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Tim Parks

# BLOOD AND POWER

THE RISE  
AND FALL  
OF ITALIAN  
FASCISM

JOHN  
FOOT

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# BLOOD AND POWER

The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism

JOHN FOOT

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To Paul Ginsborg



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## Preamble: A Family Story

My father used to tell a family story. Every summer, in the 1970s and 1980s, the entire Foot clan would gather at my grandparents' beautiful house in Cornwall. My grandmother Sylvia would preside over mealtimes – the great matriarch – delighted to have her three sons, her daughter, and assorted friends, grandchildren, uncles and aunts all there. Meals were served around a huge, long table. Discussions were often heated and usually political, but there were also silly jokes and games. This was a family steeped in politics. Four Feet had stood for parliament in the 1945 election, although only one had been elected. Three had been MPs at one time or another. My grandfather was a career diplomat, used to dealing with politicians and parties. There were photos of him in the house with Churchill, with the queen and with Yasser Arafat. My father was a militant, on the radical left. In his telling of the story, the debate has become intense, around the table. As often happened, someone accused somebody else of 'supporting fascism'.

Then, a small voice piped up. It was my great-grandmother, Aurelia Lanzoni, who was born in Kars in Turkey in 1867, but was of Italian heritage. She had lived in Bologna in the early twentieth century, and had witnessed at first hand the rise of the blackshirts and Mussolini. She was a tiny woman. There is a photo of her holding me as a baby, but she died soon after my birth, in 1965, and is buried outside Edinburgh. By then she had a shock of white hair. 'Ah, the fascism!' she'd say, in my dad's telling of the story. 'It was wonderful!!'

My great-uncle, George Tod, Aurelia's son, wrote a kind of autobiography which was never published but has remained within

the family. In 1921, he remembered, he was at school in Bologna. 'My earliest memory of my grandmother is of her returning home in about 1920/1921, with her hair dishevelled, her hat squashed and in her hand, her dress torn and her nose bleeding. She had been attacked by a communist gang ... The town was in turmoil,' he wrote. 'Separate gangs of communists and Bolsheviks roamed uncontrolled.' George Tod saw fascism as positive. 'When Mussolini came, the gangs were routed, order was imposed, sometimes harshly and even unjustly but certainly a great improvement in security.' In short, he concluded: 'There was a rebirth in Italy.' Of course, he added: 'Fascist methods were not very gentle. Many carried the *manganello*, a sturdy walking stick. More of a staff than a stick. Very convincing. Security returned.'<sup>1</sup>

In this history of Italian fascism, the *manganello* will play a key role. For some, fascism was indeed 'wonderful'; for many others, it was a nightmare.

## Prologue

Italy invented fascism. Out of the chaos of the First World War, in which nearly 600,000 Italian soldiers lost their lives, a new movement emerged which preached hatred for politicians and love for the fatherland. Fascists embraced violence, both in their language and on the streets. At first, they were overshadowed by a socialist uprising where revolution seemed inevitable during the ‘two red years’ – the *biennio rosso* – of 1919–20. But soon, groups of fascists, known as squads, dressed in black, were on the march in the countryside and cities of Italy, destroying a powerful union movement, crushing democracy and spreading fear throughout the country: 1921–22 were the ‘two black years’ – the *biennio nero*.

Many local fascist leaders emerged during this latter period, but by 1922 one man had taken charge. His name was Benito Mussolini and he had been a radical anti-war socialist until 1914. Mussolini was appointed prime minister at the age of thirty-nine after fascists carried out a semi-coup during the so-called ‘March on Rome’ in 1922. The liberal state thought it could contain and use fascism but it was making a very serious mistake. Mussolini would remain in power for nearly twenty-one years, setting up a regime which negated democracy itself, imprisoned or murdered anybody in opposition, and set out – no less – to create an entirely new nation, with a new set of heroes, myths and symbols. In many ways, Benito Mussolini seemed a very unlikely dictator. He had two real skills, honed in the first thirty years of his life: journalism and public speaking. His previous attempts at political organisation and militancy had usually ended in failure.

Having taken power through murderous violence, Italian fascism held onto it through further bloodshed and the occupation of the state. In power, fascism eliminated all vestiges of free speech. Violence was not

just inflicted on its own people. A brutal military occupation of Ethiopia in the 1930s was backed by the use of poison gas and horrific massacres of men, women and children. Fascism eliminated its opponents with gusto, or reduced them to a state of fear. It also rewrote its own history, painting the fascist movement as a glorious defender of the fatherland, as a revolutionary and modernising force, but also as a return to order. Fascism was built on a mound of dead bodies, cracked heads, traumatised victims of violence, burnt books and smashed up cooperatives and union headquarters. Most of those who ended up governing Italy had committed crimes for which they were rarely investigated, let alone tried. None of this was inevitable. Yet somehow, over the years, this carnage has tended to be played down, or justified, even by anti-fascists.

In power, fascism was brutal. But it did not rule by force alone. It tried to win over Italians through cultural politics, welfare institutions, sporting triumph, colonial conquest and the invention or use of a series of enemies, old and new. Above all, in 1929 an historic pact was signed with the Catholic Church, in a masterpiece of diplomacy and alliance-building. Dissent was strangled at source. A secret police force controlled people's private lives, backed by an army of informers and spies.

In the end, Italian fascism overreached itself, buying into its own propaganda that portrayed a nation of warriors carrying '8 million bayonets'. In 1938, Italy introduced widespread discrimination against the Jewish population with a series of 'racial laws'. The 'Pact of Steel' was signed with Hitler in 1939. At the height of his power, in 1940, Mussolini launched into war against France and Britain. It began with easy triumph, but soon turned into disaster. After the Allies landed in Sicily in 1943 and bombed Rome, Mussolini was forced out of power. Fascism was over. A bitter civil war followed. In April 1945 Mussolini was shot trying to escape to Switzerland and hung by his feet from a petrol station in Milan.

There has been considerable historical debate about the meaning of Italian fascism. Was it a modern dictatorship, thrusting towards the future? Or did it hark back to the past? Was it essentially a nostalgic attempt to create what was called a 'new Roman empire'? How important was violence to its rise and permanence in power? Did the regime create a consensus in the 1930s? Did fascism transform Italy, or was it just a superficial dictatorship, whose influence faded quickly once democracy had returned?

Italian fascism looked forwards *and* backwards. It built extraordinary modernist structures, such as Florence railway station, but also neo-classical throwbacks. It encouraged and tolerated innovative forms of art and performance, as with the futurists, but it also covered Italy in dubious realist statues and images of its leader. It understood the power of the media and advertising, but it also glanced back longingly to a rural Italy which was fast disappearing. It was at times radical, but also radically reactionary, and often simply pragmatic. It claimed to be anti-system and anti-political, but most of its leading proponents were corrupt, and enriched themselves. These contradictions were also its strengths.

\*

This is not a traditional history of Italian fascism. It tells the story of the 1920s and 1930s largely through the stories of real people – fascists, anti-fascists, socialists, communists, anarchists. Violence is a central theme. This book depicts victims, perpetrators and bystanders.<sup>1</sup> Without violence, before and during the regime, fascism would never have come close to power. It was fundamental, visceral, epochal and life-changing: both for those who experienced it, and those who practised it. Fascist violence brought something fundamentally new to the political scene: a militia party, whose use of murder, beatings, intimidation and destruction swept aside all opposition. Revolvers, nail-studded cudgels, fire and castor oil were all part of the weaponry of the blackshirts. In their wake they left thousands of terrified opponents, and hundreds of ransacked and charred buildings. This violence and its ramifications are ever-present in the stories this book recounts.

Like the Italians under the regime itself, historians have often become transfixed by the figure of Benito Mussolini, but Il Duce is not at the centre of this volume. We know much about Mussolini, but too little about ordinary Italians and how they lived through the dictatorship. How did Italians experience the regime? Who were the fascists and who resisted their rise? What happened to those who were beaten, widowed or orphaned by postwar violence?<sup>2</sup> How did it feel to be forced to drink a litre of castor oil, and then paraded through the streets, covered in your own excrement? During the rise of fascism, and under the regime, violence ‘struck not only its victims but also its spectators’, and ‘every new act of violence evoked past acts and induced new terror’.<sup>3</sup>

Historians of fascism have also become fixated by the outputs and world view of fascism itself – studying the regime on its own terrain – its monuments, exhibitions, architecture, film and, of course, its leaders. This has led to a bias towards the 1930s and towards the so-called ‘years of consent’. Violence has been underplayed and the victims of that violence, with a few exceptions, ignored. But violence ran right through the twenty years or so in which Mussolini held political power. It was everywhere, a constant presence. Without violence, which fascism excelled at, and used in a refined, radical and innovative way, Mussolini would never have come to power, or stayed there for so long. The framing of that violence, and the othering of socialist violence in the 1920s, was central to the way that fascism presented itself as a saviour, a heroic bulwark against Bolshevism and chaos. ‘Good’ violence was pitted against ‘bad’ violence. In this, the use of propaganda, ‘fake news’ and the judicial system were all central pillars of the story that Italian fascism told its people. Like my great-uncle George Tod, many Italians felt that fascism had brought order from chaos – and for this they were grateful. For many Italians, fascism was, as my great-grandmother said at that dinner table in Cornwall, ‘wonderful’.

This book does not tell the whole story of Italian fascism. No work can do such a thing. There are thousands of books and articles and documentaries dedicated to Italian fascism and to Mussolini, covering every aspect of the regime from all angles – from jazz, to politics, to Mussolini’s body, to his mistresses and lovers, to architecture, art and sport. This is a history told through episodes, fragments, massacres and trials, moments of violence and escape, defeats and victories, silences and noise, rhetoric and reality. It focuses on real people, on the emotional and personal tragedy, and triumphs, which fascism implied, for many people and their families. It reflects, as does all history, individual interests, foibles and quirks, and my own interest in micro-histories, stories and details. This book seeks to place the reader right in the middle of the events that brought Italian fascism into being and then into power.

In recent years Italian fascism has been at the forefront of political debate. The rise of right-wing populists in the 1990s, beginning with the extraordinary twenty-year era linked to the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, has led to parallels being made with Mussolini’s regime. Berlusconi was often compared to Mussolini, and his rehabilitation of neo-fascists, whom he brought into government, was seen as a warning

signal for democracy itself. He defended the record of Mussolini, repeating the stereotypical depiction of Italian fascism as essentially benign and generally popular. Post-Berlusconi, global politics has also seen constant references back to the 1920s, and to Italy. Current right-wing Italian populist politician Matteo Salvini has used fascist slogans taken directly from the 1920s and 1930s. Donald Trump was dubbed the ‘Mango Mussolini’, and the attack on the US Capitol by armed rioters in January 2021 was frequently compared to the March on Rome itself, leading to an extensive debate around the question of whether Trumpism represented a return to fascism.<sup>4</sup> Mussolini himself had refused to accept the results of the 1919 elections in Italy, vowing to overturn them by whatever means necessary. A whole series of ‘strong men’ have dominated world politics, whose communication strategies and disdain for democracy have used models of masculinity mirroring Mussolini – from Putin’s bare-chested horse-riding, to Muammar Gaddafi’s use of rape and sexual assault.<sup>5</sup> Propaganda tactics and the spin put on events, as well as outright lying, are also features which were crucial to Italian fascism and its imposition of one (false) version of the past onto the present.

Italian fascism matters. It is still with us, as a warning, a prototype and a possible future. It was not a necessary evil. It did not treat its opponents lightly. It failed to bring order and stability. It was directly responsible for the ‘premature deaths’ of at least a million people, in Italy and across the world.<sup>6</sup> In short, it was a catastrophe, which also enabled and informed the rise of Nazism in Germany, and other fascisms and authoritarian regimes.

The people whose stories are told here were fascists, socialists – or sometimes socialists who became fascists – apoliticals, and others. Not everyone was coherent or predictable or linear in terms of their beliefs or actions. Some are relatively obscure figures. Many were victims; others were perpetrators of violence and oppression. Their testimonies date from before the days of fascism, through the Second World War, the postwar regime, and often into the post-1945 period, if they lived that long. Some of these tales are tragedies, some are odysseys, others are mysteries. All of them form a part of a larger history of fascism, and those who opposed the movement and the regime.

This history begins in 1911, in a barracks, in Bologna.



1911

A SHOT AT DAWN

'I am happy to have defended my comrades, give me those six bullets that I have earned, so that my comrades will remember me. I should not have been called to arms, the nine months I served in the army were enough, and I always behaved well. The King, General Spingardi [Minister of War during the Libyan campaign] and the parliamentarians should go to war instead of us, in order to conquer a land which the capitalists will then exploit.'

Augusto Masetti<sup>1</sup>

Dawn, 30 October 1911. A courtyard of the Cialdini Barracks, in the city of Bologna. Uniformed troops are being addressed by a Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Stroppa, who is speaking from a stage. Stroppa tells the soldiers that they no longer have any family beyond the fatherland, and that the troops have been selected to go to war, the next day, in Libya. It is time for Italy to become a great nation, and a great nation needs an empire. None of the assembled soldiers had volunteered.

Suddenly, a soldier raises his rifle and fires a shot towards the officers. The bullet hits Colonel Stroppa in the shoulder. It is reported that the shooter then cries out: 'Long live anarchy, down with the war', as he pulls the trigger. Stroppa is injured, the bullet passing through his body. As the shooter is set upon and taken away he is said to shout: '*Fratelli, ribellatevi*'

(brothers, rise up!) and that he would rather die in Bologna than in Libya. That night in prison he tries to take his own life.

\*

Augusto Masetti had been a bricklayer in the small central Italian town of San Giovanni in Persiceto, not far from Bologna. He had been conscripted (for the second time) and was twenty-three at the time of the Stroppa shooting. Masetti was soon vilified in the mainstream press. Some called him '*l'arabo di Bologna*', or the 'Arab of San Giovanni di Persiceto', a phrase intimating that he was a traitor, a friend of the enemy – the Libyan 'Arabs'.<sup>2</sup> But for anarchists, and many others, he was an instant hero, and soon became a potent symbol of anti-militarism and rebellion. A popular song told the story of Masetti locked up in 'Cell number 9'. He sometimes claimed to remember nothing of that morning – but he also seemed at other times to have a very clear memory of the shooting itself. His selective 'amnesia' remains a mystery.<sup>3</sup>

'Pro-Masetti' committees soon sprang up across the country, bringing together anarchists, republicans and socialists, as well as some Catholics. Campaigns proliferated in favour of Masetti, and other dissenting soldiers. His defence was taken up by the celebrated socialist lawyer Genuzio Bentini, who was admired and revered for his powerful oratory, and who also represented a socialist and fellow anti-militarist called Benito Mussolini.

According to the military code, Masetti should have been executed (shot in the back) but it was believed by the authorities that this would create a powerful martyr. An alternative solution was required. Two leading psychiatrists came to the rescue with a lengthy report, couched in obscure scientific language, which decided that Masetti's decision to shoot at the officers was not due to anarchism, or anti-militarism, but that Masetti was insane. He was, they argued, 'just a degenerate who reacted in a pathological way to the trauma of being called to arms and to the fact that his name was drawn by lot thus sending him to war'.<sup>4</sup> They also made reference to his appearance to justify their decision, measuring his head and body (his arms, for example, were described as 'monkey-like').<sup>5</sup> This diagnosis was useful for the state and the army, although it did little to silence the campaign in favour of Masetti, or the myths surrounding his act of rebellion. Pamphlets were published calling for his release: one was entitled 'Masetti has never been mad'.<sup>6</sup>

Masetti himself was silenced – shut away in a number of forbidding criminal asylums.

War and conscription divided Italians. Many were proud to fight for their country, whatever the cause, but huge numbers – possibly the majority – were not. Anti-militarism had been a constant feature of Italian society, as was militarism. But virulent debates on these themes took root and political form with the Libyan colonial war of 1911–12. Augusto Masetti's case was not forgotten, and his example was to re-emerge with force and passion in 1914, on the eve of a conflict which would lacerate the world and leave millions dead and injured. Masetti became an icon, for both sides. Fascism would first emerge around the fissures of these bitter and violent divisions – as both pro-war and radically anti-anti-war. Fascists judged Italians through their attitude to war.



# 1914

## INSURRECTION: RED WEEK

‘We don’t yet know if we will win, but we can be certain that the revolution has begun.’

Errico Malatesta, 17 June 1914<sup>1</sup>

‘People were killed for the sake of it ... shots were fired at will – seventy of them – just to prevent people going to a city where the Statuto [Italy’s original 1848 constitution] was being celebrated, which is a commemoration of constitutional liberty.’

*Utopia*, July 1914<sup>2</sup>

‘It was not a blind uprising, but an insurrection with precise objectives. The context was not revolutionary, but there was a widespread feeling of revolution, a desire, the expectation of something new.’

Benito Mussolini, July 1914<sup>3</sup>

Every year, on 7 June, Italy marked the creation (or ‘concession’) of its first constitution – the 1848 *Statuto Albertino* – which had laid the basis for a united Italy. This was a national, non-religious holiday, when the fatherland celebrated – essentially – itself, and its monarchy. Usually, across the country, there would be a series of patriotic demonstrations, military marches, and the waving of the national flag. But on 7 June 1914, tensions were running high. Pro-Masetti campaigns aimed to use this occasion to contest the nation’s right to fight wars.

Today, in the Central Archives in Rome, which are housed in a huge, fascist-built building on the edge of the city, there are vast numbers of files dedicated to individual 'subversives'. The so-called Casellario Politico Centrale is a key site for documents of this kind, organised by name and containing hundreds of thousands of individual files which run from the Italian liberal period, through fascism, and beyond. Usually, the more dangerous the person was considered by the Italian state, the bigger the file. Documents of all kinds are kept within folders and then stored in larger hard-edged box files. Some people's papers, exceptionally, take up more than one box file. Errico Malatesta's records stretch across *thirteen*.<sup>4</sup> As the historian Maurizio Antonioli has written: 'For the Italian government, Malatesta was the most feared of all.'<sup>5</sup>

Malatesta was an anarchist and a revolutionary – and by 1914 he was a legendary figure. For years, going back as far as the 1870s, he had tried to spark revolts in different places across Italy. Born in 1853, he was a diminutive, bearded figure, who dressed like the worker he was; age had not mellowed him and he remained a powerful speaker and writer. At the end of July 1913 Malatesta returned to Italy after a fourteen-year period of exile, which had followed an extraordinary maritime escape from internal exile on the remote island of Lampedusa in 1899.<sup>6</sup> Now he was back, and at the centre of events, once again.

It was almost as if Malatesta's mere presence was enough to cause a revolution. He had been imprisoned numerous times – and had taken on a mythical quality among the Italian left and the Italian working class – and, in an opposite way, within the state and the establishment. His appeal (and the fear of his supposed powers) went way beyond that of anarchism itself.

Malatesta chose to base himself in Ancona, on the eastern coast of Italy. For much of the twentieth century, this port city was a centre of radicalism and subversive thought and agitation. According to the authorities, there were 45,000 'subversives' in Ancona, out of a population of around 70,000 – including 780 anarchists, 20,000 or so Republicans, 7,000 socialists, 350 young socialists, 10 trade unionists and revolutionary syndicalism, and 7,000 'clericals' (who were strangely lumped together with the others).<sup>7</sup> Malatesta was soon immersed in anti-militarist activity, calling protest meetings to coincide with the 'Festa dello Statuto', in favour of Masetti and other soldiers who were suffering repression and torture due to their anti-militarist views and

actions. ‘This holy day,’ wrote Malatesta, ‘when the monarchy celebrates its splendours, should be transformed by the will of the people into a day of protests against the only and single institution which supports the monarchy: militarism.’<sup>8</sup> Banned by the authorities, the meetings went ahead in defiance of these orders.

\*

On 7 June 1914, in Ancona, it was pouring with rain, so much so that most of the military parades in the city were called off. That afternoon, a Sunday, an anti-militarist meeting and illegal demonstration were planned. One of the speakers was the young republican Pietro Nenni, who attracted ‘lively and unanimous applause’ from the 500 or so people in attendance. He was followed by Malatesta and others. After the meeting, at around 6.35 p.m., the relatively small crowd began to file away. A group began to sing ‘*l’Inno dei lavoratori*’ – the workers’ hymn – and started to march. Their route down a narrow street was blocked by *carabinieri*. The marchers felt trapped, with no obvious way out. There was pushing and shoving; stones were thrown. Then, amidst great confusion, a policeman discharged a shot in the air, presumably to try to disperse the demonstrators. In the panic that ensued, twelve *carabinieri* fired on the crowd itself. They thought, they later claimed, that they were under attack. Two demonstrators were killed on the street, one was fatally injured, and four others were hurt. The three dead were Attilio Giambrignoni, a twenty-two-year-old anarchist; and republicans Antonio Casaccia, aged twenty-four, and Nello Budini, who was just seventeen years old. Two dozen shots had been fired in total. Seventeen *carabinieri* were injured. News spread fast. It was another ‘proletarian massacre’ – to add to the long list of those killed by the state under ‘liberal Italy’ since the unification of the country in the 1860s.<sup>9</sup>

*Revolt!*

‘This ... revolution had no idea what its demands were, or what it desired.’

Gaetano Salvemini<sup>10</sup>

How would the trade union and socialist movement respond to the deaths in Ancona? Would a general strike be called? Without waiting for the answers to such questions, spontaneous protests broke out.

Shops pulled down their shutters, and put up signs which read: '*Chiuso in segno di protesta per la strage proletaria*' ('Closed in protest at the proletarian massacre'). 'The city,' one journalist reported, 'is like a corpse.' He continued: 'The working masses have occupied the centre of the city, tumultuously.'<sup>11</sup>

On 8 June, the day after the deaths, an unsigned editorial appeared in the Socialist Party newspaper, *Avanti!* Its content was incendiary:

Premeditated murder ... murder without extenuating circumstances ... there was a desire to punish Ancona, a hiding place for rebels. There was a desire to give a lesson, in blood, on behalf of the state and the men of order ... Malatesta, the unions, the site for the Socialist Congress, the Republican groups ... too much subversive news has been produced recently by this city ... tomorrow, when the news has spread across Italy, in the cities and the countryside, the response to the provocation will be spontaneous ... and we have a duty to support it and back it ... the news from Ancona affects us, we are exasperated ... the proletarian soul will be shaken.<sup>12</sup>

According to the journalist who wrote the article, *enough was enough*. The author of the piece was the editor of the paper – who was already well known for his vivid prose style, militancy and oratory. His name was Benito Mussolini.<sup>13</sup>

In the city of Ravenna, close to the east coast of Italy in the Romagna region, there had been tension in the air even before news filtered through about the deaths in Ancona. Thousands of rural workers entered the city on 10 June, some by boat. It seems that at a certain point a cry went up from the crowd to 'go to the prefecture', the seat of national power in most cities, as exercised through a centrally appointed prefect. Rumours abounded of revolutionary acts elsewhere, and of further casualties in Ancona. In front of the prefect's palace, in Piazza del Popolo, an angry crowd gathered. Bottles flew through the air and one hit a policeman called Giuseppe Miniagio, who later died in hospital of his injuries.<sup>14</sup>

Phone lines were cut, and the post office was invaded by the protestors. Others entered a church and religious furniture was used for barricades, with damage done to the altar. On 11 June the Prefect of Ravenna formally handed over his powers to the army in order, he

claimed, to re-establish public order. In the disturbances that followed, some soldiers were taken prisoner. Most notoriously, a certain General Agliardi was stopped and disarmed at a roadblock set up by strikers in Cervia in the province of Ravenna. He was later released unharmed, after five hours. This was to become the most famous (for the revolutionaries) and most outrageous (for the state) moment of what became known as 'Red Week'. Meanwhile, outlandish stories circulated including one that the king himself – Victor Emmanuel III – had fled Rome.<sup>15</sup>

In the town of Alfonsine in the province of Ravenna there was, without any doubt, a revolution. 'People were called to the square by the sound of horns;<sup>16</sup> a church and its priests were attacked and religious furniture piled on a vast bonfire. The priest, Don Tellarini, later described what he saw. 'Playing loudly with all their might the crowd occupied the square with their barbaric music, those dirges that the poor savages of Africa chant during their cannibal-like parties.'<sup>17</sup> Goods, food and wine were seized. A local monarchist club was attacked by agitators, portraits of the king and queen were thrown out of the window, as well as the billiard table. Church bells rang all night. The town hall was set on fire, its walls daubed with the slogan: 'Long live Masetti, down with the army'. On 21 June, 200 soldiers on horseback arrived to restore order.

During Red Week, one witness described how women in the factory town of Terni in Umbria 'filled their aprons with ashes; the mounted police came and they threw ashes into the horses' eyes'.<sup>18</sup> Another recalled: 'We were Terni's street urchins ... we broke into the station, we tore up the rails, overturned the freight wagons, so no trains could come through with ammunition or soldiers.'<sup>19</sup> The rail route from Rome to Ancona, which passed through Terni, was blocked by demonstrators. There was a three-day general strike.<sup>20</sup> Shops closed and put up signs saying: *Lutto operaio* ('Working class mourning'). Protests continued after the strikes were called off. 'A clear type of revolution' was taking place across a wide area: 'churches were burned, stations invaded by the mob, barricades [were built] in the streets and "Freedom Trees" [trees or poles carrying flags and radical slogans, following a tradition going back to the French Revolution] were raised in the centre of squares.'<sup>21</sup>

Workers also went on strike in Milan. 'Shopkeepers were forced by strikers to shut their businesses, [but] not without resistance,' recalled one observer. A cart carrying bricks was seized. The 'bricks were collected

and thrown at a train that was coming from Venice ... Soon after, a cavalry squadron charged the demonstrators. The police chief arrested seven people including the anarchist Aida Latini, who followed the agents to the police headquarters in Via Settembrini, waving a slipper in the air.<sup>22</sup>

In Naples, a general strike was called as news from Ancona filtered through. A socialist and trade unionist called Francesco Misiano handed out leaflets to railway workers which called on them to support the action: 'Comrade Railway Workers ... those who fail to take part in this struggle and sell their souls for a few coins, are trampling on human dignity. Long live the strike.'<sup>23</sup> In clashes in the city, four demonstrators died, at least three thanks to gunshots, including a sixteen-year-old worker called Pietro Raimondo on the evening of 11 June. His mother had no photo of her only son and requested one of his corpse to remember him by. Barricades went up in various parts of the city and there were mass arrests. Misiano was sacked from his job with the railways.<sup>24</sup>

Under pressure, the national union leadership had reluctantly agreed to call a general strike on 9 June.<sup>25</sup> But strikes were also organised and called locally by many of the 'Chambers of Labour' – territorial labour organisations – with the occasional support of railway workers. There was much debate over how long the strikes should last but as they spread, they would turn out to be the biggest series of such action ever seen in Italy. The newspaper *La Stampa* reported that in Ancona: 'The general strike is complete, absolute, and is extended to all public activities.'<sup>26</sup> Railways ground to a halt, preventing troops being moved towards the rebellion.

Soon large parts of the centre of the country were paralysed by the strikes, accompanied by a chaotic form of revolt which appeared, to some, like a revolution. In Ancona, one journalist wrote: 'The population is gripped by panic, there is widespread fear that things will get worse, many people have barricaded themselves in their own homes.' Errico Malatesta appeared to be in command, for a short while; as the report stated: 'The tired, but harsh figure of ... Malatesta roared in many meetings, and the anarchist agitator is in charge of the crowd at this moment with his characteristic eloquence which inspires emotions, pain, pity, rebellion.'<sup>27</sup> Even Malatesta himself was taken by surprise by the force and breadth of the insurrectionary wave.<sup>28</sup> Malatesta wrote

that 'the Romagna [region] is in flames'.<sup>29</sup> Later he claimed that: 'For a week we were in total charge.'<sup>30</sup>

It was said that at some point during Red Week, Ubaldo Comandini, a distinguished republican member of parliament, had stood up in a square, or a cafe, or perhaps even on the balcony of the town hall, in Cesena in central Italy, and proclaimed the Republic to the cheering crowds below.<sup>31</sup> He was said to have worn a suit and pince-nez, and sported a perfect moustache. The reality was rather more prosaic. Comandini had simply stated that, for a time, central government had lost control of parts of the Romagna region, including Cesena, where the communication lines had been cut. Nobody appeared to be in charge. It was a *de facto* Republic, but it was also very short-lived. Comandini actually spent most of his time during Red Week trying to calm protestors. He was quick to play down the extent of the movement in the days that followed, noting 'the absence of any action by the revolutionaries'. It felt more like a rebellion than a revolution. Churches were attacked in Cesena itself, and a customs post was burnt.<sup>32</sup> In other places priest's vestments were stolen, and the strikers wore them as a sign of both victory and humiliation. A clergyman in one town brandished a pistol to protect his church. In another, the water supply was cut off by demonstrators.

When the dust had settled, Comandini stated that 'it makes me smile when I hear talk of the proclamation of a Republic ... the Republic was a fact. There was no sign of the government and the city was in the hands of the people. If this is a republic, it existed for a few days.' In short, Comandini's 'proclamation of the Republic' was no more than a tale, a myth.<sup>33</sup> As Comandini himself said, without any sign of the state or government, a series of 'incredible stories' spread quickly. It felt as if we were heading, he said, for somewhere 'unknown'.

There were numerous examples of spontaneous organisation, with citizens' committees being set up. Order was often maintained by the Chambers of Labour, which became, for a time, and in some places, a kind of *de facto* state, 'the only authority that was recognised as such'.<sup>34</sup> Excessive force was not used to put down the rebellion, in part because the authorities weren't entirely sure they could rely on the army. But this was also perhaps a wise choice strategically, avoiding escalating the bloodshed and creating more martyrs. The cannons were not sent in, although it should not be forgotten that sixteen demonstrators were killed, and more than 600 injured.

During the uprising, the anarchists tried – paradoxically perhaps – to maintain some sort of order. On the one hand they were clear that: ‘This is no longer a strike, but a REVOLUTION’. But they also claimed: ‘We do not plan, for now, to abolish individual property ... there is no need to worry now if a hairdresser, for example, has served a client, or not, or if a shopkeeper has opened his shop.’<sup>35</sup> However, on 11 June the general strike was called off by the national union leadership by telegram. The trade union proclamation of 12/13 June read:

The aim for which we acted has been achieved, but the ideals for which we fight have still not been realised. A unitary committee has now been formed which will bring together the forces of subversion and prepare our future actions. Now let us all return to work, to our homes, satisfied with what we have achieved, proud of the threat which burns in our hearts. From midnight ... the strike is suspended!

Although there was local opposition to this order in many areas, almost as quickly as it began, the revolution fizzled out. Many later blamed the union leaders for their ‘sabotage’ of the revolution. Ludovico D’Aragona of the union federation later said: ‘we could not go out onto the streets of Milan without being booed and whistled at ... we were called traitors, sell-outs’.<sup>36</sup>

Red Week cemented the idea on the revolutionary left that a general strike was an appropriate response to attacks on the movement, and to violence from the state. This weapon would be used time and time again in the postwar period (with little success). Others criticised the uprising as a ‘revolution without a programme’ which, in the words of the (at that time) socialist Gaetano Salvemini, ‘didn’t know what it wanted or what to ask for’. But Salvemini also warned: ‘The riots ... are a sign of a crisis.’<sup>37</sup> Future Socialist Party leader Giacinto Menotti Serrati said that: ‘Stones thrown against the troops are not enough ... I do not think that the situation in Italy allows us to seriously contemplate a revolution.’<sup>38</sup> Serrati had been one of the first leaders to call off the strike action, in Venice, where he was secretary of the Chamber of Labour. Reformist socialist Claudio Treves called the protestors ‘hooligans’ and argued that they had nothing to do with the change socialists desired.<sup>39</sup> But Mussolini disagreed, writing that: ‘It was not a blind uprising, but

an insurrection with fairly precise aims. There wasn't a revolutionary situation, but there was widespread sympathy for a revolution – a desire, the expectation of something new.<sup>40</sup>

### *Escape*

Red Week was over and as the state forcefully reasserted its power, mass arrests took place all over the country. But where was Malatesta? The most spied upon and followed person in Italy, with all those files and police reports in Rome, had disappeared, much to the embarrassment of the police. Rubbing salt into the wounds of the state authorities, Malatesta soon gave an interview. He was in London, where he taunted the Italian state for failing to arrest him. He claimed that he had managed to slip past his guards, had stayed with a monarchist (to throw them off the scent) and had then taken a train to Switzerland.<sup>41</sup> He also analysed what had just happened in Italy. It wasn't, he declared, 'a movement that was prepared or desired ... but ... the revolution was about to happen'.<sup>42</sup> The decision to call off the strike, he said, had caused confusion. He stated he had not been 'the leader' of the revolt, which had, in fact, not produced any leadership at all.

Red week was a rebellion without a programme. It was inspired by anti-militarism and republicanism, by the acts of individuals such as Augusto Masetti, and was imbued with strong aspects of anti-clericalism. But what ideas was it promoting? Who was in charge? It had united (briefly) anarchists, trade unionists, socialists and republicans – but why? For the historian Marco Severini, 'a good part of central Italy was paralysed and isolated for a number of days, increasing a sense of utopia but also fears, exaggerating the role of agitators and militants who would soon be forgotten, and leaving a tragic trail of bloodshed which would prove to be a preview of the destruction of the world war'.<sup>43</sup> No one at the time was able to pinpoint its purpose with any coherence. It was a violent spasm, in anticipation and yet also protesting at the violence that was to come, and the sacrifices that would be made. Some two weeks later, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot dead in Sarajevo, sparking a series of events which would lead rapidly to a global conflict. The protagonists of Red Week quickly split in the face of war – some backed the conflict; others were radically opposed.



## 1915–18

### THE GREAT WAR

‘Everybody recognises that the war represents an historical break, in the sense that a whole series of questions which piled up individually before 1914 have precisely formed a “mound” modifying the general structure of the previous process.’

Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

‘Four years of pain, suffering, of violent conditioning, of contempt for your own life and that of the others, of enforced subservience, of compulsory discipline, have created an environment full of anger, hatred, passion and fury.’

Enrico Dugoni<sup>2</sup>

Allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary through the Triple Alliance of 1882, Italy initially remained neutral in the First World War, on the grounds that the alliance was a defensive arrangement. Then, on 24 May 1915, it declared war on Austria-Hungary. The decision was taken by the king and a minority of the cabinet, without the approval of parliament, after secret meetings in London at which the Entente powers promised that, in the event of victory, Italy would be able to annex the regions of Austria-Hungary largely populated by Italians.

Most Italians were opposed to joining the war, although an organised and violent minority had campaigned vigorously in favour. Over five million Italians were called up, and the conflict caused serious strain in a country

which had only recently been unified and whose population identified far more with their local village or region than with the nation. Most of the fighting took place around the Isonzo river in the north-east, but the front stretched west through Trentino and Alto Adige. The infamous and seemingly endless ‘battles of the Isonzo’ claimed 200,000 lives for an advance of twenty-five miles. In the trenches ‘the clear distinction between life and death’ collapsed.<sup>3</sup> It was also a ‘white war’, sometimes fought in the mountains at heights of over 3,000 metres, where more soldiers died from the cold than from Austrian gunfire.<sup>4</sup> Even today, more than a hundred years later, bodies are still pulled out of the melting glaciers every year; all are given military funerals. In August 1916, under pressure from France and Britain, Italy also declared war on Germany.

War divided Italians in violent and radical ways. That conflict, with its myths, ‘many histories’ and deep economic, social and political transformations, changed the face of Italian life.<sup>5</sup> Less than fifty years after its unification, Italy went through a brutal form of modernisation compressed into four years. Italy was an agrarian country when it entered the war in 1915. Its army was mainly drawn from rural areas (two-thirds of war orphans would come from rural backgrounds). Millions were uprooted from their land and forced to fight – underfed, badly supplied and ineptly led. The family, the ‘bedrock’ of Italian civil society, was ripped apart as men were conscripted and sent to the front, women entered the factories and peasants moved to the towns. The human cost was horrific.

Over three and a half years, nearly 600,000 soldiers in the Italian army were killed, and many thousands terribly injured. As a proportion of the population, these casualties were higher than Britain’s. Many Italian towns and villages were destroyed and thousands of people made homeless. Italian military justice was especially harsh. Since there was no great enthusiasm for the war (and a fair amount of open opposition), the tactic adopted by the generals was to terrify their troops into fighting. It isn’t known how many soldiers were executed in total; some were killed through the practice of decimation – the random shooting of one in ten troops – as an example to the others. By the end of the war, something like a million military trials had taken place – a figure that makes clear the failure of the harsh regime adopted by General Cadorna, commander-in-chief of the army until 1917. Mutinies were common and suppressed by force. More than a hundred summary executions took place at the front in a desperate attempt to keep the

troops in order and there were 150,000 desertions. Meanwhile, on the home front, things were beginning to disintegrate.

*Rice and bread: Milan and Turin in revolt, 1917*

Industrial transformation had brought women into factories and out of their homes in huge numbers. Female workers in wartime industries increased from 14,000 in 1914 to 198,000 in 1918.<sup>6</sup> In industrial Milan the role of women was profoundly altered by the war. Women entered the (mainly munitions) factories or took jobs on trams and buses, as the men left for the front. Industrial work was stressful and dangerous. There were over 30,000 industrial accidents in Milan in 1917 alone. Women, at the bottom of the scale, exhausted, underpaid and unskilled, were often the victims, and subjected to ridicule and harassment. When tensions in Milan reached fever pitch in May 1917, after two tough years of conflict and mobilisation, it was the women who moved first.

In May 1917 the temporary scarcity of the staple Milanese food – rice – was the spark. Protests swept across the province of Milan. The uprising began in textile factories, but these quickly developed more widely into riots against price rises.<sup>7</sup> One commentator described the demonstrators as being ‘masters of Milan for 24 hours’.<sup>8</sup> Soon the demonstrations took on an open anti-war stance and on 5 May thousands of women marched from the countryside to the north and into the city, forcibly closing factories producing war materials and arms. Despite mass arrests and repression with some women being prevented from entering the city, demonstrations continued. Strikes extended across the countryside and to industrial towns on the outskirts of Milan. There were public order disturbances, and factories were vandalised to cries of ‘Down with the war!’<sup>9</sup> Milan’s protests fizzled out, but the authorities had been warned. Three months later, in Turin across to the west of Italy, it was the breakdown of bread production and deliveries that caused a collapse of order. Italy’s other key industrial centre exploded into violent protests that threatened the entire home front sustaining the war.

On 22 August 1917, the bread failed to turn up in Turin. The authorities had known for some time that supply lines were under great pressure. Prices were rising and by the middle of the month the grain held in the port areas closest to Turin had run out.<sup>10</sup> Turin was central to the national war effort – producing munitions and equipment in its

numerous factories and workshops. The city's workers and their families needed to be fed, so they could produce arms. Many protestors, as in Milan, were women. When they discovered that there was no bread, all hell broke loose. As Teresa Noce, future communist leader and resident in Turin at the time, later wrote: 'It was the women who started everything.'<sup>11</sup> It was said that a large car had driven by, and someone from inside had shouted 'Let them eat biscuits'.<sup>12</sup> It was claimed that this was the catalyst for the revolt. 'So, let's eat the biscuits,' someone responded on 22 August, and another echoed that 'this time, the biscuits aren't just for the rich, we will eat them as well'.<sup>13</sup>

Groups of women and children began to attack bakeries and other stores. Soon the army was called in. Now Italy's troops were fighting on two fronts, internal and external. Noce remembered the outbreak of violence. 'We heard the first gunfire. Nobody slept that night. Everything had stopped, from the factories to the workshops to shops to transport ... barricades went up everywhere.'<sup>14</sup> There were reports of fraternisation between troops and demonstrators, but Antonio Gramsci, the Turin-based socialist and journalist, wrote after the war that 'we waited in vain for the soldiers to help us, but the soldiers were hoodwinked into thinking that the revolt had been provoked by the Germans'.<sup>15</sup>

Barricades went up and factories ground to a halt as the workers walked out. It felt very much like a revolution, but who were the leaders? There were none. Nobody was in charge. As Noce concluded: 'Without arms and without leadership, there was no way the uprising could win.'<sup>16</sup> A general strike was called for 23 August – 'All the factories were closed.'<sup>17</sup> Later, the then editor of *Avanti!*, Giacinto Menotti Serrati, was clear that 'this was not *our* movement'.<sup>18</sup> Lenin heard news of the revolt, and he wrote somewhat optimistically that 'there is no doubt that a world revolution is developing ... in Italy there has been an explosion of the masses in Turin'.<sup>19</sup>

As the revolt developed, and word got out as to what was happening, Serrati himself set off from Milan, where he was based, in an attempt to reach Turin. The two cities are less than a hundred and fifty kilometres apart, but it was wartime, and he was closely watched, with the authorities anxious to try and prevent him travelling. Serrati somehow made it to Chivasso, on the edge of Turin, on the morning of 24 August. He then walked towards the city to a place called Gassino (ten kilometres

away) and, after avoiding the clutches of the *carabinieri*, finally arrived in Turin that evening. By the next day, he was back in Milan.

Serrati had not come to lead a revolution. In fact, he attempted to calm things down and end the strike.<sup>20</sup> At no point did the socialist leadership see the possibility of the events of August 1917 in Turin leading to a wider revolution – just as they hadn't during Red Week in 1914. In retrospect, however, this was probably the most insurrectionary moment of the entire war on the domestic front. Gramsci later wrote: 'Those women workers and male workers who rose up in August in Turin, who armed themselves, fought and died like heroes, but they wanted the war to end with the defeat of the bourgeois Italian army and the victory of the proletarian class.'<sup>21</sup> Leaflets appeared which stated: 'Proletarian blood has been spilt, but not pointlessly' and which referred to the war with the words used by the pope on 1 August 1917 – as a '*strage inutile*' – a 'useless slaughter'.<sup>22</sup>

On the streets, in Turin, the revolt was crushed in blood. Largely unarmed crowds were fired upon by troops, again and again. Many of the dead had been shot in the head. Ambulances found it is too dangerous to pick up bodies and the injured. Food supplies were hampered still further by the spontaneous barricades and the chaos. The revolt reached its peak on 24 August. Machine guns were brought in by the army and as one eyewitness wrote, 'lead was spread everywhere'.<sup>23</sup> Official figures of the dead varied wildly, and to this day many believe that the number of casualties was far higher than the forty-one admitted at the time, although different figures are alluded to at various times. Gramsci vastly exaggerated the numbers in his postwar writing.<sup>24</sup> However, in the early 1970s the journalist Giancarlo Carcano went through the documents and death certificates and found that the official numbers were broadly correct.<sup>25</sup> Who were the forty-one dead? Most were, not surprisingly, striking workers. At least five women were killed, as well as three soldiers who died repressing the revolt. Some of the demonstrators had been armed. A state of war was declared in Turin – martial law, effectively. On Sunday 26 August, the revolt came to an end and the barricades were taken down.

### *Repression and trials*

Once the shooting was over, further repression was swift, with mass arrests in the working-class areas of the city. 'Those arrested were

beaten ferociously and packed onto lorries.<sup>26</sup> Ordinary people were picked up, seemingly at random. Many were prosecuted through the so-called 'quick trial' (*direttissimo*) process, which could be completed in a matter of days, a procedure reserved for 'exceptional' events. At least 822 people were arrested in the first wave and 326 were charged, with 264 found guilty after 'quick trials'. Some of those arrested were found to be deserters in hiding, and people faced a mix of civil and the harshest military justice.

Italy's authorities painted the revolt, or *moti* ('uprisings'), as a conspiracy whipped up by anti-war agitators and planned – or at the very least inspired – by socialists, anarchists and 'enemy powers'. To this end a series of socialist leaders were arrested and charged, often via military tribunals, with extremely serious crimes. Serrati was picked up in Rome on 29 May 1918, accused of 'indirect betrayal', and locked up for the rest of the war.

Thirteen people were finally called to trial in June 1918. An impressive group of left-wing lawyers was mobilised to defend Serrati and others, including the legendary socialist member of parliament, the bearded, tall, Giuseppe Emanuele Modigliani, brother of the famous painter. Serrati decided to stage a political defence. After a few delays, the trial finally began on 10 July. Prosecutors used speeches Serrati had made well before the revolt as 'evidence'. He had spoken in Turin on May Day in both 1916 and 1917, when his words were described as 'inflammatory'. But the key moment for the authorities was a meeting with representatives from revolutionary Russia who visited Italy in August, which it was claimed, improbably, was the trigger for the revolt itself (which broke out some days later). It was said that Serrati had called at that meeting for the people of Turin to: 'Rise up ... at the right moment' and had said that 'a spark is all that is needed'.<sup>27</sup>

At that infamous demonstration with Russian representatives on 13 August (the Bolshevik revolution, of course, had not yet happened), which was much picked over in the trial, Serrati had live-translated a speech by the Russian, Josif Petrovič Goldenberg. This was a big meeting, which some claim attracted around 40,000 people.<sup>28</sup> It is not clear if Serrati spoke good Russian, and he was charged with wilful mis-translation – of making a more incendiary speech than that actually given by the representative from revolutionary Russia. Reports of Serrati's 'free translation' stated that: 'He embellished Goldenberg's words whilst translating them.'<sup>29</sup> According to the journalist Giancarlo

Carcano: ‘He [Serrati] said that the Russians were in agreement with the Italian socialists in wanting the immediate end of the war, and that the Russian delegate was convinced of the imperialist aims of the Italian war, and concluded his speech with the cry “Long live the Italian Revolution” while inviting the Italian workers to copy the actions of their Russian comrades.’<sup>30</sup>

Serrati denied any connection between these meetings and the subsequent revolt, pouring scorn on the whole idea. In 1918, as the tide was turning their way, the socialists transformed the trial into a political opportunity. Serrati stated at the outset: ‘I am no expert in law, the law in my opinion is an expression of power. Today, you are in power and you are the law.’<sup>31</sup> He argued he had always been a socialist (‘I have expressed these ideas for 25 years’) and that being a socialist was not a crime in itself.<sup>32</sup> ‘I am accused of having translated the words of Goldenberg, badly.’<sup>33</sup> Serrati was also accused of ‘insurrection against the powers of the state’. He openly admitted his failure to lead. This had been a revolt which had broken out without any kind of socialist leadership – a bread riot: ‘it was a movement which had nothing to do with us’.<sup>34</sup>

‘I have had everything in my life,’ concluded Serrati, ‘as much as a modest militant could hope for. I have only one quality: my faith.’<sup>35</sup> A verdict was handed down on 2 August. Serrati was found guilty. Despite the fact that the judges described him as ‘a willing traitor’ he was given a relatively light sentence of three years and six months. Modigliani was ‘unable to halt the bile of the judges ... who once again showed themselves to be backward and conservative’.<sup>36</sup> Serrati only spent a little more time in prison before an amnesty saw his release in February 1918 from Turin’s Le Nuove prison.

Serrati went back to editing *Avanti!*, the socialist daily whose print run rose massively in post-Great War Italy. While in prison he had continued to write for the paper, using the byline ‘N.48’, his cell number. His respect among the masses rose hugely due to his trenchant opposition to the war and the lively nature of his journalism, and the fact that he declined to become a parliamentary deputy. He later wrote that the trial of 1918 had been ‘the most beautiful moment of my life as a rebel’.<sup>37</sup>

August 1917 in Turin soon entered the pantheon of ‘what if’ moments in the history of the Italian left.<sup>38</sup> *If only* there had been leadership, *if only* the proletariat had been armed, *if only* the troops had been willing not to

shoot on the demonstrators, as in previous moments of insurrection and rebellion in Italian history. As with Red Week in 1914, Turin 1917 was seen by some as yet another missed opportunity, another betrayal.

CAPORETTO AND VITTORIO VENETO: FROM  
DEFEAT TO VICTORY, 1917–18

‘Italy is moving towards a situation with two great parties: those who were there [in the war] and those who weren’t ... the millions of workers who will return to the furrows of the fields after having been in the furrow of the trenches will create a synthesis between class and nation from an antithesis.’

Benito Mussolini, ‘Trincerocrazia’, 15 December 1917<sup>39</sup>

When Austrian troops broke through Italian lines in October 1917 at a place called Caporetto, on the border with what is now Slovenia, it felt like a catastrophe. Having done so, they advanced towards Venice. A chaotic retreat saw large parts of Italian territory invaded. Hundreds of thousands of Italian prisoners were taken, and arms and supplies abandoned. Refugees flooded out of the occupied zones and fled from the cities close to the new front line. Many more abandoned their arms. The apocalyptic aftermath of defeat was described vividly by Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*.<sup>40</sup> The writer Carlo Emilio Gadda, who took part in the chaotic retreat and was imprisoned for months by the Austrians, said at the time: ‘My moral life is over,’ and later: ‘The shame of the defeat became increasingly strong. I think about history: I will be placed among the dishonourable.’<sup>41</sup>

General Cadorna blamed his own soldiers, accusing them of a ‘military strike’. In a letter he wrote that ‘the men are not fighting’.<sup>42</sup> One of the generals held to account for the devastation at Caporetto was Luigi Capello, who had become known as ‘the butcher’ for his activities in the Libyan war.<sup>43</sup> Capello was also ‘active as a Freemason’.<sup>44</sup> He has been described as ‘dynamic’ and ‘alarming’ ... ‘bulking larger than life ... a plain-speaking warrior, learned in the arts of war, implacable in attack’.<sup>45</sup> Capello essentially saw his troops as cannon fodder. As the historian Mark Thompson writes, the ‘main effect’ of Capello’s tactics on his troops was ‘exhaustion and resentment, mounting into hatred’.<sup>46</sup> Capello, as we shall see, would go on to play an unexpected role in

post-Great War Italy. In Rome, the government fell. Caporetto, and the reaction to it, had deepened the violent fractures which the war had already opened up in Italian society.

### *General Graziani*

To 'keep order' behind the lines, in the wake of Caporetto, another general, Andrea Graziani – well known for his brutality – was provided with his own firing squad. He took to his task with some gusto. As Thompson writes: 'He had 19 men shot in the back for sundry offences on the morning of the 16 November alone, another man, Alessandro Ruffini, was shot for saluting without taking his pipe out of his mouth.'<sup>47</sup> After the war, *Avanti!* ran a vigorous campaign against Graziani, citing these and other incidents.<sup>48</sup> Graziani later said that his decision to have Ruffini shot was 'a necessary if harsh act which helped to persuade the other 200,000 stragglers that in that moment there was a stronger power than their anarchy'.<sup>49</sup> General Graziani became, for many, a 'symbol of repression'.<sup>50</sup> But for others, such as the future *squadrista* and fascist, Ferruccio Vecchi, he was 'an unalloyed hero'.<sup>51</sup>

Two trials were held relating to these events after the war, but Graziani was cleared in both and he became a powerful figure under fascism. He died in February 1931, aged sixty-seven. His body was found at dawn, near a railway line close to a new station under construction in Prato, Tuscany, by railway workers; he was dressed in black and his feet were close to the rails. A train ticket was found in his jacket pocket. He also had 6,000 lire on him, in cash. It was a mysterious death, not least because the body was found on the other side of the tracks from where his train had been travelling. His coat, bag, hat and umbrella were left on the train. What had happened? Had he opened a wrong door by mistake? The liberal daily *Corriere della Sera* wrote that after Caporetto, Graziani was a 'hero' who had managed to 'give demoralised troops a sense of strength and faith, and the ability to resist the enemy gain'.<sup>52</sup> Judicial enquiries concluded that Graziani's death had been 'accidental', although doubts remained. He had been the only passenger in the three first-class carriages on the train.<sup>53</sup> The press claimed that 50,000 people attended his funeral in Verona.<sup>54</sup>

In 2005 the name of Alessandro Ruffini (the man shot on Graziani's orders for saluting while smoking a pipe) was added to those of

forty-nine other victims inscribed on the war monument in his city, Castelfidardo in central Italy. This rehabilitation was organised by the local council, after a book appeared which detailed the tragic events of 1917. It had taken nearly ninety years for the pointless death of Ruffini to become part of the official memory of the war.

\*

After Caporetto, much of the blame for territorial losses were laid at the door of the so-called ‘defeatists’. Italy’s army regrouped and dug in on the banks of the Piave river. Meanwhile, a new military hierarchy was put in place. General Cadorna’s leadership ended with the debacle of Caporetto and he was replaced by General Armando Diaz. A vast patriotic effort on the home front began with the aim of preventing further encroachments into Italy, invaded for the first time since unification. Some of the harsh conditions and absurd disciplinary methods used earlier in the war were toned down. Big promises were made to the troops, including land, bread and – eventually – peace.

The fact that the Italian army was able to reorganise and win a victory at the battle of the Piave river in June 1918 (thanks in part to the internal collapse of the Austro-Hungarian armies) could not wipe away the shame of Caporetto. *Fare caporetto* came to mean ‘to run away quickly’ and Caporetto became a synonym for ‘disaster’.<sup>55</sup> Despite the eventual victory, the retreat in 1917 had crystallised divisions over the war, and gave birth to stereotypes about Italian soldiers that have not faded away even today.

The battle of Vittorio Veneto, close to the Piave river, brought a final Italian triumph. An armistice was signed on 3 November 1918, but celebrations were muted: Italy had lost hundreds of thousands of men for very little extra territory, and the idea that it had been a ‘mutilated victory’, in the words of the nationalist writer and poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, soon took hold. This was a victory which came at momentous human cost. Soon the conflict would move back to the home front, as the soldiers returned from the trenches.

### *Divided Italians*

At the time of the armistice, over two and a quarter million men were still under arms. Half a million Italians would die of ‘Spanish flu’ in

the postwar pandemic. Deep fissures ran right through the nation. Italy was both made and broken by the war, which left behind deep physical traces – trenches, barbed wire, unexploded bombs, bullet holes, rubble, and of course corpses. War had created a violent generation, and not just among the soldiers themselves. Pacifism and revolt on the home front saw the rise of Italian Bolsheviks, who wanted to ‘do as in Russia’.

### *Defeatists*

On the one side of the divide were those implacably opposed to the war. These individuals were often referred to disparagingly as *disfattisti* – defeatists. Ercole Bucco, Pietro Farini, Francesco Misiano, Giuseppe Modigliani and Giacomo Matteotti were all hostile to the war. All spoke out against the conflict. All became hate figures for their anti-war radicalism, and targets of violence and judicial repression, but also immensely popular for the same reasons. All became symbols of the deep tensions opened up by the conflict, and would go on to be key figures after 1918. They will play a central role in this book.

Born in 1884 in the deep south of Italy – in Ardore in Calabria – Francesco Misiano joined the Socialist Party in 1908 after moving to Naples. During Red Week in 1914 he was involved in the general strike in the city, and was sacked from the railways, where he worked, as a result. Misiano was in Turin in 1915 during the first mass protests against the war and he later continued his struggle within the army itself, as a conscript, carrying out open, anti-militarist agitation among the troops in his barracks. For this, he suffered harassment and torture, was threatened with being sent to the front line and to the most dangerous zones of the conflict, and was even locked up in a psychiatric hospital for a while.

After escaping from his barracks in Cuneo in the north of Italy, he was accused of desertion. As a consequence, Misiano fled to Switzerland and Germany (he faced execution in Italy) and only returned home in 1919. In Switzerland he met Lenin and the two men became friends. Lenin returned to Russia in 1917 to lead the revolution. In Germany, Misiano took part in an armed revolutionary uprising which led to his imprisonment there. He became a prominent political figure, a go-between with personal and political connections to the Bolsheviks and Lenin himself. At one crucial point he was even entrusted with a letter by Lenin to bring back to Italy.<sup>56</sup>

Misiano's anti-war militancy was public and radical, and he personified radical anti-militarism in wartime and postwar Italy. 'When the intervention in the war was close, in 1915,' he later stated, 'I was one of many thousands who fought against that intervention by Italy. I spoke in numerous meetings in Piedmont, Liguria, Tuscany, Lombardy and you were aware of this, the police knew about it, the government, everyone knew what was my attitude to the war ... in the face of the war I fought against the war.'<sup>57</sup>

He made no secret of his hatred of a conflict that had caused such deep rifts among Italy's citizens. Standing as a candidate in the 1919 elections (while still behind bars in Germany) he was elected with a large number of votes in both Naples and Turin, despite the fact that he had been unable to campaign. Soon afterwards, Misiano's election was validated. He became famous and infamous at the same time: popular among the revolutionary base and among workers; hated by many others.

Giuseppe Emanuele Modigliani came from a distinguished family. He was often known simply as Mené. It was impossible not to recognise him. His beard ('a prophet's beard') was long, and by 1919, mainly white.<sup>58</sup> He was Jewish, from the port town of Livorno – and he worked, like so many socialist intellectuals of that time – as a lawyer. A socialist reformist, he was a legendary orator; it was said that he had 'a tenor's voice'. Arrested many times, he was idolised by the working-class base, although often marginalised by the ideological battles within the party before and after the First World War.

A pacifist, Modigliani opposed Italy's intervention in wars in both 1911 and 1915, which made him into a hate figure for many – a marked man. Anti-Semitic propaganda was already circulating in his home town of Livorno around the time of the Libyan war, which depicted him as mixture of a Turk and a stereotypical Jew. Along with other defeatists, he was blamed by many for the near defeat of the Italian army at Caporetto in October 1917, and was referred to disparagingly as 'The Marquis of Caporetto' (a title that was also used for his fellow socialist, Claudio Treves, who was also Jewish).<sup>59</sup> He duly became a target for violence. In November 1917 posters were put up naming him and containing threats: 'We will avenge the shame we have suffered with their blood.'<sup>60</sup>

A month later, in Rome, Modigliani was recognised in a restaurant by two men who shouted that he should be 'chucked out of the place,

he is not worthy to be here'. A scuffle ensued, 'during which the parliamentarian claimed he was grabbed by his beard'.<sup>61</sup> Subsequently, he was attacked or threatened on numerous occasions. For his supporters, Modigliani's beard was very important: it made him seem like 'a priest from [the opera] *Aida*'.<sup>62</sup> To others it was seen as symbolic of his power and masculinity – a much sought-after trophy for fascist squads, who pledged to use it 'to clean Mussolini's boots'. Fascists and nationalists tended to be clean-shaven or sport small goatees or just moustaches.

\*

Ercole Bucco was a potent speaker and an incendiary agitator who first emerged as a radical in the small agricultural centre of Cento, south-west of Ferrara, and then in the city of Bologna. Thin, with small, rimmed glasses ('he always wears gold-rimmed glasses')<sup>63</sup> and a moustache, there was something of the dandy about him. Born in 1886, he grew up in Cento and joined the Socialist Party at a young age. Like many socialists, and Italians in general, he experienced emigration and was constantly on the move. In 1912 he became secretary of Cento's Camera del Lavoro and was soon making a name for himself with his radical organising powers, energy and oratory. His potted biography in his police file referred to him as 'lively and impulsive' but also educated and intelligent, and a 'tireless' organiser as well as 'violently anticlerical and anti-militarist'.<sup>64</sup> In a 1914 pamphlet he wrote that 'The cause of the war is a barbarian cause; the cause of peace is a cause of civilisation.'<sup>65</sup> From 1915–19 he served as a corporal and driver in the army.<sup>66</sup>

Entire cities, at times, seemed to oppose the war. Pietro Farini, who ran a chemist store, was a leading socialist in Terni. In 1915, he had been attacked by pro-war demonstrators. But during the war, on May Day 1917, he called on the peasants to light fires 'to salute their sons who are in the war, and call for an end to the massacre'.<sup>67</sup> In his unpublished autobiography, Farini remembered that: 'At the end of a beautiful day ... at dusk, in the valley, on the hills, on the mountainsides, we saw the fires rise, dozens, hundreds, thousands, ... toward Rome ... toward the Abruzzi, on the mountains ... on the road to the north where machine guns were sowing death among Italy's sons ... Terni seemed enfolded in a huge fire ... a sea of lights out of which [the people] voice their sharp call for peace.'<sup>68</sup>