

Camillo Berneri

Frank Mintz

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Born in Lodi on 28th May 1897, he spent his childhood at Reggio Emilia and was active in [a] Socialist youth group. He decided to resign by sending an open letter which caused some disturbance: ". . . the Socialist movement has started on a disastrous descent towards the depths of destructive egoism, thus following in the path of the moral strength of Christianity, which grew strong thanks to its martyrs and fell into decay when the sacrifices of its followers ceased." "We need a new burst of energy, we must return to a time when to love an idea meant not to fear death and to sacrifice one's whole life to total submission." (1915). This deep, militant commitment which one meets again and again right up until his assassination was never, however, a blind faith, as we shall see.

In 1917 he was drafted. Did he want to be an objector or desert? "There are occasions when to get oneself killed is the most logical solution, and to get oneself killed becomes a moral necessity. Cases of conscience are more terrible than Austrian bullets or asphyxiating gases." "One fights and one dies. Violets grow on the blood-soaked earth, along the ditches of red water."

After the war he finished his studies while very actively involved in the anarchist press. He became a humanities teacher in a high school.. The coming of the Fascist regime and his refusal to give any loyalty as a civil servant to this regime meant that he had to go into exile.

Thus began a long series of arrests and expulsions from France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland, to which were added the usual problems of political exiles: arguments, fits of enthusiasm disappointments, spying etc. "I dreamt of building a solid and spacious edifice, but I have found out that my energy is short-lived: I have weighed my brain, X-rayed my heart and I feel that I am sometimes vile and sometimes proud. I wonder whether my political activity is no more than a pointless stirring of the dry leaves of an ideology in decline. My faith which was a fine, tender and rich green is now brown like the vines in autumn."

Beneri was living with his wife and two daughters who were in France. In 1930 he wrote from a Belgian prison to his daughter Giliana: "One day you will perhaps understand how much papa loved your mother and you two, although he so often made her suffer, and although he has not been so affectionate with you." (written in French).

But despite these physical and moral obstacles, Berneri was intellectually fully active: "The curious thing is that on the one hand I am compelled towards militant politics, and on the other hand, in the field of culture, my preferred studies are either of a most peculiar erudition (I have

squandered so much time on stupid things: psychology, zoology, telepathy etc) or extremely abstract (I have a large book of material on Finalism). The result is a general unease.” (Letter to Luigi Fabbri, September 1929).

”The more I read our press the more I think I am dreaming. You know that I can’t help it and that I hardly agree with anyone. (. . .) As for the unions, I believe that it is the only area in which we could build anything, although I cannot accept union officials and I can clearly see drawbacks and dangers in anarcho-syndicalism in practice. If I blame individual-ism, it is because, although less important numerically, it has succeeded in influencing virtually all of the movement. (. . .) My dream is to instigate the investigation of a long succession of problems, and then, by collecting together critical remarks, annotations. solutions etc., from the people who will be discussing them, to arrive at a programme for 1932 or 1933, to put it forward as the programme of a group of anarchists who will let others live in peace but who wish to advance by a route of their own.”

(Letter to Luigi Fabbri, July 1930).

It does not seem that this project saw the light of day. On the other hand, Berneri wrote numerous articles and anti-religious leaflets on the emancipation of women. He also put forward a theory which was published as ‘The Anti-Semitic Jew’ in which he studied the compulsory or voluntary assimilation of the Jews. Andre Spire, poet and Zionist, judged the book to be “of primary importance.”

But his most important writings were ‘Fascist Espionage Abroad’(in Italian) and ‘Mussolini and the Conquest of the Balearic Islands,’ and his militant articles from which we shall give three quotations which seem to sum up Berneri before his arrival as a volunteer in Spain.

”Happily the Masonic phenomenon is completely negligible in the Italian anarchist camp. But there has been a considerable minority of anarchists who, enticed by the hope of ‘extreme measures,’ have allowed themselves to be drawn into the political games of this ambiguous form of anti-fascism.” “Freemasonry supports any movement which can help the bourgeoisie and fights any that might harm it.”

”It is necessary to leave romanticism behind. To see the masses, I would say, in perspective.

There is no such thing as the people, a homogeneous entity, but crowds, varied and separated into categories. There is no revolutionary will of the masses, but revolutionary movements in which the masses are an enormous lever. (. . .) If we wish to arrive at a potential reconsideration of our revolutionary strength, which is not insignificant, we must get rid of our ideological apriorisms, and of the habit of putting things off until a future date that is convenient for settling problems of tactics and reconstruction. I say reconstruction because the greatest danger of the halting and deviation of the revolution lies in the conservative tendency of the masses.”

(1930).

”To wait for the people to awake, to talk of mass action, to reduce the anti-fascist struggle to the development and maintenance of the ranks of the party and the union

instead of concentrating one's means and one's will on revolutionary action, which alone can change this atmosphere of moral degradation in which the Italian proletariat is in the process of becoming entirely corrupted, is despicable, it is sheer idiocy and an act of betrayal"

(1934, end of 'Worker-idolatry')

At the news of the uprising in Spain, Berneri and the majority of the Italian anti fascists made their way there immediately. They formed a column which was to be integrated in the Ascaso column on the Aragon Front, organised by Berneri and Carlo Rosselli (a left-wing Socialist). Berneri took part in the battle of Monte Pelado (28th August, 1936) - "We defended the position with 130 against roughly 600 trained and well equipped men, and that in four hours of fighting" - and of Huesca (3rd September 1936)

He ended up devoting himself mainly to propaganda without stopping occupying himself with the Italian column. He ran the magazine 'Guerra di Classe' (in Italian) and spoke on the CNT/FAI radio in transmissions to Italy. The book 'Pensieri e battaglie' (Paris 1938) gives us a certain number of comments on the situation which Berneri noted down. One can see how they clarify his articles as regards the danger of a communist putsch and the strained relationships with the anarchist governmentalsists.

"One group of people really get on my nerves, it is the volunteers who have come as observers (French for the most part). They come here with the airs of priests and got up like cowboys to spend half the time in cafes."

(21st September, 1936).

"The article in Number 6 has irritated the Consul General of the USSR in Barcelona who has asked the regional committee (of the CNT) if they approved it. I don't know what they replied."

(January 1937).

"Issue Number 8 of 'Guerra di Classe' will appear when it can. The Committee (regional committee of the CNT) has dealt with it in the same way as with 'L'Espagne Anti-fasciste'¹ and I don't want to be accused. However, it did distress me slightly. I shall make up for it by contributing to magazines and I shall write some pamphlets."

(February 1937).

"For some time we have often had sufferers in our camp because of the Stalinists."

(January 1937).

"Giopp has been released because of the intention of Espla and Arieto, but his case is serious, and they have escorted him and made him leave by plane for fear of a dirty trick by the Communist Cheka which is in command at Valnecia." (. . .) "I cannot see when I shall finish the pamphlet about the Balearics (which I am forcing myself to work on despite my misgivings!) in order to be able to start an avalanche of articles on the situation here which is in danger of being upset by the Bolshies!"

(March 1937).

¹ Magazine edited by Prudhommeaux who had to return to France to be able to publish without censorship.

"I who am not generally afraid in the face of danger, I am sometimes seized by a fear of death without there being any particularly objective reason."
(letter to his wife, 25th April, 1937).

Ten days later, 5th May 1937, Berneri and Barbieri, both anarchists were arrested at home by ten armed plain-clothes policemen on the charge of being 'counter-revolutionaries' At Barbieri's protests, one policeman took out his card, No. 1109 (noted by Barbieri's wife). [Web maintainers note: Both were murdered later that day]

Beneri's last two works were 'Us and the POUM' published by an Italian anarchist paper in New York, without doubt because of the critical defence Berneri wrote was not publishable in Spain in April-May 1937; and a speech of 3rd May 1937 on the CNT/FAI radio to Italy on the occasion of the death of Gramsci, 'he tenacious and dignified militant who was our opponent, Antonio Gramsci, convinced that he laid hid a stone in the construction of the new society.'

(This biography based largely on Israel Renof's in 'Noir er Rouge' replaces Luigi Fabbri's over-sentimental one).

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