

# Lessons from the Rise of Mussolini, 100 Years On

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*One hundred years ago, in October 1922, Benito Mussolini's paramilitary blackshirts marched on the Italian capital to demand the dissolution of the government of Prime Minister Luigi Facta. The March on Rome is the foundational myth of fascist power. Through this daring act, so the story goes, the strongman Mussolini installed himself as head of the Italian government.*

Yet the march itself was a farce. Mussolini's fascist forces numbered only a few thousand and, armed mostly with sticks, were scattered and bogged down in mud and rain. They were vastly outnumbered and outgunned by government troops in the capital. And Mussolini, the "man on horseback" himself, hid in a barricaded office near the Swiss border.

Despite the obvious weakness of the fascists, the government mounted only symbolic resistance to the coup. "Everybody knew perfectly well that the troops would refuse to take any forcible action whatever against the Fascisti, with whom they were in sympathy", the British ambassador observed. Less than 24 hours later, King Victor Emanuele appointed Mussolini prime minister. When the new dictator's troops finally reached Rome, they entered in a victory parade.

For all the theatrics of the March on Rome, Mussolini didn't take power against the will of the ruling class, but with its blessing. The fascists' road to power was paved by tolerance, the outright collaboration of the police and politicians, and lavish financial backing from industrialists. The Italian ruling class welcomed Mussolini because its members viewed the fascists as a solution to several years of crisis and class struggle that had put in question their own rule.

The First World War had turned the country into a tinderbox. Nearly 6 million Italians had been drafted, 600,000 killed and 700,000 permanently disabled. Peasant conscripts returned from the fronts radicalised. Factory workers chafed against the establishment of martial law in their workplaces. The 1917 Russian Revolution provided radicalising workers with a practical example to follow: topple the capitalist system to end the barbarity of war. During the movement's height, the *Biennio Rosso* (Two Red Years) of 1919-20, workers

launched a decisive struggle to wrest control over Italy from the ruling class. At the same time, peasants seized the land and began forcing massive concessions from large landowners. Civil war seemed imminent.

The social crisis also produced the right-wing radicalisation that gave birth to fascism. Benito Mussolini, a prominent figure in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), shocked his comrades by declaring in favour of the country's entry into the war. A meeting of PSI members drove Mussolini out, spitting on him and calling him a traitor.

In November 1914, Mussolini founded a new right-wing daily newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia* (*The People of Italy*), with the backing of Italian industrialists and French imperialism. In these pages, his new ideas took form. *Il Popolo* trumpeted support for the war and hostility to all forces, such as the socialist movement, that had the potential to disrupt it. Mussolini quickly began drawing the conclusion that democracy itself was holding the country back from achieving its destiny—he would eventually describe fascism as “supreme anti-democracy”.

The movement was a new form of reactionary politics. Instead of relying on sections of the ruling class and state, Mussolini created a mass popular movement in defence of the capitalist order. Fascism's method was political violence; its ultimate objective was, as Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky described, “to smash the working class, destroy its organisations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery”. Mussolini brought together different disaffected layers of society to this end: bitter war-hardened veterans, middle-class youth who revelled in political violence and the despairing long-term unemployed. The project won him support from British government agents, who sponsored the fascist movement after Mussolini explained: “I will mobilise the mutilati [disabled ex-soldiers] in Milan, and they will break the heads of any pacifists who try to hold anti-war meetings in the streets”.

In April 1919, the fascists launched their first major attack on the left, burning down the headquarters of the Socialist daily newspaper *Avanti!* (*Forward!*). Police stood aside as the fascist gang murdered three socialists. But while the workers' and peasants' movements were still on the offensive, and Italy was caught in “strike frenzy”, the fascists were hesitant to confront the workers' movement in its metropolitan centres of power in the industrial north. They instead built their base in rural areas, such as the Po Valley, where landowners hired them to terrorise peasant organisations.

The wave of struggle reached its peak in September 1920, when half a million armed workers in the industrial north occupied their factories. Many workers saw this as the final struggle to expropriate their bosses and begin the construction of a socialist society. Speaking at a workers' occupation of FIAT (the Italian Automobiles Factory of Turin), Antonio Gramsci, a revolutionary Marxist, underlined the historic nature of the events: “Social hierarchies have been smashed and historical values turned upside down”. The head of FIAT was so despondent that he offered to hand his factories over to the workers.

But the Italian Socialist Party blinked at the opportunity to lead a struggle for power. Its leadership was paralysed by divisions between revolutionaries who wanted to topple the capitalist system and reformists who wanted a share of power within it. In the end, they compromised with the bosses, extracting a few concessions and agreeing to end the

occupations.

While the September factory struggles formally ended in a stalemate, the capitalists immediately sought revenge on the workers' movement. As the French anarchist Daniel Guérin wrote, they "felt the chill of expropriation pass over them" and wasted no time re-establishing their dominance. In early 1921, unemployment rose dramatically and the strike rate plummeted. Capitalists banded together in new industrial and agricultural federations to coordinate their assault. They also started to give serious backing to the fascist movement. In spring, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti endorsed fascist candidates as part of a national bloc, helping 30 of them get elected. Large amounts of money began flowing to Mussolini's organisation.

The fascists were carrying out an orgy of violence against the left. In six months, they ransacked 119 trades council branches, 107 cooperatives, 100 workers' cultural centres and 28 union branches. Dozens of left-wing militants were murdered. The state rapidly ceded power to the blackshirts—as they marched through town after town, military arsenals were handed to them.

Given the profound threat that fascist violence posed to the organisations of the workers' movement, it is remarkable that neither of the main left parties waged a consistent fight against Mussolini's gangs.

The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was formed at the beginning of 1921 by activists repulsed by the Socialist Party's repeated betrayals. The undisputed head of the PCI was Amadeo Bordiga, an energetic and charismatic revolutionary who had organised the opposition to the Socialist Party's reformist leadership. Bordiga rightly condemned the electoral obsession of the Socialist Party, which subordinated workers' struggle to winning seats in parliament. But he went too far, dismissing any distinction between capitalist democracy and fascist dictatorship, and systematically underplaying the threat fascists posed to democratic rights, arguing that they would be no different to any other capitalist government:

"Fascism incorporates the counter-revolutionary struggle of all the allied bourgeois forces, and, for this reason, it is by no means necessarily compelled to destroy the democratic institutions. From our Marxist point of view, this situation is by no means paradoxical, because we know that the democratic system is only a collection of deceptive guarantees, behind which the ruling class conducts its battle against the working class."

At other times, he implied that the victory of fascist dictatorship would actually be an advance for the workers' movement because it would destroy illusions in capitalist democracy. "So the fascists want to burn down the parliamentary circus? We'd love to see the day", he wrote in July 1922, just months before Mussolini's victory. "The main danger is, and remains, that everyone agrees that the apple cart isn't overturned, and that a legal and parliamentary solution is found." This perspective ignored the fact that democratic rights are vital for the workers' movement. The right to form unions and political organisations, which are the basis for developing workers' social power, was precisely what the fascists wanted to destroy.

The response of the Socialist Party, which still commanded the loyalty of most organised workers, was equally dismal. It was still divided between "maximalists" who mouthed revolutionary rhetoric, and reformist parliamentarians and union leaders. The reformists set

the tone of the party's response to fascism, arguing that the institutions of the capitalist state would defend democracy and protect the working class from fascist attacks. Reformist leader Giacomo Matteotti spoke in parliament urging passivity: "Stay home! Do not respond to provocations. Even silence, even cowardice, are sometimes heroic".

There was, however, one popular organisation that understood the need to unite masses of people in practical resistance to the physical threat of fascism: the Arditi del Popolo (The People's Daring Ones). This organisation arose out of associations of the war veterans, who had returned to Italy from the front deeply politically polarised. While some joined the fascists, many turned to the left, and pledged to use their military experience to obstruct the advance of the blackshirts.

In July 1921, the organisation held its first national rally in Rome. Three thousand armed Arditi led a march of 50,000 striking workers from different political and union organisations. The demonstration called for the disarming of the fascists. In August 1922, they repelled an armed attack by 20,000 fascists on the left-wing stronghold of Parma. As an Arditi leader later recalled:

"Working-class people took to the streets—as bold as the waters of a river which is bursting its banks. With their shovels, pick-axes, iron bars and all sorts of tools, they helped the Arditi del Popolo to dig up the cobblestones and tram tracks, to dig trenches, and to erect barricades using carts, benches, timber, iron girders and anything else they could get their hands on. Men, women, old people, young people from all parties and from no party at all were all there, united in a single iron will: resist and fight."

Just ten weeks after his forces were defeated in Parma, however, Mussolini was in power. He later admitted that, had the tactics used by the left in Parma been replicated across the country, the success of his movement would have been thrown into question.

Despite its initial strength, the Arditi del Popolo was quickly isolated. This was primarily because the main workers' parties disgracefully abandoned it. While many rank-and-file Communist Party members naturally understood the importance of defending democratic rights, and gravitated toward the Arditi, the party leaders around Bordiga had other ideas. They declared: "We can only deplore the fact that Communists have been in contact with the people in Rome who initiated the Arditi del Popolo, offering to work with them and follow their instructions. If such actions are repeated, the most severe measures will be taken".

Bordiga had a sterile and sectarian approach to revolutionary politics. Rather than attempting to convince masses of workers of the necessity of revolution by fighting alongside them, he believed it was necessary to build a party of the "pure and hard" that strictly separated itself from every other institution and waited patiently for the masses to come and join it.

The PSI, on the other hand, clung to the idea that appealing to "legality" would save it, and signed a disgusting "peace pact" with Mussolini. This meant disavowing any support for the actions of the Arditi. Ultimately, the tragedy of Mussolini's rise is not only that the working class was defeated, but that it was beaten without a real fight. There was no lack of will to confront the barbarity of the fascists, but workers were misled and disoriented by the leaders of their organisations.

The ruling class thought that it could use the fascists as a battering ram against the

workers' movement, and then incorporate them into the political system. The Liberal prime minister believed that, in power, Mussolini would behave like any other conservative politician. But Mussolini's project radicalised as he consolidated control over the state. Political assassinations of socialists and other dissenters increased. Within three years, Mussolini had banned all political opposition, dissolved the trade unions and consolidated the world's first fascist regime.

A century on from the March on Rome, new fascist and far-right forces are assembling. Again, the global ruling classes are showing that they are perfectly willing to deal with them as long as it's good for business. The red carpet has been rolled out for Giorgia Meloni, a fascist Mussolini admirer, to form a new government in Italy. Far-right regimes have been normalised from India to Brazil.

The experience of Mussolini's rise holds important lessons for socialists. Perhaps the greatest lesson, obscured by most conventional accounts of the March on Rome, is that Mussolini could have been stopped. Had the workers' movement been united to confront the fascists, as it did in Parma, one of the darkest and most brutal chapters of European history might have been avoided.

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