

The Poet Who Stole a City: D'Annunzio, Fiume, and the Adriatic in 1920

Hello, and welcome back to the blog. With *Murder on the Adriatic* arriving on the first of August, I thought I'd write about the world Alaric von TreLOW sails through on his way home, because in January 1920 the Adriatic was not merely a sea. It was a stage. And strutting at the centre of it, in a captured city, surrounded by pirates, poets, mutineers and lunatics, stood the most famous writer in Italy.

If you invented Gabriele D'Annunzio for a novel, your editor would send him back. Too much, they'd say. Pick three of his qualities and cut the rest. And yet there he was: Italy's most celebrated poet and its most scandalous celebrity, a bald, one-eyed dandy in his mid-fifties who had spent the war becoming a genuine hero: leading a motor-boat raid into an Austrian harbour and flying over Vienna to bomb the city with propaganda leaflets. He had debts like a government, more lovers than a fleet of sailors, and an unshakeable conviction that he was the destiny of the Italian nation. In September 1919, he decided to prove it by stealing a city.

The Mutilated Victory

To understand why, you need to understand what victory felt like in Italy, which was, remarkably like defeat. Italy had entered the war in 1915 on Allied promises of territory along the Adriatic. Six hundred thousand dead later, the peacemakers in Paris proved reluctant to pay in full. President Wilson, armed with his principles and his maps of who lived where, was particularly unmoved. D'Annunzio gave the national mood its name: the *vittoria mutilata*, the mutilated victory. Readers of this series will recognise its German cousin at once. The stab in the back and the mutilated victory are the same wound in different languages: *we won, or should have won, and politicians betrayed us*. The Great War did not end in 1918. It merely changed clothes.

The sorest point of all was Fiume, today Rijeka, in Croatia, a port city at the top of the Adriatic with an Italian-speaking centre and a Croatian hinterland, claimed by both Italy and the new Yugoslav state, and awarded definitively to neither. While the diplomats argued, D'Annunzio acted.

The March from Ronchi

On 12 September 1919, D'Annunzio set out for Fiume at the head of 2,500 men: deserters, demobilised shock troops, and eventually whole units that mutinied to join him along the road. The Italian general sent to stop him did the arithmetic on ordering troops to fire upon a national hero, concluded it did not add up, and stood aside. By evening, the poet had his city. The Italian government, presented with a stolen town it half-wanted but could not legally accept, settled on a policy of embarrassed blockade and hoped the problem would go away.

It did not go away. It got stranger. Much stranger.

The Pirate Republic

For fifteen months, Fiume under D'Annunzio was part military occupation, part political laboratory, and part costume party that had escaped adult supervision. The city filled with veterans who could not stop being soldiers, revolutionaries of every flavour, artists, adventurers, and young men drawn to the one place in Europe where the war's intensity had never been switched off. There were speeches from the balcony nearly every day, but not typical speeches, call and response sessions with the crowd, theatrical, liturgical, intoxicating. There was the introduction of black shirts, ceremonial daggers, and Roman straight-arm salutes. There was, by most accounts, a quantity of cocaine and free love that would have made a 1960s rock band feel right at home.

And because a blockaded city must eat, there was piracy. Actual piracy. D'Annunzio's raiders, he named them *uscocchi*, after the corsairs who had terrorised these same waters three centuries earlier, seized cargo ships and brought them into port to feed the city. And because it was Fiume, they dressed the part, with sashes, leather belts, bandoliers, paired pistols, big boots and bandanas around their heads, because if you're going to be a pirate, do it properly.

In the winter of 1919–20, a merchant vessel in the upper Adriatic sailed in genuine danger of being boarded by pirates commanded by a poet. What novelist could resist?

That January, the very month of *Murder on the Adriatic*, the whole enterprise hung in limbo. Rome was negotiating, blockading, and praying; D'Annunzio was orating, raiding, and drafting increasingly extravagant plans. Later in 1920 he would proclaim his own state and give it a constitution with music enshrined as a fundamental founding principle, which, whatever else one says of the man, is a better founding principle than most. It ended at Christmas 1920, when the Italian government finally lost patience and sent the navy. A battleship put a shell into the poet's palace, and D'Annunzio, who had urged everyone else to die gloriously, decided, on reflection, to go home and write.

The Dress Rehearsal

It would all be a splendid comic opera, were it not for what came next. Because watching Fiume very carefully was a Milanese newspaper editor named Benito Mussolini, and what he saw was a working prototype. The balcony speeches, the black shirts, the salutes, the choreographed crowds, the sacred theatre of the leader (Il Duce) and his legion, the discovery that a determined column of armed men could simply march into a city, and the state would blink - Mussolini took the lot. D'Annunzio staged the rehearsal; Mussolini ran the production, for twenty years, with a country instead of a town. And in Germany, men of a similar stamp; the Freikorps veterans and embittered officers who populate the earlier books in this series, were taking notes of their own. Barely two months after the novel's voyage, some of them would attempt their own march on a capital. But the Kapp Putsch deserves a blog of its own and shall have one.

The Voyage Home

This is the sea Alaric crosses in *Murder on the Adriatic*: six days from Port Said to Trieste, on waters where the war refuses to lie down and die, towards a coastline where the next war is already learning its lines. He is, of course, merely trying to get home to Berlin. Readers of the first six books will know how reliably that sort of plan survives contact with a corpse.

Murder on the Adriatic is out on 1 August, and the ebook is available for preorder now at <https://amzn.eu/d/09CgOJqn>. Thank you, as ever, for reading.