

Europe: The Anti-Fascist Revolution

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Remembering the Action Party, one of Italy's biggest anti-fascist partisan movements.

Over the last two decades, the Italian Resistance has been a subject of sharp public debate, with both political and historical efforts “radically to repudiate the role and significance” of anti-fascism in Italy’s contemporary history. As Pier Giorgio Zunino wrote in 1997, “for the Italian history of the second half of the twentieth century, anti-fascism is the villain.”

Indeed, most often simply identified with its Comintern (Communist International) variant, the anti-fascism of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s is branded “anti-democratic” because of its “blind[ness]” to the other “enemies of democracy,” as the Italian revisionist Renzo de Felice put it. Attacks on the twenty-month-long Resistance are essentially concentrated on its minoritarian character (thus seeing the anti-fascist parties as a mere second edition of the National Fascist Party itself) and the “cruelty” of the “violence” committed during the civil war and the months following Liberation.

Italy is a country where the “negative memory” of this experience fuses with the political uses made of that memory. In this context, what is especially challenged “decade after decade” is the central, epoch-defining character of this period for the history of the dominated.

This is because, between September 8, 1943 — the date that the Badoglio’s post-fascist government signed an armistice with the Allies, triggering a German occupation of northern-central Italy — and April 25, 1945 — the date of the final liberation of Italy’s great northern cities — the Resistance was not only a war of national liberation, but also a civil war and a class war — [a social war](#) that implicated the population itself.

Of course, not all “the people” were in the “*maquis*,” as the title of Communist leader Luigi Longo’s *Un popolo alla macchia* might suggest. But a large part of the Italian population thought that the end of fascism should mean a challenge not just to the regime itself, but also to the Italian state as it had formed after the *Risorgimento* [national unification struggle of the mid-nineteenth century], and indeed, to bourgeois society as a whole. In this sense, anti-fascism really represented a positive struggle, with a political and social charge that projected itself into the future.

In this context of a radical challenge to the existing order, the Action Party (*Partito d’Azione* or Pd’A), throughout its brief existence, played a very specific role. Created in 1942 and dissolved in 1947, over the twenty months of civil war the Pd’A was an advocate for the radical transformation of Italian society.

This advocacy also translated into practice; in the war of Resistance that raged, especially in Northern Italy, from September 1943 onward, the Action Party made a relatively unparalleled contribution, offering the greatest number of combatants to the armed struggle. Giovanni de Luna [captured this reality](#) with his reference to the “party of the shot.” The Pd’A made a major contribution to the insurrections of April 1945, in particular in Turin.

The living embodiment of a revolutionary “wind from the North,” *azionismo* also laid down a lasting

system of values founded on anti-fascism. It considered anti-fascism not only in conjunctural terms — as a fight against the regime Mussolini had established from 1922 onward — but as a perpetual duty.

This was summarized in April 1934 by Carlo Rosselli, founder of the secular, non-communist Justice and Liberty (*Giustizia e Libertà* or GL) movement. A figure whose memory was forever part of the Pd'A after his 1937 murder by fascists, Rosselli spoke of anti-fascism as “a struggle for eternity.”

“We Are at War”

Azionismo was rooted in the anti-fascism of the liberal revolutionary Piero Gobetti, who died in 1926 under the blows of the fascist *squadristi*; as well as its early 1930s political actualization by GL, the movement of the revolutionary socialist Carlo Rosselli and, among others, Emilio Lussu, a member of the Sardinian Partito d'Azione. Based in Paris in the 1930s, Rosselli and Lussu were both escapees from the island of Lipari, where they had been confined by the Fascist regime.

For Piero Gobetti, fascism was “the autobiography of the nation.” On November 23, 1922, in a famous article entitled “Eulogy to the guillotine,” he wrote:

Fascism... has been the autobiography of the nation. A nation that believes in class collaboration; a nation that renounces political struggle, on account of its own sloth.... Fascism in Italy is a catastrophe, and it is an indication of a decisive infantileness, for it marks the triumph of facility, of confidence granted, of optimism, of enthusiasms.

This interpretation emphasized the elements of continuity between liberal Italy and fascist Italy and the idea of a missed *Risorgimento* - meaning an unaccomplished process of political unification and economic modernization. From this perspective, fascism was the result of this missing liberal/bourgeois revolution, and the expression of a backward and “uncultured” country whose only political experience was one of systems of government that combined clientelism, paternalism, transformism and authoritarianism.

Fascism was thus the expression of “an old ill, rooted in the distant past of Italian history.” This interpretation combined with the idea that it was necessary to fight not only fascism itself, but all that had made it possible. This emphasized the role of the Italian ruling class in the affirmation and stabilization of the regime.

During the 1930s, this line of interpretation would develop, in the context of an anti-fascist struggle waged in secrecy and exile. This fight now confronted a clearly established regime and a regimented country, in years that the revisionist historian Renzo de Felice described in terms of “consensus.”

The revolutionary socialist Carlo Rosselli developed his own analysis of fascism based on Gobetti's reflections, among others, discussing the development of what he from the early 1930s called “the anti-fascist revolution,” and refining its repertoires of action.

In January 1932, the first issue of the *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* asserted the need to pass from “the phase of a negative and indistinct anti-fascism” to that of the affirmation of a “constructive anti-fascism that understands and transcends the fascist experience and the experiences of post-[World War I] Europe.”

Founded on the combined Mazzinian imperatives of “thought and action,” in a March 1931 circular addressed “To the Workers,” GL presented itself as a “revolutionary movement” aimed at overthrowing fascism by insurrectionary means. Carlo Rosselli and the members of GL conceived their political engagement as a radical rupture from fascism, but so, too, from pre-fascist Italy.

In this sense, they constantly repeated that there could be no question of fighting to return to *l'Italietta di Facta* [referring to pre-Mussolini liberal prime minister Luigi Facta]. What united the militants of GL was “the revolt against the men, the mentality, and the methods of the pre-fascist political world” (“Per l’unificazione politica del proletariato,” GL, May 14, 1937).

It also targeted the Italian Socialists, who had reduced themselves to impotence. We might particularly note the rather severe analysis Emilio Lusso gave of the Socialists’ collapse faced with the rise of fascism in his February 1934 article “Orientamenti”:

The masses were brilliantly guided toward catastrophe... It took just a few mercenary brigands, gathered in such little time, to destroy the results of forty years of proletarian organization. It took not a flurry of machine-gun fire but only the rumble of a milk truck to disband what ought to have been the revolutionary army.

The renewal of socialism and the anti-fascist struggle were thus envisaged as two interdependent and inextricably linked phases. GL advocated the defeat of pre-fascist political configurations, presenting itself in terms of “unity of action” among socialists, republicans, and liberals, and seeking to revive the struggle on Italian territory, if necessary using illegal and violent means.

From 1930 onward, GL cells formed mainly in the towns of Northern Italy and in intellectual circles. This was the only non-Communist movement to construct a real network, and the Pd’A [formally constituted in 1942] would base itself on this, as it built its forces around such figures as Riccardo Bauer, Ernesto Rossi, Francesco Fancello, Nello Traquandi, Umberto Ceva, Vincenzo Calace, Dino Roberti, Giuliano Viezzoli, Ferruccio Parri, and many others. While this social and militant base was principally among intellectuals, this small circle would become a hardened troop, ready to take up arms.

GL, the Pd’A, and the Revolution

Indeed, fascism placed the young (liberal and/or socialist) intellectuals, as the basis of GL, and the Pd’A in a paradoxical situation. The regime established by Mussolini seemed to position the “rearguard” fight for the defense of democratic freedoms as the order of the day. There is no doubt that the anti-fascist engagement of liberals like Ernesto Rossi or Riccardo Bauer was built precisely around this primary revolt, more moral than political.

Yet it was at precisely this moment that the fight for freedom emancipated itself from the historical and theoretical frameworks in which it had emerged. It broke away from the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it adopted more complex notions that resolutely anchored it in the era beginning in October of 1917.

Piero Gobetti was again at the heart of this way of conceiving anti-fascism, which combined liberalism with exhortations to revolution. Over the course of his short life, he consistently emphasized that his liberalism was rooted in the concrete experience of the struggles of the downtrodden, with the Turin factory councils of 1919-20 and the soviets in Russia in his view marking their most complete expression.

Gobetti thus saw the workers’ movement as “freedom on the way to establishing itself” and the October Revolution as “an affirmation of liberalism” because it broke “a centuries-long slavery” in creating an “agrarian democracy,” a state in which “the people have faith.”

Autonomy, anti-bureaucratic demands, voluntarism, “free initiative from below,” and the role of the individual – not of the “mass” – were the inner secrets to this libertarian and revolutionary liberalism, attached to social revolution and fully anchored in the twentieth century. GL drew on this

same thread in the 1930s. Thus, the [question posed](#) was “reconciling the political and social potential of the Russian Revolution with the scientific, humanistic, liberal legacy of the West.”

If fascism reflected Italians’ moral, political, and cultural immaturity – in short, a “lack of character” – then building a new political order must inevitably proceed via a revolutionary struggle. This was a struggle in which active minorities would play an exemplary role, and which would “then spread among wide layers of the population.”

One of the challenges this posed was how to envisage a revolutionary process in a country that had never seen any large-scale revolutionary phenomenon, the “popular and revolutionary *Risorgimento*” having been swept aside by the monarchy, the clergy, agrarian feudalism, and finance.

From this perspective, the anti-fascist revolution could be a “social and moral” second *Risorgimento*, which would result in the emancipation of the workers. Over the 1930s – for GL’s Carlo Rosselli in particular – the revolution became more clearly proletarian, and anti-fascism became synonymous with anti-capitalism.

This was not an abstract anti-capitalism, but a “concrete and historical” one founded on the observation and the conviction that liberal democracy had exhausted its historical role. The post-World War I crisis of democracy and the crisis of capitalism thus became potent factors in the interpretation of the struggle that must now be fought.

The Pd’A structured itself around themes linked to the origins of fascism and the anti-fascist revolution, questions which Carlo Rosselli in particular had posed within GL. While the onset of World War II broke up the networks constituted in exile (especially in France) it would also constitute the terrain in which these new political orientations could be tested in practice.

As [Leonardi Paggi put it](#), we can here see “the war’s absolutely leading role not only as a factor for the destruction of the old order, but also as the site of the reconstruction of a new one.”

Indeed, “the fascist war” (from 1940–43) would play a fundamental role in driving the rise of a properly anti-fascist social and political consciousness, taking on ever wider proportions. The strike wave of March 1943 and the outpourings of joy on July 25 of that same year, as Italians greeted the news of Mussolini’s downfall, each bore witness to this.

Moreover, during the civil war of 1943 to 1945, the anti-fascism that had built up over twenty years of fascism and that etched itself on the body of a devastated, “martyred” country, now transformed into a real movement driven by men and women and by their hopes and expectations. The immediate trigger for the formation of the Action Party was, of course, the war. Yet it was also driven by the heartfelt need for an unremitting struggle, by and through the war, against everything in the process of modern Italy’s construction that had led to disaster.

From its creation in June 1942, the Pd’A presented itself as the rallying point for the diverse elements of non-Communist anti-fascism of both socialist and liberal orientations. The Pd’A was, first of all, composed of members of the liberal-socialist movement founded among young intellectual circles in central Italy in 1937 by Guido Calogero and Aldo Capitini, whose 1940 program called for the formation of a “common front for freedom.”

In July 1943, this current was joined by the militants of GL, which became a socialist unity movement under the direction of Emilio Lussu after the 1937 assassination of Carlo Rosselli. On March 3, 1943, GL, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party signed a pact for unity in action, advocating “a national insurrection to smash fascism’s policy of war.”

As Giovanni de Luna emphasizes in [his book](#) (which is sadly yet to be translated), the different souls of the Action Party were nonetheless united by the conception of politics its militants constructed – a politics considered inextricably linked to morality – and by the constant search for means of action to respond to Italy’s concrete needs, particularly those of its peasant, worker and intellectual layers, in order to radically change the social and political order.

Hence the party’s “republican prejudice” and its calls for change in Italy’s state structure and its economy. Among the seven points of the Pd’A’s June 1942 political program, we might mention: decentralization of power to the local level; the nationalization of monopolies; land reform; trade-union freedom; and the separation of church and state. The Italian historian [Claudio Pavone thus recalled](#) how the “Action Party spoke in its program of its intent to establish a socialism for new times” and how this party had expressed a “utopia, as the aspiration for the utmost.”

The question of the means of struggle was at the center of the debates at the Pd’A’s national congress on September 5-7, 1943 – a congress held before the armistice [between the post-coup Badoglio government and the Anglo-Americans] was declared, and with German troops having spread across Italian territory from July to September. The idea of a war of national liberation here translated into the understanding that it would now be necessary to wage a large-scale war. The GL brigades would now constitute the Pd’A’s armed wing, under Ferruccio Parri’s command.

These brigades were conceived as sites for the consolidation and/or emergence of a social and political consciousness, even if recruitment for the Pd’A brigades was a lot more selective than that which took place in the Communist-led Garibaldi brigades. [Dante Livio Bianco wrote](#):

[T]rue political work in partisan formations consisted not so much of giving ‘lectures’ or of forcing partisans to read the political press, as of touching (and that was how it was – even only touching) on the key points, uncovering them and bringing them out of the generic, the confused, the indistinct, and instead proposing these points – even in their most basic form – to the individual consciousness, thereby drawing out new motives for action.

But the debate also concerned the definition of the struggle itself: was this a struggle for national liberation and/or a “democratic” revolution? For the militants of the Pd’A, the one necessarily went hand-in-hand with the other, but the contents of this democratic revolution were differently defined even within the party – more radically so among former GL militants, and in more liberal terms among others.

Yet all agreed on an intransigent opposition to Badoglio’s post-fascist regime under the “Kingdom of the South” [ruling Allied-occupied regions after September 1943], and on a relentless search for unity in action among the parties of the Left. Throughout the Resistance war, the *azionisti* thought that Italy’s concrete situation could result in processes “of a revolutionary character.”

“You are either for revolution or for reforms,” Pd’A secretary for Northern Italy [Leo Vilianni](#) wrote, “and we are for revolution.” The “revolution” even became a “permanent revolution,” “whose goals can never be determined once and for all, but rather are continually redefined.”

However, the Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti’s return to Italy in late 1944 and the international realignment of the Allied forces – who were now clearly focused on the future of Western Europe’s reconstruction – marked the end of the “revolutionary” hopes of *azionismo* and the anti-fascist revolution. Palmiro Togliatti’s speech at Salerno would mark their swansong.

In this Southern town, the Communist leader asserted the need for the unity of anti-fascists of

whatever political or religious orientation, and proposed that the institutional question (monarchy or republic?) be put off until after the war. *Azionismo's* revolutionary and Jacobin anti-fascism had truly resonated with the aspirations of the popular, peasant, and working-class layers of Northern Italy, but this would now be defeated by the new situation of Allied "diplomatic" anti-fascism, to which Togliatti's Communist Party added decisive impetus, shortly before the Allies reached Rome in June 1944.

There now began to emerge the image of a "betrayed" or at least "unfinished" Resistance, meaning "the incompleteness of an ideal that was never fully realized, but nonetheless continued to feed hopes and to awaken stresses and energies for renewal." As [Marco Revelli wrote](#), "...the true mortal sin of anti-fascism consisted in its struggle against the roots, against the tradition of Italy, in its destructive charge dissolving the fundamental aggregations of fatherland and family."

And *azionismo's* "mortal sin" was not only that it kept this memory alive, but that it was able to transmit this experience over time, as well as the questions it posed to the Italy of the past, their own present, and the future. This was especially the case of Piero Calamandrei (a father of the 1948 Italian Constitution), Giorgio Agosti, Leo Valiani, Aldo Garosci, and Alessandro Galante Garrone.

Of course, the Pd'A's was a short experience, doubtless linked to its variety of political souls and its inability to provide a common substance to the anti-fascist revolution that it considered so necessary. But *azionismo* remains a thorn in the side of those who hope to see the subversive potential of the Resistance experience die away as the years pass.

And indeed, with the commemorations every April 25, what is put on the agenda anew is the fact that this past can again become a force in the present. Without doubt, this is the sense in which *azionismo* and its "anti-fascist revolution" remain a rallying point for the oppositional Italian left today. The slogan "Now and always, Resistance!" was chanted once more on April 25, 2017, renewing the subversive potential of militant *azionismo* and the living force of its "permanent revolution."

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