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Honors Thesis

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO AND THE REGENCY OF CARNARO

by

Patrick Burton Marie Merkle

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements
for University Honors

Political Science Department

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Advisor: Dr. Mark I. Choate

Honors Coordinator: Dr. Daniel Nielson

ABSTRACT

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO AND THE REGENCY OF CARNARO

Patrick Burton Marie Merkle

Political Science Department

Bachelor of Arts

Italian novelist and poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, through skillful rhetoric and daring leadership, inspired Italian nationalists to seize the port of Fiume on the Dalmatian coast of the Adriatic Sea. His rule over the people of Fiume through his gifted oratory and forced citizen participation in government ceremonies had a mass appeal; attracted to such a prospect of widespread popularity, Benito Mussolini, and subsequently Adolf Hitler, adopted D'Annunzio's theatrics within their respective fascist parties. Despite obvious similarities between Italian Fascism, German Nazism, and D'Annunzio's authoritarianism, D'Annunzio was not a proto-fascist, as the few scholarly works on D'Annunzio tend to assert. This exposition of D'Annunzio's endeavors in Fiume hopes to divorce the poet from Mussolini's radical movement and demonstrate that, although D'Annunzio inspired fascists, the Regency of Carnaro failed to have fundamental characteristics of fascist regimes. A brief analysis of Fiume's legal charter, co-written by D'Annunzio and De Ambris, further exonerates D'Annunzio of the charge of being a fascist.

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Patrick Burton Marie Merkle

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Introductory Remarks

On the morning of September 12th, 1919 Gabriele D'Annunzio led a band of three hundred Italian veterans of the First World War out of Italy to Ronchi, a town in the outskirts of Trieste. They planned to rendez-vous with four hundred grenadiers and armored vehicles to transport the merry contingent to the Bay of Carnaro. To their pleasant surprise, they were met by over seven hundred troops who wished to capture Fiume and the whole Dalmatian region for Italy. By eleven o'clock they arrived in Cantrida, a suburb of Fiume, and D'Annunzio met with the Allied appointed military governor of Fiume, the Italian General Pittaluga.

Benito Mussolini's newspaper publication *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which vigorously endorsed the seizure of Fiume, recorded the conversation between the two:

"Poet!" exclaimed the General. "You will be the ruin of Italy if you do this." "General!" replied the poet. "It is you who will be the ruin of Italy. If you withstand fate, and become an accomplice to a policy of infamy. I, Gabriele D'Annunzio, declare this city Italian. Viva Fiume Italiana!"...The General replied that he was in Fiume not as an Italian, but as an Allied general... "I know," said D'Annunzio. "In that case, you will have to open fire on my soldiers, who are the brothers of your soldiers. If you must do so," he opened his great-coat, revealing his medals, "fire first on this!"¹

Unwilling to fire on fellow Italians, the general surrendered the city to D'Annunzio—half of the Italian garrison subsequently joined the conqueror's ranks. In less than twelve hours and without any bloodshed whatsoever, a novelist-poet-politician-dramatist-war

¹ *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Sept. 13th, 1919.

hero became commander over a principal city and port on the Adriatic and disarmed a multinational force drawn from the victorious nations of the First World War.

European Political Landscape of 1919

In the eight months after the Armistice of Compiègne was signed on 11 November 1918, the victorious European powers set up in Paris a de facto international capital. Each nation proposed their individual territorial claims according to their own interests, which caused such a “disharmony of intentions which caused the failure of the dream of a more cohesive and united Europe.”² As an aggregate, the Allied powers mostly discussed the civil war in Russia between Communist Reds and counterrevolutionary Whites, a conflict to which Italy contributed many forces.³

At home, Italians were disappointed with the unproductive Paris talks and disgruntled over the extended deployment of troops to a foreign country. The Allied nations, demoting the urgency the transfer of Fiume to the newly formed Kingdom of Yugoslavia, were too distracted with Russian civil war to react to an armed conquest of Fiume. National clamors for new land acquisitions and international apathy produced suitable events for D’Annunzio’s Dalmatian enterprise.

Not only was Fiume a suitable outlet for Italian jingoist militarism, but it also held political significance for the Italian people. Giosuè Carducci, the first Italian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature and a great influence on D’Annunzio, helped articulate Italian nationalism in his poetry after the Unification of Italy. Carducci proclaimed a restoration of the Italian empires of Rome and the Renaissance and inspired Italians to

² Randazzo, Francesco. 2018. “The Russian Revolution: Intellectuals, the Military, and the Politics of Modern Italy.” *Новейшая история России*, vol. 4. 823.

³ *Ibid.*, 821.

press for the seizure of former territories. Thus in 1893 the Francesco Crispi government declared a war of annexation on Ethiopia—the invasion was solidly backed by Italian nationalist poets like D’Annunzio.

Failure to capture Ethiopia in 1893 forced the Crispi government to resign and to be replaced by the centrist Giovanni Giolitti; it did not temper nationalists’ fervor for war and for new soils. Thus suppressed nationalism with an unenergetic centrist government characterized Italian politics until the ascension of Prime Minister Nitti in 1919, whose legacy was inevitably marred by his government’s humiliation in Fiume at the hands of D’Annunzio.

Il Comandante D’Annunzio

How Gabriele D’Annunzio, an Italian poet and dramatist, came to head a paramilitary force against Fiume is a remarkable tale. D’Annunzio was born on March 12, 1863 in Pescara, an Italian town on the Adriatic coast. His father Francesco, originally surnamed Rapagnetta, abandoned his family name and adopted his aunt’s husband’s last name. Gabriele, feigning noble lineage, would later write about his deep aristocratic roots through the D’Annunzio family—in reality, his ancestors were mattress stuffers.⁴ Francesco was a middle-class merchant in Pescara and served as mayor for a time before revelations of bigamy and unsustainable debts forced his resignation. In addition to his father’s noble pretensions and libidinous nature, Gabriele inherited his mother’s religious devotion, albeit not of a typical Christian nature.⁵

⁴ Rhodes, Anthony. *Gabriele D’Annunzio: The Poet as Superman*. New York, McDowell Obololsky, 1960. 3.

⁵ D’Annunzio, until his final years, had practiced pagan rituals to spiritual embodiments of Italy.

Francesco D'Annunzio recognized that Gabriele showed promise as a scholar and sent his son to Cicognini College in Prato to receive a classical education. There, Gabriele excelled as a poet and wrote his first volume of poetry *Primo Vere*, written in the style of Carducci's blend of classical and nationalist symbolism. His poetry was well-received in Rome by the famous critic Chiarini⁶ and D'Annunzio became an overnight sensation in Roman literary circles. After his initial successes, D'Annunzio introduced overt references to sensuality in his poetry and was labeled a Satanist and sadist.⁷

D'Annunzio's poetry was marked by an overuse of adjectives and emotive language; needless to say, he soon became very popular with the ladies of Italian high society. Unlike other Italian writers who scorned association with the established classes, D'Annunzio regarded himself as an untitled nobleman. Famous among wealthy young women—he, soon after arriving in Rome, began writing on female fashion and clothing in the *Fanfulla della Domenica*. D'Annunzio attended high class parties on a regular basis, adopted foppish mannerisms, and became a fixture among the elite as a poet to the ruling class.

In this way, D'Annunzio met his only legal wife, Maria Gallese, the daughter of the Duke of Gallese of a well-respected black family.⁸ The romantic Maria eloped with Gabriele and severed her personal and economic ties with her family (or rather, her father disowned her for marrying a lascivious poet). Maria and her three children with Gabriele were completely devoted to Byronic poet. Unfortunately, D'Annunzio had grown

⁶ Fanfulla della Domenica, May 2, 1880.

⁷ To be fair, D'Annunzio's *Ora Satanica*, an ode to carnal pursuit, was understandably regarded as satanic by nature.

⁸ Black refers to a political faction. In Rome, the blacks were pro-papacy and anti-Savoyard regency. The whites, of course, were the converse.

accustomed to his rakish lifestyle and plunged his new family into insurmountable debts, continued to have liaisons with his female fans, and, after eight years of marriage, finally abandoned his wife and young children. According to Anthony Rhodes, after three years of marriage D'Annunzio had already begun to retire to the homes of Franz Liszt and a childhood painter friend named Michetti with women who “were not his wife.”⁹ There, he wrote three semi-autobiographical¹⁰ works *I Romanzi della Rosa*, *Il Piacere*, and *Il Trionfo delle Morte*, which established him as the foremost *fin-de-siècle* novelist in Italy. Each novel challenged contemporary social mores and explored disturbing themes like death, murder, incest, fratricide, bigamy, etc.; they were widely popular among avant-gardists and futurists, but, unlike his early volumes of poetry, were not well-received by the established aristocracy.

D'Annunzio's opportunity to be universally accepted, to be respected by the nobility, came with the 1891 election for Prime Minister of the Sicilian Francesco Crispi, who had earlier fought alongside Garibaldi. Crispi had felt that Italy was cheated out of imperial expansion, especially at the Congress of Berlin which awarded new territories to each participating European power except Italy. D'Annunzio, a devoted classicist and admirer of Carducci, saw the risorgimento of Italy as the harbinger of a new Roman Empire: Italy was entitled to new lands. Instead of writing about his debauches and sexual conquests, D'Annunzio used his oratorical skill to advocate for the seizure of Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Tripoli and to restore Italian supremacy in the Atlantic.

He composed a theater drama *La Nave*, which was a hugely successful patriotic drama that drew praise from all social classes, including the royal Savoyan family.

⁹ Rhodes. 31.

¹⁰ The graphic nature of these works led many critics to believe D'Annunzio was a sexual deviant.

According to Anthony Rhodes, after its first night performance in Rome the crowd shouted: “*Arremba! Arremba!*”; “*Il pallio a Marco Gratico!*”; “*Arma la prora e salpa verso il mondo!*”¹¹ D’Annunzio’s attitude towards Italian expansion into Africa could be summed up by an adage of his own creation: *Teneo te Africa*.¹² By committing himself to the nationalist cause, D’Annunzio was accepted among the aristocracy as one of their own. Gabriele had always presumed himself a nobleman, but now that his affection for the elite was reciprocated his mannerisms became even more affected and eccentric. He regularly dueled persons who he perceived had insulted him,¹³ entertained celebrities at his home, dressed like a dandy, and, most significantly, assumed incredible sums of debt.

A committed nationalist, D’Annunzio stood for election to parliament as a capitalist conservative from his native Pescara in 1899. It’s important to note that he had no desire to be a politician—he famously referred to the Montecitorio as a *cloaca maxima*; he wrote about his reasoning for seeking election to his publisher:

I have just returned from an electoral journey, my nostrils full of the most acrid human smell. This may seem to you a strange undertaking, at odds with my art and principles...But, my friend, the world must see that *I am capable of everything*.¹⁴

D’Annunzio was certainly a committed nationalist, but his political ideologies are less certain. To illustrate, he frequently missed votes when summoned by the conservative whip because he could not be bothered to set aside a book. In a more

¹¹ “Board the vessel! Board the vessel! The papal robe to Marco Gratico (the protagonist of the play)! Arm the prow and sail towards the world!”

¹² Rhodes. 68-69. Why it is not *Teneo te Africam* with Africa as an appositive, I haven’t a clue.

¹³ D’Annunzio’s famous bald head was a result of a wound treated with ferrous perchlorate, which he received in a duel with a Signore Magnifico.

¹⁴ Rhodes. 77.

dramatic example, D'Annunzio publicly crossed from the far-right section of parliament to the far-left, a symbolic departure from the conservatives to the liberals, because he so disliked the verbiage in speeches given by the Prime Minister and his conservative government.

After his two-year stint in parliament, D'Annunzio returned to writing and women, taking up residence at Villa La Capponcina in Florence with Italian actress Eleonora Duse. Because D'Annunzio's expenses exceeded his income tenfold, he relied on Eleonora's stage income to fend off creditors.¹⁵ Eventually his debts were so massive that he and Eleonora fled to France in 1910, where he hoped she would become the foremost actress (as she was in Italy) through performances that he had written. Their relationship was heavily monitored by newspapers all over Europe, so when D'Annunzio's semi-autobiographic *Il Fuoco* was published, a novel about a young artist and his older mistress,¹⁶ it was an international bestseller.

D'Annunzio did not intend to spend the rest of his life as an exile in France. When World War I broke out in 1914, he enthusiastically lobbied Italy to enter on the side of the Triple Entente. Not only was warmongering popular among the Italian masses, but more suitable territorial gains were available through an alliance with Britain and France against the Austrians.¹⁷ At the request of the northern Italian cities, D'Annunzio was invited back to the country to give

¹⁵ Rhodes. 101.

¹⁶ Eleonora Duse was six years older than D'Annunzio.

¹⁷ Italy's entry into the war was ineluctable. The question remained: on whose side? The Foreign Minister Sonnino entered secret negotiations with both sides at once to decide who would offer better compensation. The Allies had the better offer evidently.

speeches in support of a war against Austria.¹⁸ For D'Annunzio, speeches were insufficient, he wished to be sent to the Front.

Gabriele wrote a disquisition on Pindar in his work *Notturmo*, which extols the ancient poet for his capacity to both write about war and to engage in it: “At the height of Pindar’s lyrical power the Greek poet could cut the cords of his lyre and suffocate his song, because he knew that he could also fight, and dare.¹⁹” To be a true poet, he believed, he had to be a doer of the deeds in his writings. Thus, in a letter to his friend Albertini of the *Corriere della Sera* he writes: “I have started my first war poems, but it is essential that I now take part in the action myself, if I am to continue writing.²⁰”

Despite his age, D'Annunzio was fifty-two years old when Italy joined the war, he petitioned the government to assign him positions in the Italian Royal Air Force, Navy, and Army. D'Annunzio was highly decorated for heroism and valor in the War—he even lost an eye while flying daring aerial missions over Vienna with the famed *La Serenissima* squadron. It was this D'Annunzio, an international superstar and decorated war-hero, who rode a 1918 Fiat 501 at the head of 1,000 men and captured Fiume.

Fiume

Fiume was not selected at random by D'Annunzio and his legionnaires. Many nations lay claim to the Bay of Carnaro and its well-situated port at Fiume. In 1868 the Austro-Hungarian Empire brokered an agreement between Croatia and Hungary over the

¹⁸ Rhodes. 166.

¹⁹ D'Annunzio, Gabriele. *Notturmo*. Second Offering.

²⁰ Rhodes. 177.

ownership of Fiume; the outcome of this agreement continues to astound historians. Written in both Hungarian and Croatian on a parchment known as the Kriptic text, the treaty solved the land dispute with an impossible solution: in Croatian, the Croats were the possessors of Fiume; in Hungarian, Fiume would be an exclave of the Hungarian Kingdom.²¹ Not understanding the other's language, both governments' representatives approved of the agreement and it was signed into law by Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph.

To further complicate the dispute over who ought to administer Fiume, the Hungarians enlisted Italians through generous land grants and housing vouchers to occupy the city. As a result of this strange colonization, by the end of World War I these three peoples—Hungarians, Croats, and Italians—challenged the Allied powers' decision to hand Fiume to the Slavs in newly created Yugoslavia.

The call to arms to occupy Dalmatia, and Fiume in particular, were major rallying cries for Italian nationalists. D'Annunzio's *La Nave* originated the slogan "*Arma la prora e salpa verso il mondo,*" which directly alludes to rearming the Italian navy and conquering the old lands of the Venetian Empire across the Adriatic. D'Annunzio played a major role in stoking the flames of the public's nationalist expansionist fervor and gave daily speeches to large multitudes from his hotel balcony in Rome, in which he railed against the flabby liberalism of the government and the laissez-faire attitude of Prime Minister, Francesco Nitti, in particular.²² D'Annunzio's orations were so effective that the government forbade his speeches and sent two generals to his suite to request that he,

²¹ Rhodes, 198.

²² Rhodes, 200.

as a member of the reserved armed forces, obey his superiors and cease his addresses. As the story goes²³ the two generals left the apartment committed to the Fiume cause.

A serious proposal to capture Fiume came in August 1919, when young officers, fearing that the combined Anglo-French occupation troops would hand Fiume to the Yugoslavians before territorial negotiations were settled,²⁴ formed a paramilitary battalion with veteran grenadiers to “protect Fiume.”²⁵ These soldiers, almost all in their early to mid- twenties, approached the bellicose firebrand Gabriele D’Annunzio and asked that he lead their contingent. And so Gabriele, an aviator, novelist, playwright, poet, and war-hero, became a modern-day Caesar, crossing the Rubicon for the glory of Italy. In a letter to Mussolini he drew a parallel between himself and the classical dictator, saying “Dear Comrade, *the die is cast*²⁶...Tomorrow morning I shall take Fiume by arms!”

D’Annunzio’s march on Fiume, modeled on Caesar’s march, served as a dress rehearsal for the newly formed Fasci di Combattimento’s²⁷ March on Rome on 28 October 1922. His actions are even considered by many scholars to have been first substantial fascist call-to-arms. According to Robert O. Paxton’s *Anatomy of Fascism*, fascist movements share certain mobilizing passions for their foundations: “a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;... the need for authority by natural leaders, culminating in a national chief who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s desires; the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason; the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to

²³ This anecdote is told by Gabriele’s eldest son, Mario.

²⁴ Italians had, at this point, felt that the Allies promised Dalmatia to them.

²⁵ Rhodes, 202.

²⁶ According to Suetonius *Alea iacta est* were the words muttered by Julius Caesar as he crossed the Rubicon River in 49 B.C.

²⁷ Created 23 March 1919 by Benito Mussolini at the San Sepolcro Piazza in Milan.

the group's success...²⁸ Italy's humiliation at not receiving its promised land settlements from the dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire would have facilitated these feelings among nationalist veterans who found a Nietzschean superhero in Gabriele D'Annunzio.

D'Annunzio's bombastic, nationalist rhetoric did not diminish at Fiume. He continued to hold daily rallies extolling Italian poetry, music, and virtues. His soldiers integrated with the population and lived in a society that separated into two main camps: those who held evening sessions to discuss the "Abolition of Money; the Ideal Fraternal Army; the Embellishment of Life; Free Love; the Abolition of Prison;" and die-hard nationalists who wished to liberate all the Balkans and annex lands for Italy.²⁹ Given the libertine nature of D'Annunzio,³⁰ that he admonished his officers to maintain decorum is a testament to how raucous his troops had become in Fiume. Venereal diseases were rampant in the city and the ravishments of the Spanish Flu were endemic. D'Annunzio's stormtroopers might have been willing to withstand uncomfortable conditions, but the city also held 50,000 inhabitants who required foods, medicine, and a civilian standard of living.

After D'Annunzio's success at the seizure of Fiume, more veterans and young romantics flocked to the city-state; the inability of the Nitti regime to maintain order further incensed Italians against their own government. Emboldened by the pusillanimity of Allied coalition forces and unable to sustain such a large population without foreign

²⁸ Paxton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. New York, Vintage Publishing, 2005. 41.

²⁹ Rhodes, 220.

³⁰ A possibly apocryphal tale relates how he had a new mistress every day at his Fiuman palace, each of whom was gifted a handkerchief to be worn around the head. Each girl was told that she alone was the recipient of the silk head covering. At a city-wide ball to which the young ladies were invited, they soon discovered, to their embarrassment, how many other lovers of the Comandante there were. Rhodes, 235.

imports, D'Annunzio enlisted the old colonel Vittorio Margonari as Minister of Supply to provide for the city's inhabitants by any means necessary.³¹

Margonari formed a fighting force of left-wing Genoese merchants under the name *Uscocchi* who raided cargo ships, kidnapped officers, and looted army warehouses to sustain D'Annunzio's growing autocratic city-state. One of their most daring expeditions, which also showed the sea-unworthiness of the Italian navy, was the capture of the *Cogne* merchant ship.³² After stowing themselves in the ballast holds, the *Uscocchi* waited for the South America-bound merchant ship to enter open waters before emerging and capturing the ship's officers. Then, under a Yugoslavian flag, the pirates piloted the ship through the Italian blockade of Fiume and into the harbor. D'Annunzio sold the ship and its cargo back to the private shipping company for ten million lire; most of the crew remained in Fiume to join the swelling D'Annunzian forces.

Such shameless enterprises—and a particularly embarrassing episode where D'Annunzio's pirates stole Italian officers' horses—eventually compelled the Italian government to take a more aggressive stance against Fiume.³³ D'Annunzio's own expansionist ambitions accelerated the government's sense of urgency to finally crush the Fiuman experiment.

According to Mario D'Annunzio, who accompanied his father to Fiume, after Gabriele proclaimed the Regency of Carnaro on September 8th, “plans were studied for a march from Fiume which, along the Ancona coast, could lead the Legionaries to Rome and the conquest of power. My father had even given the idea a motto: ‘From Italy let us

³¹ Rhodes, 223.

³² *Ibid.*, 226.

³³ *Ibid.*, 233.

navigate to Italy!³⁴” Further territorial acquisitions by an unruly mob and unpredictable dictator, whose autonomy was recognized by the Soviet Union, proved too much for the Italian government. At the time the Italian land forces were demoralized and were likely to join D’Annunzio’s forces. Enrico Caviglia, the commander of the Italian blockade, wrote in *The Conflict of Fiume* that

D’Annunzio’s aim was less to liberate Fiume from the Yugoslav danger, than to place himself at the head of a revolutionary movement based politically on Fiume, and militarily on the armed force in Venetia Giulia, with whom he hoped to make a march on Rome. The morale of our troops at the time rendered this perfectly feasible. Nor, at that moment, would there have been much resistance from troops in the rest of the peninsula.

The Nitti government, unable to effectively rally its units against D’Annunzio and Fiume, collapsed and was replaced by the old statesman Giolitti, who forced the surrender of D’Annunzio through an amphibious assault on the city. So on December 29th 1920, after five days of naval bombardments and a few casualties, Gabriele D’Annunzio, himself injured by shrapnel after mortars were aimed at his palace, surrendered to the Italian Navy:

In full confidence and goodwill, I leave the people of Fiume the sole arbiters of their destiny. We are proud to have given our blood, to have shown our devotion to a people of such pure and elevated character. I am today, as in the night of the Ronchi march, the Chief of the Legionaries. Only my courage is left me. I wait now for the people of Fiume to ask me to leave the city to which I came only for its salvation. I leave to it only my dead, my sadness, and my victory.

The Fiuman experiment lasted little over a year from September 1919 to December 1920.

Government and Constitution of Fiume

Its constitution, *Carta del Carnaro*, was written only three months before the surrender of D’Annunzio and his forces. Nevertheless, Fiume’s impact on contemporary

³⁴ Rhodes, 247.

political movements, especially fascism, and the uniqueness of its government can be neither over-studied nor understated.

D'Annunzio's administration of Fiume requires especial attention for three reasons: It provides the first semi-functioning example of ochlocracy, or mob rule, in the 20th century, it foreshadows subsequent populist movements that either threatened to overhaul an established government (like Codreanu's Legion of the Archangel Michael) or successfully dominated a liberal democracy (like Mussolini's Fascism and Hitler's National Socialist Worker's Party), and it highlights the ideals and priorities of disgruntled nationalists in the aftermath of the First World War.

Alceste de Ambris' famous anarco-syndical-futurist constitution of Fiume was not written until September 1920, three months before the fall of the city. Until the city's ambiguous charter was written, D'Annunzio led the people of Fiume through public assemblies which declared the general will of the city. These assemblies resembled the plebiscite elections held in Nazi Germany after 1934 when Adolf Hitler consolidated power through his euphemistically named Gleichschaltung. Like in later Nazi Germany, the will of the people was uncovered through public speeches and mass democratic participation in state-sponsored ceremony. Of course, the general will nearly always aligned with the express wishes of the approved speakers. There was no parliamentary debate on issues nor a formal vote; instead, citizens would assemble in public areas of Fiume and express their concern to D'Annunzio. These concerns then determined the city's subsequent policies.

Certainly these discussions would have been driven by the skilled rhetoric of D'Annunzio. They were often preceded by song and dancing, which formed an amorphous

state religion, and marked by flowery speeches by D'Annunzio to elicit feverish devotion from the townsfolk for his personal cult. Much of D'Annunzio's political life in Fiume revolved around ceremony and mass participation in state events. Besides communal banquets and balls, D'Annunzio encouraged citizens to listen to his daily addresses from his balcony and to adopt symbolic gestures like the Roman salute.

Until September 1920, D'Annunzio ruled effectively as dictator of Fiume and its suburban satellites. Given his frequent correspondence with Mussolini throughout 1919³⁵, disdain for the liberal democratic Italian government, and employment of a personal army, many scholars refer to D'Annunzio's rule over Fiume exclusively in terms of fascism; however, it's equally valuable to distinguish D'Annunzio's Fiume from Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany.

Fascism involves the reinvigoration of a national spirit, usually accomplished via brutal suppressions of socialists and communists. It arises within a state and forms state-like organs that operate parallel to official institutions;³⁶ it seeks to replace inutile government flabbiness with force and brawn. D'Annunzio's expedition sought to fill none of these rules, except perhaps the latter: it failed to direct the youthful stormtroopers' anger against socialists nor communists—in fact, it welcomed support from the Soviet Union; it did not operate parallel to the Fiuman state but functioned as the state; and its stated goal, regardless of earnestness, was to re-occupy Italian land to be administered by the liberal Italian government.

Although the Fiuman experiment cannot be properly termed a fascist project, it certainly inspired subsequent fascists and their actions. Earlier in 1919, Benito Mussolini

³⁵ Fascism was founded in April 1919, five months prior to the march on Ronchi.

³⁶ Cf. Nazi Germany's People's Court with the Weimar judicial system.

formed the first fascist party out of the anxieties and anger of anti-communist Italians. The shocking success of the Soviet Union reverberated throughout post-WWI Europe so that many governments, especially those with majority Socialist and liberal coalitions, believed the spread of Bolshevism to be inevitable. As a result, workers' strikes became more frequent, landowning farmers feared illiberal land seizures, and business owners foresaw a collapse in productivity. Mussolini understood these social anxieties and capitalized on them.

Mussolini formed *squadristas*, or brigades, of former stormtroopers, his fabled blackshirts. Through a campaign of castor oil, torture, and outright murder, these blackshirts organized in small units throughout Italy to punish striking laborers and eliminate socialist groups, which had paralyzed Italian agrarian production. With the employment of *arditi* stormtroopers and rabid nationalist sentiments, the comparisons with D'Annunzio's fighting column stop. It would also be an error to assume that D'Annunzio's expedition was solely staffed by fascists. Clearly fascists approved of the expedition, but D'Annunzio's warm relationship with the socialists of Genoa show the diversity among Italian nationalists within his movement.

Nevertheless, many of those who returned from Fiume's ignoble defeat in 1920 enlisted in Mussolini's fascist lists, including the Jewish politician Aldo Finzi³⁷ and the father of Fiume's constitution, Alceste de Ambris³⁸. Mussolini copied certain key actions of D'Annunzio for his own political ends. He understood that D'Annunzio's proximity with the people impelled the masses to engage in ceremony and assemblies, which

³⁷ The future undersecretary of Labor for the Fascist Party and even served in parliament as an elected Fascist.

³⁸ He later left the Party and became a vociferous opponent of Mussolini's fascism shortly before the March on Rome, not before co-authoring the Fascist Manifesto with futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

maintained nationalist fervor and momentum. It is no coincidence that the former schoolteacher would soon be internationally recognized for his balcony addresses, colorful uniforms, Achillean cry,³⁹ and Roman salutes.

D'Annunzio derived energy and youth⁴⁰ from the ceremony he introduced to Fiume. Theatrics defined the Fiuman state and D'Annunzio wished his daily showmanship and poetic lifestyle to define the Fiuman state. As a result, in September of 1919 Gabriele D'Annunzio and Alceste de Ambris co-authored the constitution of Fiume and published it on 27 August in 1920 under the title *Carta del Carnaro*. The authors split responsibilities over crafting the document; de Ambris, a socialist syndicalist, outlined the affairs of government to follow a corporatist model, and D'Annunzio provided poetic flair to the text and probably authored a few sections himself.⁴¹

The lyrical constitution defines the social, legal, economic, and religious framework of the Regency of Carnaro. It is comprised of sixty-five articles separated by twenty-one subheadings and outlines the authors' vision and administration for Fiume; it also reveals the philosophical underpinning that the motley crowd of futurists, romantics, and nationalists had for a new society. Selections from the Charter sufficiently illustrate that this document prioritizes the nation over individuality, aesthetics over pragmatism, and the general will over liberal values. In addition to these three emphases which stand in stark contrast to the prevailing values of other Western European nations, including Germany and Italy, the following selections will show the progressiveness of

³⁹ Eia, eia, eia, alala! Was first adopted by D'Annunzio for his fighter squadron during the War.

⁴⁰ He was already 57 years old when he marched on Fiume.

⁴¹ Sections I,XI, XX, and XXI were almost certainly written exclusively by D'Annunzio.

D'Annunzio's politics in 1919 and proof of his growing fondness for leftist socialists and communists.

This insight into what D'Annunzio and de Ambris envisioned as the ideal state in post-WWI Europe foreshadows the goals that Mussolini and his fascists would have for Italy.⁴²

The Carta begins with a Latin epigraph that repeats the city's motto: *Quis contra nos?* It then declares the general will of Fiume, asserting its sovereignty as an Italian exclave on three claims: its history, geographical location, and on an ambiguously worded Roman right.⁴³ This introduction stresses the *romanità* of Fiume and its incongruity with the other Balkan states. The clear nationalist symbolism and invocations to Italy likely serves to unite the variegated political opinions of the different nationalists who followed D'Annunzio to Fiume.

The proceeding chapters outline the administration of Fiume and contain provisions that span the entire ideological spectrum from radically leftist to anarchist to statist, all united under a traditionalist Roman conservative spirit. II. 6 states that "all citizens of the State, of both sexes are equal, and feel themselves equal in the eye of the law." And then, in II. 8, "The Constitution guarantees to all citizens of both sexes: primary instruction...paid work with a fair minimum living wage; assistance in sickness," etc. Besides the statements' progressiveness on women,⁴⁴ they call for a welfare state more advanced than anywhere else in post-war Europe. Then in a direct assault on

⁴² Although this applies to Mussolini's early ideological goals, his co-option by the normative and conservative factions of Italy rendered Il Duce more mainstream. See Robert O. Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism* 132-148.

⁴³ Carta del Carnaro. I.I

⁴⁴ Italy would not give women the right to vote until 1945.

European liberalism, the Carta, in II. 9, exclaims that “the State does not recognize the ownership of property as an absolute and personal right, but regards it as one of the most useful and responsible of social functions.”

The final provision of the second section declares Fiume’s three articles of belief: “life is a good thing; a true man is he who...renews the dedication of his manhood to his fellowmen; labour...adds to the beauty of the world.” Filippo Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism*, which sings the “love of danger, habit of energy and fearlessness,” and glorifies “war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism” seems to be echoed in these provisions. The Charter’s assertion about labor was undoubtedly influenced by Futurists’ belief that there is no more beauty “except in struggle.”

What sets the Regency of Carnaro apart from other governments is its organization into ten distinct economic groupings, or corporations. IV. 18-19 describes these corporations’ functions as representations of the “aspiration and effort of the people...towards material and spiritual advancement.” Each laborer’s occupation places him into one of the nine corporations with a tenth reserved “for the mysterious forces of progress and adventure.” Enrico Corradini’s right-wing Italian Nationalist Association would later adopt this model for economic progress, proclaiming that “Nationalism believes that the syndicate must become the basis of economic life and wants to bring this about.⁴⁵”

The Charter introduced some anarchist, or at least libertarian, ideals through its conception of a commune. The communes were assemblies of the people without general oversight by the government; they exercised normative power and “all powers not

⁴⁵ Associazione Nazionalista Italiana, in *Il nazionalismo* Rome, ANI, 1920. 8.

specially assigned by the Constitution.⁴⁶” In the event of bedlam or outright revolt, the Executive would restore law and order only if “the communal authorities agreed in requesting it to do so, if a third of the citizens exercising political rights in the commune itself should make the request.⁴⁷”

Ultimately, the Charter establishes legislative, judicial, and executive power that relies on neither normative nor common law principles to direct its citizenry. Section IV delineates the roles of the legislature, comprised of a Council of Senators and a Council of Provvvisori.⁴⁸ The Senate, whose members were elected proportionately, was set to meet once a year “in the month of October, for a short definite sitting,” and had authority over the penal and civil code of Fiume.⁴⁹ The Council of Provvvisori, on the other hand, met twice in a year in May and November, when it debated in a very non-D’Annunzian manner of a “laconic method of debate.⁵⁰” Members from the corporations elected their own Provvvisori. On the first of December, the two houses of the legislature unite as a Grand National Council “under the title of Arengo del Carnaro” for the sake of discussing foreign affairs, constitutional reform, extensions of liberty, and budgetary needs.⁵¹

The Executive branch is composed of seven ministers appointed by the legislature, each holding equal power with the Prime Minister casting a tie-breaking vote in a *primus inter pares* manner.⁵² The Carta separates the Judiciary between elected magistrates, who resolve petty crimes within the commune, Labour judges who resolve disputes between employers and workers, and then the High Court, which “adjudicates on

⁴⁶ V. 22.

⁴⁷ V. 25.

⁴⁸ VI. 27.

⁴⁹ VI. 30.

⁵⁰ VI. 32.

⁵¹ VI. 33.

⁵² VII. 35. Cf. with the Executive Council of Switzerland.

all questions civil, commercial, and penal which are not dealt with” by the lesser judges.⁵³

Section IX of the Charter was likely the only portion of the constitution that was implemented by D’Annunzio occupied Fiume. Devoted to the roles of the Commandant, this portion was realized by D’Annunzio’s actions from the moment he captured Fiume until his Bloody Christmas abdication.⁵⁴ The Charter allows for temporary dictatorial rule in times of “extreme peril,” “not forgetting that in the Roman Republic the dictatorship lasted six months.”⁵⁵ This nod to Roman rule is intentional, reinforcing the historical ties of Fiume to the Roman Empire. The Commandant’s powers are absolute and assessed by the National Council at the end of the Commandant’s allotted term.⁵⁶

The novelties and innovation of the Charter are balanced by its benefits to citizens. Unlike traditional conservative states that dominated Europe before World War I, Fiume’s constitution emphasized the benefits of citizenship and forsook the old values of hierarchy, tradition, religion.⁵⁷ In section X the Charter promises that “the State adopts the children of all citizens who are killed in defense of their country, assists their families in distress, and commends to the memory of future generations the names of the fallen.”⁵⁸ Further, the citizenry is tied to constitutional reform: if one third of the citizens make a request for reform, then national debate will consider the inquiry,⁵⁹ and the citizenry may

⁵³ VIII. 38-40.

⁵⁴ The surrender of Fiume to the Italian Navy shortly after Christmas earned this epithet from D’Annunzio himself.

⁵⁵ IX. 43.

⁵⁶ IX. 44-45.

⁵⁷ Recall the famous slogan of Tsar Alexander III of Russia: “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.”

⁵⁸ X. 48.

⁵⁹ XII. 55.

initiate legislative proposals with approval from one-fourth of the Great National Council.⁶⁰

The Charter places great emphasis on the education of the citizens. Section XI is written poetically,

for any race of noble origin, culture is the best of all weapons...Culture is the preservation against corruption; the buttress against ruin...The culture of Rome must be here in our midst and the culture of Italy. For this cause the Italian province of Carnaro makes education—the culture of her people—the crown and summit of her Constitution, esteems the treasure of Latin culture as the foundation of her welfare.⁶¹

It calls for a “free University, housed in a spacious building...to choose the best students from among the good and to assist the best in the discovery of new possibilities in the rendering of human sentiment.⁶²” These schools are under direct supervision by the State; they maintain a rigid secularism without “any emblems of religion or of political parties;”⁶³ and they were “well lighted and ventilated” with artwork of Italian masters on the walls.

D’Annunzio, obsessed with the beautification of his surroundings,⁶⁴ stipulated in the Charter for a College of Aediles, “wisely selected from men of taste, skill, and a liberal education.⁶⁵” Their duties were to promote a “new architecture” for the city and

⁶⁰ XIII. 56.

⁶¹ XI. 50.

⁶² XI. 51.

⁶³ XI. 52-54.

⁶⁴ Vide Anthony Rhodes’ Chapter “Vittoriale degli Italiani” in his *D’Annunzio: The Poet as Superman*.

⁶⁵ XX. 63.

“to provide for the decorum of life; secure the safety, decency, sanitation of public edifices, and private dwellings” among other tasks to perfect the city.

D’Annunzio and de Ambris wished to elevate and re-invigorate the citizens of Fiume. In the final section of the Charter, they declare that “music is a social and religious institution” and that “in the pauses of music is heard the silence of the tenth corporation.”⁶⁶ Music was tied to progress, like Italian Futurist ideology, de Ambris and D’Annunzio wrote that “in the noisy machines which, even they, fall into a poetical rhythm, music can find her motives and her harmonies:” the prioritized pragmatism over luxury. The Charter’s last provision stipulates that every commune would have a choral society and orchestra, whose “celebrations will be entirely free—in the language of the Church—a gift of God.⁶⁷” The open access to public events would inevitably further encourage widespread participation in government-sponsored ceremonies.

Despite the early demise of Fiume, likely preceding any opportunity to fully implement the Charter, its influence on later Italian Fascist and Nazi German politics was substantial. In Benito Mussolini’s 1932 *Doctrine of Fascism*, he outlines his economic vision and priorities for Italy. In the essay, Mussolini advocates a total reorganization of the Italian workforce into distinct corporations which work in harmony to provide for the needs of the entire state.⁶⁸ Early Nazi purists advocated the same. These economic ends of fascism and Nazism originated directly from De Ambris’ and D’Annunzio’s Carta.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ XXI. 64.

⁶⁷ XXI. 65.

⁶⁸ Mussolini, Benito. *The Doctrine of Fascism*. Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1935.

⁶⁹ Since neither Fascist nor Nazi party could attain a complete legislative majority, they both failed to implement the radical economic policies of D’Annunzio in order to ally themselves to their respective country’s conservative-bloc.

Further, the direct involvement of both regimes in private citizens' lives also derived from the Carta.

Literary Context

Despite D'Annunzio's exciting military exploits and fascinating contributions to the Italian nationalist movement, his political innovations are largely neglected by biographers. The authoritative French biography, *D'Annunzio* by Philippe Jullian, focuses on Gabriele as a poet and man whose actions were largely driven by artistic expression. Even J.R. Woodhouse's work, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: Defiant Archangel* reviews D'Annunzio's literary texts and their impact on modern writers without much discussion on political themes. Understandably, the birth of Mussolini's Fascism in 1919 overshadows the *impresa di Fiume* for historians.

Nevertheless, some writers energetically trace fascism's success to D'Annunzio's conquest of Fiume: the most notable examples are Lucy Hughes-Hallett's *The Pike* and Anthony Rhodes' *D'Annunzio: Poet as Superman*. Unfortunately, even these biographies miss the mark of D'Annunzio's significance. Mrs. Hughes-Hallett mistakenly denigrates D'Annunzio as a right-wing politician and ardent fascist; Anthony Rhodes minimizes D'Annunzio's genuine nationalist fervor and attributes his actions to a florid case of megalomania.

This essay hopes to correctly identify D'Annunzio as a skilled orator with profound nationalist convictions. Mussolini recognized D'Annunzio's ability to rouse reach mass groups of Italians from across the political spectrum and social strata, and adopted his mannerisms. Moreover, similarities between the two in public speech have been mistaken for political equivalents.

Conclusion

Gabriele D'Annunzio, blinded by nationalist ecstasy, seized Fiume and its environs for the glory of Italy. Dismay over the Nitti government's refusal to accept the annexation of Fiume impelled the poet-adventurer to rule over a large municipality that was plagued by resource shortages. To worsen the scene, D'Annunzio was unable to secure aid from fellow nationalist groups like Mussolini's sympathetic fasci, and the Italian Navy blockaded the harbor to force a capitulation. Rejected by friends and country, D'Annunzio turned to his own poetic promise for direction and, with Alceste de Ambris, engineered a modern government that was supported almost entirely by the patriotic energies of Fiuman Italians.

D'Annunzio created a constitution that codified a nationalist revolution; conservative and liberal principles were violated to create the *Carta del Carnaro*. Most essential for the welfare of the State was the promotion of arts, learning, and music; property and individuality were cast aside in favor of labor, civic duty, and productivity. The effect of Fiume, D'Annunzio had hoped, would be a regeneration of the Italian spirit; after Dalmatia D'Annunzio would march on Trieste and then Rome to revive Italian grandeur. Perhaps Fiume revealed the willingness of Italians for a political revolution because Mussolini's unorganized fasci would soon march on Rome and force a change in government.

D'Annunzio proffered Fiume's resignation only after he saw that a prolonged bombardment would result in the massacre of his fellow Fiumans. The demagogic leaders Mussolini and Hitler would improve on this by gambling their lives and those of their party members for positions in conservative governments. Had D'Annunzio refused to

surrender or executed his march on Trieste, his revolution might have percolated throughout Italy. Nevertheless, D'Annunzio proved to his contemporaries that a nationalist cause, fueled by demagogic rhetoric, mass participation, and ceremony, could overthrow governments and accomplish political goals. Fascists and Nazis adopted the ceremony of this system and its mass appeal and improved on them for greater success: in contradistinction to D'Annunzio's regime, both fascist and Nazi parties organized institutions that operated parallel to their liberal democracies' equivalent and engaged in wide-spread terror against perceived internal enemies, usually socialists and communists.

Whether a Gabriele D'Annunzio could exist today is a topic that many theorists attempt to answer. Osbert Sitwell, an Englishman who lived in Fiume during the Regency, once described D'Annunzio as a poet more accomplished than Byron. To imagine a celebrity of such popularity committing to as radical a project as annexing a foreign city may not be the least attainable requisite for a modern-day D'Annunzio. His incredible successes in literature and Mussolini's lasting rule over Italy dissuade biographers from treating D'Annunzio as an independent political force. Nevertheless, what was essential to D'Annunzio's success as an authoritarian dictator was the widespread scorn for liberal democracy and its failures, a recent national humiliation, and intense nationalist sentiment is also essential for fascism to prosper. If one could imagine each of these conditions occurring, then one could envision an environment that would welcome another Gabriele D'Annunzio. If selective violence were tolerated, then fascism and Nazism could also return.

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