Gaetano Bresci: Tyrannicide and Defender of the People

With Remarks by Malatesta and Tolstoy

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On this day, July 29, in the year 1900, the anarchist Gaetano Bresci assassinated King Umberto of Italy. But there is a lot more to his story than this single deed. Here, we remember an Italian worker and immigrant who risked his life to save Errico Malatesta from an assassination attempt, then gave his life to impose consequences on the king for the deaths of hundreds of poor working people. We've also included translations of Malatesta's and Tolstoy's reflections on Bresci's attack, and an Italian folk song inspired by Bresci's deed.

> "I'm sure I was not wrong to do what I did. I do not even intend to appeal. I appeal only to the next proletarian revolution."
>
> -Gaetano Bresci, interrogation

At the end of the 19th century, rising food prices provoked fierce struggles throughout Italy. On May 6, 1898, thousands of workers and their families traveled to Milan, looting bakeries and marching on the royal palace. Troops fired cannons and rifles at the crowd, killing 300 people and wounding up to a thousand more. In the subsequent crackdown, the government closed the universities of Rome, Naples, Padua and Bologna, outlawed 110 newspapers, and arrested thousands. This kind of violence and oppression drove many Italians to flee the country—and to adopt radical politics.

A year later, on the night of May 9, 1899, Errico Malatesta, protégé of Mikhail Bakunin and longtime anarchist organizer, escaped from the island of Lampedusa to which he had been sentenced to penal confinement. (Lampedusa recently reentered the headlines as a destination for migrants attempting to reach Europe without documents.) He swam out to a fishing boat and sailed across the Mediterranean Sea to Malta. From there, he crossed the Atlantic to Paterson, New Jersey, where he was to edit the Italian émigré anarchist journal *La Questione Sociale.*

While Malatesta was addressing a meeting in West Hoboken, New Jersey, a would-be assassin rose from the crowd and raised a pistol to fire at him. An unarmed man in the audience threw himself upon the assailant so that the shot only grazed Malatesta's leg. At great risk to himself, the unarmed man wrestled the gunman to the ground and disarmed him. Malatesta declined to press charges against his would-be assassin, just as his contemporaries, the anarchists Louise Michel and Voltairine de Cleyre, refused to use the state to prosecute the men who attempted to murder them.

Who was the man who risked his life to save Malatesta? His name was Gaetano Bresci.

Born near Florence in 1869, Bresci took an apprenticeship to become a weaver at the age of 11. He adopted anarchist politics while still a teenager. In 1892, he was sentenced to 15 days in prison for insulting guards who were fining a baker for keeping his shop open late. In 1895, he too was exiled to the island of Lampedusa on account of labor organizing activity. After his release, he fathered a child with a partner named Maria. Finding it difficult to secure employment, Bresci gave her money to care for their child and set out for the United States in search of better prospects, arriving in New York on January 29, 1898. In Hoboken, he married an Irish immigrant—Sophie Knieland, with whom he had two daughters, Maddalena and Gaetanina—and moved to Paterson, New Jersey to work in a mill.

As Emma Goldman recounts in her autobiography, *Living My Life,*

> Gaetano Bresci was one of the founders of *La Questione Sociale,* the Italian anarchist paper published in Paterson. He was a skillful weaver, considered by his employers a sober, hard-working man, but his pay averaged only fifteen dollars a week. He had a wife and child to support; yet he managed to donate weekly contributions to the paper. He had even saved a hundred and fifty dollars, which he lent to the group at a critical period of *La Questione Sociale.* His free evenings and Sundays he used to spend in helping with the office work and in propaganda. He was beloved and respected for his devotion by all the members of his group.

In the words of Bresci's comrades of *La Questione Sociale,* reported in the *New York Times*,

> "He was a quiet man. He never drank or smoked and did not go about. He was always quiet and never made any trouble. Yes, and he liked music. He used to teach it."

His foreman at the mill echoed this description, calling him "a good workman and a man who had never made any trouble."

Yet Bresci did not rest easy in the United States. The violence in his homeland gnawed at him. The Italian monarch, King Umberto, had decorated the general who gave the order to fire on demonstrators in Milan, proclaiming that he had "rendered a great service to the king and to the country." Bresci resolved to return to Italy.

Emma Goldman continues the story:

> One day Bresci had unexpectedly asked that his loan to the paper be returned. He was informed that it was impossible; the paper had no funds and had, in fact, a deficit. But Bresci insisted and even refused to offer any explanation for his demand. Finally the group succeeded in securing enough money to pay back the debt to Bresci. But the Italian comrades bitterly resented Bresci's behavior, branding him as a miser who loved money above his ideal. Most of his friends even ostracized him.

On May 17, 1900, Bresci embarked on the French steamer Guascogne to return to Italy. He was carrying $200, a camera, and a five-shot pistol he had purchased in Paterson. In the city of Prato, he practiced his marksmanship by setting wine flasks on the ground and attempting to hit them so precisely that his bullet would enter through the neck of the bottle and only strike the glass bottom. He visited his sister's village, then made his way to the countryside north of Milan where King Umberto was taking his holidays at the Villa Reale di Monza.

Sunday, July 29, 1900 was an especially hot day; a thermometer in Milan reached 38.2 degrees celsius. A dozen miles to the northeast, Bresci helped himself to five servings of ice cream in the Caffè del Vapore. That evening, King Umberto attended an athletic contest followed by an awards ceremony at the sports club "Forti e Liberi." Shortly after 10 pm, as the sovereign was returning to his palace in a two-horse sedan, Bresci stepped out of the crowd and drew his pistol. Three shots hit King Umberto in the shoulder, lung, and heart. His deed accomplished, Bresci permitted the Carabinieri to take him into custody. "I have not shot Umberto," he maintained. "I have killed a king, I have killed a principle."

Emma Goldman recalls:

> A few weeks later came the news that Gaetano Bresci had killed King Umberto. His act brought home to the Paterson group the realization of how cruelly they had wronged the man. He had insisted on the return of his money in order to secure the fare to Italy! No doubt the consciousness of the injustice done Bresci rested heavier on the Italian comrades than his resentment against them. To make amends, in a sense, the Paterson group charged itself with the support of their martyred comrade's child, a beautiful little girl.

One of Malatesta's old comrades, the anarchist lawyer Francesco Saverio Merlino, defended Bresci in court. In the end, Bresci was sentenced to lifelong penal servitude on Santo Stefano, another island prison off the Italian coast.

> "The government resorted to violence and you should not be surprised if the example of violence, coming from above, has caused a reaction from the bottom of society—if there were those who believed there was another need, that is to say, to oppose the violence of the government by means of private violence."
>
> -Bresci's lawyer, Francesco Saverio Merlino

Only a few months later, in May 1901, the *New York Times* reported that he had been found hanged in his cell—almost certainly murdered by the prison guards. According to some accounts, they threw his body into the sea; others maintain he was buried in the cemetery of San Ercolano di S. Stefano.

The word "vengeance" remained etched into the wall of his cell. Bresci had scratched it there with his fingernail.

We remember Bresci not only as an anarchist who killed a tyrant, but also as the one who saved Malatesta's life—as a person who repeatedly risked his own life for the sake of others and finally made the ultimate sacrifice in order to ensure that there would be consequences for the slaughter and oppression of the poor. The courage and compassion he displayed in tackling the gunman in West Hoboken was the same courage and compassion that drove him to give his life for the sake of equality and freedom—for the cause of anarchy.

> "I attacked the king because in my opinion he is responsible for all the pale and bleeding victims of the system that he represents and has to defend. And as I have said on other occasions, I conceived this design after the bloody repression that took place in Sicily about 7 or 8 years ago following the state of siege established by royal decree in contradiction with the law of the state. And after the additional repression of 1898 occurred, even more numerous and more barbaric, once again following the state of siege established by royal decree, my purpose assumed greater vigor."
>
> -Gaetano Bresci, interrogation

> "July 29th, 1900–1905. To Gaetano Bresci, who by the spontaneous sacrifice of his own liberty freed Italy from that crowned monster Umberto I. To Gaetano Bresci, who alone amongst the general cowardice knew how tc rise and strike the murderer of Italy's starving. To our heroic companion, barbarously murdered in the prison of St. Stephen by the order of the deformed Emanuele III, we send today—the fifth

anniversary of the event—our sincere salutations as fighters with the ardent desire, the firm determination, to follow him as quickly as possible on the way so brightly marked out by him—to rebellion. Hail‼"

-*L'Insurrezione,* published in Britain by Italian anarchists on the five-year anniversary of Bresci's deed. For the crime of publishing this paragraph, both the publisher and the owner of a newsstand that sold it were sentenced to hard labor in prison.[1]

Appendix I: Errico Malatesta on Bresci's Deed

A rough translation of the full text of "The Tragedy of Monza," published in 1900.

First of all, let's put things in perspective.

The king has been killed; and since a king is still a man, the fact is to be deplored. A queen has been widowed; and since a queen is also a woman, we sympathize with her pain.

But why so much noise for the death of a man and the tears of a woman when it is accepted as a natural thing that every day so many men are killed, and so many women brought to tears, because of wars, accidents at work, the repression of revolts, and a thousand crimes produced by poverty, by the spirit of revenge, by fanaticism and alcoholism? Why such a display of sentimentalism about this particular misfortune, when thousands and millions of human beings die of hunger and malaria amid the indifference of those who have the means to save them?

Perhaps because this time, the victims are not vulgar workers, not an honest man and an honest woman, but a king and a queen?

Actually, we find the case more interesting, and our pain is more felt, more alive, more real, when it comes to a miner crushed by a landslide while working, and a widow who remains to die of hunger with her children!

Nonetheless, even the suffering of the royalty is human suffering and must be deplored. But all this lamenting remains sterile if the causes are not investigated and no attempt is made to eliminate them.

Who is it that causes violence? Who makes it necessary?

The whole existing social system is founded on brute force placed at the service of a small minority that exploits and oppresses the great mass; all the education given to children can be summarized as a sanctification of brute force; the whole environment we inhabit is a continuous example of violence, a continuous exhortation to violence.

The soldier, that is, the professional murderer, is honored, and above all the king is honored, whose historic role is to be chief of soldiers. With brute force, the worker is robbed of the product of his labor; with brute force, weak nations are robbed of their independence. The emperor of Germany incites his soldiers not to give quarter to the Chinese; the British government treats the Boers as rebels who refuse to submit to foreign arrogance and burns their farms, and chases women from their homes, and even persecutes non-combatants, and renews the horrible deeds

[1] For more information, consult Pietro di Paola's excellent *The Knights Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora (1880–1917).*

of Spain in Cuba; the Sultan has the Armenians murdered by the hundreds of thousands; the American government slaughters the Filipinos after having vilely betrayed them. Capitalists send workers to die in mines, on railways, in rice paddies in order to avoid paying the necessary expenses for workplace safety, and they summon soldiers to intimidate and shoot workers who demand improvements in their conditions.

One more time: from whom does the suggestion come, the provocation to violence? Who makes violence appear to be the only way out of the current state of affairs, the only means by which to escape being eternally subjected to the violence of others?

And in Italy it is worse than elsewhere. The people perpetually suffer from hunger; the lords boss people around worse than in the Middle Ages; the government competes with property owners to exploit the workers to enrich themselves and squander the rest in dynastic enterprises; the police are the arbiter of the liberty of the citizens, and every cry of protest, every appeal is strangled by jailers and drowned in blood by soldiers.

The list of massacres is long: from Pietrarsa to Conselica, to Calatabiano, to Sicily, and more. Only two years ago, the royal troops massacred unarmed people; only a few days ago, the royal troops put their bayonets at the service of the property owners of Minella, compelling forced labor from the famished and desperate workers. Who is guilty of the rebellion, who is guilty of the revenge that occasionally results—the provocateur, the offender, or those who denounce the offense and want to eliminate the causes?

But, they say, the king is not responsible!

We certainly do not take the mockery of constitutional fictions seriously. The "liberal" newspapers that now argue about the king's responsibility, they knew well that above the parliament and the ministers, there was a powerful influence, a "high sphere" to which the royal procurators did not allow clear allusions. And the conservatives, who are now waiting for a "new era" from the energy of the new king, show they know that the king, at least in Italy, is not the puppet that they would have us believe he is when it comes to attributing responsibilities. And besides, even if he does not do evil directly, he is always responsible for it, a man who can prevent it and does not—and the king is the head of the soldiers and can always, at least, prevent soldiers from firing on unarmed populations.

It is true that if we take into account considerations of inheritance, of education, environmental factors, then the personal responsibility of the powerful diminishes and perhaps disappears completely. But then, if the king is not responsible for his actions and omissions, if in spite of oppression, of the massacre of the people done in his name, he should have continued to govern the country, then why should we hold Bresci responsible? Why should the Bresci serve a life sentence of unspeakable suffering for an act that, no matter how much you want to judge it wrong, no one can deny was inspired by altruistic intentions?

But this question of the search for responsibility interests us little. We do not believe in the right to punish, we reject the idea of revenge as barbaric: we do not intend to be executioners or avengers. The mission of liberators and peacemakers seems holier, nobler, more beneficial.

We would willingly offer our hand to the kings, to the oppressors, to the exploiters, if only they wanted to return men among men, equal among the equals. But while they persist in enjoying the present order of things and defending it with force, thus inflicting martyrdom, brutalization, and death by hardship on millions of human beings, then it is a duty for us to oppose their force by force.

To oppose force by force!

Does this mean that we delight in melodramatic plots, or that we are always in the act or intention of stabbing an oppressor? Not at all. We abhor violence by sentiment and by principle, and we always do our best to avoid it: only the need to resist evil by suitable and effective means can move us to resort to violence.

We know that these isolated acts of violence, without sufficient preparation in the people, remain sterile and often provoke reactions that it is not possible to resist, producing misfortunes and hurting the very cause they intend to serve.

We know that the most essential thing, the indisputably useful thing is not to kill the king as a person, but to kill all the kings—those of the courts, the parliaments, and the workshops—that govern people's hearts and minds; to eradicate faith in the principle of authority that so many people worship.

We know that the less ripe the revolution is, the bloodier and more uncertain. We know that, since violence is the source of authority, since indeed it is basically identical with the principle of authority, the more violent the revolution is the greater the risk will be that it will give rise to new forms of authority. And so we strive to obtain, before using the last reasons of the oppressed, the moral and material force we need to minimize the amount of violence necessary to overthrow the regime of violence under which humanity is suffering today.

Will we be left in peace to our work of propaganda, organization, and revolutionary preparation?

In Italy, they prevent us from speaking, from writing, from associating. They forbid workers from organizing and struggling peacefully for emancipation—or even to improve their miserable and inhumane conditions of existence a little bit. Prisons, house arrest, and bloody repression are inflicted not only on us anarchists, but on anyone who dares to imagine a better state of affairs.

Is it surprising that, if the hope of being able to fight profitably for their own cause is lost, ardent souls allow themselves to be carried away to acts of vindictive justice?

Police measures, which always target the least dangerous; the frantic search for non-existent instigators, which is grotesque to anyone familiar with the dominant spirit among anarchists; the thousand absurd proposals for extermination advanced by amateurs of policing—all these only serve to highlight the savage hatred that festers in the soul of governing classes.

If you want to completely eliminate the bloody revolt of the victims, the only sure way to do so would be to abolish oppression.

If you want to diminish the outbreaks, the only way to do so is to give everyone the freedom to carry out propaganda and organization; to give the dispossessed, the oppressed, the malcontents the possibility of engaging in civil struggles; to permit them the hope that they could obtain emancipation via bloodless means, even if gradually.

The government of Italy will not do anything but continue to repress… and will continue to reap what it sows.

While we deplore the blindness of the rulers who give this struggle an unnecessary harshness, we will continue to fight for a society in which all violence is eliminated, in which everyone has bread, freedom, knowledge, in which love is the supreme law of life.

Appendix II: Leo Tolstoy on the Killing of King Umberto

Selections from "Thou Shalt Not Kill," published August 8, 1900.

When kings like Charles I, Louis XVI, or Maximilian of Mexico are sentenced to death, or when they are killed in court revolutions, as were Peter III, Paul, and all kinds of sultans, shahs, and khans, there is generally a silence on the subject. But when they are killed without a trial and without court revolutions, as was the case with Henry IV, Alexander II, the Empress of Austria, the Shah of Persia, and now Umberto, such murders rouse the greatest indignation and amazement among kings, emperors, and their retinues, as though these men did not take part in murders, did not make use of them, and did not prescribe them. And yet, the very best of the kings slain, such as Alexander II and Umberto, were the authors, participants, and accomplices in the murder of tens of thousands of men, who died on fields of battle, to say nothing of domestic executions. The bad kings and emperors have been the authors of hundreds of thousands, or of millions of murders…

The murders of kings, like the late murder of Umberto, are not terrible on account of their cruelty. The acts committed by the commands of kings and emperors—not only in the past, as the Night of Bartholomew, the massacres for the sake of faith, the terrible pacifications of peasant uprisings, and the Versailles slaughters, but also the present governmental executions, the starvations in solitary cells and disciplinary battalions, the hangings, the chopping off of heads, the shooting, and the slaughters in war—are incomparably more cruel than the murders committed by anarchists. Nor are these murders terrible on account of not having been deserved. If Alexander II and Umberto did not deserve to be killed, how much less those thousands of Russians who perished at Plevna deserved to be killed, and those Italians who perished in Abyssinia. Such murders are not terrible on account of their cruelty or the innocence of the murdered, but on account of the senselessness of those who commit them.

If kings such as Alexander, Carnot, and Umberto are murdered under the influence of a personal sentiment of indignation, provoked by the sufferings of an enslaved nation, or under the influence of a personal feeling of revenge, such acts, however immoral, are comprehensible. But how is it that an organization of men—of anarchists, as they now say—which sent Bresci out, and which is threatening another emperor, has not been able to invent anything better for the amelioration of men's condition than the murder of those men whose annihilation can be as useful as the cutting off of the head of the Hydra, when in place of the one cut off there immediately grew out a new one? Kings and emperors have long ago arranged things in the same manner as in a magazine rifle: the moment one bullet flies out, another takes its place. *Le roi est mort; vive le roi!* So what sense is there in killing them?

…It is not Alexander, Umberto, William, Nicholas, and Chamberlain who guide the oppressions and wars of the nations, or who are the authors of the oppressions of the masses and the murders in wars, but those who have put them in the positions of rulers over the lives of men, and support them in these positions. And so Alexander, Nicholas, William, and Umberto are not to be killed, but men are to stop supporting the order of society that produces them. What supports the present order of society is the egotism and stupidity of men who sell their freedom and honor for their insignificant material advantages…

Above all, we must not permit them to kill people; we must refuse to kill by their command.

Appendix III: At the Station of Monza—A Song Inspired by Gaetano Bresci

(by anonymous—early 1900s)

At the Monza station
A train comes roaring in
They killed the king
Hit him with three bullets.

We will burn the churches and the altars,
We will burn the buildings that hold them up
With the guts of the last priest
We will hang the pope and the king.
Revolution yes, war on society,
Revolution yes, war on society.
Rather than living, living like this,
Better to die for freedom,
Better to die for freedom.

And the Vatican will burn
And the Vatican will burn
And the Vatican will burn
With the Pope inside.

And if the government opposes it
And if the government opposes it
And if the government opposes it
Revolution!

Revolution yes, war on society,
Revolution yes, war on society,
Rather than living, than living like this,
Better to die for freedom,
Better to die for freedom!

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