

# MUSSOLINI PLAYS ALL HIS CARDS

*This study is in the nature of an Appendix to "Fascism" (PLEBS Sixpenny Series) dealing with events since that booklet was written. It does not attempt to repeat its analysis.*

THE crisis in Italy is a class phenomenon of a very odd character. Fascism was originally a weapon in the hands of the big industrial capitalists for the purpose of crushing the workers. That they had to use such a weapon was fundamentally a sign of weakness, but the weapon was effective enough. The workers' movement was beaten by methods of mass murder. But now Italian capitalism is in the position of Frankenstein with his monster. Fascism, having served its purpose, will not go away. Whole sections of the middle class and the employing class—almost certainly a big majority by now—want the Mussolini episode of Italian history to close and "normalisation" to return. Fascism, however, is now no longer a mere instrument of capital. Capital called it in as the Sultan called in his Janissaries to kill a rival, and the Janissaries have remained in the palace and domineer over the surprised ruler.

Fascism has decided to stay in Italy and rule Italy in its own interests, which are not always or even generally those of capitalism, once the working class is down and out. The interests of capitalism in Italy at the moment are internal order and unimpeded transport. The workers are defeated, but capital cannot reap the harvest until normal conditions are restored. A liberal senator, reported in the *Daily Herald*, put it clearly when he said that Fascism must go because it was preventing the employers receiving the full profit of Labour's defeat. Moreover, he said, the continuance of Fascism was reviving a sullen spirit in the workers, whereas a gradual "normalisation" under moderate Fascist auspices might have perpetuated the present pleasing relation between employers and employed.

But the Fascists propose to govern, as has been said, in their own interests. These interests are in the main three. They are based not on class, but on caste or *esprit-de-corps*, and they are fatal to the "normalisation" cry. The first is the indefinite retention of the 300,000 Fascist militia-men as a crippling charge on the State. All over Italy these men hang about cafes and wine-shops in fantastic costumes, and vary the day with aimless violence. The second is the continuance of the present system of local government, called "Rassismo." A Ras, which is an Abyssinian word for

chief, is the local Fascist leader who controls the town, as Regazzi in Molinella and Farinacci in Cremona. The normal municipal machinery remains and works in appearance as before, but the real power lies in the Ras' hands. His orders cut across or reverse official decisions and his graft rules all appointments. Inefficiency and corruption follow automatically. Thirdly, the Fascists require frequent Communist or "subversive" disturbances. These are needed not merely for the purpose of looting, beating, raping and burning, which is what a Fascist means by employment, but also in order to bring to heel the restive bourgeoisie. Fascism gained its power because of the capitalist and lower middle class fear of red revolution. It can hold its power easily only if that fear is revived : and so the Red Spectre has to be prodded into convulsive movements. Fascist agents, it is known, have given arms to unwary Communists.

Carrying out this programme, the Fascists have more and more come into conflict with the capitalist classes. The papers that suffer suppression now—*Corriere della Sera*, *Mondo*, *Giornale d'Italia*, *Stampa* and so on—are not Socialist and Communist : they are papers of the politics and standing of the *Manchester Guardian* and *Times*. The remaining Fascist papers, *Popolo d'Italia*, *Idea Nazionale* and so on, are of no more standing than the *Empire News*, *News of the World* or *Morning Post*. Strong pressure has naturally been brought to bear on Mussolini to get him seriously to adopt the bourgeois policy of "normalisation." At the end of the year these proposals appeared to have been accepted. The new election law was proclaimed. The "extreme Fascists" representing the militia, headed by Farinacci, an ex-socialist thug who is the most powerful "Ras" in Italy, thereupon visited Mussolini. What passed then is uncertain, but there is little doubt that they handed him the "black spot" like any other pirate crew, unless he surrendered absolutely to their decision. Mussolini collapsed and the bourgeois effort to tame Fascism ended. The visible signs of this collapse were the "forty-eight hours" speech of Mussolini and the secession of ex-Premier Salandra.

The Fascist terror that followed lasted for several days in its acute form : in a milder form, indeed, it is still continuing. Doubt still exists as to what happened, but private letters have left no doubt in my mind that it was not a "fiasco." Fascisti burnt and beat up and down the country in their old manner. The full flood of savagery was let loose again, the opposition press being suppressed or so gagged that it could not speak. There was, however, this difference : the victims of this violence were no longer only socialists and Communists : they were every variety of Liberal and Constitutional politician.

(Perhaps a parallel will make the strange position clear. Imagine

a government headed by the Duke of Northumberland, in power through a coup, turning back after a mild period into extreme Fascism. Mr. Churchill, their last supporter, leaves them. The *Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, and indeed all papers except the *Morning Post and Telegraph* (bought by the Fascists) are suppressed. The staff of the *Daily News* is flogged: the offices of the *Scotsman* are burnt. Sir John Simon is severely beaten. Sir Charles Macara, attempting to ask a question of the Premier, is beaten on the head with loaded clubs. No exact news is available, but it is known that Liberal and Conservative clubs—the only ones left—have been sacked up and down the country, their members being beaten and perhaps killed. The British Legion has been dissolved by violence. No one knows who is alive still and who murdered: Poplar and the Clydebank have been systematically devastated. The Duke of Connaught narrowly escaped clubbing on a charge of being connected with the Freemasons.)

It is too early, when this is written, to say whether the terror has succeeded. Its object was to terrify the opposition into silence and to scatter it into its component parts. Especially did the Fascists want to break up the Aventine block which has left the Chamber. They appear not to have done so, but whether they have or not cowed the opposition up and down the country is as yet unknown.

Of course it is not true, or not yet true anyhow, to say that Fascism is totally without support of some sections of Capital. The Fascist government is notoriously corrupt, and contractors who have "come across" with enough palm oil have reaped rich harvests. Nearly every Fascist official of importance (except Mussolini himself and his secretary Acerbo, be it said) idles about Rome flaunting sudden wealth and new mistresses. This money has not been given for nothing and the particular firms who have benefited by the graft will desire it to continue; and so support the Fascists. Again, until quite recently at least, the iron and steel "heavy industry" supported Mussolini because his "vigorous foreign policy" meant more orders. There are some, but not decisive, indications that this support is weakening. Finally, there is the question of foreign support. The greatest banking concern in Italy is the Banca Commerciale. Since the collapse of the Banca di Sconto, none of the native Italian banks like the Banca di Roma have been in the same class with the Commerciale, which is notoriously foreign-controlled and handles much Rothschild money. Now, foreign capital has no objection to misgovernment and corruption. Contracts giving grossly inflated profits can be obtained more easily—as in the Sinclair Oil case exposed by Matteotti—and an isolated government is more susceptible to pressure generally. Corruption

and tyranny were positive recommendations to the City, the Bourse, and Wall Street in the cases of Nicholas II., Abdul Hamid and Ismail, as Mr. Brailsford pointed out years ago in the *War of Steel and Gold*. It is significant that after an initial attempt to suppress it, Mussolini's relations with the Banca Commerciale have been very friendly. It is far from certain that the native bourgeoisie of Italy will be able to rely on the aid of International finance against Fascism.

These do not end the list of Fascism's supporters. There is still the Pope. Pius XI. is a subtle old Italian cleric, who has put his money, despite restiveness even in the College of Cardinals, upon Mussolini. He has hesitated in the past and may again, but for the moment his influence is pro-Fascist. What that influence is can only be estimated. Its roots are not economic interest, but lie far back in two thousand years of history. At present it keeps many peasants immobilised, has enfeebled the action of the Popular party and keeps two wretched relics, called Catholic Centrists, in the Cabinet as Mussolini's last hostages.

Still, the core and centre of Fascism is the militia. The January Terror and the Farinacci ultimatum showed that the only way out was to break the militia and pull down the Ras in every town. How can the bourgeois do this? In face of so difficult a problem—how the capitalists with the workers' support (what a position!) are to overturn Fascism by force—the usual Left-to-Right classification is not a sufficient guide. Unexpected elements show strength and advanced talkers weakness. Let us examine the opposition more closely.

There are two sections: the Aventine, or original opposition which left the Chamber, and the later opposition which has quite recently quitted Mussolini because of his refusal of "normalisation." Take the second, which is the least important. It consists chiefly of the personal following of the imperialist nationalists Salandra, Giolitti and Orlando (ex-premiers all) and the group of Combattimenti (ex-soldiers). Giolitti is the most artful living Italian politician.\* The ex-soldiers are under the most reactionary and nationalist leaders. These groups gambled altogether on Mussolini proceeding with "normalisation." There was to be a non-Fascist government, or a mixed moderate Fascist-Nationalist-cabinet. The capitalist was to resume control, and Mussolini was to stand aside with his organisation intact, in case it was needed for the future. The group was already counting its chickens and arranging the method: the King was to send for Salandra, who would find himself unable to form a cabinet, and then it would be

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\* See Index to *Fascism*, s.v. Giolitti.

Giolitti. But Farinacci, like Brennus the Gaul, flung his sword in the scale and upset the bargain. This was checkmate to this group, and they are likely to lie low awhile and do nothing. A decisive anti-Fascist move from other groups might be followed by the rank and file of the ex-soldiers and the dissolved "Italia Libera" association.

And now for the Aventine opposition—so called because it meets on the Aventine Hill like the Plebs of old. It consists of many groups which shift and change. But here are the main groups, reading roughly Right to Left: Sards, Left Liberals, Democrats (with internal dissensions, like most others for that matter), Populars (Catholics), Republicans, Unitary Socialists, Socialists (Maximalists). The last two parties alone represent the workers: the third workers' party, the Communists, has left the opposition and in January re-entered the Chamber. Up till the time of the "forty-eight hours' speech" the Aventine had scored heavily at the expense of Mussolini. It is true that it had not called a full general strike at the burial of Matteotti, as demanded (probably rightly, but not certainly so) by the Communists, but by leaving the Chamber and focussing the agitation on a sort of rival Parliament at the Aventine, it had given a very sharp and definite nature to the struggle. The official Chamber was left ridiculous and in the air. The Press campaign was admirably directed; the shocks of the Matteotti confessions exactly timed. So long as Mussolini was kept inside the Parliamentary game, the Aventine won steadily. But now that he has run wild again, new tactics are wanted, and the groups that come forward are not those one might expect. It depends upon the resoluteness, rather than the advanced ideas, of the Party, sometimes even on the individual.

Of the bourgeois parties, the Sards and Republicans are of little weight. In the Liberals that attend there is small strength: they may at any time go over to the Giolitti-Orlando group. The Populars contain big rural masses and detest Fascism. Their programme reads as though it were fairly advanced and large sections of the Populars would undoubtedly join in a serious active move. But the party directors are not likely to move. The party is Catholic and the Pope still says, No. It is in a relatively small group of Democrats that we find more strength of will. Mussolini has already made a serious attempt to kill or maim Signor Amendola, the "big noise" here. Amendola is an enemy of the workers and an ex-minister of the Colonies. His mind is military and he is accustomed to action. Well before Mussolini's running amuck he warned the Aventine at the Milan Conference, when others piously talked of propaganda, that the Fascist Militia must be smashed. There could be no peace, he said, till it had been ground to pieces.

Now, Amendola is a man in close touch both with the Court and high Army circles. The Army not only shares the general contempt for Fascism, but is spurred to especial dislike by professional jealousy. Even the Generals are estranged : they only await the King's sanction to go out and wipe up the blackshirts. They hold, with some justice, that Fascism would crash before any serious military force—especially as recent mobilisations have shown a waning of numbers in the urban militias. If Amendola can bring them to the point of action, Fascist tyranny will end. This seems almost the only weapon left to the bourgeoisie ; though of course there may be secret preparations of which we know nothing.

And what of the workers, trodden deep in the mire by these antagonists ?

Bad and divided leadership and great misery. Italian Socialism is split into three. The Unitary Socialists, whose secretary was Matteotti, are much stronger since that crime, which rallied to them many workers who had decided that this group was incapable of action. But the Unitarians, or Reformists as they are commonly called, hardly deserve this confidence. Their leaders share Matteotti's rosy idealism without possessing his courage or ability. Turati, their dominant man, is more fluent than Mr. MacDonald and even less capable of decisive action. They are almost the most timid group in the Aventine. Moreover (as exposed in *Fascism*) they can be accused of worse than timidity. Their most important group, the trade union leaders headed by D'Aragona, have for months now strangled any trade union action or revival, and still boast of their success in breaking up the metalworkers' seizure of the factories. These trade union officials are popularly called Bonzes, from the Buddhist priests who are reported to be able to sit motionless in the same attitude for vast periods of time. This name gives away their character : we have had some remarkably fine "collectors' specimens" of them over here. To expect the workers' liberation from this class-peace reformist party is absurd : it is too much even to expect it to take direct action against Fascism. Members of it have even been willing to serve under Mussolini.

The increase, however, in the Reformist ranks has not been due only to Matteotti's death. It has been due even more to the deplorable division between the two class-war parties, the Maximalists and Communists. The main lines of the policy of both these are identical, but during their bitter quarrels the Reformists have held the leadership. At the last T.U.C. in Italy the Reformists swept the board through the dis-union of these two, who, systematically cut each others' throats. It is probable, indeed, that the Reformists, once outnumbered by the Maximalists alone,

have now more members than both together.\* In this connection the author of *Fascism* makes an error in classing the Reformists and Maximalists together. A far deeper gulf lies between the Reformists and Maximalists than separates the latter from the Communists.† Both parties are firmly based on the class-war and consist of tried revolutionaries (even Zinovieff admits it). They both realise that direct war by themselves alone on Fascism would lead to a horrible massacre : they both try to manœuvre beneath the shield of bourgeois dissatisfaction with Fascism into a position where they can recommence the workers' struggle. They both work for the reconstruction of the class trade unions on a class basis as opposed to the Fascist. In all these cases their action has been paralysed by bitter disputes on tactical questions and personal feeling.

The differences that separate them are, firstly, the refusal of the Maximalists to accept the discipline and policy of the Third International, which they contend knows nothing of Italian affairs ; secondly, points of tactics—e.g., the Communists have now left the Aventine block while the Maximalists have stayed in. The two groups during last summer and autumn several times made indirect and sullen overtures to each other, only ending in fresh quarrels. At the end of the year matters were much worsened by the affair of Serrati. Serrati, a man of much ability but unsympathetic character, was heading a group of Maximalists who demanded that the Party join the Third International. After months of agitation he left the Party with his followers and joined the Communists. Immediately *Unità*, the Communist daily, crowed that he had been all the while a Communist agent, aiming at disrupting the Maximalists and carrying away as many as possible. This way of crying "Yah !" was childish enough, and in addition has embittered *Avanti* and its party so that they talk now as though every Communist was a crook.

Until these two parties are reunited the proletariat is defenceless. After all, when everybody in sight has been duly called a Hired Lackey of the International Bourgeoisie, the fact remains that the two class war parties are divided and hostile, unable to do anything but check each other. What influence the Communist International can or will exercise on one of the combatants is uncertain. The report of the 1924 Congress gives certain indications that wisdom

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\* Figures are lacking, but both parties have recently published lists of subscriptions to their newspaper funds. The Reformists got 625,000 lire, the Communists 25,000, and the Maximalists about 300,000—all in small subscriptions.

† I am not speaking without my book. I have studied the three dailies *Giustizia*, *Avanti*, *Unità*, for some months now and they show conclusively that L. W. was unjust in calling the Maximalists "reformists."

may prevail. Zinovieff, it is true, held up to the derision of Congress a letter from "old Lazzari" of the Maximalists in which he said that it "was a matter of conscience" with him that made him reject certain instructions of the Communists, and consequently, said Zinovieff, Lazzari was no Communist, only a sentimental revolutionary. But Bordiga, the Communist, was rebuked for taking an extreme attitude against the Maximalists.\*

Here is the position, then. We can only hope, firstly, that the two parties reunite quickly; secondly, that the Court will assent to turning, sooner or later, the Army on to the sanitary job of cleaning up Fascism. Once the break comes, in whatever way it comes (and it cannot come without the smashing of the militia) events will rush so swiftly that no one can say where they will end. Perhaps——

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