

Fighting Fascism: Lessons from Italy

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The election of Donald Trump came as a surprise to many, given the obvious demagoguery, incoherence and authoritarianism he exhibited as a candidate. It matters little that he lost the popular vote, the fact is that enough people in specific states were willing to vote for him – and now we all have to live with the outcome. The result of decades of right-wing glorification of the wealthy, calls to run the state as a business (i.e., as a dictatorship), and the like can now be seen in all their glory. A better argument for anarchism would be hard to find.

That does not mean, of course, passively awaiting the next election as the myth of democracy would have us believe. It means resisting – and there have been promising signs of that, such as lively town-hall meetings (which raises the question, why not make them permanent and so become a power no politician can ignore?). It has also been seen in protests against the worst of Trump supporters – the KKK, neo-Nazis and the rest of the so-called “alt-right.”

That Trump could not bring himself to read a simple prepared statement and instead ad-libbed about “both sides” shows that he did not want to alienate them. Sadly, significant numbers of Republican voters likewise cannot see the difference between fascism and resisting fascism. A significant part of America has lost its moral compass.

The events in Charlottesville bring home that resisting fascism is not only necessary but also dangerous. This can be seen from the rise of fascism in Italy after the First World War, something which was never inevitable and from which lessons can be learned.

“A Preventative Counter-Revolution”

The rise of Mussolini cannot be viewed in isolation. After the end of the First World War there was a massive radicalization across Europe and the world. Union membership exploded, with strikes, demonstrations and agitation reaching massive levels. This was partly due to the war, partly to the apparent success of the Russian Revolution. Across Europe, anarchist ideas became more popular and anarcho-syndicalist unions grew in size as part of a general rise and growth of the left.

In Italy, the post-war ferment grew into a near revolution, with the rise of workers’ councils and the occupation of factories in 1920. The anarchists and syndicalists took an active, indeed, leading role in the movement as Errico Malatesta, who took part in these events, writes:

The metal workers started the movement over wage rates. It was a strike of a new kind. Instead of abandoning the factories, the idea was to remain inside without working ... Throughout Italy there was a revolutionary fervour among the workers and soon the demands changed their characters. Workers thought that the moment was ripe to take possession once [and] for all the means of production. They armed for defence ... and began to organise production on their own ... It was the right of property abolished in fact...; it was a new regime, a new form of social life that was being ushered in. And the government stood by because it felt impotent to offer opposition. (*Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* [Freedom Press, 1993], 134)

The socialists and their trade unions did not back the movement in spite of having talked of being revolutionary for decades, although groups and individuals within the party did (such as in Turin, with Antonio Gramsci taking the lead – these would later split from the Socialists and form the Italian Communist Party). Faced with the hostility of the “official” labor movement, the occupations ended after four weeks.

Unsurprisingly, the promises given by the employers and state to end the occupations were not kept and “after the factories were evacuated” the government (obviously knowing who the real threat was) “arrested the entire leadership of the USI [Italian Syndicalist Union] and UAI [Italian Anarchist Union]. The socialists ... more or less ignored the persecution of the libertarians until the spring of 1921 when the aged Malatesta and other imprisoned anarchists mounted a hunger strike from their cells in Milan.” (Carl Levy, *Gramsci and the Anarchists* [Berg, 1999], 221–2) They were acquitted after a four-day trial.

This period of Italian history explains the growth of fascism in Italy. As Tobias Abse points out, “the rise of fascism in Italy cannot be detached from the events of the biennio rosso, the two red years of 1919 and 1920, that preceded it. Fascism was a preventive counter-revolution ... launched as a result of the failed revolution” (“The Rise of Fascism in an Industrial City,” David Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian fascism: Capitalism, populism and culture* [Lawrence and Wishart, 1986], 54) The term “preventive counter-revolution” was originally coined by the anarchist Luigi Fabbri, who correctly described fascism as “the organisation and agent of the violent armed defence of the ruling class against the proletariat, which, to their mind, has become unduly demanding, united and intrusive.”

The capitalists and rich landowners backed the fascists in order to teach the working class to know their place, aided by the state. They ensured “that it was given every assistance in terms of funding and arms, turning a blind eye to its breaches of the law and, where necessary, covering its back through intervention by armed forces which, on the pretext of restoring order, would rush to the aid of the fascists wherever the latter were beginning to take a beating instead of doling one out.” (Fabbri) To quote Abse:

The aims of the Fascists and their backers amongst the industrialists and agrarians in 1921–22 were simple: to break the power of the organised workers and peasants as completely as possible, to wipe out, with the bullet and the club, not only the gains of the biennio rosso, but everything that the lower classes had gained ... between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War. (54)

The fascist squads attacked and destroyed anarchist and socialist meeting places, social centers, radical presses and Camera del Lavoro (local union councils). Thousands of individuals were attacked and murdered. However, even in the dark days of fascist terror, the anarchists resisted the forces of totalitarianism:

It is no coincidence that the strongest working-class resistance to Fascism was in ... towns or cities in which there was quite a strong anarchist, syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist tradition. (Abse, 56)

The Arditi del Popolo

The anarchists participated in, and often organized sections of, the Arditi del Popolo (The People’s Shock-troops), a working-class organization devoted to the self-defense of workers’ interests. The Arditi del Popolo organized and encouraged working-class resistance to fascist squads, often defeating larger fascist forces: for example, “the total humiliation of thousands of Italo Balbo’s

squadristi by a couple of hundred Arditi del Popolo backed by the inhabitants of the working class districts” in the anarchist stronghold of Parma in August 1922 (Abse, 56).

The Arditi del Popolo was the closest Italy got to the idea of a united, revolutionary working-class front against fascism, as had been suggested by Italian anarchists and syndicalists during the biennio rosso. This movement “developed along anti-bourgeois and anti-fascist lines, and was marked by the independence of its local sections.” (*Red Years, Black Years: Anarchist Resistance to Fascism in Italy* [ASP, 1989], 2) Rather than being just an “anti-fascist” organization, it was “not a movement in defense of ‘democracy’ in the abstract, but an essentially working-class organization devoted to the defense of the interests of industrial workers, the dockers and large numbers of artisans and craftsmen.” (Abse, 75) Unsurprisingly, the Arditi del Popolo “appear to have been strongest and most successful in areas where traditional working-class political culture was less exclusively socialist and had strong anarchist or syndicalist traditions, for example, Bari, Livorno, Parma and Rome.” (Antonio Sonnessa, “Working Class Defence Organisation, Anti-Fascist Resistance and the Arditi del Popolo in Turin, 1919–22,” *European History Quarterly* 33: 2 184)

However, both the socialist and communist parties withdrew from the organization. The socialists signed a “Pact of Pacification” with the fascists in August 1921. The communists “preferred to withdraw their members from the Arditi del Popolo rather than let them work with the anarchists.” (*Red Years, Black Years*, 17) Indeed, “[o]n the same day as the Pact was signed, *Ordine Nuovo* published a PCd’I [Communist Party of Italy] communication warning communists against involvement” in the Arditi del Popolo. Four days later, the Communist leadership “officially abandoned the movement. Severe disciplinary measures were threatened against those communists who continued to participate.” Thus by “the end of the first week of August 1921 the PSI, CGL and the PCd’I had officially denounced” the organization. “Only the anarchist leaders, if not always sympathetic to the programme of the [Arditi del Popolo], did not abandon the movement.” Indeed, the leading anarchist newspaper, *Umanita Nova*, “strongly supported” it “on the grounds it represented a popular expression of anti-fascist resistance and in defence of freedom to organise.” (Sonnessa, 195, 194)

However, in spite of the decisions by their leaders, many rank-and-file socialists and communists took part in the movement. The latter took part in open “defiance of the PCd’I leadership’s growing abandonment” of it. In Turin, for example, communists who took part in the Arditi del Popolo did so “less as communists and more as part of a wider, working-class self-identification ... This dynamic was re-enforced by an important socialist and anarchist presence.” The failure of the Communist leadership to support the movement shows the bankruptcy of Bolshevik organizational forms, which were unresponsive to the needs of the popular movement. Indeed, these events show the “libertarian custom of autonomy from, and resistance to, authority was also operated against the leaders of the workers’ movement, particularly when they were held to have misunderstood the situation at grass roots level.” (Sonnessa, 200, 198, 193)

The Communist Party failed to support the popular resistance to fascism. The Communist leader Antonio Gramsci argued that “the party leadership’s attitude on the question of the Arditi del Popolo ... corresponded to a need to prevent the party members from being controlled by a leadership that was not the party’s leadership.” Gramsci added that this policy “served to disqualify a mass movement which had started from below and which could instead have been exploited by us politically.” (*Selections from Political Writings 1921–1926* [Lawrence and Wishart, 1978], 333) While less sectarian towards the Arditi del Popolo than other Communist leaders, “[i]n common

with all communist leaders, Gramsci awaited the formation of the PCd'I-led military squads." (Sonnessa, 196) In other words, the struggle against fascism was seen by the Communist leadership as a means of gaining more members and, when the opposite was a possibility, they preferred defeat and fascism rather than risk their followers becoming influenced by anarchism.

As Abse notes, "it was the withdrawal of support by the Socialist and Communist parties at the national level that crippled" the Arditi. (74) Thus "social reformist defeatism and communist sectarianism made impossible an armed opposition that was widespread and therefore effective; and the isolated instances of popular resistance were unable to unite in a successful strategy." And fascism could have been defeated: "Insurrections at Sarzanna, in July 1921, and at Parma, in August 1922, are examples of the correctness of the policies which the anarchists urged in action and propaganda." (*Red Years, Black Years*, 2–3) Abse confirms this analysis, arguing that

[w]hat happened in Parma in August 1922 ... could have happened elsewhere, if only the leadership of the Socialist and Communist parties thrown their weight behind the call of the anarchist Malatesta for a united revolutionary front against Fascism. (56)

As with libertarian calls for a united front during the near-revolutionary situation after the war, these calls were ignored.

Perhaps needless to say, the state verbally denounced the violence (on both sides, of course!) but primarily targeted those opposing the fascists as Fabbri noted:

Italian jails are filled with workers and the heaviest sentences rain down on workers who made the mistake in clashes of using violence to defend themselves from the fascists. Moreover, we have already seen the government's stance as soon as the spontaneous initiative of the people came up with the idea of forming proletarian defence units which were dubbed the Arditi del Popolo. Outside of Rome ... the mere idea of setting up Arditi del Popolo chapters has been pre-emptively stamped out in the most vigorous fashion – through bans, threats, raids and arrests.

Fabbri also indicated "the police's class function" and how fascist attacks "happened under the very eyes of huge police, carabinieri, Royal Guard and constabulary forces who would, after some initial sham opposition, let things proceed" while "chapters of the Arditi del Popolo are broken up and its members arrested for offences against the security of the state – or is the state fascism, perhaps? – merely for their intention to offer other than passive resistance to fascist violence." Governmental edicts "trigger[ed] the imprisonment of many more workers as supposed Arditi del Popolo, whereas no action will be taken against the fascist action squads."

In the end, fascist violence was successful and capitalist power maintained:

The anarchists' will and courage were not enough to counter the fascist gangs, powerfully aided with material and arms, backed by the repressive organs of the state. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were decisive in some areas and in some industries, but only a similar choice of direct action on the parts of the Socialist Party and the General Confederation of Labour [the reformist trade union] could have halted fascism. (*Red Years, Black Years*, 1–2)

After helping to defeat the revolution, the Marxists helped ensure the victory of fascism.

Conclusions for today

The rise of fascism confirmed Malatesta's warning at the time of the factory occupations: "If we do not carry on to the end, we will pay with tears of blood for the fear we now instill in the bourgeoisie." (quoted by Abse, 66) It is not surprising that when their privileges and power were in danger, the capitalists and the landowners turned to fascism to save them. This process is a common feature in history (to list just four examples: Italy, Germany, Spain and Chile). Moreover, capitalists have always hired private goons to break strikes and unions – American capitalists being at the forefront of that.

Yet there is no mass working class revolt – nor has there been for many decades. The neo-liberal onslaught started by Carter and intensified by Reagan has been successful – labor has been defeated to a large degree and wealth has flooded upwards (rather than "trickled down"). As such, there is no real equivalent of the ruling class's fears in the 1920s:

The anarchist Luigi Fabbri termed fascism a preventative counter-revolution; but in his essay he makes the important point that the employers, particularly in agriculture, were not so much moved by fear of a general revolution as by the erosion of their own authority and property rights which had already taken place locally: 'The bosses felt they were no longer bosses.' (Adrian Lyttelton, "Italian Fascism," *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* [Penguin, 1979], 91)

The rise of Trump has been somewhat driven, ironically, by those most subject to Republican policies – policies which Trump seeks to continue (under the usual rhetoric of tax reform). However, we should not stress that aspect of his support too much – he has always been more popular with the top-end of the wealth distribution. Most elements of the capitalist class seem happy enough to have the crazies in office so long as they can secure that agenda. Short-termism, perhaps, but there is no popular movement to disabuse them of such notions.

So the "alt-right" are currently not needed by the ruling class – but obviously it would be suicidal to ignore them on the hope (if that is the word!) that there is no upsurge in class struggle which would make their services more appealing to the elite. Lack of ruling class backing will not stop them from attacking black people, feminists, the left, strikers, etc. if they feel strong enough. So we need to confront them; otherwise they will be emboldened by the lack of resistance, just as the Italian fascists were. And if we confront them – even verbally – we need to be able to defend ourselves, just as the most forward-looking of the Italian left did.

Similarly, we must remember that the state is not a neutral body and will seek to defend the powers and property of the few (even if we ignore any personal sympathies individual law enforcement officers have with the right). Any appeal to the state to pass laws restricting freedom of assembly, speech and so on will see them used primarily against the left and rebel workers. Such illusions must be dispelled.

While the obvious lesson from Italy is that we must unite with those seeking to defeat fascism, we must be watchful for two dangers.

First, that anti-fascism gets watered down so much that it forgets the roots of fascism in capitalism. Fascism rises, mostly, to defend capital but also to some degree because it offers false solutions to real problems. Any effective anti-fascism must provide a class analysis, a critique of capitalism, real solutions. This cannot be done if we seek a popular front and submerge this

analysis. This does not mean isolation, quite the reverse as we must win others to our views, but any united front must be aware of the roots of fascism and how to counter its scapegoating with genuine alternatives. Urging people to simply vote for the lesser – but still neo-liberal – evil will not do it.

Second, we must be watchful for those on the left – primarily Leninists of various kinds – who will view any militant anti-fascist movement as merely a means for building their party. As the example of the Italian Communists shows, this can go so far as to undermine popular resistance if they think that is working against the interests of the vanguard. Popular resistance and organization needs to be viewed as a positive in and of itself, not as a means of building a party.

While learning from history, we must beware of mechanically applying what worked in the past. We are not living in Italy during the early 1920s. There is no mass libertarian movement with firm roots in workplaces and communities. The need is to build both and in this the Arditi del Popolo shows the way forward. It united those who saw the threat of fascism and were willing to act. However, it was also part of wider working class social movements – and worked with these to defeat the fascist gangs. Without this wider social base, any militant anti-fascist organization is in danger of being isolated and so defeated by the powers of the state.

Further Reading

This article is based on section A.5.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* vol. 1 (AK Press, 2008), which covers the near revolution in more detail.

Luigi Fabbri's *The Preventive Counter-Revolution* (libcom.org) is an excellent early (1921) account of the rise of fascism by a leading Italian anarchist.

M. Testa's *Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance* (AK Press, 2015) has a useful chapter on the resistance to Mussolini.

Tom Behan's *The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini* (Bookmarks, 2003) should be avoided. While meant to be about the Ardito del Popolo, it is really about the Italian Communist Party and its errors. While it has some useful material, it was written by a member of the British SWP during their short-lived return to anti-fascist activity in the early 2000s and suffers as a result. See my critique "The irresistible correctness of anarchism" (anarchism.pageabode.com).

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