



On the Road to Italian Fascism: The Fiume Affair and Global Politics

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ABSTRACT

Despite its relative obscurity beyond the realm of Italian history, the Fiume Crisis (1919-1920) is a critical juncture for the study of modern European history, international affairs, and the genesis of fascism in Italy. Following the conclusion of WWI, Italians felt betrayed by their Entente allies who did not deliver Italy the territorial expansion they promised. Gabriele D'Annunzio described this as a “mutilated victory” and seized upon the geopolitical instability following WWI by capturing the Croatian city of Fiume to deliver Italy some of the land it was promised. Although his reign in Fiume only lasted fifteen months, his actions inspired the likes of Benito Mussolini to use unilateral force to claim power in 1922. Thus, beyond representing a critical episode in fascism's history, Fiume is arguably the birthplace of Italian fascism.

Introduction

In many ways, World War I marked a watershed in Italian history, as it was Italy's first major war since its unification nearly half a century prior in 1871 when different states on the Italian Peninsula consolidated into one Italian state. However, despite Italy contributing a high proportion of soldiers, having a mortality rate higher than its alliance members, and fighting on a critical front against Austria-Hungary, Italy's contributions to WWI are often treated as a matter of secondary importance in the broader historiography of the period (Gibelli 2010, 464-465). Italy's allies also viewed Italy's wartime contributions as marginal because it did not directly fight their main enemy, Germany, supposedly making Italy undeserving of the territories it had been promised during the 1915 Treaty of London, which laid out the conditions for Italy joining the Entente and abandoning neutrality (Sullivan 1983). Many Italian nationalists took this view as a great offense and declared *vittoria mutilata* – that their victory had been tainted and mutilated by their allies failing to fulfill the terms on which Italy agreed to join the war and abandon its neutrality. Some of these same nationalists even decided to take matters into their own hands, and seized the Croatian port city of Fiume (now called Rijeka) – a city that was at least sixty percent ethnically Italian (US Department of State 1918, 443). By taking unilateral action and undermining Fiume's right to self-determination on a global stage, the Italian nationalists created a geopolitical crisis that paved the way for other authoritarians to enact imperialist regimes.

In this paper, I will examine how, as the

boldest and most blatant display of unilateral authoritarianism in Italian history up until that point, the Fiume Crisis was a turning point in twentieth century Italian political history. I will start by providing the diplomatic and political context that compelled Italy to enter WWI as well as define Italy's expectations for what it would receive territorially as a victor of the war. I will then establish a direct connection between Italy's expectations from the Treaty of London and its feeling of betrayal over its meager territorial gains from the Treaty of Versailles – the treaty that concluded WWI. I will go on to describe exactly what the Fiume Crisis was, how the international community reacted to it, and what the event meant to Italians. Lastly, I will argue that the Fiume Crisis established the foundation upon which Benito Mussolini later built his Fascist doctrine and eventual seizure of power.

Methodology

The existing body of literature concerning the Fiume Crisis primarily focuses on the general course of events and the flamboyant personality of Gabriele D'Annunzio – the famous Italian poet and ardent nationalist who led Italy's seizure of Fiume. I attempt to rectify this by discussing the political and diplomatic discourse surrounding the period. Moreover, while many historians connect the affair to Mussolini's March on Rome and fascism's success in Italy, they fail to situate the seizure of Fiume within a larger chain of events that includes Italy's entrance into WWI against the wishes of the Italian masses. Because there are many different angles one could use to study the Fiume

Crisis, in this paper I prioritized examining the event through a political lens because many of the diplomatic deliberations and criticisms of the event were recorded in English. Thus, documents such as treaties, official statements, and other miscellaneous governmental documents comprise the bulk of my documentary corpus.

A Mutilated Victory Will Mobilize the Masses

The Fiume Affair stands as the culmination of Italy's historic mistrust of other nations, its irredentist and imperial desires, and its sense of frustration and betrayal over its allies' failure to deliver the promises outlined by the Treaty of London. Prior to WWI, Italy had an extensive history of foreign domination and mistrust, with the peninsula frequently passing between its more powerful neighbours and always remaining under foreign control (Marcuzzi 2018, 101). After its unification which ended its period of geographic fragmentation, Italy entered into an alliance with its historic enemy, Austria-Hungary, to ensure its territorial integrity to the north and the east. The alliance constituted an attempt to choose "the stronger side," viewing any ally as a "potential future opponent" as well (101). This paranoid view of national security resulted in "a solid Italian mistrust of everyone," as Italian politicians remained split on which allies would prove the most politically expedient (101).

Italy maintained this paranoid mindset into the beginning of WWI, initially deciding to remain neutral and assess the different alliance networks that were embroiled in the conflict despite its existing ties to Germany and Austria.

However, eventually both the Entente – which included France, Britain, and Russia – and the Triple Alliance – which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire – approached Italy to entice it to join their side, and on April 26th, 1915, Italy agreed to join the Entente instead of its German and Austro-Hungarian allies. In doing so, Italy chose to prioritize its relationship with Great Britain who it relied on for imported raw materials rather than its allies to its north (Marcuzzi 2018, 103).

Italy's motivations for joining the war went beyond national security, with the promise of Italian irredentism and imperialism outlined in the Treaty of London also playing a major role. Irredentism greatly shaped nineteenth and twentieth century Italian nationalism, and the idea of a union of "unredeemed" lands with their Italian mother country became a major rallying cry for the Italian unification and its entrance into WWI (Hechter 2001, 84). The Treaty of London addressed Italian irredentist interests by promising Italy permission to annex territories with high concentrations of ethnic Italians, such as Trieste and Trentino and advanced Italy's imperial ambitions by promising it territories that would prove strategically advantageous for expanding its fledgling empire, such as the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea (The Treaty of London 1915, 1). The treaty also promised Italy a fair portion of any additional territorial conquests that may occur during the war in places like Africa and Anatolia (The Treaty of London 1915, 2). By acquiring "unredeemed" territories thought to be Italian at heart as well as new territories, Italy aimed to ensure its domination of the Med-

iterranean and Adriatic regions and become a considerable European power.

Due to these political aspirations, Italy accepted the terms of the Treaty of London and threw itself into the war effort, effectively opening an additional front against Austria-Hungary and accumulating significant death tolls. Italy lost approximately 680,000 men to the conflict, a mortality rate steeper than its British ally's (Gibelli 2010, 464). However, once the negotiations for the end of the war began, Italy found itself betrayed by its allies who did not ensure that it received the territories they promised. One of the major causes behind this development was US President Woodrow Wilson's formidable opposition to the Treaty of London, which he argued was invalid because of its secrecy (Wilson 1919, 761).

Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italy's most famous poet and flamboyant right wing nationalist, condemned Italy's WWI allies and in 1918 declared "*vittoria nostra, non sarai mutilata*" – translating roughly to "we will not let our victory be mutilated" (Sullivan 1983). D'Annunzio's statement would greatly shape Italy's perception of the war by asserting that his nation had not received compensation for the heavy price they paid during the war. His proclamation had two obvious consequences: it created a national mythos of betrayal and victimhood, and foreshadowed his eventual attempt to correct this betrayal by seizing what he believed rightfully belonged to his country – the city of Fiume.

Face of the Fiume Affair

Italian frustrations over the Treaty of Versailles and their mutilated victory culminated

in September 1919 when D'Annunzio and his "legion" of volunteers, most of whom were disgruntled veterans and right-wing nationalists, seized the Croatian city of Fiume (Wilcox 2018). One of the most effective ways to understand D'Annunzio's reign of Fiume is by analyzing the 1920 Charter of the Regency of Carnaro, the new constitution that separated Fiume and made it its own state. This founding document entailed a strange melding of ideologies, with the charter's sixty-five articles touching upon topics ranging from state-sponsored music, re-establishing Roman traditions, and "the culture of the Adriatic race" (O'Sullivan 1983, 202). In many ways, the charter proposed some progressive ideals, such as governmental accountability through the recall of elected officials, the constitutionally-enshrined right to petition their government, and "the Great National Council" which was set to meet every seven years "in a special conference to consider constitutional reforms" (198). D'Annunzio also incorporated elements of syndicalism, with his own, artistic twist, by creating a system of ten guilds for his citizens largely on the basis of their occupation. One of these guilds encompassed no specific trade and D'Annunzio described this guild as "reserved for the mysterious forces of progress and adventure" (197). With this provision, D'Annunzio created an elite class in Fiumian society reserved for intellectuals, artists, and the *Übermensch*, reflecting his devotion to Nietzsche and ancient Romans (Wilcox 2018).

Retrospectives on Fiume and D'Annunzio have since described his rule in greater detail, shedding light on how his blended constitution

affected the lives of Fiumians. Unsurprisingly, D'Annunzio often used violent methods to ensure the creation of his artistic utopia, with his paramilitary troops, who many viewed as the first iteration of Mussolini's Black Shirts, forcing their political enemies to consume castor oil, "a noxious laxative" (Burton 2019). The government also expelled ethnic Croats from the state, likely to establish the dominance of the "Adriatic race" and Italian culture. D'Annunzio noted "for any race of noble origin, culture is the best of all weapons" (O'Sullivan 1983).

D'Annunzio's assertion that Fiume belonged as a part of Italy actually had ample evidence to support it. Firstly, Fiume passionately asserted that it wanted to join with Italy, which Fiumians viewed as their "Mother Country" (US Department of State 1918, 443). It viewed itself as closely tied to the peninsula through their shared Roman heritage, with a Fiume representative stating, "the Wolf which nursed Romulus and Remus gave life also to our Fiume, now reborn to liberty... I repeat our oath: *Fiume shall be Italian*" (US Department of State 1918, 443-444). Moreover, the city had a long history connecting it more to Italy than to Croatia except for a nineteen-year period when Fiumians were "subjected forcibly against their will to Croatian domination" (US Department of State 1918, 444). Fiume had previously engaged in a violent revolt starting October 30th, 1919 against the Croats who annexed them following the demise of Austria-Hungary (US Department of State 1918, 444).

External Reactions to the Fiume Crisis

Much to his disappointment, D'Annunzio's time in Fiume ended in 1920 after Italy invaded the country and deposed his government. A lot of what contributed to the demise of D'Annunzio's reign in Fiume in 1920 was the external pressure – mainly from the United States – to end the Fiume Crisis. US President Wilson greatly influenced international law during his tenure as the commander in chief, meaning that he substantially shaped the discourse surrounding the Fiume Crisis and Italy's perceived misbehaviour. Wilson's flagship policy was his Fourteen Points – which were released nearly a year before the war's conclusion – in which he outlined his vision for the post-war new world order, founded on the basis of self-determination, limitation of imperialism, and, optimistically, world peace. He asserted in the preamble of the document that "the program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program" (Wilson 1918, 1). In addition, Wilson explicitly addressed Italy's fate, dedicating an entire point to the issue of Italian imperial ambitions. Point IX stated that "a readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality," reflecting Wilson's desire to create countries around a distinct ethnic core (Wilson 1918, 1).

Considering that Wilson had already viewed Italy's borders as an area ripe for conflict, it came as no surprise when he leapt to action to condemn D'Annunzio's exploits in Fiume. The United States – who entered the war nearly two years after their Italian allies – refused to recognize the Treaty of London, which Wilson decried as a "private" understanding between

imperial France, Britain, Russia, and Italy. He viewed the agreement as unfair considering that many states had joined the Entente since the signing of the treaty with no knowledge whatsoever of its existence (Wilson 1919, 761). Thus, Wilson believed that the Treaty of London provided Italy with no legal authority to seize Fiume.

After explaining why the Treaty of London was an illegitimate agreement, Wilson elaborated on why Italy's seizure of Fiume was unjust within the context of his conception of right and wrong. Firstly, Wilson viewed D'Annunzio's seizure as foreign tyranny. Wilson contended that placing the area under Italian rule would mean subjecting the region to foreign domination because he wrongfully believed the area to be predominately ethnically Croatian (Wilson 1919, 762). He went on to highlight that Fiume's port was critical to the commerce of the area, meaning that surrendering it to Italy would greatly harm the economy of that coastal region. Lastly, he believed that Italy no longer needed Fiume and the miscellaneous islands scattered throughout the Adriatic because it was no longer defending its extensive shoreline against Austrian naval attacks (762). However, according to Wilson's "Fourteen Points" and prioritization of self-determination, it made sense for Fiume to join Italy. The metropolitan area of the port city had an extremely high concentration of people who considered Italy their "Mother Country" (US Department of State 1918, 443). Thus, a "readjustment of the frontiers of Italy" in accordance with "clearly recognizable lines of nationality" would include the core of Fiume, but not the suburbs,

because estimates describe the population being up to eighty percent Italian in the center of Fiume (446). Moreover, correspondence between Wilson's secretary of state and the American ambassador to Italy describes the city as "Italian by blood, language, character and sentiment" (US Department of State 1918, 443). The ambassador goes on to add that the "vast majority of the inhabitants of Fiume... protest against being sacrificed without reason to what they claim now can be considered... Jugo-Slav imperialism." This quote reflects how the people of Fiume resented the growing Slavic imperialism resulting in the creation of Yugoslavia and preferred to become part of Italy (US Department of State 1918, 443). While Wilson's doctrine of self-determination and resistance to imperialism were very progressive views for any mainstream politician to have during this era, it bears mentioning that he applied these principles unevenly. He used his doctrine to condemn the Italians who stood lower within the European gradation of powers, but scarcely challenged the mighty British Empire who was far more guilty of the "crime" of imperialism.

Wilson's frustration with the secret nature of the Treaty of London placed France and Britain, the original signatories of the treaty, in a very awkward situation. Neither country wanted to anger Italy, they "were content to let Wilson bear the burden of the Italian quarrel, while they endeavoured to remain on good terms with both him and the Italians (Albrecht-Carrie 1966, 113). Both countries decided to remain out of the conflict, lacking any explicit policy about the fulfillment of the Treaty of London unlike their Italian and American allies, and not

wanting Italy to become competition by gaining territorial power (Albrecht-Carrie 1966, 113). While international reactions to the Fiume Crisis ranged from apathetic to apoplectic, Woodrow Wilson's indignant, albeit hypocritical, opinion ultimately affected the situation the most.

D'Annunzio and Mussolini

Many of the hallmarks of Italian fascism were present in D'Annunzio's political exploits, such as his extreme nationalism, promotion of conservative political values, and his willingness to use violence to achieve his political ends. D'Annunzio's entire political life was defined by extreme ethnic nationalism. He pushed Italy to enter WWI to win glory and then invaded Fiume to correct his country's humiliation. In Fiume, he emphasized the greatness of his Roman ethnicity by highlighting the great cultural accomplishments of Rome – ranging from antiquity, to the Renaissance, to his own personal contributions. He also asserted that Italian identity and greatness was based on blood. He tied Italy's fate to being “the long-awaited inheritor to the great Roman Empire.” Croats, unlike Italians, were not descended from Romans, and thus had no place in his new state, leading D'Annunzio to force ethnic Croats out of Fiume in order to create a homogenous state for Italians. He also maintained socially conservative views for much of his life, famously explaining that civilization had become “feminized and soft” which would not be accepted in his utopia; instead, he wanted men to become “fierce warriors once more” (Burton 2019).

Many aspects of D'Annunzio's political re-

gime reappeared several years later following Mussolini's ascent to power, but that does not mean that D'Annunzio was welcomed with open arms into the fascist inner circle. Instead, fascists attempted to distance themselves from the flamboyant D'Annunzio. Upon Mussolini's rise to power, his biographer and lover, Margherita Sarfatti, condescendingly referring to D'Annunzio's actions in Fiume as “marvelous exploits, all of them, marked by fire and daring and originality, but also... in the nature of mere episodes” (Sarfatti 1925, 6). Her attitude reflected how fascists viewed D'Annunzio's actions in Fiume as aspirational, but also of marginal importance. D'Annunzio himself recognized his influence on Mussolini's regime and wrote to Mussolini several weeks after his march on Rome in order to understand and challenge their schism. He wrote, “Is it not true that the best of the movement called ‘fascist’ was engendered by my spirit? Did I not announce today's national uprising forty years ago... So how can I be your enemy? And how can you be mine?” (D'Annunzio, 253).

One explanation for the questions D'Annunzio posed so emphatically could be that his exploits in Fiume, his charisma, and his noble Roman lineage made him a threat to Mussolini's claim to power. In the same way that Mussolini was able to woo thousands of Italians to the fascist cause with his impassioned speeches, D'Annunzio also created a potent cult of personality: “It was D'Annunzio's canny ability to transform politics into an aesthetic – even religious – experience that proved most prescient to Mussolini's rise. His narratives of bygone eras of glory, of virility expressed

through violence, whipped an alienated and fractious populace into frenzy. His blithe disregard for truth allowed him to create... his own reality” (Burton 2019). D’Annunzio’s ability to persuade the masses likely made him one of Mussolini’s most dangerous rivals, so in order to secure his base, Mussolini had to relegate the very man who inspired and enabled his movement to the sidelines.

Consequences & What Fiume Means

The Italian imperialist fiasco in Fiume is representative of two larger trends prevalent in this region of the Mediterranean – the emergence of fascism and the geopolitical instability in the region caused by the post-WWI collapse of empires. The Fiume Crisis is an important juncture for studying the genesis of Italian fascism because it fits into the larger pattern of authoritarianism that became popular during this era. While many historians identify Fiume as the “birthplace” of fascism and directly tie D’Annunzio’s actions to Mussolini’s March on Rome, there is strong evidence that ties Fiume to Italy’s entrance into WWI as well (Gumbrecht 1996, 256). The majority of the Italian populace in 1915 preferred neutrality to intervention in the Great War, but nationalists like D’Annunzio persuaded the government with their countless demonstrations that their opinions reflected that of the public. Historians have written that by going against the general will, Italy’s entrance into WWI “confirmed the notion that determined elites could overcome the passive majority,” a common characteristic of authoritarian governments (De Grand 2006, 609). D’Annunzio perpetuated this trend by cir-

cumventing democratic institutions and taking matters into his own hands to establish the Regency of Carnaro. This kind of approach and mindset culminated with Mussolini’s March on Rome which showed a similar flagrant disregard for the will of the people. However, Fiume’s place in the genesis of fascism should not be understated; D’Annunzio and his regime formulated much of the imagery and tactics that Mussolini harnessed in order to seize control of the Italian government.

The Fiume Affair also highlights the volatility that the Balkan region experienced due to its multiculturalism and the collapse of empires in Europe and the Middle East, epitomizing why the “Adriatic Question” remained a sticking point in European diplomacy. The Adriatic Question refers to the diplomatic uncertainty of the division of the northern Balkans following the demise of Austria-Hungary. Before WWI, much of the northeastern Balkan peninsula was included in the highly entrenched government of Austria-Hungary; when the Dual Monarchy dissolved, the Entente had to grapple with which groups to prioritize and how to resolve Italy and Yugoslavia’s competing claims (“The Adriatic Question 1919,” 3). D’Annunzio’s seizure highlighted the moral hazard of attempting to establish an ethno-state in the region due to the different ethnic groups living in close proximity to each other. In order to establish a truly Italian state, his government deported many Croats from their homes. Similar population exchanges occurred between the southern Balkan states and Anatolia in the wake of the Ottoman Empire’s demise, resulting in extensive bloodshed and heartache as ethnic minori-

ties were expelled from their homes (Gingeras 2009, 2). The population exchanges that occurred during the WWI era showed how the fall of an empire affects the lives of its ethnic minorities. Because of the Adriatic Question and D'Annunzio's authoritarian actions, the Fiume Affair stands at an interesting juncture in WWI history, embodying both the chronic instability caused by the fall of a multiethnic empire as well as the emergence of fascism – an ideology that would define the global political arena for years to come.

Conclusion

Italy is viewed by many historians as a minor player in WWI, but although it did not deal the fatal blow to Germany or Austria Hungary, its participation in the war is still of great importance to twentieth century European history because of how the war's outcome resulted in the genesis of fascism. Initially, Italy aspired to remain a neutral state, but when the Entente approached it with terms that would allow it to claim unredeemed lands, control the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, and gain more colonial territories, it decided to abandon its neutrality and throw itself into the conflict. However after WWI ended, it became increasingly clear to Italians that they would not get the terms the Entente promised despite their contribution to its victory, enraging many Italian nationalists who claimed their victory was mutilated. Gabriele D'Annunzio – Italy's famous poet with a penchant for political theatrics – looked eastwards to the port city of Fiume and decided to claim some of the unredeemed lands for his home country, forming the Regency of Carnaro

in 1919 and ushering in the diplomatic crisis known as the Fiume Affair.

During his reign in Fiume, D'Annunzio crafted a strange state which combined various progressive ideals with syndicalism and ethno-nationalism, ruling in a way that many historians now label as proto-fascist. Despite claiming to have created an artist's utopia, D'Annunzio relied heavily on deportations of local Croats, political violence, and a cult of personality to remain in power. However, Carnaro only stood for fifteen months before being toppled by the Italian Government in an attempt to establish good relations with Yugoslavia.

Likely the harshest critic of the Fiume Affair was Woodrow Wilson who condemned it as foreign rule that undermined Fiumian's right to self-determination – even though the vast majority of Fiumians actually preferred joining Italy. The Fiume Affair received mixed reactions from Italy itself, with the ultra-right simultaneously attempting to harness D'Annunzio's momentum and distance themselves from him, and the liberals holding responsibility for the demise of D'Annunzio's dream. While D'Annunzio's time in Fiume was short-lived, it is a critical juncture in Italian and European history that embodied both the geopolitical instability created from collapsed empires and the birth of fascism.

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