

MUSSOLINI'S POWER GRAB



David Paenson

Contents

Meloni.....	3
Italy's unification.....	4
A youthful Imperialism.....	4
Italy's Industrialation.....	4
The working class organizes.....	5
Italy's entrance into the First World War.....	5
Mussolini switches sides.....	5
Postwar workers' movement.....	8
Soldiers' militancy	9
Mussolini's »proletarian anti-imperialism«.....	10
Socialists abandon small peasants and soldiers.....	10
A fascist factory occupation.....	11
The founding of the fascist party.....	12
The destruction of Avanti! headquarters.....	12
"Caro vita Summer" 1919.....	14
The make-up of the Socialist Party.....	14
Fascist electioneering 1919.....	15
"Biennio Rosso".....	16
The leaders of the Socialists and the trade unions cave in.....	17
Upsurge in fascist violence.....	17
Why the failure of the workers' movement?.....	18
The Arditi del Popolo.....	19
The financiers of the fascists.....	20
Mussolini's tactical relationship to violence.....	20
The psychology of a fascist.....	21
The »March on Rome«.....	21
The nature of fascism.....	22
Back to today.....	23
Further reading.....	23

The front cover depicts Mussolini's hoards on their "March on Rome" on October 31st 1922.

Meloni

The self-proclaimed "neither fascist nor non-fascist" Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), has been in command of the Italian government since her election victory in September 2022, having obtained 26 percent of the vote.

The party logo of her so-called "movement" is a burning flame in the colours of the Italian flag leaping out of Mussolini's tomb.



In October of the same year the leader of the German fascist AfD, Björn Höcke, proclaimed his aim to grab power at the 2024 elections – an aim he did not achieve. But his capacity for mobilizing is nevertheless frightening: on October 7th 10,000 of his followers marched through Berlin, and only 1,000 protested against. In Britain Tommy Robinson and his ilk mobilized ten times more in the summer of 2025.

Fascism in government is not equivalent to a fascist state, as shown by the magnificent general strike of Italian workers and mass demonstrations in over 60 Italian cities protesting Israel's seizure of the flotilla ships on their way to delivering urgently needed aid to the besieged Palestinians of Gaza in October 2025.

Full-blown Fascism has a number of features. Enormous flexibility, uninhibited violence, mass mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie, autonomy from the state apparatus despite its interlocking with the latter's officers, including the army, even

before its takeover of power, an undisputed "Führer", to whom party members owe absolute allegiance, the dissolution of the individual into a faceless mass ("giving the worm the feeling of being part of a big dragon", in the words of Hitler in *Mein Kampf* 1923, referring to the revolutionary workers at the time who knew very well what they demanded, but wanting to replace them with blind petty bourgeois and lumpenproletariat), the explicit aim of destroying the workers' movement and any other democratic organizations, its subordination to capitalism, despite any anti-capitalist slogans it may raise, its close ties to and financial subsidies from the capitalist elites, its imperialist programme, but above all of import to us today: precisely because of its heterogeneous character it can be stopped by a mass movement of the working class, providing it acts timely and in unity.



Hitler visits Mussolini in Venice 1934. The depressing atmosphere is wonderfully captured in Ettore Scolas "A Special Day" starring Sophia Loren

All these various elements can be found in Mussolini's party. This pamphlet aims to draw a picture of their interactions and reinforcing dynamics. One thing we have to keep in mind: only three and a half years elapsed between the founding party rally of the "fascisti" on the 23rd of March 1919 and Mussolini's nomination as prime minister by King Victor Emmanuel III on October 30th 1922.

Against the background of the crisis-ridden world we are living in – economic slowdowns, imperialist war in the middle of Europe, Israel's destruction of Gaza and its stated aim of "liberating" Northern Cyprus from Turkish occupation, US military build-up in Taiwan, etc. – fascism is again rearing its ugly head. At the same time we are witnessing mounting resistance against all these policies in the shape of mass demonstrations against Trump and his proto-fascist ICE or the mass riots against Macron in France. To help these protest movements to reach their goal it is urgent to learn the lessons of history and act accordingly.

Italy's unification

In the year 1860 referendums took place in eight regions of fragmented Italy on the question of uniting with the Kingdom of Sardinia to form a unified Kingdom of Italy – two further plebiscites followed in 1866 and 1870. The times were ripe. Germany's unification took place in 1871, and the US became a unified capitalist state after the defeat of the southern slave states in the Civil war of 1861-1865.



Unlike Bismarck's unification on the ashes of the defeated Paris Commune, Italy's was very much the expression of a popular feeling, as the voting results show: Tuscany 366.571 for 14.925 against, Venice 647.246 for 69 against, Naples in the poorer south 1,3 Million for ten thousand against, Sicily 432.053 for 667 against.

In the South people associated unification with land reform. Their hopes were however bitterly disappointed when Garibaldi, the hero of the 1848 Revolution, switched sides and ordered his troops to suppress land occupations by the peasants. Luchino Visconti gives us a striking description of the events in his "The Leopard" (1963).

A youthful imperialism

Italy's new-found unity catapulted it into the league of the established imperialist powers, first and foremost Great Britain and France, but also Germany, the US, Russia, Austria and Japan, albeit as one of the weaker ones, forcing it to navigate a course between its senior brothers.

Britain for example gave Italy the green light to occupy Egypt's possessions on the South coast of the Red Sea in order to push back France's influence in the region, whilst France invited Italy to set its eyes on Tripolitana (a vast area in the North-West of today's Libya) instead of Tunisia.

The colonial master Italy soon earned its first bloody nose in various battles against Ethiopian troops in 1887 and 1889. That did not deter it, however, from trying again and again.

Italy's industrialisation

Imperialism depends on massive industrialisation. Modern wars, especially inter-imperialist wars, such as the one we are witnessing in Ukraine, require huge investments in modern, large-scale industry. You can't have modern canons without a modern steelworks.

The pace was quite astounding. Steel production rose from 3,600 tons in 1881 to 158,000 tons in 1888, power production from 3 million kWh in 1881 to 752 million in 1910. However, Italy remained dependent on expensive imports of coal.

Modernisation also took place in farming, especially the Po region.

Industrialisation was paired by the development of a modern working class. Between 1861 and 1870 the number of miners jumped from 45,000 to 330,000 and in iron production from 33,000 to 154,000.

The working class organizes

The Socialist Party, Partito Socialista Italiano, formed in 1892. Just three years later it had 15 members in Parliament. Its daily *Avanti!* first appeared in 1896.

Because industrialisation was primarily geared to military aims instead of raising the living standards of the working class, bread riots and strikes erupted in 1898, which were suppressed with the help of 40,000 soldiers. Martial law was declared in many cities. On May 8th barricades were set up in Milan, facing canons, hundreds were killed and over a thousand wounded. In 1904, one year before the first Russian Revolution, Italy was the scene of the mightiest general strike in history, which managed to wrench a series of social legislation from the government.



Founding congress of the PSI in 1892

Italy enters the War

Mussolini earned his medals as a willing servant to the ruling class as early as the autumn of 1914 – that is five years before the founding rally of the fascist party in 1919.

As we have seen, Italian imperialism had to navigate between the established imperialisms. These manoeuvres continued into the first months of the war, with Italy not deciding which of the two contending blocks to support: the Central Powers under Germany's leadership or the Triple Entente led by Britain, France and Russia. Italy in fact was bound by treaty to Germany, but had secret talks with the Entente which led it to opting for the latter.

It was in this deadlock that France and Germany discovered in Mussolini's rhetoric a valuable mouthpiece.

Mussolini switches sides

Right up until the summer of 1914 Mussolini had been a leading member of the Socialist Party and chief editor of the party *Avanti!* since 1911. He was an ardent and very popular opponent of Italy's entry into war.

His about-face came into the open on October 4th 1914, just a month into the war.

In this day, whilst still a member of the Socialists and chief editor of *Avanti!* he founded, together with leading syndicalists, the *Fascio rivoluzionario d'azione internazionalista* (Revolutionary Fascism of Internationalist Action).

On November 15th 1914 he published the first edition of his new daily *Il Popolo d'Italia* (The People of Italy).



"The streets solemnly appeal to the rulers: Waver no longer in neutrality, now is the time for action!" This was the front-page splash of the December 20th edition of *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

He was finally thrown out of the party fourteen days later, on November 29th.

Mussolini kept *Il Popolo d'Italia* under his direct control for almost 30 years, right up to 1943. It was his tool to extend and consolidate his network of followers deep into upper-class circles. It was his instrument of propaganda, agitation and organisation wrapped up into one. Not unlike Lenin, he also created a network of correspondents who wrote regularly for the paper. The editorial office was right in the centre of Red Milan and served as starting post and endpoint for his demonstrations and rallies.

The British secret service MI5 rewarded him for the next ten years, right up till 1925 when he was long firmly in power, with weekly transfers of £100 Sterling, the equivalent of £7,000 in today's currency. The French foreign ministry also financed

him, together with Italian industrial magnates.

Let's take a look at the founding, barely one page long proclamation of his *Fascio rivoluzionario d'azione internazionalista* of October 5th 1914:

In this tragic hour, in which monstrous war celebrates its bloody carnival, in which civilisation seems to have lost its reason under the deluge of barbarism, we feel it our duty, we militants of the various revolutionary factions, to proclaim our stand clearly and honestly, so that our silence may not be interpreted as acquiescence or cowardice at a time when it is in the supreme interests and the duty of every revolutionary to express his own opinion and clarify his attitude in the face of escalating events.

Let us not examine the origins of this great tragedy, that would be an idle pursuit. If we as revolutionaries cannot but hold the international bourgeoisie jointly responsible for the scourge of the peoples, it would nonetheless be insincere and dishonest not to acknowledge the extent of our own responsibility, as revolutionaries, as the working classes of the various countries, as the vanguard elements, who made aversion to war and the fight against militarism part of their programme, for the insufficient and ineffective work carried out in order to prevent the bourgeois governments and the militaristic castes of Europe from realizing their aims through war.

The facts force us to recognize unambiguously that the Workers' International proved utterly impotent in confronting the developments and stopping their military solution in time. While the French, Belgian and British comrades knew how to fulfil their duty as socialists, ready to launch an international general strike aiming at igniting a general revolt against the bellicious plots of the bourgeoisie, those of Germany and Austria -- precisely those states that in the eyes of the whole world appear as the artisans of a sinister conspiracy of born-again forces of medieval Europe against any glimmer of civilisation, every

scrap of progress – instead of lining up the forces of their powerful economic and political organisations against the furious rampage of their governments, have yielded to the most brutal and savage current of imperialism, casting aside their duty as socialists, traitors to the duties of international workers' solidarity.

Perhaps our dream of brotherhood among peoples beyond all borders would not have been in vain if the German and Austro-Hungarian socialists had risen up against the Austrian government's despicable ultimatum to the small Serbian people, if they had been moved by the anguished cry of Luxembourg and Belgium, vilified and offended in their sacrosanct right to freedom and independence, if, in a word, they had asserted the causes of proletarian interest and socialist civilisation against their governments, standard-bearers of military tyranny and imperialism.

Thus, war is now a tragic reality of which we cannot be indifferent spectators without betraying the very cause of the revolution, without renouncing our socialist principles that speak to the peoples in the name of civilisation and freedom. And so it is worth asking whether the most vital interests of the working class in different countries, whether the cause of social revolution, are better served by the attitude of strict neutrality desired for Italy by the official Socialist Party, in full agreement with clerical elements, and to the advantage of German arms, or rather by intervention in favour of the states that represent the cause of freedom and peace in Europe: in favour of France, the cradle of a hundred revolutions, of England, the bastion of all political freedom, and of generous and heroic Belgium. The answer cannot be in doubt for us revolutionaries who, faithful to the teachings of our great thinkers, believe that the limitations of national revolutions cannot be overcome without first having reached them, for whom class struggle remains a vain formula, not an effective and fruitful force, so long as every people has not united within its natural boundaries of language

and race and the question of nationalities has not been definitively resolved, those necessary historical prerequisites for the normal development of the class movement, for progress and for the triumph of the very ideas of workers' internationalism. The triumph of the Austro-German bloc would be, in Europe, the renewed triumph of the Holy Alliance, the strengthening of the cause of reaction and militarism against that of revolution, in a word, the persistence and consolidation of those forces of militaristic and feudal conservation that have produced today's immense catastrophe, that will produce other wars tomorrow, more grief and more ruin for the working classes, halted in their upward march towards the conquest of their economic emancipation.

Great historical conflicts are not resolved by negating them ideologically, but by overcoming them in practical terms: war is not fought by ruminating on formulas or opposing it with sterile verbal denials, but rather by eliminating its root causes and reducing the factors that give it strength and success.

Today, die-hard neutralists appear to be the true friends of war. By fighting alongside the revolutionaries of France, Russia, Belgium and England for the cause of freedom and civilisation against that of authoritarianism and Teutonic militarism, for reason against force, for European revolution against the mad and criminal dream of establishing a universal empire – a medieval vision that must be consigned to the Middle Ages – we believe that we are doing the most useful work possible today in favour of European peace, for the cause of social revolution, for the reconstitution of the Workers' International on the new basis of systematic aversion, pursued by all means, to any war that is not a war of the oppressed against the oppressors, of the exploited against the exploiters.

WORKERS

Events are unfolding rapidly. Italy, alongside the powers fighting for the freedom and independence of peoples, would hasten a decisive outcome,

mitigating its immense disasters. Armed neutrality does not spare our country from the serious consequences of war and, at the same time, does not immunise us from the danger of war: rather, it gives the government, with the mobilisation of the army, the possibility of catching us off guard tomorrow with whatever war it chooses to declare, even against the reasons of civilisation and our own interests, and moreover – which would be even worse – the means to cover us with shame, with vile blackmail, putting a price on our non-intervention. Imposing war against the Austro-German bloc today is the best way to prevent Italy from insidiously returning to its subservience tomorrow.

We revolutionaries have no interests to preserve, no reason to deceive the people. Let the parties that have honours, salaries and political positions to preserve talk of neutrality, these blind or self-interested advocates of great national cowardice and historical infamy, allied with dynastic and clerical politics and accomplices of slaughterers and looters. We revolutionaries want to revive the tradition of the great minds and great hearts who heard the voices of the human future and foresaw the destiny of peoples.

To not cooperate in the victory of the best solution means to help the worst. Revolutionaries must have no doubts about their choice. Our cause is that of Amilcare Cipriani, Kropotkin, James Guillaume, Vaillant, that of the European revolution against barbarism, authoritarianism, militarism, Germanic feudalism and the Catholic perfidy of Austria. Everyone must do their duty to the utmost and in every way possible. All the living forces of the world, all those who wish toiling humanity a better future and fight for the triumph of the workers' cause and social revolution, for the brotherhood of peoples and the end of all wars, must take the field resolutely. We must force the government to stop dishonouring us or to take their leave, and from now on take on responsibilities and prepare for action.

(NB. Membership applications are accepted at

the temporary headquarters of the Fascio, at Via Eustachi 50, Milan).

That was the programme of the Italian imperialists, the industrial magnates, the officer corps, the elite soldiers of the *Arditi*, but not of ordinary soldiers.

Mussolini was fully aware of this. In public he always spoke of the people's war-fever. But in private he admitted it was non-existent. He confided to his biographer De Bagnac: "I know everything about the backstage of the front troops' enthusiasm. I am well familiar with the feelings of estrangement the peasant soldier harbours for the ideality of war. [...] Their hatred for war is also hatred against us who willed it, without being given the opportunity of determining its course. War is also anger at the Cadornas, the Capellos, at Andrea Graziani, whose executionary platoons of carabinieri stand in the backs of the soldiers' ranks." (General Graziani had earned a reputation for court marshalling countless soldiers and having them shot.)

At the war's end Mussolini for a short while endorsed the newly founded League of Nations. But when Italy was "robbed of its righteous share of the booty" by the victorious powers, on whose side it had fought, he soon reverted to being an ardent supporter of a new war to remove this ignominy.

Postwar workers' movement

The militancy of the Italian workers' movement of the years leading up to the First World War – after a short interlude due to the state of emergency – resurfaced in the final year of war and after hostilities ceased.



Italian soldiers in the lost battle of Caporetto in November 1917

Italy counted 650,000 dead and one million wounded. The returning troops were intensely radicalized. In 1919 the powerful metal workers' union won the eight hour day. Membership of the Socialists swelled to 200,000, the party obtained 1.8 million votes at the November elections of the same year. With its 32.3 percent it was the majority party, a quarter of all mayors in the country were socialists.

The membership of the socialist trade union federation Confederazione generale del lavoro (CGdL) increased eightfold to two million, while the anarcho-syndicalist trade union Unione Sindicale Italiana counted 300,000 members and the catholic trade union Confederazione Italiana del Lavoro, recognized by the pope, counted according to its own figures 1.8 million members, mostly in rural areas.

There was a lively cooperative movement. The labour ministry listed 20,000 cooperatives in 1921, amongst which 6,500 consumer cooperatives. In the year 1915 workers' cooperatives employed one in seven of the country's workforce. In 1919 Italy's largest dockyard was in the hands of a workers' cooperative. Rural labourers too were well organized. They had their own labour exchanges and set the minimum

wage. No labourer could hire himself or herself out without their approval.

Soldiers' militancy

Within days of the war ending, mid-November 1918, rank-and-file soldiers founded a National Association of Combatants, *Associazione nazionale combattenti*, which grew to 300,000 members within a few months. Mussolini, the hated war-monger, exerted zero influence on them.

But he gave it a try anyway. His approach was to turn the general bitterness amongst the wounded and mutilated and the families of the killed to his own advantage using the following screwed logic: their sacrifice must not be allowed to be in vain. *Il Popolo d'Italia* railed against granting amnesty to deserters, which he considered "a screaming depravity, a slap in the face to the memory of the dead who haven't *deserted* but have *fallen*, to the honour of the survivors, who have *fought*." It was the opposite of the demand of the Socialists, who called for a general amnesty for all victims of military justice.

The first soldiers' congress came together in Juni 1919, 1,000 soldiers participated.

Leading fascist Vecchi tried to intervene in the proceedings. He sprang onto a table and started reading out a manifesto against all bourgeois candidates and bourgeois parliament generally. He was greeted with whistling and was thrown out. As to Mussolini, he had to wait patiently outside.

Mussolini's »proletarian anti-imperialism«

Mussolini had learnt his jargon in the years of apprenticeship in the Socialist Party.

Angelo Tasca, who, together with Gramsci, Togliatti and Bordiga, had split the

communist wing from the PSI and founded the Italian Communist Party at the beginning of 1921, in his classic *Nascita e avvento del fascismo* summarized Mussolini as a man who in reality had never been a socialist, but simply a power-hungry egomaniac, an eclectic who gathered hackneyed ideas from the most varied of sources in order to regurgitate them as the opportunity arises.

He was past master in twisting social-democratic words into their opposite. Thus he abused the class term "proletariat" in order to characterize the relationship between weaker, so-called "proletarian" nations, to which Italy belonged, and the so-called plutocratic nations to which Britain and France belonged, as justification for Italy's own brand of imperialism.

In his New Year's editorial on January 1st 1919, i.e. only weeks after the end of an imperialist war which had killed 16 million soldiers, he wrote: "Imperialism is the eternal, the unchangeable law of life. It is essentially nothing other than the need, the clamour and the will for expansion, which every individual, every living and vital people carry within themselves."

Socialists abandon small peasants and soldiers

The radicalism of the soldiers returning home – three million had served under the most atrocious conditions – was not taken up by the Socialists. Many were from rural areas and were hoping for the plot of land promised to them in the framework of the land reform of 1917.

The poorer population in the fertile Po Valley consisted of agricultural workers, part-leaseholders, leaseholders and small



Agricultural workers destroy milk

holders. They faced the large land owners and their cronies in the higher ranks of the police, the army, the judiciary and the church.

The agricultural workers were well organised. Tasca tells that there was work for them only on 120 to 130 days of the year. To avoid starving in times of idleness they conducted during the high season or just before harvest time bitter strikes, refusing to milk the cows and leaving them to perish, abandoning the crops. Their demands centred not on higher wages, but on the distribution of work and the supply of the agricultural produce to the consumer cooperatives under their control. Scabs were boycotted mercilessly, for instance bakeries were prevented from selling them bread.

The agricultural workers also forced the leaseholders and part-leaseholders to participate. These were allowed to keep a certain quota of their crops, but had to leave the rest to rot in the fields. The perished cows, the masses of rotting corn must have broken the peasants' hearts, writes Tasca.

The labour exchanges controlled by the agricultural workers successfully defended wage levels. Anyone seeking work had to register, and anyone seeking workers also had to register so as not to be boycotted. Small holders did not benefit from these achievements.



Agricultural workers 1920

In order to protect strikes and demonstrations against the goon squads and scabs set upon them by the land barons "Red Guards" were formed in 1919. In some areas they even controlled all transportation from one place to another. They organized boycotts, set fire to granaries, killed cattle and occasionally attacked the landowners' mansions and the houses of strike breakers.

This radical movement on the land was tragically never coordinated with that of the industrial workers. The Socialist Party instead scared the small holders off with their demands for socialisation of the land – the opposite of Lenin's policy of immediate land distribution to the hungry peasants and the returning soldiers.

The Socialists, instead of demanding land for everyone, promoted the transformation of large estates over a period of years and against compensation for the owners. For the rural population of southern Italy and for small holders, who could barely survive

on their tiny plots they had nothing to offer. Particularly the latter were antagonised by the socialisation plans, fearing to lose the little they had alongside the large land owners, with only the vague prospect of one day obtaining employment in the to-be-founded cooperatives.

But things were even more dire. The Socialists wanted to have their programme voted on in a parliament in which they lacked a majority and implemented by a government in which they refused to participate. Thus they drew the hatred of the large land owners upon themselves without being able to mobilize the country folk. This opened a space for Mussolini's fascists to present themselves as the friends of the petty holders and find new recruits for their thuggish expeditions against the existing cooperatives.

A fascist factory occupation

Before the war even ended Mussolini founded the nationalist-syndicalist labour union, *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), on June 9th 1918, to compete with the mass social-democratic trade unions. General secretary of the UIL was a certain Rossoni, who had previously militated in the *American Industrial Workers of the World*. He became a member of the fascists in 1921 and was to become one of the main architects of the fascist state and the forced incorporation of workers into the fascist "trade unions". Another leading fascist coming from the ranks of the UIL was Bianchi, who was the party's first national secretary.

One example of Mussolini's strategy of side-tracking the socialist workers' movement can be seen in the factory occupation of the *Franchi I Gregorini* steel-works in *Dalmine* (north of Milan) on March 15th 1919 – just eight days before the founding congress of the fascist party. During the occupation the workers kept production going and they hissed the tricolour, Italy's national flag, in order to distance themselves from the red flag of the socialists. The occupation went forward under the slogan "In the interests of Italian industry and for the benefit of the people of whole Italy".

The whole experiment lasted three days and ended in a humiliating flop. The owners cut the electricity off, the 600,000 square meters of the grounds were occupied by 1,000 soldiers and the occupiers thrown out.

This did not stop Mussolini from praising the adventure to the skies. Three days after the end of the occupation, on March 20th, Mussolini, together with other leading

fascists and UIL representatives, paid homage to the "avant-garde of national syndicalism". Standing before 1,000 assembled workers he damned the "negative strikes of the Socialists" and praised the "creative strike with no interruption of production".

In one and the same breath, however, he indirectly distanced himself from the occupation: "The experiment was cut short by the inexorable demands of class law." In other words, it was from the start doomed to defeat. His speech was in the final analysis an apology for continued bosses' rule.

Actually no surprise, since one of the main shareholders of the occupied factory was a generous donor to Mussolini's *Il Popolo d'Italia*. The circle was complete.

But the workforce was not so easily duped. One and half years later, during the whole month of September 1920, when the metal industry of all Italy was hit by a wave of factory occupations, they hissed the red flag over the factory gates instead of the Italian tricolour. And one of the participants of the first occupation wrote a pamphlet about it in which he distanced himself from the fascists.

Mussolini's speech before the workforce became part of fascist folklore. Right up to the end of his dictatorship in 1943 it was always quoted as magnificent proof of his affinity to the working class. Three days later he then founded his fascist party.

The founding of the fascist party

The founding meeting took place on March 23rd 1919 in a sumptuous hall in Milan's city centre put at his disposal rent free by the bosses' organisation "Circolo degli Interessi Industriali e Commerciale". In attendance

were 100 avowed fascists of various tendencies, ultra-conservatives, anarchist-syndicalists, ex front soldiers, Freemasons, left advocates of war and futurists.

Mussolini's programme reflected the strength of the working class movement. Thus he demanded "technical works councils at a national level", which brought to mind the Russian soviets. As to foreign policy he demanded "peaceful competition between the civilised nations". And his social programme included "a genuine part-expropriation of all assets". That was Mussolini's typically ambiguous language – for what is a "genuine" but only "part" expropriation? And what guarantees are there that "peaceful competition between the civilised nations" doesn't spill over into a new war?

For all his socialist jargon Mussolini made it absolute clear on the very day of founding the party who was the main enemy: "It is necessary to make oneself aware of the fact, to believe and bring others to believing, that the only reactionary party today is the official Socialist Party ... because it has been striving at counter revolution ever since 1914."

The destruction of the *Avanti!* headquarters

Mussolini's freshly constituted *fasci* soon turned words into deeds. On April 15th, just three weeks after the founding conference, they ransacked and destroyed the headquarters of the Socialist Party's newspaper. There followed a regional



Sitz der gebrandschatzten sozialistischen Parteizeitung Avanti!

But a targeted retaliation was missing. Some nice speeches were held in parliament. Serrati, *Avanti!*'s chief editor, wrote: "The blood of the victims, spilt with the connivance of the authorities, will help socialism bloom anew." And Bombacci, soon to become the new Socialist leader, claimed: "Our party is buoyant and proud, because this is the historic period of socialism's triumph." Addressing the *squadristi* he added: "Carry on, gentlemen, if you so please, we for our part march on today just like yesterday untroubled and enthusiastically on our road." And the reformist party whip Turati: "If the spectacle of individuals boasting about having committed arson, shooting and rampaging continues and the authorities carry on in their refusal to acknowledge this, or even promote it, then Italy is facing sad days and we will not be to blame."

We will not be to blame? These words clearly signal the party's intention to do precisely nothing. It is an exsanguinate appeal to the government, may *they* take the responsibility for beating back the fascists. A regional general strike was called, but with the limited aim of applying pressure unto the authorities, to act *in place of* the antifascists.

On the first anniversary of the assault Mussolini wrote a scathing article in his newspaper: "On April 15th the Socialists of Milan – for all to see – proved themselves to be philistines and cowards. They were not capable of planing or attempting an gesture of revenge ... And all the collected donations ... will not suffice to erase the historic meaning of that day when the maximalist puppet ... fell into the stinking waters of Naviglio canal." The "maximalists" constituted the left wing of the Socialists and talked openly about revolution.

Mussolini had put his finger on his opponent's weakness: their unwillingness to hit back fast and decisively and nick the fascist movement in the bud. This should be a lesson for us today, a lesson which Hitler spelt out after his seizure of power: "One thing only could have stopped our movement – if our enemies had understood its workings and had from day one and in all brutality destroyed its core."

April 15th – just like Mussolini's speech before the workforce of the Franchi i Gregorini steelworks – remained a central pillar of fascist legend building right up to the end of Mussolini's dictatorship. The futurist painter Enrico Prampolini created two enormous paintings both stretching 5x6 meters to commemorate the event at the fascist art exhibition in 1932.



Fascist art exhibition 1932-1934

"Caro vita Summer" 1919

Left wing agitation continued spreading throughout 1919. Summer was afflicted by rising unemployment – fed by the returning soldiers and the difficulty of reconvertng war time production – and tearing inflation.

The situation exploded on June 14th. Hungry masses stormed the shops. Mussolini declared himself to be on their side, whereas the Socialist *Avanti!* and the trade unions attempted to curb the movement and reestablish discipline.



Demonstration against inflation

In Siena for instance a Socialist climbed onto a lorry, convinced the crowd to desist from their "shameful and ignominious plunder", collected the stolen wares, transported them to the trade union quarters and gave them back to their owners.

In Ancona troops were deployed in front of the shops, and when the crowd ignored them, order to shoot was given. The soldiers refused, the crowd was jubilant. Some exasperated shop keepers entrusted the keys of their stores to trade union officials.

The make-up of the Socialist Party

At their congress in October 1919 the maximalists gained a majority, whilst the reformist wing was completely isolated. The congress marked a sharp left turn and joined in its entirety Lenin's Third International.

Everyone talked of proletarian dictatorship, the coming revolution, the necessity for revolutionary violence and soviets.

Only the reformist Turati warned of possible suicide. "Today our enemies do not take us seriously, but the day they hit back will find them a hundredfold better armed and they will smash us. Then we can say goodbye to parliamentary action, goodbye to the trade associations, goodbye to the

Socialist Party!" For Turati, a sincere fighter for the eight hour day and thorough workers' education, socialism was to be the natural outcome of general progress, not least of an increasingly enlightened bourgeoisie, and the working class was simply not ripe for socialism.

When the then chief editor of *Avanti!*, Bissolati, was offered the opportunity of a Socialist participation in government in 1911, his party comrade Turati's answer was very reserved. "Participation in power? If it must be, maybe; but it is surely not possible." The main obstacle in his view was the lack of preparedness of the working class. "What does socialism in present-day Italy represent? The socialism of the broad masses is barely skin deep, and in the better organized oases it serves, and how could it be otherwise, perhaps not contemptible interests, but limited and narrow ones. Bissolati was shortly afterwards expelled from the party because of his advocacy of conquering Libya.

Such a harmonious development as envisaged by Turati had always been an illusion, but in the crisis years of postwar Italy when each class and even individual layers were only out for their own urgent interests and no room for compromise remained, all the more so. Italy's desolate economic situation allowed only for open conflict, which had to be resolved by force one way or the other – either it was revolution or bottomless reaction.

After many a heated debate on the necessity and inevitability of force, the Socialist Party moved on to organizing the parliamentary elections. The party remained, in spite of its left turn, essentially a parliamentary party. It undertook no steps to organize the revolution or even to prepare their own ranks for revolution.

Fascist electioneering 1919

In the run-up to the 1919 November election the fascist party was divided. In some cities it joined alliances with other right-wing parties, in others it called for a boycott.

In this situation Mussolini managed to push through his line of standing alone as fascists, futurists and *arditi*, even if it meant losing.

He gave the fight in the streets precedence over elections and he organized his key election rally in Milan accordingly. Mimmo Franzinelli describes the scene in his book "Fascismo anno zero". Mussolini had summoned the *arditi* from several cities, plus 150 marines. They were under strict orders to remain silent during the rally so as to ensure the stewards could better hear the orders they received and immediately identify and hecklers and cudgel them out.

Already two hours before the start, the armed *arditi* surrounded the square and submitted any passers-by to a fastidious search. The square was lit up by hundreds of torches held high by the stewards. The speakers' platform, a lorry, was surrounded by a further hundred stewards in army uniform.

Above their heads the black flag of the *arditi* and that of the city of Fiume in Yugoslavia, under occupation by Mussolini's friend d'Annunzio, were flown.

The rally was set off by a pistol shot, a rocket soared high lighting up the whole square. Each one of the five speakers was announced by a pistol shot.

In his speech Mussolini swore to destroy parliament as it stood. Only the ex-soldiers, the "aristocracy of the trenches" had the right to pass laws. He wanted the complete freedom of the people.



FIAT workers assemble during the occupation of the factories

In spite of all the show the election was a complete fiasco for the fascists who didn't win a single seat – but it was also a flop for all the other interventionist parties.

However, the party of anti-war ex-soldiers with their 300,000 members also fared poorly, because they didn't manage to agree on a programme. Again this was the fault of the Socialists who had nothing to offer them.

The Socialists for their part won the election hands down, winning 1.8 million votes and obtaining 156 seats in parliament. They were now the strongest fraction.

One example for the left-wing mood is provided by the industrial city of Turin. A Socialist railway worker, who had participated in the Berlin Spartacus insurrection in January 1919, drew 193,000 votes.

It wasn't Mussolini's time yet. The workers' movement was still in full swing.

Out of exasperation in view of their electoral defeat the fascists threw a grenade

into the crowd of Socialists celebrating their victory, wounding ten.

The Socialists responded by demanding that the police chief remove the *arditi* from the city and dissolve Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento*. Mussolini's *Il Popolo d'Italia* mocked a party perpetually babbling about revolution and having just won the election outright, instead of *doing* the revolution turned to the police for help: "The Leninists and the festering PSI abscess say they want to seize power and govern Italy. What holds them back? Why don't they do it?"

"Biennio Rosso"

The post-war years 1919-20 are known under the name "Biennio Rosso", the Two Red Years. The bosses and the great land owners wanted to break the back of this militancy once and for all and went on the offensive.

The bosses of the metal industry used an economic recession to force the metal workers to their knees. The metal workers' trade union FIOM, after months of fruitless negotiations followed by outright rejection of any wage increases by the industrialists, had their backs to the wall. They saw no other way out than to order a work-to-rule which, in response to the bosses' announced lock-outs, grew into a massive wave of factory occupations. All through the month of September 500,000 metal workers, joined by railway workers, held their factories in their own hands.

A glimpse of the euphoric atmosphere during the occupation is given by a famous exchange on the telephone between a transport company and Fiat. The former wanted to clarify some details with the Fiat manager: "Hallo, who's there? – This is the Fiat soviet. – Ah! ... pardon ... I'll ring again ..."

Another famous telephone conversation, quoted by Paolo Spriano in his "The Occupation of the Factories" took place between prime minister Giolitti and the Fiat boss Agnelli, who urgently requested the government to finally intervene. Giolitti listened patiently and explained his policy:



Armed Red guards protecting their factory

Giolitti: Only time can solve the problem. Otherwise there is no policy but force.

Agnelli: Precisely ...

Giolitti: Maybe. But let us understand each other. I will not allow the security forces to stay in the streets, defenceless if the red guards open fire from above. To drive the workers out of the factories we need artillery ...

Agnelli: I agree ...

Giolitti: We are in a position to supply it immediately. At Turin there is the 7th regiment of mountain artillery. I will give the orders at once. At dawn tomorrow, Fiat will be bombarded and liberated from the occupiers.

Agnelli: No! No!

Giolitti: Well, then?

Agnelli: no reply

Giolitti, a cunning politician who had weathered all kinds of storms knew that not artillery, but the opportunism of the Socialists and the trade union leaders would do the job without any bloodshed. His predictions were correct.

The leaders of the Socialists and the trade unions cave in

Indeed, they were craving for a compromise solution. Already in February 1920 they had abandoned a very militant, month-long strike of the Turin workforce to their own

devices, refusing to organise solidarity across the country. A similar course of action was to repeat itself in September 1920.

In the morning of September 10th, while the occupations were in their second week, the maximalist party leadership talked about "the decisive revolutionary battle" and the leadership of the trade union congress CGdL held splendid speeches about "trade union control of industry".

But that very same evening the trade union leaders told the Socialist leaders: "So you believe the time for revolution has come. Very well. We summon you to take over the leadership of the whole movement." The Socialists got cold feet and returned the ball into the CGdL's court, which, next day, decided in a formal vote of 591,425 against 409,569 to strike revolution off the agenda.

The occupations dragged on a couple more weeks and eventually wage increases and vague promises of trade union control were conceded.

The strikers' mood alternated between satisfaction with the gains achieved and frustration at not having seized the opportunity to push through more radical aims. But in any case the dynamic of the working class movement was broken.

Upsurge in fascist violence

After the end of the factory occupations at the close of September 1920 one violent fascist excess followed another. Angelo Tasca writes: "In the first semester of 1921 the fascists destroyed 17 editorial offices and print-shops, 59 peoples' centres, 110 chambers of labour, 83 locals of the agricultural workers, 151 Socialist offices and 150 cultural centres. Almost all these

acts of destruction took place between the months of March and Mai."

He quotes the socialist Marion Cavallari:

On the heels of these violent fascist forays follow the trucks of the Carabinieri; the Carabinieri all the while sing the same fascist war songs. In Porto Maggiore a tragic incident cost the life of a fascist. Thereupon the town was attacked in the night by around one thousand fascists throwing hand grenades, breaking into homes, setting houses alight, beating and wounding people – all under the gaze of the security forces. But that was not all: the carabinieri block the entrances to the town; every time a truckload of fascists comes along, it is stopped; the carabinieri then ask if they are armed, and in the event that the question is answered in the negative, they provide them with arms and ammunition.

Why the failure of the workers' movement?

We must pose the urgent question of how the magnificent Italian industrial and rural workers' movement with their mass memberships, their dozens of newspapers, cooperatives, clubs and trade union offices, party centres, libraries, their high degree of organization and self consciousness could be smashed in the two short years separating the Biennio Rosso from Mussolini's takeover. Why did they not organize effective fightback and smash the fascists with mass violence instead of allowing themselves to be taken to the slaughtering house?

There are a number of reasons.

The workers' movement and that of the agricultural workers was so to speak over self-confident and underestimated the fascist danger, even when they were the direct targets of fascist attacks.



Antifascist barricade in Parma 1922

Even the great Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who published his own newspaper, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, wrote very little about the fascist peril. He concentrated all his energies on the factory commissions and the accomplishment that these were elected by the whole factory workforce and not only by trade union members.

In his eyes the commissions represented the germs of the future workers' state, comparable to the Russian soviets. These commissions did indeed play a central role during the strikes and factory occupations in April and again in September 1920. But they were essentially *defensive* organs, each one busy fighting off bosses' attacks in their individual factories.

Olivetti, the boss of the Italian industrialists organized in the *Confederazione dell'industria italiana* wrote a guest article for Gramsci's paper in mid-May 1920, just four months before the factory occupations, in which he ruthlessly laid out the contradictions in Gramsci's concept. There were only two viable alternatives: either the factory commissions clearly limited their aims along the lines of the German "Betriebsräte", that is works councils which simply participated as very junior partners in defending some basic workers' rights – he could go along with that – or there needed to be a fully developed workers'

state as in Russia, which could fulfill broader functions. But Gramsci's concept of commissions challenging the monopoly of the capitalists *within the framework of capitalism* and even organizing the transition to communism was an absolute no-go. Lenin on his part accused Gramsci of syndicalism.

Gramsci himself noted a few years later self-critically that he had neglected to timely build a faction within the mighty Socialist Party, which could have autonomously expanded the movement beyond Turin. He would albeit have encountered bitter opposition from the party leadership, as shown when the latter unceremoniously suppressed the Piedmont edition of their newspaper which was also under Gramsci's editorship.



The symbol of the Arditi del Popolo

The Arditi del Popolo

It's not that the fascists didn't meet with resistance. The Arditi del Popolo, an anti-fascist people's militia, was formed in June 1921 – albeit at a time when the workers' movement had surpassed its zenith. It was nevertheless still not too late if they had had the broad, active and also formal endorsement of the mass industrial and rural workers' organizations. The Arditi del Popolo grew despite everything to 20,000 members within a few months, but remained mostly onto themselves with their

separate culture and their own antifascist symbols.

Mussolini saw them as a real danger for his own movement and, scheming as he was, he signed, after months' of negotiations, a "non-aggression pact" with the Socialists. His aim was to give the PSI a false sense of security and to isolate the radical Arditi del Popolo.

This manoeuvre was a masterpiece of Mussolini's. The PSI and the trade union leadership now recommended their members to stay at home and avoid any confrontation with the fascists. "Stay in your apartments; don't react to provocations. Silence and cowardice are at times real heroism."

The newly formed Communist Party of Italy (PCI), founded on January 21st 1921 under Bordiga's leadership, acted no less irresponsibly when they founded their own "class conscious" Red squads with 6,000 members at their height. Communist Party members were forbidden from supporting the Arditi del Popolo. As to the Workers' Alliance Against Fascism, formed in 1922, it too got only lukewarm support from the PCI – Tasca in Turin did support it, but not Gramsci, who criticized it as a bureaucratic manoeuvre.

The fascists had other advantages over their foes. They were armed, even with machine guns. This was against the law, but they were never prosecuted, unlike the workers. Another advantage was the mobility of the fascist squads. Mounted on their trucks they could come from afar, whereas the workers in the towns and in the countryside were bound to their dwelling places. This was the advantage of mobile warfare over trench warfare, as Tasca put it.

The financiers of the fascists

It's important to get the character of fascism right. It is a militant, even militarist movement of petty bourgeois elements organizing itself independently of state institutions – this was Trotzki's characterization.

Tasca describes the composition of the first *Squadre*: "In the Po Valley the cities are on the whole less red than the countryside; the rich landowners, the garrison officers, the university students, the state officials, the rentiers, the professionals, the business people live in the cities. The first fascists and cadres of the combat groups, the *squadre*, stemmed from these layers.

On the other hand this movement is dependent on the good will and even active support of the state. On October 20th 1920 war minister Bonomi – the very same individual whom Mussolini had thrown out of the PSI in 1912 for his support for the Libyan invasion – ordered 60,000 reserve officers, who would otherwise have been retired, to place themselves under the command of Mussolini's *fasci di combattimento*, providing them with four fifths of their pay.

Mussolini always entertained close ties with the elites among the large land owners and industrialists. Fascism's Janus face can be seen in the German AfD and the British Advance UK.

The weekly subs party members had to pay were low, 1 lira for students, 2 for workers and 3 for employees. These subs were collected by ex-officers, chosen especially for the job. Their main purpose was to bolster inner party discipline.

Mussolini's fascist paper *Il Popolo d'Italia* was distributed free of charge, which necessitated its being heavily subsidized through

rich donations. Some industrialists provided their workforces with copies – which did not affect the paper's hard propaganda line against individual capitalists, including those who gave generously to keep the paper going.

Mussolini's tactical relationship to violence

But there was another aspect to Mussolini's mastership at playing all the keys of the keyboard. In other words he had more than just one Janus head apart from the one turned to the bosses and the other to the workers.

This is shown in his tactical relationship to violence, something many an adept didn't understand. So at times he favoured "moderation", on other occasions he spoke in favour of violence.

In a speech on May 4th 1921, on the eve of parliamentary elections, he had proclaimed: "We will, so long as it is necessary, beat the skulls of our foes in more or less delicate manner until truth has wound its way into their brains." But just six days later he urged caution: "Fascists must not allow themselves to lose their sense of measure. Such a loss could dash or sabotage a great victory. Once you have triumphed it's dangerous to want to exasperate the extent of victory."

These varying approaches were also a reflection of the character of his base, which he did not always fully control. It even came to an open split in the party and Mussolini came close to coming out loser. In several cities and in the country his base openly revolted against him. It wasn't a revolt from the left, to make him stick to his "socialist" programme. His base wanted rather to up their orgy of violence. In the lead-up to a regional assembly of the

Bologna fascists they plastered the whole city with posters against the "traitor Mussolini". Mussolini was forced to resign from the executive committee of the fascists who enjoyed their new-found freedom to indulge in further pillaging.

In the end Mussolini was able to take the helm again by agreeing on a "compromise" which saved the face of both sides. It is worth quoting his train of thought:

Should fascism become a party? After lengthy deliberation and examination of the political situation I have reached the conclusion that we must answer the question in the affirmative. ... The genesis and development of the fascist party have forced upon us a dilemma: either we create a party or an army. ... In my view the problem must be resolved in the following manner: a party must be created so cohesive and disciplined as to be able, should it prove necessary, to immediately transform itself into an army, which could act at the level of violence – be it to attack or to repulse attacks. We will have to provide the party with a soul, that is a programme.

The psychology of a fascist

These tensions within the fascist party are vividly described by Vasco Pratolini in his wonderful bestseller "A Tale of Poor Lovers", later filmed by Carlo Lizzani. The author describes the psychology of a typical petty bourgeois fascist, a certain Osvaldo, who has just murdered the anti-fascist Maciste and thus earned his spurs:

And from now on be felt, quite rightly so, to be one of them ... Against pangs of conscience humans have discovered as an antidote the Ideal ... Having had to admit to himself that he had screwed everything up in his life, there remained only two avenues open to the man: either commit suicide, or save one's skin ... Deliberating on this

certainty and with the despair of a shipwrecked he will reach the shore of conviction, he will authentically become another man. He will not remember what he once had been. Not because he doesn't want to remember, but because he is no longer able to remember.

Tasca's succinct depiction: "I need not think, therefore I am."

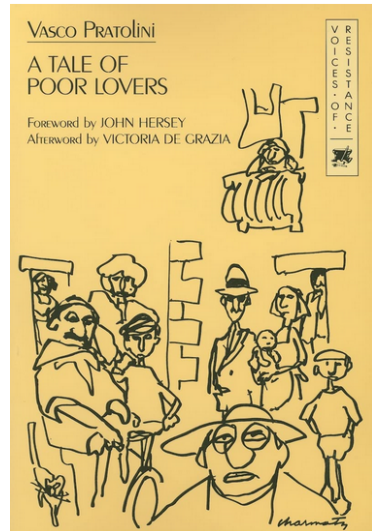
The »March on Rome«

If Mussolini today is remembered at all, it's most probably in connection with his "March on Rome" in the autumn of 1922. Mussolini himself and his fascist movement – but also his followers of today – style this march into a magnificent heroic triumph.

Tasca's detailed account provides a much more sobering picture. In purely military terms it was a dilettante undertaking which almost ended in a debacle. His 40 to 50 thousand *fasci* posted around Rome were no equal to the regular army. To their dishonour, drenched to the bones under a never ending downpour, half starved and dying of thirst, they sank into the mud.

As to Mussolini he never "marched" to Rome, but took the night train from Milan to the capital on the evening of October 29th. But not before the king had reassured him in writing that he would be entrusted to form a government of his own choosing.

In the previous weeks Mussolini had deployed a whole panoply of diplomatic steps. He bargained with, hassled and threatened politicians of various parties, obtained the placet of the pope who announced his "gratitude for the opportunity to learn what the fascists had to offer" – this too one of Mussolini's many about-turns, after having adopted in the first months of his movement a strictly "republican" anti-clerical line –, drew leading



A very moving novel centered on a back street in Florence at the beginning of the 1920s

military to his side, whilst at the same time mobilizing his *fasci* to occupy several prefectures, which mostly failed but managed to create an atmosphere of generalized chaos and thereby to force upon his undecided opponents the feeling that there was no stable alternative to Mussolini.

When he finally appeared before the king in his palace, dressed in his squadrist gear, he proclaimed he had just come from a raging battle which happily enough had claimed no victims, and accepted the offer to form a government.

The king remained a faithful follower of Mussolini's for 21 years, right up to his fall in 1943, after which he nominated the old fascist Badoglio to premiership and to lead the armistice negotiations with the allied forces. The latter had no qualms about recognizing the king and Badoglio as Italy's legitimate representatives.

The nature of fascism

I started off with a list of characteristics. But an index alone is not enough. We need to turn to Trotsky's analysis at the beginning of the 1930s as a guide, at a time when he warned of the menacing danger of Hitler's coming to power and argued for a united front of the mass workers' parties in Germany, the Communist KPD and the social-democratic SPD. He tore to pieces the politics of the KPD who saw in fascism just another form of bourgeois rule and berated social-democracy as "social fascists".

Social democracy, today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism from the petty bourgeoisie. Social democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can exert no influence. Fascism cannot intrench itself in power without annihilating the workers' organizations. Parliament is the main arena of social democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the social democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance, more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.

That such a united front between both workers' parties was a possibility is shown by the developments in France in February 1934, when two massive antifascist demonstrations, marching separately, the one called by the Socialists, the other by the Communists, came together in one big victorious tide.

Back to today

In order to answer our opening question: conditions as they existed in the aftermath of the First World War with their enormous splits, mass mobilizations and aggressive regrouping of the various social strata are not present today, not in Italy nor in Germany or Britain. But the growing crisis in wake of wars and economic downturn offers the fascists an opportunity to grow much faster than in the past and much faster than we might expect. We are confronted, today as in the 1920s, with the task of destroying them before they destroy us.

Further reading

Angelo Tasca, Naissance du fascisme: L'Italie de l'Armistice à la marche sur Rome
Paulo Spriano, The Occupation of the Factories 1920
Vasco Pratolini, A Tale of Poor Lovers
Ignazio Silone, Il fascismo
Daniel Guérin, Fascisme et grand capital
Mimmo Franzinelli, Fascismo anno zero. 1919: la nascita dei Fasci italiani di combattimento



Mussolini was Hitler's model. He founded his fascist party in 1919 in the middle of the crisis that shook Europe after the First World War.

Three years on the Italian king handed him complete power, which he quickly turned into a one-man dictatorship.

Leading up to his seizure of power he had built a mass party with tens of thousands of thugs, who terrorised trade unionists, socialist mayors and communists.

His rise to power could have been stopped if the mass parties of the working class had recognized the danger and smashed his movement.

In view of fascists' comeback across Europe and in Britain it is important to draw the lessons from a 100 years ago.