

# **Milan's Anarchists in the Fight for Liberation**

Mauro de Agostini

1985

# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| From the March on Rome to the “Exceptional” Laws . . . . .                  | 3  |
| Relentless Repression . . . . .   | 3  |
| Attempts at Clandestine Activity . . . . .                                  | 4  |
| Smuggled Out of the Country . . . . .                                       | 5  |
| The War . . . . .   | 6  |
| From 25 July To 25 April . . . . .  | 6  |
| 8 September 1943 . . . . .  | 7  |
| Reorganisation . . . . .  | 8  |
| Units launched . . . . .  | 9  |
| L’Adundata dei Libertari . . . . .  | 10 |
| From <i>L’Azione Libertaria</i> to <i>Il Comunista Libertario</i> . . . . . | 11 |
| The “League of Councils” . . . . .  | 12 |
| Towards the Uprising . . . . .  | 13 |
| 25 April 1945 . . . . .   | 15 |
| Appendix, a few useful dates . . . . .                                      | 16 |

In Milan, traditionally a stronghold of Marxist socialism, the anarchists had never been a major force. It was only in 1920 and thanks to the heated atmosphere of the Red Biennium, to the publication of the daily newspaper *Umanità Nova* under Errico Malatesta and to the removal to the city of the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) leadership that Milanese anarchism enjoyed a period of broad influence among the masses, influence that quickly plummeted after the factory occupations ended. The swingeing crackdown that followed the Diana Theatre bomb outrage (on 23 March 1921), together with the unrestrained violence of the fascists dealt a severe blow to the movement.

## From the March on Rome to the “Exceptional” Laws

The March on Rome brought it a new lease of life. In February 1923, *Pagine Libertarie* (the review launched by Carlo Molaschi in June 1921) was shut down, the police seized all of the books from the Casa Editrice Sociale and the Tempi Nuovi bookshop and numerous militants were rounded up: militants like Molaschi, Giuseppe Monanni, Leda Rafanelli, the typesetter Zerboni, Fioravante Meniconi [a member of the *Umanità Nova* staff and author of a plea on behalf of the Diana Theatre bombers] Mario Mantovani and Angelo Damonti who were in charge of the Political Victims’ Support Committee, and others. Even the USI was by then only a shadow of its former self. Armando Borghi recalled: “Only a few of us stood our ground at our ‘base’ in the Via Achille Mauri. We had no illusions about a resurgence. And no chance of keeping up contacts, not even by post. It was a point of honour among us to say that the USI ‘still existed’.” The best known militants were monitored and tailed day and night. “it was as if there was a shadow always on our tail, holding off so as to stay at a safe remove from us.”

However, as late as 1925 Molaschi’s cultural review *L’Università Libera* was successfully published, as was the USI mouthpiece *Rassegna Sindacale* which drew contributions from, among others, Borghi, Nicola Modugno (the former secretary of the Andria *Camera del Lavoro*) and Alibrando Giovannetti. Mention should also be made of the publication of *In Marcia*, the rail union mouthpiece edited by Augusto Castrucci.

The “exceptional” laws of November 1926 removed any lingering possibility of action within the law, leaving conspiratorial work as the only option.

## Relentless Repression

On 11 March 1927 the police burst in on USI leaders Giuseppe Papini, Nicola Modugno and Giuseppe Gervasio while they were holding a meeting with communist and republican personnel regarding possible clandestine re-launch of the CGL. They were hauled before the Special Tribunal and received heavy sentences.

Issue 722 of Geneva’s *Il Risveglio Anarchico* carried a letter from Milan from Leonida Mastrodicasa (“*Numitore*”) and dated 18 June 1927, describing the situation in the city:

“In the space of two months there have been three ‘round-ups’ of subversives, amounting to a total of twenty days in detention; (...) the vast majority of comrades and of revolutionaries have no way of avoiding similar consequences in that their status as suspects and subjects under surveillance has them under curfew at home from 9.00 pm. to 7.00 am., with three months’ jail hanging over their heads plus an enforced residence order should they be found missing during

the many night-time visits by police: add to this their being virtually continually out of work because of the dismissals that such terms of imprisonment entail ...”

Lots of families, especially the families of internees were reduced to the most dismal poverty, given the “virtual impossibility of raising aid from sympathetic or neutral elements of the working class, because of the climate of terror created by the vast surveillance and spy network monitoring everywhere and everything (...)”

Many were forced into exile by hunger and harassment. A small office in Gorla belonging to Gaetano Gervasio (the fascists referred to it as the “red bureau”) had become the only recourse for many comrades in search of lodgings and employment.

On 20 March 1928 Raffaele Sclaudi, railwayman, was brought before the Special Tribunal on charges of possessing antifascist material: although a self-confessed anarchist, Sclaudi was convicted of “membership of the PCI” [Partito Comunista d’Italia, Communist Party of Italy].

A bomb in the Piazzale Giulio Cesare (a provocation organised by the fascists themselves) led to further round-ups and among those arrested were Molaschi (as ever), Nello Giacomelli and the brothers Libero and Henry Molinari.

In July the anarchist Galli from Clivio was murdered in a hotel in Milan.

Notwithstanding the severest blows inflicted by the crackdown, a measure of clandestine activity, albeit rather limited, continued. At the end of 1928 the notorious Inspector Rizzo successfully dismantled an “Anarchist Aid” network operating in Milan and Verona. It was headed by Pietro Costa in Milan and the Swiss railway worker Giuseppe Peretti, who shuttled between Italy and the outside world collecting sums of money for jailed comrades.

Referred to the Special Tribunal along with them were: Diego Guadagnini, from Imola, then living in Milan, his partner Ermenegilda Villa, Romeo Asara from Milan (who was suspected of manufacturing and passing counterfeit money), Guglielmo Cimoso, Angelo Rognoni (who eluded arrest), Umberto Biscardo from Verona and, from Carrara, Gino Bibbi (regarded as one of the organisation’s “masterminds”).

## Attempts at Clandestine Activity

In 1930 police noticed a certain escalation in anarchist activity revolving around the figure of Augusto Castrucci: Castrucci was a very active organiser for the Italian Rail Union (FSI) and had been serving on the FSI General Council from 1914 and in 1925 he had, as we have seen, been the director of the monthly *In Marcia*. It was noted that a meeting had been held on the premises of the Trattoria Toscana at 26 Via Panfilo Castaldi, and in April a search of the Virgilia printworks at 92 Viale Abruzzi, belonging to the Baraldi brothers, led to the discovery of about a thousand May Day leaflets hot off the presses. The set type for these was also uncovered “artfully hidden in a box of characters”. The authors of these leaflets, besides Castrucci, were Ciro Baraldi and Armando Tisi.

Baraldi, on file as an anarchist since 1898 and active at the turn of the century especially as publisher of libertarian texts, had gone over to the interventionist camp in 1914, but had returned to the movement following the advent of fascism. Tisi had been a trade union organiser in Genoa and an active anarchist propagandist, writing under the nom de plume ‘Scintilla’ for *L’Agitazione* in Rome and for *La Tribuna del Popolo* in Sampierdarena.

In December that year, a group of Alfa Romeo workers (socialists, anarchists and republicans) was rounded up for distributing materials from *Giustizia e Libertà*.

A number of libertarian ventures was noted in 1931 (a manifesto put up on the town railings in Limbiate, a packet of adhesive labels bearing printed phrases in praise of anarchy discovered outside the police station in Porta Monforte).

1933 saw the uncovering of a clandestine organisation set up by the revolutionary syndicalist Michele Veglia and including socialists and anarchists (the latter included Alfiero Guerra, G. Battista Ginelli and Luigi Villa). According to the police report, Veglia “had for some time been in clandestine correspondence with the anarchist Amos Pagani and other exiles, some of whom he had met during his time on Ustica and Ponza.” From them he had had occasional deliveries of money and copies of *Giustizia e Libertà* and *Lotta Anarchica*.

The group, which had around 25 members, had a presence in Precotto, Sesto San Giovanni and Monza and maintained contacts with a group already up and running in Porta Ticinese.

It had access to a cyclostyle machine on which it had printed a handbill and had been planning to launch a newspaper called *Il Comunista*.

At this point we should also note the death of comrade Carlo Restelli who was killed together with the smuggler Avellini whilst trying to leave the country on 5 September 1933.

## Smuggled Out of the Country

Police investigations were stepped up during 1934 and led to the uncovering of two functioning networks for smuggling people out of the country. The first network, dismantled in May, was headed by Cesare Ragni, Camillo Caloni and Armando Papa (Papa was still extremely active although he was by then almost completely blind). The head of the second network was Alfredo Brocheri, one of the many forgotten heroes of the freedom struggle. An anarchist from his youth, he had refused to back down after the dictatorship was introduced, but he had also become an active organiser of operations smuggling people out of the country. Many people escaped by means of the “Brocheri railroad” – Amleto Astolfi and Eugenio Macchi to name but two (Macchi had killed a customs policeman in the course of an earlier failed attempt to leave the country).

Brocheri corresponded with Pietro Sini who was exiled in Paris. When Michele Schirru came to Italy, bringing, among other things, a sum of money intended for political victims, he was referred by Sini to Brocheri (whom he failed to locate, however).

Brocheri and Lodovico Corti were caught following the arrest of Pietro Foglio on a mission from France. Brocheri was taken to the Regina Coeli prison in Rome where he was horribly tortured (among other things, they used an iron hoop that was placed around his head and progressively tightened) in a futile attempt to make him talk.

His suffering made him lose his mind. He died in internment a few years later, his mind and body broken.

Not that he was the only one to die in prison. We should recall, among others, the names of Ettore Aguggini who died in Alghero prison, and of Giuseppe Boldrini who was transferred from a fascist prison straight to the Mauthausen death camp.

After 1934, the police records make no further reference to an organised anarchist presence in Milan. By then militants were virtually all behind bars, interned, in exile or under close surveillance.

Even so, not every contact had broken down. There were reports in 1936 of attempts to establish a connection between Amos Pagani (an Anarchist Federation trustee living in exile in Lausanne) and a few militants living in Milan: such contacts were abruptly severed when Pagani was deported from Switzerland. In 1938 two letters sent by a certain “Mario” from Milan and addressed to a front man in Paris (a “Mr. Thiefant, hairdresser, at 337 Rue Belleville, Paris 19”) were intercepted: it was clear from these letters that there was fairly consistent correspondence between local and exiled personnel.

Moreover the police were convinced (albeit probably incorrectly) that Luigi Bertoni in Geneva was successfully keeping in touch with those Milanese anarchists still at large.

## The War

Whereas by 1938 the libertarian movements seemed to have been all but broken, the other antifascist denominations – the socialists, communists and *Giustizia e Libertà* – were no better off. Italy’s entry into the war and her initial reverses created a consensus and gave the opposition fresh heart. The war was extremely unpopular, so as discontent spread through the country like an oil slick, the antifascist movements sprang to life again and reorganised themselves: older militants were reactivated and fresh blood recruited.

The anarchists went through this process as well.

It seems that Milanese militants did not participate in the various clandestine meetings held in Sestri Ponente and Florence in 1942 and 1943, but there were certainly contacts, established by Pasquale Binazzi from La Spezia.

In 1942 there was activity by a partisan group (ante literam [“before the word existed”, that is before the Italian state had abandoned fascism]) comprised of Carrarans Belgrado Pedrini, Giovanni Zava and Gino Giorgio. The trio operated in Carrara, La Spezia and Milan, producing and circulating propaganda materials and carrying out self-financing robberies. In the end they were captured following a bloody fire-fight with the fascist police.

By the way, in the spring of 1942 a leaflet “The Renaissance Song”, an antifascist parody of the famous “Lili Marlene”, was circulating in Milan. The lyrics were the work of revolutionary syndicalist Antonio Moroni. The enormously successful parody cost Antonio and his young son Alberto five years in internment.

## From 25 July To 25 April

Our sources are silent regarding developments between 25 July and 8 September 1943 [ie between the fall of Mussolinin and the armistice, after which Italy rejoined the war on the allied side]. The only information we have relates to the frantic activity of Antonio Castrucci who was one of the driving forces behind the relaunching of the Italian Rail Union. He turns up on 28 July at the first foundation meeting held at the Shunting Sheds, where he tabled a 15-point memorandum (which the gathering endorsed) in which the chief demand was for the re-employment of railwaymen “stood down” for political reasons during fascism’s twenty year reign. Over the ensuing weeks he busied himself with reorganising. By early September he was heading up a railwaymen’s panel that travelled down to Rome for negotiations with Labour Minister Pacciardi and Communications Minister General Amoroso.

## 8 September 1943

“6.00 pm. The radio carried the long awaited news that Badoglio had offered an armistice to the Allied army command and that this has been accepted as a surrender offer by Eisenhower (...)”

So noted Pietro Bruzzi in the exercise book in which he had begun to write diary entries.

Pietro Bruzzi, a native of Maleo (Milan) born in 1888, had been drawn to socialist ideas whilst still very young before becoming an anarchist in 1909, in which year he took over the running of the Milan libertarian newspaper *La Protesta Umana*. He moved abroad in 1910, to France and the United States before returning to Paris where, earning his living as a mechanic, he came into contact with local anarcho-syndicalist groups. On his return to Italy in 1916 he was arrested as a draft-dodger but managed to escape and fled to Switzerland where he was suspected on involvement in a dynamite attack: crossing into France, he was very soon expelled from there. On his return to Milan, he was sentenced to be shot for desertion (luckily, this was commuted to a 20 year prison term and eventually he was pardoned). Over the years that followed he stayed in Milan, becoming one of the chief editors of the fortnightly *L'Individualista* and wrote for *L'Iconoclasta* in Pistoia. In April 1921 he fled to the Soviet Union to escape the mass arrests after the Diana Theatre massacre. He stayed there for a short time, working as a mechanic in the Comintern garage: he then moved on to Berlin where he participated in the foundation congress of the anarcho-syndicalist International (IWA). He was in Austria and Belgium and then in Paris where he stayed for nine years (three of them spent in jail). In 1931 he moved to Barcelona where he was active under an assumed name: taking part in trade union activity, giving talks, organising a committee of solidarity with the Italian anarchists and contributing to the local libertarian press.

When his presence was discovered he was deported, only to return surreptitiously to Spain. When he was arrested again he was sentenced to a year in prison which he served in the notorious *Ciudad de Barcelona* prison ship. Finally, on 28 January 1935 he was extradited to Italy. Interned on Ponza for five years, he was back in Milan by 1940.

His diary provides us with a vivid account of developments at this time: “9 September 1943 – at 3.30 pm. today, the workers of Milan were summoned to a rally in the Piazza del Duomo (...) in the end the speakers, having demonstrated its necessity, undertook to supervise and arm the workers in the formation of action groups designed to assist the regular army in driving the Germans from Italian soil.”

Meanwhile, things were gathering pace; on 10 September “the workers returned to work, but word quickly spread of incidents provoked by German troops in several locations around Milan. Yesterday, the local general commanding, Ruggero, promised to distribute weapons to the citizenry (...) The workers feel under imminent threat and are lobbying the general for the promised arms. For a while, Ruggero put them off but in the end he told them that ... he has no arms!

Widespread dismay in the population. But what is going on? In the afternoon, troops from the city garrison and roundabouts, preceded by their officers, dispersed and broke up, with every man going his own way in the end.

Those soldiers living in the city or nearby districts drifted off in uniform, whilst others searched everywhere for civilian clothing, even should it be only a shabby, grimy worker's overall, just as long as they could get out of their despised and compromising uniform (...)”

That evening General Ruggero announced over the radio that he had reached an accommodation with the German command: Italian troops would garrison the city and keep order, whilst the Germans would confine themselves to occupying a few outlying areas, but the very next morning there was a surprise attack on the Italian garrison and its troops were disarmed, captured and largely herded together in the goods yard in Porta Romana. German armoured troops were occupying Milan.

Bruzzi wrote on 13 September: “Tremendous consternation among Badoglio’s new commissars and other would-be leaders of the Italian masses. With the proclamation of an armistice, virtually the entire Italian populace deluded itself with the thought that the war was now over (...) the upshot, therefore, has been a deep disappointment, all the more serious because it is so widespread, affecting, besides the political amateurs, even those believed to be the most accomplished interpreters and connoisseurs of politics.”

## Reorganisation

The first initiative from Milanese libertarian quarters of which we are aware was the publication and distribution in October of a four-page pamphlet signed by “the revolutionary syndicalists of Italy” and addressed to “the workers of Italy”. Drafted by Alibrando Giovannetti, 4,000 copies of it had been printed clandestinely by Alberto Moroni on the presses of the Provincial Administration in Mombello where he was working and it was the expression, not of “specific” anarchist groups, but rather of some members of the old Italian Syndicalist Union (USI): it looked forward to the establishment of a “Socialist Republic of Syndicates”, based on social ownership of the means of production and administered by means of company unions or cooperatives.

Meanwhile, on his release from the Renicci d’Anghiari concentration camp, Mario Perelli was back in the city. In the years after the Great War, Perelli had been an activist with the USI and anarchist movement and had been indicted over the Diana Theatre bombing, even though he had had no hand in it, as one of the supposed leaders behind the “plot” and sentenced to nearly 17 years in prison. In 1932 he had been released under surveillance and been dispatched to internment when war broke out.

We know from him that a number of secret meetings was held in the home of a certain Carraro in the Via Castelmorrone. Two different viewpoints had emerged among the comrades: on one side were the supporters of an uncompromising policy line that rejected any compromise or agreement with non-anarchist forces (Bruzzi was certainly in that camp), and, on the other, supporters of a policy of broad consensus with other working class forces. Perelli himself was a backer of this latter approach.

In fact, Perelli had close ties with Lelio Basso and other socialist leaders hostile to the “all classes together” policy of the National Liberation Committee (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, CLN). In October 1943 Basso had launched the newspaper *Bandiera Rossa*, the first edition of which had declared: ‘Now that all parties — from the liberals to the communists — are talking about unity and a national front against the Germans and fascists, we want to spell out our own watchword loud and clear : proletarian revolution.’ And he had quit the PSIUP [Partito Socialista Italiano di Unitá Proletaria, Italian Socialist Party for Proletarian Unity] early that November. It was through Basso’s good offices that Perelli was able to publish a newspaper written by himself, *L’Idea Proletaria*. Funding for it had been raised by the Genoese



anarchists and virtually the entire (2,000 copies) print-run was shipped off to Genoa. However, the presentation of the paper which was deemed overly “bland” drew harsh criticisms from comrades and Perelli was forced to suspend publication.

## Units launched

The need to set up armed formations in an attempt to push the Resistance in a revolutionary direction impelled Perelli to establish contact with a youth group led by one Germinal Concordia, which, although it operated pretty much within the socialist orbit, displayed libertarian tendencies. In the face of resistance from the uncompromising elements progress was made towards the establishment of a unit described as a “mixed column”.

“In January 1944 – a document from the 2<sup>nd</sup> ‘Malatesta’ Brigade notes – in S. Cristina near the Guidetti Brothers machine shops (...) the 1<sup>st</sup> Antifascist Agitation Committee was established, the handiwork of mechanics Sinogrante Castiglioni, Prospero Saracchi, Bruno Passoni, Luigi Discacciati and Dr Antonio Pietropaolo, the company’s commercial director.”

Antonio Pietropaolo was very active in the Pavia district where he was working; he was another anarchist of long standing and like Perelli had been convicted in connection with the Diana episode.

The organisation quickly extended its theatre of operations and armed groups were launched in adjacent districts like Corteolana, Inverno, Monteleone, Mirandolo, Bissone, Chignolo Po and Monticelli. Pietropaolo’s home in Corteolana served as operations headquarters. Later these groups made up the 2<sup>nd</sup> ‘Malatesta’ Brigade of Pavia’s 1<sup>st</sup> ‘Garibaldi SAP’ [Squadre di Azione Patriottica, Patriotic Action Squads] Division of the CVL (Freedom Volunteers Corps).

“British prisoners were helped with money and clothing: some were escorted as far as Milan from where they moved on to Switzerland.”

Close relations were established with Slovak troops stationed in Corteolana and S. Cristina. As we know, Czechoslovakia had been broken up into a “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia” directly administered by Germany and a “Free Slovak State” under the puppet government of Monsignor Tiso. Both the “Protectorate” and the “Free State” had tiny armies which, as the threat from the Red Army came closer, were hurriedly relocated far from home for fear of defections. Many of those troops were posted to Italy, there to be deployed on police and prisoner details, but the Czechs and Slovaks, driven by a deep-seated hatred of the Germans, were quick to establish secret relations with the Resistance forces.

In Corteolana and S. Cristina, several Slovaks, following negotiations with Pietropaolo’s group, deserted, bringing with them their arms and munitions. On one occasion, four heavy machine-guns also came over and these formed the core arsenal of the ‘Malatesta’ unit.

“A group of patriots was established among the Slovaks themselves”, whilst others were hidden up until the Liberation in an apartment procured by Perelli in Milan.

Some of this weaponry was moved into Milan and hidden by some militants from Porta Romana whilst other weapons were obtained through raids and the disarming of militias of the Saló Republic [the rump fascist regime propped up by the Germans]. There was an active resistance group in the “Baia del Re” (the Via Palmieri area). And in the Canzo district (Como) there was a libertarian unit known as the ‘Amilcare Cipriani’ and led by Tarciso Robbiati, a militant

renowned in the pre-fascist era for his spectacular escapes. It does not appear, however, that there was any connection between this unit and the Milan group.

Meanwhile, Antonio and Alberto Moroni were still active in the Mombello area: there was extensive agitational work carried out among the 1,500+ employees of the provincial Administration based in Mombello (hospital, service and printing staff). The Provincial Printworks, where both the Moronis were employed, was continually churning out clandestine newspapers. Contacts with the Milanese organisation were not quite complete, so they cooperated with Republican Party personnel (now espousing a revolutionary line) and the 'Mazzini' Brigades. They collaborated with the group of the anarchists Rigamonti from Cesano Maderno and Pierantoni from Milan. The latter worked in the Tecnomasio Brown Boveri where he was active in agitational work. The Moronis were arrested and charged with being the printers of *Avanti!* and taken to S. Vittorio for questioning and were saved by a stroke of luck. On their return to Mombello they were obliged to go to ground in order to avoid arrest.

## **L'Adunata dei Libertari**

Despite the difficulty of the times, the Milanese organisation managed to keep up contacts, albeit fitfully, with comrades elsewhere and especially in Genoa and Turin. And so, in June 1944, "after various talks between comrades from some northern regions", the plan to launch a clandestine press organ "the indispensable basis for follow-up growth by our specifically libertarian movement" finally bore fruit. Bruzzi was put in charge of it. Which is how *L'Adunata del Libertari* saw the light of day on 18 June 1944. The paper, which described itself as "a propaganda paper coordinating our groups into a single federation" set itself the task of "carrying forward a tradition and a history of struggles and lessons that are coherent and uncompromising regardless of what situations we may have to confront".

In its initial appeal, the "committee of the FAI" wrote: "We know that no confusion is possible between our own and the doctrines that inspire the various political parties, in that the chief aim of those parties is to capture the State and with it the exercise of established authority, whereas we seek a society founded upon the administration of wealth being vested solely in those who produce, without intermediaries of any sort.

Consistent with our principles we are for a comprehensive social revolution carried out by the workers and against any monopolisation on the part of authoritarian political parties."

Uncompromising revolutionary activity, the necessity and priority of specific organisation (and not just at the local, but rather at the national level), an active presence in mass movements for the purpose of guiding them: these were the main features of the policy line proposed by *L'Adunata*. However, the paper was born under a bad sign. Pietro Bruzzi was discovered and arrested by the Germans as was comrade Ernesto Ventura and virtually the entire print-run was impounded.

In June, Romeo Asara was arrested too. "Romeo" had been among the first to take to the hills and ever since September 1943 he had been an active participant in the struggle and been wounded. He was captured first by the supporters of the Salo republic and savagely tortured but had succeeded in escaping. Arrested this time following information given, he was scheduled for deportation to Germany by the Germans (who as yet did not know his real identity) but managed

to escape again and returned to Milan. Bruzzi was not so lucky. He was held for several months in San Vittore Olona prison before eventually being shot as a hostage on 19 February 1945.

“His bullet-riddled corpse [was] left lying face down on the street for days to serve as an ‘example’.”

## **From *L’Azione Libertaria* to *Il Comunista Libertario***

The need for an analytical propaganda mouthpiece was too sorely felt for the plan to be laid to rest after Bruzzi was arrested. Consequently, between August and 15 September five issues of a new paper called *L’Azione Libertaria* were published and December saw publication of the launch edition of *Il Comunista Libertario*.

Meanwhile the war was drawing to a conclusion: on 6 June the Allies landed in Normandy, quickly liberating much of France; in Italy they occupied Rome (4 June) and Florence (22 August); in the east, the Red Army continued its victorious progress and in Greece and Yugoslavia partisan activity was being stepped up.

In the view of anarchists, the collapse of the Italian state and the spread of guerrilla activity throughout Europe seemed to open the way to prospects of revolution: the very same proletarian revolution that fascism had been talking about in 1920 and which now, in the wider context of war-time crisis, stood on the centre-stage of history.

*Il Comunista Libertario* wrote: “In this war there are two inter-connected wars; the war between countries and the war between the classes”.

Even the Anglo-Americans were showing a fear of revolution. Their failure to press beyond the Gothic Line and Alexander’s proclamation [Alexander issued a proclamation (November 1944) to the partisans that the Allies were easing up for the winter and to “stand down” until the offensive resumed while remaining in a state of readiness and harassing the Germans. Effectively, he abandoned them to facing the Germans alone and without help.] were construed as attempts to undermine the guerrilla effort.

“Fear of proletarian pre-eminence has produced these two visible outcomes: a slowing-down of the war, suspension of deliveries to the more or less red partisan brigades, leaving these rebels wide open to destruction at the hands of a fortified fascism” The real enemy that they needed to beat was not the fascism that “overnight, on 25 July (...) had dropped smoothly and without conflict out of currency and into pre-history.” It had been destroyed by its own creators, of whom only a vague shadow, sustained by the Germans, now remained. But the bourgeoisie had stopped looking to the fascist cudgel for the defence of its own privileges and were now looking to British bayonets instead.

The inception and growth of fascism was being looked at through the prism of the “pre-emptive counter-revolution” model put forward by Luigi Fabbri. “At the end of the first great European war, the Italian forces for revolution were over-estimated by the then ruling class. That over-estimation led industrialists, landowners, bankers and representatives of the armed forces to adopt drastic counter-measures.

At this point over the national political horizon came a self-styled revolutionary movement that described itself first as socialist, then as republican and later as monarchist. The industrialists, landowners and bankers weighed it up and found that these were opera buffa revolutionaries and, taking it over, funded and armed the movement. And so fascism was born (...)

Fascism was therefore being looked upon as merely an instrument and a disguise for class interests. *L’Azione Libertaria* noted that the mean-minded, backward-looking Italian bourgeoisie had been progressively eroded during fascism’s twenty years in power: it had prospered, parasite-fashion, on the back of under-payment of workers and through State protection and commitment, whilst not bothering to reinvest its profits in technological improvements to its enterprises.

Now the Italian bourgeoisie seemed to be an utterly spent force consigned to history and the question of revolution therefore loomed in concrete terms.

In anticipation of that revolution, *L’Azione Libertaria* and *Il Comunista Libertario* laboured, not just the necessity of a specific organisation (there was a report of the launching of an ‘Italian Libertarian Communist Federation’ on the say-so of a ‘congress’ held ‘in a city in Northern Italy’) but also the need to get involved in mass movements: militants were urged to take an active part in their local CLNs and there was a call for a united proletarian front based, not upon some agreement between party hierarchs but upon a genuine unity among workers at grassroots levels.

## The “League of Councils”

It was with this thought in mind that December 1944 (at the same time as *Il Comunista Libertario*, therefore) saw publication of the first edition of *Rivoluzione*, a news-sheet announcing the establishment of the “League of Revolutionary Councils”. The latter body was made up of anarchists, socialists and dissident communists. *Rivoluzione* took an extremely hard line with regard to the CLNs, which were accused of being amenable to accommodation with the monarchy and of having tolerated a resurrection of the old conservative forces around the country. “The only recognizable action of the National Liberation Council (CLN) — the newspaper wrote — has been the waging of the war against the Germans; it cannot be said that this has been done in the interests of the Italian people only, but it has primarily been turned to their own advantage by the Allies and the reactionary classes, and these visibly afford it their support.”

And even as partisans were fighting and dying in the mountains, a corps of some 40,000 royal carabinieri “whose stock in trade is not waging war but rather opening fire on the Italian people” had been raised in the South.

“There are hundreds of thousands of young people who, at the instigation of the CLNs, are fighting in the mountains in the midst of unprecedented hardships and difficulties. — *Rivoluzione* continued — Yet these youngsters do not know for whom they are fighting, whether for themselves or for the old masters, nor do they know what will become of their formations. Because at no time has the CLN raised the flag of reconstruction to propose an ideological programme for some new Italy on behalf of which to fight. They have only talked about war against the Nazi-fascists (...)

“But the war is only the most pointed phase of the bourgeois world’s economic crisis (...) The workers, the exploited masses cannot embrace that war and when, as is happening, they find themselves caught up in it in spite of themselves, they must, if they are to liberate themselves, turn this war from an imperialist war into a war of liberation, which is to say, into a revolution.

”*Councils* are the new format that the people has spontaneously devised in this run-up to the Italian revolution: and it is they that must provide for the organisation of defence and combat, today and for the organisation of production and administration in the future.”

Be it said here that there were certain contacts which, through the good offices of Prof. Cione, brought together notables from the dying Saló Republic (such as minister Biagini and police chief Bettini) and members of the Resistance such as Corrado Bonfantini, commander of the Socialist Party's 'Matteotti' brigades, negotiations that also involved Germinal Concordia ('Michele'). Through these negotiations the fascists were trying to sow division in the enemy camp and, on a more prosaic level, to improve their chances of saving their skins. Eager to fish in troubled waters, antifascists were hoping to successfully organise an uprising which would, once the Germans had pulled out, proclaim a socialist republic and confront the Allies with a *fait accompli*. Obviously, such negotiations could not bear fruit as the antifascist notables very quickly withdrew. Concordia was arrested by the Germans in early February 1945 and nothing came of the negotiations.

## **Towards the Uprising**

Meanwhile the libertarians' activities were proceeding apace: Concordia, probably before he was arrested, had managed to hammer out an agreement with the management of the Carlo Erba works in the Via Imbonati: the factory was placed at the complete disposal of the partisans who, in return, pledged to defend the works against the Germans. Possession of the Carlo Erba plant guaranteed control of several important major arterial routes northwards from the Piazzale Maciachini and access to enormous stores of medicines and chemicals of use in the making of explosives, to which end some libertarian units moved into the premises. Pietropaolo's car shuttled between Milan and Corteolana, ferrying propaganda materials and the occasional weapon (only a few as they were in scarce supply all over), making the risky journey successfully. On one occasion Perelli and Pietropaolo got bogged down with the car loaded with newspapers and had the brass neck to seek the assistance of some passing German troops. A plan was devised for the freeing of Bruzzi: a team of armed men travelled to San Vittore Olona where he was being held. A few of them got to talk to him but Bruzzi, who argued that he was in no immediate danger, opted to avoid a risky operation that could have endangered the lives of many of his comrades. Such hesitation proved fatal, for he was shot a few days later as a reprisal. That was on 19 February 1945.

After that the decision was made to rename the libertarian formations the 'Malatesta-Bruzzi' Brigades. In the meantime the armaments available to them were slowly increasing, thanks to the disarming of Saló Republic militians and the contributions from Slovak deserters. Among the few people active in weapons procurement was Arturo Petrucchi, a veteran militant who had been a deserter during the First World War and endured protracted harassment under fascist rule as well as years as an internee in Tremiti, Ponza, Pisticci and Mongrassano. His prison file recorded a long list of punishments imposed "for having refused to give the Roman salute" and because he was "incorrigibly opposed to the Regime and its Institutions."

In the meantime the clandestine press continued to publish. There was no shortage in Milan of comrades with a degree of expertise in the trade, people like Ferruccio Veneri who was very active, or the young Carlo Doglio who, following intense underground activity in Emilia Romagna, had moved to the Lombard capital in order to flee the pursuing Nazi-fascists. Ciro Baraldi and Giuseppe Monanni were print-workers too, but we know nothing of any possible involvement on their part.

A second edition of *Rivoluzione* was published and distributed and among other things it carried a few thoughts from “Aroldo, communist worker” on the relationship between councils and party: aside from a few formal acknowledgements, the party, it transpired, was completely redundant in an outlook that saw the councils as the sole representatives of class interests and as the only real, revolutionary reference point.

That same month, the ‘Malatesta’ Brigade from Corteolona established organisational ties with the 1<sup>st</sup> Pavia ‘Garibaldi SAP’ Division. The commanding officer of the ‘Garibaldi SAP’, Gianni Passatore, wrote apropos of this: “The ‘Malatesta’ Brigade under the command of Pietropaolo had contacts with this Divisional command in February 1945, but we had been in touch since January through the good offices of some Czechoslovaks. The ‘Malatesta’ Brigade was promptly overhauled and among other things a distinguishing feature of the brigade was the precision, discipline and coherence of its personnel”

On 22 March 1945 the SS laid an ambush for Pietropaolo and Perelli and captured the former (who was jailed in S. Vittore until 25 April), whereas Perelli, who escaped by a whisker, took refuge in Carraro’s home, where he hid out for several days until his trail ran cold. The brigade’s activities suffered no disruption however and were indeed stepped up: in Corteolona, Pietropaolo was replaced as commander by Castiglioni and Saracchi with Romeo Asara as political commissar: a second edition of *Il Comunista Libertario* saw publication; an attempt was made to distribute to German troops a leaflet published in German, entitled ‘*Aufruf, Offiziere, Unterrroffiziere und Mannschaften der deutschen Wehrmacht*’ inciting them to mutiny.

“On the night of 31 March 1945, at the instigation of Sarachi and Castiglioni, a few Slovaks organised by the Malatesta groups and with expertise in the use of automatic weapons and wearing Slovak uniform, were taken to Milan with a cargo of automatic weapons and hand grenades and munitions, risking the Vigentina road-block.”

In April the Mombello group distributed a leaflet signed by “revolutionary syndicalists”.

Up until this point the Milan anarchists had remained wholly independent of the CLN, but as the uprising neared the risks implicit in excessive isolation were becoming increasingly obvious. And so, a fortnight before 25 April 1945, Perelli arranged with Bonfantini that the ‘Malatesta-Bruzzi’ units would be accepted under the umbrella of the ‘Matteotti’ Brigades as autonomous units. As Perelli remembers it, come the uprising, the libertarian units deployed around two hundred men in Milan, the bulk of them concentrated in the northern districts, with some other groups in the Romana-Ticinese districts. In addition to these formations, there was the ‘Malatesta’ Brigade in Corteolona.

A late snapshot of their organisation shows the units organised as follows: the I and II ‘P. Bruzzi’ Brigade (operating in Affiori, Sempione and Garibaldi) and the I and II ‘E. Malatesta’ Brigade (in the Taliedo, Vigentina, Romana and Ticinese districts), but this deployment assuredly refers to after the Liberation.

The commander-in-chief was Mario Perelli, whose second-in-command was Germinal Concordia aka ‘Michele’ (who was probably still in prison, although our sources do not mention him) and Antonio Pietropaolo aka ‘Luciano’ (who had been replaced by Saracchi and Castiglioni as we have just seen), with Romeo Asara as political commissar in Corteolona, a post filled in Milan itself by Mario Mantovani, a very well-known militant who had been a deserter during the Great War and who had been named in 1919 as an alleged agent liaising “between the Bolshevik element in Germany and Russia and colleagues in Switzerland” and who had been very active in the Italian and international anarchist movement, with a litany of deportation orders and prison

terms to his credit. In 1936 the fascist police had described him as “the most direct (sic) brains behind the anarchist movement in Brussels.” He had returned to Italy after the Nazi invasion of Belgium. Initially interned, he had been released on health grounds after 25 July.

## 25 April 1945

On 25 April, the ‘Malatesta-Bruzzi’ units took on a retreating German column in Affori “reaping a rich haul of weapons and sundry equipment” and extended their control over their entire area, whilst the Carlo Erba works prepared to defend itself “in concert with personnel from every party”. Schools in the Piazzale Maciachini were taken over and barricades thrown up to ensure control of streets radiating from the Piazzale.

“The Brigade Nere barracks in the Via Ceresio in Porta Volta was taken over (...) From there our volunteers could monitor and protect the power station overlooking the barracks. Heavy and light machine-guns were set up outside the gates. An armoured car shuttled backwards and forwards between the main locations. This operation prevented destruction of the power station which was able to carry on supplying power to the city.

The nearby X MAS [10<sup>th</sup> Anti-Submarine Motor Boat Flotilla] barracks in the Via Tito Speri, which held huge stocks of clothing, foodstuffs and vehicles, had been fortified by the fascists for vigorous resistance. Reinforced concrete fortifications blocked off the streets. A team of our comrades from the ‘Favilla’ detachment, under comrade Oscari, seized the barracks from within before immediately contacting reinforcements who flooded in from the outside.”

A similar fate befell other X MAS barracks in the area.

Some militants helped seize the radio station in the Corso Sempione while ‘Malatesta-Bruzzi’ units took over the Triplex building and made ready to defend it.

“From there they then set off to seize control of the railway where they blocked in a locomotive with some armoured cars (...) ‘Malatesta-Bruzzi’ patrols reconnoitred the road as far as the town of Pero. A detachment posted to that town mounted a surprise attack on a column of Germans trying to force a passage through the construction and dispersed it.”

Lots of vehicles were captured as booty and these included a mail van that was promptly repainted in red, to widespread enthusiasm. In the Ticinese district, anarchists “seized the initiative even before the order for the uprising came through, calling at local businesses and calling upon the workforce to come out on strike. The first disarmings of the Germans and fascists occurred in the Via Palmieri.”

Later, they joined forces with Giustizia e Libertá units to storm the police barracks. In Porta Venezia, “on the night of 25–26 April” they helped mop up the last remaining enemy positions and ensure a link-up with the Central Station.

In the Pavia region, men from the II ‘Malatesta’ Brigade took control of the area under their remit. In Corteolona the GNR barracks was taken over, a German vehicle column was attacked and in S. Cristina and Bissone, with the aid of the Slovak unit billeted there, the area was liberated. After a few short skirmishes Chignolo Po, Mirandolo, Monteleone and Inverno were liberated as well.

Anarchist activity was not confined to armed struggle, however: wherever possible, some factories were taken over and taken under the direct management of the workforce and the

same thing happened to some landed estates: foodstuffs and clothing impounded from barracks were distributed to the population.

But this was a short-lived experiment. The anarchists, together with a few dissidents from the “leftwing” parties, were the only ones really looking for revolutionary change and, what with their being so heavily outnumbered and with the Anglo-American forces’ presence, their efforts were necessarily doomed to failure.

And so the glory days of April gave way to the humiliating disarmament of the partisans and “the restoration of order and the rule of law”.

The Italian bourgeoisie had found itself other protectors.

[Translator’s note: I have left out the footnotes as these are largely technical. ]

## **Appendix, a few useful dates**

- 10 July 1943 – Allied landings in Sicily.
- 25 July 1943 – Fascist Grand Council votes no confidence in Mussolini. King dismisses Mussolini who is arrested.
- 3 September 1943 – Italian govt representatives sign armistice with the Allies.
- 11–12 September 1943 – Mussolini rescued by Otto Skorzeny of the SS.
- 23 September 1943 – From Munich Mussolini announces formation of a fascist republic (the Salo republic) in close alliance with Germany.
- September-October 1943: Officially, the earliest partisan units are formed.
- 13 October 1943 – Italy declares war on Germany.
- 10 November 1944 – Gen. Alexander recommends partisans to stow away their guns for the winter and await resumption of the Allied advance.



The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Mauro de Agostini  
Milan's Anarchists in the Fight for Liberation  
1985

Retrieved on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2024 from [www.katesharpleylibrary.net](http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net)  
Published in *Lettera ai Compagni* (monthly bulletin of the FIAP Federazione Italiana di Associazioni Partigiane, Italian Federation of Partisan Associations), Rome, Anno XVII, No 7 (July 1985) and No 8 (August 1985). Translated by Paul Sharkey.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**