

Mary Nardini

A Profile of a Milwaukee Anarchist

Mary Nardini Gang

2018

Mary Nardini was an Italian anarchist who lived and organized in Milwaukee's Bay View neighborhood in the early 20th century. She was revered in the Italian anarchist community as the 'guiding light' of *I Dilettanti Filodrammatici del Circolo Studi Sociali* (Amateur Thespian Social Studies Club). The Thespians were a group of Italian anarchists who operated a space that was not unlike many contemporary infoshops. Members of the group occupied themselves distributing anarchist literature, hosting discussions, and putting on anti-state and anti-church plays as fundraisers to support anarchist political prisoners.

Bay View's Little Italy, as a community, was known for its general distaste for the church and the state. Folks in the community were deemed troublemakers by religious and pro-government Italians who lived in the Third Ward neighborhood. Among the latter was Reverend August Giuliani. In 1917, Giuliani began a campaign to convert the largely secular Bay View Italians to christianity. He and his choir held weekly revivals, complete with singing and preaching in the streets of Bay View.

In late August of 1917, Mary Nardini and a handful of other anarchists confronted Reverend Giuliani in the streets. They declared themselves anarchists and proclaimed their hatred for the state, the church, laws, and the pope. Visibly shaken and offended, Giuliani and his band left.

He returned the next week. When he and his choir arrived, they saw Mary reading a book on her porch. As Giuliani began his sermon, several anarchists gathered nearby and began singing 'vulgar' italian songs that announced, "We fight the government, we fight the citizens, we are for anarchy!" Soon a crowd of over seventy-five had gathered and were heckling Giuliani. One person in the crowd promised Giuliani, "If you return to Bay View, we'll kill you. We have the lake for people like you!" Fearing for his life, Giuliani fled.

On September 9th, Giuliani returned again, bringing several Milwaukee police officers with him. As he arrived, Mary Nardini was seen yelling into the front door of a house. Within moments, she marched out of the residence with a column of over fifty anarchists following closely behind. The police began roughing up one of the anarchists, resulting in several of the folks in Nardini's crew drawing their guns. What ensued was a shootout between police and anarchists that left two anarchists dead, several people wounded on both sides, and Giuliani running for his life.

In the aftermath, Nardini and over a dozen other anarchists were arrested for rioting. Eleven people, including Nardini, were then indicted for the incident.

On November 24th, while the defendants were in jail awaiting trial, a suspicious package was delivered to Giuliani's church in the third ward. Fearing a retaliation bombing, church servants brought the package to the downtown police station. Sure enough, the package held a bomb. While being inspected the bomb detonated, killing nine police officers, including several who were involved in the Bay View incident. The explosion at the police station marks the most cops killed in any incident in the history of the Milwaukee Police Department.

Though Nardini and her comrades were in police custody at the time of the explosion, the incident irreversibly tainted the jury, and at trial she was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison.

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Be Gay Do Crime, December, 2018, Contagion Press

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