

Luigi Camillo Berneri

(Lodi, 1897 – Barcelona, 1937)

Toni

1998

Luigi Camillo Berneri was born on 20th July 1897 in Lodi, in Lombardy, Northern Italy. His father was a self-educated local civil servant; his mother, Adalgisa Fochi, a primary school teacher who wrote on education, and was involved in conferences and projects for the promotion of literacy. Her father was one of Garibaldi's Redshirts¹, whereas her grandfather had been a member of the 'Carbonari'² secret society, and a follower of Mazzini³.

Camillo had an eventful childhood. Malnutrition having brought him near death at only a few months old, his family moved to Milan, where his mother started to write for an education magazine. In 1904 he was in Palermo, Sicily, where he came down with typhus. In 1905, he lived in the towns of Cesena and Forlì in Romagna, the “reddest” and most republican region in the kingdom. In Varallo Sesia, Berneri fell ill with enteritis. However, only with the move to Reggio Emilia did political activity begin for Camillo Berneri.

He was already a member of the Italian Socialist Youth Federation (FGS⁴) when, in 1912, they held their Congress in his town, one of the first in Italy to be governed by a leftist administration. Berneri was a member of the “culturist” tendency, that is to say he maintained the importance of the Party as a vehicle to bring cultural enlightenment to the masses, in order to make them aware of their rights. Berneri was the only student out of the seven hundred FGS members in Reggio Emilia. On 1st February 1914, he wrote his first article for ‘l'Avanguardia’⁵ (“The Lies of the Old Testament”⁶), a piece full of attacks on the clergy, in the style of the young Mussolini, who was a socialist at that time. However, Lido Caiani, the editor of ‘l'Avanguardia’, had not long followed Mussolini in adopting an “interventionist” position (that is, in favour of declaring war on Austria-Hungary), when Berneri managed to kick him out of the paper with the help of Amadeo Bordiga (who would found the Italian Communist Party (PCd'I⁷) in 1921).

¹ Garibaldi: Left-wing leader of the movement for the liberation of Italy

² Italian for “charcoal burners”. The Carbonari were an early 19th-century masonically-organized bourgeois constitutionalist grouping.

³ Mazzini: Republican nationalist leader.

⁴ La Federazione Giovanile Socialista.

⁵ The Vanguard.

⁶ “Le Menzogne del Vecchio Testamento”.

⁷ Il Partito Comunista d'Italia.

Berneri's conflicts with the Socialist Party followed the riots in Reggio Emilia which took place during the rally organized by Cesare Battisti, the pro-intervention ex-socialist from Trento. The Party's official position on the war became an ambiguous "neither support nor sabotage". But Berneri, absolutely against the war, left the Central Committee of the Socialist Federation of Reggio Emilia, and befriended Torquato Gobbi, a twenty-year-old anarchist bookbinder. Berneri met and married Giovanna Caleffi, a clever and hardworking sixteen-year-old anarchist. She would become his life-long companion, inspiring him to write "A harem lacks variety compared to a woman with whom you are deeply in love"⁸.

On being conscripted, Berneri, now an anarchist, started to agitate in the army, even amongst officers, for which he was gaoled on Pianosa, near the Isle of Elba.

After the war had ended, he joined up with Errico Malatesta, recently back from his period of exile, and worked with him on 'Umanità Nova'.⁹ But he also worked with non-anarchist anti-authoritarian magazines such as Piero Gobetti's 'Rivoluzione Liberale'¹⁰ (whose founder would die exiled in Paris following a fascist beating). In Florence, he visited Piero Calamandrei (later an Action Party 11] anti-Nazi and "father" of the Italian democratic constitution), and Nello and Carlo Rosselli, with whom he attended Gaetano Salvemini's university lectures. They were all agreed on a policy of persistence and determination in the face of the fascist squads' attacks. Berneri also went to Bonaventura's psychoanalysis classes, which would turn out to be useful when he wrote an essay on the psychology of Benito Mussolini¹¹.

He had to leave Florence due to fascist persecution and he withdrew to Umbria to teach in a teacher-training school. Because of his continuing political propaganda, he was forced to flee to France with his wife and daughters.

He was expelled from France as a "dangerous anarchist", and then proceeded to be kicked out of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany and Spain. At that point, unable to be expelled into any other country, he could legally reside in France.

In the thirties in Paris he earned a living with a little shop &endash;where he welcomed the most wanted Italian exiles&endash; and did filing work in libraries and on newspapers on behalf of Salvemini, his anti-fascist professor.

Problems arose when Guido Miglioli, an anti-fascist Catholic, introduced him to, and vouched for, one Ermanno Menapace. Menapace was not, however, an anti-fascist exile, but a dangerous agent of the OVRA, the fascist régime's secret political police. The infiltrator exploited the divisions that had arisen between Berneri and Giuseppe Donati, giving Berneri money to help him to publish writings against Donati, a Catholic anti-fascist who had accused the régime of the murders of Matteotti and Giovanni Minzoni, a parish priest from Argenta. However, Donati was also approached by an OVRA infiltrator, who, in turn, subsidized his writings against Berneri.

The situation became more complicated when Carlo Rosselli and Emilio Dolci managed to escape from Italian prisons and reach Paris. A series of bombs exploded in Nice and in bars in Cannes. The responsibility lay with the fascist régime, who expected the anarchists to be blamed, forcing the French government to repatriate them. In the meantime, Camillo Berneri had been preparing an 'attentat' on Alfredo Rocco &endash;the man behind the infamous Rocco

⁸ "Un harem è più povero di varietà di una donna profondamente amata."

⁹ New Humanity.

¹⁰ Liberal Revolution. (Funnily enough.)

¹¹ Berneri, 1966.

Penal Code¹²; during his Brussels visit. Menapace arranged it so that Berneri would be arrested in Belgium, in possession of a pistol and some photographs of the Minister of Justice, Rocco. So, he was captured and Menapace returned to Rome. In court on 22nd February 1930, Berneri's friends were acquitted, but he himself was sentenced to six months in prison, while Menapace was sentenced 'in absentia' to two years, since it was accepted that he instigated the whole thing. Once back on the other side of the Franco-Belgian border, Berneri went through a second trial for the same events and was sentenced to a year and two months. He was given amnesty on 14th July 1931 and expelled from the country, but, as he had already been declared undesirable ('persona non grata') in the surrounding countries, Berneri was again able to stay in Paris.

Life in Paris went on with the job of drafting texts and trying to convert Italian exiles to anarchism. In this period his daughter married the English anarchist Vernon Richards, who subsequently wrote a text on Malatesta and took part in the Spanish Civil War.

His numerous libertarian articles in the widest variety of European and North-American publications show how prolific a writer Berneri was. Among his more notable works are his studies on Mussolini's psychology, in which the 'Duce' is seen not as a theatrical fool, but as a cunning politician who knew how to use theatrical tricks to subdue the masses (unlike Gramsci, who saw in the dictator the buffoon, not the politician). Another important subject was anti-Semitism, analysed not only in 'El delirio racista'¹³ and in 'Le Juif antisémite'¹⁴, but in many letters to friends. He analysed the "self-hate" expressed by many Marxist Jews and attacked Marx himself for his embarrassed silence on the Jewish question. Anticipating the Holocaust, Berneri wrote "Anti-Semitism will be one of mankind's favourite forms of stupidity for some time to come"¹⁵. His sympathy for the Jews was due to the fascination he had for those with no country; he wrote "the stateless are the best suited to form the bases of the great human family". Sadly, fascist Jews in Turin, who would, a year later, endure the Italian race laws of 1938, attacked his 'Le Juif antisémite' in their magazine 'La Nostra Bandiera'¹⁶.

Berneri's theoretical attack on the concept of the State came with his identification of bureaucracy as a tool of oppression of the centralist State – whether bourgeois or "Soviet". There was much controversy between him and Trotsky on this. Trotsky saw the Soviet bureaucracy as a "historical absurdity"; for Berneri it was not an absurdity, but a natural consequence of trying to maintain the State apparatus, which had not led to Soviet society being "classless", but to a division between proletarians and autocratic bureaucrats. For Berneri, only federalism could provide a way to escape bureaucracy, and thus the State. He was not referring to the administrative federalism, imposed from above, that would do no more than create so many small-scale States, but rather to the federalism that comes from social revolution, which would have produced independent communes, freely federated, in which federations of grass-roots councils would have taken over the functions of the bureaucratic State organization. When it came to his own country, what Berneri saw as an absurdity was the attempt to govern Italy by a single administration, given the country's great regional diversity. This had led to the rise of a parasitic bureaucracy.

¹² Still in effect today in the Italian "Democratic" Republic.

¹³ Racist Delirium.

¹⁴ The Anti-Semitic Jew. In Italian, L'ebreo antisemita (Berneri, 1984).

¹⁵ "L'antisemitismo sarà ancora per lungo tempo all'ordine del giorno della stupidità umana."

¹⁶ Our Flag.

Bernerri declared, “In the economic sphere anarchists are possibilists, in the political sphere they are 100% intransigent!”. By this he meant that even if the critique of the state and the negation of the principle of authority were aims that could not be dispensed with, the anarchist economic model must remain open and experimental. He personally considered that free rein should be given to individual business and labour and collectivist business and labour. Thus, he condemned collectivization if it were forced, rather than a free choice. This led him to the conclusion that anarchy would not bring about a society of absolute harmony, but one of tolerance.

On 12th July 1936, news of the ‘coup d’état’ in Spain reached Paris. With the slogan “Today in Spain, tomorrow in Italy” on their lips, the Italian anti-fascists got ready to leave. On the 25th, Bernerri arrived in Catalonia with a cargo of rifles and ammunition. He was immediately offered there a position in the Council of the Economy, but he refused as soon as he realized he was dealing with a sort of ministry.

Bernerri instead hosted a rally before 100,000 people in Plaza de los Toros, in Barcelona, bringing with him the greetings of the Italian anarchists and their solidarity with the Catalan revolution.

So, with Angeloni and de Santillán (from the CNT-FAI), he organized an Italian anarchist column within the Francisco Ascaso formation in the Pedralbes barracks (renamed “Bakunin”), and on 19th August, he left the exultant crowds of Barcelona for the Aragonese front. On the 21st they arrived at Vicién and occupied the Galocha upland plain, dominating the road between Huesca and Saragossa. On 23rd August he took part in the harsh engagements on the “bare mountain”, where the anarchists Angeloni, Perrone and Centrone died, Angeloni singing the Internationale. But the attacking Nationalist troops were completely driven back. Because of problems with his vision and hearing, Bernerri was sent back from the front and returned to Barcelona.

In Barcelona, he tried to warn people about the important implications of the imminent fascist landings in the Balearic Isles, did propaganda work, attacked the Madrid government for its politics of compromise which were damaging Catalan autonomy, and criticized the ambiguous behaviour of the French and English governments. He wrote for ‘Guerra di Classe’¹⁷, and often visited the ‘Amigos de Durruti’¹⁸.

When clashes with the Communist Party broke out, his house, where he lived with other anarchists, was attacked on 4th May 1937. They were all labelled “counter-revolutionaries”, disarmed, deprived of their papers and forbidden to go out into the street. There was still shooting in the streets when, on 5th May 1937, news arrived from Italy of Antonio Gramsci’s death in a fascist prison. Then, after writing his last letter home to his daughter — his spiritual final testament, Bernerri went out and walked towards Radio Barcelona where they were commemorating the death of the Communist Gramsci, who had written in ‘Ordine Nuovo’¹⁹ “We must never permit ourselves to be enemies of the anarchists; enemies have contradictory ideas, not merely different ones”²⁰.

Leaving Radio Barcelona, Bernerri set off for the Plaça de la Generalitat²¹, where some Stalinists shouted out to him. Before he could turn and look, they opened fire with machine guns, and left his dead body there on the street.

¹⁷ Class War. An Italian-language paper published in the Catalan capital.

¹⁸ “Friends of Durruti”, a purist FAI splinter group.

¹⁹ New Order

²⁰ “Non ammetteremo mai di essere avversari degli anarchici, avversari sono due idee contraddittorie, non due idee diverse.”

²¹ Parliament Square.

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Translated from the Italian by David Short

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