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# Female Public Employees during a Post-Imperial Transition: Gender, Politics and Labour in Fiume after the First World War

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After the demise of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, Fiume's long political transition provided women with new challenges and opportunities. This was especially true for female public employees who had to adapt to a weak and fluid state that provided them with social security and benefits in exchange for loyalty and control. Beginning with two case studies of women elected to the Fiume city council in 1919, this paper explores how the two professional cohorts they represented – teachers and tobacco workers – learned to cope with the turbulent national and political events, as well as with the rapidly deteriorating economic conditions.

On 26 October 1919, Fiume voters cast their ballots for the city council. During the ongoing struggles over questions of sovereignty and the future territorial settlement, voters were only allowed to express support for one list of candidates, and these candidates advocated annexation to Italy. These were the first elections held after the demise of the Habsburg Empire, and the very first ones, in the history of the city, for which women were enfranchised. Out of the fifty-six people elected to the Fiume<sup>1</sup> city council, on 26 October 1919, three names stood out: those of Ofelia Nascimbeni, Antonia Verson and Olga Kucich. While Kucich's employment status was not clear, Nascimbeni and Verson worked as a teacher and a tobacco worker respectively.<sup>2</sup> The decision to include them in the main city assembly as representatives of two professional cohorts was not fortuitous but rather testifies to the importance attached to the categories they largely represented. But their importance went beyond that, as teachers and tobacco workers were regarded as strategic pillars of the post-1918 Fiume state.

Both teachers and tobacco workers were public employees dependent on the state or the municipal administration. Scholarship on the post-Habsburg successor states has focused consistently on the highest echelons of public employees, investigating the choices civil servants faced during the challenging circumstances resulting from the empire's dissolution.<sup>3</sup> While research has addressed certain lower categories, such as policemen or railway workers, female employees have not yet received the attention they deserve. Nonetheless, their participation in the state-sponsored labour market did provide them with regular salaries and access to the welfare system, which included the right to pensions and insurance covering serious illness. It is certainly true that women provided cheap labour. Limited access to

<sup>1</sup> The Croatian name for Fiume is Rijeka. Here I will use Fiume because I wish to refer to the internationally known name, as well as to the territory of the city after 1918. In 1948, the cities of Fiume and Sušak were unified.

<sup>2</sup> 'L'esito delle elezioni', *La Vedetta d'Italia* (VI), 25 Oct. 1919, 2. Olga Kucich was listed as a 'private', which could imply that she was employed in a private or family business, lived off private means or did not have paid employment.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019); Gábor Egry, 'Navigating the Straits: Changing Borders, Changing Rules and Practices of Ethnicity and Loyalty in Romania after 1918', *The Hungarian Historical Review*, 2, 3 (2013), 449–76; Ágnes Ordasi, "'Scale e Serpenti'? Le condizioni dei rappresentanti del potere dello Stato ungherese dopo la Grande guerra', *Qualestoria*, 2 (2020), 93–112.

professional employment and education conditioned them for this, all of which helped perpetuate consistent underachievement compared with their male colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, public employment granted them economic independence and autonomy, and often differentiated them – in terms of their rights – from other employed women.

A solid and reliable state employer offered stability and social security, as was promised in the Habsburg period; but what happened when the state dissolved first, and then changed its form during a troubled transition? What was the attitude of weak state authorities towards individuals who happened to be both its subjects and employees after 1918? How did gender complicate this picture? This article will try to respond to this set of questions.

It is clear from memoirs and press sources that women had already established their presence in the Fiumian pre-war labour markets, and they maintained this presence after 1918. Women worked as both skilled and unskilled employees in a range of jobs from the more traditionally female, such as teachers, midwives or domestic workers, to less feminised professions such as clerks or even doctors. Some women held public jobs, as was the case for the many female employees at the post office. Nonetheless, the most feminised professions were the teachers and the tobacco workers. Women formed the majority of teachers in the decades preceding the First World War, while the headteachers of all the female high schools were women in 1914.<sup>5</sup> The Fiumian tobacco factory had included a great majority of women from its first days in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Teachers and tobacco workers represented two professions that had already been feminised long before 1914, with a gender ratio uninfluenced by the mass employment of women in the First World War. These professions were thus representative of both the continuities and ruptures that 1918 brought with it. The local authorities were well aware of the gendered features of both the categories, and these features contributed to attitudes that differed from those taken towards men.

While to some extent representative of other post-Habsburg contexts, these case studies relate to certain peculiarities related to the city. Fiume was a small-scale urban environment, and the state and municipal level coincided when the Italian National Council took over state powers in 1918. A long political transition that stretched from 1918 to 1924, when the city was annexed to Italy, also characterised Fiume.

The main innovation to spread across the entire Habsburg area was a push towards the creation of a nation-state to replace the old supranational infrastructure. The reconfiguration of state belonging in multinational areas brought about new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, with new loyalties and practices overlapping with the old ones. In the aftermath of the First World War, Fiume – which had enjoyed a semi-autonomous status in the Habsburg Monarchy – became a diplomatic and political issue at the Versailles Peace Conference, because the city was claimed by both Italy and the nascent Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (named Yugoslavia from 1929). In late October 1918, when the national councils proclaimed independence in many post-Habsburg countries, Fiume saw the establishment and rise to power of the National Council of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This was followed by the Italian National Council seizing control of the city a few days later and advocating its annexation to Italy because of its majority Italian-speaking population. Fiume's struggle to join Italy was attentively followed in the Italian peninsula, especially thanks to its loudest advocate, the flamboyant poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who epitomised Italian irredentism and nationalism. On the Italian National Council's invitation, Gabriele D'Annunzio marched on the city with his entourage

<sup>4</sup> Waltraud Heindl, *Josephinische Mandarine: Bürokratie und Beamte in Österreich 1848–1914* (Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 147–54.

<sup>5</sup> Albeit uneven, the trend towards the feminisation of teaching in the decades preceding the First World War was a transnational one. James C. Albisetti, 'The Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective', *History of Education*, 22, 3 (1993), 253–63; Attila Nobik, 'Feminization and Professionalization in Hungary in the Late 19th Century: Women Teachers in Professional Discourses in Educational Journals (1887–1891)', *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, 4, 1 (2017), 1–17.

<sup>6</sup> When the factory was founded in 1851, it employed 120 female and 8 male workers. See Saša Dmitrović, 'Mala povijest duhana u Rijeci', *Sušačka revija*, 18/19 (1997), 70.

of supporters (renamed *legionnaires*), who were mostly young former soldiers and army officials from Italy. As a pioneer in the staging of mass politics, he governed Fiume, at first together with the Italian National Council, from September 1919 to December 1920.

D'Annunzio continued the previous efforts of the Italian National Council in presenting the multi-national and multilingual Fiume as a symbol of unconditioned Italianness, and he turned it into a headache for the Italian government, as it had to mediate the hostility of the great powers who had argued against the city being annexed to Italy. When the Rapallo Treaty established the Free State of Fiume – as a buffer zone between Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – the Italian army expelled D'Annunzio and his legionnaires. Rather than end the instability, this instead increased a deterioration in public order. In 1920 an autonomist party emerged. The autonomist leadership, which had previously declared a stance close to Italian cultural irredentism, increasingly advocated independence for the city and opposed the pro-annexationist cause, building a new localist narrative.

The autonomist bloc won the elections in April 1921 and set up the Constituent Assembly. Nonetheless, the Free State of Fiume was prevented from operating due to the nationalist and fascist pressure and was finally overthrown in a coup d'état in March 1922. After an interregnum marked by chaos, military governors moved to favour annexation to Italy.

Fiume underwent the longest transition in the upper Adriatic area, in which the war failed to end with the demise of the Habsburg Empire but was instead perpetuated in a climate of widespread violence and delayed cultural demobilisation.<sup>7</sup> At least until 1924 the state identified roughly with the city borders and was incredibly weak, torn apart by national and social tensions.

A troubled post-war transition did not spare the neighbouring municipality of Sušak, which had been part of the Kingdom of Croatia and Slavonia in Austria-Hungary and was predominantly populated by Croatian speakers. Sušak had been separated from Fiume not only by a canal but also by an administrative border that had allowed the two cities to develop as an interconnected area. Although occupied by the Italian army in the immediate aftermath of the war, Sušak was fully integrated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes from 1923 onwards. With the annexation of Fiume to Italy, the previous boundary became an international border.

While worldwide attention was focused on political events, a social crisis was unfolding. Fiume, a burgeoning industrial and commercial centre, as well as the main Hungarian port in the Habsburg Monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century, experienced a deep crisis. The Fiumian economy's malfunctioning was rooted in its adjustment to the new post-imperial framework that resulted in locals facing unprecedented challenges.<sup>8</sup> Cut off from its hinterland, which was incorporated into either Italy or the future Yugoslav state, and regularly threatened with maritime and commercial blockades, the thriving urban centre saw its factories and infrastructural activity drop, while most of its inhabitants became unemployed and dependent on subsidies from the municipality, which itself relied on Red Cross provisions.<sup>9</sup> A considerable part of this burden fell on women who had become responsible for protecting their salaries and providing for their families from the war onwards, while also struggling with bureaucracy to claim their rights.

As much of the recent historiography has shown, there was another story to be told besides the negotiations of the great powers and the building of nation-states, a story of ordinary people who tried to stay afloat and possibly improve their lives. The scholarship has increasingly focused on

<sup>7</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: How the First World War Failed to End* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); Marco Bresciani, 'The Post-Imperial Space of the Upper Adriatic and the Post-War Ascent of Fascism', in Tim Buchen and Frank Grelka, eds., *Vergangene Räume – Neue Ordnungen. Das Erbe der multinationalen Reiche und die Staatsbildung im östlichen Europa 1917–1923* (Frankfurt Oder: Viadrina Universität, 2017), 47–64.

<sup>8</sup> Dominique Kirchner Reill, 'Post-Imperial Europe: When Comparison Threatened, Empowered, and Was Omnipresent', *Slavic Review*, 78, 3 (2019), 663–70.

<sup>9</sup> Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 73–107; Giuseppe Parlato, *Mezzo secolo di Fiume. Economia e società a Fiume nella prima metà del Novecento* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2009), 99–112.

the gendered aspects of post-imperial transitions in East Central Europe, with particular attention devoted to political activism and enfranchisement.<sup>10</sup> Following a recent call for this literature to be integrated with the issues of labour and class,<sup>11</sup> this article uses the formal political inclusion of women as a starting point for an enquiry into their agency in the shifting post-1918 society.

However, until recently, the abundant historiography on post-1918 Fiume has rarely engaged with everyday life.<sup>12</sup> The stress on political events and on the construction of D'Annunzio's legend and the national issues has often led to a mismatch between the harsh reality of a besieged city and the description of Fiume as imagined and described in various memoirs by certain contemporary political actors – as thriving amid patriotism and pro-Italian sentiments. This was the story told by the male voices of newcomers, who have conveyed a stereotypical view of women, often describing them as lovers or dependants. The impact of the Fiume expedition on reshaping Italian nationalism is undeniable,<sup>13</sup> but equally undisputable is the mismatch between this experience and Fiumians' lived experience.<sup>14</sup> Dominique K. Reill's recent book makes this clear, as it foregrounded Fiumian society and showcased the multi-layered quality of the political projects pursued, ranging from the local elite, which strove to maintain the prosperity achieved in the Habsburg time by reinventing the city in a patriotic guise, to D'Annunzio's entourage, which strove to create a rupture with the old system.<sup>15</sup> The post-1918 chaotic turn of events compelled locals to navigate the changes brought about by the non-linear process of state formation.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars have focused attention on all those who did not belong to the pro-Italian line-up and who sided with different political options, and they took a comparative look at the pro-Italian, pro-Yugoslav and autonomist narratives. This has contributed to a more complex representation of the background against which the events that attracted international attention unfolded.<sup>17</sup> Such heterogeneity of perspectives will be complemented by studying how social relations were reshaped by gender and labour in the aftermath of war.

### Women and the Public Arena in Post-1918 Fiume

In September 1919, on the eve of D'Annunzio's taking control of the city, the Italian National Council granted all the women and men who had local citizenship (*pertinenza*)<sup>18</sup> the right to vote and to be

<sup>10</sup> Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Women Activists Between War and Peace: Europe, 1918–1923* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> See for example the recent ERC project ZARAH (Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Transnationally, from the Ages of Empires to the Late 20th Century) (P.I. Susan Zimmermann).

<sup>12</sup> Among the few exceptions see: Parlato, *Mezzo secolo di Fiume*.

<sup>13</sup> Raoul Pupo, *Fiume città di passione* (Bari: Laterza, 2018); Marco Mondini, *Fiume, una guerra civile italiana* (Rome: Salerno, 2019); Federico Carlo Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume* (Ospedaletto: Pacini, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> William Klinger, *Un'altra Italia: Fiume 1918–1924* (Trieste: Lega Nazionale; Rovigno: Centro di ricerche storiche, 2018); Tea Perinčić, *Rijeka ili smrt: D'Annunzijeve okupacija Rijeke 1919–1921/ Rijeka or Death! D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka 1919–1921* (Rijeka: Naklada Val, Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka EPK 2020, 2019); Ljubinka Toševa Karpowicz, *Rijeka/Fiume 1868–1924. Od autonomije do države* (Rijeka: Udruga Slobodna Država Rijeka, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Jeličić, 'Repubblica con chi? Il movimento socialista fiumano e il giallo Sisa nel contesto post-asburgico fiumano', *Qualestoria*, 2 (2020), 73–95; Ordasi, "'Scale e Serpenti'?"

<sup>17</sup> Natka Badurina, 'I croati di Fiume ai tempi di D'Annunzio', *Qualestoria*, 2 (2020), 45–71; Vanni D'Alessio, 'L'altra Fiume. La "dannunziade" vista e vissuta da croati e jugoslavi', *Memoria e Ricerca*, 3 (2020), 491–508; Francesca Rolandi 'Un trionfo mai richiesto? Partecipazione politica femminile e rappresentazioni di genere nella stampa locale di Fiume e Sušak dopo la Grande guerra', *Italia contemporanea*, 293 (2020), 73–98; Giovanni Stelli, 'Gli autonomisti fiumani e l'Impresa dannunziana', in Giordano Bruno Guerri, ed., *Fiume 1919–2019. Un centenario europeo tra identità, memorie e prospettive di ricerca* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 37–59 and Vjeran Pavlaković, 'D'Annunzio in Rijeka 1919: Representations in the Yugoslav Press', in *ibid.*, 99–117.

<sup>18</sup> *Pertinenza* (*Heimatrecht*), the right of residence established in Austria-Hungary, a kind of local citizenship that allowed Habsburg subjects access to various measures of welfare in their hometown or in their parents' place of birth, became the basis for post-First World War citizenship in Fiume. On the use and misuse of *pertinenza* in post-1918 Fiume see

elected to the city council. In September 1920 universal suffrage was included in the Constitution of the Regency of Carnaro, which never entered into force, and in the electoral law for the Constituent Assembly passed on 31 January 1921. In those elections, which took place in April, Fiumian women voted for the last time until the end of the Second World War.<sup>19</sup>

Women's suffrage has been frequently stressed in the historiography when addressing the putative emancipatory potential of D'Annunzio's political project, despite women's suffrage having been granted before he took power in the city.<sup>20</sup> However, a look at the wider context provides evidence of the fact that enfranchisement was more grounded in the regional context rather than being a feature imported from outside. In many post-Habsburg states women obtained the right to vote, while in both Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes there were initial hopes that suffrage might be achieved. However, in this region suffrage did not automatically mean participation.<sup>21</sup>

The October 1919 elections did not give citizens of Fiume political agency, but rather aimed to show widespread support for the forces advocating annexation to Italy. These were the only elections that submitted only one list of candidates in which 'citizens of every class and sex were represented'.<sup>22</sup> Other ballots were repressed by the pro-annexation nationalist sector.<sup>23</sup> From its beginning Fiume did not stand out as a promising site for a thriving democratic life.

Women's suffrage in Fiume was presented by the local elite and later by D'Annunzio's entourage as a patriotic duty and an antidote to feminist engagement.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the call for participation that D'Annunzio addressed to women often referred to them as irrational and passionate supporters rather than as aware citizens. This was embodied in the figure of the *popolane*, wherein women from the urban lower classes were believed to have worshipped D'Annunzio, as they worshipped saints.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, repression frequently targeted women who achieved social capital both through education or political activism and could, consequently, pose a challenge to their opponents. Bearing this in mind, the presence of three women on the city council after the October 1919 elections<sup>26</sup> did not entail effective enfranchisement. With few exceptions, Ofelia Nascimbeni, Antonia Verson and Olga Kucich were no longer visible in the public sphere after their appointment, while the real power lay at the hands of the executive committee.

While D'Annunzio's expedition fuelled nationalist enthusiasm and the Adriatic city attracted Italian female activists,<sup>27</sup> no Fiumian woman made newspaper headlines or was particularly active

Dominique K. Reill, Ivan Jeličić and Francesca Rolandi, 'Redefining Citizenship After Empire: The Rights to Welfare, to Work, and to Remain in a Post-Habsburg World', forthcoming in *The Journal of Modern History*.

<sup>19</sup> *Legislazione di Fiume* (Rome: Provveditorato generale dello Stato, 1926), 82–3, 92–3, 281–4.

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Salaris, *Alla festa della rivoluzione. Artisti e libertari con D'Annunzio a Fiume* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Disobbedisco, Cinquecento giorni di rivoluzione. Fiume 1919–1920* (Milano: Mondadori, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Judith Sapor, *Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War: From Rights to Revanche* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, *Opasne iluzije. Rodni stereotipi o meduratnoj Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> 'Cittadini!', VI, 25 Oct. 1925, 2.

<sup>23</sup> The plebiscite on the *modus vivendi*, a proposal for a compromise on the creation of a formally free State of Fiume strongly tied to the Italian state, held in December 1919, saw D'Annunzio nullifying the result, as it turned out to support the Italian government's compromise line. The elections for the Constituent Assembly in April 1921 were followed by fascists and legionnaires assaulting the courthouse and burning the ballot boxes.

<sup>24</sup> Oscar Pedrazzi, 'Le donne fiumane', VI, 7 Sept. 1919, 3.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., 'Il trionfo di domenica', VI, 19 Oct. 1919, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Silverio Annibale, *La questione di Fiume nel diritto internazionale* (Fiume: Unione italiana, Trieste: Università popolare, 2011), 93.

<sup>27</sup> On the nexus between women's political participation, suffrage and nationalism, see Emma Schiavon, 'The Women's Suffrage Campaign in Italy in 1919 and Voce Nuova ("New Voice"): Corporatism, Nationalism and the Struggle for Political Rights', in Sharp and Stibbe, eds., *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 49–68; Angélique Leszczawski-Schwerk, 'Dynamics of Democratization and Nationalization: The Significance of Women's Suffrage and Women's Political Participation in Parliament in the Second Polish Republic', *Nationalities Papers* 46, 5 (2018), 809–22. On local humanitarianism see: Emiliano Loria, "'Tizzoni fiammeggianti': l'assistenza all'infanzia nella Fiume dannunziana (1919–1920)', in *Fiume 1919–2019. Un centenario europeo tra identità, memorie e prospettive di ricerca* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 159–82.



in the myriad of humanitarian initiatives organised by the nationalist front. Similarly, no women's organisation played any role in claiming female rights; these rights were rather reframed as a gift to women from their male counterparts. While gender was barely an identity category in 1918 for local women, labour certainly was, as was clear in the activism of those who claimed to represent professional groups. Drawing on these reflections and departing from the symbolic presence of representatives of teachers and tobacco workers in the city council, this article will investigate how these categories of female public employees navigated the post-1918 transition.

### Political Affiliations, Nation-Building and Patriotic Duties: Teachers and Headmistresses

In the early twentieth century, when roles for middle-class women were often determined by their marital status, teachers were among the few autonomous actors able to depend on their own salaries while also being community role models. Teachers had to be mobile to become educated as they had to attend a school outside Fiume. The destination they chose had several consequences. Traditionally, most teachers studied in the Habsburg state; however, from the end of the nineteenth century the Fiume municipality – increasingly looking towards Italy – started offering fellowships to students eager to gain a teaching specialism while living on the peninsula. Girls also took up this opportunity, as did the teacher and educational counsellor Gemma Harasim, who spent two years in Florence between 1907 and 1909 while attending university courses.<sup>28</sup> Born and raised in the multilingual Fiume environment, this experience would have left its mark on Harasim. Despite being a harsh critic of Italian nationalism, she soon positioned herself in the Italian cultural milieu, fostered by her collaboration with the established journal *La Voce* and her marriage to the leading intellectual Giuseppe Radice Lombardo. Interestingly, her step-brother, Rikard Lenac, became one of the custodians of Croatian national identity. Educational trajectories often implied adhesion to the culture in which the students were educated, which often mapped onto divides within families. As Enrico Morovich recalled, on the eve of the First World War his paternal aunt had been educated as a teacher in Hungary, where she also taught, spoke the language fluently and cultivated loyalty towards the Habsburg state. His maternal aunt had instead spent her formative years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan. Named Federica Blanda, she became the vice-president of the pro-Italian association *La Giovine Italia*, which she actively promoted; she joined other nationalist associations too.<sup>29</sup> Class barriers were projected onto the geographical space, with teachers from well-known families who were often involved in politics exerting control over workplaces in the city. Those from a more modest background were often appointed in the nearby rural areas, and they had to cope with the related inconveniences, which included imposing Italian on pupils who had a weak command of the language.

With the rise of nationalisms in the nineteenth century, education became one of the main battlegrounds for the national movements that were trying to consolidate communities in the highly contested border areas.<sup>30</sup> This became even more urgent in the post-1918 context. The Italian authorities ascribed to schools the task of expanding an Italian national consciousness in the areas annexed to Italy after the war. Language played a crucial role in this mission, as stressed by the 1923 Gentile reform that gradually led to Italian being the only language permitted at school, even in multinational areas.<sup>31</sup> However, despite the heavy nationalisation, education continued to lead women to challenge the monopoly over knowledge held by men,<sup>32</sup> and it allowed them to take up roles in highly skilled workplaces, e.g. as headmistresses and high school professors.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Lombardo Radice, 'Le "Lettere da Fiume" di Gemma Harasim', *Fiume*, 9, 3–4 (1961), 184–85.

<sup>29</sup> Enrico Morovich, *Un italiano di Fiume* (Milano: Rusconi, 1993), 40–2.

<sup>30</sup> Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 23–4.

<sup>31</sup> Laura L. Downs, "'The Most Moderate Italianization?'" Social Action and Nationalist Politics in the North-Eastern Adriatic Borderlands (1919–1954)', *Acta Histriae*, 26, 4 (2018), 1087–102; Monica Galfré, *Una riforma alla prova. La scuola media di Gentile e il fascismo* (Milano: F. Angeli, 2000), 94.

<sup>32</sup> Fabio Giomi, 'Forging Habsburg Muslim Girls: Gender, Education and Empire in Bosnia and Hercegovina (1878–1918)', *History of Education*, 44 (2015), 274–92.

In the tense Fiumian political environment, teachers were given the crucial role of raising a generation of patriots; moreover, in the case of women, this mission was caught up in an extension of their maternal role, which was implicit in their profession and exacerbated by the fact that many teachers were unmarried and focused on their job.<sup>33</sup> As educators and mothers of the nation, they found themselves on the front line of the national and political struggle, and they were deeply conditioned by the political factions in power. It is likely that the conflicts among the teaching staff, counterposing nationalists and different-minded people – but also locals and newcomers – prevented the teaching staff from politically organising to improve their working conditions.

The pressure exerted on teachers who were regarded as non-compliant, characteristic of late-Habsburg rule, was exacerbated after the reversal in political fortunes. Some experienced teachers who had tried to downplay tensions became the target of a political campaign, in which they were accused of lacking patriotism.<sup>34</sup> In October 1919, the Italian language newspaper *Il Giornale* denounced the presence of ‘traitors among our teachers’, including two ‘openly Austro-ophile’ headmistresses who abstained from voting during the election. The newspaper called for the ‘cleaning’ of this ‘evil race’, ‘which should be evicted from our schools’.<sup>35</sup>

The peculiar situation that Fiume experienced as a semi-autonomous body was different to that of other neighbouring areas integrated into the Italian Kingdom after 1918. In those areas, ‘nationally aware’ teachers were targets for internment, persecution or dismissal from the beginning,<sup>36</sup> especially after teaching the Slovenian and Croatian language had been abolished. The Fiumian authorities had already banned Croatian from the local schools in the late nineteenth century, and they had relegated it to the bordering town of Sušak, which had become the epicentre of pro-Yugoslav and Croatian identity, with female teachers in the ideological trenches. Despite the fact that some Fiumian teachers took part in pro-Yugoslav events, e.g. Silveria Momcilovich, who is thought to have travelled to Ljubljana to see the Yugoslav Royal Family in 1922, and who referred to Petar Karađorđević as ‘our king’,<sup>37</sup> their orientation does not seem to have developed into a more structured political engagement, and it did not encounter a harsh repression. From 1920, the possibility of Fiume being annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was no longer feasible, while supporters of the Free State of Fiume continued to challenge the front that advocated annexation to Italy. The conflicts that broke out from 1920 between the autonomist faction on one side and the pro-annexationist and fascist faction on the other were played out on the street in brawls and physical attacks, as well as in press campaigns – and in conflicts among the teaching staff.

The fragmentation of the former pro-Italian front had repercussions for the teaching personnel. During the First World War, Rosa de’ Emili, a primary school teacher who was regarded as a symbol of Italianness, paid for her national sentiments with internment by the Habsburg authorities in the camp of Kiskunhalas, in southern Hungary. After the war she became the headmistress of the civic female school, but soon found herself at odds with D’Annunzio’s entourage which repeatedly tried to intimidate her due to her pro-autonomist engagement. On 12 November 1921, she stood up against the fascists by denouncing the fact that some madmen (*energumeni*) had burst into the school, and they had demanded that she interrupt her classes and send the pupils home to celebrate the Italian king. According to her report, as she refused to obey their orders, they besieged the school, smashed

<sup>33</sup> Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Danilo Massagrande, a cura di, *I verbali del Consiglio Nazionale Italiano di Fiume e del Comitato Direttivo 1918–1920* (Roma: Società di studi fiumani – Archivio Museo storico di Fiume, 2014), 249–50; Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*, 218–22.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Traditori fra i nostri insegnanti’, *Il Giornale politico, commerciale, marittimo e finanziario*, 28 Oct. 1919, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Marta Verginella, ‘Political Activism of Slovenian Women in Venezia Giulia after World War I and the Rise of Fascism: From Autonomy to Subordination’, *Acta Histriae*, 26, 4 (2018), 1040–62; Gorazd Bajc, ‘Internments after the First World War. The Case of Women in the Northern Adriatic, 1918–1920’, *Acta Histriae*, 26, 4 (2018), 1017–40.

<sup>37</sup> Questura di Fiume Sezione presidenziale, 13 Sept. 1922, k. 56, Opći spisi (3), Školsko vijeće Rijeka (42), Državni arhiv u Rijeci (DARI).

the windows and threatened to attack the building with firecrackers. In 1922 she was allegedly insulted and imprisoned by the fascists, and that year she went into retirement.<sup>38</sup> In her case, it is likely that the need to secure a politically compliant team of teaching staff did not result in a prompt dismissal but rather in more subtle measures that also led other experienced teachers and headmistresses to withdraw from public life. By 1925, the heads of primary schools were predominantly personalities close to the Italian nationalist milieu.

In 1918 the Italian National Council had initially intended to renew the teaching staff's contracts, reinventing the staff as purely Italian, even if they had to organise Italian courses in order to help teachers who were not proficient switch to another working language overnight.<sup>39</sup> However, some teachers were not hired by the new administration after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Caterina Bonetta was one such example, a 53-year-old teacher born in Fiume and who taught in the state Hungarian schools that were shut down in the summer of 1919. As the Hungarian government was held responsible for the former state employees, many returned to Hungary even if they had spent a significant part of their life in Fiume. But the situation was more critical for those who had been born and raised in Fiume.<sup>40</sup> The reason behind the abrupt interruption to Bonetta's career was likely neither due to her poor knowledge of the Italian language, in which she was used to writing poems, nor due to her professional skills – indeed, according to a 1919 report she 'treats the pupils very well and achieves excellent results'. It was more likely due to her political orientation, which would have grown into antifascism.<sup>41</sup>

However, there were also teachers who benefited greatly from the political transition, as was the case with the above-mentioned Ofelia Nascimbeni. A couple of months after having been elected to the city council, Nascimbeni became headmistress of the Emma Brentani School. This stirred up animosity among her colleagues who submitted an appeal against her appointment and stated that her election contravened established norms. Her appointment evidenced favouritism towards teachers who had obtained a qualification in the Kingdom of Italy (as she had), rather than in the Habsburg territories. Besides protecting their own privileges, Nascimbeni's colleagues likely perceived her as profiting from her new position in order to improve her professional career in the name of Italianness.<sup>42</sup>

The narrative of a pro-Italian community sticking within national lines stumbled, however, due to the competition for scarce resources in the city. Instead, the situation often counterposed locals and newcomers, therein awakening old frictions and fostering alliances. Nascimbeni represented the Fiumian elite who allegedly recognised Italy as their ideal homeland but who nurtured concerns over an influx of cadres from Italy. This attitude may be best illustrated in the harsh row that, according to a complaint sent to the school council, occurred in front of the pupils when the headmistress Nascimbeni threatened the teacher Maria Vitali. Nascimbeni reproached her for having filed an appeal against the result of a selection process in a public competition for a teaching post, a competition that had not led to her appointment. 'So, it is true that you dared to file an appeal against a *fiumana*! We will not forget it. You know that the atmosphere has never been favourable to you', Nascimbeni allegedly told Vitali.<sup>43</sup> Originally from Liguria, Vitali had come to Fiume together with her father and brother, and she passionately joined the nationalist cause. Nascimbeni and Vitali were formally part of the same Italian nationalist front, and they proclaimed that a mutual love existed between

<sup>38</sup> Letter by Rosa de Emili, 12 Nov. 1921, k. 55, 3, 42, DARI; 'Per non dimenticare. I meriti dei nostri liberatori', *La Voce del popolo*, 9 Sept. 1922, 2; Patrizia Hansen, 'Le prime scuole a Fiume in un quaderno manoscritto di Stefano Tuchtan e Antonio Sirola', *Fiume*, 33 (2016), 49.

<sup>39</sup> Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*, 207–18.

<sup>40</sup> 1190, cart. 28, Governi di Fiume, AGF (Archivio generale fiumano), Fondazione Il Vittoriale degli Italiani (FVI).

<sup>41</sup> She later became the secretary of Riccardo Zanella, the chief of the Autonomist Party. Relazione sull'ispezione delle classi parallele delle scuole elementari ungheresi, 22 June 1919, k. 54, 3, 42, DARI; b. 723, Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), Ministero degli Interni (MI), Archivio centrale dello Stato (ACS).

<sup>42</sup> Folder Riječko Nacionalno Vijeće (Consiglio nazionale italiano) Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro, k. 53, 3, 42, DARI.

<sup>43</sup> Rapporto della prof.ssa Maria Vitali a carico della sig.na prof. Ofelia Nascimbeni, 11 Jan. 1925, k. 53, 3, 42, DARI.



Italy and Fiume, but they also embodied the rupture present between local employees and those coming from Italy.

In a climate of widespread demands and strikes, with not only workers but also clerks and civil servants at the forefront, teachers were forced to seek approval from the political factions in power and unable to act collectively to improve their conditions, either across political or national lines. While back in early 1919 a certain amount of cohesion emerged among the teaching staff, as when the teachers of the Academy of Commerce (unsuccessfully) protested against the political firing of two colleagues, similar attempts did not emerge over the following years.<sup>44</sup> The 'holy mission' attached to education resulted in obsessive control over teachers' activities, which exposed them to threats from the surrounding political environment. With the onset of fascism, parents started reporting the teachers' behaviour to the school or political authorities, accusing them of not being patriotic enough or even of discriminating against the openly patriotic pupils.<sup>45</sup> The national card had become the most effective one to play, and it even proved able to reverse established hierarchies such as the relationship between teachers and students.

### New Boundaries, Workers' Claims and Cohesiveness: The Example of the Tobacco Workers

While many teachers were educated and middle-class women, many women participating in the Fiumian labour market belonged to the working class, with tobacco workers among the most numerous. The important role attached to the local tobacco factory is reflected not only in the fact that the tobacco worker Antonia Verson was the only worker sitting on the city council but also in the political support that the factory enjoyed. In spring 1919, the Italian National Council extended its powers over the Fiume tobacco factory, which had previously belonged to the Hungarian state.<sup>46</sup>

As stressed by several studies in different contexts, tobacco factories with their vast concentration of the female workforce were pivotal cases pertaining to predominantly female workers' unionisation.<sup>47</sup> This was also the case with the Fiume tobacco factory. It opened in the mid-nineteenth century and became one of the largest factories in the local burgeoning industrial sector. It numbered over 2,000 workers, mainly women, whose nimble fingers were needed for the fine-grained tasks.<sup>48</sup> This concentration of women in a single workplace resulted in their unionisation and activism. From 1887 the tobacco factory was home to one of the first mutual aid societies in the region, while women repeatedly took to the street in 1905–6, striking jointly with other kinds of workers. Despite the persistence of harsh working conditions, there were tangible improvements in the years before 1914, including rights to a pension and some kind of health insurance.<sup>49</sup>

The new working environment affected other spheres of life too. Paid work provided female workers with more agency within the family, but also in gender relations. Women were permitted increasing

<sup>44</sup> Massagrande, *I verbali*, 256–7.

<sup>45</sup> See, i.e., Antonio Demori to Comando della M.V.S.N., k. 62, 3, 42, DARI.

<sup>46</sup> Attilio Depoli, *Fiume XXX ottobre 1918: scritti scelti* (S. Giovanni in Persiceto: Li Causi, 1982), 227–8; Massagrande, *I verbali*, 406–7, 412–3, 419, 488.

<sup>47</sup> On other tobacco factories in the region, see: Miroslava Despot, 'Tvornica duhana u Senju. Njen postanak, razvoj i prestanak rada (1894–1945). Prilog privrednoj povijesti Hrvatskog primorja', *Senjski zbornik: prilozi za geografiju, etnologiju, gospodarstvo, povijest i kulturu*, 6, 1 (1975), 407–20; Raul Marsetić, 'La Regia Manifattura Tabacchi a Pola', *Quaderni del Centro di ricerche storiche di Rovigno*, 27 (2016), 81–139; Tamara Nikolić Đerić, 'Tobacco Industry Changing Lives: Women Workers at the Turn of the 20th Century', *Narodna umjetnost: Hrvatski časopis za etnologiju i folkloristiku*, 52, 1 (2015), 173–88; Anna K. Benedikt, 'Von diesen Studen an ist unser Geist erwacht': *Arbeiterinnenbewegung in Kärnten 1900–1918* (Klagenfurt: Institut für die Geschichte der Kärntner Arbeiterbewegung, 2014). For an overview on female working conditions: Susan Zimmermann, *Die bessere Hälfte? Frauenbewegungen und Frauenbestrebungen im Ungarn der Habsburgermonarchie 1848 bis 1918* (Vienna: Promedia Verlag; Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Vinko Anić *et al.*, *Povijest Rijeke* (Rijeka: Skupština općine – Izdavački centar Rijeka, 1988), 259.

<sup>49</sup> Ljubinka Karpowicz and Mihael Sobolevski, *Sindikalni pokret u općini Rijeka do 1941. Godine* (Rijeka: Općinsko vijeće Saveza sindikata Hrvatske, 1990), 30, 71; Ilona Fried, *Fiume città della memoria, 1868–1945* (Udine: Del Bianco, 2005), 34.

freedoms – they often married later, to men who did not belong to their family network – and also increasing opportunities for socialising. Such a description coincided with those depicted in Fiumian popular songs as well as memoirs, which described them as ‘jaunty women because they earned their living autonomously, and they were deprived of bigotry’.<sup>50</sup> Despite being often regarded as symbols of a Fiumian identity, many of them came from the surrounding countryside, and thus acted as links between the urban and the rural world. To some extent, the factory turned them into Fiumians.

After the end of the war, the Fiume economy, cut off from both sources of raw materials and export markets, oscillated between coming to a standstill and stagnating deeply. However, the local leadership strove to prevent mass firings of workers and to provide the unemployed with subsidies to prevent social unrest, especially as the threat of the communist revolution in Hungary was close by.

The persistence of the imperial framework in tobacco workers’ minds is proven by the fact that in December 1918, some tobacco workers submitted a request for a salary increase to the Italian National Council, mentioning the pay rise that tobacco workers had received in Hungary.<sup>51</sup> As they stressed in one sentence, which might sound insolent, ‘our sympathetic joy with the city is huge; but it could grow bigger should the Italian National Council consider our request’.<sup>52</sup> Their bravery was likely due to the fact that many tobacco workers had become the family breadwinners as several factories had closed down and their husbands were unemployed. Their bare survival now depended on their miserable salaries, calculated as five-hour daily shifts due to the lack of raw material. As one worker put it when she was caught sneaking tobacco out, the salary was so low ‘that it was impossible not to steal’.<sup>53</sup> The harshest period followed 1918 when the factory activity radically diminished. Of the many redundant workers, the choice of who to fire became political.

As was clearly stated by a member of the executive committee, the gradual dismissal of Croatian workers, ordered in June 1919 at a rate of twenty-five per week, served not only to downsize the number of workers but also to discipline them.<sup>54</sup> As in other factories, the few workers who remained now had to be Fiumians. But who was a Fiumian? The dismissed women were regarded as foreigners because they lived and held *pertinenza* in Sušak or in the – mostly Croatian-speaking – suburbs of Fiume, and they made a daily commute to the tobacco factory. The establishment of a new temporary border gave the Fiumian authorities the opportunity to get rid of some workers by labelling them as foreigners, with Croatians top of the list to fire.<sup>55</sup>

Initially, the fact that tobacco workers were predominantly women did not act in their favour. Their salary was often regarded as supplementary, and their unemployment was not regarded as likely to provoke social unrest as it was with men.<sup>56</sup> The complex post-imperial transition also challenged their rights which had seemed to be consolidated. Those without *pertinenza*, mostly from the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, stopped receiving their pensions after 1919.<sup>57</sup> While mostly targeting Croatian retired workers, the chaotic situation could also negatively affect those who were supposedly ‘on the right side’. The case of Innocenza Francesca Raffin demonstrates this. Raffin, despite being born in Fiume and having worked in the tobacco factory for twenty-three years, was deprived of her pension in 1919 because she held *pertinenza* in the Italian city of Pesaro.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Paolo Santarcangeli, *Il porto dell’aquila decapitata* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1969), 151; Diana Grgurić, ‘Canzonetta fiumana’, *Sušačka revija*, 89–90, 2016. See b. Canzoni fiumane, Archivio Generale, Archivio Museo Storico di Fiume – Società di Studi Fiumani.

<sup>51</sup> Reill, ‘Post-Imperial Europe’, 666.

<sup>52</sup> 1.242, cart. 28, Governi di Fiume, AGF, FVI.

<sup>53</sup> Massagrande, *I verbali*, 406.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 297, 311, 349.

<sup>55</sup> 4.5055, cart. 242, Governi di Fiume, AGF, FVI.

<sup>56</sup> Parlato, *Mezzo secolo di Fiume*, 53.

<sup>57</sup> Despot, ‘Tvornica duhana’, 57.

<sup>58</sup> K. 44–5, Privremene vlade (3), DARI.

Dismissed workers found support in the pro-Yugoslav sectors, as they tried to take advantage of the wave of bitterness that arose from the discriminatory policy put in place. For instance, the workers' organisation from Fiume and Sušak turned to the Yugoslav authorities and drew on the fact that, as openly stressed by the high county ruler (*veliki župan*), financial aid could be used for propaganda struggles against the Italian nationalists. In late 1919 at least sixty dismissed female tobacco workers from the nearby municipalities received subsidies from the Yugoslav government.<sup>59</sup>

Tobacco workers soon learnt how to stay afloat in this situation, and managed to gain a slight salary improvement, benefiting from a combination of factors. First, workers did not only identify officially on national grounds; rather, political engagement gave them a certain agency, and allowed them to preserve some unity. The existing documents tell us a story of political engagement in which different political options were at stake – the workers included supporters of the Socialist and Communist Party but also of the Autonomist and the People's Party, during a period in which the once-powerful socialist movement in Fiume was starting to lose its political weight.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, women's suffrage turned tobacco workers into a significant voter grouping. This happened on the eve of the 1921 elections when both the National Bloc and the Autonomist Party cajoled them.<sup>61</sup> Unsurprisingly, the spring of 1921 was a crucial period for activism: the turbulent situation at that time led the main newspaper to talk of a 'Fiumian strikemanía', with female tobacco workers less keen to compromise than men.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, being mostly women, they were regarded by the city authorities as less intrinsically political than other workers and managed to wage strikes without getting involved in open public violence. Ultimately, the tobacco factory was not doing well, but it was doing better than many other factories – especially after January 1920, when raw material began to be supplied from Italy.<sup>63</sup> Later, while trying to secure the economic reins of the city before the annexation, the Italian government took control of the tobacco factory, together with other strategic infrastructures. This granted the factory more economic stability and provided workers with more room for negotiation.

A glance at the biographies of several tobacco workers offers a glimpse into the everyday life of a dynamic grouping of barely literate working-class women, who were endowed with resourcefulness, to the point of their first-hand engagement in politics. This was the case with Ernesta Stefancich, a pro-autonomist and experienced tobacco worker who inherited her position in the workplace from her mother. She participated in the conflicts between the fascists and autonomists and sided with the latter. During the fascist coup d'état of 1922, she dared lead a delegation of co-workers to the French consulate in Fiume to seek protection. This was a political action that attempted to denounce fascist violence.<sup>64</sup>

Political divisions were also present, entangled with tensions between local workers and those who had recently emigrated from Italy. New workers from Italy were often regarded as close to the fascist trade unions. In 1922 the police mentioned Stefancich as one of several who had plotted against a new worker from Italy. The normalisation imposed by the new fascist regime did not immediately put an end to her political activities, which included the busy distribution of texts for the antifascist press. In 1929, thanks to her mother's support, having provided her with the money necessary to cross the border illegally, she eluded the surveillance and escaped Fiume. In fact, she had just been notified of the decision taken by the local police station to transfer her to the tobacco factory in Venice in order to

<sup>59</sup> K. 5462, Odsjek za Istru 1918–1921, Zemaljska vlada. Odjel za unutarnje poslove (79), Hrvatski državni arhiv.

<sup>60</sup> Ivan Jeličić, *Nell'ombra dell'autonomismo. Il movimento socialista a Fiume, 1901–1921*, PhD Thesis, University of Trieste, 2015–16, 279–89.

<sup>61</sup> 'La lezione delle tabacchine ai corruttori dell'anima fiumana', *Fiume ai fiumani*, 23 Apr. 1921, 2.

<sup>62</sup> 'Operiamo nella realtà', VI, 17 Feb. 1921, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Depoli, *Fiume*, 251.

<sup>64</sup> Stefancich apparently became involved in politics well before her husband, Angelo Adam, who would have later become a political activist close to the Autonomist Party. Both Adam and Stefancich, as well as their daughter, became victims of post-Second World War reprisals in their hometown, possibly because of their union activism and their opposition to the annexation of Fiume to Yugoslavia. See Mario Dassovich, *L'aquila aveva preso il volo. Pagine fiumano-istriane dall'ultimo dopoguerra* (Gorizia: LEG, 1998), 52–3.

isolate her.<sup>65</sup> This was a harsh measure, bearing in mind that she had a five-year-old child, but milder than what other political activists had experienced. To some extent, it is telling of the ambivalent relationship between the state and some of its employees.

The tobacco factory was frequently presented as a model plant at which workers exchanged loyalty for benefits. The main local newspaper promoted a narrative of tobacco workers as symbols of Italianness, and it repeatedly advocated for the replacement of the workers residing in Sušak with Italian ones, as ‘the Eneo canal had turned into a border’. As in other industries, fascist trade unions began to play a prominent role. High-ranking officers from the local fascist party tried to impose themselves as mediators between the workers and the factory management and sought to gain decision-making powers on the employment of new workers. In 1923 fascism became visible in the factory, when the pictures of the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III, D’Annunzio and Benito Mussolini, the fascist prime minister, were affixed to the walls and ‘all the women and men, with their outstretched arm responded to the final *alalà*’.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the call for an improvement in welfare services started with the local press before the annexation to Italy and certain real improvements were achieved over time. Even with the influx of workers from Italy from 1923 onwards, and with the fascist trade union supervising new hires, they did not secure a totally compliant staff.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, tobacco workers were among the few active workers prone to protest in Fiume immediately before and after the annexation to Italy, and they formulated their requests as economic rather than political. This fragile balance was spoiled in January 1925, when they organised the last big strike in Fiume. Besides protesting against a newly introduced tax, what likely concerned the local political authorities was their demand to negotiate with the factory management. This demand was rejected as a legacy of the past regime that should be eradicated.<sup>68</sup> The strike was eventually brought to an end by a factory lockout (*serrata*), while members of the local fascist party once more imposed their presence as mediators.<sup>69</sup> However, oppositional political activism persisted in the factory for a while, as attested by a 1926 investigation into the presence of a female local Communist Party committee in the factory.<sup>70</sup>

The workers from Sušak who were fired in 1919 were also resourceful. They spent several years struggling with the Yugoslav central government – which had become responsible for the pensions of Yugoslav workers for work performed in Fiume – to obtain their pensions, including sending delegations to Belgrade and drawing support from local feminist circles.<sup>71</sup> Tobacco workers had learnt to act politically, and they tried to do so while it was reasonably possible.

## Conclusions

After 1918, the reshaping of the institutional structures, a long and contradictory process, affected the security granted by state employment. Local nationalists called initially for the exclusion of all the public employees lacking *pertinenza* in Fiume. However, any implementation of mass exclusionary measures immediately had to deal with the fact that workers could not be easily replaced with other workers who lacked their skills and experience. This did not mean that the Fiumian governments, despite their weaknesses, renounced exerting further control over their employees. Intrusive political pressure did not only entail getting rid of workers, but it often also included making them

<sup>65</sup> ‘Voci dalla Tubetti’, VI, 23 June 1922, 2; b. 4942, CPC, MI, ACS; fasc. Manifattura tabacchi, k. 28, Riječka prefektura (8), DARI.

<sup>66</sup> See the section ‘Movimento sindacale fascista’, VI, 13, 14, 18 July 1923, 3.

<sup>67</sup> K. 13, 8, DARI.

<sup>68</sup> ‘La chiusura della Manifattura Tabacchi’, VI, 20 Jan. 1925, 2; ‘L’agitazione delle operaie delle Manifatture’, VI, 20 Jan. 1925, 2.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Si riprende il lavoro alla Manifattura tabacchi’, VI, 24 Jan. 1925, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Partiti sovversivi, 25 Sept. 1926, k. 136, 8, DARI.

<sup>71</sup> Željko Bartulović, *Sušak 1919–1947: Državopravni položaj grada* (Rijeka: Pravni Fakultet Sveučilišta u Rijeci, Adamić, 2004), 79–80, 441; ‘Pitanje penzije otpuštenih radnica riječke tvornice duhana’, *Naša Sloga*, 21 Feb. 1930, 2; ‘Sušačke radnice o svom boravku u Beogradu’, *Naša Sloga*, 23 Feb. 1930, 2.

more compliant. Political and national affiliations triggered processes of social upwards or downwards mobility, often stirring divisions among workers. Family networks and relations established in the workplace did not cease to matter. Both teachers and tobacco workers had difficulties in adjusting to the new post-imperial framework, which implied new plans regarding the national and political 'engineering' of employees. This new framework also reflected a chaotic mixture of Habsburg legislation and new practices.

Teachers – especially those in the former Hungarian schools that were shut down in the summer of 1919 – found themselves compelled to stress their loyalty to the Italian National Council and hope for their positions to be reconfirmed. The major stagnation of production – due to a lack of raw material but also a decrease in links with the previous Habsburg markets – became the perfect background upon which to selectively dismiss staff members, and it also served the purpose of making the staff more compliant. Besides their symbolic importance, political rights that were newly awarded to women had an ambivalent outcome. If in 1919 to 1920 female participation was disempowered and used by the ruling elite to support the main pro-annexationist option, in the 1921 elections, when a real competition between two political factions took place, some women engaged in first-hand struggle and tried to negotiate an improvement in their conditions.

While better placed in society, despite the importance attached to their role, teachers became more vulnerable than other cohorts. Their life paths were increasingly conditioned by their identification with a political or national group, which could determine the opening of new opportunities or discrimination measures. The 'national mission' attached to their role triggered a pervasive control over their behaviour within and outside the classroom, which was supposed to avoid any critical stance towards the government, while also representing a model of patriotism and morality. The widespread climate of political violence that plagued the city did not spare the schools. There were new ways of intimidating teachers, in which gender was likely to play a role. Female teachers were more often in the eye of the storm of allegations raised by nationalists than were their male colleagues. This coincided with some experienced teachers and headmistresses withdrawing from the profession, and with the appointment of new teachers in key places who came from the nationalist and fascist sectors. As they were busy at coping with the political pressures and adhering to the rules of their political protectors, teachers were not ready to engage and fight to improve their working conditions, as other categories of workers at least tried to do.

On the contrary, tobacco workers, despite the divisions that the factory experienced, maintained a significant degree of cohesion. This was probably fostered by everyday contacts in the common workplace and their belonging to a peculiar community that brought together women from the urban and rural environment as well as from different generations. Networks within the factory fostered resourcefulness, which led working-class women to repeatedly voice their requests. Moreover, the Fiumian nationalists' and the Italian government's policy of supporting the tobacco factory (regarded as a strategic factory) allowed it (which had a largely female labour force) to outperform other (often male-dominated) industries in the city. It ended up unintentionally giving tobacco workers major negotiating powers. Similarly, if sometimes the gendered identification of tobacco workers with women made prompt dismissals easier, in other circumstances the misogynous bias in attaching a non-political role to women allowed them to advocate their claims more easily than would have been the case with male workers. Tobacco workers were thus one of the categories that succeeded in retaining more room for manoeuvre, symbolised by the fact that Verson was the only worker on the city council to support the worker category she represented.<sup>72</sup>

After the 1921 elections, Fiumian women lost the right to vote. Nonetheless, one of the spheres in which women retained their space of manoeuvre was the labour market. Despite discrimination and ideological setbacks, throughout the entire fascist period, this market included many women. If the corporatist and anti-feminist attitude of the regime restrained cross-class solidarity, specific groups, such as professional ones, nonetheless retained a space of manoeuvre not just for material claims but

<sup>72</sup> Massagrande, *I Verballi*, 71.



also for different kinds of self-organisation. The fascist state continued to be regarded as a more solid employer than others, especially in Fiume, where opportunities for private initiatives were significantly diminished by economic stagnation, at the price of securing loyalty from one's own employees. The less women were invested in a national mission, the more they succeeded in tackling the pervasive control of a weak state-in-the-making.

**Acknowledgements.** This article was completed as part of the EIRENE project (Post-War Transitions in Gendered Perspective: The Case of the North-Eastern Adriatic Region), funded by the European Research Council under the Horizon 2020 financed Advanced Grant funding scheme [ERC Grant Agreement no. 742683]. The author would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks also to Dominique K. Reill, Nancy M. Wingfield and Ivan Jeličić for their valuable suggestions, and to Andrew Hodges for his support in line-editing the text.

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**Cite this article:** Rolandi F (2024). Female Public Employees during a Post-Imperial Transition: Gender, Politics and Labour in Fiume after the First World War. *Contemporary European History* 33, 159–172. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777321000850>