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Remembering the Anarchist Resistance to fascism

Andrew Flood

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The history of the anarchist resistance to fascism is something we are never told about in mainstream or even left histories. The victors over fascism wrote the 'history' of anti-fascism after W.W.II.

On February 3rd 1931, Italian police arrested Michael Schirru in a hotel room in Rome. He was Italian by birth but had become a US citizen. He had returned to Italy with one purpose, to kill Mussolini. Schirru was just one of many anarchists in the pre-war years who put their lives on the line in the fight against fascism.

Schirru's 'trial' took place on May 28th. The judge was Cristini, a young fascist cut-throat raised to the highest ranks in the hierarchy. No jury. A contemporary account of the trial in a US anarchist paper described how "Schirru conducted himself with great dignity during his trial – which, under the circumstances could hardly be called a trial. He repeated his former declaration of intention to kill Mussolini and gave his reasons". The Tribunal sentenced Schirru to be shot in the back.

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“At 2:30 o’clock, the next morning, he was awakened from his sleep and told that his execution would take place at sunrise. He asked permission to write his last words to his dear ones; declined the assistance of the priest and then was taken to the Braschi fortress, on the outskirts of Rome, where he was executed — only eight and a half hours after sentence had been passed — by a firing squad of twenty-four fascist militiamen”.

Individual acts like these were just the tip of anarchist organisation against fascism. In this period every western government saw fascism as a useful bulwark against ‘communism’. From the early 1920’s Italian anarchists had physically fought the fascists and even after World War II anarchists were being jailed for fighting the fascist Italian state in that period.

In Germany the anarchist- syndicalist FAUD (Free Union of German Workers) had decided in 1932 to go underground once Hitler came to power and to work towards a general strike. This proved impossible, the FAUD was far too small to do so on its own and of course once Hitler came to power its numbers were further decimated as many members were either arrested or forced to flee into exile. However with the help of Dutch anarchists they did succeed in setting up a FAUD secretariat in exile in Amsterdam.

Inside Germany FAUD members like labourer Franz Bunget and unemployed steelworker Julius Nolden attempted to continue operating underground. Both were to be arrested by the Gestapo. However with others they succeeded in getting an underground network going that smuggled people out of Germany and smuggled anti-Nazi pamphlets in, often with strange titles to mislead the fascist authorities.

Court records show that one pamphlet went under the title of ‘Eat German fruit and stay healthy’ and became “so pop-

ular among miners that they used to greet each other with: 'Have you eaten German fruit as well?'" The outbreak of the Spanish Revolution in 1936 saw an underground network that raised money for the Spanish anarchists and their fight against fascism and recruited technicians to go to Spain and provide needed expertise.

In December of 1936 however the Gestapo managed to discover the first of these groups and in raids then and in 1937 arrested 89 male and female members of this anarchist underground. In early 1938 these comrades were charged with "preparing acts of high treason". All but six were convicted.

Julius Nolden was 'lucky' and spent the next 8 years in Luttringhausen prison until the arrival of the 'allies' in April of 1945. Others were not so 'lucky' and were murdered in prison. Lathe operator, Emil Mahnert was thrown out of a window, bricklayer, Wilhelm Schmitz, died in "unexplained circumstances", Ernst Holtznagel was sent to a military punishment battalion where he died, Michael Delissen was beaten to death by the Gestapo in December 1936 and Anton Rosinke was murdered in February 1937.

The history of the anarchist resistance to fascism is something we are never told about in mainstream or even left histories. The victors over fascism wrote the 'history' of anti-fascism after W.W.II. They gave prominent place to the aristocratic German officers who failed to kill Hitler late in the war but ignored the ordinary workers who struggled in the 1920's and 1930's when the western governments saw Hitler as an ally. The account here is but a snippet, based on the valuable work done by the 'Kate Sharpley Library' in recovering, translating and publishing this history.

After the war in August 1946, Ernst Binder wrote:

"Since mass resistance was not feasible in 1933, the finest members of the movement had to squander their energy in a hopeless guerrilla campaign. But

if workers will draw from that painful experiment the lesson that only a united defence at the proper time is effective in the struggle against fascism, their sacrifices will not have been in vain.”