

WHY BOTHER, WOODROW?:  
THE REASONS BEHIND WILSON'S FIUME STAND

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"Fiume was a comparatively trivial issue upon which to wreck a peace settlement for the world."<sup>1</sup> -- British Prime Minister David Lloyd George

### 1-Introduction

American presidents have traditionally underestimated the importance of events in southeastern Europe. This area, where so many different cultures share space, has sparked some of the most dangerous ethnic conflict of anywhere in the world. It seems that every time that a president attempts to intervene in this region, he over-evaluates American influence over these diverse peoples and becomes embroiled in a nasty conflict. The most recent example of this tendency is the current Bosnian crisis, as President Clinton scrambles for the correct course of action. However, an earlier example of the difficulty presidents have in this area helps to demonstrate some of the problems associated with diplomacy in general.

In the field of diplomatic history, few events have affected so many lives or had such a profound influence on the whole world as World War I and the resulting peace conference at Paris. Indeed, the most powerful leaders in the world at that time gathered in Paris to discuss the fate of hundreds of millions of people. At the conference, one might have expected the Big Four--French Premier Georges Clemenceau, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando and American

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<sup>1</sup> David Lloyd George, Memoirs of the Peace Conference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939) 2: 541

President Woodrow Wilson--to pursue only those issues of profound importance to their countries while leaving aside issues of lesser national importance. This point certainly seemed true of the European leaders, yet President Wilson clung to principles that he deemed more important than national self-interest. As a result, he promoted ideas, such as that of the League of Nations, that held more international significance. In any case, one would have suspected that Wilson would confine his interests to subjects that affected millions.

For the most part, Wilson's conduct followed this model; yet in one particular issue -- the assignment of the small Adriatic port of Fiume -- Wilson acted in a manner that reflected neither American self-interest nor a vitally important international cause. In this case, Wilson's insistence on preventing the Italians from annexing this city proved foolhardy at best and disastrous at worst. The President chose to support the Yugoslav<sup>2</sup> claims to Fiume despite the fact that the Italians had made the acquisition of the port a national issue. The resulting crisis halted the work of the Conference and severely damaged the Alliance that had won the war. At one point, the Italian government, led by Prime Minister Orlando and Foreign Minister Baron Sidney Sonnino, actually left Paris and returned to Rome.

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<sup>2</sup> The current term "Yugoslav" has been substituted for the 1919 word "Jugo-slav." At the time, the official name of the country was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. This state had been proclaimed on December 1, 1918 and would not officially change its name to Yugoslavia for several years.

The Italians threatened not to sign the peace treaty with Germany at all, which would have significantly weakened the settlement. Wilson knew that an Italian boycott could possibly cause the Germans not to sign the Peace Treaty, leading to a lengthy and protracted stalemate.

Why would Wilson risk so much on one port? This essay hopes to resolve this issue definitively. The reasons for Wilson's stand were multiple and comprise the body of the present discussion. These reasons also range from those that focus on Wilson's personality and beliefs to those that have causes that would have caused any American president to act similarly. First of all, Wilson could not justify giving Fiume to the Italians by referring to any of his standard principles. One could not examine the city of Fiume in isolation. On the contrary, one had to look at the whole region as an economic entity. As such, the overwhelming majority of the population was Croatian. Thus, on the grounds of national self-determination, Fiume had to go to the Yugoslavs. Woodrow Wilson had too much pride to compromise when he could not reconcile this decision with his stated principles. A second reason for Wilson's stand sprang from his overly generous settlement of Italy's northern frontier with Austria. Once Wilson realized his mistake, he would not give in to Italian demands in other areas. A third reason for Wilson's position came out of his belief that he could get away with standing on this issue. As noted earlier, Wilson seemed enormously popular in Italy at the end

of the war. America also held enormous economic and military advantages over Italy in this period. In addition, Wilson believed that he had the support of the British and French. However, the aid that these two governments promised Wilson on this issue never materialized. A fourth reason for Wilson's intransigence sprang from the opinion of his advisors, nearly all of whom supported Yugoslavia's claims in the region. Finally, Wilson also realized that the port of Fiume held true economic significance only for the Yugoslavs. The Italians would already receive the nearby and larger port of Trieste to help their shipping needs, while Fiume appeared to comprise the Yugoslavs' only established port. Much of Eastern Europe relied on this port, and the Italians seemed much more likely than the Yugoslavs to close this port to the rest of Eastern Europe.

## 2-Historiography

One may say that a fractioned literature which does not properly explain the Fiume issue prevails on the subject of the Peace Conference. Much secondary material centers on Wilson's own personal weakness as the cause for his difficulties in Paris. Other works suggest that the combination of Wilson's personality and the structural limitations on his power would have prevented his success at the Conference regardless of his actions. Many historians resort to a simple recapitulation of the proceedings without advancing any strong thesis. However, none of these works suggest that Wilson, despite the barriers to his success, could have negotiated his own peace settlement by pursuing a different tack. In addition, regardless of the central thesis of the book, few historians bother to analyze the Fiume negotiations, preferring instead to list the events chronologically.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Nicolson's Peacemaking 1919 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933) proves the best example of a work that centers on Wilson's personal limitations as a cause for the President's failure to implement his type of peace. Nicolson began with the suggestion that America had unlimited economic and military superiority over the European combatants. In addition, Europe was wholly dependent on the United States to keep the peace and preserve the Allies from economic collapse. As a result, according to Nicolson, the President could have forced any program he wished on the combatants. However, Wilson declined on moral grounds to impose his type of peace. As a result of Wilson's failure to protect his ideals, the Old World settled the peace on its grounds, and the world lost its opportunity for a permanent peace.

Like Nicolson, John Maynard Keynes wrote The Economic Consequences of the Peace (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) as a disgruntled member of the British delegation. His main thesis involved the horrible consequences that would result from the overly harsh reparations clauses that the Allies imposed on the Germans. Keynes portrayed Wilson as a man with no ideas, only principles. He also suggested that Wilson would give in on virtually all issues at the first sign of conflict. Like Nicolson, Keynes implied that Wilson could have used his influence to create a more generous peace.

Arno Mayer's Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) demonstrates a Marxist viewpoint of the Conference proceedings. Mayer suggested that the fear of a Bolshevik revolution like the one in Russia motivated the Allies to accept a peace based on Wilson's Fourteen Points, instead of the more punitive peace the French preferred. He also suggested that the forces of order (the Old World Right) used the war and the peace to gain the upper hand in their struggle against the forces of movement (the Left). In addition, Mayer postulated that Wilson, the leader of the non-Bolshevik Left, wished to separate the moderate Orlando from the hard-line Sonnino by issuing his famous statement of April 22 that documented America's opposition to Italy's claims in the Adriatic. Mayer's provocative argument tended to overestimate Wilson's success in Paris. Moreover, Mayer over-played the Allies' dread of revolution. While clearly an important factor in the proceedings, this fear did not affect every decision at the Conference.<sup>4</sup>

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Because of Wilson's personal weakness, Clemenceau proved able to impose a punitive peace. Thus, Keynes's treatise falls into the same category as Nicolson's.

<sup>4</sup> Like Mayer, Ray Stannard Baker's article "The Versailles Treaty and After" [Current History 1989 88 (534)] depicted Wilson as considerably more successful than he actually was. This statement should not prove surprising when one considers that Baker edited Wilson's papers and wrote numerous books on Wilson's participation at the Paris Peace Conference. The principal thesis of this article suggested that the United States provided a moral purpose to the Allies with its entry into the war. However, this moral lift did not carry over into the postwar period as a result of the war's vast devastation. Unfortunately, the Allies convened the peace conference in this period and the harsh terms of the settlement reflected the low morale in Europe. Nevertheless, Wilson proved able to lessen the punitive terms of the peace with his moral presence. Not only does Baker portray Wilson as having more of an influence on the settlement than he actually did, but



Some important books focus more on the Fiume question. One such work is Rene Albrecht-Carrie's Italy at the Paris Peace Conference (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938). Albrecht-Carrie demonstrated that the motivations behind Italian actions at the Conference arose entirely out of Sonnino's lust for territory and power. Albrecht-Carrie's most provocative point involved his suggestion that the British and French stayed out of the negotiations for Fiume not because of a lack of interest, but rather because of policy. Both countries hoped that Italy would not claim the territories promised it in the Treaty of London. In addition, France opposed a strong Italy that might challenge French power in the Mediterranean. As a result, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, who both agreed with Wilson in opposing the Italian claims, nevertheless stayed out of the negotiations for Fiume whenever possible. Albrecht-Carrie's hypothesis tends to ignore the British and French attempts to speed up the settlement of the Adriatic question. In addition, several comments made by Lloyd George tend to underscore the

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this argument focuses more on the human element behind the settlement (i.e., the morale of the time) than on the structural reasons behind Wilson's failure.

The central thesis of Seth Tillman's Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) stated that, because of a common cultural heritage and value system, along with a similar liberal political tradition, the United States and United Kingdom developed common goals for the conduct of the war and the Peace Conference. However, the countries formulated their similar objectives quite independently, thus pursuing different strategies and slightly diverse methods of achieving those goals. Wilson tended to act more idealistically on issues, whereas British Prime Minister Lloyd George proved more willing to compromise. Tillman also suggested that the peace settlement, as a whole, was a reasonable embodiment of the Fourteen Points. While this work does discuss some of the structural limitations on Wilson's power, mostly it details the human factors behind the settlement.

opinion that British policy on Fiume was to avoid isolating Italy while hoping this issue would pass as quickly as possible. France and, more especially, Britain did not particularly care about the settlement of Fiume.

Two works which focus on the Yugoslav position on the Fiume issue are Ivo Lederer's Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) and Dragan Zivojinovic's America, Italy and the Birth of Yugoslavia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

Neither offers a particularly strong or controversial viewpoint on the negotiations for Fiume. Both works tended to demonstrate Italy's lack of scruples in pursuing its goals in the Adriatic. Zivojinovic suggested that Wilson wished to keep the Balkans free of great power influence after the war. As a result, he opposed Italy's presence in Fiume and Dalmatia. Nevertheless, neither work adds much to the literature on Fiume.

Dennison Rusinow's Italy's Austrian Heritage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), Leo Valiani's The End of Austria Hungary (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), and Michael Ledeen's The First Duce: D'Annunzio at Fiume (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) each offer only a few interesting points on the Fiume question. Rusinow's work operated on the thesis that inheriting Austria-Hungary's provinces caused problems for Italy that the liberal-democratic government could not solve. In addition, the stalemate over Fiume exposed Italy's weakness

and isolation, thereby giving the political Right a justification for attacking the Italian government. Moreover, Rusinow suggested that Wilson allowed Italy to gain more territory in the north (the Brenner pass frontier) in order to lessen her claims in the Adriatic. This suggestion contradicted the more likely reason that the Brenner pass frontier was simply a mistake based on Wilson's lack of briefing on the situation. Valiani's book stressed how the lack of foresight by the leaders of Austria-Hungary cost them their Empire. Meanwhile, it suggested that Sonnino was even more ruthless than was previously thought, and that the moderate Orlando wished to oust him from the government. Ledeen's pro-Italian book does suggest that American opposition to Italian interests arose from the prevailing racial attitudes in the United States at the time. Ledeen did not substantiate this claim with any evidence or quotations from American leaders, however.<sup>5</sup> Like the other works, this book does not focus adequate attention on Wilson and the reasons behind his stand on such a small issue. The

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Elcock's Portrait of a Decision: The Council of Four and the Treaty of Versailles (Birkenhead, U.K.: Eyre Methuen, Ltd., 1972) portrayed Wilson as an arrogant man of principles but no plan and also suggested that one of his primary motives in Paris was to punish Germany. Elcock suggested that Lloyd George did in fact have principles, and that several other historians' portrait of him as a wholesale compromiser was unfair. Although well written, this book does not argue anything that one might consider particularly controversial.

Herbert Hoover wrote a book thirty years after the Conference that adds to the literature, even as a primary source. This work, The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), portrays Wilson as a victim of circumstance and his own poor planning. An underlying theme of the book is the emphasis on Woodrow Wilson alone trying to prevent reactionary forces from imposing a punitive peace.

current discussion intends to fill this gap in the literature.

## 3-History

Following the greatest conflict the planet had yet seen, the people of Europe and indeed the whole world hoped for a quick settlement of the peace. Most people wished to return to their pre-war lives as quickly as possible. However, along with relief, many people felt somewhat hollow as virtually everyone in Europe had lost someone close to them as a result of the armed conflict. Although many clamored for a punitive peace to penalize the Germans and Austrians who, most agreed, had initiated the war, others did not really care how their leaders settled the peace.

In Italy, the surprise of the sudden victory over the Austrians tended to elicit more patriotic fervor among the people than in the rest of Europe. As a result, Italian public opinion, fueled by the rhetoric of governmental leaders and nationalists, became the most belligerent in Europe. In addition, very few Italians viewed the Croats, Czechs and Slovenes differently than they did the Austrians and Hungarians. All had fought in the same army against the Italians. Foreign observers in Italy at this time did not seem to understand the public opinion. While Ray Stannard Baker, an advisor to Wilson who was in Italy to prepare for the President's visit, separated the nationalist position of the upper class from the belief in self-determination that the masses preferred<sup>6</sup>, he probably did not give enough credit

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur S. Link (ed.), The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, 68 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 53: 434

to the ability of the Italian leaders and the press to manipulate opinion. Baker's view that the masses supported not only Wilson, but also the ideals he promulgated, would mislead Wilson into over-estimating his sway over the Italian people.

Nevertheless, at the close of the war, it seemed that the President enjoyed great personal popularity in Italy. Nearly everyone in Europe believed that the presence of American troops had proved the decisive factor for the Allies in their triumph. Moreover, it appeared that Wilson himself constituted the focus of European adulation. On his tour of Italy, Wilson visited Turin on January 6. Dr. Grayson, the President's personal doctor, friend and advisor, wrote of this typical day on the tour in his diary: "We arrived at Turin at nine o'clock. A general holiday had been declared and the streets were black with people. The party proceeded to the City Hall, where the President was made a citizen of the municipality in a big reception room crowded with notables."<sup>7</sup> Gino Speranza, the attache in the American embassy in Rome, stated that the reaction to Wilson in Rome proved so overwhelming that the floor of the Capitol could not hold the number of people who hoped to wish the President well at an official ceremony.<sup>8</sup> At this point, it appeared

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<sup>7</sup> Link 53: 621

<sup>8</sup> Diary of Gino Speranza, December 29, 1918. Taken from Rene Albrecht-Carrie, Italy at the Peace Conference. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938) 82

that most Italians viewed Wilson and America as the saviors of their country.

Wilson and his advisors considered the acclaim in Italy and Europe as an endorsement of his principles, not just an expression of gratitude for American aid. Wilson's famous principles for the peace settlement were embodied in the Fourteen Points that he had announced in January 1918. He stressed the concepts of internationalism, self-determination of peoples, and a just peace for both the winners and losers of the war as the proper method of settling the peace. He called for the creation of an association of nations to help regulate the peace. Concerning specific territorial settlements, the President encouraged at all times the fairest solution possible for all involved. Wilson made no exceptions for Italy. Point Nine stated: "A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality."<sup>9</sup> Woodrow Wilson firmly believed that his principles were the only fair way to fashion the peace and he thought that on his post-war tour the European people had given him an enthusiastic mandate to pursue his plan.

Early in the Peace Conference, which began in mid-January, Wilson discovered that the other European leaders would not simply follow his lead as he had hoped, and that the lack of a program for the conduct of the Conference would

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<sup>9</sup> From the address of President Wilson delivered at a Joint Session of Congress on January 8, 1918

cause trouble. Wilson's principal adviser, Colonel House, wrote in his diary on January 22 (while sick in bed), "The President came to see me today to tell of what was going on in the meeting at the Quai d'Orsay. As far as I can see they are not getting anywhere, largely because of the lack of organization."<sup>10</sup> Wilson had believed that the Conference would run swiftly and that the Europeans who had earlier approved of the Fourteen Points as a basis for the settlement would let him dictate the peace. On the contrary, Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, stated the real position of the three Allied leaders: "They loudly applauded the President's declarations of principle as the just bases of peace, but they never once attempted to apply them unless their own national interests were advanced."<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately for Wilson, Lansing's assessment proved correct. One can observe the tendency by the European leaders to praise Wilson's principles while pursuing their own national self-interest in the negotiations for Fiume.

In 1919, Fiume (Rijeka to the Croats) was a port city of nearly fifty thousand people located on the eastern side of the Adriatic. Fiume itself contained 24,200 ethnic Italians, 15,700 Croats and 6,500 Magyars, according to the 1910 Hungarian census.<sup>12</sup> However, when examined as a

<sup>10</sup> Charles Seymour, ed., The Intimate Papers of Colonel House: The Ending of the War (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1928) 4: 274

<sup>11</sup> Robert Lansing, The Big Four and Others of the Peace Conference (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1921) 51

<sup>12</sup> Ray Stannard Baker, Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement (New York: Doubleday, 1923) 4: 264



single entity with its sister city of Susak, the Croats formed a slight majority. The hinterland that formed an economic region with Fiume was entirely Croatian. Until 1918, Fiume held the status of a self-governing corpus separatum under the Hungarian crown and became an important port serving much of Eastern Europe. Fiume's location, roughly five miles east of the place where the Istrian peninsula met the mainland, placed it at least fifteen miles east of any other area of Italian ethnic dominance.

Before 1917, Fiume had not been one of the areas claimed by Italian irredentists<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, the secret 1915 Treaty of London between Italy, France, Britain and Russia that brought Italy into the war gave Fiume specifically to the Croats, while allowing the Italians other extravagant claims on (soon to be) Yugoslav territory, including much of Dalmatia.<sup>14</sup> This controversial document would have vital importance as the Conference progressed. The President denounced the treaty as a perfect example of the type of secret diplomacy that he wished to end.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the President declared that this pact should not bind the British and French any longer because the Austro-Hungarian Empire, against which the treaty

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<sup>13</sup> Irredentists were Italian nationalists who believed that every neighboring territory that included a large number of ethnic Italians should be united with Italy. There were a large number of Italians living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire when the war began.

<sup>14</sup> The Italians renounced their claims on Fiume in the Treaty of London as a result of a complex diplomatic intrigue. Fiume would be given to the new state as compensation for land that this state would turn over to Bulgaria. At the time, the Allies wished to gain Bulgaria's support against the Central Powers.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Mantoux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four. trans. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 19 Apr. 1919, v.1: 289

had been signed, no longer existed. Nevertheless, as the Conference progressed, it became apparent that the Italians intended to claim all of the territory promised to them in the Pact of London plus Fiume.

The first rumblings of trouble in the Adriatic occurred at the close of the war. On October 30, 1918, as Hungarian power in the city waned, the National Council of Fiume, an Italian organization, proclaimed "the union of Fiume to its Motherland, Italy."<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that this organization contained only ethnic Italians and a few Hungarians, it would consider itself the legal authority in Fiume for the next few years. Problems also developed with the occupying armies after Fiume was "liberated" by the Allies. General Tasker Bliss, an American military advisor, sent an urgent telegram to Wilson's staff on November 26, 1918 saying: "Confidential report my representative Fiume indicates Italian authorities have gone much farther than necessary preserving life and property or that demanded by the terms of armistice and Fiume has appearance permanent Italian occupation."<sup>17</sup> Even at this early point, the Italians, who comprised the vast majority of the occupying army in Fiume, appeared to have developed the intention of staying in Fiume indefinitely. On the political level, House wrote in his diary on December 21:

the President, Orlando, Sonnino, and I were together from ten until twelve o'clock. The President talked

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<sup>16</sup> Sidney Sonnino, Papers. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1968) reel 50

<sup>17</sup> Link 53: 208

well but he did not convince the Italians that they should lessen their hold on the Pact of London. On the contrary, Sonnino convinced the President that from a military point of view Italy was pretty much at the mercy of the nations holding the Dalmatian coast.<sup>18</sup>

These two statements showed that the Italians had already drawn the "battle lines" over the Adriatic in the pre-Conference period. Soon, the Italians would move from simply claiming the territory given them in the Treaty of London to insisting upon the treaty of London plus Fiume.

For the most part, members of the Italian government unanimously supported the hard-line expansionist strategy with regards to claims at Paris. Their argument was grounded in the philosophy that Italy deserved much compensation because it had suffered greatly during a victorious war. The only truly moderate Italian Cabinet member, Leonida Bissolati, resigned his position as Minister for Military Aid and War Pensions on December 28, 1918, under pressure from those who wished for Italy to claim as much as possible in the territorial settlement. He met with the President in Rome on January 4, 1919, to discuss the difficulty in opposing Baron Sonnino, an expansionist.<sup>19</sup> With Bissolati out of the Cabinet, Sonnino, the Foreign Minister, could pursue his territorial goals without internal opposition. Thomas Nelson Page, the American ambassador to Italy, wrote in his report on the resignation: "Reasons for resignation appear to be difference with Sonnino over Adriatic and disapproval over

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<sup>18</sup> Seymour 4: 253

<sup>19</sup> Link 53: 641

Orlando's alleged halfheartedness in real application of Wilsonian principles to Italian national and international problems."<sup>20</sup> Bissolati was one of very few influential Wilsonians in Italy. With him out of the Cabinet, the nationalism of the government and the government-controlled press took over.

Wilson demonstrated his position toward the Adriatic situation in a letter to Orlando on January 13. In this letter, he attempted to reassure Orlando that the Americans would support their Italian allies. He stated that the Yugoslav state should have no navy, that all fortifications on the Eastern Adriatic should be destroyed, that the League of Nations would protect all minorities in all countries, and that Fiume and Zara (another disputed city further down the coast) should become free cities and free ports. He also sent a map that drew what would become known as the "Wilson line," a boundary that split the Istrian peninsula. Wilson concluded by stating, "The 'Pact of London,' I respectfully submit, cannot wisely be regarded as applying to existing circumstances or carried out consistently with the agreements upon which the present peace conferences are based."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Wilson had outlined a settlement that came much closer to Yugoslav demands than to Italy's wishes.

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<sup>20</sup> David Hunter Miller, My Diary at the Conference, 21 vols. (New York: Appeal Printing Company, 1924) 3: (Document 124), 115

<sup>21</sup> Link 54: 50-51

The Conference itself focused on the League of Nations and the settlement of all questions relating to Germany before finally moving on to the Adriatic situation in April, as a result of the insistence of Orlando (although Italy was assured of continued military support). At this point, the important decisions of the Conference were made by the Council of Ten, consisting of the heads of government and the foreign ministers of the five strongest military powers among the victors: the United States, the United Kingdom, France Italy, and Japan. No real negotiations on the Adriatic question occurred in this period.

In February, however, both the Italians and the Yugoslavs issued their specific claims. The Italians formalized their earlier claims of the Treaty of London plus Fiume through a published memorandum. The Yugoslavs attended a meeting of the Supreme Council (another decision-making body) on February 18, 1919. At this time, Milenko Vesnitch and Ante Trumbitch, the Yugoslav representatives, outlined their claims for the frontiers of their new nation. Surprisingly, they not only asked for Fiume, but also for Trieste, where an overwhelming Italian majority existed.<sup>22</sup> These extravagant claims by the Yugoslavs would only serve to entrench growing Italian animosity toward them. (The Italian claims to Trieste were supported by all but the Yugoslavs).

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<sup>22</sup> Miller 14: 486-501

Meanwhile, on February 14, the President had returned to America. In his absence, on February 22, Sonnino brought up the question of when the treaty with Austria-Hungary would be discussed. The other leaders did not give a firm answer, but Sonnino let it go.<sup>23</sup> Soon after his return to Paris on March 14, Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Orlando would form the Council of Four, which would hold the real decision-making power until the signing of the treaty with Germany in late June. The four leaders isolated themselves with only Frenchman Lt. Paul Mantoux as an interpreter. Later, the British representative Sir Maurice Hankey would join them as another interpreter and assistant.

The full-blown Fiume crisis developed in April. On the eleventh, Orlando suggested once again that the Italians had grown tired of waiting for the Council of Four to settle all the German questions before moving on to the Italian ones. Speaking also for Clemenceau, Lloyd George stated about Fiume, "This question must first be settled between the President of the United States and M. Orlando; for concerning the frontier of the Adriatic, France and England are bound by the treaty (London) they have signed with Italy."<sup>24</sup> As a result of their honor-bound adherence to the Treaty of London, France and Britain intended to stay out of the Fiume crisis as much as possible. Orlando's rumblings continued on the thirteenth, as he suggested that the Italian

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<sup>23</sup> Lloyd George 2: 520

<sup>24</sup> Mantoux 1: 227

people would not allow the other nations to put off their concerns any more. Lloyd George showed his distaste for the whole conflict by stating, "To indicate my feelings regarding Italy, I add that I am ready to accept in advance any solution on which President Wilson and M. Orlando manage to agree."<sup>25</sup> On April 14, Orlando brought Fiume's representative to the old Hungarian Diet, the Italian sympathizer Andrea Ossoinach, to see Wilson. Ossoinach told Wilson that "the Fiumani solemnly declared against any other solution than that of being united to the kingdom of Italy."<sup>26</sup> Wilson proved no more impressed by this plea than he had been by Orlando's emotional petitions for Fiume. Despite the wishes of the Italians and the lack of interest by the British and French, Wilson continued to support Yugoslav claims on Fiume (although he did not oppose the creation of a free port). Dr. Grayson wrote in his diary on the eighteenth that Wilson had stated that "Italy is the only one insisting upon claims inconsistent with the principles explicitly laid down as the basis of the peace....Apparently, it has come to a parting of the way."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, at this point, Italian and American positions on Fiume lay in direct opposition. For several days the negotiations proved fruitless.

On April 20, in a meeting of the Big Four that Baron Sonnino also attended, Prime Minister Orlando declared that

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<sup>25</sup> Mantoux I: 245

<sup>26</sup> Link 57: 341

<sup>27</sup> Link 57: 450

because the Americans would not allow Italy to annex Fiume, the Italians were compelled to ask the British and French to fulfill their obligations under the Treaty of London.

President Wilson protested in strong terms, suggesting that the Americans would never agree to an obvious violation of the principles under which the Conference was convened.<sup>28</sup>

In a subsequent meeting of the signatories of the Treaty of London (Britain, France and Italy, minus Russia), Sonnino offered to trade the extensive provisions in Dalmatia that Italy would receive under the Pact of London for Fiume and its immediate surrounding area.<sup>29</sup> Because the procedures of the Conference required unanimous votes, the stalemate appeared without end. Even if Italy could receive Britain and France's reluctant help, the United States would never agree.

A meeting of Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson followed on April 21. Wilson suggested that he might publish a statement in Italy that denounced the Treaty of London and called for Fiume to become an international free port. The President believed the Treaty of London expired when Austria-Hungary ceased to exist. Lloyd George responded to Wilson's proposal, "The document could indeed produce a helpful impression in Italy, but only after a certain period of time. For the moment, we must expect only madness."<sup>30</sup> As Clemenceau

28 Mantoux I: 290-297

29 Mantoux I: 297-302

30 Mantoux I: 308



and Lloyd George gave their tacit approval to the publication of this statement and indicated that they would respond with a statement of their own (written by British Foreign Minister Lord Arthur James Balfour and later called the Balfour Memorandum), Wilson published a slightly longer version of the statement in Italian newspapers on April 23.

The effect in Paris of Wilson's publication of this statement to the Italian people was immediate. As Robert Lansing observed in his memorandum on April 24, "The President gave to the press last night his statement on the Italian claims....The Italians at once 'blew up.' Orlando leaves for Italy tonight and Sonnino follows him tomorrow. Unless Italy is given Fiume her representatives say they will not sign a treaty with Germany. They are in a fine rage and all Italy will be in a turmoil."<sup>31</sup> Wilson's direct appeal to the Italian people followed a propaganda form previously used only against enemies. In a meeting of the Big Four on April 24, Orlando replied as Wilson had expected but hoped would not come to pass. Orlando said:

The publication of this document, which, in its form, is friendly and courteous, gives the public the impression that it is an appeal made to peoples in general. The consequence, even if that consequence was not desired, is to cast doubt upon my authority as the representative of the Italian people...I find it necessary to return to the sources of my authority.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Link 58: 102

<sup>32</sup> Mantoux I: 358-359

In this statement, Orlando cordially expressed his anger at Wilson for directly appealing to the people of Italy over the head of its leaders. After indicating that the remaining members of the Big Four could sign the treaty with Germany without the presence of Italy, Orlando left for Rome.

For the most part, the Italians attempted to use Wilson's principles to stake their claim to Fiume, and, with some creative statistics, they could present a case based on self-determination and the nationality principle. The Italian claims had some historical foundation, as Fiume had remained a separate entity within the Hapsburg Empire until 1848. From 1848 to 1869, Fiume formed part of Croatia. In 1869, representatives from Fiume convinced the members of the Hungarian Diet to allow Fiume to regain its status as a corpus separatum.<sup>33</sup> The Hungarians believed that the ethnic mix in this area justified Fiume's unusual political status. The Italians used this historical precedent to claim that Italy ought to annex this city that had only briefly been a part of Croatia.

Another major component of the Italian argument stemmed from the strategic situation in the Adriatic. Before and during the war, Italy had only two naval bases on the Adriatic Sea (Venice in the north and Brindisi in the south), because the Adriatic coast of Italy had few good ports. As a result, the holder of the eastern half of the Adriatic, with

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<sup>33</sup> Sonnino, reel 51

its numerous ports, islands, and sheltering harbors, maintained a real military advantage over the Italians. In addition, the Hungarians had heavily fortified their portion of the coast. As noted earlier, Wilson hoped to mollify Italian fears of the new state of Yugoslavia by promising to destroy the Hungarian fortifications and forbidding the Yugoslavs from building a significant navy. The acquisition of the large port of Trieste and Pola on the Istrian peninsula gave Italy four naval bases on the Adriatic. Wilson also stated that the League of Nations would protect the Italians from any Yugoslav attacks.<sup>34</sup> The Italians claimed that these concessions did not constitute a solid defense for their country and that they needed the port of Fiume as well as most of the Adriatic islands and the Dalmatian coast to safeguard their interests. Thus, the strategic necessity of Fiume became a topic of debate.

The final component of the Italian claims on Fiume stemmed from a misuse of Wilson's principle of self-determination. As noted earlier, ethnic Italians did form a majority in the city of Fiume itself. An ethnic Italian-produced census in December, 1918, which the Italian government used for its official figures (the 1910 Hungarian census was probably more accurate), stated the number of Italians at 28,911 or 62.5% of the total figure of 46,264 citizens of Fiume.<sup>35</sup> This majority only held if one

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<sup>34</sup> Lloyd George 2: 547

<sup>35</sup> Sonnino, reel 51

considered the city of Fiume separate from Susak. In reality, this latter Croat city could not be separated from Fiume. The Italian proposal to draw the border at the stream separating Fiume from Susak would split an economic and cultural entity. In addition, even the Italian proposal did not separate Fiume from its hinterland only a few miles off the coast. Although no census count exists for this area, it was clearly 100% Croatian, and its annexation (with Fiume) to Italy would mean that more Croats would be brought into Italy than Italians. Once again, however, one could not split this area from Fiume for economic and cultural reasons. Thus, the argument that Italy ought to annex Fiume on the grounds of self-determination only succeeded if one used partial numbers for the area to be acquired.

In Italy, public opinion, which had for some time been encouraged by the press to believe that Fiume was a question of vital national importance, did indeed 'blow up' over Wilson's statement of April 23. As Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page reported in a telegram to the American Mission in Paris on April 24, "The tone of the press last night and this morning is one of intense anger....The attitude of the press and people daily becomes more threatening and the newspapers are full of violent attacks on the President but also on the Allied Representatives denouncing latter for disloyalty and lack of good faith".<sup>36</sup> Page went on to describe a

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<sup>36</sup> Link 58: 91

demonstration in Rome that resulted from Wilson's statement. Demonstrations and consistent attacks on Wilson in the Italian press would not abate, as the fate of Fiume had clearly become a national issue in Italy. The quasi-governmental Royal Italian Geographical Society proclaimed that: "of its own free will Fiume would sooner go to the devil than become Croatian."<sup>37</sup> Even the other Allies became targets in Italy as Sonnino's political newspaper, the *Giornale d'Italia*, declared that: "By opposing the free decision of Fiume to be united with Italy, England and France would commit an unfriendly act and so violate the spirit of the Alliance."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Fiume had become such a national question that Wilson and his supporters became Italian enemies.

Orlando would not return to Paris until May 7, after he had received a vote of confidence from the Italian Parliament. This support would not last long. As the crisis appeared to have no solution, Orlando's inability to break the stalemate in May would, in early June, lead to a vote of no confidence and his resignation. Francesco Saverio Nitti would replace him as Prime Minister, while Tommaso Tittoni would become the new Foreign Minister. The uproar in Italy over this issue would compel the new government to continue

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<sup>37</sup> Dr. Attilio Tamaro, The Treaty of London and Italy's National Aspirations, 10

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, Gen. Eds. British Documents on Foreign Affairs, (University Publications of America, 1991) Series I: The Paris Peace Conference, 10: 271

the previous administration's policy of attempting to annex Fiume outright.<sup>39</sup>

During the period of the walkout by the Italians, the remaining members of the Council of Four did not know if the Italians would return at all. Delegates whispered that Germany would not sign a peace treaty if the Italians did not sign. This situation would mean, of course, that all of the time spent in Paris negotiating the Treaty was wasted. The Japanese used the crisis to their advantage by threatening to leave the Conference if the Council (of Three) did not accede to their demands on a mandate for Shantung province in China. The Chinese hoped to regain this province, which Germany held as a colony before the war. The Japanese wished to reap the financial rewards of this province through its mandate. Eventually, the Big Three would compromise with the Japanese and allow the mandate, prompting Secretary of State Lansing to observe, "If it is right for Japan to annex the territory of an Ally, then it cannot be wrong for Italy to retain Fiume taken from the enemy."<sup>40</sup> House suggested a compromise on the Fiume question because "if Italy refused to sign the Treaty with Germany and if Japan also refused, and there is some danger of this too, then conditions would be serious."<sup>41</sup> The fear of the rejection of the whole peace settlement motivated

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<sup>39</sup> Rene Albrecht-Carrie, Italy at the Paris Peace Conference, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938) 235

<sup>40</sup> Robert Lansing, The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1921) 260

<sup>41</sup> Link 57: 504

the Allies to compromise with the Japanese in a situation that was very similar to the Fiume disagreement.

Fiume would not drift out of the world spotlight for several years. In mid-September 1919, the prominent poet and nationalist Gabriele d'Annunzio seized Fiume with a band of Italian war veterans. With the aid of the National Council of Fiume, d'Annunzio would govern Fiume for over a year. Meanwhile, in Paris, the stalemate over Fiume would not be settled until 1920, when Republican isolationism had taken the United States out of discussions of this type. By this time, Wilson had proved unable to fight such battles successfully as a result of a series of strokes that had left him incapacitated. With the United States out of the negotiations, Italy could negotiate directly with Yugoslavia. The resulting Treaty of Rapallo of November 1920 gave Italy a coastal strip so that it bordered the new Free State of Fiume. The Italian army would remove d'Annunzio from Fiume in late December. In 1922, Mussolini would annex the Free State of Fiume to Italy. World powers would notice, but would not respond.

The list of the consequences of Wilson's stand on Fiume brings back the question that began this discussion. Why did Woodrow Wilson feel that a possible Italian annexation of Fiume warranted his stand on an issue of such little overall importance? To prevent the Italians from taking this city, he risked cracking the Alliance and alienating the entire nation of Italy, not to mention the millions of Italian-

Americans. If Wilson had simply given in to Italian demands when it first became obvious that they felt strongly about the issue, he could have saved himself a mountain of troubles. One must keep in mind that this port in the Adriatic held absolutely no significance, strategic or otherwise, for Americans. The following sections intend to demonstrate the reasons behind Wilson's intransigence on the Fiume issue.



#### 4-Wilson and His Principles

Woodrow Wilson could not reconcile giving Fiume to the Italians with the principles upon which he believed he based all of his decisions. Wilson adamantly believed in the self-determination of peoples. The vast majority of people in the economic region of Fiume wished to become part of Yugoslavia. Wilson probably knew more about the logistics of this dispute than he did about almost any other question. Earlier compromises by Wilson had occurred because of self-determination, geographic necessity, strategic importance, or because his acquiescence would aid the League of Nations. Fiume failed to meet any of these criteria. As a result, Wilson could not justify giving Fiume to the Italians on any grounds due to his personal convictions.

One could not examine the city of Fiume in isolation. Conversely, one must consider Fiume the center of a small economic region which depended on the port. As a matter of fact, even the Italians did not dispute this concept. The Italians' main point centered on their belief that the annexations of territory to the east would include only a small overall percentage of Croats who mainly resided in rural areas. The Italians also relied upon the fact that the Hungarians had considered the Fiume region a corpus separatum. Because of the historical and economic ties to the surrounding hinterland, and the indisputably Italian

nature of the city of Fiume itself, Orlando believed that Italy should annex this area.<sup>42</sup>

These arguments proved far from convincing to the President who, from the reports of his advisors, knew the details of the census as well as anyone. As the economic and historic region of Fiume included a Croatian majority even if Fiume's sister city, Susak, were not included, Wilson could not relent. In addition, the separation of Fiume from Susak, which the Italians desired, proved more artificial than real. These two cities relied upon each other economically, and the "river" which divided Fiume from Susak was actually much closer to a small stream.<sup>43</sup> The opinion of most experts that Fiume and Susak comprised as much of a single entity as Paris (divided by the much larger Seine) damaged the Italian claim considerably.

Woodrow Wilson knew that he could not justify giving in to the Italians on the grounds of self-determination even though the Italians, who made up the majority in the city of Fiume, had voted in a plebiscite to join Italy. When considered as an economic region, the area was distinctly Croatian. The fact that the Yugoslav government approved a plan to allow a plebiscite in the area of Fiume and its immediate vicinity (minus the Croatian city of Susak) should testify to the Croatian nature of the area.<sup>44</sup> In fact, a

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<sup>42</sup> Mantoux 1: 276-279

<sup>43</sup> Link 56: 607-608

<sup>44</sup> Link 59: 34

plebiscite probably would have satisfied Wilson's principle of self-determination, yet the Italians would not agree to one.

Geographically, Italy lay at least fifteen miles from the closest area of Italian majority (which was located near the Wilson line). As the eastern half of the Istrian peninsula was primarily Croatian, any attempts to include Fiume in Italy would have stretched the border far to the east of an Italian-dominated region. Also, in order for Italy to defend the border, it would have had to locate the frontier several miles from the coast. Italians only made up the majority, even in Fiume, along the coast.<sup>45</sup> East of the middle of the Istrian peninsula, any area more than five miles from the coast was exclusively Croatian. Clearly, the geography of the Fiume region hurt the Italian claims.

As stated earlier, Wilson repeatedly offered to neutralize the eastern Adriatic. The Yugoslavs would not have a navy. In addition, the new Italian ports and naval bases of Trieste and Pola were located extremely close to Fiume. Thus, any Italian claim to Fiume on grounds of self-defense would prove fairly weak. Another relevant point here is that Italy had little to fear from a new state like Yugoslavia. The new kingdom would have far more pressing demands than starting wars with its stronger neighbors. As Italy was (eventually) able to defeat the much larger Austro-

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<sup>45</sup> Baker 4: 264

Hungarian Empire, it probably did not need to fear a new smaller country with no navy. (In fact, Italy would dominate Yugoslavia in the 1920s.)

Conversely, many of the people who dealt with Wilson described him as proud. Harold Nicolson, a British aide, implied that Wilson's spiritual and mental rigidity led to his subsequent health problems.<sup>46</sup> John Maynard Keynes, among his other criticisms of the President, complained that Wilson would not listen to advice.<sup>47</sup> Wilson did not like to think that he ever made a mistake. He tended to reconcile his compromises with his pride by believing that he would in some way strengthen the League of Nations by complying. Lansing has written, "As the leaders of the Allied Powers, with their practical ideas, came to a realization of the situation and saw that the President was willing to concede much in exchange for support of the covenant (of the League), they utilized his supreme desire to obtain by barter material advantages for their own nations."<sup>48</sup> The Fiume crisis did not occur until well after the Covenant of the League of Nations had been finalized. As a result, Wilson had less reason to compromise on this question than he did on his earlier compromises.

A proud Woodrow Wilson simply could not bear to compromise his famous principles on the Fiume question.

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<sup>46</sup> Harold Nicolson. Peacemaking 1919 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1933) 198

<sup>47</sup> John Maynard Keynes. The Economic Consequences of the Peace (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) 45

<sup>48</sup> Lansing, Big Four 50

Unlike his other compromises, he knew that, on the grounds of self-determination, military defense and geography, the Italians could not claim Fiume. The fate of the League of Nations was not at stake. Knowing all of this, he held firm on Fiume, even though he had given Italy everything it wanted in an earlier territorial settlement.

## 5-The Brenner Pass Mistake

One of Wilson's most regretted decisions of the conference stemmed from the change of the Italian frontier with Austria. In effect, Wilson altered an extremely unfair border that had favored the Austrians into a similarly generous border for the Italians. He made the decision to give the Italians this border along the crest of the Alps long before he realized the logistics of the situation. The President regretted this decision as much as any that he made throughout the course of the Conference. Thus, it seems likely that the proud President resolved not to give in to the Italians on Fiume as he had done on the South Tyrol (Trentino-Alto Adige, to the Italians). The President was not the type of man to let the same people take advantage of him twice.

In the north, Italy had always possessed an unfavorable frontier with Austria. For decades, Italian irredentists had called for "Trentino and Trieste." A large number of ethnic Italians had lived in Austria as a consequence of this border. At the close of the war, Italians looked forward to rectifying the situation in the north just as they hoped to adjust the boundaries in the east. The Treaty of London promised to set the boundary at the top of the Alps, a solution that would include an extremely large contingent of ethnic Germans under Italian control. The Italians claimed this line was the only militarily defensible border with the

Austrians. Because the Austrians had lost the war, they found themselves in the position of having their future frontier dictated to them. With the British and French uninterested in a question that did not concern their interests, Wilson had the power to decide the Italian frontier with Austria.

It seems that Wilson first granted the Brenner Pass frontier to Italy even before the Conference opened in January. Apparently, the Italians had convinced him that only by drawing the border at the top of the Alps and the Brenner Pass could the Allies ensure that Italy would have a defensible natural frontier with the Austrians. It is still unclear at what precise moment Wilson allowed the Italians this frontier. Nevertheless, the issue had clearly been decided before the American experts even had a chance to present their opinion in the Territorial Report on January 21. Their line for the frontier lay somewhat south of the top of the Alps at the watershed line. According to the experts, this line, while not as strong strategically as the Brenner Pass, nevertheless provided a strong military defense and made more sense with regard to the nationality question.<sup>49</sup> If Wilson had seen this report, he probably would not have been so generous to the Italians. By choosing to draw the frontier at the Brenner Pass, Wilson added an extra 71,000 ethnic Germans to Italy with only 10,000 Italians and Ladins.

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<sup>49</sup> "American Territorial Report". Taken from Albrecht-Carrie, 364-369.

Clearly, this border did not follow Wilson's own principle of self-determination.

Wilson's gift to Italy of the Brenner Pass in the north and a total German-speaking minority of perhaps 200,000 people (even the experts' line would give Italy 161,000 ethnic Germans) did not go unnoticed at the Conference. House wrote of the this decision, "I have often wondered just why Wilson consented to this line. Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and I discussed it during the Armistice proceedings and the three of us came to the conclusion that the Tyrol should not be taken from Austria. They were committed by the Secret Treaties (London), but thought the United States could protest."<sup>50</sup> Lloyd George noted in his memoirs:

The Foreign Office view was that the whole situation had changed since 1915, when the Treaty of London was signed; that the Italian case for a strategic rearrangement of frontiers might be sound at that date; but that now that Austria-Hungary was broken up and could no longer be a military menace to Italy, the strategic reasons for the frontier deemed essential for security in 1915 had entirely disappeared.<sup>51</sup>

Apparently, Wilson's decision contradicted the British and French position as well as the principle of self-determination. Even Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's adviser and supporter, called Wilson's decision "unfortunate."<sup>52</sup>

Subsequently, Wilson himself realized that he had erred in giving the Italians the Brenner Pass frontier. With both of his most trusted advisors, House and Baker, telling him

<sup>50</sup> Seymour 4: 435

<sup>51</sup> Lloyd George 2: 518-519

<sup>52</sup> Baker. Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement 2: 146



that he had made a mistake in agreeing to the boundary, Wilson surely knew of his gaffe. In addition, the President soon recognized that the Italians had outsmarted him by asking for a commitment on this frontier before he realized its implications. While not one of his most famous compromises, it seems clear that Wilson realized that the Brenner mistake was one of his most egregious errors of the peace conference.

Because Wilson knew that he had made a mistake in giving the Italians the frontier at the crest of the Alps, he became less likely to grant the Italians all of their desires concerning their Eastern frontier. He had plenty of time to consider his mistake because the Fiume question did not become a major issue until April. Though Wilson may not have had revenge in mind when he decided to hold out on Fiume, it does seem likely that he did not want to give in to the extravagant claims of the Italians on an issue in which he had been fully briefed after his earlier uninformed mistake. Moreover, on the Fiume question, the Italians would have a much more difficult time claiming self-defense. Thus, Wilson's anger at himself for allowing the Italians to trick him once may have fueled his desire not to let it happen again.

## 6-America's Superiority

It probably never entered Wilson's mind that he would not succeed in preventing the Italians from annexing Fiume. Wilson clearly thought that he could get away with an inflexible attitude on this question for several reasons. First, he believed that he continued to enjoy great personal popularity in Italy. Next, America maintained economic hegemony over the Italians. Third, the United States also held a distinct military advantage over Italy. Fourth, Wilson believed that the British and French would back him up on this issue. Finally, the President never realized that the Italian leaders would make a national issue out of Fiume so that they could not relent or risk losing power. All of these factors played into his belief that he would succeed in pressing this issue.

Woodrow Wilson believed that he was popular enough in Italy to win the Italian people over to his side. Of course, he had plenty of reason to think this. Bissolati, the Italian who resigned from the Cabinet, told Wilson in their meeting on January 8, "The Italian people are the most Wilsonian in Europe, the most adapted to your ideals...I wish to express my great personal admiration for you, which is shared by all Italy--indeed, I might say, by all Europe."<sup>53</sup> Lloyd George noted that, "millions in every country looked to him as the man who at that moment represented more than any

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<sup>53</sup> Link 54: 644

other statesman of his time the longing of humanity to put an end to the barbarity of war"<sup>54</sup> Most likely, around the time of his visit to Italy in January, Wilson really was the most popular man in Europe.

Clearly, America held economic hegemony over Europe. Ray Stannard Baker shared this exchange with an unnamed Italian official:

(Baker asked the official whether or not Italy favored the League of Nations.)

Italian: Yes, but we want Fiume first.

Baker: That is interesting. It would relieve us of a great responsibility.

Italian: How is that?

Baker: Well, we are now stabilizing your lira at 6.32. Of course, if you withdraw from the Conference, you cannot expect us to go forward doing that. And, our merchants are now shipping much wheat and other food to Italy. I presume they will not care to do this unless they are well assured of their pay.<sup>55</sup>

This anecdote helps to highlight the tremendous economic advantages the United States held over the Italians. The money that the Americans lent to her Allies helped to keep them afloat both during and after the war. Italy was no exception. Italy needed America in order to keep the lira stable and even to feed itself in the postwar era. Like much of Europe, Italy relied upon the food given to it by the United States. In a memorandum to Wilson on December 18, 1918, Baker observed, "The American control of the food supply might be made a very powerful instrument in modifying

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<sup>54</sup> Lloyd George I: 111

<sup>55</sup> Link 57: 69-70

excessive demands (by the Italians)."<sup>56</sup> Although Wilson would never have acted upon this economic hegemony and threatened to starve the Italian people for the actions of their leaders, he surely believed that Orlando and Sonnino would not take that chance by angering him.

The United States held military hegemony in Europe at the close of the war as well. Surely, Wilson believed that no country would take even the slightest chance of risking conflict with the Americans. While the Italians maintained a large occupying force in Fiume, the Americans had a small force there as well. Clearly, the Italians would not have dared to remove these American soldiers through armed force. Moreover, Wilson would not remove this force until he had settled the Fiume question.

Wilson counted on the support of the British and French. He had little reason to believe that they would not support him to the best of their ability. On April 23, immediately before Wilson would issue the statement that led to the stalemate, Lloyd George told Wilson, "On Fiume, I am prepared to follow you completely and to cut off imports of coal into Italy if necessary".<sup>57</sup> Clemenceau gave tacit approval of the release of Wilson's statement as well. Both leaders suggested that, if Wilson released his statement, they would release the Balfour memorandum which said much the same thing and would show support for Wilson. Unfortunately for Wilson,

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<sup>56</sup> Link 53: 435

<sup>57</sup> Mantoux I: 344

they did not follow up on this promise. Instead of publicly taking sides on this issue, the British and French felt that their interests would be better served if the Italians considered Wilson their only opponent.

Obviously, Wilson had no idea that the Italians would make Fiume into such a heated national question. He had no reason to suspect that the Italian leaders would find a port that they had given up in the Treaty of London only four years before so vital as to risk losing their positions over it. In addition, even when he realized that Fiume had become a vital issue, he overestimated his own ability to overcome the Italian leaders through his personal popularity. Clearly, Wilson did not have an accurate perception of the reality of Italian politics on this issue.

Because the Italian leaders had already staked their political careers on the Fiume issue and Wilson had placed his reputation on the line, neither side could relent after mid-April. The same Wilson who felt so sure that he would prevail over the Italians on this issue had to recognize that his chances grew slimmer by the day. Wilson did not wish to topple Orlando from the Italian government, as he consistently remarked upon his fond feelings for the Prime Minister, yet, at this point he could not relent on this issue. The lengthy negotiations had yielded only a stalemate.

## 7-Wilson's Advisors

Woodrow Wilson was not the only American who believed the Italians should not receive permission to annex Fiume. Overall, most of the American delegation, from the President's closest advisors to the territorial experts, seemed to believe that Fiume should not go to the Italians. While it has often been stated that Wilson did not really listen to his advisors, that accusation, which has some truth in it, was not entirely true. At the very least, Wilson relied upon his advisors for the sort of technical information upon which he based his decisions.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Wilson did take advice upon occasion.

Wilson's most trusted advisor, Colonel House, unequivocally supported the Yugoslav claims to Fiume. House told Orlando on January 9 that he was "not in favor of giving territory to Italy which might sow the seeds of future discord and war."<sup>58</sup> Although House frequently tried to negotiate compromise solutions throughout the month of April, this did not change his fundamental opposition to allowing the Italians to take Fiume. His numerous attempts to coerce the Italians to accept "free city" status for Fiume all failed. On April 18, House noted, "The President and I discussed the question of Fiume, and I urged him to settle it one way or the other. I have about come to the conclusion that since we cannot please the Italians by compromise, we

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<sup>58</sup> Seymour 4: 437

might as well do what seems best in the judgment of our experts, and that is to give it directly to the (Yugoslavs), safeguarding the rights of all those contributory to the port."<sup>59</sup> In spite of his prudent attempts at compromise, House favored the Yugoslavs in this matter and tried to help them once he realized the Italians would accept nothing less than annexation.

Wilson's Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, similarly opposed Italian claims in the Adriatic. He commented, "As long as the Empire existed as a Great Power, the boundary of the Pact of London, so far as it related to the Adriatic littoral and islands, was not unreasonable or the territorial demands excessive." However, once the Empire collapsed, most Italian claims in the area, including Fiume, should have been abandoned, Lansing argued. At this point, he believed the Italians only pursued these claims in order to make the Yugoslavs weaker.<sup>60</sup> Lansing did not agree with these objectives, and he urged the President to reject Italian claims to the area.

Like House and Lansing, Ray Stannard Baker, another important Wilson advisor, urged the President to reject Italian claims on Fiume. Baker questioned the motives of the Italians with regard to Fiume: Italy "wanted Fiume in order, bluntly, to assure her undisputed economic domination of the Adriatic, and to stifle any rivalry on the part of the new

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<sup>59</sup> Seymour 4: 444

<sup>60</sup> Lansing, Peace Negotiations, 224-225

(Yugoslav) State."<sup>61</sup> Baker believed deeply in the moral primacy of Wilson and his principles. As a result, he considered Wilson the leader of the New movement to settle disputes through cooperation with international benefit as the goal. He opposed this to the Old European technique of secret negotiations to achieve selfish national objectives.<sup>62</sup> Baker considered the Italian demands for Fiume a perfect example of the conflict at the Conference between Old and New ideals.

Nearly all of the territorial experts believed that an Italian annexation of Fiume would constitute an egregious error. Douglas Wilson Johnson, the Chief of the Division of Boundary Geography on the American Peace Commission, adamantly supported the Yugoslavs on this issue. He could not justify overturning the nationality principle so that half a million Yugoslavs could be annexed in order to reach 24,000 Italians (his number). Moreover, Johnson believed that the Big Four would have to violate the principle of self-determination in order to give Fiume to the Italians, as the majority of people in the region wanted to become Yugoslav citizens.<sup>63</sup> Johnson and most of the rest of the territorial experts did their best to prevent the Italians from annexing Fiume. Johnson later noted, "All arrangements

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<sup>61</sup> Baker. Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement. 2: 135.

<sup>62</sup> Baker. Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement. 2: 128

<sup>63</sup> Charles Seymour and Edward Mandell House, eds. What Really Happened at Paris: The Story of the Peace Conference 1918-1919 by the American Delegates (New York: Charles Scribners Sons. 1921) 122-123



proposed by Italy must inevitably have had the effect of preventing the normal development and use of Fiume by threatening the freedom of the port and insuring its early annexation to Italy."<sup>64</sup> As a result, Johnson did all that he could to dissuade Wilson from accepting any Italian proposed settlement.

Virtually all American territorial experts agreed with Johnson on the Fiume issue.<sup>65</sup> Together they sent Wilson a memorandum in early April that declared that the Yugoslavs should receive Fiume on the grounds of economics, nationality and historic reasons. Furthermore, they specifically spoke against making Fiume a free city, as any such solution would only cause serious disagreements and unrest among the Italian and Croatian population.<sup>66</sup> All these experts vehemently opposed Italian claims in the region.

Only Sidney Mezes, the Director of Technical Experts of the American Commission and George Louis Beer, a colonial expert, out of all Wilson's advisors, supported the Italian claims to Fiume. Both these men believed that America should support larger countries over smaller ones in any type of dispute so as to gain maximum benefit from these conflicts. Beer observed in his diary, "Germans, Magyars and Italians were being sacrificed to people whose cultural value was

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<sup>64</sup> Seymour and House 137

<sup>65</sup> Joining Johnson in opposition to Italian claims on Fiume were W. E. Lunt, Chief of the Italian Division on the American Commission; Clive Day, Chief of the Balkan Division; Charles Seymour, Chief of the Austro-Hungarian Division; and Allyn Young, Chief of the Division of Economics.

<sup>66</sup> Link 56: 607-608

infinitely less....It is far preferable to have Poles under Germans and (Yugoslavs) under Italians than the contrary, if there is no other good alternative."<sup>67</sup> Obviously, the internationalist Wilson did not agree with these views and he disregarded them.

With so many of his advisors urging him to give Fiume to the Yugoslavs, it should come as no surprise that Wilson would take a stand on this issue. If nothing else, Wilson relied on these experts for information on the region. The same information that would make all of these advisors oppose Italian claims probably would make Wilson think likewise. Moreover, these are all of Wilson's most trusted advisors. Even if Wilson did not necessarily listen to his advisors as much as they might have wished, he probably believed in an issue that they supported with near unanimity. Thus, all of these friends and advisors may have squelched any lingering doubts Wilson maintained about the correctness of his position on the Fiume issue.

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<sup>67</sup> George Louis Beer, Diary. March 18, 1918. Taken from Albrecht-Carrie, 119

## 8-The Economic Reality of Fiume

Woodrow Wilson maintained one other principle that would occasionally direct him when his other guidelines did not seem adequate. This was the idea of economic benefit. In all likelihood, any American president would have at least recognized that a possible solution to a dispute could stem from a recognition of which party had a greater economic need to fill. Thus, even the idealist Wilson recognized that self-determination and nationality could not form the only principles behind territorial settlement. He occasionally relied also upon the principles of strategic importance and economic benefit. The strategic uses of Fiume have already been discussed. In addition, the economic value of Fiume seemed to benefit the Yugoslavs more than Italy. As a result of the Italians' ability to use other good ports in the area, most importantly Trieste and Venice, Fiume had more utility for the Yugoslavs. In addition, Eastern Europe depended on Fiume as its outlet to the sea and world markets. The Italians seemed much more likely to close the port to Eastern European shipping than did the Yugoslavs. For all of these economic considerations, Wilson believed that Fiume would be better off under the Yugoslavs.

Wilson did believe in allowing annexation in areas that did not necessarily meet his self-determination criteria if such areas held more economic significance for one side than the other. The most obvious example of this was the Danzig settlement. Danzig was a Baltic port city populated mostly

by Germans. Poles lived in the hinterland surrounding Danzig, as well as on the coast to the west. (To the east lay East Prussia, an ethnic German region that the Big Four would separate from the rest of Germany.) A Commission of territorial experts stated that the Poles needed Danzig as a port and outlet to the sea. In the face of evidence proving the German character of the city, Wilson and the rest of the Big Four allowed Danzig and its surrounding area to become a "free city." In this case, which had significant similarities to that of Fiume, Wilson's support of Danzig's special status stemmed from the economic necessity of the city for the Poles, not the nationality of the citizens of Danzig.

The Italians would have annexed Trieste regardless of the disposition of Fiume. Trieste in 1919 was a much larger port than Fiume and was located on the eastern side of the Adriatic, roughly forty miles (across the Istrian peninsula) from Fiume. Trieste alone could certainly have sufficed to cover Italy's shipping needs in the region. In addition, Fiume had handled only a small quantity of Italian shipping as a free port under the Hungarian crown. Many at the Conference suspected that the Italians wanted Fiume so that they could control all of the shipping in the region. Baker quoted Barzilai, one of Italy's delegates at the Peace Conference saying, "It will be very difficult for us to keep up the commerce of Trieste unless we control Fiume and are

able to divert its trade to Trieste."<sup>68</sup> Although this quotation seems somewhat dubious because of the sheer lunacy of an Italian delegate making such a statement while negotiating for Fiume, the point that the Italians did not need Fiume as a port remains clear.

Conversely, Yugoslavia required Fiume as a commercial center. The Yugoslavs had no other decent ports in the area and needed Fiume for their shipping. Moreover, according to Johnson, of all of the ports in Yugoslavia only Fiume had adequate rail facilities.<sup>69</sup> American territorial experts in their memorandum to Wilson of April 4, called Fiume the "only good port and chief commercial city" in Yugoslavia.<sup>70</sup> In another memorandum on April 17, Isaiah Bowman, the chief American territorial specialist, declared on behalf of Lunt, Johnson, Seymour and Young that: "In our opinion there is no way--no political or economic device, of a free port or otherwise--which can repair to (Yugoslavia) the injury done if an outside Power prevents Fiume from being made an integral part of the Yugoslav system".<sup>71</sup> All of these opinions help to show that the Yugoslavs needed Fiume.

Many of Wilson's advisors believed that Italy only wanted Fiume in order to gain a stranglehold on shipping in the area. Of course, this would place the new nation of Yugoslavia in a position subservient to Italy. Lansing

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<sup>68</sup> Baker, Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement, 2: 135

<sup>69</sup> Seymour and House, 133

<sup>70</sup> Link 56: 608

<sup>71</sup> Link 57: 432

suggested that only Trieste and Fiume had shipping and rail capacity in the area so that, by having both ports, the Italians could prevent Yugoslavia from becoming a commercial rival in the Adriatic.<sup>72</sup> Baker apparently considered the desire to strengthen Trieste as the primary reason for the Italians to want the city. While Baker's opinion may have overstated the point, the concept remains valid.

Many Eastern European countries other than Yugoslavia used Fiume as their principal port. Under the Empire, Hungary, Bohemia, and, to a lesser extent, Austria, relied on Fiume for their shipping needs. Even an Italian propaganda document entitled "A Few Reasons Why Fiume Wishes to Remain Italian" stated that, "The port of Fiume was not built to meet the economic requirements of Croatia, but of Hungary, and therefore it must remain what it has been in the past, the port of the hinterland of (Yugoslavia), for these countries cannot be completely cut off from the sea."<sup>73</sup> The idea that neither Yugoslavia nor Italy used the port of Fiume as much as the interior countries of the Danubian basin becomes apparent in this statement. (Of course, the Italians claimed that the Yugoslavs would close the port to foreign shipping, not themselves.)

Regardless of their statements to the contrary, the Italians seemed much more likely than the Yugoslavs to close the port of Fiume to the Eastern European nations that relied

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<sup>72</sup> Lansing, Peace Negotiations, 227

<sup>73</sup> Sonnino, reel 51

on it. If Italians still harbored bad feelings towards the Croats because they had fought for the Empire in the War (and many Italians clearly did harbor such sentiments), then it appears obvious that they would also dislike the Austrians, Hungarians and Czechs for the same reason. Also, considering the unstable political climate in Italy, even if the current government of Italy did not close Fiume to the Eastern Europeans, any future government might have done so.

## 9-Conclusion

Following Mussolini's annexation of Fiume in the 1924 Treaty of Rome with Yugoslavia (some of the northern hinterland was given to Yugoslavia) which replaced the Italian-dominated Free State of Fiume, Fiume remained part of Italy until World War II. After the collapse of the Italian government in 1943, German troops occupied Fiume along with the rest of northern Italy. Despite attempts by Germany's ally, Croatia, to annex Fiume, this status would not change until the spring of 1945. Before the liberating Yugoslavs under Marshal Tito could reach the city, the departing Germans destroyed the port. The Italians and Yugoslavs both maneuvered diplomatically to control Fiume in the postwar settlement and another Free State of Fiume became a possibility. Nevertheless, the Peace Treaty of 1947 gave Fiume to Yugoslavia and most ethnic Italians emigrated to Italian-held Trieste.<sup>74</sup>

The problems in Fiume after World War II might never have happened if the Big Four had solved this crisis after World War I. For several weeks, the work of the Paris Peace Conference ground to a halt while the most powerful men in the world debated the fate of an area with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. For one member of the Big Four, Orlando, Fiume would become such an important national issue that it ended his political career when he failed to get it. The principle

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<sup>74</sup> Dennison Rusinow, Italy's Austrian Heritage 1919-1946. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 404



of the issue caused Wilson to allow himself to be isolated from the rest of the Big Four, and to draw the ire of an entire nation. Conversely, Lloyd George and Clemenceau could not believe that such a "trivial" issue could "wreck the peace." Clearly, many of the reasons for Wilson's stand on this issue stem from the quirks of his personality. Others would likely have caused any American president to consider standing firm on Fiume. Regardless, the significance of this issue for the politics of the time has already been established. But what lessons can be learned from the Fiume crisis?

First of all, the most obvious point is that issues that seem trivial to some may have "life or death" consequences for others. Not only did the government of Italy fall over this issue, but Gabriele d'Annunzio actually found a large number of Italian citizens who felt so strongly about Fiume becoming part of Italy that they invaded and held the city to prevent its cession to the Yugoslavs. While this does say something about the power of propaganda, it also points out the importance of seemingly marginal issues for some people. Scoffing at the significance of the political problems in Haiti will not make these problems go away, nor does one know when these issues might affect us. World War I began because some militant Serbs wished to make a political statement and events snowballed. If the assassination of one relatively obscure prince could lead indirectly to the deaths of tens of

millions of others, then it makes sense to pay attention to these types of issues as well as the larger ones.

Even the largest and most powerful countries can be thwarted by smaller ones if the weaker country knows how to make the price of intervention for the stronger country too high. Wilson clearly had the Italians by the throat militarily and economically, but the Italians' persistence and maneuvering allowed them to hold off the most powerful man in the world. In 1924, Fiume did become part of Mussolini's Italy (at least until the middle of World War II), despite all of Wilson's efforts to the contrary. Even the President of the United States loses some battles when an entire nation opposes his ideas.

Conversely, another point to learn from the Fiume crisis is the effect that one person can have on the fate of thousands or millions. Clearly, many American presidents would have ignored their advisors and simply given in to Italy's demands. The only protests would have come from a new and weak Balkan kingdom and a relatively insignificant Slav minority in the United States. The payoffs for Wilson would have been obvious: preserving the Alliance, having every major world power except a chaotic Russia sign the peace treaty, gaining the friendship of both Italy and the large Italian-American minority, and keeping Italy in his League of Nations. Nevertheless, Wilson held firm and started a potentially calamitous chain of events. Even though Italy would eventually gain Fiume, without Wilson's

intransigence, none of these incidents would have occurred. Obviously, neither Lloyd George nor Clemenceau felt particularly strongly about this issue. Thus, one might say that the Fiume crisis developed as a result of the quirks of Wilson's personality. This one man had the gumption and the authority to create this stalemate. Periodically, the effect that one person can have on shaping history proves amazing. Because the power of the President of the United States is generally taken for granted, people forget that this is only one person subject to the same trials and failures as the rest of us. Whether or not Wilson made the correct decision in this matter, the fact remains that his choice had effects that he never could have predicted.

This brings up the possibility that Wilson, like many other Presidents both before and after him, did not really understand the force of nationality as well as he thought he did. Many of the territorial settlements of the Conference, such as the Sudetenland and the division of East Prussia from the rest of Germany would help to ignite another disastrous world war. It seems that this champion of the self-determination of peoples did not realize that those types of solutions which left substantial minorities in weak countries would lead to problems later. Otherwise, he would not have helped force such a large number of ethnic Germans to reside in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Perhaps his principles only extended to the victors of this war. He definitely did not protect the interests of the German people, who had this

settlement imposed upon them, from the anger of the British and French. Maybe Wilson would not have offended the Italians so deeply if he had defended the rights of the Germans as well as he secured those of the Croats. The Italians, after all, considered the Croats as hated an enemy as the Austrians. The President's failure to adequately consider the opinion of the Italians towards the Croats gave him an inaccurate picture of the events in the Adriatic.

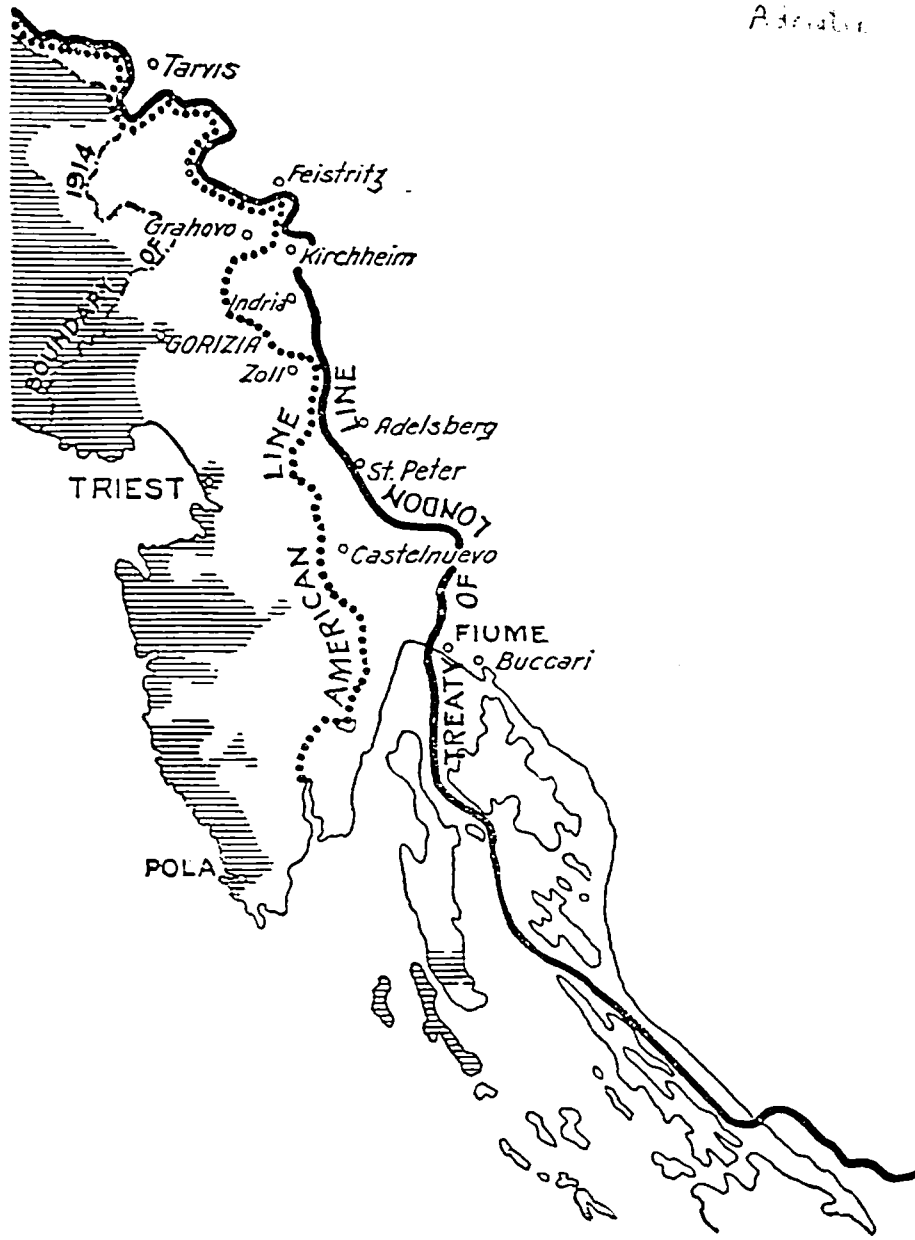
Wilson believed so adamantly in the power of the League of Nations that he ignored the warning signs that virtually every delegation in Paris other than the United States looked out only for its national self-interest. He thought that the League of Nations would eventually supercede the power of the individual nation in the field of diplomacy. As a result, he did not even notice that each of the other principal powers at the Conference concerned themselves principally with only those questions that directly affected their national interests. Internationalism as a principle and a guiding force in disputes did not have nearly the force that Wilson believed in 1919.

Recent events in the former Yugoslavia highlight once again the phenomenal importance of nationality in this area of the world. In the 1990s, Croats, Serbs and Muslims cannot agree on a manner in which to divide the former Yugoslavia. A brutal civil war has resulted in which terms like "ethnic cleansing" have returned to our vocabulary.

Clearly, the former Yugoslavia is not the only area with this problem as places as different as Russia, Rwanda and California struggle to find equitable solutions for minorities while keeping the interests of the majority in mind. Over three-quarters of a century have passed since the events in Paris and Fiume. Perspective has not made solutions any easier.

In 1919, fewer than 30,000 Italians surrounded by several hundred thousand Croats were an important enough cause to topple a government, halt the work of a peace conference, and spark an invasion. While a modern observer might scoff at the seemingly narrow outlook of people in 1919, it appears that exactly the same type of situation has similar effects today in numerous parts of the world. People still identify themselves by their nationality before they consider their region, and neighbors still kill each other because each has a marginally different appearance and culture. If lessons are to be learned from the Fiume episode, certainly one of them is that seemingly small issues of nationality should never be taken lightly. Some of these conflicts will become the focus of attention for the entire world.

Map I - Fiume & Adriatic



Map showing the Treaty of London line for the eastern boundary of Italy, also the old boundary of 1914, and the line proposed by the American experts and fought for by President Wilson. The shaded areas represent territories populated chiefly by Italians

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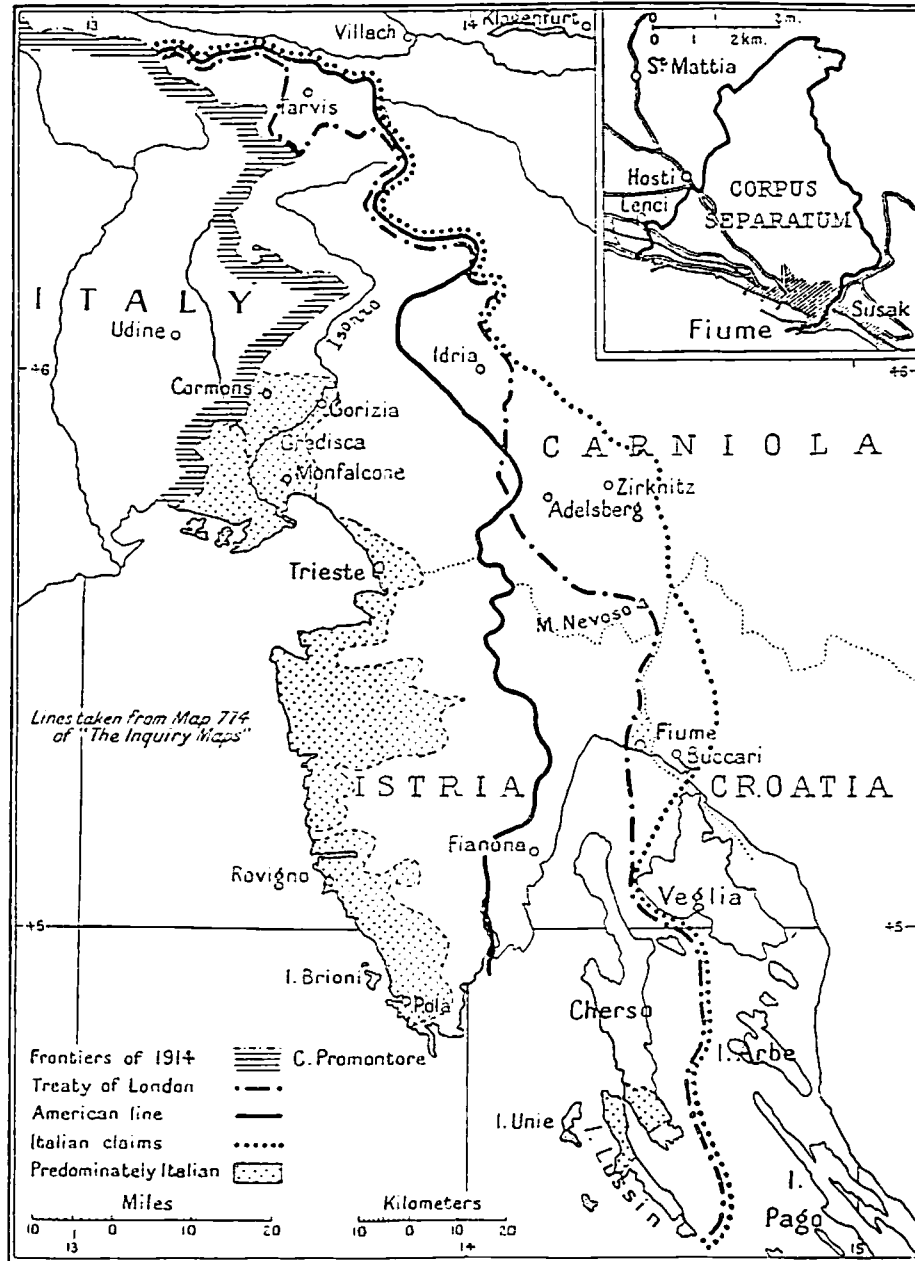
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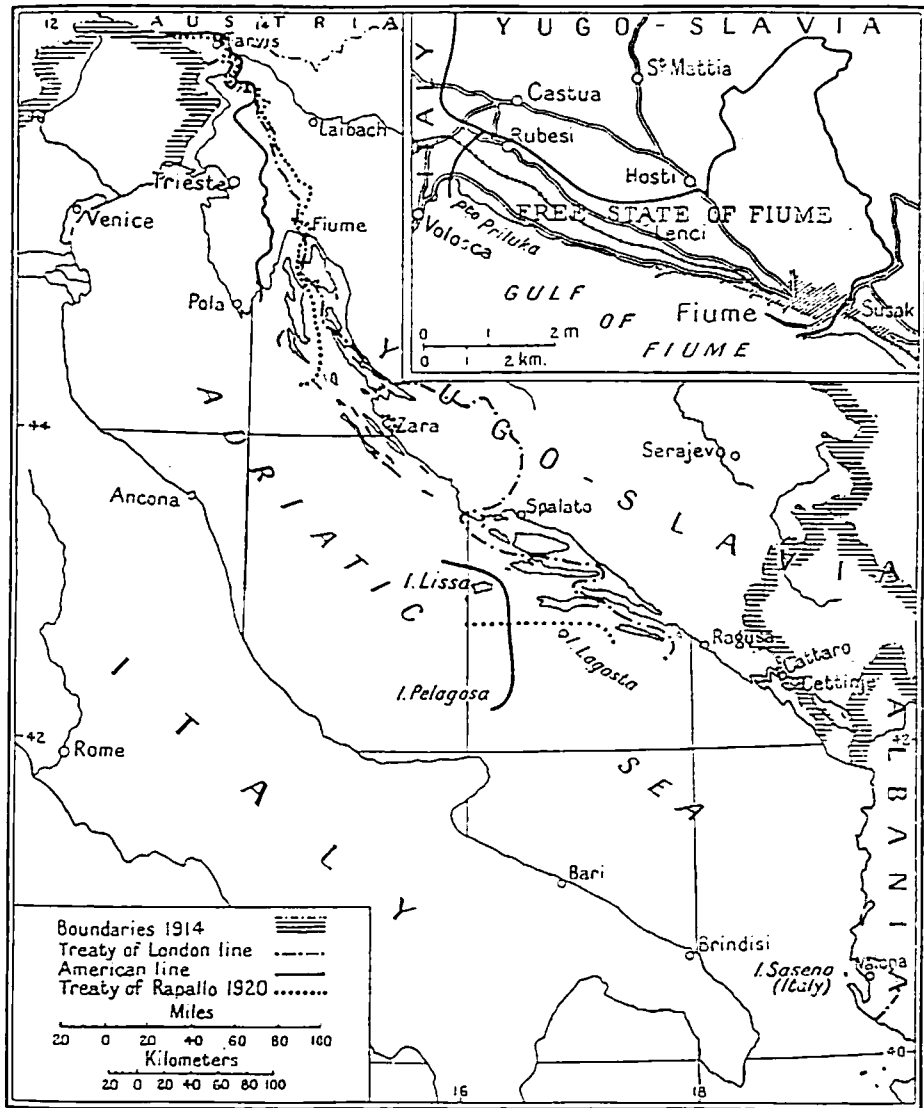
<sup>1</sup>Secret Minutes, Council of Four.



### V. JULIAN VENETIA AND ISTRIA: LINES PROPOSED IN 1919

Three remarks should be made in regard to the line of the Treaty of London as it appears in this map: (1) The extreme northern segment extends West of Tarvis (cf. map I); (2) between Istria and Monte Nevoso, instead of running in a straight northwest-southeast direction, the Treaty of London line is curved toward the west so as to cut the Fiume-Laibach railway at the San Pietro junction (cf. maps I, VI); (3) in the extreme south it curves around the island of Lussin, and excludes Pago, which was assigned to Italy in the Treaty of London. The boundary of the *corpus separatum* is taken from Bowman, *The New World*; and from Benedetti, *Fiume, Porto Baross e il retroterra*.

Map 3 - Fiume + Adriatic



XI. THE ADRIATIC SETTLEMENT OF 1920: THE TREATY OF LONDON LINE OF 1915, THE AMERICAN LINE OF 1919, THE LINE OF THE TREATY OF RAPALLO OF 1920, AND THE FREE STATE OF FIUME

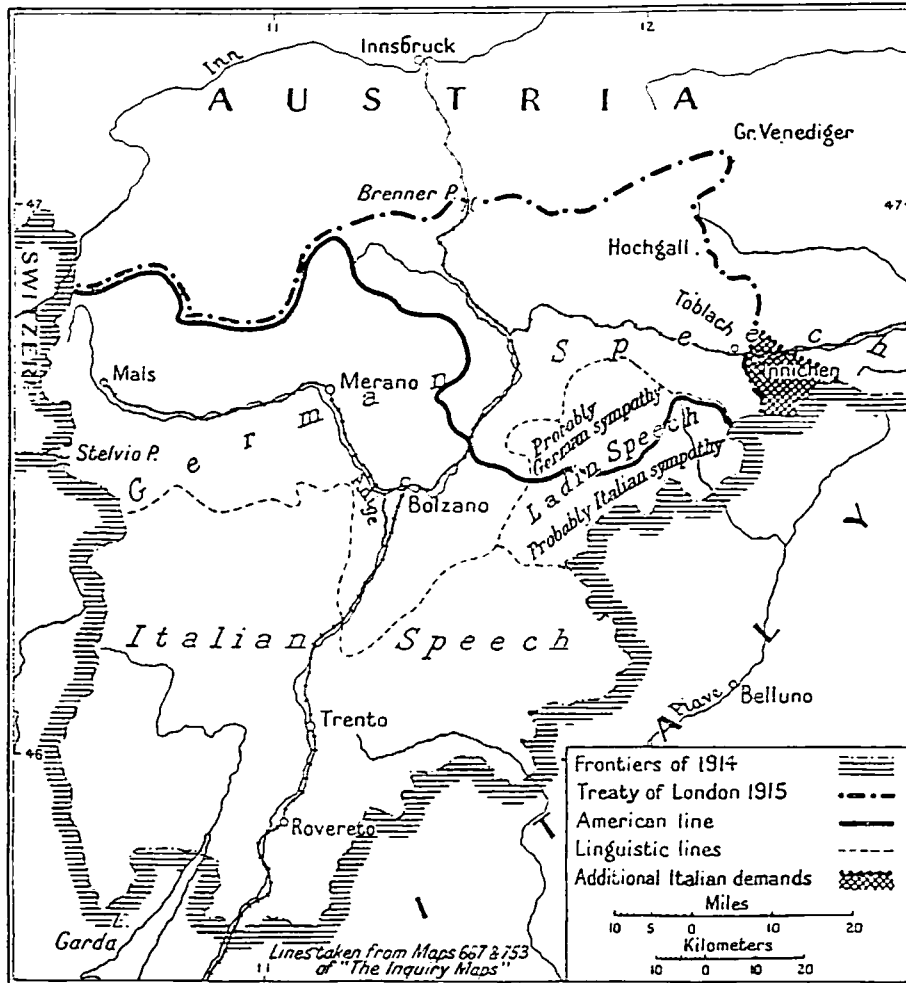
The boundary of the Free State of Fiume is taken from Bowman, *The New World*, and from Benedetti, *Fiume, Porto Baross e il retroterra*.



Map 4 - Brenner Pass Frontier

92 THE PROBLEM OF THE ADRIATIC STATED

Italy, as against 75,000 Italians left in Yugoslavia. In this case again this was presented as a reasonable compromise and a concession to



IV. LINES PROPOSED IN THE TYROL IN 1919

Note that the linguistic line is practically identical with the line of the Austrian offer of 1915 (see map, I). The law of the Austrian Republic of November 22, 1918, and the decision of the Austrian Staatsrat of January 3, 1919, also described a line very closely following the linguistic line, the Ladins being included in Austria (cf. map in Almond and Lutz, *The Treaty of St. Germain*). For the linguistic line in this map and the following, cf. also the map given by Marinelli, "The Regions of Mixed Population in Northern Italy," *Geographical Review*, March 1919, pp. 144-45.

the necessity of giving an adequate hinterland to Trieste and Pola for economic and strategic reasons (see Map V).

As to Fiume, while the city had a sizable Italian majority, which

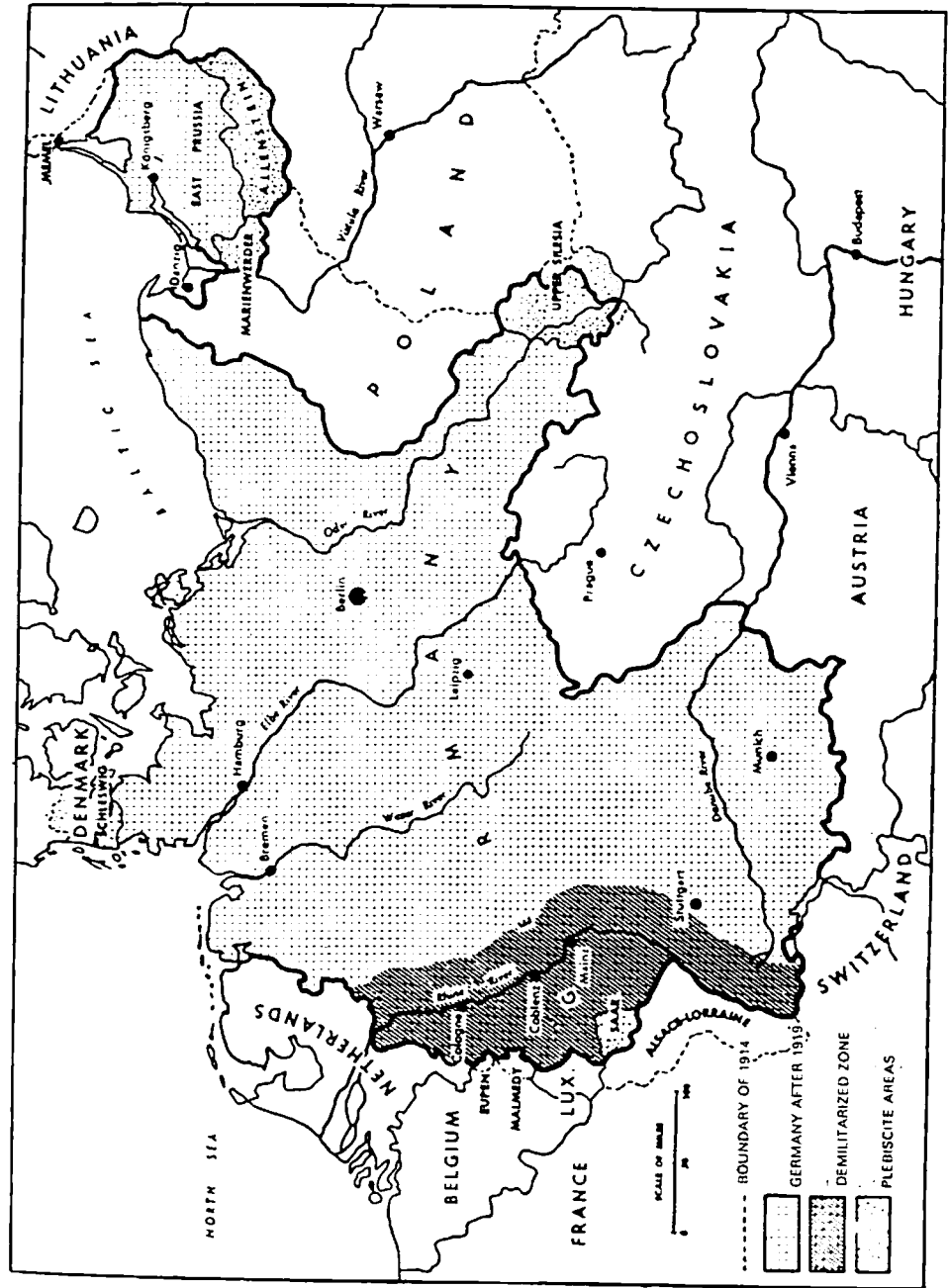
MAPS - DANZIG

THE GERMAN SETTLEMENT

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Map 1 Germany after 1919. The final boundary settlement 1919-23 (Reprinted with permission from H. I. Nelson, *Land and Power*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 363)