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## Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Culture of Violence

(Was the Italian soldier-poet a liberator?

Or a warning of the dark times to come?)

**The problem with the exhibition's view of D'Annunzio is that if you take the libertarian bits and leave out the rest, you can have any kind of D'Annunzio you want.**

The exhibition opens with a beautifully-restored Fiat T-4, its burnished maroon surface shimmering seductively under the angled lights. This was the car in which Gabriele D'Annunzio entered the city of Rijeka in the early morning of September 12 1919. A glass case nearby displays D'Annunzio's goggles and car-coat, the latter looking surprisingly well-pressed, as if waiting to be taken out onto the catwalk in a retro-futurist fashion show.

Speed. Adventure. Uniforms. We are in the opening room of “Disobbedisco” (“I disobey”), an exhibition celebrating the centenary of D'Annunzio's march on the Adriatic port city of Rijeka.

The exhibition is housed in a series of metal containers that stand in the middle of Il Salone degli incanti, Trieste's magnificent, cathedral-like former fish market, and it will run until November 3 2019. Indeed you can hardly miss it, with red “Disobbedisco” banners running the length of the city's Riva del Mandracchio, beckoning you onwards towards the show.

The question of Rijeka (Fiume to its Italian inhabitants, who were in the majority of the city centre but not in the suburbs) was one of the issues that agitated Italian society the most in the summer of 1919. Until recently part of the Austro-Hungarian



**In D'Annunzio's Rijeka everybody wore a uniform (exhibit in "Disobbedisco" exhibition, Trieste)**

Empire, the ethnically mixed port on the eastern shores of the Adriatic had not been listed in the 1915 Treaty of London as one of the cities to be offered to Italy at the war's end. It had been earmarked instead as part of the nascent kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (more popularly known as Yugoslavia), and indeed a Croatian administration had been briefly installed in the town for a few weeks of in November 1918. Rijeka's Italian community threw the Croats out, and agitated for inclusion in the Italian state instead. They were backed by units of the Italian army, who nevertheless had to share peacekeeping duties with contingents of French, British and American troops. Rijeka's ultimate fate was to be decided by the international diplomats then meeting at Versailles.

### **The Renegade City**

What concerned Italian nationalists the most in 1919 was the fear that the country would fail to take advantage of its victory in World War I, losing out on Adriatic territories coveted by nation-building politicians for decades. Nationalist elements

in Rijeka itself had spent the summer of 1919 casting around for a figurehead who would lead an armed expedition to the city, declare its union with Italy, and present the international community with a *fait-accomplis*. They also hoped that the seizure of Rijeka would encourage nationalist elements elsewhere in Italy to stage a nationwide uprising, overthrowing a Rome government that seemed weak in its promotion of national interests, and smashing the Italian socialist movement at the same time. The figurehead that emerged was Gabriele D'Annunzio, the flamboyant writer and national ideologue who had campaigned for Italy's intervention in World War I, and gone on to serve with flamboyant distinction in both army and air force. D'Annunzio marched into Rijeka on September 12 1919 at the head of some 200-300 volunteers, a number soon swelled by thousands of deserters from the regular army. Installed as the unlikely leader of a renegade city, he sat back to see how the politicians of Europe would react.

D'Annunzio's 16-month rule over Rijeka has always divided opinion. On one hand he is the proto-fascist, the man whose repertoire of uniforms, parades and balcony speeches was enthusiastically adopted by Benito Mussolini. Others however see him as a libertarian, a revolutionary, a man whose forthright nationalism had an emancipatory effect on people frustrated by the ineffectuality and corruption of the politicians in Rome.

The exhibition in Trieste clearly takes the latter view. "The Fiume Enterprise was not a fascist action" are the opening words of the exhibition flyer, which goes on to suggest that the enterprise may have well have started with nationalism, but ended up as an exercise in revolutionary democracy.

The exhibition's approach to D'Annunzio is stirring, inspirational even, but also opportunistic, exploiting a contemporary taste for national self-celebration (and not just in Italy) to present an airbrushed account of an enterprise that was actually much more complex.

### **The Bitter Adriatic**

The exhibition's narrative thrust starts with D'Annunzio's confrontation with the Italian General Pittalugha at the entrance to Rijeka on the morning of September 12 1919. It was a Crossing-of-the-Rubicon moment, when the poet famously disobeyed the general's order to halt. It makes for a dramatic opening, but also takes D'Annunzio's Rijeka enterprise out of its historical context. We see D'Annunzio the rebel,

thumbing his nose at the authorities, rather than getting any explanation of how, if at all, the poet's march on a disputed city might be politically or morally justified. What we get instead is a curatorial conjuring trick in which a political story is told, but with the actual politics taken out.

The exhibition's curator, Giordano Bruno Guerri, is general director of the Vittoriale, D'Annunzio's lavish former home above the western shores of Lake Garda. Guerri knows the D'Annunzio archives inside out – indeed his recent book *Disobbedisco: cinquecento giorni di rivoluzione* (published in March, it is in many ways a companion to the exhibition) is a mine of fascinating detail, and takes us into the heart of D'Annunzio's court. However Guerri is careful about which parts of the story he tells, leaving us with a feel-good D'Annunzio who did his best for Italy and left a positive, idealistic legacy.

D'Annunzio's position as an unapologetic Italian nationalist is treated fairly and frankly in the notes that accompany the exhibition. The effect that such nationalism had on other people, however, is largely left to our imagination. Captions state clearly that Rijeka in 1919 belonged to a multicultural milieu in which Italians did not have an absolute majority, but we don't get to find out much about what happened to that multicultural milieu after D'Annunzio took charge. D'Annunzio, we read, was convinced of the "superiority of Latin culture." The question of superiority over whom is simply left unanswered.

The politics of national superiority were central to D'Annunzio's appeal right from the start. His belief in the essential Latinity of the eastern Adriatic (and, by extension, the unsuitability of anyone other than Italians to rule over it) was crucial to his campaign in favour of Italian intervention in World War I. Articles such as *La très amère Adriatique* ("The Bitter Adriatic"; published in *Le Figaro* in April 1915) argued, with typical poetic flourish, that the Adriatic was Italy's God-given sea. After the war, when it became clear that the maximalist demands of Italian nationalists might not be met, he argued (quite implausibly given the ethnic makeup of the area) that the whole of Dalmatia was a legitimate Italian aspiration. His *Lettere ai Dalmati* ("Letter to the Dalmatians"; by "Dalmatians" he meant the minority Italian-speaking population of Dalmatia, not the majority Slavs) of January 1919 claimed not only Rijeka for Italy, but the whole of Dalmatia including Zadar, Šibenik, Split and Trogir. These themes were reiterated in speeches at Venice in April 1919 and Rome in May, suggesting powerfully to Italian post-war audiences that they had been unjustly robbed of their Adriatic destiny.

## The “Cause of Fiume”

D'Annunzio's condescending attitude to the people who actually lived on the eastern Adriatic is summed up by his Appeal to the Croats, published in Rijeka newspaper *La Vedetta d'Italia* on October 5 1919, in which called the Adriatic “a Latin sea, on which the Slavs have full right to an economic outlet.” He went on to describe Croatia as a “Danubian nation”, as if its people didn't have any historical connection with the sea.

Once in charge of Rijeka, the exhibition notes tell us, D'Annunzio initiated a “new way of doing politics, based on the centrality of the commander”, involving mass meetings, propaganda, and “the marginalization of opponents.” Who were the opponents and how were they marginalized, you may ask. In September 1919 Zagreb's *Jutarnj list* was reporting that Croatia residents of Rijeka had been roughed up by D'Annunzio's unruly volunteers, and the nearby town of Bakar was filling up with fugitives. The offices of Croatian-language newspaper *Primorske novine* were trashed. On October 17 D'Annunzio's administration issued a proclamation to the effect that all those elements hostile to the “cause of Fiume” should leave the city or be shot as traitors. As the Italian paper *Il Messaggero* pointed out, this would have entailed the summary shooting of not only any Slavs left in the city but of any left-wing Italians too.

The fact that nobody in the end did get shot is often cited as evidence that the D'Annunzio regime wasn't that bad, and doesn't deserve to be bracketed with the more ruthless variations on political nationalism that came in its wake. What D'Annunzio's apologists frequently fail to register however is the fact that intimidation is in itself a form of violence, and a regime which treats people of other national groups or other political beliefs as essentially disloyal is contributing to a culture of intolerance which, if not actually violent in itself, is at least pre-violent.

One of the things that Giordano Bruno Guerri does get right is his assertion that people were profoundly changed by World War I, and wanted to see a radically different society in the years that followed. One of the reasons why young Italians flocked to Rijeka during D'Annunzio's rule was because it was a utopia of accumulated negatives – it wasn't a decadent parliamentary democracy, it didn't have anything to do with socialism, it wasn't the vehicle of great power interests, and it wasn't run by religious conservatives – which basically meant that in Rijeka you could be whoever you wanted.

## Corporate states

The memoirs of Italian soldier Giovanni Comisso and others reveal that the young and the free really did congregate in Rijeka in 1919. They enjoyed a degree of sexual liberation (including tolerance of homosexuality) and a freedom of lifestyle that did not exist in Italy proper. Comisso (together with flamboyant pilot Guido Keller) founded avant-garde art magazine *Yoga*, while futurist Mario Carli came here to publish revolutionary organ *La Testa di Ferro*. Not for nothing did Italian cultural historian Claudio Salaris dub Rijeka's D'Annunzian period *La Festa della Rivoluzione*, as if it was a 500-day art performance.

Bearing in mind that D'Annunzio's Rijeka never had a functioning political or economic system, however, all this talk of its revolutionary impact rings rather hollow. The exhibition's assertion that D'Annunzio was an emancipatory figure who offered an alternative to Italy's parliamentary system rests largely on the *Carta del Carnaro* (Kvarner Charter), the manifesto-cum-constitution published in September 1920. Devised by Italian syndicalist Alceste de Ambris, and poetically enhanced by the pen of D'Annunzio himself, it promised a mixture of both direct democracy and corporatism (the organization of the population into groups defined by occupation); equal rights for all, regardless of sex, race, religion or class; and, in a typically D'Annunzian touch, a constitutionally-enshrined role for music in all spheres of life.

However the Charter is taken out of chronological context and presented as if it was one of the founding documents of the D'Annunzio regime, rather than a last desperate attempt at being taken seriously. The Charter was never put into practice, and the details of how it might work were never elaborated. The main reason for its publication was that the D'Annunzio's Rijeka was on its last legs, and in desperate need of new allies. The Charter would, its authors hoped, curry favour with the Italian left by demonstrating that D'Annunzio was not the conservative nationalist they thought he was. Unsurprisingly, the left spurned D'Annunzio's advances.

Ultimately the exhibition focuses far too much on Rijeka and far too little on the international context, leading one to believe that D'Annunzio's enterprise was a patriotic rebellion against an Italian government that was failing to pursue national interests. In fact the Italian government was following a decidedly nationalist agenda, and used its opposition to D'Annunzio's Rijeka adventure to cover up land grabs elsewhere in the eastern Adriatic. Hoping to put pressure on peacemakers assembled at Versailles and gain more territories in any resulting post-war treaties, the Italians

had embarked on a wholesale invasion of maritime Croatia in 1919. Italian troops marched inland as far as Knin, and occupied Dalmatian islands from Rab in the northwest to Korčula in the southeast. One Italian commander, inspired by D'Annunzio's example, tried to take control of Trogir on September 25 1919 but was, according to local newspaper reports at the time, chased out of town by lightly-armed locals. However much D'Annunzio may have been out of step with the Italian government in 1919, he was still one of the main ideologues of a widely-supported policy of colonial expansion.

### **D'Annunzi-me, D'Annunzi-you (a-ha)**

The problem with Disobbedisco's view of D'Annunzio is that if you are allowed to take the libertarian bits and leave out the rest, you can have any kind of D'Annunzio you want. His invasion of an ethnically complicated city, which he then proceeded to brandish as a political toy, can be explained away by the fact that he was a great artist, or because he was the mercurial animator of other people's desires.

A much more convincing account of the period is provided by Antonio Scurato's recent prizewinning novel *M: Il Figlio del Secolo*, a work of documentary fiction which puts D'Annunzio, Mussolini and other radicals in the context of Italy's volatile post-war political environment - and attempts to show how the actions of one influenced the ideas of the other. The way Scurato tells it, it wasn't just the uniforms and showmanship that Mussolini took from D'Annunzio, but also the culture of radical indignation that they both shared - dislike of Slavs and Socialists, the insistence on patriotic rectitude, the vitriolic language used to denounce opponents, and the promotion of radical democratic solutions that didn't actually have any genuinely democratic content.

Ultimately, the question of whether D'Annunzio was a fascist or not is the wrong question. Not even Mussolini knew what fascism was in 1919, and simply spent the next few years improvising an ideology out of the best available material. What's important is that D'Annunzio was a leading proponent of an unashamedly Latin imperialism that saw Slavs as a lesser culture, that he regarded military takeovers as superior to diplomacy, and that he saw the alchemic pseudo-democracy of popular acclaim as superior to any electoral parliamentary system.

The revisionism of today's Dannunzians doesn't just serve to legitimize the takeover of Rijeka in 1919, it also legitimizes Hitler's takeover of Austria in 1938, the



Serbian rebel takeover of the Krajina in 1990-91, or indeed Vladimir Putin's foisting of war upon the Donbas in 2014. All of the above were exercises in the pre-emption of peaceful conflict resolution, propelling radicals into power and ensuring that moderate voices were marginalized. The true legacy of D'Annunzio is border change and population redistribution, not life, love and freedom.

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## **Gabriele D'Annunzio e la cultura della violenza**

### **Il poeta-soldato italiano era un liberatore? O un avvertimento sui tempi bui che stanno per giungere?**

#### RIASSUNTO

L'articolo tratta sulla mostra „Disobbedisco”, allestita a Trieste in occasione del centenario della marcia di D'Annunzio su Fiume, che segnò l'inizio dell'occupazione di questa città, che durò fino al gennaio 1921. La mostra è stata allestita nel 2019, nell'ex mercato del pesce di Trieste, nella sala chiamata Il Salone degli incanti.

Le opinioni sui sedici mesi di D'Annunzio a Fiume sono sempre state divise. Da un lato, era un proto-fascista, un uomo il cui repertorio di discorsi dai balconi, le uniformi e le sfilate in strada fu poi adottato con entusiasmo da Benito Mussolini. Altri lo vedono come un libertario, un rivoluzionario, un uomo il cui sincero nazionalismo ha avuto un effetto liberatorio sulle persone frustrate dai politici romani inefficienti e corrotti.

Questa mostra a Trieste è ovviamente più vicina al secondo punto di vista. „L'avventura di Fiume non è stata un atto fascista”, è scritto nell'introduzione del volantino della mostra, che prosegue dicendo che tutto potrebbe essere partito da motivi nazionalisti, ma si è concluso come una sorta di esercizio della democrazia rivoluzionaria.

D'Annunzio è rappresentato nella mostra in modo molto vivido, come un uomo le cui opere sono fonte di ispirazione, appoggiando opportunisticamente le tendenze odierne verso l'auto-glorificazione nazionale (e questo non è il caso solo in Italia), quindi l'intera impresa di D'Annunzio è presentata in un modo abbastanza abbellito, sebbene la realtà fosse molto più complessa.

La mostra si concentra principalmente su Fiume, convincendoci che l'avventura di D'Annunzio era in realtà una rivolta nazionalista contro il governo italiano, che non si diffuse in nessun'altra parte del paese. Per quanto D'Annunzio fosse in disaccordo con le autorità italiane nel 1919., era comunque solo uno degli ideologi

della politica di espansione coloniale piuttosto largamente apprezzata.

Il problema con questa mostra su D'Annunzio è che si concentra solo sulle sue aspirazioni libertarie, e il resto viene trascurato. Quello che è importante è che D'Annunzio era uno dei principali sostenitori dell' imperialismo latino spudorato, che vedeva gli slavi come membri di una cultura inferiore, che preferiva colpi di stato militari alla diplomazia e preferiva una pseudo-democrazia alchemica di sostegno pubblico a qualsiasi sistema elettorale parlamentare. La vera eredità della politica di D'Annunzio è il desiderio di cambiare i confini e di sfollare la popolazione, non la vita, l' amore e la libertà.