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Federico Carlo Simonelli

PhD Political history - Adjunct lecturer of Contemporary History (M-STO/04)
University of Urbino "Carlo Bo", Scuola di Lingue e letterature straniere, piazza Rinascimento 7,
61029 Urbino (PU) – Italy

**“THE LIONS’ RETALIATION”
D’ANNUNZIO AND THE ITALIAN NATIONALIST MYTHOLOGY IN DALMATIA
(1918-1921)¹**

Abstract

This paper examines how Dalmatia became a disputed land between Italy and the Kingdom of SHS at the end of the First World War and how this multi-ethnic region was represented in the Italian imaginary as an “unredeemed land”. In particular, it explains how this representation was part of the irredentist and nationalist mythology perfected by Gabriele d’Annunzio while leading the Italian volunteers in the occupation of the contended city of Rijeka/Fiume between 1919 and 1921. The “Fiume exploit” is known as a paramilitary crisis concentrated in the Kvarner gulf, the echo of which contributed to the rise of fascism in Italy. Analyzing d’Annunzio’s propaganda and its background, the paper proposes a critical interpretation in which the important role of Zadar and Split emerge in this mobilization. Moreover, it identifies the d’Annunzio’s main purpose in the annexation of the entire eastern Adriatic coast through military conquest, the cultural assimilation of non-Italian speaking communities, and the celebration of Dalmatia in a nationalist mystique which considered Italy as heir to the empires of Rome and Venice.

Keywords:

D’Annunzio; Fiume exploit; Fascism; WWI; Dalmatia

1. Dalmatia and Italian nationalism in front of the First World War

The participation of the Kingdom of Italy in the European War alongside the Triple Entente in May 1915 was the result of a violent debate in the Country between neutralists (for the most part socialists, Catholics, and a diverse coalition of moderate liberals) and interventionists (nationalists, liberals, democrat-socialists, revolutionary syndicalists). The victory of the interventionists was not only determined by a precise strategy of Antonio Salandra's government with the support of the king, but by an intense propaganda campaign in which the war against the Habsburg Empire was presented as the necessary final act of the national unification started in the XIX century, the so-called *Risorgimento* (Resurgence). This credo made it possible to present Italy's commitment to the Great War as a "Fourth war of independence”.

By signing the secret Treaty of London (26 April 1915), which sanctioned Italy's intervention alongside the Allies and Serbia, the Italian government obtained territorial promises deriving from both ideal and strategic reasons. In case of victory, Italy would have annexed Trento, Trieste, and Istria, territories of the Empire with a strong Italian-speaking presence and which were therefore

¹ This paper represents the draft of a branch of broader research on d'Annunzio's nationalist mythology on the Adriatic eastern coast and its consequences for the Italian imaginary. This research began with a PhD study focused on the construction of d'Annunzio's myth of Fiume/Rijeka, which I aim to extend to a long period analysis of contemporary European public memories from a comparative perspective. In this research stage, which still needs an official affiliation, I had the opportunity to meet Vjerman Pavlaković, who encouraged me to pursue this path. I would like to thank him and Darko Gavrilović for this invite. I am grateful to Carlo Leo, PhD candidate Literary studies KU Leuven, for the precious confrontations on common field of research while I was working on this paper.

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traditionally known in the national imaginary as "unredeemed lands" (terre irredente), whose annexation would have allowed the definitive unification of the Country. In addition, Italy would have obtained some Adriatic islands and northern Dalmatia, including the city of Zadar/Zara.

The Italian government requested Zara and its hinterland for strategic reasons: the linguistic justifications (there was a large and ancient Italian-speaking community) were pressing but of secondary importance to foreign minister Sidney Sonnino, who aimed to create a balance of power on the Adriatic sea between the Empire (of which he did not imagine the dissolution) and a stronger Italy.

Despite the ancient cultural connections between Kvarner and Dalmatian coasts and the Italian peninsula, and despite the presence of autonomist Italian-speaking movements (and later irredentist pro-Italian groups) who fought the illirist and yugoslavist movement and militated for secession from the Habsburg Empire, the Italian public opinion came to consider these regions as "unredeemed lands" only by the end of the First World War.

Moreover, not everyone in Italy agreed on the need for the annexation of Dalmatia. This disagreement was due to the multiethnicity of the region, recognized both by the patriotic intellectuals in Italy and by the Dalmatian Italian-speaking autonomist élite. Nevertheless, the local clash between autonomism and Croatian patriotism and the territorial disputes following the collapse of the Empire radicalized the nationalist debate about the authentic national identity of Dalmatia: was it a Slavic or Italian land?

In Italy, the idea of annexing Dalmatia as a "purely Italian land" was fiercely propagated by the Italian Nationalist Association (Associazione Nazionalista Italiana), a party founded in 1911 that aspired to make Italy a colonial, industrial and cultural power.

The ideology of this new Italian right found its most prestigious mouth in the writer Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938). He can be considered one of the first European "superstars" of the Belle époque: besides being a renowned author of poems, dramas, and psychological novels, he was famous for his luxurious life as an aristocratic dandy and latin lover.

With the new century, he also became well-known for his endorsement of an imperialist policy inspired by an idealized American past of the Italian people. Several of his works orbit around the need for a power policy in the Mediterranean. In d'Annunzio's imperialism, the Italian-speaking communities of the eastern Adriatic coast represent tangible legacies of the roman and Venetian empires that a "Great Italy" must claim. This vision emerges in his historical drama *La Nave* (The Ship), published in 1907, set in a latin Adriatic community between the twilight of the Roman Empire and the foundation of Venice.

During the summer of 1914, d'Annunzio was in France, where he had moved three years earlier. From the beginning of the conflict, the writer militated for the intervention of Italy alongside the Triple Entente against germanic imperialism. In his opinion, the new war was not only an opportunity to acquire all the Italian-speaking communities under the control of the Habsburgs but a unique chance to transform Italy into a hegemonic power in the Mediterranean. This expansionist vision was primarily based on stretching national borders to include neighbouring lands that incorporated Italian speakers and memories of a prestigious latin past, particularly the entire eastern Adriatic coast, from Trieste to Albania².

During the debate between interventionists and neutralists, d'Annunzio represented the ace in the sleeve of the government, which in May 1915 financed his return to Italy and entrusted him with the media campaign that justified the declaration of war on Austria-Hungary.

During the war, d'Annunzio managed to be enlisted as an officer of the Third Army deployed on the eastern front, to experience first-hand the conquest of Adriatic lands, legitimated as national "redemption" also thanks to the activity of local pro-Italian activists who deserted the imperial army to fight alongside Italy. D'Annunzio's celebrity allowed him to freely move to and from the front line,

² "La très amère Adriatique", *La Petite Gironde*, 25 April 1915; "Le Ciment Romain", *La Petite Gironde*, 30 April 1915.

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part of a more extensive propaganda campaign for the war. He delivered speeches for troops and organized spectacular exploits with infantry, navy, and Air Force, often leading in the first person. In addition, he participated as an observer in several air raids and organized spectacular deeds like the "Bakar mockery" (February 1917) and the flight over Vienna (August 1918).

This war activity (which cost him the loss of an eye) allowed him to be celebrated as a "warrior bard" and to be promoted to colonel and commander ("comandante") of the air squadron. Moreover, he demanded and obtained several decorations, culminating in a gold medal presented to him at the end of the war in Trieste.

2. *The armistice and the nationalist struggle for Dalmatia*

With the armistice between Italy and the Empire in dissolution (3-4 November 1918), the Italian armed forces occupied the lands promised by the Treaty of London (Trento, Trieste, Istria, northern Dalmatia). In addition, they sent naval units to patrol the city of Rijeka/Fiume (contended between pro-Yugoslavia and pro-Italy local activists) and the dalmatian coast under SHS control where Italian-speakers communities lived³.

Zara/Zadar became the headquarter of the Italian governorate of northern Dalmatia, entrusted to Admiral Enrico Millo. The governor set up a local civil administration that initiated a process of nationalizing public life and urban space, exploiting the solid Italian-speaking presence in the city to marginalize the Croatian element and ban pro-Yugoslavian activities. Various governments carried out this political and cultural assimilation policy in the multi-ethnic area to legitimate new boundaries and territorial claims with the principle of nationality.

With the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson's rejection of the Treaty of London, and the territorial dispute between Italy and the Kingdom of SHS, the eastern Adriatic coast became a symbolic battlefield. In Italy, a debate arose between those who pleaded for the annexation of the entire Dalmatia (for the most part nationalists and veterans) and those (moderate liberals, socialists interventionists, and republicans) who pleaded exclusively for the territories with an Italian majority, such as Trento, Trieste, Fiume but not the entire Dalmatia, since only Zara had a majority of Italian speakers.

The nationalists imposed their point of view on public opinion. With the help of members of institutions, dalmatian irredentists and veterans from December 1918 organized a campaign of demonstrations to circulate the image of Dalmatia (as well as Fiume) as a purely Italian land that was in danger of falling again under foreign rule. This mobilization aimed to exercise pressure on the government of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, engaged in the Paris negotiations.

The mobilization was presented as a reaction to the "mutilated victory", a slogan with which d'Annunzio condemned the armistice that, from his point of view, prevented the heroic Italian march towards the eastern Adriatic coast.

The "warrior bard" established himself as the tribune of this campaign. In those days, taking advantage of his increased prestige as a war hero, d'Annunzio began to produce writings and speeches in which he elaborated a patriotic mythology and mysticism about the "venetianity" – and therefore italianity - of Dalmatia.

The first of such writing was published on 14 January 1919 with the title *Lettera ai Dalmati* (Letter to the Dalmatians)⁴. Through a long open message to the dalmatian pro-Italian activists Ercolano Salvi from Split/Spalato and Giovanni Lubin from Trogir/Traù, d'Annunzio declared that Italy must reject Wilson's mediation and Yugoslav claims and reclaim its historical right to annex Dalmatia. This vision was made explicit in the form of a prosopopoeia of an ideal winning Italy: "My eastern

³ Ministero della Marina, *Le occupazioni adriatiche*, 103 ff.

⁴ "Lettera ai Dalmati", *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 14 January 1919.

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border is marked by the Velebit [Alpi Bebie] and Dinaric Alps, which are a continuation of the Julian Alps. All that strip of land, which has an Italian origin and essence, belongs to me".

The mystical and pre-modern prose of the "warrior bard" evokes monuments and archaeological remains of Rome and Venice, disseminated on the Adriatic coast as relics that guard the "mana" necessary to fulfil the destiny of the nation. For instance, he names the dalmatian memoirs in the church of St. George in Venice, Diocletian's Palace, and the sculptures of Saint Marc's winged lion in the coastal cities.

At the same time, he denounces the recent destruction of a winged lion in *Omiš/Almissa* by pro-Yugoslavian activists through a chronicle with anti-Slavic chauvinist nuances: "Our defeated enemy, the filthy Croatian, climbed the Venetian walls like a rabid monkey and chipped the winged lion". This episode of political iconoclasm allows d'Annunzio to present the possible annexation of Dalmatia to the Kingdom of SHS as a desecration. He rejected the idea of an SHS state (which created a new competitor for Italian hegemony) and presented the pro-Yugoslavian Croats as barbaric and opportunistic enemies who jumped on the bandwagon to achieve their historical goal: to invade the latin cities on the coast. Furthermore, giving Dalmatia to the Slavs meant betraying the national cult and the sacrifice of the Italian dead in the war.

In the following weeks, the "warrior bard" came to threaten a possible war against the Kingdom of SHS to exert pressure on the Italian government, which at that moment was at odds with Wilson in Paris. On 25 April 1919, the traditional religious celebration of St. Mark in Venice was imbued with political implications: the flags of the dalmatian cities were displayed in the procession in St. Mark's square, where d'Annunzio gave a speech where he invoked the rebirth of the Venetian power and asked the crowd: "Are you ready to fight again?"⁵.

In the first days of May, the writer was invited to Rome, where under the direction of the nationalist party, he delivered speeches in which he even threatened an anti-parliamentary coup if the government did not defend the Italian claims on the Adriatic. He wanted to establish a religious cult of the nation renewed by combat and military sacrifice, to legitimize at the same time a new Italo-Yugoslav war and an anti-democratic militancy against the "plutocratic lobby" represented by the League of Nations.

The nationalist directors of the campaign came to envision an independent and rebel expedition to take the Adriatic lands, while in the regions occupied by the Italian army, "legions" of volunteers composed of local irredentists and veterans were created. In March, d'Annunzio had tried to convince general Zoppi to hijack in Split a ship loaded with troops headed to the Italian colonies in Libya⁶.

However, this campaign failed to dissolve the opposition of a large part of the Italian politicians and to prevent the formation of a moderate government led by Francesco Saverio Nitti. The immediate need to overthrow the new government persuades d'Annunzio and nationalists to put aside their idealized image of Dalmatia and to focus provisionally on a nearer and more shared aim: Rijeka/Fiume. This city was part of the "Italian majority" territories also claimed by Democrats and thus became the protagonist of d'Annunzio's speeches and writings⁷.

During the summer of 1919, the myth of Fiume as an unredeemed "holocaust" city was strengthened when Italian control over the contended city faltered after the skirmishes between Italian and pro-Yugoslavs French soldiers and the decision of an interallied commission to organize local elections that had to involve the entire population. At that point, the local irredentists, some Italian officers, and the politicians supporting the Adriatic mobilization organized a rebel expedition to keep Rijeka/Fiume under Italian control.

⁵ "A Venezia nel giorno di San Marco", *Corriere della Sera*, 26 April 1919.

⁶ Gerra, *L'impresa di Fiume*, I, 35-36.

⁷ Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 48-50.

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D'Annunzio was chosen as frontman of the *impresa fiumana* (Fiume exploit): as a celebrity and decorated veteran, he was the ideal face of an expedition that had to question the international balance of power without compromising relations with the Allies. From that moment, the "warrior bard" would gain new worldwide fame as *comandante* (commander) of the seditious troops - later baptized *legionari* (legionnaires) – who occupied Rijeka from 12 September 1919 to January 1921. Recent historiography contextualizes the sixteen months of the "Fiume exploit" and their aftermath in the broader framework of "war after war", which propagated in part of post-war Europe⁸.

3. D'Annunzio's exploit and Dalmatia

Several scholars between the 1950s and early 2000s highlighted the subversive aspects of d'Annunzio's rebellion, focusing on the fact that Rijeka/Fiume experienced a utopistic regime destined to be transferred to Italy. I would argue that this is partly true. In recent research, I have suggested how d'Annunzio's short-term tasks were: a) to trigger the formation in Italy of a government – or a regime – with a nationalist tendency that would oppose wilsonism and bolshevism; b) the Italian annexation of the entire Adriatic east coast; c) the dissolution of the Kingdom of SHS. However, before examining the concrete acts through which d'Annunzio tried to bring his exploit to fruition, let us see the government policy he executed in "his" city and which he intended to apply to Dalmatia⁹.

As soon as he entered Rijeka/Fiume without violence on 12 September 1919, d'Annunzio delivered a speech from the governor's palace in which he declared the city united with Italy. With his local followers, he hoped for the support of the Italian military governor, but when the latter refused, the "warrior bard" took his place and obtained his departure along with the Allied contingents.

In the following days, the Italian government imposed an embargo on the city occupied by the rebel troops, but at the same time tried to exploit the situation in international negotiations. In the meantime, *comandante* (commander, military governor) d'Annunzio transformed Rijeka/Fiume into a fortified stand, where a dense agenda of celebrations and proclamations took place.

The writer's propaganda (and then the legionnaire's memoirs) intentionally overlooked the fact that the city became an armoured stand, with censorship, no political liberty and court-martial, from which pro-Yugoslav activists and later autonomists were banned¹⁰.

Nevertheless, through an elaborate media strategy, d'Annunzio presented to the international public opinion a "live patriotic poem" in which Fiume appeared as a purely Italian city, liberated by a group of heroes of the Great War. In this representation, they were there not only for the Italian claims on the Adriatic but for the liberation of all the peoples oppressed by an "international financial élite", which controlled the League of Nations, the Italian government, the Allied colonial empires, and the new Kingdom of SHS.

In the Summer of 1920, when international negotiation decided on the future transformation of Fiume into a Free State, d'Annunzio appropriated the project and made it functional to his plans. The proclamation of the "Italian Regency of Carnaro", on 8 September 1920, allowed him to set up a local government entirely controlled by the legionnaires and to prepare the economic and cultural penetration of Italian elements into Fiume and the rest of the Adriatic coast.

In fact, from the earliest days until the end, d'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka/Fiume aimed at nationalizing a multi-ethnic urban space. Furthermore, the writer-dictator promoted public

⁸ Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*

⁹ Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, chapters 3-5.

¹⁰ Perinčić, *Rijeka or death*; Badurina, *D'Annunzio a Fiume*.

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installations to rewrite the city's history: since it had never been part of the Venetian empire and indeed had been a sworn enemy of the ancient Queen of the Adriatic, it was necessary to overstate its "romanity" and its "venetianity".

For instance, on 4 November 1919 the statue of double-headed eagle holding the urn on the city tower, the symbol of the municipality and autonomy, was mutilated of one of the heads to be transformed into a "roman" eagle. Likewise, on 15 June 1920 a modern medallion with the winged lion of Saint Mark was installed on the Town Hall's façade (today the sculpture can be seen in the *lapidarium* of the Rijeka City Museum). Moreover, on 12 November 1920, in Dante square (today trg *Republike Hrvatske*) three flag pillars were installed, and on the emblem of the Regency was carved on the central one: the *Ouroboros* snake that wrapped itself around the Ursa Major, the symbol of eternal cyclical nature which in this case represents the rebirth of the Venetian empire (see paragraph 3.3). Below we will examine the main actions attempted by d'Annunzio to reconstitute the Serenissima empire.

3.1 First attempts to extend the d'Annunzio's regime in Dalmatia

During the sixteen months of legionnaire rebellion, rumors about its extension to Dalmatia often leaked out¹¹. D'Annunzio encouraged them, welcoming dalmatian volunteers to Rijeka/Fiume and, particularly, a delegation of irredentists from Zadar/Zara. On 21 September, he delivered a message to his supporters in Dalmatia: "You are not forgotten. [...] The army of Victory reconstituted grows every day. [...] The fate of the Adriatic Sea can be decided only by the Italians. Any other people is a people of intruders and we will not let them prevail"¹².

The echo of d'Annunzio's deeds spread quickly in Dalmatia, especially in the part occupied by the Italian troops. On 23 September, while the Italian and American troops thwarted a pro-Italian coup attempt in Trogir/Traù in agreement with the Serbian garrison, in Zadar/Zara a battalion of pro-Italy irredentists volunteers was organized and recognized by the authorities with an official ceremony at the theatre Giuseppe Verdi¹³.

In the following weeks Giovanni Giuriati, the political *éminence grise* of the "Fiume exploit", often went to Zadar to ask governor Millo to maintain control over Dalmatia at all costs. The pressure of dalmatian activists and the fear of being deprived of his authority (as happened to the governor of Rijeka/Fiume) led Millo to support d'Annunzio ultimately. The latter and his followers wanted to publicly display Millo's support, which in their intentions represented a sort of extension of their exploit to Dalmatia.

On 14 November d'Annunzio, Giuriati and their staff landed in Zadar with three infantry companies. The arrival of legionnaire ships was greeted by an impressive demonstration organized by local irredentists with the governor's support. During an official meeting with the "warrior bard", Millo assured him that he would never leave Dalmatia to the kingdom of SHS and allowed d'Annunzio to deliver a speech from the Town Hall to the crowd gathered in Lord's square (*piazza dei Signori* today *Narodni trg*). Alongside the governor and mayor Luigi Ziliotto, d'Annunzio announced that "there is the problem of Fiume no longer"; he concluded "there is only the great problem of the Italian Adriatic. We will solve it"¹⁴.

The following day d'Annunzio left his three companies in Zadar/Zara and returned to Rijeka/Fiume and as soon as he arrived he delivered a speech to the citizens: "We are victorious once again. All night the women

11 Prefecture reports, f. 3, cat. Ps A5 1916-21, Ministero degli Interni, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome).

12 "Ai fratelli di Dalmazia", *Bollettino ufficiale del Comandi di Fiume*, 26 September 1919.

13 Vallery, *Zara e la Dalmazia*, 52-53.

14 Gerra, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 184-185.

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of Zara brought flowers and garlands to our ship. This is a symbol of victory and will carry our destiny from Fiume to Zara, to Spalato and beyond...”

Despite these proclamations, the legionnaires did not react when, in January 1920, the Italian community of Split/Spalato denounced various instances of violence from pro-Yugoslav activists with the support of Serbian authorities. In those weeks, the pro-Italian representatives of dalmatian cities gathered in Zadar/Zara and Trieste, denouncing “the desperation of the threatened Italians of Dalmatia”. However, d’Annunzio’s strategy consisted in strengthening his stronghold and patiently waiting for the ideal situation to trigger an Italo-Yugoslav conflict.

3.2 Plans for an Adriatic-Balkan war

In January 1920 d’Annunzio provided his “live poem” with more subversive nuances, inviting the national syndicalist Alceste De Ambris to join side as a political organizer. Although many historians identify this choice as the beginning of a “revolutionary” phase of the “Fiume exploit”, my research concluded that, beyond the propaganda, it maintained the original nationalist aims.

That month, just before De Ambris’ arrival, Giuriati left Rijeka/Fiume but remained the main strategic advisor for d’Annunzio. First, he left for Paris, where he tried – in vain – to participate in the Peace Conference as representative of the “warrior bard”; then he settled in Zadar to coordinate the irredentist mobilization, creating a connection between d’Annunzio, Millo and the anti-Yugoslavian movements. The coalition’s main task was to support an insurrection of Croatian and Montenegrin separatists to disrupt the Kingdom of SHS. Between Spring and Autumn 1920, d’Annunzio’s agents anticipated a great war against Serbian hegemony that would create a new geopolitical balance controlled by Italy: Slovenia and Croatia would become independent and would renounce any territorial claim against Italy; the dalmatian cities would have form an independent republic with free ports and strategic *enclaves* under Italian control¹⁵.

To justify these plans, d’Annunzio announced that he would establish a “League of oppressed peoples” in Rijeka/Fiume, open to governments or movements worldwide fighting against the Allies’ hegemony and the political system represented by the League of Nations. In January, he declared that he wanted to give “a new face to the Adriatic problem”, assuring that “the Croats, eager to free themselves from the Serbian yoke, turn to me” and that he will soon support an uprising that will allow him to “enter Zagreb as a liberator”¹⁶. He did not hide how all this was instrumental to Italian interests: on 20 May, he announced: “with the collapse of the Serbian kingdom many peoples will regain their freedom and Italy will obtain the recognition of its claims on the Julian Alps and the sea”¹⁷. In those months, d’Annunzio and his collaborators repeatedly tried to provoke a war between Italy and the Kingdom of SHS, in which his legionaries would fight alongside the Croatian separatists and even the Italian regular Armed Forces.

The formation of a new Italian government chaired by Giovanni Giolitti (June 1920), fostered d’Annunzio’s hope that his patriotic rebellion could win with the support of the institutions.

While the new government was being formed, on 15 June the writer-dictator celebrated the feast of the patron St. Vitus in Fiume with a great gathering, a public dance party in Dante square and the inauguration of a medallion of the Lion of St. Mark on the Town Hall façade, delivering a speech that made his plan explicit:

The battle begins all over the seafront. [...] There were no Lions of Saint Mark in Fiume of Saint Vitus. Now there is. But it is not alone [...] All the Lions of Istria, [...] of Carnaro, [...] of Dalmazia [...], from the walls, the gates, the towers, the loggias, the castles, the town halls, all of them turn to Fiume, converge on Fiume, roar in Fiume. It is the lions’ retaliation. It is the *Dominante*’s [“the ruling”, an

15 Cuzzi, *Tra autodeterminazione e imperialismo*, pp. 157-159.

16 Simonelli, *D’Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 121

17 “La consegna della medaglia di Ronchi ai volontari delle terre redente e alle truppe del genio”, *La Vedetta d’Italia*, 22 May 1920.

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epithet for Venice] retaliation. It is the retaliation of the Venetian power and grandeur on the Adriatic Sea without peace.¹⁸

In his intentions, Fiume had to become a meeting point for irregular volunteers supporting the regular Army during the conflict, as explained in a letter asking the new Ministry of War, Ivanoe Bonomi, to “support the mobilization [of legionnaires] giving them the precise task of solving the Adriatic problem”¹⁹.

The government at first showed a willingness to cooperate. D’Annunzio’s officers began planning a combined action with the Italian regular army in the event of a war. General Ceccherini (legionnaire military chief) agreed with general Ferrario (chief of the Italian regular division deployed in Istria) that it was necessary to wait for the right *casus belli*²⁰. The opportunity, finally, came: in the same days controversial incidents on the Adriatic coast occurred between Italians and pro-Yugoslav Croats.

The most dramatic occurred in Split/Spalato. From the end of the war the city was under SHS control, but Italy sent the cruiser *Puglia* to guard the port as a protection for the local Italian minority as long as negotiations were still in place. To the local administration and pro-Yugoslavian activists, the presence of the warship represented an act of declared imperialism, and between 1919 and 1920, tension with the Italian crew increased. Finally, disaster struck on 11 July during a celebration for the Kingdom of SHS. Local activists waved the Yugoslavian flag just in front of the *Puglia*, when some Italian officers requisitioned the flag, a riot broke out in which captain Tommaso Gulli, who landed to rescue his officers, and sailor Aldo Rossi, who was escorting him, were killed²¹. The news triggered a wave of anti-Slavic demonstrations throughout the coast under Italian control, and the young fascist movement (which in the Adriatic area incorporated irredentists, soldiers and pro-d’Annunzio activists) spearheaded anti-slavs violence in Istria. The most striking reprisal occurred in Trieste, where local fascists attacked the iconic *Narodni Dom*, an important centre for the Slovene community in the city. During the assault, people died on both sides, and the building was set on fire²².

Fiume was the eye of the storm: feeding tensions in the area but remaining almost immune from the surrounding chaos. As we have seen, the dannunzians aimed to fortify the borders and prepare for war. On 13 July, when news from Split/Spalato reached the city, irredentists and legionaries started a hunt for the Croatian, destroying shops, offices and factories²³. D’Annunzio sent troops to contain the anti-Slavic riot and delivered a speech in which he ordered to stop all violence and to prepare for a proper battle: «The danger is finally here. [...] Is it war? It will be» and assured that Italian soldiers would soon free “the noble vestibule of Diocletian’s palace from Serbian rubbish”²⁴. Several pro-Yugoslavian and political opponents were expelled from the city in the following weeks²⁵.

D’Annunzio sent a message urging not to perpetrate anti-Croatian violence in Zadar/Zara, too: he intended to prove to the governor of Dalmatia that he was ready for the imminent joint action with the regular forces. On 12 July, Millo had warned him of a possible Serbian attack around the 15th of the month²⁶. However, the Yugoslav attack did not arrive, nor did the Italian government seem eager to fight. On the contrary, during the Summer, foreign ministers Carlo Sforza and Ante Trumbić organized new bilateral negotiations.

¹⁸ “*La riscossa dei Leoni*”, *Bollettino Ufficiale del Comando di Fiume*, 17 giugno 1920.

¹⁹ D’Annunzio to Bonomi, 27 June 1920, f. “Bonomi I.”, Private Archive, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

²⁰ Report 10 July 1920, f. “Ceccherini S.”, Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

²¹ Petaros Jeromela, *11 luglio 1920*, 307-336

²² Vinci, *Sentinelle della Patria*, pp. 78-87.

²³ “La dimostrazione di ieri sera”, *La Vedetta d’Italia*, 14 July 1920.

²⁴ “Proclama 13 luglio 1920”, *Bollettino Ufficiale del Comando di Fiume*, 20 July 1920.

²⁵ Further information on the coercion towards pro-yugoslavs, *Izbjeglice i štete za D’Annunzijevo režima*.

²⁶ Millo to d’Annunzio, 12 July 1920, f. “Millo E.”, Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

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3.3 *The Italian Regency of Carnaro: a ghost protectorate*

At the end of August 1920 d'Annunzio proclaimed Fiume an autonomous state called "The Italian Regency of Carnaro". Several historians and journalists, taking the fascinating statements of the writer-dictator literally, explained this decision as a romantic attempt to create an "ideal society" opposing the "mad and vile world". However, I contend that this act had much more concrete strategic reasons: it was an interim solution to offer – and impose – the Italian government a means to rule indirectly over the disputed region without compromising the official foreign relations. «We are forcing Italy, that does not want intend to win, to obtain its victory», declared d'Annunzio on 31 August, presenting the Regency as a state entity "protected by an Italian army under the command of an Italian chief"²⁷.

His goal was to extend this form of "ghost protectorate" to Dalmatia. The project for an independent league of Adriatic cities under Italian control, from Rijeka/Fiume to Kotor/Cattaro, had been studied by Italian armed forces since winter²⁸ and seemed to inspire a passage from the Statute of the Regency, also known as *Charter of Carnaro (Carta del Carnaro)*, published on 30 August. This *Charter* was conceived by De Ambris but rewritten and officially signed by d'Annunzio, who integrated it with a long-term project of cultural imperialism. Let us see how.

The statute is intended for the city of Fiume but expects the future aggregation of other cities: in one of the first drafts d'Annunzio does not define the new State as "regency" but uses the term "confederation"²⁹. The definitive text declares that the Regency could include "rural and maritime municipalities attracted by the free port regime"³⁰. Each municipality can establish its laws, but the central government has the power to intervene in its internal affairs³¹. The aim, De Ambris declared, is "to make the peaceful coexistence of various races in the same political aggregate possible"³². However, behind this conciliatory formula we can see a long-term project: the cultural assimilation of Croats. As one of the first articles written by d'Annunzio explicitly states: "Latin culture" must be promoted in the Regency territories until "the creative spirit of latinity will sooner or later reshape the other lineage"³³.

The principal means of assimilation would be public education. In d'Annunzio's statute, public primary education is delivered in the language spoken by the majority of the population and includes teaching other languages spoken in the Regency. However, in academic education "the Italian language has a distinguished privilege"³⁴. Considering that the ideal confines of the Regency should have included a coastal region where Croatian was largely spoken, it is clear why the legislator defines culture as "the brightest of long weapons": the school is the cradle of an all-Italian future ruling class³⁵.

The "pan-Adriatic" goal of the Regency was also explicated in its banner designed by d'Annunzio, exhibited in Fiume during a great celebration of 12 September 1920. The dictator-writer illustrated the sign's meaning during the ceremony: "It is vermilion like the banner of Saint Marc [...] buried under every Venetian altar in Dalmatia". In the centre of the sign stands the *Ouroboros* snake wrapping itself around the Ursa Major, which guides sailors in their route. The Regency, assures

27 "La Sagra di tutte le Fiamme", *Bollettino Ufficiale del Comando di Fiume*, 1 September 1920.

28 Giuriati, *Con d'Annunzio e Millo*, pp. 152-153.

29 Manuscript n. 588, Private Archive, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

30 Reggenza del Carnaro, *Disegno di un nuovo ordinamento*, 9.

31 Reggenza del Carnaro, *Disegno di un nuovo ordinamento*, 29-30.

32 "La conferenza", *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 10 September 1920.

33 Reggenza del Carnaro, *Disegno di un nuovo ordinamento*, 54.

34 Reggenza del Carnaro, *Disegno di un nuovo ordinamento*, 56.

35 Reggenza del Carnaro, *Disegno di un nuovo ordinamento*, 52.

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d'Annunzio, represents the rebirth of the empires of Rome and Venice, as well as the “high hope of a future domination”³⁶.

The proclamation of the Regency was celebrated with events dedicated to the bond between Fiume and Dalmatia. In the last days of August, some important nationalist exponents visited Dalmatia governed by Millo, where they participated in several irredentist demonstrations, and on the way to Italy they stopped in Fiume to pay homage to d'Annunzio. On 22 September Guglielmo Marconi also landed in Fiume after a trip to Dalmatia with his yacht *Elettra*. The scientist delivered a speech from the governor's palace in support of d'Annunzio and allowed the dictator-writer to broadcast a proclamation on the radio of his laboratory ship³⁷.

In Autumn d'Annunzio tried to prove that the Regency was an autonomous state that kept the true Italian national identity and was ready to provoke a war, even without the support of Rome. On 16 October he declared in a proclamation to the Dalmatians: “The real Italy is on this side of the Adriatic Sea. [...] We are Italy, you are Italy”³⁸. In the same days, there was a last attempt to provoke a Yugoslav civil war and to extend the legionary occupation to Dalmatia: d'Annunzio's agents signed agreements with Croatian and Slovenian separatists and intensified the organization of volunteers³⁹. The mobilization was publicly announced in Fiume on 27 October with a spectacular military exercise of elite units, which exhibited the insignia of Spalato, Zara, Buccari and the old Kingdom of Dalmatia⁴⁰.

However, war plans gave way to diplomacy: in the first days of November the Belgrade delegation led by Vesnić and Trumbić arrived in Italy to start negotiations.

On the night between 3 and 4 November the legionnaire forces responded by occupying for the first time a territory beyond Fiume walls, in an attempt to provoke a border crisis and interrupt the negotiations: the legionaries fortified the islet of Saint Marc between the island of Krk/Veglia, occupied by regular Italian troops, and the Yugoslav town of Kraljevica/Portorè.

D'Annunzio's dream of a new patriotic war would end a few days later, and instead of Yugoslav dissolution, he would be responsible for a brief but bloody Italian civil war.

3.4 Rijeka and Zadar as guerrilla battlefields against the Treaty of Rapallo

The Treaty of Rapallo (12 November 1920) marked the final act of d'Annunzio's rebellion. With the new agreement, Italy extended its borders to Snežnik/Monte Nevoso, annexing Istria, the islands of Cres/Cherso and Lošinj/Lussino and Zadar/Zara as an exclave; The Kingdom of SHS gained sovereignty over Dalmatia and the islands of Rab/Arbe and Krk/Veglia. Although just as in Belgrade and Zagreb Trumbić was criticized for leaving out Trst, Istria, Rijeka and Zadar, in Italy, the leading nationalist newspaper complained of a “Dalmatia surrendered, the strategic dominion of the Adriatic Sea given to the Yugoslavs”⁴¹.

Immediately, d'Annunzio and his new *éminence grise*, the nationalist Corrado Zoli, tried to oppose the application of the treaty, sending legionaries to occupy the Kvarner territories assigned to the Kingdom of SHS: the islands of Rab/Arbe and Krk/Veglia and the mountains north-east of Rijeka/Fiume.

36 “Il gonfalone”, *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 14 September 1920.

37 “Il popolo di Fiume acclama Guglielmo Marconi”, *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 23 September 1920.

38 “Eia, Dalmati!”, *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 17 October 1920.

39 Cuzzi, *Tra autodeterminazione e imperialismo*, 157-159.

40 “Sernaglia”, *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 28 October 1920.

41 *L'Idea Nazionale*, 12 e 14 November 1920.

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They tried to propagate the rebellion to Dalmatia as well. On 12 November d'Annunzio, in a public speech, assured that "the Adriatic will restore the gulf of Venice as it once was" and announced "a larger undertaking [...] beyond Sebenico, within the roman walls of Spalato"⁴².

Three days later the "warrior bard" sailed south to meet Millo on one of the Dolfin islets, on the southern edge of Kvarner. D'Annunzio hoped that the governor would confirm he would not abandon Dalmatia, but Millo recommended avoiding any hostile act which would worsen the situation for the Italian communities that would pass under Yugoslav sovereignty⁴³. In the following days, when a group of Dalmatian irredentists arrived in Rijeka/Fiume to solicit an expedition to Dalmatia, Millo wrote again urging d'Annunzio not to support them⁴⁴.

While the regular Italian Army surrounded Rijeka/Fiume and ordered the legionaries to withdraw from the islands just occupied, the irredentists in Zadar mobilized, organizing demonstrations and announcing expeditions of volunteers in the dalmatian lands ceded to the Kingdom of SHS. On 2 December, when Millo declared that he could not oppose the treaty and ordered the departure of some companies, the irredentists organized a demonstration, repressed by the governor's troops. D'Annunzio reacted by publishing a proclamation condemning the admiral's surrender and declaring that himself was the only chief capable of defending the Adriatic Sea until death⁴⁵.

Many Italian politicians, including the representatives of Zadar/Zara Luigi Ziliotto and Roberto Ghiglianovich, asked him to accept the treaty so as not to compromise the situation of Italian-speaking dalmatians in the Kingdom of SHS. Nevertheless, d'Annunzio sent reinforcements to his legionaries in Zadar with the order to resist. On 21 December, while the government troops advanced towards Rijeka, d'Annunzio sent a message to the Italian sailors, urging them to rebel: "Can't you hear the cry of Zara, Sebenico, Spalato?"⁴⁶.

On Christmas Eve, the attack on Rijeka/Fiume was launched and a parallel siege began in Zadar within the city because the legionaries barricaded themselves in their barracks. Two days later, while the legionaries were fighting in Rijeka/Fiume against the regulars and in Krk/Veglia against the Yugoslav volunteers of the *Galeb* organization, the government troops also attacked the legionary barracks in Zadar/Zara. The rebel garrison tried to resist with the support of local activists while also trying to hijack a ship to Sibenik/Sebenico. This dalmatian city, already under SHS control, was to host a pro-Italian uprising, which died in the bud because activists were few and isolated and therefore immediately arrested. After a few hours of fighting, the legionaries in Zadar also had to surrender⁴⁷.

The five-day battle known as "Bloody Christmas" ended the last day of the year with a negotiation in which d'Annunzio obtained the withdrawal of his men to Italy without legal consequences and the custody over the new "Free State of Fiume" entrusted to an irredentist provisional government until the first elections.

With the return of d'Annunzio to Italy, on 18 January 1921, the long and controversial event known as the "Fiume exploit" officially ended. However, we have seen how, in reality, his "patriotic live poem" had a broader scenario, in which Rijeka/Fiume was not symbolically more important than Zadar/Zara and the other dalmatian cities.

42 "La grandiosa manifestazione", *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 13 November 1920.

43 Millo to d'Annunzio, 13 November 1920, f. "Millo E.", Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

44 Millo to d'Annunzio, 18, 20, 22, 25, 28 November 1920, f. "Millo E.", Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

45 "Un uomo è perduto. Un uomo resta", *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 21 December 1920.

46 "Ai marinai d'Italia", *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 21 December 1920.

47 Santini, *Fiamme dannunziane*, 230-243.

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4. *Martyrs, relics, the heritage of d'Annunzio's mythology of Dalmatia*

The violent guerrilla leading to the expulsion from Rijeka/Fiume and the other territories occupied by the legionaries was the result of an inclination cultivated in the previous months and destined to spread to Italy with the rise of fascism in the following two years.

D'Annunzio agreed to end his exploit with a brief civil war that cost about fifty deaths because he considered the occupation of Rijeka/Fiume as an episode of a broader patriotic mission still suspended, and which should have culminated with the construction of a new Italian empire on the Adriatic Sea. During and after the "Fiume exploit" this future mission was made explicit through the construction of a personal cult of martyr heroes.

The "warrior bard" perfected traditional liturgies for the war dead to legitimize his rebellion and create consensus. Not only he celebrated the protagonists of Risorgimento and those fallen in the war or victims of fighting and accidents occurred during the "Fiume exploit", but he also created a macabre ritual that allowed him to present himself as a medium capable of interpreting the will of the fallen heroes.

This rite of political necromancy occurred in the of Spring 1919, at the beginning of his personal campaign for the annexation of the Adriatic lands: during a speech at the City Hall in Rome, he unfolded a large bloodstained Italian flag.

The history of this object dates back to 28 May 1917, when d'Annunzio visited a prestigious infantry unit (the *Toscana* Brigade) deployed in an advanced position on the Timavo river, carrying a large national flag which he intended to hoist over the Duino castle, just beyond the enemy lines across the river. The writer – already celebrated as a war hero – persuaded major Giovanni Randaccio to lead a risky assault on the castle, but the mission ended in a slaughter of Italian soldiers in which the major himself died. D'Annunzio promptly transformed that catastrophe into myth: he celebrated Randaccio as a martyr and placed the great flag on his bullet-riddled bod, so that it absorbed the blood and became a relic⁴⁸.

During the mobilization of Spring 1919 this "shroud" allowed d'Annunzio to elaborate a totemic cult: the fallen hero became an entity that represented the people renewed by war, and the national flag soaked in his blood became a talisman capable of radiating virtue and imposing the principles of a new struggle. In several significant speeches of his "exploit" d'Annunzio unfurled this flag to impose his declarations and decisions, calling the crowd to swear allegiance to him.

From an "ethnographic" analysis of d'Annunzio's celebrations, the ostension of the Timavo flag has a precise political meaning: the orator-necromancer unfurls the sacred flag to establish dominion over spaces and bodies, exercising what anthropologist James G. Frazer defines as "sympathetic magic"⁴⁹. Its ostension on the seats of power served to proclaim their "redemption": in May 1919, at the Town Hall of Rome, it announced the insurrection against the incapable government; on 12 September on the terrace of the governor's palace of Rijeka/Fiume, it marked the beginning of the Italian rule. For the same reason, it was also exhibited at the Town Hall of Zadar/Zara on 14 November: through it, d'Annunzio wanted to publicly

⁴⁸ Mosse, *Masses and man*, 95-96.

⁴⁹ D'Annunzio used this rite of sympathetic magic to symbolically "take possession" of the bodies of the fallen during the Rijeka occupation, transfiguring them into martyrs. This posthumous investiture is not limited to his followers but also to Italian opponents. The rite was celebrated even after the final battle against the regular soldiers, to justify the end of that "fratricidal struggle" and the peaceful return to Italy. On 2 January 1921, during a religious ceremony in the Cosala cemetery, d'Annunzio covered with the Timavo flag the coffins of the legionaries, of some regular soldier and of a woman who died during the "Bloody Christmas". In the speech he gave on that occasion, d'Annunzio assured they all sacrificed themselves for the fate of the Country: the real enemy is the corrupt political class that sacrificed Dalmatia and pushed them against each other. This analysis is presented in details in Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 248-250.

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demonstrate the extension of his exploit to the part of Dalmatia controlled by the Italian troops. Thus, when he delivered his speech that afternoon, he showed the great bloodstained flag to the dalmatian citizens: “I brought it to Fiume and today I bring it here to Zara, for Zara and even beyond”.

From that moment on, as we have explained, d’Annunzio’s mission became the Italian occupation of the rest of Dalmatia. Furthermore, while preparing for the Italo-Yugoslav war, heroic ghosts from Split/Spalato, dalmatian city under SHS, joined his pantheon.

The first of them was Francesco Rismondo, a young and wealthy fellow citizen of Ante Trumbić who, unlike the latter, wanted the annexation of his city to Italy. In 1915 Rismondo was one of the irredentist activists who deserted the imperial army to fight with Italy. However, just a few weeks after his enlistment in the Italian army he was missing in action, probably captured by imperial troops and hanged for treason.

His mysterious end made him a martyr for the freedom of Dalmatia. In Rijeka/Fiume, d’Annunzio evoked him as a deified warrior who ascended to heaven just like Romulus. Thus, on 21 July, he dedicated to Rismondo a religious martial ceremony in the public parc: after an outdoor mass officiated in front of an empty coffin surrounded by dalmatian volunteers and soldiers, the writer-dictator evoked Rismondo as the “Assumed of Dalmatia” who represented the past and future history of the latin Adriatic⁵⁰.

The ritual use of the empty coffin was inspired by the celebrations dedicated a few days earlier to two other new martyrs from Split/Spalato. Captain Tommaso Gulli and sailor Aldo Rossi, killed during the demonstrations against the Italian warship Puglia docked in the port of Split/Spalato, were celebrated as fallen in the war in the part of Dalmatia under Italian occupation, where Governor Millo ordered to celebrate symbolic funerals with empty coffins. D’Annunzio also organized an imposing ceremony in the church of Saint Vitus with sailors and infantry⁵¹. In the following days, in Trieste, when an Italian officer died of the injuries sustained during the assault to the *Narodni Dom*, his funeral procession was led by a wreath sent by d’Annunzio⁵².

The Treaty of Rapallo ended the Adriatic war but not the mystique of death created for it. In February 1921 d’Annunzio retired to northern Italy in a villa on Garda Lake, near the newly “redeemed” Trentino. In the following years, the writer transformed the villa into a sumptuous monumental complex dedicated to his art and experience as a patriot. He called it “Il Vittoriale degli Italiani” and bequeathed to the State. Despite his increasingly reserved habits as an eccentric nabob, in his last seventeen years d’Annunzio maintained contact with the fascist regime hoping that Mussolini would fulfil his Mediterranean imperial dream⁵³.

In 1924, when fascist Italy and the Kingdom of SHS signed the Treaty of Rome which sanctioned the annexation of the Free State of Fiume to Italy, d’Annunzio expressed his dissent for that agreement that seemed to forget his struggle for Dalmatia.

As he died in March 1938, the “warrior bard” was unable to see the aims of his “patriotic poem” come to fruition in the Axis war against the “plutocratic democracies” and the invasion and dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, the relics of d’Annunzio’s mythology, kept in the Vittoriale, continued to be venerated as part of fascist mysticism. Just a few weeks after the Italian occupation of Dalmatia in April 1941, Giancarlo Maroni, architect and superintendent of the Vittoriale, planned to carry the Timavo blood-stained flag on a pilgrimage through the dalmatian cities. The flag would be displayed in a solemn ceremony that would have sanctioned

⁵⁰ “L’ assunto di Dalmazia”; “La solenne commemorazione di Francesco Rismondo”, *Bollettino Ufficiale del Comando di Fiume*, 22 July 1920.

⁵¹ Millo to d’Annunzio, 12 July 1920, f. “Millo E.”, Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

⁵² D’Osimo to d’Annunzio, 22 July 1920, f. “D’Osimo M.”, Fiume Archive, Correspondence, Vittoriale degli Italiani Foundation Archives, Gardone Riviera (Italy).

⁵³ Raimondo, *Cento anni di storia del Vittoriale*, Silvana, Milano 2021, 36 ff.

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the “redemption”, thus fulfilling d’Annunzio’s vow. Mussolini approved the plan, but the new governor of Dalmatia Giuseppe Bastianini, who was fighting against the Yugoslav resistance and mediating with the *Ustaše*, suggested to postpone it to “a quieter moment” which for the fascists never came⁵⁴.

The Timavo flag and other relics of d’Annunzio’s mythology remain in the Vittoriale today. They are currently visible in a special exhibition in d’Annunzio’s house museum, but for years they were kept inside the most impressive monument of the Vittoriale: the bow of the *Puglia*.

The cruiser, protagonist of the Split/Spalato riots in July 1920 and scene of Gulli’s and Rossi’s martyrdom, was dismantled in 1923. The Minister of the Navy donated the bow to d’Annunzio, who decided to install it in his park as a temple dedicated to Gulli, Rossi, and all Italian sailors fallen in the war for that sea he considered still “unredeemed”.

The *Puglia* became one of the most iconic places of the Vittoriale: d’Annunzio used it both as a sanctuary to celebrate patriotic recurrences and as a space for concerts and receptions; the fascist organizations gathered there the participants to the guided tours in the patriotic park. After the fall of the regime, the ship became a place for meetings of veterans and exiles from the Adriatic regions annexed to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Over the last seventy years the Vittoriale has been gradually depoliticized. Today, it is presented to a broad public and tourists as the fairy Xanadu of a visionary and patriotic artist who managed to exploit fascism without ever completely submitting to it. Among the main attractions, along with the eclectic house museum and the Greek theatre, is that ship on the hill overlooking the Garda. However, one wonders if the many tourists that cheerfully recreate the famous scene from *Titanic* in that bow pointing East are aware that, beyond the peaceful lake, there lies the ideal destination of the imposing warship: the Adriatic coast from Rijeka to Kotor.

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⁵⁴ Simonelli, *D’Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 219.

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SUMMARY

Federico Carlo Simonelli

PhD Political history - Adjunct lecturer of Contemporary History (M-STO/04)

University of Urbino "Carlo Bo", Scuola di Lingue e letterature straniere, piazza Rinascimento 7, 61029 Urbino (PU) – Italy

“The lions’ retaliation”. D’Annunzio and the Italian nationalist mythology in Dalmatia (1918-1921)

At the end of the First World War the Eastern Adriatic became a disputed land between Italy and the Kingdom of SHS. The dissolution of the Habsburg empire triggered a debate within Italian politics: a moderate side intended to annex only lands with an Italian-speaking majority (the cities of Trieste, Rijeka/Fiume, Zadar/Zara), while an integralist side, led by the Nationalist Party, aimed at the annexation of the entire eastern Adriatic coast, including the multilingual region of Dalmatia.

This latter vision found its main herald in the writer and war hero Gabriele d’Annunzio, chief of the military rebels who occupied the disputed city of Rijeka/Fiume between 1919 and 1921 in opposition to the Peace Conference in Paris. Many historians consider the “Fiume exploit” as an ideal theatre-stage in which a new post-war politics, led by veterans and political and artistic avant-gardes, was experimented.

The paper proposes a different interpretation, showing how d’Annunzio considered Rijeka as the first stage of a larger campaign that he tried to extend to the whole Adriatic coast, analyzing the different strategies he employed to achieve the task:

- 1) He sought an alliance with the Italian governor of northern Dalmatia;
- 2) He had secret contacts with the Italian government and the Croatian and Montenegrin separatists and tried to provoke an Italo-Yugoslav war that would lead to the dissolution of the Kingdom of SHS. In the conflict d’Annunzio’s legionaries would have fought alongside the Italian regular army and anti-Serbian secessionists;
- 3) He established a formally autonomous “Regency” to prepare the cultural and economical Italian penetration in Rijeka and aimed to extend this model (here defined as “ghost protectorate”) to the rest of the Adriatic coast;
- 4) He unleashed a violent guerrilla in Kvarner and Dalmatia against the application of the Treaty of Rapallo.
- 5) He elaborated a personal Dalmatian mythology in which the cult of the Roman and Venetian empires was intertwined with that of martyrs and relics of modern irredentism, to spread his expansionist vision.