

# Review: The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini

The importance of checking references

Anarcho

June 15, 2005

The rise of fascism in Italy is a subject of interest to anarchists as Mussolini's rise cannot be detached from the *biennio rosso*, the two red years of 1919 and 1920. Italy was on the verge of social revolution, reaching a peak with the factory occupations of 1920. Fascism was a response to this, a "*preventive counter-revolution*" (to use Luigi Fabbri's expression).

Unfortunately, there are few decent books on this period in English. This made Tom Behan's "*The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini*" (Bookmarks, 2003) potentially very important. It claims to be the about the "*Arditi del Popolo*" (AdP), the world's first anti-fascist movement which, while managing to defeat Mussolini's Black Shirts on numerous occasions, is rarely gets into the history books. However, being the SWP, the book is riddled with inaccuracies and distortions. These, ironically, are easily identified simply by reading the references Behan himself provides. And, being the SWP, the worse relate to the anarchists and syndicalists -- ironically, as these were the only groups who supported the AdP wholeheartedly and, doubly ironically, the only people who publicly advocated the "united front" tactic Behan champions.

This book itself is not all bad. The actual accounts of the development of the AdP and specific (successful) fights against the Black Shirts in Rome, Parma and Sarzana presents the English speaking world with much new material. It is a shame you have to wade through so much crap to get to it. He also correctly shows fascism is a defence of capitalism against a rebellious working class, the state protection of the Black Shirts, the links between the fascists and the police and the funding provided by industrialists and landlords. And he is right in stressing that fascism could have been stopped and in placing the AdP at the centre of any attempt to do so. However, this should not detract from the major limitations in Behan's book, namely that it is ideologically driven and utterly unreliable on the dynamics of the period and so any lessons to learn from it.

Factual errors abound. As an example, he asserts that anarchism in the 1870s was "more attuned to the needs of the peasants" and that it "was concentrated in the towns and countryside of the South, and had relatively little following in the northern cities." While this may reflect Marxist dogma, the facts are radically different. According to one of his own references, Italian anarchism's real stronghold at this time was north central Italy, with the majority of members being artisans and workers. The peasantry had the least representation.

Then there are the omissions. He makes no mention of the Italian Anarchist Union, the twenty thousand strong anarchist federation with a daily newspaper which played a key role in the *biennio rosso*. Anarchists only appear as “individuals” and never as part of an organisation. He also forgets to mention (like Bob Black) that the “surprisingly large number of revolutionary syndicalists” whom Mussolini “found common ground with” after the war were Marxists (according David Roberts, one of his, and Black’s, references). Similarly, he downplays that Mussolini had been a leading left-wing Marxist before the war, dismissing him as a “demagogue” with “superficial radicalism.” How he managed to rise so far in the Socialist Party to begin with is left unasked.

His most outrageous claim, however, is that “semi-anarchist, semi-revolutionary syndicalist USI federation ... with its main stronghold in the rural areas of the Po valley ... therefore played a relatively minor role in the big industrial disputes” of the *biennio rosso*. Behan does provide a reference, namely a 1963 academic study called “*The Italian Labor Movement*” but fails to explain why the reader should prefer this source to subsequent works by Gwyn Williams, Carl Levy and Martin Clark (all of which he uses as references) which focus directly on the factory occupations. Perhaps because these works show that it was the libertarians who first raised the idea of factory occupations and played the leading role in 1920?

It is understandable why Behan should rewrite history so. His book shows the absolute failure of Marxism (in all its guises). Looking at the Italian Socialist Party, it proved Bakunin right, not Marx and Engels, by becoming as bureaucratic and reformist as he had predicted. He denounces the “Socialists’ inability to provide strong leadership,” yet he fails, unlike anarchists at the time, to link this to the hierarchical leadership so beloved by Marxists. The irony of calling for “strong” leadership in a book about resisting fascism also seems lost on him!

This blindness is repeated in his discussion of the Italian Communist Party (PQ). He deplores its actions and its leadership, yet never asks basic questions about what it says about Leninism. He states that “many PC1 members used their common sense and joined the AdP” against their party’s wishes and the despite “feedback from below” the “PCI Executive Committee dug its heels in.” Why, if the Leninist party is most democratic ever, did the PCI pursue its policy against the wishes of its members? And if Bordiga was so at odds with the membership then why did they (“often the most politically sophisticated activists”) support him by an overwhelming majority in 1922 and repeatedly elect him as leader?

This is the key problem with the book. While Behan claims that the AdP “forms the central part of the book, the real focus is on the Communist Party. He discusses the ins and outs of its internal politics and its relations with Moscow far more than giving a serious account of the problems facing the AdP, how it organised, how confronted fascism and its relations with other anti-fascist forces. Unsurprisingly, when Behan does discuss the politics of the AdP, he rarely does it justice. He states, for example, that “they were still influenced by the ideas of D’Annunzio and therefore nationalism” before quoting their first manifesto which clearly stated that “We reject the manipulations and greed of patriotism, which takes pride only in its race. We avoid all nationalist scheming.” If Behan gets such basic points wrong, it is fair to say that his attention is less than focused on the AdP!

Pondering the actions of the PC1 leadership he tries to explain this by the party being young (infantile?) as well as being “much smaller” than the Socialist Party. He then adds that “it also had to contend with a very large anarchist movement.” This “context” allows some of its “suspicion and sectarianism” to be “understood.” Is he really suggesting that it was anarchist sectarianism that caused the PCI leadership to reciprocate? But that does not fit with years of anarchist argu-

ments for a united front. Initially raised by libertarians in January 1919 when Armando Borghi, anarchist secretary of the USI, proposed a “united revolutionary front,” it was rejected by the Socialist trade union. In mid-September 1920, the USI sponsored an “interproletariat” convention in which the PSI refused to participate. Behan is silent on this.

He does quote Malatesta’s appeal for unity against fascism made in May 1922, while ignoring previous libertarian calls (and Marxist responses to them). Given that he argues that the tragedy was that the “Communist and Socialist left never came together around an enlarged AdP to form a united front against fascist attacks,” this silence is strange. Particularly as the anarchist policy would have worked. The successful resistance to fascism in Parma and elsewhere was due to the application of libertarian ideas of a revolutionary united front.

In spite of lack of evidence and official hostility, Behan tries his best to paint the PC1 as the mainspring of the AdP. While acknowledging that “its membership came from many different political traditions” he asserts not only that the “majority were probably Communists” but also “if they continued to engage in politics they generally became Communists”! What is it? And how could the PC1 have “entered the AdP en masse” if they were “probably” the majority? And if the majority of the AdP were communists, why did the PC1 leadership oppose it? He even selectively quotes Gramsci, conveniently forgetting that he considered the party leadership’s attitude correct as it “corresponded to a need to prevent the party members from being controlled by a leadership that was not the party’s leadership.” Behan’s contradictions can only be explained by the obvious fact that the “majority” in the AdP were not “probably” communists at all. Significantly, the strongest working-class resistance to Fascism was in places with a strong anarchist tradition, a fact Behan ignores.

Perhaps the problems with the historical accuracy of Behan’s account could be forgiven if he managed to draw correct conclusions from this period but he does not. He states that the anticapitalist demonstrations “have brought people together, and taught them the importance of having hundreds of thousands of people on the streets - of safety in numbers.” Yet his example, Genoa, does not prove this as large numbers did not stop the police attack! If the rise of Mussolini can be said to show anything it is that “safety in numbers” is not enough.

Incredibly he asserts that the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) has “some similarities” to the AdP. What an insult to the AdP! The AdP was rooted in working class life and it is precisely such links that anti-fascists need to rebuilt. Yet Behan seems to reject this, arguing that the class based politics of the 1920s were a mistake as the “sterile verbal extremism” of the PSI resulted in “a practical refusal to make common cause with any ‘progressive bourgeois’ elements.” By 1921, he argues, the working class “was now on the defensive and needed allies. This meant creating alliances on the ground, even outside the working class.” In other words, while attacking the “Popular Front,” his vision for the AdP and ANL, is precisely that. What else do you call a mish-mash of individuals and tendencies united by the lowest common denominator of being “outraged and disgusted by fascism?”

Fascism needs to be fought using revolutionary socialist ideas, not the ANL’s “two simple strands”, namely “the exposure of people pretending to be democrats as Nazi Hitler-lovers” and “militant campaigning to ensure that the Nazis never gain a stable foothold in society.” This does not present an alternative to fascism and, moreover, can boil down to supporting New Labour (or even the Tories). Given that these parties are responsible for maintaining the social problems that fascists try to use to scapegoat others, the message is that “anti-fascism” means supporting the status quo.

Behan does, of course, pay lip service to the need for anti-fascism to be relevant to working class people, yet this is not seen as being at the core of anti-fascism as it not one of the “two simple strands.” He patronising states that “a revolutionary party is needed to educate and organise together with workers.” Thus the working class (like the AP) is considered the steam which the engineers of revolution use to implement their ideologically correct principles. Rather than a socialism rooted in, and growing out of, working class life and struggles, we have a “socialism” which the working class must be “educated” into following.

Little wonder that armed with such an elitist and patronising attitude the SWP and its fronts have been so ineffectual against the BNP. Rather than present a working class socialism, the SWP is pursuing an essentially conservative agenda and fails to explain the class argument against fascism. Little wonder that its interventions have meet with so little success -- in spite of leafleting against the BNP, people still voted for them. Clearly labelled them “Nazi Hitler-lovers” does not work. Fascism will only be defeated when a viable working class socialism exists -- one based on self-management, direct action and solidarity (i.e. anarchism). As the resistible rise of Italian Fascism shows.

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