

# The Unquiet Dead

Anarchism, Fascism,  
and Mythology

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2. Conflict and Complicity:  
early Italian anarchists and fascists



Fascists and anarchists have been enemies for nearly a century... but that was not always the case. Before Italian fascism<sup>a</sup> was clearly the horror it became, many anarchists converted to fascism, or found common cause with its followers; and fascism drew inspiration from anarchists for some of its more interesting early experiments. Anarchists and fascists reacted against the same material conditions, and had many shared negative goals in the short term, though deeply conflicting positive goals. A decade later, anarchists fought fascists in the Spanish Civil War, as we discuss in the next section, and have done so in many other places and times. How did things change? How could such bitter enemies have ever been complicit in each other's development?

### context

Italy was formally unified as a nation in 1861. As in Germany, this unification was meant to create a national identity and shared sense of purpose for all the formerly disparate regions. However, heavy taxation dispirited its population, and when Italy tried to join other European powers in colonizing Africa, the country found it had come too late to the game to do so very successfully. Neither social unity at home through economic security, nor imperial adventures that might have affirmed national unity, ultimately proved possible.<sup>b</sup>

a While it is common practice to capitalize “fascist” and related words when referring to Mussolini’s party and state, to distinguish them from the general phenomenon and ideology, I have chosen to leave it uncapitalized, except when quoting. I do not care to legitimize fascism in even stylistic terms.

b However, the Italian army murdered 275,000 Ethiopians during its attempt; less than a third of these people were combatants. This stands as one of the greatest atrocities committed by Italian fascism, but it is also typical of European colonialism of the period just before—and, arguably, today, though it may present itself in different forms. Earlier Italian colonialism also established the national boundaries of Eritrea, combining several independent kingdoms, to the continued detriment of its population today.

After a short series of corrupt conservative governments, a moderate, Giolotti, took control. He was able to level out the economy and reduce class tensions... which did not win him favor from either the far Left or the far Right. Nationalists wanted Italy to pursue imperialism, and socialists and anarchists resented how the moderates among them were bought off by participation in Giolotti's government, which all saw as a corrupt oligarchy of the rich. This resentment forms half the backdrop for both the building intensity of struggle on the left and the eventual success of fascism on the right; the other half was painted by the mass of veterans returning from WWI, some of them politicized and all of them angry. The idea of the true Italy, the vital part of the nation, at once the common spirit of the masses and the agenda of the political and cultural avant-garde, became widespread; an orientation against social democracy and representative governance went with it. Radicals on the Right called for imperialist war, those on the Left called for class war, but both wanted revolution. As we know, the Right succeeded, but not without substantial collaboration from and intermixing with the Left. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Fiume.

### **I. Fiume: la dolce vita, or: the city aflame**

“Await me with faith and discipline. I will fail neither you nor destiny.”

-a telegram from D'Annunzio to those organizing his arrival in Fiume

In the fall of 1919, egomaniacal soldier-poet Gabriel D'Annunzio led a volunteer rebel army to the disputed city of Fiume. The Italian soldiers stationed there were ordered to stop him, but disobeyed their orders, and welcomed him instead. Desperate, their general drove to meet D'Annunzio before he entered the city, and begged him to turn around. D'Annunzio responded as Napoleon had over a century ago, baring his medal-clad and uniformed chest. “All you have to do is to order the troops to shoot me,” he said. Knowing the likely outcome of such an order, the general gave up and accompanied D'Annunzio into the city. They were welcomed by banners, ribbons, laurel leaves, ringing bells and chants of “Long live Italian Fiume! Long live D'Annunzio!” The fascist occupation of Fiume began.

Fiume, located on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, is now known by its Croatian name, Rijeka. Though it is largely Croatian, it has long been a multiethnic community that includes Serbs, Bosniaks, and Italians. In the messy aftermath of WWI, it was torn between Italy and the area that became Yugoslavia; while many Fiuman citizens and Italians wanted the city to belong to Italy, the

United States would not allow that. Burning with resentment against this US dictate, D'Annunzio and his followers saw taking the city as an almost sacred mission, one necessary for the revival of Italian destiny and Fiuman survival. Their occupation of the city lasted for fifteen months. In those months, Fiume became a laboratory for political and social experiments: a unique fusion of anarchist, fascist, socialist, and libertarian politics and ethics existed, with a constitution guaranteeing equality on many bases, unprecedented plans for ensuring social welfare, and an unusually direct democracy. A carnival spirit prevailed, and sexual mores were overturned; dancing and lovemaking went on all night long, and sometimes all day as well. The pastries were reportedly excellent and plentiful until the moment the city ran out of flour, starved by blockade.

This coup was perhaps possible only because of the man who led it, though he failed his mission in the end. Esteemed warrior, poet, and lover, Gabriel D'Annunzio was worshipped by the men and women who surrounded him. He was seen as eccentric, mystic, romantic and seductive, lauded for his heroic deeds in World War I; his appeal to youthful creativity and virility made him compelling, and his ability to use emotion to mobilize armed men was terrifying to the Italian leadership. When he arrived in Fiume, he found its liminal atmosphere much to his liking; and, with the involved consent of its citizenry, made it a paradise... until they ran out of money. D'Annunzio had charisma in inverse proportion to his business sense.

Despite D'Annunzio's importance to the project, the occupation of Fiume was a collaborative effort taken up whole-heartedly by city-dwellers and arriving soldiers alike. The occupying soldiers, who felt discarded by society after their return from WWI, yearned to be useful again, free and esteemed; the organizers of the occupation conspiracy strategically called upon that impulse. The Fiuman occupation became larger than itself: a rebellion against corruption and government, a people's mission, and a celebration of the finer things of life.

The feats of this glorious city read as a jarring contrast to our moralistic narratives when one reads them knowing that D'Annunzio was not only a bit of a fraud but very much a fascist. Admiration of his lively spirit would motivate thousands of Italians to actively participate in fascism in a way that more quotidian people and efforts never could. Fiume became a symbol for Italian national pride, and its hero-citizens were lauded as examples of the true Italian spirit rising up from decades of corrupt government suppression towards a glorious – fascist – future. The collaboration of many

anarchists and socialists in the city served to strengthen its success as a fascist enterprise—but also to make it genuinely interesting as an experiment in different ways of living. As many Italian anarchists moved towards fascism, the city became a microcosm of their interactions and complicities, shocking from the hindsight of their eventual deadly conflict.

### **political organization and city life**

A month into the occupation of the city, Captain Giuseppe Giulietti hijacked a ship full of arms meant for the Russian White Army and diverted it to Fiume. Giulietti was a socialist, and a friend of the noted Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta. His hijacking communicated solidarity on three levels: with the Bolshevik army, against whom the munitions would have been used; with Italian maritime workers, at the time involved in a labor struggle with the government; and, most significantly for us, with the Fiume occupation. D'Annunzio, a man always most moved by bold and poetic deeds, took note:

...the commandante observed that the arrival of the *Persia* in Fiume “confirmed not only the sanctity but the universality of our cause... The cause of Fiume is not the cause of the soil, it is the cause of the spirit, the cause of immortality... From the indomitable Sinn Fein of Ireland to the red flag which in Egypt unites the half moon and the cross, all the insurrections of the spirit against the devourers of the raw flesh... are ready to become reignited from those sparks of ours which fly far away...

This is an interesting departure from typical fascist rhetoric, which tends to focus wholly on the national character of its “native people” and to proclaim their inherent connection with the land they inhabit. It marks the beginning of D'Annunzio's attempt to universalize the spirit of the Fiume occupation into one of international resistance to power, and his collaboration with the radical Left. In coming months, D'Annunzio would proclaim the start of a (doomed) League of Fiume, ostensibly an alliance of the oppressed peoples of the earth against the League of Nations, which he described as “that conspiracy of privileged thieves and robbers.” He saw himself as the leader of the oppressed, fighting in resistance to the American imperialism that shifted national boundaries in the treaties that ended WWI.

D'Annunzio gave a fascinating speech, “Italy and Life”, after the arrival of the *Persia*:

All the rebels of the earth will be gathered under our sign. And the feeble will be armed. And force will be used against force. And the new crusade of all poor and impoverished nations, the new crusade of all poor and free men against the usurping of nations, the accumulators of all wealth, against the races of prey and against the caste of usurers who yesterday exploited war in order to exploit peace. ...Therefore, our cause is the greatest and the most beautiful which today has been directed against the evil of the world. It extends from Ireland to Egypt, from Russia to the United States, from Romania to India. It gathers the white races and the colored peoples, reconciles the gospel with the Koran... Every insurrection is an effort of expression, an effort of creation. It does not matter if it is interrupted in the blood, provided that survivors transmit the instinct... to the future. For all veterans... it is time to rush toward the future.

Although “usurers” is often fascist code for “Jews”, he was more likely thinking of capitalists; as I described in the previous section, D’Annunzio and most other Italian fascists were not *particularly* anti-Semitic, although they were still Gentiles operating without critique in the heavily anti-Semitic context of the time. Moreover, D’Annunzio’s language of internationalism in this speech is far more familiar from the anarchist publications of the time than anything nearly fascist, with the exception of the final phrase, which portends Futurist and Arditi rhetoric—themselves conflicted movements, as we will see. And, while D’Annunzio’s evocation of “the colored peoples” may feel repugnant in light of modern race analysis, it was (is?) unusual for white Europeans of any political affiliation to take note of “the colored peoples” beyond thinking over who might be further colonized or exploited, let alone to call for a united struggle with them. This moment of breakthrough analysis, born out of struggle and the extension of solidarity towards Fiume by the Left, was about as good as it got; the League shortly drowned in a sea of cultural misunderstandings, lack of funding, and political intrigue.

At home, D’Annunzio and Fiuman government became heavily influenced by the participation of an anarcho-syndicalist, Alceste De Ambris, in D’Annunzio’s cabinet; he replaced a moderate who had acted as a go-between for D’Annunzio and the Italian administration. This move signaled D’Annunzio’s rejection of the Italian government’s attempt to moderate and normalize the Fiume occupation, and his increasing interest in Leftist struggle. In partnership with De Ambris, a new and outrageous constitution was drafted: the Carta del Carnaro. It read in part:

The Republic of the Carnaro is a direct democracy that has productive labor as its base and the largest possible functional and local autonomy as its governing principle. It confirms, therefore, the collective sovereignty of all citizens, without regard to sex, race, language, class, or religion; but it recognizes major rights to the producers and decentralizes the power of the state as much as possible, in order to assure the harmonious blending of the elements that form it.

The notion of such complete formal sovereignty barely existed anywhere. However contradictory, this was an anarchist-inflected document of governance. Its agenda was to be accomplished via the establishment of voting industrial unions called Corporations, each with its own identity, cultural practices, and social welfare systems... something quite close to the anarchist notion of federated groups based on affinity. There were nine formal Corporations proposed, and an informal tenth—its task, along with a structure called the College of Ediles, was to elevate civic life, celebrate labor, and make Fiume a more beautiful and culturally rich city. This Constitution made the Fiuman government one of the first to propose practicing consensus politics between its many politically and ethnically disparate constituents.

However, the occupation ended before this constitution could be enacted. In practice, the city was ruled by D'Annunzio and his cabinet, by a mayor, and by a series of political/social/spiritual groups. The most prominent of these was called YOGA, organized by a popular war hero, a flying ace named Guido Keller; he described his group as “a union of free spirits tending toward perfection”, and was heavily influenced by Futurism. Keller, rather a Han Solo figure, was also employed in city government in the piratical “office of the armed coup”, designed to embarrass the Italian government while procuring food and supplies for the city. Keller's activities and image served to sustain and co-create the Fiuman self-impression as trickster rebels who lived well and fought hard; aside from their acts of piracy, he and his compatriots dressed eccentrically and cultivated extreme hairstyles. This sort of entertainment was necessary to preserving the myth the city ran on, having little else.

In addition to their ties to Futurists (whom they critiqued heavily for reducing the individuality and originality of art), YOGA was also in touch with German Dadaists, and Bolsheviks in Russia and Hungary; these contacts helped them to push art and politics in Fiume in a more radical direction. YOGA published a journal of the same name and “organized a 'People's Academy' with regular public debates on topics as free-ranging as free love,



abolition of money, destruction of prisons, beautification of the city...” The group proclaimed itself “against the forces of inertia of the past. We are and must be elements of the new world, lined up for a merciless battle against those of the past.” These elements were politically heterogenous: “communists and anarchists, Bolsheviks and William Morris-like socialists, bohemians and nihilists, Nietzscheans and Rosenkreutzers, Rousseauist dreamers and Utopian Proudhonists...not a party with a fixed doctrine, but an open meeting ground for all rebellious spirits... They tried to attract people not on the basis of a homeogenous political program, but rather on their principle of diversity and vitalistic spontaneity.”

The Brown and Red Lotuses were interesting subdivisions of YOGA. The Brown Lotuses “promoted the idea of an agrarian democracy of small producers. Among them, a race-earth-nature ideology was widely diffused, and they had strong anti-capitalist, anti-industrial, and anti-city feelings” along with a good deal of appropriated Eastern mysticism. The Red Lotuses, on the other hand, were strongly involved in Fiuman city life, organizing festivals and art events; they “utilized the many international connections of the group to promote their ideas of 'Moving. Living. Destroying. Creating.'” They were anti-fascist, but interested in “developing and exalting the meaning of race” in company with their “international conception that promotes the Dionysian race and the race of the spirit by the practical means of Love.” As we shall explore later, this combination of white (though whiteness itself was not fully theorized in this time and place) celebration of the connection of race to land, a Nietzschean imaginary, Dionysian release, and resistance politics is still, disturbingly, heavily present within the Left today.

A lot of revolutionary activity was afoot in Fiume even before the occupation, not least among its female residents. To keep one crew of Italian sailors in the city until the occupation was successful, women entertained the sailors all night long, “sealing their ears with the wax of their kisses” while others removed vital parts of the ship's machinery. Later, women “dressed in their finest clothes” and armed with guns and knives filled the street before the occupation, ready for what might come from its failures; they refused orders from the main organizers of the occupation to disband. Other Fiuman women mixed with Italian soldiers on the borders of Fiume, successfully encouraging them to defect and join the struggle with stories of the suffering of the Fiuman people.

When D'Annunzio was debating about whether or not to respond to the city's call for Italian support, a conspirator arranged for his own small daughter to

arrive at D'Annunzio's office with a bouquet of flowers and a ribbon around her neck with "Fiume or death!" written on it. She "delivered an eloquent address, concluding with an impassioned plea: "As you have saved the mother [Venice, in WWI] save also the daughter... Fiume, ready to immolate herself in a heroic holocaust upon the altar of the Motherland, salutes you, oh hero, and hopes always in your immaculate faith." The gesture was precisely calculated to move D'Annunzio's heart, and succeeded where many serious arguments from respected tacticians had not. Later, when Fiumans started to have a hard time feeding themselves because of sanctions, four thousand Fiuman children were sent to Italy. This was done on the premise of simply keeping them fed, but carried the clear agenda of provoking solidarity and support from Italians at home. The government tried to stop the children's crusade, but was shamed by D'Annunzio into allowing it to continue. D'Annunzio's strategic appeal to society to protect the future as embodied in children worked as well as it had upon D'Annunzio himself.

Sexual liberation and hedonistic festivals were more than incidental to Fiume; they were the essential glue for creating and maintaining the atmosphere necessary to sustain the occupation. One observer described 1920 Fiume as "a place where the highest concentration of a specifically bourgeois and intellectual subversiveness could be found and transgression of norms and mass practice of rebellion was an organised everyday occurrence." Women's liberation from marriage and the home, open homosexuality, changes in dress, and a "new aesthetics of communal life" became common in Fiume, along with a "neverending cycle of dances, concerts, banquets, theatre performances, games, torchlit processions". D'Annunzio stopped calling it "the city aflame", and began calling it "the city of life." Keller expounded upon this transition in *Yoga*: "When the redemptive mission of the holocaust succeeded, something was expected of them. Under the ash of their involuntary physical activity, generous sparks kindled their hearts, and... they gradually understood... that life is born from struggle, as harmony is generated from discordant sounds."

Fiume was not all sunshine and flowers and free love; ethnically-based conflict occurred there routinely, including during the occupation. Most notably, a mob destroyed Croatian businesses for nearly 48 hours in July. In the fall of the previous year, the city was gripped by xenophobia, and its newspaper called for the expulsion of foreigners from the city. Specific foreigners whom the press accused of wrongdoings were characterized as Jewish by that press in explicitly racist and stereotyped ways. A handbill was distributed throughout the city describing the League of Nations as "invented

by international Jewish bankers as a mask for their speculations against all the peoples of the world.” In response, the president of the Committee of the Italian Jewish Communities wrote D'Annunzio a letter calling his attention to these various instances of anti-Semitism, including the circulation of the old rumor that D'Annunzio was himself a Jew. D'Annunzio and other members of his administration and military denounced the anti-Semitic press, and it largely stopped.

## D' Annunzio

D'Annunzio was an embodied representation of the libidinal force many disenchanted Italians found missing from their society, a creative mythologist who drew forth beauty and passion from others. His speeches are described as transcendent experiences in which enormous crowds leaned silently into his unamplified voice. He saw himself, and was seen by others, as the embodied Italian Nietzschean Superman—able to fuck, fight, and write poetry with equal skill. All of the misogynist implications of that position were present as well; in one of his novels, D'Annunzio “described his spiritual ancestors as an ancient and noble race of warriors, and he hailed their acts of savagery in the past: 'their victories, the beautiful women they raped, their drunkenness, their magnificence.’” He believed he was a great warrior poet sent by history to transform the “great unwashed”, to elevate essence out of the pit of massification. In this, Fiume and its *la dolce vita*, the mythic city of passion and richness, was made for D'Annunzio, and he for it.

D'Annunzio was also largely responsible for popularizing Nietzschean ideas in Italy. “In the early years of the twentieth century, everybody was reading Nietzsche... It was through D'Annunzio and the various artistic and literary avant-garde circles that his ideas emerged as a trendy topic of conversation in the fashionable salons before becoming part of official academic culture... Above all it was D'Annunzio's picture of Nietzsche, that is: Nietzsche filtered through the provincially decadent and morbidly sensual aestheticism of the Italian poet, that was destined to have more success and diffusion in Italy than the original, mainly because it was more profound and therefore easier to understand.” This was D'Annunzio's most important role relative to the growth of fascism, whether in relation to Fiume or to Nietzsche: when ideas or situations passed through him, he refracted their light in a way that made them romantic and inspiring to others.

D'Annunzio saw the anticipated passing of the ruling classes as an opportunity for a meritocracy of heroes and geniuses. His revolt against the Italian

government was motivated by his artistic disdain for modern bourgeois mass society and its tendency to stifle creativity.<sup>c</sup> This is the prettier side of the fascist drive—a rebellion against the established and corrupt order in favor of the cultural and artistic supremacy of genius. Unfortunately, this critique also demonstrates a disdain for “average” people; in a meritocracy, someone is still on the bottom. Many individualist Italian anarchists of the time would follow a similar line of reasoning into fascism.

Rhetoric and theater were intrinsic to D'Annunzio's success. In his first speech upon entering the city, he announced: “In this mad and cowardly world, Fiume today is the symbol for liberty. In the mad and cowardly world there is a single element: Fiume. There is a single truth: and this is Fiume. There is a single love: and this is Fiume! Fiume is like a blazing searchlight that radiates in the midst of an ocean of abjection.” In this moment, he initiated the powerful imagery that resonated with Italians so strongly that his illicit expedition could not be stopped for more than a year: a city ablaze with a passion that would destroy all that was rotten and ruined about the West, something that would “transform [the West] into something finer and holier.” His call was too powerful, in fact: within a month or two of his arrival, he had to issue an appeal for Italian troops to stop defecting to Fiume, as he could not feed them all. Ledeen says about the speech: “...politics had become something greater, something transcendental. In his dialogue with the crowd, D'Annunzio manipulated the mass of his listeners into a single personality, which spoke to him with a single voice. When he asked for its act of faith, it spoke to him with a single *si*, and he expected this unanimity.” This is a central irony of D'Annunzio, and elitist fascism generally: those against “massification” often produce masses. When not everyone sees themselves as heroes, self-proclaimed Supermen attract crowds.

When the Italian government eventually offered a fairly palatable deal to end the occupation, the Fiuman council approved it. Many Fiumans were displeased by this news, and an angry mob gathered outside the government building. D'Annunzio took the issue to the people, a strategy few other politicians were using at the time. Standing at his balcony, “[p]aragraph by paragraph, he read the government's proposal to the crowd, and he asked them 'Do you want this or not?' Mixed cries reached his ears, and at the end of the recitation, the crowd demanded the rejection of the proposal and renewed resistance by their leaders. 'But resistance means suffering. Is that what you desire?' His own wishes became evident when he unfolded the banner. . .

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c Ledeen speculates that this was partially fueled by D'Annunzio's embarrassment over his own tendency to collect extravagant material luxuries.

and invited the Arditi to sing their war songs. With this new act of defiance, D'Annunzio promised the crowd that he would submit the question... and the populace burst into a new celebration that lasted late into the night.” He had successfully manufactured a consensus against the deal, and there was little forces inside or out could do in response.

Better erotic theater than this can hardly be imagined; D'Annunzio called his adventure in Fiume “the loveliest of the lovelies”, and the city responded sensually to his regard. But not everyone regarded D'Annunzio with worshipful love; many other powerful men of his period distrusted him deeply. Mussolini wrote often about his worries about D'Annunzio's power to inspire love in men. Marinetti described him as “a wonderful sorcerer, deep down a cynic, full of pederastic vanity; infantile, but with a terribly forceful will and ambition”; elsewhere, he wrote that D'Annunzio “has remained the aesthete, a maniac of beautiful gestures, a prisoner to beautiful phrases and to men of mediocre status who flatter him and foster his mania.” Much the same could be said about Marinetti; some of this must be sour grapes, as D'Annunzio didn't care for him much. The kind of homophobia these men felt towards D'Annunzio is one common among fascists, a homophobia grown in the cracks of their attempt to build a society of intense love and camaraderie between men, and the libidinal nature of those relationships. They found his decadence and poetic extravagance both desirable and concerning.

D'Annunzio's success lay in his ability to combine art, culture, hedonism, and politics into something people loved and were willing to die for, something that transcended all its elements and became nearly religious. He was aware of the spiritual implications of what he was doing, and embraced them. He saw Fiume as a kind of “superworld”, and the forces that opposed them the “underworld”; he coined a new term for the prime minister of Italy, one that means something like “shit”, something low and inhuman. He was accused of promoting “Orpheus over Christ” by the church in his embrace of hedonism; he also adopted Christian imagery for his own purposes. Fiuman festivals were a kind of civic liturgy, more or less explicitly. During one, St. Sebastian's Day, D'Annunzio was presented with a bayonet in recollection of St. Sebastian's wounds, uniting the two men in the public imagination. Ledeen analyzes this blending of the sacred and profane as necessary for the blending of right and left in Fiume: it was the force that compelled the people who lived there towards unity in new heights of struggle. The inspiration that once drove people to die for Christianity now drove them to live and fight for fascism.

D'Annunzio wanted the Fiuman adventure to both liberate Fiume and purify the Italian people. Later, his desires extended to the liberation and elevation of all oppressed peoples. While he failed at ultimately liberating the city, forced to retreat in shame after a five-day shelling of the city in 1920 known as “Bloody Christmas”, his efforts inspired those who were also intent on the purification of the Italian people. Fascism drew great spiritual inspiration and strength from Fiume, the Arditi who occupied it, and from D'Annunzio himself. It was both the prelude to Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy, and one of its necessary sparks. It is a painful coincidence that, decades before the Shoah, Fiume was widely called “the City of the Holocaust”, following from D'Annunzio's imagery—the fire that inspires can also be wildly destructive.

Mussolini, despite his distrust of D'Annunzio and distaste for his lifestyle and affect, was not above using D'Annunzio to gain power. Reluctant to aid D'Annunzio materially until he demanded it, he was less shy about “hitching on to the blazing D'Annunzian star”, cynically using his newspaper to signal support for Fiume and thereby gain credibility and supporters from the reflected shine. This is typical of Mussolini, who routinely used the feats and sincerity of others in his climb to the top; once there, he discarded, silenced, or at best used those who had assisted him. This man, the formal inventor of fascism, was once an anarchist, or close to it... and he stabbed a lot of former comrades in the back during the process of his transition.

## **II. Mussolini, some anarchists, and their turn towards fascism**

...An ideology may generate forces, and... these forces are chosen, little by little in the silence, in the darkness of tyranny, in the fervor of a passion for justice sufficient enough to breathe life into them. But a programme never takes shape in a crematory furnace.

—Armando Borghi

Benito Mussolini was born into a rich family history of socialist and anarchist struggle in the region of Romagna. When his father died, “a thousand comrades of the party followed his coffin.” He crossed to Switzerland when he was 20, apparently to avoid military service—an act compatible with his socialist politics at the time, but something he later needed to cover up as militarism became crucial to fascism. While he was in Switzerland, he was expelled from two cantons for labor agitation. Around this time, the authorities began describing him as an anarchist, though he seems to have still identified as a socialist. He began reading Stirner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—a combination common among many anarchists who went on

to become fascists. Upon returning to Italy, he translated two of the works of the foundational anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin, and began writing in support of anarchist attacks. After doing a short prison term for opposing the Tripolitan War, he attended a socialist congress at which he was given authority over the important Socialist daily *L'Avanti* and thus became the “leading star” of the party.

From this position, Mussolini was able to capitalize upon the uprising known as “Red Week” to strengthen his own power. An anarchist soldier, Augusto Masetti, shot his general in protest of the Tripolitan War, and was shut up in an insane asylum. He immediately became a cause célèbre for all war resisters, and at an ensuing protest on his behalf, the police shot and killed two republicans and an anarchist. A general strike and week of rioting spread throughout of Italy, involving many thousands of angry participants. Mussolini, ever the opportunist, claimed his writing in *L'Avanti* inspired Red Week, which was actually a decentralized movement that took advice from few leaders. It seems that Mussolini barely participated in the uprising at all, beyond writing from the safety of his newspaper office. Borghi snidely remarks: “It is well to remember that in the radical quarters of Milan Mussolini had the reputation of a braggart and a coward.”

As momentum built towards Italian participation in WWI, Mussolini wrote in *L'Avanti* against intervention and militarism in general, in accordance with the views of the general Left. A few on the Left began to argue for intervention, most notably Massimo Rocca, who wrote under the pseudonym of Libero Tancredi. He argued that participation in the war would train the proletariat for the eventual revolutionary war; that the war was just; and that war was a hygienic force that cleansed the world of old impurities. Mussolini engaged in fierce, conflictual dialogue with Tancredi and others, before suddenly switching sides and arguing for the war; this happened exactly as he broke with *L'Avanti* and the Socialist Party and began his own paper, *Il Popolo D'Italia*. Critics see this as another moment of opportunism; Mussolini had gotten all he could out of the Socialists, and it was to his political advantage to switch sides. (Some say he was even directly bought by the Italian government.) This betrayal came to completion a few years later, when his blackshirt thugs trashed the offices of *L'Avanti* to terrorize the Left into submission. Despite his sudden interventionism, Mussolini himself barely participated in the war, leaving the military after incurring a small wound in training. As his fascist troops were soon largely composed of disenfranchised Arditi (the elite troops of the war), and the Futurist aesthetic prized warfare as a cleansing, virile experience, he later went to great pains to hide this.



But Mussolini was still not yet himself fully a fascist, as we can see in an episode concerning time. When the state began to impose daylight-savings time, many Italians refused to abide by it. The refusal to acknowledge time and its regulation was and is an important element of resistance to capitalism; many anarchists and indigenous revolutionaries have written about the necessity of destroying the social construct of time, and Benjamin reminds us of how the French revolutionaries of 1830 fired at the clocks to stop the day. Daylight-savings time was seen as an attempt by bosses to impose enforced productivity through globalizing and regularizing time upon the workers. Mussolini shared this analysis. He wrote: “The question of “legal time”, which on the rebound has brought with it that of illegal time (which after all is the only legal one, according to the laws that regulate the universe as discovered by astronomers) is a serious affair, much more serious than those who jeer at it think. For myself I say... that we are face to face with the first great revolution of the Italian people against those who govern them.” Mussolini still, plainly, counted himself part of the rebellion against the government and its mechanisms of oppression. Fascist states later attempted to become relentlessly efficient, modern machines that used techniques like time to strip people of their humanity and enforce obedience—but Mussolini had not yet begun to consider this mentality desirable. His essay concludes:

The State is a terrifying machine that swallows living men and throws them up dead, like numbers. Human life has nothing secret or intimate left to it, either in the spiritual or material domain. The smallest corners are explored, the slightest movement tabulated. Each person is pigeon-holed and numbered as in a slave galley. Here is the great curse which has oppressed the human race since far off days, when they felt their way gropingly: to have created through the centuries “the State”, only to succumb under its weight. If the revolt against legal time were a supreme effort of revolt against the coercion of the State, a ray of light would then filter into our despairing individualist souls. But probably there will not be such a way out. We too are vowed to sacrifice. So much the worse...

There remains to us, the last survivors of Individualism, in order to go through the present night and that of tomorrow, the religion of Anarchy alone—an anachronistic religion for our day, but how consoling!

This is anarchist rhetoric at its finest. Rhetoric notwithstanding, Mussolini shortly made his turn towards brutal, regulatory statism of the sort he just described. Armando Borghi paints a bloody picture of the early consequences



of this turn:

There are people who pretend that the Fascist crimes appeared only after the March on Rome, or after the affair of Matteotti. Among those people are several categories: the unthinking; the superficial; the accomplices of the first days, bent on hiding their own faults; those liberals, entrusted with watching, who slept and woke up too late under the lash of the whip; those whom the imperial sewer vomited up because of a surfeit of blood. ...let us not forget that the Fascist reign of terror developed long before the murder of Matteotti.

They killed in the streets, the hospitals, the public schools, the prisons, the churches, the houses. They obstructed those who make a profession of relieving human misery—nurses, lawyers, doctors, firemen—from going to the relief of victims. They punished fathers for their sons, or entire families... Arms in hand they got people out of their beds. They killed under the very eyes of mother and children...

The most favored among [the victims] escaped with floggings, with affronts and humiliations, which graded from teeth-pulling to the castor-oil purge, including the shaving off of the beard. But there were also others who were mutilated, blinded, thrown out of the window, or again immersed into water up to the neck. There were those whom they put naked into the most frequented streets of the city and exhibited to the public. They reserved that fate usually for dignified, cultivated people, who had held public offices. Many became insane after undergoing such outrages and humiliations.

Mussolini continued to fling his cry: “strike everywhere, spare no one!” In that way he arrived at Rome.

Mussolini was backed in all of this by the Church, the rich, and the state — an alliance common to the rise of fascism in many situations. This was not a merely ideological form of support, but a very material one:

As 1921 progressed, Mussolini's squads became more openly violent, intimidating socialists, communists and anarchists and continuing to attack their institutions, burning buildings and destroying printing presses. This was seen as acceptable by the state and the bourgeoisie to keep the 'Reds' in hand; the industrial class saw fascism as effective against union militancy; and the landowners saw it as a way to suppress the peasants agitating for land reform. The activities of the squads

were very rarely punished by the police, military government or the courts. Sympathetic members of the military trained or armed them, and the police supplied vehicles for the roving squads to attack political opponents.

The Left came out to fight regardless; their main failing was in forgetting their own revolutionary goals, in being too reasonable. Gilles Dauvé offers this analysis:

The scenario varied little. A localised fascist onslaught would be met by a working-class counter-attack, which would then relent (following calls for moderation from the reformist workers' movement) as soon as revolutionary pressure tapered off; the proletarians trusted the democrats to dismantle the armed bands of fascists. The fascist threat would then pull back, regroup and go elsewhere, over time making itself credible to the same state from which the masses were expecting a solution. The proletarians were quicker to realize the enemy in the black shirt of the street thug than in the “normal” uniform of a cop or a soldier, draped in a legality sanctioned by habit, law and universal suffrage.

When, in October 1922, Mussolini arrived in Rome with a huge crowd of supporters, the king knew it was within his best interests to accede to Mussolini's demands to be made part of the government—but this was not only because the consequences might have otherwise proved dire for the king himself. Rather, the king knew Mussolini to be his ally against the Left, and gathered him close before the Left remembered their revolutionary goals.

On a personal level, Borghi portrays Mussolini as a man dominated by resentment and petty anger, and cites various examples of his explosive bad behavior. These range from betraying his friends, to locking his exes up in mental institutions, to feeling unreasonably hurt by people's reactions to his own decisions. This kind of resentment, Reich's *character armor*, is a common current amongst fascists; I believe it is fundamental to their enterprise.

Mussolini's feelings, his ability to climb to power through a series of alliances and later betrayals, and his philosophical leanings when he was an anarchist all seem important to me in understanding his turn. The support he received from others, whether such support was intentional or not, was also vital. D'Annunzio and Marinetti, Rygier and Arpinati, De Ambris and the unnamed residents of Fiume—all were complicit in his rise to power, and paid dearly for it later. Nietzsche and Stirner, Sorel and Schopenhaur—these are the

names of philosophers revered by anarchists who turned fascist... as well as many who did not. They were not fascists themselves, I will argue—but their lines of thought were suitable for fascist appropriation.

While he is one of the least sympathetic examples of this trajectory, Mussolini is a clear example of how just critique of society can become reactionary violence, of how resisting power can create new, terrible power. His movement against the state crystallized into a more oppressive and brutal state than before. His interest in saving Italy, in creating a new fascist man who was powerful and respected, in fighting what he saw as modern decadence and failure, is most clearly indicted by how it turned out—but also by its foundation in resentment and a sense of inferiority. It seems to me that these beginnings will always lead to horrifying ends.

### **anarchists who turned**

Looking briefly at the trajectories and lives of other anarchists (or close) turned fascist (or something like it) and finding their commonalities will help us to understand the roots and complications of this tendency. In his book *The Anarchist-Individualist Origins of Italian Fascism*, Stephen Whittaker reviews the interrelated lives of several of these: Leandro Arpinati, Torquato Nanni, Massimo Rocca, and Maria Rygier.

Leandro Arpinati was “a fascist of the first hour”; an anarcho-individualist from Emilia-Romagna, birthplace of Mussolini, with its rich history of socialist and anarchist struggle. Whittaker credits him with “fus[ing] elements of Rocca, Rygier, and Nanni’s thinking with his own experiences in his native Romagna to carry currents of anarcho-individualism into the fascist movement, and to the higher levels of power.” His father was a socialist, and Arpinati rebelled against both his father and his politics when he became an anarcho-individualist. He made his turn towards fascism out of friendship with Mussolini and reading Rocca, and began providing private security for Mussolini at speaking events. In 1920, he deliberately provoked a confrontation between socialists and fascists in Bologna, and used the death of a fascist at that event to justify the violent campaigns of fascist terror that preceded the March on Rome. He generated a culture of grassroots fascist violence, violence as an ends as well as a means. In this way, he organized the fascist takeover of Bologna, and a huge rise in fascist membership. In 1924, he oversaw fascist intimidation around the election, insuring the fascist electoral victory that formalized the dictatorship. Later, he was responsible for actually *normalizing* fascism, transforming it from daily

intensive terrorist violence into something more sustainable; for example, he did a lot to advance the cause of fascist sports, giving people a way to exercise “revolutionary virility” without destabilizing bloodshed. Arpinati sought to actualize the dream of fascism: a state in which the wishes of the individual were something synonymous with the wishes of the nation. For Arpinati, an idealist, this meant that fascist administration had to be perfectly ethical. He was eventually imprisoned for ten years over his opposition to the Italian alliance with Nazi Germany, as well as his efforts around these principles of perfect accordance; true believers are seldom rewarded by the fruits of their labor. Shortly after his release, granted because he asked to join the war effort, he joined Nanni in Santa Sofia.

Torquato Nanni was a socialist leader who served as the mayor of Santa Sofia, but had fascist friends and sympathies. He was still routinely harassed and attacked by fascists, including people who worked for Arpinati, despite their history of friendship; these fascists and their attacks were funded and supported by the area's landowners, who feared and despised the socialist project. Despite his own harassment, Nanni wrote in defense of fascist violence; Arpinati had to intervene to save him from it several times. Nanni was permanently torn between his love of the Romagnan *comune* (small villages that operated collectively and semi-independently of the national government), his Leftist principles, and his desire to follow Mussolini. This inner conflict proved actually fatal. At the end of WWII, Nanni and Arpinati found themselves living together and sharing an awkward double-loyalties position—making nice with the Nazi soldiers occupying their area, but using their fascist credentials to protect local villagers from harm while secretly spiriting British troops to safety at night. Despite these efforts, several days after the war ended the two were shot by socialist partisans and their bodies thrown in a ditch for their crimes and collaborations with fascists.

Massimo Rocca (Tancredi)<sup>d</sup> was an anarcho-individualist whose writings exerted great influence on Arpinati, whose pro-intervention challenges to Mussolini forced Mussolini to come out in favor of WWI, and whose friendship helped Maria Rygier shift towards fascism. One of the first anarchists to begin arguing for military intervention in WWI, he relied upon the works of Stirner, Nietzsche, and Sorel to advance a hybrid idea of what an individualist society ought to look like and how to achieve it. He was deeply influenced by his brief exile to the US; being mistreated as an immigrant

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d While Rocca founded a journal called *Il Novatore* and his followers were called *novatoriani*, he should not be confused with the Futurist anti-fascist anarchist who went by Renzo Novatore. The word means “innovator.”

there embittered him and turned him towards Italian nationalism. He was one of the primary advocates of nationalist Social Darwinism, introducing an element of ethnic racism into Italian fascism; he saw Italian nationalism not as an end to itself, but as a gathering place for his society of strong individuals. He later suggested the formation of “Competence Groups” as a way to recruit the elite into fascism, in pursuit of his individualist ideals. He was eventually forced into exile in 1926 over his disagreement with certain elements with fascism.

Though born into wealth and privilege, Maria Rygier quickly joined the socialist movement, and became an anarchist around 1906. She fought against militarism at first, and did several prison terms for acts of rebellion on various fronts—women's rights, opposing the church, class struggle, supporting the assassin of King Umberto, and participating in the Red Week revolt. At first seen as a hero for her valor “despite” her gender, she was later disempowered by sexist attacks from various anarchist men, though her fame persisted long enough for her to receive equal billing with Malatesta at several anarchist conferences. While she was initially a strong supporter of the previously described war dissenter Augusto Masetti, her anger towards the inaction of many Leftists and her friendship with Rocca (one of the few to show her solidarity during this fall from grace) moved her first towards individualism, then towards interventionism—and, finally, fascism. However, she was eventually exiled from fascist Italy for her sympathies with Freemasonry, which she refused to renounce.

We can pick out several instructive common factors in these stories.

*the emotional drift of history.*

At the start of these events, power was up in the air: while provisionally held by the government, it was actually held by the people, and anarchists and fascists fought for their affections. Because fascists were more willing to use charisma, brutality, and backstabbing, they won the game—but this was not predetermined; anarchists had a longer history in Italy, and many sympathetic fellow travelers. From the most cynical perspective, one could see the political drift of these five individuals (to include Mussolini) as one that simply follows the social current. It is small comfort that none of them held on to it for long.

These people and their agendas were themselves formed by the same social history and social conditions they sought to harness. The forces that brought fascism to power are the same that fueled anarchism—disillusionment with

the state, a history of local autonomy, outrage against global powers, veterans who felt betrayed, and so on. As always, the forces of history are both larger and more atomically particular than the names they most prominently record.

*charisma, mythos, and theory.*

Those who won in Italy were willing to deploy these forces of manipulation; anarchists were not so willing, or, otherwise, were unable to. These elements also worked to shift individuals from one camp to the other; it seems that Mussolini's power of attraction worked upon Arpinati, Rocca's upon Rygier, and so on. D'Annunzio's Fiume is a most powerful example of how transformative these forces can be; had the forces of anarchy become dominant in the Fiuman lore, perhaps the occupation would have become a larger source of strength for anarchists than for fascists. (Indeed, some recent anarchist publications still cite Fiume as an anarchistic event.) It seems as though Italian anarchists during this period did not easily recognize these forms of power, and were therefore both personally vulnerable to them and ill prepared to combat them in the public arena.

Stirner and Nietzsche, who “arrived together” in Italy, were important mythic and theoretical reference points for fascists and anarchists alike. Their ideas of the union of egos and the Superman were extremely popular with many anarchists who later turned fascist; they bestowed a sense of ethical impunity and denied the necessity of listening to their dissenting comrades. Many anarchists who read these philosophers were/are certainly not fascists, but their work was of serious inspiration to nearly all of those who turned. It is interesting to contrast political evolution from these nihilist thinkers with the political development of those Russian nihilists, discussed later, who always cared more for the soviet.

*bad experiences with their comrades; becoming bitter and resentful.*

Rocca and Arpinati were exiled (and to some degree, self-exiled) from anarchist circles over their individualism and militarism; the same was true of Mussolini, in relation to socialist circles, and Rygier suffered from sexist violence on all fronts. Nanni alone is, seemingly, free from this aspect, sticking loyally beside the fascists who treated him badly while continuing to call himself a socialist. Excepting him, all of these people seem to have built new homes of resentment and criticism generated from the political and social structures that they once inhabited. This mentality seems to have led to re-enacting the harm they had suffered. The Italian state commonly used phrenology to mark anarchists as terrorists and put them in insane asylums; in this way, scapegoating them for the social ills they opposed, “anarchists

became the criminal and the crime at the same time.” It was therefore no innovation for Arpinati, former anarchist, to do the same to his former comrades.

Rocca's social Darwinism is linked to the same biological and cultural essentialist views; in his individualist-anarchist days, Rocca used his politics to bully. “[Rocca] would convince anarchist colleagues to pay for his meals in the local *trattoria* by railing against them during the meal with snippets of his Stirner-Nietzschean logic such as 'you pay for my meal because you're weak. I, on the other hand, am strong.’” Rocca would later write, “That which many anarchists and subversives cannot or do not want to understand is that the force behind an authority or an exploitation does not depend either on the guilt or the will of the one who does it, but on the resignation of those exploited and those who let it happen to them.” This is victim-blaming logic that justifies further victimizations, a major emotional component of fascist ideology. Rocca described humiliation as a failure of courage, as the location in which morality sets in ... but for him it was the place in which resentment and abusive tendencies took hold, the very sort of behavior Nietzsche would have abhorred. Borghi described Mussolini's character in similar ways.

*threads of friendship between them*

Rocca wrote:

They whose hearts beat one day for national revolt might today beat for another, different revolt; since they appreciate and love one another, even when they struggle in opposing camps, for the reason that only those who have faith appreciate faith in others... These people have always accepted and boasted about being responsible for their own actions, in which their conscience was enough to support them; and, their situation has always been tragic, morally and materially, representing the ineluctable clash between collective resistance and individual fate.

This solidarity and friendship, the highest value among comrades, also served as a bond that dragged not only these people, but many more, down the path of collaboration with fascism. While Arpinati and Nanni no doubt deserved their deaths, there is something tragic in their relationship.

None of this is meant to excuse or explain away the choices these people made to participate in the fascist political project. While it may not have been as clear as it is now, they are all responsible for the warning signs they ignored and the decisions they made. Once fascists began killing in the street,

it ought to have been clear enough; but the language of violence, misogyny, domination, and national identity should have made them aware of what they were doing before then. Most Italian anarchists—thousands of them—did not become fascists; many of those, and many more politically unaffiliated people, fought bravely in resistance to fascism, risking and often losing their lives in their dissent. We will never know most of their names, but these people, who fought for freedom and for their lives, are the heroes that bring these collaborators to shame.<sup>e</sup> However...

### no heroes

In my account of Mussolini's life, I relied heavily on Armando Borghi's book *Mussolini: Red And Black*, written in the early years of Italian fascism. Borghi is far from an unbiased observer, but is a particularly useful primary source—he knew Mussolini when they were both young anarchists. Borghi resented Mussolini's attempt to pretend friendliness with Errico Malatesta, whom Borghi followed. He published his book in a rushed attempt to tell the world of the Duce's early Leftism, lest people be misled by Mussolini's redactionist history; it drips with the venom of the personally betrayed as well as the righteous anger of the anti-fascist.

As I investigated Borghi's life, I was impressed by its general outline. He became friends with Malatesta at age 17, and followed him through many adventures and prison terms. During this pre-fascist period under discussion, he held a firm middle line between individualist and communist tendencies within anarchism, and stayed dedicated to the working class. He was arrested many times for anti-militarist activity, and became the editor of the anarchist weekly paper *L'Aurora*; when he celebrated the assassination of the Italian king in its pages, he was imprisoned yet again. He took up labor agitation for a time, but also celebrated Masetti's act of war resistance in a paper he co-wrote with Maria Rygier; he escaped repression for this by fleeing to Paris, though she was not so lucky and did yet another prison term. He stayed abroad until Italy offered him amnesty in 1912; when he returned, he participated in Red Week. He was interned because of his anti-war work from 1915 through 1918, and continued to agitate for class war through various publications upon his release.

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e See *Militant Anti-Fascism* by M. Testa for more.



In 1920, he visited Lenin, and they had this rather remarkable exchange:

Lenin asked him if he were opposed to centralism and Borghi replied: "You have that right. How could any anarchist be in favour of centralism?" To which Lenin retorted: "Freedom ought not to be the death of the revolution." Borghi countered with: "In the absence of freedom, the revolution would be a horror." Their conversation proceeded quietly.

Borghi was arrested in October of 1920 along with several other prominent anarchists on "no particular charges", and released a few months later. He attempted to fight the rise of fascism by promoting the Labor Alliance group, while he and his wife received continual death threats, but by 1923 they were compelled to leave the country. Borghi's exploits continued in France, the United States, and, eventually, Italy once again. I was tempted to consider Borghi a hero of anti-fascist Italy, until that impression was fractured by reading this:

"Borghi, jilted by Rygier after a brief romance, led... attacks, most of which were not directed at Rygier's ideas or intelligence, but at her femininity, her style of dress, and, later, her person." Whitaker refers in the last to a horrifying episode in which Borghi and other men forcibly took Rygier to a gynecologist to determine what was "wrong" with her mental and emotional condition—that is, why she was a defiant and therefore emasculating woman. "Using as an excuse for the exam their concerns about her lungs, she underwent a forced gynecological exam after which she was publically declared "female but impenetrable by any man", the association between her anatomical 'deformity' and her mental state deemed evident by Lombrosian standards." Whittaker adds that one might have expected Borghi to show more empathy around issues of humiliation and abuse, given his own physically harmful and degrading experiences with the police. Rygier would later endure more forced gynecological exams while imprisoned by fascist doctors, who claimed to be investigating the sources of her "hysterical character."

To resist making heroes of our dead is a primary lesson for antifascists in this history. Another is the actual value of *ad hominem* assessments of people—personal practices affect political ones, because in truth there is no separation. Mussolini abused, neglected, and locked up several of his partners, and so it is no surprise that he abused, neglected, incarcerated, tortured, and murdered many others with whom he previously had affinity as a means to gaining more power. Too, personal actions have political consequences. Maria Rygier was an independent and strong-willed person, and her movement towards

fascism was her own—but also, how much easier was that drift when anarchist men had treated her so terribly? Had she found solidarity and understanding amongst anarchists instead of sexual violence, perhaps she would have been less likely to make the transition. Many women and femmes, before and since, can speak to how brutal and disillusioning misogynist attacks are when they come from one's alleged comrades.

This devastating misogyny was also present in another arena in which Italian anarchists and fascists sometimes shared community: Futurism.

### III. Futurism: “war is the sole hygiene of the world”

So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! ...Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! ...Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers, and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! Injustice, strong and sane, will break out radiantly in their eyes. Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice.

—F.T. Marinetti, “Manifesto of Futurism”

On the 15th of February in 1910, a Futurist theatre performance took place in Italy; around three thousand people were present. Upon perceiving that the performance had political elements, particularly an anti-Austrian sentiment (Austria governed parts of Italy shortly before this), various officials attempted to intervene, but were ignored. Chaos followed:

Fights broke out between students and anarchists, futurists and austriophiles, socialists and syndicalists... While the curtain came down, Zimolo and Marinetti continued their shouts of “Down with Austria! Long live Italy!” Both were arrested and led out of the theater. Some of their adversaries lay in wait at the exit. Insults and threats were flung at them and returned with equal gusto. An anarchist took Marinetti by the throat, Carrieri received a kick to the groin. Philo-futurists threw themselves onto the passéists, and a wild scuffle broke out. The police hardly managed to escort the arrested artists to the cab. A cortège of people followed them to the police station.

A year later when the police prohibited an appearance by Marinetti in Parma, fearing another such uproar, there was a massive riot. The workers of the city invited Marinetti to speak at their hall anyway, and he gave a lecture to two thousand people called “The Necessity and Beauty of Violence.” According to Berghaus, “[t]he workers who attended the talk objected to Marinetti's

long-winded rhetoric of patriotism and his bellicose call for a bloodbath, but they nevertheless listened with interest and in silence, even when they disagreed with the pronouncements. An applause ended the evening, which provided great intellectual satisfaction.”

Futurism was an art movement, one of writing, theatre, and visual art. It was also an aesthetic; it was also a political tendency. Anarchists, fascists, and socialists all took part in it. Its creator, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, at one time aspired to be the chief artist of the fascist regime, but was often regarded with suspicion and placed under surveillance by the fascist authorities. The movement’s most interesting alliance was with the Arditi, the elite troops of WWI, whom the Futurists admired; many Arditi became Futurists themselves, some anti-fascist and some fascist. Its aesthetic was one of intense modernism, though complemented by *eternal return*, the past reinventing itself in the present; it relied heavily on notions of speed and virility, not to mention misogyny. Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism” is indicative:

We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness... We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed... Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive characteristic can be a masterpiece... We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, we will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice...

When the future is barred to them, the admirable past may be a solace for the ills of the moribund, the sickly, the prisoner... But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong *Futurists!*

This theoretical backdrop is quite different from the Volkische ideology explored in a previous section. While still essentialist in its misogyny, Futurism’s disdain for the past seems to decline the paleogenic thinking that fueled the Nazis... though Mussolini seems to have desired the return of the Roman Empire. Futurism prefigures the techno-futurism and transhumanism we see within some elitist crypto-fascist projects today, such as Tim Draper’s “Six Californias” movement, designed to segregate the rich and poor (and white and non-white) parts of California. It is an unabashed macro-formulation of the micro-battles taking place in San Francisco over the tech industry’s

gentrifying effect on the area. Perhaps this difference in fascist theory is simply a matter of class; the artists and bohemians who then found a home within Futurism are now employed in Silicon Valley.

Marinetti came out of the Paris art scene, and, in his early years, pursued literature and theatre. He admired D'Annunzio's plays very much, and defended them against negative reception. He also acquired a great love for Wagner, the proto-fascist composer, whom he saw as an “anti-traditionalist and revolutionary.” During this time, he was exposed to anarchist and socialist ideas, and also began celebrating the “Dionysian vitality of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*” in his own work. He wrote of speed, destruction, change, and his desire for newness; he became so representative of this tendency that he was frequently referred to as the “caffeine of Europe.”

Marinetti was influenced not only by Nietzsche, but (less predictably) by John Stuart Mill, whose work encouraged Marinetti to support societies of free individuals, though he read Mill in rather a different manner than is traditional. George Sorel's ideas of revolutionary violence via the general strike also spoke to Marinetti, who, as so many others along this trajectory did, divorced Sorel's arguments from their class basis until they became a general call for violence, assumed to be revolutionary in and of itself. More generally, Marinetti read anarchist authors and participated in anarchist milieus into the 1910s; anarchism was a fundamental part of the culture that surrounded him.

This meant that many anarchists took him and his ideas seriously. The opening vignette is only one example of Marinetti's multitudinous interactions with anarchists, socialists, and workers leaning to the left. When he performed the same speech on a different date, his lecture was interrupted by “assertions that 'the ideas of anarchism have nothing in common with Futurism as proclaimed by Marinetti'” in response to his call for nationalist sentiment. However, “he received thunderous applause for his praise of the anarchists' 'magnificent gesture of destruction', his appeal to the 'proletariat immersing all society in a fearless insurrection and a burst of heroic violence', and his image of 'a tragic night of General Strike and revolution in a great modern city plunged into darkness by the dominating will of workers.’” Some were disenchanted by what they saw, such as the previously described Maria Rygier, who dismissed Marinetti as a poet rather than a politician; others were put off by the Futurists' willingness to participate in elections. But, while it was never generally embraced, Futurism was certainly taken seriously and adopted by some anarchists. Anarcho-Futurism developed a more intentional embrace of the “Dionysian spirit” and a distaste for the nationalism of mainstream

Futurism; the “Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto” from 1919 speaks also of burning books, of “Laughter and Love copulating with Melancholy and Hate”, and so on, just with a few nods to the idea of an eventual anarchist society.

Things took a turn for Futurism and Marinetti when they formed an alliance with embittered veterans, returned home from WWI to scant welcome: the Arditi.

### **Arditi: “the daring ones”**

[The Ardito is] the Futurist at war, the bohemian avant-garde ready for everything, light-hearted, agile, unbridled; the gay power of a twenty-year-old youth who throws the bomb while whistling a song from a variety show... A perfect fusion of thought, beauty, action. The elegance of a primitive, child-like gesture, immediately followed by a gesture of improbable heroism. All the impulse, the force, the impetuosity of a man overflowing with Italian spirit. An aristocracy, therefore, of character, muscles, belief, courage, blood and brain... In the Arditi triumphs a totally modern and Italian youth, undisturbed by scepticism and corroding experiences... And because these are also the characteristics of the Futurist, I won't be wrong in defining the Ardito 'the Futurist at war' and the Futurist 'the Ardito of the artistic and political battle'...in fact, the Futurists have fought amongst the Arditi, and many Arditi are members of the Futurist Political Party.

—F.T. Marinetti

Six million Italians served in WWI; about four million of them served on the front lines. During the war, the troops developed a disdain for those who had maneuvered their way into cushy military posts and a dislike of war profiteers. By the end of the war, these sentiments turned into a widespread distrust and hatred for the whole political and military establishment. Nowhere was this truer than among the Arditi, the elite Italian shock troops of the war. Something like the U.S. Marines, these soldiers received great acclaim, recognition, and privilege during the war, and had a strong self-image and culture based on being the best, the bravest, the most virile men in combat. Many fascist observers saw them as the embodiment of the Nietzschean Superman, or a reincarnation of the Praetorian Guard of Roman days.

Things were bad for veterans after the war. They felt abandoned by the military, and did not receive proper post-service benefits; their resentment

made them ripe for fascism, and fascist ranks swelled dramatically. For the Arditi, things were particularly rough—not only did they lose the respect and privilege they were accustomed to, they were virtually unemployable, feared by many, persecuted by the police, and incompatible with civilian life. They had been chosen as elite troops in the war for their personalities: “strong individuals endowed with physical courage and defiance of death... adventure types with a streak of anarchical, anti-authoritarian attitude.” Once the war was over, they were perceived as enemies of the state and society because of the same traits. In response, they took up many different political formations: some explicitly fascist, some predominantly Futurist, and some anarchist. The Arditi veteran Mario Carli became a link between the Futurists and the Arditi, and wrote many “energetic and lyrical programmes” containing hyperbolic praise of the Arditi lifestyle and calls for the Arditi to cleanse Italy, “to kill the inner and outer monsters who ensnare our fatherland.”

Meanwhile, Mussolini was preparing for his rise to power, and looking for more backers; he turned to the Futurists and Arditi. He formed the group *Fasci di Combattimento* in the spring of 1919 as a sort of umbrella fascist organization for veterans. Once secured in this way, Arditi participated in the attack on the offices of *L'Avanti*, and received financial backing from the same industrialists who funded Mussolini. Marinetti, for his part, seemed delighted by Mussolini, finding him “full of Futurist ideas.” Six months later, his impressions were quite opposite; he found Mussolini to be a reactionary power and money-seeker. This constant reversal of perceptions is thematic of the relationship between the two; Mussolini alternately used him, dropped him, and regarded him with suspicion as circumstances dictated. Still, Marinetti joined the *Fasci di Combattimento*, more because it was an opportunity for recruiting Futurists than because of any particular affinity with fascism or combat. Two years later he came out in support of freeing Malatesta from prison; Marinetti, like Mussolini, was not reliably in any camp but his own.

Many attempts were made to marry all of these tendencies. Most formally, Mario Carli published an essay in the summer of 1919 titled “Parties of the Avant-Garde: What If We Tried To Collaborate?” calling for a pact between Futurists, Arditi, fascists, Socialists, Republicans, reformists, and syndicalists. “The aim of this alliance was to protect the working class against the disastrous economic and social policies of the government, and, in the long run, to overthrow the existing political order.” Mussolini rejected this effort, denying that the Socialist Party had any revolutionary substance. While Mussolini may well have been right about that, it is certain that he was far more interested in personal gain and power than in forming coalitions for their own sake.

Only two years later, such proposals were distant memories. Armed Leftist defense units called the *guardie rosse* emerged in response to the fascist attacks. They largely consisted of the *Arditi del Popolo*, veterans who leaned anarchist; many of them had taken part in the Fiume adventure. Despite their anarchist tendencies, they defined themselves as an “anti-Fascist militia set up to contribute towards a normalization of civil life, and not to incite insurrection against the State” ; this was due in part to their alliance with socialists invested in the continued existence of the state, and in part to the emergency nature of the need to counter fascists, who were murdering people in the street by now. (A similar “practical” compromise took place in Spain sometime later, as described in section three.)

The largest contingents were in Rome (2,000 fighters) and Turin (1,300) with smaller contingents in perhaps ten cities; they were welcomed by “the popular classes... because [the *guardie rosse*] had no party affiliations and were led by experienced ex-combatants who knew how to employ their military skills against Fascist squadrons.” They were supported by a “heterogenous mixture of anarchists, syndicalists, socialists, communists, republicans, and Futurists”, but were not supported by the Italian Communist Party; in retrospect, a Communist historian describes this lack of support as “the great missed chance of militant anti-Fascism prior to the March on Rome.” In cities in which local Communists disobeyed their party's instructions and showed support for the *Arditi del Popolo*, their anti-fascist efforts met with great, if temporary, success.

The authorities responded swiftly, ordering the dissolution of the *guardie rosse* and imprisoning many leaders and members; those that survived this response, such as in Parma, began operating in secret. While they existed, they struck back blow for blow against fascist attacks, burning down fascist spaces when anarchist or socialist spaces were burnt, and responding similarly to murders. There were other anarchist Futurists besides the *Arditi del Popolo*, and some of them became active, militant anti-fascist combatants during the lead-up to and early years of Mussolini's reign. Notably, now-famous anarchist poet Renzo Novatore and his anarcho-futurist group in La Spezia (which included former Red Lotus Fiumans) collaborated with the *Arditi del Popolo*. In general, Italian anarchist anti-fascist resistance was widespread, and met with intense reprisals; but that is not our subject here.

## summing up betrayal

How could a brother be the *subject* of absolute hostility? The hypothesis will have to be inverted. There can be absolute hostility only *for* a brother. And the history of friendship is but the experience of what in this respect resembles an unavowable synonymy, a murderous tautology. ...It seems to me that Schmitt never speaks of the sister.

—Jacques Derrida, reflecting on the Nazi Carl Schmitt

“If the anarchists are not careful, their enemies will write their history.”

—Gaetano Salvemini

Total hatred between anarchists and fascists is inevitable and, I hope, permanent. It is only our enmity towards the world as it exists today that we hold in common; our specific critiques, methodology, visions of the future, and joys are generally quite different. Still, I think there is also a certain fratricidal impulse at the heart of our conflict, based in our common ancestry and the intermingling we have just reviewed. This understanding does nothing to erase the enmity, only to deepen it: we may be brothers, but we can never be sisters.

The anarchist failure in pre-fascist Italy was not only the failure to avoid collaboration with fascists, but the failure to seize the revolutionary moment; in that vacuum, it was seized by others. Not only did they lose the day to their enemies, but they lost many of their own, as anarchists frustrated by this ineffectuality defected to fascism. There are a few specific missed opportunities we can point to, such as the lost momentum after Red Week, during which there could have been a Leftist revolution: the overcaution of the CLG, a prominent labor union, prevented this uprising from meeting its fullest potential. Or: Malatesta plotted with Giuletti, the captain who delivered a ship to Fiume, and D'Annunzio to lead a leftist March on Rome in 1920—well before Mussolini's successful March—but the alliance failed over differences around the question of intervention in WWI. Or: the failure of the Socialist Party to support the Arditi del Popolo in their armed anti-fascist organizing— could the Right have been defeated even then, in the streets? What would have happened if the Socialists had not signed the “Pact of Conciliation” with the fascists in 1921? The Communist Party also ordered its members to stay out of the conflict; the fight was then only between anarchists, those who disobeyed their parties, unaffiliated anti-fascists, and the fascists. In a country so dominated by the Left, this was a heavy



blow.<sup>f</sup> Even as late as 1924, there was a chance when the Left united against Mussolini after fascists murdered the socialist parliamentarian Matteoti. Still, the Left did not act, and heavy repression precluded the possibility of most open resistance after that... although some people never stopped trying. In 1926, an Italian anarchist attempted to assassinate Mussolini, but failed.

But failure was not limited to these specific moments; rather, there was an overall and overwhelming incapability to meet the social energy in the streets with open arms, to show solidarity to ones' comrades over sectarian differences, and to recognize fascism for the deadly threat it was in time. There was also a more elusive incapability: the failure to produce a cultural and spiritual impetus stronger than those created by the fascists. Anarchists were simply not compelling enough to sway the hearts and minds of enough average Italians in the way that fascists did. This is not necessarily a bad thing: compelling others to follow an ideology is not a very anarchist activity. We can also fault elitism, and the condoning of unethical violence; as Arendt wrote about the German example, intellectuals enjoy often watching respectability crumble via the deployment of violence, and anarchist intellectuals were no less guilty than their bourgeois kin, sometimes mistaking all violence for revolutionary violence. And, as ever, the cycle of repression and recuperation continues: "If Italian democracy yielded to fascism without a fight, the latter spawned democracy anew when it found itself no longer corresponding to the balance of social and political forces."

In a time of liberal governance, anarchists can confuse their rebellion against all authority with causes they would never support out of context. May we remain critical at all times, and never mistake our enemies for friends, or the enemy within as a source of revolutionary vigor. Complicity is not inevitable.

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<sup>f</sup> Gramsci, shockingly, "justified the withdrawal of communist militants from the *Arditi del Popolo* thus: 'the tactic... corresponded to the need to prevent the party membership being controlled by a leadership that was not the party leadership.'"



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