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# The untold experiment of National Syndicalism

When Fascism was the Decay of Socialism

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that defined the Fascist era, including the Roman salute, the dramatic speeches delivered from balconies, and the signature rhythmic war cries. The Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci argued that the strength of D'Annunzio's movement was rooted in the state's wartime mobilization of the middle class, which created a displaced social base ready for radical nationalist action. Vladimir Lenin acknowledged the movement's impact, describing D'Annunzio as a profoundly revolutionary figure. Vladimir Lenin was quoted by La Tribuna regarding D'Annunzio as follows:

- “The D'Annunzian movement is perfectly and profoundly revolutionary, because D'Annunzio is a revolutionary.”

The “Free State of Fiume” experiment shows that, contrary to the popular perception of fascism as the decay of capitalism, which was popularized by Leon Trotsky and researched against Mussolini's fascism, the original fascism was more left-wing than right-wing. However, fascism evolved from a synthesis of nationalist and socialist ideologies, especially revolutionary syndicalism, with the intention of gaining a sizable following by prioritizing the nation over internationalist solidarity, making it more of a third-way querfront. It would be more correct to refer to fascism as a decay of socialism because the early fascist initiatives were more of a syndicalist and socialist lean politics, merely substituting internationalism for nationalism.

Walter Benjamin noted that “behind every fascism lies a failed revolution.” This raises the question: if earlier forms of fascism emerged from currents within the left, could a new left-originating variant appear again? Preventing future left-wing expressions of fascism requires beginning with a precise, grounded understanding of what fascism actually is, since genuine anti-fascism depends on that clarity.

cause he didn't like the end product of what Mussolini offered. De Ambris co-authored the 1919 Manifesto of the Italian Fasci of Combat. However, his fascism was more of left-wing socialist fascism and different from that of Mussolini's. Because of De Ambris's influence, the 1919 Manifesto included:

- Universal Suffrage: Including the right for women to vote and run for office.
- The 8-Hour Workday: A major demand of the labour unions.
- Prohibitive Taxation on Wealth: A one-time "extraordinary tax" on capital.
- Abolition of the Senate: Removing the aristocratic upper house of parliament.
- Nationalization of Arms Factories: Taking the profit out of war.
- Confiscation of Church Property: Seizing the assets of religious congregations.

De Ambris, despite being a national syndicalist (a proto-fascist) and being a co-author of 1919 Fascist Manifesto, he stopped considering himself a "Fascist" and started his "anti-fascist" activities against Mussolini as he believed Mussolini abandoned almost every point in the 1919 Manifesto he co-authored.

## Fascism as the Decay of Socialism

Gabriele D'Annunzio is frequently referred to as the "John the Baptist" of Italian Fascism because he established the aesthetic and political blueprint that Benito Mussolini would later adopt. During his seizure of the city of Fiume and his leadership of the Regency of Carnaro, D'Annunzio pioneered the theatrical elements

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istration and a citizens' militia that included both sexes, the document sought to create a "national syndicalist utopia" that balanced individual rights with a collective commitment to the revolutionary state.

The Regency's short existence prevented these radical democratic experiments from being fully realized, despite its advanced judicial system and emphasis on referendums. In the end, the Charter is still an important historical document that testified an effort existed which combined extreme social progressivism and nationalism.

## **Mussolini – The Lenin of Fascism**

The doctrine known as "national syndicalism" was founded by Geroge Sorel and his friends from the think tank "Cercle Proudhon". Fascists such as Edmondo Rossoni continued the legacy of "fascist syndicalism," which was influenced by national syndicalists like D'Annunzio and De Ambris. Mussolini used national syndicalism and fascist syndicalism to create his own brand of fascism, which was called "state corporatism", much as Lenin added new ideas to orthodox Marxism to turn it into Bolshevism.

Gabriele D'Annunzio was able to publicly oppose Mussolini, something Marx was unable to do with Lenin. D'Annunzio became a steadfast opponent of Italy's growing ties to Nazi Germany during the 1930s. He sent a direct letter to Mussolini in 1933 cautioning against forming an alliance with Adolf Hitler, and the following year he wrote a satirical pamphlet ridiculing the German leader in an effort to sabotage their developing partnership. His final, futile attempt to convince Mussolini to leave the Axis powers and change Italy's foreign policy took place in September 1937 when he met him at the Verona train station.

It was more radical for De Ambris. Despite his ideology being the proto-fascist movement, he even became anti-fascist simply be-

its own wisdom and experience; provides for its own needs and for the management of its own funds, collecting from its members a contribution in proportion to their wages, salary business profits, or professional income; defends in every way its own special interest and strives to improve its status; aims at bringing to perfection the technique of its own art or calling; seeks to improve the quality of the work carried out and to raise the standard of excellence and beauty; enrols the humblest workers, endeavouring to encourage them to do the best work; recognizes the duty of mutual help; decides as to pensions for sick and infirm members; chooses for itself symbols, emblems music, songs, and prayers; founds its own rules and ceremonies; assists, as handsomely as it can, in providing enjoyment for the commune for us anniversary fetes, and sports by land and sea; venerates its dead, honours its elders, and celebrates its heroes.”

This constitution was remarkably progressive for its time as it enshrined absolute equality regardless of race, sex, or religion. The Charter also seems to have negative view on the private property as it stated as follows:

- no property can be the reserve of one person as if a part of that person; [...] The only unique claim on any means of production or exchange is work.

It redefined the concept of property by asserting that the only legitimate claim to the means of production was through labour, aiming to elevate the working class from mere physical toil to a state of spiritual and economic freedom. Far ahead of its time, the Charter granted women universal suffrage, equal pay, and independence from patriarchal authority, while also institutionalizing civil liberties such as divorce, freedom of the press, and a multi-ethnic, free public education system. By proposing a decentralized admin-

This text serves as a supplement to the following articles; for a comprehensive perspective, it is recommended that they be read together.

- <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/heinhtetkyaw-the-marxist-roots-of-classical-fascism>
- <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hein-htet-kyaw-how-campism-mirrors-the-fascist-geopolitics>
- <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hein-htet-kyaw-the-forbidden-history-of-left-wing-socialist-tendency-within-nazism>
- <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hein-htet-kyaw-ussr-fascist-under-stalinism-red-fascism-is-not-a-slur>

Although Marxism was initially a groundbreaking and distinctive “scientific socialism” compared to other contemporary movements (especially utopian ones), its internal history was marked by a series of crises. These crises triggered various revisionist movements, leading to the development of different forms of socialism, ranging from revolutionary to evolutionary types. Georges Sorel, a leading Marxist thinker, identified a “crisis” or “decomposition” of Marxism resulting from two main trends: Orthodox Marxism (revolutionary social democracy) and Revisionist Marxism (reformist social democracy). Sorel argued that the prevailing trends in Marxism essentially stripped the ideology of its revolutionary purpose, converting it into a bourgeois political program. He believed that both currents of Marxism at the time simply aimed to install a new class of socialist politicians and intellectuals as administrators, replacing the existing capitalists, instead of pursuing a fundamental change.

## Introduction to National Syndicalism

To preserve Marxism's revolutionary spirit, Georges Sorel proposed revolutionary syndicalism, shifting the focus from parliamentary politics of social democracy to direct action driven by the inspirational, non-rational image of the General Strike (myth) led by autonomous trade unions (syndicates) in order to achieve the moral regeneration of the proletariat. Convinced that revolutionary syndicalism still failed to connect with the proletariat, he made another attempt to resolve the "Crisis of Marxism." This effort culminated in the founding of the Cercle Proudhon, an unusual political group that brought together figures from across the political spectrum, including Marxists (like Sorel), syndicalists (Édouard Berth), former anarcho-syndicalists (Georges Valois), monarchists (Henri Lagrange), and nationalists (Charles Maurras). This syncretic proto-fascist movement blended "revolutionary syndicalism or Sorelian Marxism" with nationalism, creating a "national syndicalism" that sought to attract a broader mass to socialist nation dream.

## National Syndicalism of Gabriele D'Annunzio

Born into nobility in 1863, Gabriele D'Annunzio developed a legendary persona from an early age, fuelled by stories of his own "angelic" beginnings and provocative poetry. His debt-ridden exile in France, where he worked with Claude Debussy and fell in love with the eccentric Marchesa Luisa Casati, was ultimately caused by his early literary success and hedonistic lifestyle. Despite having been a right-wing politician in the past, he later identified as a far-left communist or anarchist. He publicly stated in his interview with Randolfo Vella for *Umanità Novav*:

## Yellow Socialism within Charter of Carnaro

The legal foundation of this society was the Charter of Carnaro, co-authored by the national syndicalist thinkers such as D'Annunzio and Alceste De Ambris. There were nine corporations (syndicates) to represent the different sectors of the economy, where membership was mandatory. The nine corporations are as follow:

- Industrial and Agricultural Workers
- Seafarers
- Employers
- Industrial and Agricultural Technicians
- Private Bureaucrats and Administrators
- Teachers and Students
- Lawyers and Doctors
- Civil Servants
- Co-operative Workers

However, there is a symbolic tenth corporation which represented the "superior individuals", led by D'Annunzio. The charter empowered the syndicates or the trade unions to organize production, distribution, resource allocation, and worker rights. Charter of Carnaro stated how these guilds or corporations work as follows:

- "Each Corporation is a legal entity and is so recognized by the State. Chooses its own consuls; makes known its decisions in an assembly of its own; dictates its own terms, its own decrees and rules; exercises autonomy under the guidance of

- “We have seen our workers exploited and held in low regard not only by the capitalists but also by the revolutionary comrades of other countries. We therefore know from experience how internationalism is nothing but fiction and hypocrisy.”

## Free State of Fiume

Under Gabriele D’Annunzio’s leadership, the Regency of Carnaro sided with other “pariah states” such as the Soviet Union and the Turkish Republic in an effort to undermine the post-war order. D’Annunzio promoted “Latinized Bolshevism,” which he defined as anarchist culture and anti-imperialist zeal that underpinned communism without dictatorship. F. T. Marinetti and the Futurists, who infused the city with avant-garde aesthetics and a worship of technological advancement, had a significant influence on this ideological mosaic. Socially, Fiume developed into a radical laboratory for sexual liberation, treating sex as a kind of artistic expression and offering a haven for homosexuality and polyamory.

The movement established a “people’s academy” designed as a forum for radical intellectual exchange, tackling provocative subjects such as the practice of free love, the complete removal of currency systems, and the dismantling of the prison apparatus. Furthermore, it sought to integrate aesthetics with social life by promoting the artistic beautification of urban environments as a means of public enrichment. The city was a never-ending celebration of parades and concerts, where drug-fuelled euphoria and experiments with vegetarianism and nudism took the place of the hardships of the war.

- “I am for Communism without dictatorship [...] my whole culture is anarchist [...] it is my intention to make this city into a spiritual island which will send out a predominantly Communist action towards all oppressed nations.”

## National Syndicalism of Alceste De Ambris

Across two continents, Alceste De Ambris made a name for himself as a powerful journalist and organiser. He played a significant role in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian socialist movement in São Paulo, Brazil, where he organised conferences and assisted in the founding of socialist publications. He assumed leadership positions in the labour movement after returning to Italy, first as secretary for the metalworkers in Savona and then as head of the militant National Glassmakers’ Federation in Livorno. By 1904, De Ambris had abandoned mainstream party politics in favour of revolutionary syndicalism. Influenced by Georges Sorel, he maintained that the only real tools for social change were labour unions (syndicates), not political parties. He became an outspoken opponent of “parliamentary socialism,” seeing it as a “petty bourgeois” betrayal of the working class that had given up its aggressive revolutionary spirit in favour of compromise and legalism.

De Ambris turned the Parma Chamber of Labour into a formidable force with 30,000 members while serving as its secretary. He promoted internal democracy, ensuring that workers had a direct say in important decisions like strikes by holding referendums. The union successfully opposed influential local landowners under his leadership, which led to the 1908 General Strike. De Ambris fled to Switzerland and France after the state cracked down on the Parma strike, then returned to Brazil to edit *La Tribuna Italiana*. He was under pressure during this second Brazilian period from both extremes: anarchists accused him of

working for the “bourgeois press,” while industrialists feared his radicalism.

During the Libyan War (1911), De Ambris returned to the Italian political scene and became a fervent opponent of war. He was directly at odds with other syndicalists, such as Arturo Labriola, as a result. De Ambris vehemently denounced the war, accusing pro-war syndicalists of selling out to the monarchy, the Vatican, and the banking elite, while Labriola defended the colonial expansion as a national necessity.

## **Fascist Syndicalism: From Internationalism to Nationalism**

Even though De Ambris was an anti-war revolutionary syndicalist at Libyan War, he viewed the World War I against the “reactionary” Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) as a revolutionary war. He believed a victory for the democratic/republican Entente would collapse old empires and spark a socialist revolution in Italy. To be fair, it was not just De Ambris from the far-left socialist tendencies such as Marxism, syndicalism, and anarchism who were in favour of World War I. Prominent anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin along with anarcho-individualists such as Massimo Rocca, Maria Rygier, and Leandro Arpinati as well as Marxists such as Georgi Plekhanov were also pro-war when it comes to World War I. It’s important to note that anarcho-individualists such as Massimo Rocca, and Leandro Arpinati became fascists along with the revolutionary syndicalists such as Edmondo Rossoni, and Maria Rygier joined the fascist ranks and converted to fascism.

Mussolini was one of the revolutionary syndicalists who also became attracted to national syndicalism and fascism around the same time. Mussolini at first was a member of the National Directorate of the Italian Socialist Party and was responsible for the “Avanti!” socialist newspaper. After becoming disillusioned

with orthodox Marxism, Mussolini was influenced by Georges Sorel’s “revolutionary syndicalism,” a revisionist Marxist ideology. Furthermore, Mussolini’s internationalist convictions were further eroded by his observations in Trentino in 1909, where he saw Austrian socialists prioritize national identity over internationalism, promoting a “racial socialism” that marginalized Italians. His doubts solidified with the outbreak of World War I, as European socialist parties abandoned internationalism to support their respective nations’ war efforts. This led him to adopt national syndicalism, as he argued in his book *Opera Omnia*, that

- “The origin of our psychological malaise is this: we socialists have never examined the problems of nations. The International has never addressed this; the International is dead, dominated by events. Of course, the nation represents a stage of human progress, not yet surpassed. The feeling of nationality exists and cannot be denied!”

Similarly, De Ambris began to adopt the logic that Italy was a “proletarian nation”—a poor, exploited country compared to the “plutocratic” powers like Britain and France. He also adopted national syndicalism as his revolutionary project over the original revolutionary syndicalism which is internationalist.

Edmondo Rossoni, a revolutionary syndicalist who edited the revolutionary syndicalist newspaper *Il Proletario* (The Proletarian) and acted as an organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), witnessed the mistreatment of Italian immigrant workers in the United States by capitalists and other revolutionary cadre. In order to “fuse nationalism with class struggle,” he went back to Italy at the start of World War I. Reminiscent of his conversion to national syndicalism at the inaugural fascist union conference in June 1922, Rossoni shared how he felt oppressed by the capitalist class and the betray by the socialist political parties which claim internationalism but treated Italian immigrant workers with racism in the US: