**Gabriele D’Annuncio – Bridge between nationalism and fascism?**



In the opening decades of the 20th century, Gabriele D’Annunzio was one of the most famous Italians alive. Writing came easily to him and was the basis of his reputation. Romain Rolland, a Nobel Prize winner and a Communist fellow-traveler, was a friend who wrote a book about him and compared him to a pike, a large fish that devours smaller fish. Turning with passion to politics in midlife, he once more operated as a pike, out to devour territory to which Italy laid claim as spoils after World War I.

The son of a small landowner, D’Annunzio was born in the Abruzzi in 1863, two years after the unification of Italy. His generation grew up in the afterglow of a heroic age. Now that they had founded Italy, Massimo d’Azeglio — one of the principal statesmen involved — could quip that it was time to find some Italians. D’Annunzio was one such. His move as a young man to Rome was a first indispensable step toward fulfilling his ambition of greatness. A journalist adopting various pen names, he churned out hundreds of pieces about Roman social and cultural life..

World War I allowed D’Annunzio to express his nationalist aggression. “I am drunk with the joy of war,” he boasted - war was his new poetry. Victory over Austria, the old occupying power and hereditary enemy, would complete Italy’s national liberation. If not, death “is as beautiful as life, intoxicating, full of promise, transfigurative.” He showed exemplary courage in the front line at the Isonzo, where the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sacrificed in atrocious circumstances for no purpose. To him, combatants were heroes, descendants of the legionaries of the Roman Empire. Emotionally pitched ever higher, his speeches to the troops repeated words like leitmotifs: “blood, dead, glory, love, pain, sacred, victory, Italy, fire.” Blood was there to be shed. Glory lay in summoning soldiers to their death.

When his own blood-and-glory moment came, he rose to it. The Paris Peace Conferences after the war had failed to decide whether the former Austrian city of Fiume on the Dalmatian coast should be given to Italy or to the new state of

Yugoslavia. In a population of 50,000, Slavs outnumbered Italians by about four to one. In the autumn of 1919, D’Annunzio accepted the invitation of the Italian minority to march on Fiume and incorporate it into Greater Italy. He informed Mussolini, who at the time was consolidating his Fascist party (and would, in 1922, borrow the tactic for the march on Rome that was to launch his dictatorship).

The men with D’Annunzio were a ragtag bunch of mutineers and adventurers. Their slogan was “Fiume or death!” Violence was a permanent feature. Some French soldiers were dragged out of the brothel where they had found shelter, and killed. D’Annunzio held that Yugoslavia was “a Balkan pigsty.” Local Croats and Serbs were liable to be arbitrarily imprisoned or expelled. “D’Annunzio seems to be having the time of his life at Fiume,” the British Foreign Office reported - he seems to have had appointed himself “the ruler of an outlaw state.”

He drafted the Charter of Carnaro, a constitution for Fiume that defined the subordination of its citizens to the demands of the state in accord with Fascist doctrine. As usual, he was playing with other people’s lives. His men, it seems, pioneered the standard Fascist punishment for dissidents of forcing castor oil, a powerful laxative, down their throats. After a year of upheaval, the Italian and Yugoslav governments signed a treaty that satisfied their mutual demands. D’Annunzio immediately condemned the compromise as betrayal. In his eyes, Mussolini’s failure to come to his aid was contemptible cowardice. Supporters tried to persuade him to take over the national Fascist movement. When regular Italian soldiers arrived to enforce the treaty, the Fiume episode was over.

He ends his life promoted to general and living in Lake Garda, turning his home into a temple to himself. Mussolini, realising the potency of the poet's appeal in Italy, smothers him with luxury, sending him ever more outrageous gifts for his garden, culminating in a plane and the prow of a battleship.. In death, as in life, the amazing story of D'Annunzio was painted in primary colours, but with the darkest of shadows.