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A decade of decadence, or ten years that shook the world: The Adriatic borderland, 1914–1924

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue on the *Decade of Decadence* focuses on the northern Adriatic transnational borderland from the beginning of the First World War in July 1914 to the Treaty of Rome in January 1924 when the city of Rijeka/Fiume was annexed by Italy and the Adriatic question was temporarily settled. As several recent studies have shown this decade is of fundamental importance at the global level and the northern Adriatic in these years represents a unique laboratory for studying the transformations of Europe in the twentieth century. Seen in these perspectives, these articles show how concepts of loyalty, sovereignty, nationality and citizenship did not conform to a linear process of nation-building but instead open new perspectives on Italian and Euro-Mediterranean politics, culture and societies before and after the First World War.

RIASSUNTO

Quest'articolo funge da introduzione al numero speciale dedicato all'area dell'Alto Adriatico, dalla Prima guerra mondiale, iniziata nel luglio 1914, fino al Trattato di Roma del gennaio 1924, con cui la città di Fiume fu annessa all'Italia e la questione adriatica temporaneamente risolta. Come hanno dimostrato diversi studi recenti, questo decennio è di fondamentale importanza a livello globale, e l'Alto Adriatico rappresenta in quegli anni un laboratorio ideale per studiare le trasformazioni dell'Europa nel XX secolo. In questa prospettiva, questo saggio e gli altri contributi che compongono il numero dimostrano come i concetti di lealtà, sovranità, nazionalità e cittadinanza non seguano un processo lineare di costruzione della nazione, ma aprano invece nuovi sguardi sulla politica, la cultura e le società italiane ed euro mediterranee prima e dopo la Prima guerra mondiale.

KEYWORDS Italy; Yugoslavia; Northern Adriatic; 1914–1924; First World War

PAROLE CHIAVE Italia; Jugoslavia; Alto Adriatico; 1914–1924; Prima guerra mondiale

Focusing on the northern Adriatic transnational borderland from the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914 to the signing of the Treaty of Rome in January 1924, which marked the annexation of Rijeka/Fiume by Italy and Mussolini's political settlement of the Adriatic question, the essays in this

Special Issue contribute to the ongoing scholarly debates on postwar ambiguities of state-making in Italy and Europe (Payk and Pergher 2019; Varsori and Zaccaria 2020). Given the marked preoccupation with excess, aestheticism, moral ambiguity, and a widespread sense of cultural and ethical decline, the characterization of this era as a “decade of decadence” is both analytically appropriate and conceptually resonant. During this decade the northern Adriatic region – embracing what are today parts of Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia – was the stage for numerous upheavals that reflected broader global events. Local communities had not yet recovered from the fervour of the Italo-Turkish and Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, even before the assassination of the heir to the Habsburg crown triggered a global conflict among the great powers. Many locals were mobilized to fight in the Habsburg forces and were sent to various battlefields, particularly to the southern front against Serbia and the eastern front against Russia. When Italy declared war against Austria-Hungary in May 1915, the entire region was drawn into the conflict. Despite initial hopes of a swift march towards Vienna, the capital of the enemy, the Italian army was halted along the Isonzo/Soča River.

The Isonzo Front brought devastation to the Karst and Gorizia regions over the following two years. After Italy’s defeat at Caporetto (Kobarid, now in Slovenia), the front shifted 200 kilometers westward, deep into the Veneto. However, widespread shortages and the prolonged conflict fatally undermined the social cohesion that had sustained Habsburg rule. (Judson 2016; Deak and Gumz 2017) in the Adriatic territories claimed by Italian irredentists. The promise of social revolution based on the Soviet Bolshevik model further strengthened resistance among workers, the hungry and starving, who no longer intended to die in the war and had mostly lost any sense of loyalty to the monarchy.

In many ways, the Habsburg state had collapsed even before it officially declared military defeat in November 1918. On November 3, the Supreme Command of the Austro-Hungarian Army signed the armistice with the Entente forces at Villa Giusti near Padua. However, judging by the severity of the conditions imposed, it could more accurately be described as a capitulation. Italian troops occupied Trieste/Triest/Trst, Istria/Istra, and parts of Dalmatia without resistance, while the nationalist poet Gabriele D’Annunzio led Italian military and paramilitary groups that seized Rijeka/Fiume in September 1919, aiming to annex it to Italy (Simonelli 2021). There was international concern that a new war might break out in the Adriatic between Italy and the newly established Kingdom of Yugoslavia, while the local populations sought ways to survive according to their own means. The result was the Rapallo Treaty of November 1920 between Italy and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that established their border and affirmed the creation of a Free State of Rijeka/Fiume with an autonomist government. But this did not bring lasting stability; economic uncertainty and

political chaos persisted. The fascists staged a coup in Rijeka in March 1922 and when the King of Italy Vittorio Emanuele invited Benito Mussolini to form a new government in October of the same year one of Mussolini's early acts was support the fascist coup in Rijeka and broker an agreement with the Yugoslav government to annex the city to Italy in January 1924. The agreement and the subsequent development of the Adriatic provinces in the interwar period was a mark not only of Mussolini's territorial ambition, but also a demonstration of the Italian state's underlying, if often underestimated, power.

The articles in this issue aim to explore the ambiguous processes of disintegration and integration and they draw on a variety of methods and perspectives to position the Adriatic as a connective space linking the European and Mediterranean regions and to recognize its role as a crucial interface between continental and maritime dynamics. By examining the Adriatic borderland within this broader framework, we aim to integrate local and regional developments in a more cohesive understanding of the global theatres of conflict. In this context the Italian experience emerges as a model that complicates national narratives of the war, its causes and effects. As Borutta and Gekas show for the Mediterranean, the approaches adopted here facilitate a unified narrative that transcends conventional geographic and historiographical boundaries, highlighting the interconnectedness of wartime and postwar processes across diverse spatial and political contexts (2012).

Extending periodizations: connecting pre- and post-war

Recent studies have challenged conventional periodizations and spatial categorizations that historians have often treated in isolation (Gerwarth and Manela 2014). Situating events such as the Italian invasion of Ottoman North Africa in September 1911 within the broader context of the First World War, we can better understand how this act of aggression set off a chain reaction that reverberated across the Mediterranean. This perspective highlights the interconnected nature of regional conflicts and their role in shaping the larger dynamics of global confrontation: with the Ottoman army preoccupied with defending the provinces (*vilayets*) of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica from the Italians, the Balkan states saw an opportunity to exploit the situation and engaged in a two-year conflict, first against the High Porte and subsequently among themselves in what became known as the Balkan Wars (Calic 2019, 376).

Integrating the Adriatic in a larger Euro-Mediterranean region, we not only gain deeper insight into the imperial aspirations of the Kingdom of Italy, but also a better understanding of how intertwined the war situations were and how deeply they were influenced by the mental frameworks developed

before the war. The strength of the appeal of imperialism and irredentism had grown in Italian politics and society long before Gavrilo Princip's shots in Sarajevo brought wider support from the Italian public (Wilcox 2021). Military successes in the Italo-Turkish war galvanized Italian nationalists both within the country and among communities outside its borders, particularly among those advocating the expansion of Italian sovereignty over the so-called unredeemed territories of the Adriatic region.

Italian irredentist groups active in Trieste, Istria, Fiume, and Dalmatia mobilized support through public meetings, and they frequently invited speakers to promote the vision of a Greater Italy. As Orazio Pedrazzi, a journalist and later diplomat for Fascist Italy, recalled how he had energized a nationalist audience in November 1912, in what was then Habsburg Trieste, at a conference dedicated to the Italian General Giovanni Ameglio, Rhodes, and the recently conquered Aegean Islands (Pedrazzi 1941, 208). Many prominent figures like him, including the geographer, jurist, and politician Attilio Brunialti, helped familiarize the Italian public with the vision of new African territories and established the ideological groundwork for colonial expansion through the notion of *predestinazione geografica* (geographic predestination). This concept first justified Italy's ambitions along the southern Mediterranean coast and was later extended to the eastern Adriatic coast as well: '*se a Parigi sognano il Mediterraneo lago francese, se l'Egeo deve diventare austriaco, non è poi utopia il pensare che l'Adriatico, che fu già veneziano, diventi lago Italiano*' ('if in Paris they dream of making the Mediterranean a French lake, and if Egypt must become part of Austria, it is not utopian to dream that the Adriatic, that was once ruled by Venice, should become an Italian lake') (Cazzetta 2004–2005, 159). The idea that Italian expansion in Africa was connected to an Italian *megali idea* (the Greek nationalist ambition to create a 'Greater Greece') across the eastern Mediterranean was also shared by the Italian Minister for the Colonies, Gaspare Colosimo. His vision confirms that it would be misleading to detach the African from the Adriatic horizon (Bosworth and Finaldi 2014, 41). For many Italian expansions in Africa and in the Adriatic were two sides of the same coin.

At the end of the nineteenth century Brunialti had written extensively on Italy's colonial interests in Tunisia and Tripolitania, but during the First World War his attention shifted to the cities of Trieste and Trento. In the immediate postwar period, he published six volumes designed to introduce and integrate the newly conquered borderlands into the Italian national consciousness. From Trentino to Friuli, Trieste, Gorizia, Istria, Rijeka, Zadar, and the Dalmatian islands, these publications cultivated in the public a sense of belonging and the legitimacy of the expansion of Italy's borders, emphasizing the historical, cultural, and political significance of these regions within the broader framework of Italian national identification (Brunialti 1916, 1919–1921).

Integrating the borderland

Multifaceted and often contested notions of territoriality and identity emerged in the wake of the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and in this transformative period the northern Adriatic region became what has been described as a 'shatter zone' (Bartov and Weitz 2013), characterized by political fragmentation, rival national aspirations, and fluctuating borders.

In her study of Rijeka in the first post-war years, Dominique Kirchner Reill (2020) identifies in the myriad territorial options including as citizenship and pertinence a set of identifications and the basis for the organization of local societies that were far more dynamic than those presented by the 'Wilsonian moment' (Manela 2007). Until the city's annexation by Italy in January 1924, the local government aimed at organizing this new city-state's life in ways designed to safeguard the privileges of the previous imperial experience rather than to embrace the political project of the unification with the Kingdom of Italy (Rusinow 1969; Manin 2001; Pupo 2014).

Comparable dynamics were evident in other border zones such as South Tyrol and across other areas of this borderland (Gatterer 1994; Pergher 2012). To address the complexities of integrating these newly acquired territories, the Italian government established the *Ufficio Centrale per le Nuove Province* tasked with coordinating local demands and implementing policies aimed at the nationalization and administrative unification of the newly annexed province. Set up in July 1919, it was headed by Francesco Salata, an irredentist intellectual from the Island of Cres/Cherso who enjoyed the esteem of the head of government Francesco Saverio Nitti and his successors. However, political conflicts at both the local and national levels led to the dissolution of this office in 1922 under the Facta government, reflecting the significant internal political transformations and the emergence of new administrative approaches toward borderland management. The elimination of the separate office for the borderlands underscored the evolving nature of state control during a period marked both by attempts at centralization and the renegotiation of governance strategies in response to local realities (Apih 1966; Kacin-Wohinz 1972; Gherardi Bon et al. 1985; Capuzzo 1992, 1996; Dukovski 1998; Apollonio 2001).

Italian borderlands and newly acquired territories played a crucial role in the rearticulation of national identities and sovereignties, and ambiguous national affiliations became the target of strict politics of nationalization. Although these policies have already been well studied, the multiple and often ambiguous sense of belonging are often neglected and indicate the need for a more nuanced analysis of how practices of belonging differ and collide with mechanisms of identification of a national community such as citizenship. In our case, legal categories established by the Italian authorities after the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy provide the necessary

framework for reflecting on complex histories of belonging and citizenship, while the movement of Slovenes and Croats towards Yugoslavia and their relocation throughout what they considered their kin-country give us the opportunity to look at projects of state-building in a more composite way (Klabjan and Bajc 2023). In fact, if many Italians left the part of Dalmatia under Yugoslav control, tens of thousands of “Yugoslavs” emigrated overseas or in neighboring Yugoslavia from what became officially the Venezia Giulia occupied by the Italian army since November 1918. As Pamela Ballinger has shown, in the case of Italian post-Second World War refugees not only the juridical but also the cultural status of individuals represented an open question for their countries (2020). This experience was not unique to this region. Several categories were used to regulate the legal status of people in the African colonies and the Dodecanese. As Roberta Pergher has shown, it was in Italy’s new provinces, however, that citizenship became a weapon for assimilation. Here categories such as *allogeni* (‘individuals of a different stock or nation’) or *alloglotti* (‘individuals whose language is not Italian’) were used to identify Italian citizens of other ethnicities (first and foremost, Slovenes, Croats and Germans) and to complicate further the intertwining of citizenship and practices of belonging (Pergher 2018, 22).

Recently Tara Zahra, Jeremy King, and Pieter Judson have questioned traditional reliance on the nation as the main vehicle of mobilization and showed that ordinary people often remain indifferent when elites attempt to promote a sense of nationhood (King 2002; Zahra 2010; Judson and Zahra 2012; Judson 2016). ‘National indifference’ has become a buzzword and a concept for re-interpreting modern European history, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and its wider potential continues to be explored in major recent studies (Bjork 2008; Feest 2017; Van Ginderachter and Fox 2019; Franzinetti 2020). It is an approach that opens new ways of thinking about the relationship between the state(s) and their societies. Caglioti and Masoero, for instance, have identified the ‘existence of multiple regimes of citizenship’ (2016, 171) and for this borderland provide an especially fruitful field for research because their heterogeneity enabled ‘borderland’ individuals to contest the categories of belonging (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011; Ballinger 2013; Hametz 2017).

As Reill has recently argued, however, nationality was not the only factor that played a crucial role in different forms of inclusion and exclusion (2020, 134–177), and it would be misleading to present peoples on the ground as only passive actors. Citizenship, too, was often precipitated by a plethora of choices. While new authorities used it as a coercive measure against non-citizens, it was also the result of pragmatic individual decisions. The focus on citizenship as other than a source of identification opens new questions about senses of belonging, sovereignties and loyalties that are especially complex in multi-ethnic areas and multi-lingual borderlands. As Montserrat

Guibernau argues, belonging to a social group is an important part of an individual's life and 'offers a vantage point from which human beings are able to transcend their limited existence by sharing some common interests, objectives and characteristics with fellow-members' (2013, 2). The emotional dimension has a crucial element that enables belonging to act as a trigger for collective political mobilization, while ethnic hierarchies were translated into social and legal practices of citizenship. As Gosewinkel demonstrates, however, this phenomenon cannot be disentangled from political transformations (2021); in our case, focusing on these transformations in the Adriatic space also reveals that the presumed essentialist distinction between supposedly inclusive Western approaches and exclusive, ethnically defined understandings of citizenship in the East is unsustainable.

Ambiguous sovereignties

Reill's observation that 'ruling empires had dissolved without new states ready to replace them' (2020, 21) confirms that the diplomatic solution brokered by Italian and Yugoslav diplomats in Rapallo in November 1920 did not bring insecurity on the ground to an end. While economic shortage affected the living conditions of the people, political pressure exerted by the new authorities aimed to make the region ethnically Italian (Hametz 2005). At a time when the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929, Yugoslavia) was indeterminate, the Italian administration worked hard to legitimize military conquests. In the context of the post-First World War political environment that was saturated with Italian nationalism and irredentist sentiment there was no room for hesitation, national indifference and non-national choices (Vinci 2011; Kacin-Wohinz and Pirjevec 1998; Verginella 2008). How did the local populations react to these attempts at national homogenization? If many responded enthusiastically to attempts to align the borders of the nation with those of the state, many others remained reluctant. Many calculated and measured the advantages (and disadvantages) of different national identities, opening the path for seeming 'indifference' towards the state and its institutions. Rather than loyalty to the sovereign state, the sources reveal a temporary willingness, and, in many cases, a need to adjust to new conditions.

The primary sources on which the essays by Jeličić, Hametz, Cornwall and Bajc draw enable us to rethink the relationship between national affiliation, territorial belonging and State sovereignty during and after the First World War in the northern Adriatic borderland. The focus on volatile, overlapping and, at times, competing centers of power (different States, but also national, regional and local structures), allows for reconsideration of the criteria and concepts of citizenship and

belonging that have shaped European politics of governance throughout its modern history. While historians have traditionally emphasized the fragility of the state, particularly at its margins (Cattaruzza 2007), the articles in this special issue instead suggest that although the integration of the new northern Adriatic territories was non-linear and often problematic, the state was not weak or powerless. What emerges is a picture of a powerful state that introduces a new state framework and new rulers that dictate the limits of citizens' powers. In many cases, individuals were forced to come to terms with, and reluctantly submit to, the will of the state and its institutions. Yet, they also looked for ways and strategies to adapt state guidelines to local practices and their own advantage. Some were even successful in navigating state options and negotiating citizenships, as Hametz, shows or engaging with the ambiguities that characterized the Rijeka experience as described by Jeličić.

Attempts to escape the authority of the state became increasingly difficult after the fascist regime was transformed into a totalitarian one in the mid-1920s. As Gorazd Bajc demonstrates, repressive measures were not a fascist invention. But the postwar transformation was not a uniform process and, as during the war, views and practices were varied and diverse. Nor, as Mark Cornwall shows, did decisions on how to relate to Italy's new Adriatic neighbor, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, follow a single or consistent line.

This issue became even more pressing following Italy's annexation of Trieste, Gorizia, and Istria, and the challenges of coping with the half a million Slovenes and Croats who had become Italian citizens. As with the Germans (and Ladins) in the South Tyrol (Di Michele 2023), the relationship between the Italian state and the Slovenian and Croatian national communities in the former Austrian Littoral – now Venezia Giulia – was anything but simple. While Italian politics trusted in the assimilative power of its own supposed 'superior civilization,' the populations of the new provinces, whether Slovenes or Croats, but also many Friulians, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs and others whose identifications remained for a long time still tied to regional, urban or even district and village contexts, struggled to recognize themselves in the new Italian homeland, while Italian nationalists oscillated between maintaining traditional, local Habsburg privileges and greater integration into Italian society. In this sense, the local fascists forced the issue: in Fiume, in March 1922, they ousted the government, anticipating events at the national level. After Mussolini's rise to power, what D'Annunzio had failed to achieve the new Duce accomplished. With the Treaty of Rome, signed on 27 January 1924, Italy officially annexed the city of Fiume. In the Adriatic, the conflicts that shook the world for ten years came, temporarily at least, to an end.

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