

2022-03-21

Ghost States of Empire

A. Genell. 2022. "“Ghost States of Empire,” H-Diplo Roundtable Review" H-Diplo Roundtable, Volume XXIII, Issue 30.

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On 30 October 1918, the Italian National Council, which was composed of leading members of Fiume's municipal government, proclaimed that the ethnically diverse Habsburg port city would be annexed to Italy in the name of Wilsonian self-determination. But the American President, Woodrow Wilson, had other plans. Fiume (today Rijeka, in Croatia) was awarded to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in the name of future economic viability—a position that prompted the Italian Delegation to leave the Paris Peace Conference. Nearly a year later, in response to Wilson's refusal to support Italian territorial claims, the nationalist poet-soldier, Gabriel D'Annunzio, and his paramilitary forces entered the city under the banner of "Italy or Death," and unleashed a fifteen-month occupation which only ended with the creation of the Free State of Fiume—a mini-state backed by the League of Nations, under Italian protection. "The Fiume Question," as it was known, more often than not has been understood as a harbinger of what was to come: the rise of fascism and the failure of the liberal order created at the Paris Peace Conference.⁸ On the surface, the Fiume Crisis might look like a tale about nationalism supplanting empire, but what if that wasn't the main story in the turbulent years following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire? More importantly, what are the historical consequences of getting this interpretation wrong?

Dominique Kirchner Reill's beautifully written monograph, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*, reexamines the process and consequences of undoing empire in this autonomous port town on the Adriatic, and does so through a stunning, archivally grounded analysis of how locals managed to recreate their world after imperial collapse. Instead of understanding the Fiume Crisis as a dress rehearsal for Benito Mussolini's March on Rome and the triumph of nationalism in post-World War I Europe, Reill argues that in the critical three-year period between 1918 and 1922, Fiumians revived imperial structures to stay afloat in a nationalizing world. She frames this augment through the idea of the "ghost imperial state" (20). It wasn't just that some Habsburg structures persisted, but that Fiumians actively preserved, and at times reworked, imperial institutions in order to revive the city's prewar autonomous political status and economic prosperity. To show precisely how the empire lived on in "the smallest of the postwar successor states" (22), the book is structured around the pillars of the state. Each chapter takes up pressing issues in the chaotic shift from empire to state: money, law, citizenship, propaganda and nationalism.

Why does the idea of the ghost state of empire matter for this particular history? Before the First World War, Fiume had a special legal and political status within the Hungarian half of the empire. Local elites vied with Budapest to gain more autonomy and economic control. At the same time, by the 1890s, Fiume was a booming industrialized port town. For locals after 1918, remaking the state in the image of the empire was a pragmatic move, and one that was designed to preserve local autonomy and recover the wealth of the prewar economy. Reill's interpretation helps explain why so many Fiumians—including Hungarians and Croatians—wanted to be annexed by Italy. It had much less to do with nationalism, and much more to do with continuing to exist as an autonomous city within a larger, more affluent empire. In the search for economic and political stability, locals opted for what they knew rather than for what was revolutionary. The ideas and institutions of empire did not simply vanish overnight; instead imperial structures lived on in the successor state—and not just because they were available, but because locals actively chose them.

While the ghost state of empire persuasively shifts how we have come to understand the Fiume Crisis, for non-specialists the book offers an opportunity to think about what this approach might mean, not just for Fiume and the other Habsburg successor states, but for all the states and mandates that were created out of the vanquished empires in 1918. As Reill herself notes, "Over half of Europe's residents found themselves suddenly without a governing body to administer their economy, their laws, or their benefits...Fiume's on-the-ground history is emblematic of the demands and strategies employed in a world whose ruling empires had dissolved without new states ready to replace them" (21). Imperial subjects across the

⁸ Reill provides an excellent overview of the historiographical debates in Italian and English. See her introduction and chapter 1.

Habsburg, Romanov, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires suddenly found themselves facing similar economic, legal, and political crises as the fifty thousand inhabitants of Fiume.

As a legal historian of the late Ottoman empire and the modern Middle East, I can offer some thoughts on the implications of Reill's argument for the Ottoman case. Before the First World War, the Ottoman empire stretched across three continents. Like the Habsburg empire, the empire was multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse—the population was about three-quarters Muslim.⁹ By November of 1918, the Arab provinces were under British control. The imperial capital, Istanbul, was divided into three occupation zones governed by the British, the French, and the Italians. Only inaccessible areas in central and eastern Anatolia were not under direct Allied control. A year later, two governments, one in Istanbul and one in Ankara, vied for control of the state. What might the ghost state of empire have looked like in Istanbul, the empire's provincial capitals Baghdad and Jerusalem, or its rich port cities İzmir/Smyrna, Beirut and Kuwait, or in villages in Anatolia and the Arabian Peninsula? How did Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and Greeks remake their understanding of state? What currencies did people carry in their wallets in Istanbul? How did Ottoman laws shape the process of constitution making in Damascus? Who counted as a citizen? What kind of state did Ottoman subjects imagine and want in 1918?

One could argue that it is impossible to consider the portability the ghost state model to the Ottoman empire, given the radically different outcomes of imperial defeat in Europe versus the Middle East. While former imperial subjects in Europe were awarded states, Britain and France divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire between themselves as mandates guaranteed by the League of Nations. In much of post-Ottoman Middle East, former citizens received a new iteration of empire—the mandatory powers abolished rights Ottoman Arabs had possessed to political participation and parliamentary representation.¹⁰ The Republic of Turkey, the main successor state to the Ottoman Empire, only secured independence and recognition through continuing the war, by fighting against the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the various Allied regimes of occupation in the capital and across much of the empire.

At the same time, the war in the Middle East looked rather different than in Europe. For starters, the Ottoman First World War began with the Italian invasion and occupation of Libya and the Dodecanese islands in 1911 and continued unabated through the fall of 1922. The war profoundly rearranged the demographic map of the former Ottoman lands, most profoundly in the new Turkey. The ratio of Muslim and non-Muslim populations in cities like Beirut, Salonika, İzmir, and Istanbul fluctuated wildly between 1918 and 1923. Ottoman Salonika, which had been the only Jewish majority city in Europe, was already deeply Hellenized by the mid 1920s. Beirut, which had always had a large Christian population, received an influx of Armenian refugees who escaped the genocide. Istanbul was suddenly much less diverse and cosmopolitan. After years of continuous warfare, the influx of refugees from the Balkans, the deportation and massacres of the Armenians, and

⁹ In the last few years, several new works have been published on the Ottoman First World War, as well the fraught political period leading up to it. For an overview of the war, and the social composition of the late Ottoman empire see Mustafa Aksakal, "The Ottoman Empire" in Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War, 1911-1923*, edited by (New York: Oxford: University Press, 2015); Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: University Press, 2010); Yiğit Akın, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford: University Press, 2018); Melanie S. Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). For recent works on political debates among the various ethnic groups of the empire see Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). For population statistics see Cem Behar, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun ve Türkiye'nin Nüfusu, 1500-1927* (Ankara: Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü, 1996).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020).

the internationally sanctioned population transfer between Greece and what would become Turkey, the demographic map of Ottoman lands was radically transformed between 1911 and 1923.

Despite these differences between the wartime and post-war experiences in the Middle East and Europe, Reill's approach has much offer historians of the late Ottoman Empire—both in terms of underlying assumptions about the role of nationalism in state making during the Armistice era (1918-1923), and more importantly, the reworking of Ottoman political, legal, and administrative institutions in the successor states.

The Armistice in the Middle East, as in Europe, was a period of economic and political instability and chaos. Throughout this brief period, the future of the state was bitterly fought over between Ottoman subjects, and against Allied occupiers who were determined to win territorial compensation for wartime sacrifices.¹¹ Historians have largely treated 1918 as a sharp dividing line between the Ottoman past and the emergence of the Arab Middle East—a division that has shaped the field of Middle Eastern history in profound ways, determining research languages and the archives that historians might access.¹² For the most part, the historiography has assumed that elites who controlled the Ottoman state in 1918 wanted nothing more than to establish a Turkish nation-state in its place, and to finally be freed from the burdens of empire.¹³ By 1918 in the face of imperial collapse, all of the subject nationalities wanted out. While there were absolutely Ottoman subjects who dreamed of the nation in 1918, the reality on the ground was far more complex and remained so through 1923—when the final peace treaty was signed between the Allies and what would become the new Republic of Turkey.

This is where I would argue that Reill's book can help us to rethink some of our stickier suppositions about the Armistice period in the Middle East. By focusing on local inhabitants and examining their practical calculations as much as how imperial mentalities shaped particular visions of the state, we might start to make sense of some of the stories that do not fit comfortably into the triumph of the Wilsonian nationalist narrative. For instance, little substantive work has been done on

¹¹ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19-20.

¹² Modern Middle Eastern historiography is generally divided between before and after 1918—a division that extends not just chronologically but also linguistically. While many historians on both sides of 1918 might know Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, the post-Ottoman era is dominated by works based on Arabic sources. Nineteenth century Ottoman historians rely heavily upon documents from the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, as well as local archival and printed sources in all the major languages in the empire, including Arabic, Greek, Armenian, Ladino, Bulgarian, Kurdish, Albanian, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, as well as Turkish sources written in the Greek and Armenian alphabets.

¹³ The idea of the Turkish nation-in-waiting is embedded in the official historiography of the Republic of Turkey, best represented by Mustafa Kemal's six-day speech on the founding of the Republic. Known simply as *Nutuk* ("speech"), Mustafa Kemal's version of events has structured historiographical debates in Turkish as much as in English. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), *Nutuk: Gazi Mustafa Kemal tarafından* (Ankara: Türk Tayyare Cemiyeti, 1927). For an early English translation see *A speech delivered by Ghazi Mustapha Kemal* (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler, 1929). In post-World War I memoirs, several late Ottoman intellectuals who ultimately supported the Republic, replicated Mustafa Kemal's views—although a close reading of what these same intellectuals wrote during the early years of the Armistice period presents a more complicated picture. See for example, Halide Edib (Adivar), *The Turkish Ordeal* (New York: Century Company, 1928) and *Türk'ün Ateşle İmtihanı* (İstanbul: Can, 2016); Ahmed Emin (Yalman), *Turkey in the World War* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1930), *Yakın Tarihte Gördüklerim ve Geçirdiklerim* (İstanbul: Yenilik Basımevi, 1970). While the debates on the founding of the republic and the collapse of the empire are much more extensive in Turkish than in English, the idea that most everyone from high state officials to non-Muslim subjects were ready to ditch the empire in 1918 (if not before) is a persistent theme in the historiography. Finally, compared to earlier periods in Ottoman history, there are far fewer works on the mechanics of the collapse of the empire, and fewer still on the Armistice in English. See Nur Bilge Criss, *İstanbul Under Allied Occupation 1918-1923* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). The excellent new work on Ottoman First World War generally ends with the signing of the Armistice in 1918.

elites in the imperial capital who early on attempted to work with the Allied occupation.¹⁴ In the literature, these figures are treated as little more than bumbling traitors who desperately clung to power and tried to sell out the Turkish nation. Yet, the Istanbul government and its supporters were composed of liberal bureaucrats and intellectuals who had forged strategies and procedures for dealing with European demands on deeply uneven terms.¹⁵ State officials were used to pragmatic politics and getting what they could out of negotiations with Europe and many tried desperately to hold onto the empire. It wasn't until March of 1920, when Britain effectively dissolved parliament after Ottomans rejected Allied partition, that many of these figures jumped ship. We know much less about everyday life under the varying regimes of Allied occupation across the empire and the kinds of practical compromises and maneuvering former subjects made in order to make sense of their radically changed worlds—not just in Istanbul, but especially in the Arab and Anatolian provinces.

Reill's ghost state model is perhaps even more compelling to consider in terms of the afterlives of Ottoman imperial institutions in the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Middle East. We might consider not only how locals refashioned and embedded imperial economic, political and legal institutions into new state structures, but also how Britain and France recast Ottoman institutions within the mandates. The Ottoman Civil Code (the *Mecelle*), which attempted to codify Islamic law in the late nineteenth century, persisted in various forms throughout post-Ottoman Middle East.¹⁶ While the Republic of Turkey ditched the Civil Code in 1926, it wasn't supplemented in many cases until well after the Second World War and remains in a handful of places. There were massive debates at the end of the war about what should happen to the Capitulations, those unequal treaties that exempted Europeans residing in the Ottoman Empire from local law.¹⁷ They existed in various forms in Egypt until 1949 and vestiges of unequal legal treatment between locals and resident Europeans and Americans continued.¹⁸ But again, as Reill shows us in her study of Fiume, what mattered is not so much that imperial institutions remained, but rather that activist locals revived and reshaped these institutions to their own pragmatic ends.

¹⁴ There are exceptions, and this is an area in which new work will soon be published. See Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul*; Orhan Koloğlu, *Osmanlı'da son Tartışmalar: Mondros'tan Mudanya'ya* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2008); Faruk Gezgin, *Ali Kemal: Bir Muhalifin Hikayesi*, (İstanbul: İSİS, 2011); Ali Kemal, *Ömrüm* (İstanbul: İSİS, 1985); Erdağ Gökner, "Reading Occupied Istanbul: Turkish Subject-Formation from Historical Trauma to Literary Trope," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55:3 (2014): 321-341.

¹⁵ Until recently, historians have not focused on the empire-to state or mandate divide in the Middle East. I will discuss a few new works that have opened new avenues of research below. There was some earlier work, mostly biographical in nature, that attempted to explain the rise of Arab nationalism. See William Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati' Al-Husri* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and *Islam Against the West Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

¹⁶ Ahmet Şimşirgil and Ekrem Buğra Ekinci, *Ahmed Cevdet Paşa ve Mecelle* (İstanbul: KTB Yayınları, 2013).

¹⁷ Debates on the Capitulations were intense at the both the Paris and Lausanne Peace Conferences. See Great Britain, *Lausanne Conference on Near Eastern Affairs 1922-1923: Records of Proceedings and Draft Terms of Peace* (London: HMSO, 1923) [Turkey no. 1 (1923); Cmd. 1814]; H. Temperley's *History of the Peace Conference*, vol. V, "Economic Reconstruction and Protection of Minorities," (London: H. Frowde, 1920-24). Laura Robson's excellent forthcoming article in the *American Historical Review*, "Capitulation Redux: The Imperial Genealogy of the Post-WWI "Minority" Regime," argues that the Capitulations supplied the groundwork for the Minority Rights treaties at Paris.

¹⁸ See Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). For some of the unpredictable ways in which the Capitulations continued to structure politics after the death of the Ottoman empire see Beth Baron, *The Orphan Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood* (Stanford: University Press, 2014) and Shana Minkin, *Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt* (Stanford: University Press, 2019). See too Abdeleslam M. Maghroui, *Liberalism without Democracy Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt, 1922–1936* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Recent work that bridges the empire-state divide has already shown that we get more out of embracing an approach that looks back at the Ottoman empire as a generative source, and not just towards the successor states that replaced it. Michael Provence has argued that Arab and Turkish nationalism was forged in Ottoman military schools. After the war, nationalists from both camps had an equal investment in forgetting the Ottoman past once the political boundaries of the region were hammered in place in the 1920s—an investment that was driven by practical on the ground realities.¹⁹ Elizabeth Thompson's work shows why it is so critical to look at what locals wanted in the chaotic aftermath of the war. After promising Arabs an independent state, Britain and France seized the Arab provinces and recast former imperial subjects, with rights and political representation, as colonial subjects stripped of these privileges. Arab liberals who were deeply committed to democracy, abandoned constitutionalism and left international law behind with grave consequences for the region.²⁰ Christine Philliou's recent book, *Turkey: A Past Against History*, profoundly challenges the rupture thesis between empire and state, and shows how political opposition in the imperial period was reconfigured in the Turkish Republic.²¹ In each of these cases, we are reminded that nationalists had pragmatic reasons, grounded in the politics and chaos of state collapse, to erase their imperial pasts. But as Reill shows too, there are serious interpretive consequences if follow the nationalists' lead.

In closing, Reill's book makes us rethink what we thought we knew about the end of empire—not just in Europe but far more broadly. *The Fiume Crisis* doesn't just provide a more nuanced local interpretation that balances the stories we know about D'Annunzio, Woodrow Wilson and the Fiume question at Paris. Instead, Reill's book challenges readers to consider deeply unsettling questions about how historians have approached state formation during the interwar years, and the dismantling of empire and the construction of successor states. All of the successor states to the Habsburg, Ottoman, German, and Russian empires dealt with similar, if not the same crises—as far as currency, law and constitution making. After reading *The Fiume Crisis*, it isn't possible to read the post-war period in the same way.

¹⁹ Michael Provence, "Ottoman Modernity, Colonialism, and Insurgency in the Arab East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, [IJMES] 43, special edition, June 2011; *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Elizabeth Thompson *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020); *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²¹ Christine Philliou, *Turkey: A Past Against History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022). Hasan Kayali's new will book will add much to the debates: Hasan Kayali, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations* (Berkeley: University of California, 2021). There are other newer works attempting to bridge the empire to nation-state divide. Cyrus Schayegh considers the ways in which economic and geographic networks in Ottoman Syria continued to structure the possibilities in the post-war period. Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Harvard: University Press, 2017); Awad Halabi, "Liminal Loyalties: Ottomanism and Palestinian Responses to the Turkish War of Independence, 1919-22," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41:3 (Spring 2012): 19-37.