

The War and the Anarchists

Errico Malatesta

April 1912

There is no nefarious deed, no criminal passion that interested parties do not try to excuse, justify, and even glorify by means of noble reasons. This is, in essence, a source of comfort, for it shows that certain loftier ideals devised by humanity over the course of its evolution have by now seeped into the universal consciousness and linger and prevail even in times of the greatest aberration. But this does not make it any less necessary that the deception be exposed, and the sordid interests and atavistic brutality lurking under the cloak of noble sentiments be denounced.

Thus, lying assurances that the undertaking would be simple, and about the great benefits the Italian proletariat would reap from it were not enough to justify and persuade the people to embrace the loot-and-pillage war that the Italian government meant to wage on the people of Libya. It would be really too outrageous if a man, other than a complete brute, were to be incited to carry out a murder on the assurance that the intended victim is defenseless and has lots of money and that there is no risk of being discovered and punished. So other, loftier motives had to be marshalled, and the naïve persuaded that this was a rare opportunity when one might become rich while performing a selfless act of magnanimity. And they came up with the need to exercise “the nation’s energies” and show the world what “our folk” are worth, their right and duty to spread civilization and, first and foremost, love of country and the glory of Italy.

We shall not bother here with the supposed material benefits, first of all because, in our view, these could never justify aggression, and then because these days few people have any belief left in such benefits, unless we are talking about the profiteering by a tiny band of monopolists and military suppliers. But it is worth our while to take a closer look at the moral arguments that have been deployed to justify the war.

Italy, they say, is not given her due place in this world. Italians are oblivious of their latent energies; they need to be shaken out of their lethargy. Life is energy, strength and action and struggle, and we want to live.

All well and good. But since we are men and not brute beasts and since the life we are out to live is a human life, there are going to have to be certain qualifications about the energy that is to be expended. Is it, perhaps, the vigor of the predatory beast to which we aspire? Or that of the blackguard, the brigand, the goon, the executioner? Or—and this may well be the example

that best fits in this instance—that of the cowardly thug who, having got a sound thrashing in town, heads for home and demonstrates his courage ... by beating his wife?

The vigor of civilized people, the force that genuinely brings an intensity to life is not the sort expended on inter-human strife, bullying the weak or oppressing the defeated. But it is the sort deployed in the contest against the adverse powers of nature, in the performance of useful toil, in the demanding researches of science, in helping to spur forward those who have been left behind, in lending a helping hand to those who stumble, in securing ever greater powers and well-being for every human being.

Yes, it is true, Italians are lacking in vigor. Mean and lazy, our bourgeoisie do not even have it in them to exploit the available workforce and forces it to move away to be exploited abroad; and our workers let themselves be driven from their homeland in search of a crust of bread and now they are being dispatched to Libya to be slaughtered for the profits of a few grasping speculators, to win fresh territory for those who stop them enjoying the land of Italy. But war is not the source of their vigor and determination to improve, any more than turning to a life of thievery and prostitution invigorates those who cannot and will not work.

Work and enjoyment of the entire fruits of their labour—that is what the Italians need, like every other people.

The warmongers say: we are bringing civilisation to the barbarians.

Let us take a little look at that.

Civilization means wealth, science, freedom, brotherhood, and justice; it means material, moral, and intellectual advancement; it means the abandonment and condemnation of brutish strife and the advancement of solidarity and conscious, willing cooperation.

Above all, civilising involves inspiring the sentiments of freedom and human dignity, raising the value of life, encouraging activity and enterprise, respecting individuals and whatever natural or voluntary associations into which men may enter.

Is that what the soldiers of Italy, in the hire of the Bank of Rome, are off to Africa to do?

In spite of Verbicaro[120] and the Camorra, in spite of illiteracy, in spite of lands left untilled and malaria-infested and the thousands of waterless, streetless, sewerless townships, Italy is still more civilized than Libya. She has strong, skilled workers; she has her doctors, engineers, agronomists, and artists; she has great traditions and a clever and gentle people that have always proved themselves capable of the most exacting, noblest tasks, when not oppressed by poverty and tyranny. She could climb quickly to the highest rungs of human civilisation and become a mighty factor for progress and fairness in the world.

Instead, deceived and intoxicated by those who oppress and exploit her and prevent her from developing her finer qualities and her wealth, she ships soldiers and priests to Africa, bringing carnage and looting, and in the vile endeavour to reduce a foreign population to slavery, she makes a brute and a slave of herself.

Let the time for reformation be fast approaching!

We come now to the ultimate argument: patriotism.

The patriotic sentiment undoubtedly holds great sway in every country and serves the people's exploiters wonderfully well by blinding its eyes to class frictions and, in the name of an idealized solidarity based on stock and nation, draws the oppressed into reluctant service of the interests of their oppressors. And this is all the more successful in a country like Italy which was for so long oppressed by the foreigner and was released from that only yesterday after cruel, glorious struggle.

But what, precisely, does patriotism consist of?

Love of birthplace, or rather, greater love for wherever we were reared, wherever we received our mothers' caresses, where we as children played with other children, and as striplings won our first kiss from a beloved girlfriend, a preference for the language we understand best and, therefore, our most intimate dealings with those who speak it: these are natural phenomena and blessings. Blessings because, while they quicken the beating heart and create firmer ties of solidarity within a range of human groups and nurture the originality of a range of types, they do no harm to anyone and are a help rather than a hindrance to progress over all. And as long as those preferences do not blind us to the merits of others and to our own shortcomings, as long as they do not make us contemptuous of a broader culture and wider relations, as long as they do not lead to a laughable vanity and conceitedness that makes us believe that we are better than the next fellow just because we were born in the shadow of a certain bell-tower or within certain borders, then they can turn out to be an essential element in the future development of mankind. Since, once distances have been nearly abolished by advances in machinery, political obstacles cleared away by freedom, and economic obstacles banished by general comfort, those preferences remain as the best guarantee against the rapid influx of huge masses of immigrants into those areas best favored by nature or best prepared by the labours of bygone generations; something that would pose grave threat to the peaceful progress of civilisation.

But these are not the only feelings upon which so-called patriotism feeds.

In antiquity, man's oppression of his fellow man was effected chiefly by means of warfare and conquest. It was the victorious outsider who seized the land, forcing the natives to work it on his behalf, and he was, if not the only master, then certainly the harshest and most despised. And whereas that state of affairs has all but disappeared from the nations of Europe, where the master is now, in most cases, a fellow countryman of his victims, it still remains the chief characteristic of Europeans' dealings with peoples of different areas. Consequently the fight against the oppressor has had, and retains, the character of a fight against the outsider.

Unfortunately, but understandably, hatred of the outsider as the oppressor turned into hatred of the outsider as outsider, and turned gentle love of homeland into that feeling of antipathy and rivalry, vis à vis other peoples, which usually goes by the name of patriotism, and which the native-born oppressors in various countries exploit to their own advantage. Civilisation's mission is to scatter this poisonous error and bring every people together as brothers in the fight for the common good.

We are internationalists, meaning that, just as the tiny homeland that revolved around a tent or a bell-tower and was at war with neighboring tribes or towns has been superseded by the larger region- and nation-sized homeland, so we extend our homeland to the whole world, feel ourselves to be brothers of every other human being, and seek well-being, freedom, and autonomy for every individual and group. Just as, back in the days when Christianity was believed and heartfelt, Christians regarded the whole Christendom as their homeland and the outsider that needed converting or destroying was the pagan, so we regard all of the oppressed and all

who struggle for human emancipation as our brothers. And all oppressors, all whose own prosperity is built upon the woes of others, as our enemies—no matter where they were born nor the language they speak.

We abhor war, which is always fratricidal and damaging, and we want a liberating social revolution; we deplore strife between peoples and champion the fight against the ruling classes. But if, by some misfortune, a clash were to erupt between one people and another, we stand with the people that are defending their independence.

When Austrian soldiery were trawling the plains of Lombardy and Franz Josef's gallows were going up in the town squares of Italy, the Italians' revolt against the Austrian tyrant was noble and holy. Now that today's Italy invades another country and Victor Emmanuel's infamous gallows are being erected and put to work in the marketplace in Tripoli, it is the Arabs' revolt against the Italian tyrant that is noble and holy.

For the sake of Italy's honor, we hope that the Italian people, having come to its senses, will force a withdrawal from Africa upon its government: if not, we hope that the Arabs may succeed in driving it out.

With such thoughts, it is we, the "anti-patriots," who will have salvaged whatever part of Italy's honor can be salvaged in the face of history, in the face of humanity. We shall be the ones to show that there is still a gleam of the sentiments that moved Mazzini and Garibaldi and that whole glorious crew of Italians, whose bones are strewn across every battlefield in Europe and the Americas where a holy battle was fought, and who endeared the name of Italy to all men, everywhere, whose hearts thrilled to the cause of freedom, independence, and justice.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
The War and the Anarchists
April 1912

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from “La guerra e gli anarchici,” *La Guerra Tripolina* (London), April 1912. This was a one-off publication edited by Malatesta’s group against the Italo-Turkish war, which was declared the year before by the Italian government against the Ottoman empire to gain colonies in North Africa by conquering the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, corresponding to today’s Libya.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net