

THE AID OF THE ITALIAN RED CROSS TO THE CITY OF FIUME IN THE D'ANNUNZIO PERIOD

DUCCIO VANNI

Assistant Professor History of Medicine, Health Science Department, University of Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

The article aims to describe and discuss the motivations and political, medical, health and social implications for which the Italian Red Cross effectively assisted the city of Fiume, during the period of Gabriele D'Annunzio's government, between September 1919 and the February 1921.

Keywords: Italian Red Cross, volunteer nurses, Fiume, medical supplies.

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The 1919 period

On 17 September 1919 - five days after the triumphal entrance of D'Annunzio and his legionaries into Fiume (Rijeka) to proclaim its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy - Italian Prime Minister Saverio Nitti wrote a letter⁽¹⁾ to Senator Giovanni Ciraolo (1873-1954), acting president of the Italian Red Cross (IRC). The missive announced the obligatory interruption on the part of the Italian government of communications between the city and the armistice zone controlled by the Kingdom; for this reason, the IRC was asked to "take all necessary steps" to be able to "promptly" supply the city's civilian population with needed provisions, in case of a request by the National Council of Fiume. In his letter, Nitti suggested that to that end Ciraolo might contact the Ministry of Transportation and the undersecretary for provisioning; in reality, the institutional figures who were involved on various levels in preparing and carrying out this particular relief effort - which continued until February 1921⁽²⁾ - were far more numerous. Yet what archival documentation above all indicates is that the IRC president had already taken the lead in making such arrangements: through an

IRC official who had just been discharged⁽³⁾, Ciraolo - on about 20 September - was the first to offer the authorities of Fiume the aid of IRC. His gesture had the blessings of General Badoglio, special government commissioner for the Julian March, who in a ciphered telegram of 22 September confirmed to Ciraolo that the offer had been received and that he would send to Rome the subsequent requests of the civil authorities of Fiume⁽⁴⁾. The latter wasted no time in making these requests: among the signers of the petitions, the name of Antonio Grossich⁽⁵⁾, the famous inventor of iodine and then president of the National Council of Fiume⁽¹⁾, stood out. The requests highlighted "serious shortages," both with regard to medical supplies and food.

As soon as the requests were received, the IRC president immediately wrote to the Italian government (attaching the documentation from Fiume), promising to manage the former of the two stated needs within his Association by promptly dispatching a technical health mission to Fiume, under the direction of Colonel Prof. Vincenzo Morini. In addition, Ciraolo explicitly asked Nitti to officially authorize the IRC - which had concluded the war with a significant reduction of its own supplies - to have

access to Italy's food reserves, making use of the volunteer personnel of the Committees of Ancona and Venice to collect them. To the end of carrying out this task of "Italian solidarity," Ciruolo further urged Nitti to establish a particular credit on behalf of the city of Fiume, which would allow the IRC to make use of supplies in State warehouses⁽⁷⁾.

Following government approval⁽⁸⁾, another correspondence⁽⁹⁾ was set in motion between Ciruolo and the general director of the Banca d'Italia, Great Commander Bonaldo Stringher. Stringher supported the Senator's requests and in the space of about ten days⁽¹⁰⁾ made an advance of 100,000 lire available to the Ancona committee and opened a credit line of 700,000 lire at the Venice branch, which could be drawn on by the president of the local committee, upon approval of the Ministry of Treasury. Although a wagon of condensed milk sent by the IRC had already been received in Fiume at the beginning of October⁽¹¹⁾, the first substantial train convoy bringing aid was sent to succor the city's population on 25 October⁽¹²⁾. This delivery, among other news, was described in detail in a typewritten report⁽¹³⁾ sent on 7 November 1919 by Ciruolo to General Badoglio, Vice Chief-of-Staff and special government commissioner for the Julian March, who was headquartered in Udine. The first page of the report briefly reminded the recipient of all the institutional and governmental authorities that were already involved and reiterated that Colonel Prof. Vincenzo Morini had already been officially dispatched to the city to act as liaison between the authorities of Fiume, the IRC and the Royal Army. In the second part, Ciruolo explained that for some time he had already provided affirmative answers to the first most urgent requests of the city by sending significant quantities of "condensed and powdered milk, medicines, bed-sheets and hospital gowns" from Red Cross warehouses. He went on to inform Badoglio that the peninsular bases for IRC provisioning of Fiume were Venice (by land) and Ancona (by sea). In particular, thanks to the advance of 700,000 lire from the Banca d'Italia, the Venice Committee was able to send a train to Fiume, which reached the city the afternoon of 25 October. The delivery in question was made by the first periodic supply train, escorted by Captain Peloso and 13 troops. This train was composed of 27 wagons and brought the following goods to its destination: 933.25 tons of pasta, 853.20 tons of rice, 788.94 tons of white flour, 433.20 tons of barley, 180 tons of other types of flour, 100 tons of meat, 500 crates of milk, and 40,320 eggs: all for a

sum total of L. 439,341.68⁽¹⁸⁾. The president's report went on to make a (less precise) reference to provisioning by sea: effected by steamships from Ancona, this supply line represented a channel put into use only more recently, in part still in fieri. By this means were being sent to Fiume not only other food-stuffs, such as potatoes and vegetables: it was hoped that fuel would also be shipped in the near future. In conclusion, Ciruolo did not hesitate to express several complaints to Badoglio made by IRC volunteer personnel who escorted the above-mentioned train convoy: in spite of their advanced age, they were refused the possibility of travelling in a special passenger wagon by staff members of the General Direction of Transportation, which was responsible to the Ministry of War. To therefore avoid repetition of such inconveniences, which would effectively render future periodic deliveries "impossible"⁽¹⁹⁾, the president appealed to Badoglio's influence over these circles and offices, reminding him of "the festive greeting" given to IRC escort personnel by the people of Fiume. Indeed, only two days later did Badoglio's written reply reassure the president about his instructions to the General Direction of Transportation to facilitate "as much as possible the profoundly humanitarian volunteer work"⁽²⁰⁾ carried out by the Association for Fiume. As winter approached, however, the material needs of the city's population increased, while their intention to stay in Fiume remained unchanged, as they wished to underline its Italian character and nourish the hope that sooner or later it would be reunited with the mother country. In fact a monograph published by American Republicans in that same year⁽²¹⁾ also upheld Italy's claims to the city, underscoring that of a total of 44,400 inhabitants, 65% (26,000) were Italian, 22% (12,000) Slav, and 13% (6,400) Magyar, with, moreover, this last ethnic group having historically opposed Fiume's possible annexation first to Habsburg Croatia and then to Yugoslavia. The arrival of the Legionaries obviously increased the number of inhabitants by several thousand.

In this context, on 24 November Ciruolo proudly forwarded to Nitti a copy of an appeal addressed to him by the "Ladies of Fiume" on behalf of the children and women "of that generous city," unambiguously adding⁽²¹⁾ that by itself the Italian Red Cross would never be able to meet the vast array of requests that it received. The letter was addressed to the IRC president and directed to the attention of the head of the Italian government; its letterhead read "Volunteers in Support of Fiume or Death." The first

part of the missive explained that in spite of the war and the misery caused by it the women of Fiume as well as their children made great material sacrifices to feed Italian prisoners from the Battles of Caporetto and the Piave River, safeguarding and hiding the Italian tricolor in the expectation that the victorious Kingdom would liberate the city from foreign domination. Unfortunately, Italy's victory had not led to the yearned-for annexation of the city to the Italian Kingdom – hence the festive greeting given to D'Annunzio's volunteers. Yet Fiume continued to suffer as a result of the military blockade, which soon caused "horrendous" misery and "total unemployment." "The ardent desire for liberty" felt by the women of Fiume still gave them "a thread of hope"; even if the world seemed incredulous with regard to the city's fate, the writers of the letter reminded people that in Fiume the little ones suffer and cry, children with naked legs and in bare feet go around the city streets singing the songs of the Motherland and the songs of the Piave and of St. Justus. These are children whom Italian soldiers here feed with food from their mess tins and dress with their clothes. These are sacred truths: whoever has been to Fiume has seen that it is so⁽²¹⁾.

The nine women⁽²²⁾ who signed the letter concluded their appeal by reiterating that this "most Italian and martyred" city was in need of everything. Proud of their work, they were confident that through the IRC president Italian women and children would also be informed of Fiume's dire circumstances, such that Italians could come to the aid of the city's population, which was exhausted but always full of hope for Italy.

Ciraolo also forwarded to Nitti a copy of one more enclosure, signed by president Grossich, which contained a substantial and varied list of requests of a medical nature⁽²¹⁾, with particular emphasis on anesthetics and disinfectants, which were needed by the city's hospitals.

Even if the requests of Fiume's population could not be completely satisfied, the climate of solid collaboration that was established between Ciraolo, Badoglio and Director Stringher led to further important provisioning of the city during the last part of 1919, with nearly weekly deliveries by both train and ship. These were effected in spite of some procedural mishaps that occurred between the president of the Venetian IRC committee and the local section of the Banca d'Italia, problems which were duly resolved thanks to the good relationship between the IRC president and Stringher⁽²²⁾. In the

context of the close patriotic bond between the IRC and D'Annunzio's movement, we must also remember the importance – symbolically and in other ways – of the unexpected visit of the Duchess of Aosta, the national Inspector of the volunteers nurses⁽²³⁾, to Fiume⁽²⁴⁾ on 4 November 1919, the first anniversary of the Battle of Vittorio Veneto. In the course of this day, the Duchess visited a hospital in the city, paid a call on D'Annunzio himself (who was "unwell") and prayed for some time at the grave of Luigi Siviero, the first legionary to fall under the fire of "Nitti's troops" in an accident which occurred the night of All Saints' Day. During her automobile ride through the city, the Duchess was immediately recognized by soldiers and civilians. Soon a cheering crowd formed to greet her, such that her car was forced to make many stops, as she leaned out, smiling and thanking the people of the city for their spontaneous and warm enthusiasm⁽²⁵⁾.

Two days later, the first page of the *Vedetta d'Italia* featured a long article (which turned out to be prophetic) written by Gabriele D'Annunzio, entitled *Il sangue fraterno* ("Fraternal blood"). The piece described Siviero's sacrifice and the Duchess of Aosta's visit to his grave in unmistakably patriotic and epic tones. Indeed, after kneeling at the soldier's casket, this "regal woman," wife of the "magnanimous Duke" – whom the Commander called the "vicar of glory" – prayed fervently "for a brother killed by a brother." For this reason, she must be praised and blessed. We soldiers of Fiume would like to hold in our hearts her image in that pose of royal humility. When she stood up, her cloak seemed the wing of a great warrior archangel, which took up our smiling dead brother under its shadow⁽²⁶⁾.

Events of the following weeks showed, however, that the good relations between the IRC, the Duke and Duchess of Aosta and D'Annunzio's government were not enough to lead the people and city of Fiume out of the impasse in which they found themselves. On the contrary, on 23 December, following the annulment of the citizen plebiscite for the annexation of the city to Italy, the permanent situation of crisis of the Italian government regarding the resolution of the question of Fiume vis-à-vis international pressure led to Badoglio's replacement by General Cavaglia, who was essentially hostile to D'Annunzio and his legionaries and insensitive to the needs of the city's population. It does not appear to be by chance, then, that at the same time the authorities of Fiume began periodically sending their own deputations⁽²⁷⁾ to Rome to attempt to "soften" the Italian blockade,

expressing their hope for Ciraoło's political support in this case as well; yet this endeavor produced increasingly unsatisfactory results during the following year.

The 1920 and 1921 period

Indeed, 1920 saw mounting obstacles to IRC efforts to provide succor and assistance in Fiume. In part these complications were due to reports reaching the Italian government⁽²⁷⁾ according to which a portion of supplies sent to the civilian population ended up benefitting D'Annunzio's troops. This explains Nitti's request to Ciraoło to reduce the flow of aid to the city, which was followed by a temporary suspension of the deliveries. In spite of these growing difficulties, a publication from that year by the Central Committee in Rome characterized the operation organized and carried out for Fiume as "the greatest logistical service that a non-government association has ever accomplished"; specifically, this effort consisted of seven full trains of roughly 30 wagons each and five steamships bringing food supplies for a value of L. 4,000,793, as well as 15 steamships with vegetables, eggs, etc., for a value of L. 1,300,000. In addition, medicines, treatments and clothing for a value of over L. 600,000 were shipped from Ancona⁽²⁸⁾.

Furthermore, in the same period the IRC sent 200 cases of sweet milk⁽³⁰⁾ for infants to the mayor of Zara, worth L. 20,000.

The "total" expenditure, then, amounted to just under L. 6,000,000, which by the end of the period during which assistance was provided to the city would reach over L. 9,000,000. Beginning in the month of April, the situation was further complicated when D'Annunzio's legionaries, anxious to meet their growing logistical needs, did not hesitate to take possession of a team of horses belonging to the Royal Army near the Istrian border. In retaliation, General Caviglia blocked an IRC train headed to Fiume for two weeks⁽³¹⁾. Ensuing government orders obliged the IRC to reduce its assistance to once-monthly deliveries, while requisitions of food supplies, in particular flour, by D'Annunzio's soldiers began to be officially acknowledged by the civilian authorities⁽³²⁾ of Fiume themselves, who promptly informed the IRC president of these incidents.

The simultaneous fall of Nitti and the formation of a government under Giolitti, who supported Caviglia in his opposition to D'Annunzio, rendered provisioning of the city even more complicated, if

such a thing was possible: often deliveries were delayed, while requested foodstuffs (such as polenta) were sometimes replaced⁽³³⁾ with cheaper substitutes (such as corn). In this context, Ciraoło should be credited with having convinced Giolitti to authorize the delivery of a special provision of surgical and sanitary material in the months of September and October^(34,35), in the midst of a plague epidemic⁽³⁶⁾; indeed, D'Annunzio himself had personally made such a request to the IRC in a letter⁽³⁷⁾ of 17 July. As is known, following the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo (12 November), the blockade of the city was tightened even further, and the standoff between the Royal Army and D'Annunzio's troops had its tragic epilogue in the fratricidal "Bloody Christmas" of 1920, which signaled the end of government of the *Vate*, himself slightly injured in the fighting⁽³⁸⁾.

Yet even in these circumstances Ciraoło and the IRC managed to continue aiding Fiume, sending "a 100-bed war hospital with personnel"⁽³⁹⁾ which was, however, only made operative at the end of the year because of bureaucratic obstruction, once again created by General Caviglia⁽³⁹⁾. According to an IRC statement from the previous January⁽⁴⁰⁾, Ciraoło's team included Prof. Raffaele Bastianelli (as director) and Prof. Vincenzo Morini, who were accompanied by "highly esteemed collaborators" as well as by eight Nurse Volunteers.

These were joined by Prof. Antonino Fummi, the IRC's head surgeon, who for some time had already been serving at Fiume's hospital. As we have seen, Giolitti officially ended the great assistance initiative organized by Ciraoło in February 1921; yet both before and after the city's annexation to the Kingdom of Italy in 1924, the people of Italy, the authorities of Fiume and D'Annunzio himself repeatedly expressed sentiments of eternal gratitude to the CRI and its president. Indeed, Ciraoło received important recognitions, which took various forms, as attested by the many documents contained in a folder dedicated to the "Meritorious Senator Giovanni Ciraoło," which is preserved in the *Archivio Generale Fiumano of the Vittoriale degli Italiani*. Evidence of the shared irredentist sentiment that linked the IRC President to D'Annunzio is provided by the contents of a telegram in which Ciraoło expresses thanks to the *Vate* for a gift received from him in January 1923:

[...] I am proud to have led the Italian Red Cross in its mission as victualer and nurse of the city under your command, of which you were the pulse and the glory (stop) and I am proud to have been

devoted to you as one of many Italians whom your words teach and inspire! Giovanni Ciraolo⁽⁴¹⁾.

Later, following the definitive annexation of the city to the Kingdom of Italy⁽⁴²⁾, the IRC was able to send a full hospital to Fiume for the establishment⁽⁴³⁾ of the marine colonies (March 1924), thanks once again to Ciraolo's mediation efforts.

Final considerations

The references cited in this essay are obviously not exhaustive in completely describing and analyzing the episode that represented the long and complex operation orchestrated by the IRC under Ciraolo's leadership both for and in Fiume. Nevertheless, the documentation consulted shows quite clearly that the quantities of food and medicine lavished upon Fiume between 1919 and 1921 turned out to be crucial for maintaining the administrative primacy of the Italian (or Italophile) population in the city. As a result, these nonviolent operations, complementary to the military actions of D'Annunzio's forces, facilitated Fiume's later annexation to the Kingdom of Italy. In particular, the substantial agreement on irredentist aims on the part of the IRC president, Badoglio, the authorities of Fiume and Stringher – who was General Director of the Banca d'Italia and member of the Board of Directors of the Central Committee at the time⁽⁴⁴⁾ – in effect forced the Nitti government to perhaps concede more than it would have otherwise been willing to, at least for some time. We recall, for example, the description of the condition of women and children in the city drafted by the “Women of Fiume,” which Ciraolo immediately brought to the attention of the head of the Italian government in an attempt to raise awareness about the needs and hopes of Fiume's population. The positive, collaborative relationship that was maintained between the IRC president and the general director of Banca d'Italia again proved to be critical in the difficult period of 1920, above all during the Giolitti government, in avoiding the complete closure of aid supply lines, in spite of the fact that by this time it was certain that D'Annunzio's troops were in part the beneficiaries of this assistance.

The conduct of Red Cross personnel on the ground in Fiume was also on a par with that of their president. The tone of the reports sent to Rome always revealed patriotic inclinations; requests for more personnel, means and materials often exceeded the actual logistical resources⁽⁴⁵⁾ available to Ciraolo. Perusing these missives gives one the same impres-

sion as that formed from reading the lists of supplies requested by the authorities of Fiume: ask for 100 to get at least 50. Finally, the significant overlap between the irredentism of D'Annunzio and that of the IRC is also evident in the reports of the men and women Legionaries of Fiume, which are preserved at the Vittoriale archive. Together with Sister Emma Messere (of the Voghera Red Cross Committee), the present author has in fact been able to ascertain that at least three IRC volunteers and six Red Cross nurses⁽⁴⁶⁾ were officially nominated Legionaries for services rendered in the city during the government of the *Vate*. Sister Messere is currently conducting research on the biographies of these and other figures who formed a bridge between the Red Cross and D'Annunzian irredentism.

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Corresponding Author:

DUCCIO VANNI

Assistant Professor History of Medicine

Health Science Department, University of Florence

Email: duccio.vanni@unifi.it

(Italy)