europe, 1850–1914*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2022), 299-304. For the political mobilization in Austria-Hungary in this period see P. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, 338-339. For an insightful description of the Belgian case Maarten Van Ginderachter, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers. A Social History of Modern Belgium* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

²⁷ For this aspect, see Ivan Jeličić, ‘Nell'ombra dell'autonomismo. Il movimento socialista a Fiume, 1901-1921’, PhD thesis, Università degli studi di Trieste, 2017, 72-74.

²⁸ ‘Il concorso delle canzonette popolari’, *La Voce del Popolo* (Fiume), 9.2.1913, 2.

²⁹ Jon E. Fox – Cynthia Miller-Idriss, ‘Everyday nationhood’, *Ethnicities*, 8, 4 (2008), 536-563.

³⁰ Pieter M. Judson, ‘Citizenship without Nation? Political and Social Citizenship in the Habsburg Empire’, *Contemporanea*, 21, 4 (2018), 633-646.

soldiers of the 4th Fiume Battalion settled in Nagykanizsa in southwestern Hungary were subsequently sent to fight in Serbia, on the Balkan Front. Before leaving for the front, these soldiers requested permission to bring the flag of their hometown with them.³¹ The letter, written in Italian, reached the mayor of Fiume who responded positively to the soldiers' request. The mayor sent the flag and paid tribute to the soldiers, reassuring them that they would know to defend 'our flag' with honor, and that they would bring it back from where they were fighting for the homeland (*patria*). In a paternal, patriotic and emotive tone, the mayor added: 'I embrace you with blessings in the name of Fiume, which thinks of You and pulsates.'³² The soldiers, thankful for the flag, replied to the mayor, pledging loyalty to 'our dear Fiume and our flag,' promising to fight as heroes – to die, if need be – for the flag and for 'our beloved homeland,' and to return victorious with 'our tricolor'.³³ Across the correspondence, devotion was directed above all to a humanized and feminine city. As the local Autonomist newspaper wrote, the young Fiumians of the battalion wanted to be united, to create around themselves an environment that allowed them, in some way, to recall their faraway birthplace (*paese*) and to obtain strength, courage and consolation in the shadow of the familiar Fiumian flag.³⁴ This attachment to a locality was quite common in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and France, and at first glance one can say that these sentiments were merely instrumentalized to encourage wartime engagement.³⁵ In this case, however, there is another element to point out.

The written exchange between the soldiers, the mayor and the local press reveals features defined by Alberto Mario Banti as 'deep images' of the morphology of national discourse, that is, the nation as kinship/family, a sacrificial and profoundly gendered community.³⁶ In these letters, 'our flag' had to be defended with honor and provided a sense of familiarity; the homeland was worth fighting and dying for and the (grammatically female)

³¹ 'Un battaglione con la bandiera fiumana', in *La Voce del Popolo* (Fiume), 8.9.1914, 2.

³² '(...) vi abbraccio benedicendovi e (probably misprint) nome di Fiume, che per voi pensa e palpita', in 'Una bandiera fiumana al campo', *La Bilancia* (Fiume), 7.9.1914, 2.

³³ 'Consci del nostro dovere giuriamo fedeltà alla nostra cara Fiume ed alla nostra bandiera, per combattere da eroi per la nostra amata patria e ritornare vittoriosi Sempre a fianco del nostro bel tricolore che porteremo con orgoglio al fuoco, alla morte, se occorre, e alla vittoria', in 'La risposta del battaglione fiumano', *La Bilancia* (Fiume), 11.9.1914, 1.

³⁴ 'Un battaglione con la bandiera fiumana', *La Voce del Popolo* (Fiume), 8.9.1914, 2.

³⁵ Claire Morelon, 'Sounds of Loss: Church Bells, Place, and Time in the Habsburg Empire During the First World War', *Past & Present*, 244, 1 (2019), 213-215.

³⁶ Alberto Mario Banti, *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011), VI-VII and Banti, 'Conclusions: Performative Effects and 'Deep Images' in National Discourse' in L. Cole, *Different Paths to the Nation*, 220-229.

subject – ‘our dear Fiume’ – pledged loyalty, thought, and concern for her heroic (male) warriors.

In short, this seems to be exactly what we have come to expect from *nationalist* discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century, with one big difference: there was no ‘nation’ on which all of this gendered and romantic patriotism was centered. Instead, local patriotism and state patriotism were intertwined, demanding and deserving sacrificial respect, left interdependent thanks to the ambiguities of the concepts of ‘homeland’ (*patria*) and ‘birthplace’ (*paese*). As pointed out by Siniša Malešević, the strength of national ideology and its contemporary grounding derives from coercive organizational power, ideological penetration, and the envelopment of micro-solidarities.³⁷ Again, what we are seeing in imperial Hungarian Fiume is not a successful national ideology. Rather, the notion of Fiumian local patriotism created and maintained by the city’s specific self-governing institutions, framed as ‘face-to-face intimacy’ was accepted by the population. In 1914, at the start of the conflict, this self-identification was successfully exploited for Hungary’s - and the Empire’s - war effort.

The ideology of local patriotism was widespread throughout the divided local political spectrum, at least among its Italian-speaking sections. It was the Autonomist newspaper that emphasized elements of local bonding and the soldiers’ need to maintain ties with Fiume. While they remained in other parts of Hungary, Fiumian locals would thus maintain foremost their Fiumian self-understanding, avoiding or diminishing other royal, regional and national forms of identifying that the front and war experience could have triggered. Yet, the pro-government newspaper, by publishing the same article, also encouraged such practices. These messages were consumed by the local Italian readership. For them, the Hungarian homeland was not opposed to Fiume. The two imaginary figures were complementary. Nevertheless, Fiume and Hungary did not possess equal value. In the letters there is no mention of the Hungarian state flag, while the Fiumian flag is the one that has to be defended with honor. It was the local flag that highlighted distinctiveness from the rest of the state and was a source of secular devotion.

Two months later, the separation between Fiumians and Hungarians was publicly displayed by another letter. In November 1914, a third Italian-language daily published a letter by a Fiumian soldier, serving in the Honvéd, who wrote the following to his father:

³⁷ Siniša Malešević, *Grounded Nationalism: A Sociological Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 21-69.

‘Fiume can be proud of her battalion and the Fiumian mothers can be proud of their sons, of the Fiumians that fight side-by-side with the good Hungarians’.³⁸ For the young soldier, Fiumians and Hungarians were jointly fighting for a common patriotic cause, yet they were separated in semantic and imaginary terms. In the imagination of this Fiumian fighter, the Fiumian mother, Fiumian sons, and indeed Fiume herself were conceived as distinct from the Hungarians. They were members of the same state and shared the same citizenship, but Fiumians and Hungarians were imagined as divergent concepts, and yet still bound together by their common patriotic effort.

Local patriotism was questioned in May 1915 with the Italian proclamation of war on Austria-Hungary. Half a year after the letter sent by the Fiumian soldier, Fiume’s mayor declared to his fellow citizens that Italy, ‘to whose nationality by language and habits we were proud to belong,’ was now the new enemy of ‘our Kingdom’. A dramatic call to be united under the common flag – without specifying which flag – was preceded by the phrase: ‘Sons of Fiume, we have followed the road already outlined by our fathers: that of loyalty to the Throne Augustissimus which distinguished our city with the adjective ‘most loyal’ – loyalty to Hungary with whom we are and want to be united forever’.³⁹ The mayor’s speech further advocated gratitude to the King and appealed to the sacrifice of lives on the ‘Altar of the Homeland.’ Surely, the new events of the war challenged the previous form of local patriotism and redefined it, yet local patriotism did not disappear altogether.

For instance, in October 1915, for Franz Josef’s name day, some municipal buildings only hung Fiumian flags, while others placed both Fiumian and Hungarian state flags on their façades. The episode generated many comments, and for the sake of not eliciting ‘false interpretations’, the freshly-elected mayor ordered that, from that point onward, on all solemn days, both flags should be displayed. One ethnic Hungarian city councilor praised the mayor’s words, claiming that the decision would have been applauded by the local (ethnic) Hungarians and would produce a positive echo across the whole motherland.⁴⁰ Fiume’s flag was thus not forbidden as a symbol of disloyalty to the state during the war, but now alone was not sufficient to express loyalty to the Hungarian state. As is evident from the voices of commentators mentioned in the municipal council discussion, there was a political group that deployed the same flag with another political agenda.

³⁸ ‘Il contegno degli honved fiumani al campo’, *Il Popolo* (Fiume), 15.11.1914, 2.

³⁹ ‘L’appello del podestà ai cittadini’, *Il Popolo* (Fiume), 30.05.1915, 1.

⁴⁰ ‘Protocollo XI’, *Avvisatore ufficiale del municipio di Fiume* (Fiume), 18.11.1915, 85.

In 1908, some years before the onset of the war, young Italian irredentists from Fiume brought both the Fiumian flag and the Italian flag to the celebration of Dante in Ravenna. The presence of the local flag, an unknown banner to the other participants, served to symbolically connect Fiume with other Italian irredentist towns (that is, Trieste, Trento, Gorizia, Pola, and Zara) in the Empire. It was used to show that Fiume adhered to the struggle of liberation of their 'enslaved' Italian brothers in Austria, as well as re-consecrating the municipal flag as a national one. The municipal flag, according to the local Italian irredentist leaders, lost its sacred value when as a ceremonial flag it appeared in the parade of Hungarian cities at the Hungarian Millennium celebration in 1896. Thus, according to Fiume's Italian irredentists, by bringing the Fiumian flag to the death place of the greatest Italian poet, the banner would regain its sacredness.⁴¹ This proved once more the significance of that flag and how Italian national loyalty was expressed and mediated through symbols of local identification.

The nationalistic reading of Dante's celebrations has a counterpart. The flag used in Ravenna was a municipal ceremonial banner ('*gonfalone*'), and since people from Fiume, and not only local Italian irredentists, participated in the organized trip, it also meant that the Autonomist-led municipality recognized Dante's celebration as a cultural rather than a political event.⁴² At that time, the city's banner was an undisputed civic-religious symbol both for Italian irredentists and political formations loyal to the Kingdom of Hungary. What was rather disputed was the symbol's belonging since its sacred value was related to whether it belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary or the Kingdom of Italy.

The flag's sacred nature did not signify it was immutable; a feature of the flag was redesigned during the war by local Italian irredentist leaders. A redesigned Fiumian flag first appeared at Quarto, near Genova. It was a highly symbolical historical place and a highly significant nationalistic event. There, Garibaldi's volunteers sailed for Sicily in 1860 to unify Italy, while in May 1915 Gabriele d'Annunzio gave a famous speech to a mass audience inciting Italian intervention into the World War. Fiumian Italian irredentists eagerly made their presence at the D'Annunzio demonstration known by waving their Fiumian tricolor, yet, with the banner's traditional double-headed eagle supplanted with a single-headed Roman one. The fervid Italian irredentist Riccardo Gigante redesigned the central symbol: the

⁴¹ Giovanni Stelli, 'L'associazione irredentistica 'La Giovine Fiume' e i pellegrinaggi alla tomba di Dante a Ravenna del 1908 e del 1911', *I Quaderni del Cardello. Annale di studi romagnoli della Fondazione Casa di Oriani-Ravenna*, 21 (2014), 87-89.

⁴² 'Echi delle feste Dantesche', *La Bilancia*, 15.9.1908, 2.

double-headed eagle was too ambiguous, as associated with the Habsburgs, for a flag representing a city to be ‘redeemed’ by Italy.⁴³ The decapitated Habsburg eagle could survive as an Italian symbol since its origin was reinterpreted. The eagle was now Roman, and originally one-headed, given by the Habsburg Leopold as the Holy Roman Emperor. The motto *Indeficienter* (Unending) now referred to the city’s water source and not to unconditional and eternal fidelity to the Habsburg dynasty. Thus, the local Italian irredentists, a political minority, wanted a more radical caesura with the imperial past. However, the Habsburg legacy did not disappear overnight.

The downfall of Empire and the downfall of local patriotism?

At the end of October 1918, with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the departure of the last Hungarian governor from Fiume, two rival national councils vied to establish control over the city. The National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs (SHS) in Zagreb considered the Adriatic port as an integral part of the newly proclaimed South Slav State – made of former Habsburg lands – while the local Italian National Council demanded the town’s annexation to Italy. For both groups, it seemed that the city’s future could only be imagined within a future nation-state, regardless of the fact that no prior treaties had delineated any such thing. Meanwhile, the contested future of the city was solved by the arrival of the Italian army, officially leading an Interallied occupation regime which discharged the SHS National Council and recognized the Italian National Council as the only legitimate local authority. In one fell swoop the key ingredients of Fiumian local patriotism seemed to have been eradicated from the political life of the city. Habsburg fidelity and Hungarian loyalty were now excised from the list of approved adherences just as quickly as the Hungarian governor had vanished from the city.

By 1919, redefining pillars of the Fiumian local patriotism became a main concern of members of the city’s new Italian National Council. Around the first months of 1919, the local high school teacher and press secretary of the Italian National Council, Edoardo Susmel, published a pamphlet titled *Fiume Italiana*.⁴⁴ In his brief propaganda work, issued by the Italian irredentist *Associazione nazionale Trento e Trieste*, Fiume is portrayed as a city of

⁴³ Federico Carlo Simonelli, *D’Annunzio e il mito di Fiume. Riti, simboli, narrazioni* (Pisa: Pacini editore, 2021), 27 and Gian Proda, ‘Gli stemmi di Fiume’, in *Fiume*, 7, 2003, 103. The article was originally published on *La Voce del Carnaro*, 15.06.1953.

⁴⁴ Edoardo Susmel, *Fiume italiana*, (Roma: Associazione nazionale Trento e Trieste, Stabilimento Armani, 1919)

centuries-old Italianity. The town's pro-Italian manifestations during October and November 1918 are described as outbursts of enthusiasm, with Italian flags waving everywhere.⁴⁵ No traces or explicit references to Fiumian flags are to be found. Aside from trace symbols of the former local patriotic heritage, Susmel also erased the Hungarian loyalist past of Fiume. Instead, the efforts of local volunteers in the Italian army, a minority, were highlighted, which deliberately neglected the pro-Habsburg efforts of most of the population. Only the Croats, the biggest potential threat to an Italian Fiume, were labeled as Habsburgophiles.⁴⁶

Susmel's propaganda work was accompanied by the Italian National Council's wide-ranging Italianization policies – whose press secretary member was Susmel himself. In March 1919, the Italian National Council enacted two laws that affected the symbolic Italianity of the town. According to a law issued by the Italian National Council, the Hungarian state flag was substituted by the Italian flag, while the Hungarian state coat of arms was replaced by the five-pointed star, considered one of the oldest Italian national symbols, in state offices.⁴⁷ The change did not represent a complete rupture with the past, since only former Hungarian state offices, now controlled by the Italian National Council, were 'Italianized.' Adopting the five-pointed star can be explained by the city's limbo situation in international affairs, the rupture with the Habsburg past and recalling the local Italian irredentist experience. The part of Fiume's elite that wanted the city to be annexed to Italy could not simply use Italian state official symbols, as it was not officially part of Italy yet, and the use of Hungarian state symbols was out of the question after late October 1918, so the five-pointed star that had been deployed by the local Italian irredentist association *Giovine Fiume* before the war was adopted.⁴⁸

Yet, in January 1919, some members of the Italian National Council's Directorate also proposed a change to the city's coat of arms. Inside the Italian National Council's Directorate, the high school teacher Silvino Gigante – brother of Riccardo, who redesigned Fiume's flag along Italian irredentist lines – proposed that Fiume should reuse its ancient coat of arms instead of modifying the existent ones, representing rather the figure of St. Vitus, the city's main patron saint. The proposal encountered positive reactions by those gathered, and the decision was made to bring it to the Italian National Council while immediately informing

⁴⁵ Susmel, *Fiume italiana*, 9 and 51-55.

⁴⁶ Susmel, *Fiume italiana*, 33-35 and 47-50.

⁴⁷ *Legislazione di Fiume*. Raccolta e ordinata da D. Barone e G.P. Gaetano, Volume primo, *Provvedimenti legislativi dei governi provvisori* (Roma: Provveditorato generale dello stato libreria, 1926), 51-52.

⁴⁸ From the minutes of the Italian National Council it does not seem it has been any discussion on the adoption of the five pointed star. Danilo L. Massagrande, ed., *I verbali del Consiglio Nazionale Italiano di Fiume e del Comitato Direttivo* (Roma: Società di studi fiumani, 2014), 192.

the population through the newspapers.⁴⁹ In April, however, the Italian National Council's Directorate considered that such a change was not within their competence, but that of the municipality.⁵⁰

Beneath this allegedly uncontested Italianizing façade, much more was going on. The members of the local SHS National Council briefly replaced the office of the Hungarian governor, and both the Yugoslav tricolor and the Fiumian flag waved on the city's central administrative palace. Specifically, the Fiumian flag was positioned over the Hungarian coat of arms, covering up the regime that had just crept out.⁵¹ According to the same Croatian sources, in those days the town was flooded by flags: Croatian, Slovene, Serbian, Italian, and Fiumian.⁵² Since the SHS National Council's High Sheriff (*veliki župan*) promised to maintain the city's privileges, the Fiumian flag served as a symbol of a continued commitment to local self-government and was not antithetic to the newly forming sovereignty of the South Slav state.

For the same reason, on 13 November, the local Croatian-language newspaper wrote against the Italian flag:

Rijeka's self-government does not mean the privileges of renegade Italians, but the privileges of a city, in which both Croats and Italians live. Thus, the tricolor of the Kingdom of Italy on the city tower is a heavy offence to [Fiume's] self-government.⁵³

From the Croatian/Yugoslav perspective, the city's self-government was not to be confused with nationalism, specifically Italian nationalism. For the members of the Italian National Council, the Fiumian flag was likewise a symbol of local self-government and not antithetic to loyalty to the Italian nation-state. For instance, in one of the most famous photographs of the 30 October 1918, plebiscite – which for the Italian National Council sanctioned the unification of Fiume with Italy – the largest flag hanging off of the balcony of the building of the *Filarmonico-Drammatica* society was the Fiumian flag, not the Italian. Again, it was a Susmel propaganda pamphlet that published this photograph in a moment when the local flag

⁴⁹ Massagrande, *I verbali*, 154.

⁵⁰ Massagrande, *I verbali*, 266.

⁵¹ Ivo Sučić, 'Rijeka 1918.-1945.', in Jakša Ravlić, ed., *Rijeka. Geografija - Etnologija - Ekonomija - Saobraćaj - Povijest - Kultura. Zbornik*, (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1953), 283.

⁵² Sučić, 'Rijeka 1918.-1945.', 284.

⁵³ 'Rečka autonomija ne znači privilegije Talijanaša, već privilegije grada, u kojem žive i Hrvati i Talijani. Zato je trobojnica kraljevine Italije na gradskom tornju teška povreda autonomije.', in 'Talijanaši', *Primorske novine* (Sušak), 13.11.1918, 2.

was neither problematic nor unknown, as it had been a few months before.⁵⁴ In another episode, the Fiumian ceremonial flag, which had been used at the Hungarian Millennium celebration in Budapest, was donated by a committee of Fiumian ladies to the first Italian warship that reached the city in November 1918.⁵⁵ Therefore, the Fiumian flag was still a reference point for the Italian-speaking population in 1918, but it had lost its prominence in favor of Italian national symbols. As written by the aforementioned Croatian-language newspaper, from 28 October onward, the Italian flag and not the Fiumian flew from the City Tower, signaling Fiume's desired annexation to the Italian nation-state – a decision that did not sit well with a new figure on the local political scene.⁵⁶

On 15 November, the day that Serbian troops entered the city, Ruggero Gotthardi, a former Austrian officer, member of the local patriciate and a merchant, published an open letter advocating a free-state solution for Fiume.⁵⁷ Though Gotthardi did not preclude the idea of a Yugoslav protectorate over Fiume, for him Fiume's autonomy was of the utmost importance and national ideas had much to do with his arguments. In his public letter to 'All the True Fiumians,' Gotthardi referred to the Fiumian flag as an emblem under which 'real Fiumian patriots' – Italians, Slavs and Hungarians of Fiumian fathers – should declare themselves united. These 'free citizens of the Italian language' should use the Fiumian cockade as a symbol of brotherhood, freedom and equality, and be united for the autonomy of 'our Fiume' and the defense of 'our Italian language.'⁵⁸ Furthermore, Gotthardi publicly attacked the Italian National Council because of the mentioned flag substitution, a removal of the 'sacred symbol for us Fiumians, our beautiful Fiumian flag, the honor of our fathers'. The exclusion of the Fiumian flag from the town's most representative building was something that Gotthardi, as a self-fashioned Fiumian patriot, could not digest. An Italian national symbol overtook the Fiumian local-patriotic symbol, demonstrating that Italy was becoming more significant than Fiume.

⁵⁴ Picture number 26, published in Edoardo Susmel, *Fiume attraverso la storia dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1919).

⁵⁵ 'Gli ultimi avvenimenti. Il saluto delle donne fiumana all'ammiraglio', *Il Giornale* (Fiume), 6.11.1918, 2.

⁵⁶ 'L'ora storica di Fiume. Sventolano le bandiere italiana e croata', *Il Giornale* (Fiume), 29.10.1918, 2.

⁵⁷ Attilio Depoli, 'XXX ottobre 1918 (precedenti e prime ripercussioni del plebiscito fiumano)', in Mario Dassovich, ed., *Fiume XXX ottobre 1918* (San Giovanni in Persiceto: Li Causi editore, 1962), 211. On Gotthardi see Karpowicz Ljubinka, 'Biografia politica di un autonomista. Ruggero Gottardi', *Quaderni*, Centro di Ricerche storiche-Rovigno, 7, 1983-84, 39-64 and Ruggero Gottardi, 'Ruggero Gottardi (Fiume, 1882-Diano Marina, 1954)', *Quaderni*, Centro di Ricerche storiche-Rovigno, 16, 2004, 395-477.

⁵⁸ Archivio Società di Studi Fiumani - Roma, Fondo Zanella, 1.4.5, Lettera aperta a tutti i veri fiumani [Open letter to all the true Fiumians].

In his letter, Gotthardi set as his goal the city's full independence. Citing the motto of the French Revolution which Gotthardi ordered as 'fraternity, freedom, and equality', he advocated national sovereignty for the people as a goal to be achieved in the Adriatic port. This reinterpretation of a symbol from autonomism to independentism and the reshaping of symbols was new, and yet there was not a clash between local and Italian nation-state symbols since the Fiumian flag was not repudiated.

On the day of the city's patron saints, on 15 June 1919, the Italian National Council decided that the Fiumian tricolor should be displayed on the Municipal Palace, as well as all municipal and state buildings.⁵⁹ However, the situation became somehow paradoxical. The Fiumian tricolor was left on the City Tower for a few weeks longer, raising complaints from an Italian councilor – a former volunteer in the Italian Army – who argued that only the Italian tricolor should remain on the tower to symbolize the city's union with its motherland. Another councilor, rather stated that 'it would be dangerous to remove that flag from the tower, as that could provoke an open dispute between that part of the citizenship that partially does not sympathize anymore with the annexation, and instead advocates for a free state.' The same councilor continued: 'Being, on the other hand, the banner dear to all citizens, since it recalls their battles sustained for Italianity, he opposed its removal'. As a result, all the delegates, besides the former Italian Army volunteer, agreed to leave the flag in its place.⁶⁰

What the population understood in this time of transition is quite difficult to grasp. Yet, a far more violent episode suggests that there were substantial tensions between Fiumian and Italian symbols. On the night of 10 March 1919, in the suburbs of Fiume, near the former border with the Austrian Littoral, animosities between Italian soldiers and a few locals boiled over in an osteria. The final outcome of this conflict was bloody: Giuseppe Kobal, a 28-year-old mechanic, died. According to the police investigation, symbols played a crucial role in the tragic events. As for one side of the story, reported by Kobal's widow, the frictions started because one Italian soldier accused her husband of stripping off his Italian national badge. However, it seems that the problem was not caused by a stripped off Italian symbol, but rather by the attempted removal of a Fiumian one. According to the police and other testimonies, a Fiumian flag was hanging on the osteria's wall and a drunken Italian soldier wanted to destroy it. The reason? For the Italian soldier, this was an 'Austrian flag.' Some civilians, hearing this information, asked for satisfaction against the perpetrators, including

⁵⁹ Massagrande, *I verballi*, 310.

⁶⁰ Massagrande, *I verballi*, 338.

the ‘completely drunken’ Kobal. The two groups were separated, and the dispute appeared to be resolved, but on the road towards the city there were shots fired, and the soldiers, apparently responding to revolver fire, shot and killed Kobal.⁶¹ This episode, while offering a glimpse into the circulation of weapons and violence in the period of postimperial transition, testifies to the difference in symbolic understandings among the soldiers of the Kingdom of Italy and presumably Italian-speaking locals.

For most Italian citizens, Fiume was an almost unknown place, a place to be claimed for Italian irredentists only after the war had begun (**figure 3**). Even then, the city was not included as a territorial gain in the Treaty of London.⁶² Local Hungarian-Habsburg symbolic specificities, such as the double-headed eagle on the Fiumian flag, could be understood as not Italian enough, not properly Italian or simply unfamiliar and therefore foreign and Habsburg by Italians from the Kingdom of Italy. What, for the locals, was a much-beloved civic symbol of the Italian character of the city inside Hungary, for the Italian soldiers was an emblem of much-hated Austria. The existence of such a potential conflict at the symbolic level was probably evident to the members of the local Fiumian elite. As Gotthardi pointed out in his open letter, the Italian National Council decided to cork the bottle and release the pressure within by pushing the Fiumians to be as Italian as possible.

As seen, the radical political trajectory some local Italian irredentists wanted was not shared by the local elite after October/November 1918. The city’s coat of arms remained unchanged until the end of 1919. The breakthrough occurred thanks to D’Annunzio. Following clashes between Italian and French troops and the locals, the Italian military presence was heavily reduced and the city’s annexation to Italy seemed quite unlikely. This all changed in September 1919 when Gabriele D’Annunzio entered the city.

In a speech given on 4 November 1919 – the anniversary of the Italian war victory – D’Annunzio suggested that a head should be removed from Fiume’s ‘Habsburg eagle’. His suggestion was carried out by two legionnaires. The eagle on the City Tower lost one head, and the Italian flag was lodged in the open neck. Yet, the local Italian nationalist newspaper was not exactly enthusiastic about the decapitation, and the population was at least a little bit surprised by the event. Following the decapitation, at its first meeting at the end of November

⁶¹ DAR-52, *Sezione di Pubblica Sicurezza*, Busta 153, 1919, MR V 1065/1919, Oggetto: Crimine di omicidio in danno di Kobal Giuseppe, Rapporto del corpo di guardie di P.S., Appostamento Pehlin, Fiume, 11 marzo 1919; Dichiarazioni di Sustar Antonio, Zardus Emilio, Jurman Mario and Kobal Elena.

⁶² See Carlo Ghinsalberti, ‘Fiume nell’opinione pubblica italiana dall’irredentismo alla Grande guerra’ in Melita Sciuca, ed., *Rijeka u stoljeću veliki promjena (Zbornik radova) / Fiume nel secolo dei grandi mutamenti (Atti del Convegno)* (Fiume-Rijeka: Edit, 2001), 22-29.

1919, the municipal council decided to redesign the city's coat of arms, romanizing what was now a single-headed eagle.⁶³ D'Annunzio was heavily committed to Fiume adopting a Venetian heritage, a heritage that was translated as a symbol of (proto-)Italian centuries-old dominance over the Adriatic. References to Roman heritage recalled the Roman Empire's historical experience as another (proto-)Italian continuity element.⁶⁴ Yet, the Fiumian flag and its colors not only survived but in fact became part of the occupation legacy. In the memories of an Italian army officer quartered in Fiume and later among the first of D'Annunzio's followers, the four Fiumian flags given to soldiers ordered to depart from Fiume in August 1919 are remembered as 'a symbol of faith and warning to superiors.'⁶⁵ Immediately upon D'Annunzio's arrival in town, a Fiumian tricolor ribbon was designed to honor his legionnaires, a reward later redesigned as a medal with a ribbon of the same colors, extending it to many followers.⁶⁶ In September 1920, the Fiumian municipal flags hung on newly inaugurated flagpoles, significantly placed below the Italian flags.⁶⁷ At the beginning of the same year, the same flag decorated the town's main church during the festival of St. Sebastian, a ceremony that 'staged the patriotic communion between women and men, soldiers and civilians, secular and clerical authorities'.⁶⁸ Local patriotism was being shaped in an Italian, D'Annunzian direction, a symbol of the legacy of his venture. The Fiumian flag was even among the flags deployed by Milan's fascists to celebrate the first anniversary of D'Annunzio's entry into Fiume.⁶⁹ But Fiume's postimperial transitions, and those of the flag, did not end there.

Flag of Fiume, can you preserve your dazzling colors only in the shadow of the Italian flag?

Following the Treaty of Rapallo (November 1920) the Free State of Fiume was established as a compromise solution between Italy and Yugoslavia – the two contenders for

⁶³ Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 274.

⁶⁴ Maura Hametz, 'Replacing Venice in the Adriatic: tourism and Italian irredentism, 1880–1936', *Journal of Tourism History*, 6, 2-3 (2014), 107-121. For a spatial perspective on how the Roman, but also Venetian elements, were used in nearby Trieste see Borut Klajčan, 'Erecting fascism: nation, identity, and space in Trieste in the first half of the twentieth century', *Nationalities Papers*, 46, 6 (2017), 958-975.

⁶⁵ 'come un simbolo di fede e come un ammonimento ai superiori' in Riccardo Frassetto, *I disertori di Ronchi* (Milano: Casa editrice Carnaro, 1926²), 29-31.

⁶⁶ F. Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 72 and 250-251.

⁶⁷ Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 145-146.

⁶⁸ Thomas Blanck, *In search of the true Italy*, 116.

⁶⁹ Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 148.

the territory. At the end of December 1920, a conflict between the Italian state and occupying legionnaires ended D'Annunzio's presence in the city. A new political moment started in April 1921 when elections for a Constituent Assembly were scheduled. The Constituent Assembly of the newly established state was populated by two factions: the Italian nationalist annexationists, led by prominent figures of the Italian National Council and the autonomists. The two rival groups embraced quite divergent local patriotic symbols. The annexationists, united in the National Bloc, used the image of the city's Roman Arch (an ancient Roman entrance to a Late Antique compound in the old town) as the emblem of their coalition, stressing the city's Roman heritage to enhance Fiume's bonds with a Latin and imagined ancient Italian past.⁷⁰ Other local patriotic symbols, such as the city's double-headed eagle, were discarded and not deployed as elements of their own political heritage. On the other side, the autonomist faction entirely embraced the local-patriotic heritage, using the City Tower with the double-headed eagle as its emblem.⁷¹ These local patriotic symbols, from loyalty to Hungary and passing through Italian nationalism, were then adapted as emblems of Fiumian independentism.

The Fiumian flag, however, was not spared from symbolic contestation. The Fiumian flag was evoked by a prominent Italian annexationist at an electoral speech in April 1921, recalling his donation of the city's flag to an Italian warship in Venice at the beginning of November 1918. This episode allowed the speaker to conclude that while the warship was still sailing with a real Fiumian flag, the flag's image was now in the hearts of every ship, soldier, sailor, as well as in that of the great homeland (that is, the Kingdom of Italy). The complete Italianization of a local patriotic symbol was further enhanced by describing the flag's colors in nationalistic tones: blue as the sea coming from Italy, red as the blood of Italian martyrs of the War and gold yellow as 'the chalice of faith where we keep the consecrated host of our soul'. Yet the Fiumian flag – whose colors were as strong as 'Fiume's Italian faith that you, flag, preserved for many centuries of subjugation' – needed to be augmented by the Italian tricolor in this new historical moment. 'Only in the shadow of the Italian flag can Fiume's dazzling colors be preserved', and, in a reformulation of Dante's

⁷⁰ See the emblem in 'Alla vittoria, alla rendenzione, oggi, o fiumani!', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 24.04.1921, 1.

⁷¹ See the emblem in 'Fiumani!', *Fiume dei Fiumani*, 23.04.1921, 1. Also, the names of some political pamphlets published by the Independentists during the elections evoke the local-patriotic symbols: *La Bandiera* (the Flag), *La Torre Civica* (The City Tower), and *L'Aquila* (the Eagle).

verses, the annexationist claimed that by losing the Italian flag, Fiume and its flag would lose herself.⁷²

These powerful rhetorical images displayed the ongoing process of the Italian nationalistic appropriation of the flag as well as the intensity and perseverance of the image of the Fiumian flag. But it was not purely rhetoric. Fiumian flags were registered on town buildings following an annexationists' procession the same month. These flags were described as old tricolors first displayed on the 'redeemed' shores on 30 October 1918 to 'testify to the program of liberty and the Italian future that still today has to be defended against more greedy enemies and sorrowful renegades'.⁷³

And yet, despite the efforts of Italian nationalists to alter this local patriotic symbol to represent loyalty to Italy, it was being adapted as an emblem of autonomism. Flag incidents during and after the 1921 elections were omnipresent. In a published and highly detailed account of fascist and legionary violence against pro-independence forces and the general civil population, the Fiumian flag appears several times. On the day of the April 1921 Constituent Assembly election, Fiumian flags were used by those supporting the autonomists⁷⁴ and these flags or flag colors were targeted and destroyed by annexationists. For instance, a truck with a Fiumian flag that had been driving on the city's main promenade was attacked by fascists and *arditi* (Italian assault troops) who tore down and burned the flag, allegedly screaming: 'Long live beautiful Italy! Down with the traitors! Death to the Fiumians! Down with the Fiume of the Croatsians!'. Furthermore, local police forces that had been recruited among legionnaires native to the Kingdom of Italy took off the Fiumian colors from their uniforms' decorations ripped off their colleagues' decorations and in turn joined the fascists in perpetuating violence. Even the municipal employees' hats – adorned with the double-headed eagle and decorations with Fiume's colors – were ripped off by fascists.⁷⁵ Other citizens singing and waving the Fiumian flag were attacked by fascists and, more importantly, the fascists searched houses for a Fiumian flag that had been made by female workers from the local tobacco factory for the Constituent Assembly.⁷⁶ The final example

⁷² '(...) come il calice della fede entro cui conserviamo l'ostia consacrata per la redenzione dell'anima nostra' and 'forti come la fede italiana di Fiume che hai salvato attraverso tanti secoli di servaggio', Il discorso di Gino Antoni, *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 18.4.1921, 1.

⁷³ 'La Vittoria di Fiume significa vittoria d'Italia', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 12.4.1921, 2.

⁷⁴ A.P., *Arditismo e fascismo a Fiume. Le elezioni per la Costituente del 24 aprile 1921 e le successive giornate di terrore. Cronaca documentata*, (Milano: Tipografia sociale lombarda, 1921), 13.

⁷⁵ A.P., *Arditismo e fascismo*, 22.

⁷⁶ A.P., *Arditismo e fascismo*, 30 and 36-37. For an analysis of the tobacco workers in Fiume in this period see Francesca Rolandi, 'Female Public Employees during a Post-Imperial Transition: Gender, Politics and Labour in Fiume after the First World War', *Contemporary European History*, 2022, 1-14

shows the flag's importance for both groups for diverging reasons: a symbol to be destroyed by the annexationists, and a symbol to be celebrated by the autonomists.

In October 1921, some pro-Italian municipal employees decided to remove the Fiumian tricolor from the *Filarmonico-Drammatica* palace, the place where a large Fiumian banner was hung on October 1918 alongside a smaller Italian flag. As the autonomist newspaper wrote, the clerks had offended the symbol of 'their land (*paese*),' which had to remain sacred to everyone, an emblem that, in difficult times, marked 'our Italianity' and 'our national diversity in the Austro-Hungarian conglomerate.'⁷⁷ The article made a step forward, arguing that the Fiumian tricolor was even considered with honor by fascists, legionnaires, and (Italian) nationalists alike. As plainly put by the columnist, some 'think that they can prove their Italianity, their love of the *patria* [*amor patrio*] by disowning and spitting on anything that tastes Fiumian, as if Fiumian was a synonym of ... ostrogothic' that is, barbarian.⁷⁸

The alleged absurdity for the autonomists was that the same figures trampling on Fiumian symbols at home deployed them in Italy, like the municipality of the newly annexed Monfalcone, which used a Fiumian flag in the celebrations of its annexation to Italy in April 1921.⁷⁹

There was nothing inconsistent about what the Fiume tricolor represented for all those involved. The municipal symbols were an emblem of self-government and Italianity, which, for the irredentists and annexationists, meant proto-national belonging to an Italian nation-state, while for the autonomists the same symbol indicated *cultural* and not political belonging to Italy. The local-patriotic symbols were contested, and the autonomists tried to monopolize them in the local political arena. It is rather telling that the clerks who orchestrated the removal from the *Filarmonico-Drammatica* building publicly apologized.⁸⁰

Apparently, Italian nationalists and the autonomists oriented toward a cultural Italianity were not the only ones deploying the Fiumian tricolor. During the same days, allegedly, some Croats used Fiumian flags, since they could not use Croatian symbols. The idea that the banner of Fiumian local patriotism could represent Croatian national aspirations

⁷⁷ 'Lo sfregio alla bandiera', *La Voce del Popolo* (Fiume), 07.10.1921, 2.

⁷⁸ 'i quali credono di dimostrare la loro italianità, il loro amor patrio rinnegando e sputando sopra qualunque cosa sappia di fiumano, come se fiumano fosse sinonimo di... ostrogoto, e con una completa mancanza di gratitudine, di rispetto verso la propria terra.' 'Lo sfregio alla bandiera', *La Voce del Popolo* (Fiume), 07.10.1921, 2.

⁷⁹ 'Anche Monfalcone festeggia l'annessione col pensiero rivolto a Fiume', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 13.04.1921, 1.

⁸⁰ 'L'incidente della bandiera alla Filarmonico-Drammatica', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 07.10.1921, 2.

provoked the local Italian nationalist newspaper to demand an end to political speculation over the flag:

The Fiumian flag – let us remember certain foreigners – can be displayed only by Fiumians that know what it has always meant to us. The Fiumian and the Italian flags do not oppose each other but are a natural integration. Because the municipal flag held the place of the [Italian] tricolor, when that could not be flown freely from our houses. Today the two flags must, and have, one sole meaning: they are the expression of the Italian feelings of the citizens.⁸¹

Despite Italian nationalists' attempts at appropriating the flag, its colors could and were still perceived as a symbol opposing annexation. In September 1922, a group of young fascists, led by a 17-year-old boy born in Fiume, saw a six-meter-tall antenna of Fiumian colors and removed a Fiumian tin emblem from it. The antenna was previously erected by some women on their property, so the youngsters' vandalism was accompanied by the shouting of an 84-year-old Istrian woman domiciled in Fiume. The fascists intimidated the old lady, firing a few gun shots in the air and left, taking the antenna to the fascist headquarters.⁸² Two very different generational, gendered, social (Fiumian-born versus naturalized Fiumian), and probably political trajectories faced each other, bound up with their respective national and/or local-patriotic conceptions. What they shared was the belief that the flag and its colors had significance, a higher moral value, which for some had to be cherished and for others repudiated and destroyed.

A Never-Ending Transition (of Symbols)

Unsurprisingly, when Fiume was annexed to Italy in 1924, the tradition was again reinvented. The Fiumian tricolor was not officially changed, but a new ceremonial flag was widely used. Contrary to the municipal council's flag deliberation of 1919, on the celebration of Fiume's annexation to Italy in March 1924, the Italian king was donated a 'light blue, damask gold' ceremonial banner, featuring the Romanized single-headed eagle. The new ceremonial flag deployed from the immediate annexation period was probably used to create

⁸¹ 'Provocazione e speculazioni', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (Fiume), 11.10.1921, 2.

⁸² DAR-52, *Sezione di Pubblica Sicurezza*, Busta 170, Mr, V, 692/1922, Majetich Loris e correi imputato di danneggiamento di un antenna – e sparo nell'abitato.

distance from the Fiumian tricolor's independentist connotations and was used in public ceremonies in the Italian period until 1935. The inconsistency between norm and praxis was solved in 1935 when a new ceremonial banner was adopted. On the rear, the Fiumian tricolor was featured; on the front, the colors recalling the tradition of D'Annunzio's rule.⁸³ Yet, the Fiumian tricolor was still used as an Italian symbol in the interwar period. In the thirties, the Municipal Council Hall was adorned by a triptych painting with Romanized figures, displaying in one section D'Annunzio as a liberator, and on another Fiume represented as a young woman (with its single-headed eagle) set behind another allegorical female representing Italy. Within D'Annunzio section of the painting, the Fiumian tricolor was featured alongside the Italian tricolor.⁸⁴ Fiume's Italian character was thus heavily linked to D'Annunzio's occupational episode, and this local patriotic symbol was preserved, though altered to fit the new fascist narrative.

As Vanni D'Alessio has pointed out, Italian nationalists and fascists used the Fiumian eagle – here we can clearly include the municipal flag and its colors – as a symbol representing the historical continuity of Italian presence in the town. The emblem and colors of this former Habsburg-Hungarian municipality were once more interpreted as symbols of a centuries-long maintenance of Italianity. Fiume's regionalism was thus mainly reframed to function as an element bonding the city (and consequently its inhabitants) with Italian nationalism. Throughout the years of Mussolini's reign, Fiume's population and the visual representation of its loyalties were arranged to cohere with fascist imperial protocols, papering over the Habsburg ones that had proceeded it.

The city experienced another radical change in sovereignty and regime after the Second World War, when it became part of socialist Yugoslavia and its Croatian name, Rijeka, became official.⁸⁵ The South Slavic, working-class-oriented state erased the eagle and the Fiumian tricolor as symbols of an adverse imperial, national and bourgeois past. The statue of the single headed eagle was not spared either and removed from the City Tower

⁸³ DARI-541, *Općina Rijeka*, Magistrato Civico di Fiume, Anno 1919, B-69, Stemma cittadino modifica, Comune di Fiume, deliberazione N.53, Oggetto: Determinazione della bandiera e del gonfalone civico, 2.02.1935.

⁸⁴ Erna Toncich and Sergio R. Moles, *Romolo Venucci* (Fiume-Trieste: Unione Italiana di Fiume, Università popolare di Trieste, 2008), 127 and 148.

⁸⁵ For the politics of national identity and the issue of bilingualism in this period see Marco Abram, 'Integrating Rijeka into socialist Yugoslavia: the politics of national identity and the new city's image (1947–1955)', *Nationalities Papers*, 46,1, 2018, 69-85.

altogether.⁸⁶ Perceiving the new state authorities as foreign, anti-Italian and experiencing political and economic pressures, most Italian inhabitants left the city. The Fiumian tricolor was preserved mainly in the Italian emigrant community, but with the single-headed eagle, maintaining its interwar Italianized character, distanced from the Habsburg past.

With the breakup of Yugoslavia and the socialist regime, the city's heritage was again discussed. In 1992, a regionalist party in Rijeka began an initiative to adopt the use of Fiume's historical tricolor, as well as the coat of arms, as the city's symbols. Three years later, the municipal council organized an open call for a redesign of the city's flag and coat of arms. Distancing itself from historical symbols, the call explicitly asked for incorporation of the Croatian checkerboard as one element in the coat of arms of new, post-socialist Rijeka. The blue and white colors used in the socialist period were to be maintained and the tricolor was not to be reused. However, a year later the advanced proposals were not approved by the municipality, and in 1998 the municipal council of Rijeka opted to use the historical tricolor as the municipal flag. The decision was overturned by the Ministry of Public Administration as, among other reasons, the Ministry considered the Fiumian tricolor an Italian irredentist symbol since it was used by an Italian exile organization. Thus, Rijeka adopted a single-color blue flag, featuring the historical double-headed eagle, but without the imperial crown or the municipality's motto.⁸⁷ The Ministry's decision, as well as the municipality's initial concept of integrating Croatian national symbols, are exemplar of the nationalistic politics and Croatian nation-building efforts of the nineties. At the same time, the 1992 regionalist party initiative is telling of an emerging political faction identifying with and advocating for a local Habsburg heritage. Debates around the Fiume flag did not end there.

Nearly two decades after the 1998 decision, in 2016, on the initiative of another regionalist party, the still center-left municipal council of Rijeka again deliberated over the usage of the tricolor. The Ministry of Public Administration disapproved of the decision, stating that the Fiumian tricolor was not Rijeka's solely historical flag and that a flag with three strips should be exclusively Croatian state's banner. This time, however, the city found a work-around, declaring the historical tricolor as the city's ceremonial flag.⁸⁸ Ironically, the Croatian public authorities' evaluation wound up matching the aspirations of wartime Italian

⁸⁶ Vanni D'Alessio, 'Divided Legacies, Iconoclasm and Shared Cultures in Contested Rijeka/Fiume', in Borut Klabjan, ed., *Borderlands of Memory. Adriatic and Central European Perspectives*, (Oxford, etc.: Peter Lang, 2019), 89-117.

⁸⁷ Robert Grubiša, 'Usvajanje riječkih simbola 1990-ih / Adoption of the Symbols of Rijeka in 1990's', *Grb i zastava*, 11 (2012), 14-16 and Ibid, 'Rijeka - nastavlja se... / Rijeka – to be continued...', *Grb i zastava*, 12 (2012), 16.

⁸⁸ Željko Heimer, *Zastave Rijeke*, 42-48.

irredentists who had wanted to transform the Habsburg-Hungarian local patriotic banner into a symbol of genuine Italianity.

As noted by Péter Techet, the recent rediscovery in present day Rijeka of local Habsburg symbols, the Fiumian flag being one of them, is a political response to Croatian nationalist tendencies. The Fiumian tricolor is no longer associated with the Habsburg period and postimperial political conflicts. Rather, its meaning is now that of a symbol of an imagined idyllic golden age of unproblematic multiculturalism, contrasting with today's homogenizing nationalism and state centralizing policies.⁸⁹

Though an account of a local symbol, this story is truly a post-Habsburg history which displays the significance of not taking for granted contemporary nationalisms as necessary and expected outcomes at the end of the nineteenth century and during the Empire's dissolution. In a sense, this story is also unequivocally European. Like Dominique Kirchner Reill pointed out in her study of members of the Adriatic multi-national elite, understandings of attachment to a locality and regional identifications have been lost by reading history backwards, by maintaining a hegemonic historiographic focus on the nationalist political movements that have taken center stage in historical narratives.⁹⁰ Locals throughout Europe imbued their lives with senses of loyalty from below, from within, and from beyond the nation and the nation-state, and we can see by comparison how strong the efforts by nationalist movements were to address, eradicate and integrate these alternative forms of collective identification.

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⁸⁹ Péter Techet, 'Post-habsburgische Erinnerungspolitik als unreflektierte Nostalgie oder als antinationalistisches Gegenarrativ im heutigen Rijeka?', *Zibaldone – Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart*, 68, 2 (2019), 127-128.

⁹⁰ Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation. Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).