

1922: Mussolinis march on Rome

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Fascism came to power in Italy at the point when the real revolutionary period in Italy between 1920 and 1922 (the 'biennio rosso') had begun to wane. Under the centrist leadership of Antonio Gramsci and Amedeo Bordiga, Italian workers had not forged an alliance with the peasants and land workers and were unable to take the post-war factory occupations and control of production beyond the point of dual power.

With strikes continuing to disrupt the economy and with the centrist leadership hesitating, mass sectors of the petit bourgeoisie became exasperated and swelled the ranks of fascism. Since the political representatives of the bourgeoisie were wracked by a crisis of authority and were effectively unable to restore order, it was left up to the fascists to offer their solution.

King Vittorio Emanuele III, stated that in October 1922 there were about 100,000 fascists ready to converge on Rome and unleash a civil war in the bid for power. He claimed that these circumstances forced him into calling on Mussolini to form a government. The fact is there were between 10,000 and 25,000 black shirts, most of whom were unarmed, positioned about 50 miles from the capital and with no connections to the fascist military command in Perugia. They could have easily been crushed by the army.

But the monarch decided to make use of the powers granted to him by the constitution, and didn't sign a decree from the then prime minister, Luigi Facta, calling for the suppression of the black shirts by the army. The latter, whose loyalty to the king was unquestioned, now had the 'legal' green light to do what its generals were already disposed to do - stand aside and allow Mussolini to come to power.

In his first parliamentary speech as prime minister, Mussolini cajoled, ridiculed, insulted and threatened the liberal parliamentarians. For their part, they listened in silence, cowering and cringing and uttering not a word. Then, showing their true 'democratic' colours, they voted overwhelmingly in favour of granting full powers to the fascist government for a whole year. All this was despite the fact that Mussolini had only 7 per cent of parliamentary seats.

Mussolini thanked them by immediately consigning them to the dustbin of history, depriving the liberal bourgeoisie of all political power and putting an end to the rule of prattling parliamentarians. But Mussolini's victory resulted from a coup d'état on the part of the king and the army, formally sanctioned by the bourgeois parliament.

It has been described by some Italian historians as a compromise between fascism and the liberal state. This helps explain the immediate demobilisation of the black shirts, and the nature of the first Mussolini government, which included only four fascists, all the others being liberals, Popular Party Catholics and even two social democrats.

But, after the murder of socialist Giacomo Matteoti by fascist black shirts in June 1924, and the announcement of the dictatorship by Mussolini in his speech of January 1925, fascism began to consolidate and to construct the corporate state - that is, crush all independent working class

organisations, its parties and unions.

Just what did Italian fascism represent and what were its roots? To justify the fact that it disarmed communist partisans and helped re-establish the democratic credentials of the very state that had terrorised workers for 20 years, Stalinism peddled the notion that fascism was the expression not of the productive industrial bourgeoisie, but of parasitic finance capital and agrarian interests.

While the fascists did defend the great landowners and Mussolini was terrified of the very notion of agrarian reform, his regime represented the interests of Italian imperialist capitalism. Fascism was the fulfilment of the imperialist ambitions of its ruling class from around the turn of the century and reached its full expression in the First World War.

For fascism, the First World War represented the 'regeneration' of Italy through the spilling of blood, a sacrifice that should have guaranteed the acquisition of the soil on which that blood had been spilt. The black shirts worn by the paramilitary squads symbolically recalled the military values of the special assault troops (Arditi) formed between 1917 and 1918.

These had been made up mainly of low-life criminals and of self-

aggrandising anti-democratic petit bourgeois intellectuals who claimed that they had fought and won the war on their own and therefore had an automatic right to political power.

The fascists cultivated a mythology about Italy's role and ambitions in the war, stressing lofty ideals. In reality, Italy's war was fought and 'won' by a mainly peasant army which was profoundly opposed to the conflict. The 'ideals' for which they died were control of the Balkans, sectors of northern Africa and Asia Minor.

Although fascism could only come to power on the back of the defeat of the post-war revolutionary working class assault on crisis-ridden capitalism, recent research is beginning to show that fascism emerged ideologically, programmatically and, though to a much lesser extent, even organisationally during the war itself.

Under the leadership of Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni and Alfredo Rocco, the Italian National Association (INA) diffused a nationalist imperialist ideology based on the 'productive' bourgeoisie. The INA argued that only through expansion could Italy's production and emigration problems be solved. It emerged around 1900 following Italy's disastrous defeat in 1896 at the hands of the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik at Adua in the disputed territory of Eritrea. On that occasion, Italy's pretensions to imperialist grandeur met head on with a determined enemy, with Italian military-industrial weakness and with the lack of support from the Italian population that for the most part hated the army.

The nationalist imperialists proposed that since the nature of never-ending struggles abroad demanded increased unity at home, what was needed was a well-organised and disciplined hierarchical social system that did away with internal democracy and which crushed the 'internal enemy'.

Class struggle and socialist terminology were still demagogically employed, but this was projected onto the terrain of the struggles between imperialist powers: the 'proletarian nation' of Italy was to go into battle against the 'demoplutocratic' powers of Britain, France and America, all of whom had divided up the world without, including Italy.

The extent to which this reactionary programme found support from the industrial and commercial classes is seen when Corradini's newspaper, *Idea Nazionale*, went daily in 1914. The board of directors consisted

of Corradini and four industrialists, the most important of whom was Dante Ferraris, vice-president of Fiat and president of the Lega Industriale.

In February 1923, just four months after the fascist rise to power, the Italian National Association dissolved into the National Fascist Party and Corradini and Rocco noted that the fusion was made possible because of a 'unity of ideals'. It was really a recognition of the fact that they represented the same reactionary interests.

Since October 1914, Mussolini had been financed by monopoly capital and large landowner interests and had been conducting a ferocious campaign of lies, insinuation and threats against the Italian Socialist Party. He received financial support from arms manufacturers such as Ansaldo in Genoa. When the first fascist meeting was held in Milan in March 1919 it was in the headquarters of the Industrial and Commercial Alliance. It was claimed at that meeting that Italy had been robbed of the territorial fruits of its 'victory' at the Paris peace conference.

It was the myth of the 'mutilated victory', one which had been tried on following Eritrea and again, though to a lesser degree, during Italy's imperialist adventure in Libya (1911-12). This was an anti-socialist and pro-imperialist mobilising myth which coincided perfectly with the strategic interests of Italian capitalism in the long-term preparation for the renewal of inter-imperialist war.

It was therefore of profound significance that on taking office in 1922 Mussolini personally took over the foreign and internal ministries, giving himself powers of domestic repression and ambitions for imperial conquest; Mussolini personified the project of crushing internal resistance to increase industrial production in preparation for ongoing war.

As early as 1919 he had called on Germany to sign the Versailles treaty, 'guilt clause' and all, so as to get the thing over with and prepare along with Italy to settle the scores left over from the recently concluded conflict.

In his writings on fascism, Leon Trotsky argued that fascism's historical mission in the epoch of imperialism was reducible to the political expropriation of the bourgeoisie in order to better re-organise capitalist society, by smashing the organisations of the working class, in preparation for imperialist war.

The coup d'état of October 1922 represented the beginning of the Italian bourgeoisie's long-term bid for imperialist predominance. Working class organisations had to be crushed in order to maximise industrial production, and whole generations of youth who would be the cannon fodder of the future war had to be prepared not just physically but ideologically.

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