

Giustizia e Libertà and the Anarchists prior to the Spanish Civil War

Santi Fedele

March 2001

The co-operation established between Carlo Rosselli and his Giustizia e Libertà (GL) movement on the one hand and Italian and Spanish anarchists on the other during the early days of Italian antifascist volunteer service in the Spanish Civil War is broadly familiar.

However, to date, researchers have given a lot less attention and thought to what that co-operation amounted to and its political underpinning, namely, the broad dealings between the GL movement and the Italian anarchist movement in exile during the 1930s. Whereas in the case of GL we are talking about a well-defined political entity with (albeit not party-type) structures, the anarchist movement must be regarded in a broader sense, comprising, in addition to the Parisian group that from 1927 on was publishing its own press organ in *La Lotta Umana* (later *La Lotta Anarchica*) that subscribed to the programme of the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI), a whole range of circles, groups and small bands of militants scattered across several locations in Europe and the Americas and held together almost solely by political ideas and rallying points represented by newspapers like *Il Risveglio* (Geneva), *Studi Sociali* (Montevideo) and *Il Martello* and *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* (both New York).

The emergence on to the antifascist stage of a novelty like Giustizia e Libertà attracted the liveliest interest from the broad ranks of the Italian anarchists in exile. For a number of reasons.

Above all the view was that GL had emerged as an alternative (if not in open contradiction to) the approach to and methods of struggle espoused by Concentrazione Antifascista (Anti-Fascist Ralliement) which, right from the outset, had come in for the most scathing criticism from anarchists for its unproductive wait-and-see policy.

By contrast, the activist approach that was a feature of the new movement was immediately visible and this was an activism which, it certainly had not escaped more perceptive libertarian observers, was rooted in frank rejection of Marxist determinism by the man (Carlo Rosselli) who had written *Liberal Socialism*.

Added to this there was the fact that the voluntarist ethic with which the founders of Giustizia e Libertà were imbued translated not merely into a primacy accorded to action, but, looking beyond the sterile ideological squabbles of the exile community, was also thought of in terms of action as a daring exemplary act likely to rouse slumbering consciences, revive enthusiasms and invite imitation.

In this respect there is nothing so telling as the responses aroused by Fernando De Rosa's attempt on the life of Prince Umberto of Savoy while the latter was on a visit to Brussels in October 1929, within weeks of the launching of GL: whereas leading lights from the Concentrazione Antifascista, in their internal discussions as well as in their official statements, whilst not withholding antifascist solidarity from De Rosa, expressed their own disapproval of terrorist acts which they regarded as politically unproductive and which, if carried out abroad, might even bring problems down on the heads of the entire Italian political emigré community, the *giellisti* (GL members), far from condemning individual terrorism out of hand, expressed full support for De Rosa's action, arguing that, in the face of a dictatorship that had deprived its opponents of every lawful weapon, the choice was between slavish submission and recourse to "mass revolution and individual attentat". In keeping with this stance, over the ensuing months, leaflets eulogising De Rosa's act were surreptitiously circulated by GL organisations inside Italy, whilst in the movement's publications abroad De Rosa was saluted as "the champion of antifascism, the rebel conscience of a generation".

Not only were the anarchists at one with the *giellisti* in praising De Rosa's action as expressing "the irrepressible hate of the people of Italy for clerical-fascist-Savoyard tyranny" and its "day to day handiwork of oppression, thuggery, crime and corruption", but they were equally enthusiastic about Bassanesi's flight over Milan in July 1930 which came to symbolise the activist, insurrectionist attitude that characterised the GL movement. In a newspaper like *Il Risveglio* (published in Geneva) enjoying very considerable readership and prestige in international anarchist circles we can read the comment: "The programme of the movement calling itself Giustizia e Libertà is not our programme, but insofar as it aims to get the Italian people to rise up against fascism, we are delighted to welcome it, if only because it has no aspiration to exclusive leadership, does not rule out the possibility of agreement between a number of currents, does not purport to be the sole interpreter of some infallible doctrine, on the revelation and implementation of which they claim some monopoly."

This welcoming of GL's activist outlook, its openness to co-operation with personnel and forces from a variety of political backgrounds in respect of insurrectionary activity, went hand in hand with the prestige enjoyed in libertarian circles by such leading GL lights as Emilio Lussu who, by fending off at gunpoint an attack on 31 October 1926 by hundreds of fascist thugs upon his home in Cagliari, had set a brilliant example of heroic determination in standing up to reactionary thuggery. This — argued the editors of *Il Martello* — was an example for all antifascists to imitate.

That being the case, the determined shunning of the GL movement and the persistent denunciation of the "bourgeois" or "moderate" character of the movement that Carlo Rosselli had founded, as spelled out by Camillo Berneri towards the end of 1930 in the pages of *L'Adunata dei Refrattari*, appears, more than anything else, to have been an attempt, by evoking fundamental ideological differences, to "stem" the tide of human and political fellow-feeling that the GL movement had inspired among Italian anarchists in exile. Such an inflexible stance seems in fact to have been designed — as the young anarchist writer (Berneri) was to state a few months later in the columns of *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* (it is no coincidence that, of the main Italian-language anarchist newspapers, it was this paper that was by far the most dogged opponent of dealings and alliances between antifascists of different political stripes) — to avert "our people's letting themselves be drawn to so-called revolutionary movements which are moulding the personnel and the repressive arsenal of a conservative republic."

But, on more than one occasion, such ideological prejudices were overwhelmed by the attraction exercised over quite a few anarchist militants by GL's conspiratorial activity, by GL's preference for daring actions and exemplary deeds (it did not rule out spectacular terrorist acts like arson attacks on financial offices and extended to repeated plans to attempt the life of Mussolini drafted by one of the members of the GL executive, Alberto Tarchiani) and by the exemplary commitment and moral integrity displayed by the dozens of GL members dragged before the Special Tribunal. This is plain from the columns of *Il Martello* when, in commenting upon the publication (in January 1932) of the *Draft Revolutionary Programme of Giustizia e Libertà*, it was argued that, in dealing with militants of the GL movement which is explicitly described as "the most important force" operating in the field of the fight against fascism, anarchists should display "no hostility, either doctrinal or personal [...] They mean well. Their intentions are of course bound up with their convictions, their interests, their mind-set [...] Giustizia e Libertà, made up of bourgeois, fights the same fight as we all so. The fight against fascism. And quite possibly does so more mightily and effectively than we do. Many of its members are in the fray. Their freedom at risk at any moment. And how many of them have already been stamped upon by the Special Tribunal!"

Things were taken even further by Alberto Meschi who, in a contribution entitled 'The Anarchists and Giustizia e Libertà', published by both *La Lotta Anarchica* (1 May 1932) and *Il Martello* (2 April 1932), not only referred to GL as a movement that had "written splendid pages in the fight against fascism", but, apropos of the GL *Programme*, carried in the first issue (January 1932) of the *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* and designed to provoke full discussion and heated controversy in antifascist circles, stated that he valued its spontaneist-revolutionary elements as represented by its advocacy of local revolutionary committees which, come the victorious revolution against fascism, would lay the groundwork for a new organisation of society, independently and in advance of the summoning of any constituent assembly: he even hypothesised that anarchists might involve themselves in these committees in order to combat and frustrate from within the feared resurgence of authoritarian, state-worshipping tendencies.

That was enough to bring a backlash from those who argued, like Gigi Damiani, that, whilst *Giustizia e Libertà* was at liberty to equip itself with a programme, "which is a State, a government programme" and granting that there was a chance of some understanding between various forces in the fight against fascism, anarchists had to be wary of the dangers of a form of partnership, such as Meschi had speculated about, "which inevitably would boil down to amalgamation, with us becoming subordinated to movements that are not our movements and which are antagonistic to ours." There was an even harsher backlash from the editorial team of *La Lotta Anarchica* which, after dismissing the GL *Programme* when it was issued as "unadulteratedly petit bourgeois in its character and essence", was to append to Meschi's article in their fortnightly an editorial comment arguing that the "collaborationist" proposals of the anarchist Meschi were suggestive of a mentality lacking confidence in the future prospects of libertarian doctrine and practice.

A lot more anxiety and worry would shortly be felt by the uncompromising anarchists of New York's *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* and the severe custodians of libertarian orthodoxy gathered around the Paris-based *La Lotta Anarchica*, at the "pro-GL" declarations of the man who was, following the death of Errico Malatesta, the most prestigious figure in the Italian anarchist movement in exile — Luigi Fabbri. As early as mid-1932 he had declared that he had watched the emergence and progress of the GL movement with some warmth because "cutting all the cackle, it was stepping on to the plane of action where it was at once most perilous and useful:

inside Italy itself". And, for all GL's bourgeois-democratic nature and socialist reformism "the emergence of a force so active on an openly anti-monarchist, insurrectionist terrain, which does not even rule out individual revolt, in itself represents a new revolutionary development laden with promise for all of us who yearn for revolution in Italy".

The following year, in reply to a survey conducted by the *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* on the subject of a political and ideological overhaul for antifascism, Fabbri underlined the sympathy he had felt towards GL right from the start on the basis that it "had taken a stand on frankly insurrectionary ground, not even ruling out individual revolt [prompted by] yearning for freedom, its dynamic voluntarism and its direct action aims and its desire to strike primarily inside Italy." Furthermore, Fabbri welcomed those sections of the GL *Programme* that anticipated a series of short-term radical socio-economic changes arising out of the creative spontaneity of the revolutionary process and investing the antifascist revolution with an essentially libertarian character, with unfettered creativity operating from the bottom up, quite unlike the authoritarian, statist model entertained by marxists.

Fabbri wrote: "It is my belief that if this movement can hold on to its initial elan and above all its activist approach to conspiratorial and insurrectionist endeavour within Italy, then, starting right now and not just as a project for the future, it can be a factor of the first magnitude in the Italian revolution. What I approve above all else is the idea that the revolution should start right now, right from the outset, and that the practical demolition tasks, expropriations and reorganisation that may become firm gains for the Italian people should not be put off until later and entrusted to the uncertain decision-making of constituent assemblies, plebiscites, governments, etc." Therefore — Fabbri concluded — this had nothing to do with erosive ideological confusions, let alone petty rivalries and unfair sectarianism between anarchists and GL personnel, but rather a balanced stance which "whilst it should not rule out criticism and level-headed discussion of controversial items from the programme or of potential GL errors", ought likewise not to rule out "on the other hand, a spontaneous ad hoc offering of our assistance as the need arises, without compromise or further commitments, nor expectation of reward and forbearance."

Fabbri was to reiterate these views in a follow-up piece for *Studi Sociali*, partly in reply to repeated objections and criticisms from the comrades from *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* who, in an article over the by-line of the fortnightly's director, Raffaele Schiavina, expressed their "sadness" at Fabbri's "pro-GL" declarations.

But it should not be thought that Fabbri was alone in the Italian anarchist movement in affording due consideration and indeed a warm welcome to certain aspects of the GL movement: this was demonstrated by the discussions that took place at the October 1935 exchange of views (*Convegno d'intesa*) between Italian anarchist emigrés in Paris, only a few weeks after Fabbri had died in Montevideo that June.

In fact, in one of the introductory reports inaugurating the proceedings of the get-together, one focusing on the issue of Italian libertarians' dealings with other antifascist parties and groups, GL was named in addition to republican circles and revolutionary syndicalism as a favoured partner with whom one might discuss honest and sustained co-operation between antifascist fighters of divergent opinions who nevertheless had a shared aversion to "the parties and personnel from the past who have unvaryingly remained the same old aspirants to power ready to enter into political and social compromises". GL personnel represented a "heretical" and minority faction of the Italian left which had shunned the socialist-communist unity of action policy launched in 1934, people with whom anarchists (another document from the *Convegno* stressed) should be

prepared to engage in dialogue and, if feasible, come to some agreement, not least for the purpose of countering the 'Bolshevik' communists' plans to isolate libertarians. Dialogue with the communists was absolutely out of the question because it would signify forgetting that "after fascism, the most perfidious and insidious enemy of all for us [anarchists] and for the revolution is the official communist party", given its declared intention to replace fascist tyranny with the tyranny of a "so-called 'proletarian' dictatorship which, when all is said and done, turns out to be every bit as pernicious and tyrannical as autocracy."

Even more explicit was the contribution to the Paris proceedings of the *Convegno* by Sabino Fornasari (listed in the minutes under the pseudonym of *Lambrusco*), who expressed the opinion that contacts and, to some extent, collaboration with GL were appropriate, pointing out that "GL is not so much a party as a 'revolutionary movement', a movement thrown up at a very difficult point in history and animated by a revolutionary and conspiratorial spirit rarely to be encountered in other political groups." And it had to be borne in mind that "whereas other parties had always slandered and vilified the anarchist movement, even in its most selfless, heroic aspects, GL had not only understood and, in certain circumstances, welcomed our contribution to revolutionary conspiratorial action, but has indeed, encouraged and even assisted us in it."

But the most intriguing aspect of the issue (in some ways more important and telling than Fabbri's repeated expression of pro-GL sympathies and the stance adopted at the October 1935 *Convegno d'intesa*) was the about-turn in Berneri's attitude to GL in the mid-1930s. This involved no uncritical support nor any departure from libertarian orthodoxy, but developed into an attitude of great interest and close attention to developments within the GL movement. A number of factors contributed to this.

No doubt one factor was that Berneri had picked up on the space and prominence afforded in the GL press to the contributions coming from an intellectual of such outstanding libertarian socialist views as Andrea Caffi, whose incisive analysis of mass society's degeneration along increasingly illiberal and authoritarian lines could not but have aroused the interest of an observer as hawk-eyed as Berneri.

Remember too that Rosselli's recurrent criticisms of the more oppressive aspects of modern state organisation were encapsulated in his famous September 1934 article *Against the State* which was destined to trigger quite some controversy within the GL movement and in which Rosselli took his politico-intellectual provocation to the lengths of saying things like: "there is a monster abroad in the modern world — the State — and it is devouring Society [...] The choice by now is plain: either it, the State, crushes us, Society, or we defeat the modern State, setting Society free." Only to conclude that "the Italian revolution, unless it wishes to degenerate into further state-worship, into savage barbarism and reaction, will have to resurrect Society as a federation of associations, as free and as various as possible, upon the ruins of the capitalist fascist State."

It cannot be overlooked either that the debate within the GL ranks over the course of 1933 on the propriety of whether or not the movement should be transformed into a party was resolved when the victory went to Rosselli's thesis which held that GL was not a body structured along party lines but rather "a free federation of nuclei that will be the parties of the future and which even now subscribe in common to a certain number of basic principles (revolutionary struggle, not merely political revolution but social revolution, autonomies and respect for the methodology of freedom)". A free federation that did not rule out the formation within its ranks of study groups with Marxist, federalist, liberal socialist, syndicalist, communist, liberal or anarchist lean-

ings, all bound together by the discipline of revolutionary work, debating and devising ideas and programmes for the new Italy.

More generally, there was the whole debate and political and cultural endeavour within GL ranks from which it was plain by the mid-1930s that the prevailing trend was towards a socialism with emphatically autonomist and federalist features.

Autonomy was not only and not so much seen as autonomy in the sense of a managerial policy in enterprises which the 1932 *Programme* anticipated would be taken into social ownership, but rather in the broadest political sense, after the Gobetti-style interpretation of the Turin GL group around Leone Ginzburg, with autonomy being construed as the inspiration and principle informing the unhindered emergence and spontaneous establishment of a plurality of democratic formations in which the future political and social life of an Italy freed of fascism would be thrashed out.

Rosselli helped to develop this theme of autonomy (represented, essentially, as the creative revolutionary spontaneity of forces not hide-bound by the schemas of doctrinal revolutionism) by arguing that “once the freedom forces have been let loose on the grassroots of social life and the forces of privilege and class oppression at the top of the State have been humbled, then life will resume and will be reorganised. It will then be the people that determines its final lifestyle through the new institutions thrown up by the revolution (revolutionary committees, councils, communes, cooperatives, etc.). It will be the people that will govern itself.”

Through this emphasis on spontaneity, autonomism linked up with federalism, federalism being understood not so much in territorial terms as in terms of a free coming together of the political, economic and social institutions that the creative spontaneity of the revolutionary process would have engendered.

It is no coincidence that Rosselli was inspired to explore and develop such themes in the context of the intense debate that he had with Berneri in the columns of the weekly *Giustizia e Libertà* regarding the contribution that could be expected from Italian anarchists come an antifascist revolution driven by ideals not unlike those of libertarian socialism. It was at that point in fact that he was urged by Berneri to clarify GL’s understanding of federalism and autonomism. Rosselli summarised in these terms the salient features of a view according to which “the living agencies of autonomy are not the bureaucratic, indirect organs wherein the coercive element prevails, but rather the ground-floor, direct, free or largely spontaneous organs in whose life the individual is a direct participant or in a position to control. Therefore, *the commune*, a territorial unit with solid roots and functions in Italy; *the factory and agricultural holding councils*, the agency or one of the agencies of organised producers; the *camere del lavoro*, *trade unions*, *leagues*, the trades protection and cultural agencies; *the parties, groups, press*, as the agencies of day to day existence; *the school, the family, sporting groups, cultural centres* and countless other forms of free association, the agencies of civil society.” From which it followed that “it is on foot of these new or overhauled institutions, connected one with another by a complex series of relationships, their existence governed by the most wide-ranging freedom of association, of the press, of speech, of culture, that a federal state geared towards freedom, which is to say, a liberal, federalist socialist society, will be brought into being [...]”

This was an argument with a high political and cultural profile that led to Berneri’s proudly invoking and harking back to the finest traditions of Italian and world anarchism to counter Rosselli’s pretensions in describing himself and his GL colleagues as “20th century libertarians”; that saw him asserting anarchists’ political and organisational autonomy against any attempt

to subsume them that would lead to their ” cast in the same role within the GL ranks as the rosemary is in the roast beef”. But at the same time Berneri did not rule out the possibility that further developments might lead to GL’s evolving decidedly in a libertarian socialist direction.

This debate between (Rosselli’s) liberal socialism and (Berneri’s) libertarian socialism, different but not antagonistic, was all the more serious and rigorous in that it was governed by a genuine spirit of tolerance and mutual respect.

This was — it is worth noting — a debate that took place under the shadow the approaching outbreak of civil war in Spain, something essential to bear in mind if we wish to understand the roots, other than circumstantial, of the close collaboration relationship that emerged during the early stages of that war. This extended to co-operation between GL personnel and Italian and Spanish anarchists in terms of their military contribution.

In all likelihood this debate would have been taken further later except that its protagonists were shortly to suffer the same fate at the hands of different totalitarian barbarisms: Berneri was murdered by Stalin’s agents in Barcelona on 5 May 1937: Rosselli was murdered on French soil on 9 June 1937 by Mussolini’s goons.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Santi Fedele
Giustizia e Libertà and the Anarchists prior to the Spanish Civil War
March 2001

Retrieved on 14th June 2025 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in *A Rivista Anarchica*, no. 270 (March 2001). Translated by Paul Sharkey.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net