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## Italy – The Working Class and the Two Wars

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A feature distinguishing people's war from conventional war was the way it combined social aspirations for equality and emancipation with political goals, such as national independence and democracy. These former aspects were marked in Italy where overt working class struggle was more prominent than elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> One reason was that fascism originated here, so rather than resistance developing in sharp reaction to foreign invasion, it matured over decades under a hated social system that was closely associated with capitalism from its inception in 1922.<sup>2</sup> Business and finance supplied 74 per cent of fascist party funding<sup>3</sup> and in return Mussolini smashed the unions, and imposed draconian wage cuts in 1927, 1930 and 1934.<sup>4</sup>

His regime was less repressive than Hitler's, but it still condemned 17,000 political opponents to internal exile, 60,000 to special surveillance and control, and imposed 28,000 years of penal servitude between 1926 and 1943.<sup>5</sup> Workers made up 85 per cent of those convicted.<sup>6</sup> The Socialist leader Matteotti was murdered, while Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), languished in jail, only being released to die. It has been argued that an 'indefatigable subversiveness' survived within popular culture, but before the Second World War this did not translate into active resistance.<sup>7</sup>

The war changed everything. Italy's entry was not smooth. Spriano tells us that Mussolini's doubts about the ability of his country to withstand a major conflict were pushed aside by the establishment. After witnessing the success of *Blitzkrieg* it was anxious to 'arrive in time to seize an easy and crushing victory'.<sup>8</sup> War brought the ruling class tangible benefits. By 1942 engineers hours had risen to 60 per week<sup>9</sup> and Fiat's share price had soared by 62 per cent. Its director revelled in 'the formidable Japanese conquests in the Pacific and the absorption of the rich territories of Russia into the European Axis economy', as they promised 'expanded production and vaster markets'.<sup>10</sup> Italy's rapacious plans were ultimately frustrated by the Allies, as was the case with Germany and Japan. However, it took

till 1945 and required overwhelming force to obliterate the latter. Mussolini's rule crumbled two years earlier. Why was it so fragile?

It was partly due to Italy's GNP which was a third of Germany's. This made the army more vulnerable to defeat in an inter-imperialist conflict. Even more significant was the fact that the regime was destroyed from within by people's war. Between 1938 and 1945 the cost of living increased 20 times over. With grossly inadequate rationing on the one side, and astronomical black market prices<sup>11</sup> on the other, it was no surprise that many of Turin's 150,000 thousand strong labour force lost 10 to 15 kilograms in weight.<sup>12</sup> Gradually the gulf between the repression-hardened minority of politically-motivated resisters and the masses began narrowing.<sup>13</sup>

This became clear when strikes swept across the northern industrial belt in the spring of 1943. Their epicentre was Turin where flourishing war production in vast factories generated a sense of collective power. At the same time Allied bombing had flattened 25,000 homes but the state provided no air-raid shelters.<sup>14</sup> Confidence combined with desperation to generate strike action even though this was a perilous step to take under fascism, especially during wartime.<sup>15</sup> A leaflet of January 1943 illustrates the mood:

For food and liberty!  
 Down with the 12-hour day and the damned war!  
 We demand that Mussolini be chased from power!  
 We are struggling for peace and our country's independence!  
 For a pay rise that is actually paid out!  
 Action, strike, struggle – these are the only weapons we have to  
 save ourselves  
 Strike, strike, strike!<sup>16</sup>

Such appeals fell on fertile ground. During winter 1942/3 stoppages increased from two to five per month.<sup>17</sup> Then, on 5 March, 21,000 workers at Fiat Mirafiori responded to the call of the 80-strong communist cell and struck, despite the signal for action – the factory siren – being silenced by management.<sup>18</sup> Walkouts spread through Turin and beyond. By 15 March the movement encompassed 100,000 women and men<sup>19</sup> and at the end of the month every factory in Piedmont had shut.<sup>20</sup>

Mussolini was shocked that 'the population was so hostile and averse to fascism' and offered major concessions.<sup>21</sup> He realised that: 'This decidedly nasty and extremely deplorable episode has suddenly thrown us back 20 years.'<sup>22</sup> Hitler, who just a month before

had lost the key battle of Stalingrad, understood the implications too. He found it 'unthinkable that so many people can strike, and no-one dares intervene ... I am convinced that in the circumstances anyone who shows the minimum weakness is doomed.'<sup>23</sup> His words were prophetic.

The Turin strike was the first successful mass walkout in two decades, and arguably the most important of the global war. The shock it administered fascism was supplemented by an Anglo-American landing in Sicily (on 10 July 1943). Then the establishment panicked. It had wallowed in the benefits of fascism for 20 years, but now that association was a liability provoking revolution and/or the wrath of the advancing Allies. To gain some room for manoeuvre Italy's government asked the Germans to accept its withdrawal from war in return for ceding its Balkan conquests, but they refused.<sup>24</sup> Grasping for another way out the government decided to publicly ditch Mussolini and secretly conclude an armistice with the Allies. The Fascist Grand Council itself voted 19 to 7 to depose and arrest the Duce.

The ruling class hoped the change would be no more than cosmetic. Pirelli, the industrial magnate, began discussions with the Allies<sup>25</sup> on the basis that 'the monarchy, the crown, the church, the army and the leaders of the economy' would remain at the helm.<sup>26</sup> There was a slight presentational difficulty. It was this very monarch King Vittorio Emanuele III who made Mussolini dictator in 1922. The Duce had touted the myth that he came to power in a daring seizure of power during which 3,000 martyrs had died – the March on Rome.<sup>27</sup> But the claim was fake. As one writer put it: 'Only when all was over did there begin the spectacle which has been called the March on Rome.'<sup>28</sup> Some advisors had begged the King to invoke state power to counter Mussolini's antics but he openly boasted about his refusal: 'I desire that all Italians know that I signed no decree for a state of siege.'<sup>29</sup> This decision paid off. With Mussolini as his PM, Vittorio Emanuele would add Emperor of Ethiopia and King of Albania to his list of titles. So now, even after Mussolini was formally deposed, the King insisted that 'fascism cannot be dismantled in one go. It needs to be gradually modified in order to remove those aspects which are shown to be harmful to the country'.<sup>30</sup> His new PM was Marshal Badoglio. His anti-fascist credentials were no better. He too had energetically supported Mussolini and earned promotion and the title of Duke of Addis Ababa in the process.

If the Second World War had been an unambiguous battle against fascism, then this supposed metamorphosis of the Italian government would have been recognised for the fraud it was. However, the Allied powers embraced the King and Badoglio with open arms. They had no qualms because, as one writer puts it, 'there was no ideological prejudice against personalities of the Fascist regime'.<sup>31</sup> The Anglo-Americans shared the Italian establishment's fear of revolution and willingly forgave past misdemeanours, just so long as Italy quit the rival imperialist coalition. Indeed, the US had made overtures to the King before and after Italy's entry into the Second World War.<sup>32</sup> Churchill's admiration of the Duce dated from 1927 and was undimmed when, in 1943, he contemptuously dismissed 'the usual arguments against having anything to do with those who had worked with or helped Mussolini'.<sup>33</sup> The King had other surprising friends. When the US expressed doubts about his ability to keep control, Russia granted him full diplomatic recognition. It was the first Allied power to do so.<sup>34</sup>

Demonstrators who ecstatically welcomed the Duce's downfall on 25 July 1943 were unaware of these sordid games. Tearing down the symbols of dictatorship they celebrated the end of fascism and war. Their joy was premature. The government ordered newspapers to 'avoid criticising the men and events of the previous regime [or] the war. Exercise maximum care towards our German ally. Do not call for the freeing of political prisoners ...'.<sup>35</sup> Badoglio, as military governor of Italy, declared: 'it is necessary to act with maximum energy to prevent the current excitement degenerating into a Communist or subversive movement.'<sup>36</sup> Using language reminiscent of Athens, the army and police were instructed to confront the jubilant crowds 'in combat formation, opening fire from a distance, but also using mortars and artillery as though proceeding against enemy troops'.<sup>37</sup> In Reggio Emilia, 11 were machine-gunned at a demonstration for peace and the expulsion of the Wehrmacht. In Bari there were 19 victims.<sup>38</sup> Italy's ruling class was still equivocating over which imperialist camp would best suit its purposes, but it had no doubt who the real enemy was.

In March 1943 Hitler had berated the Italian government for weakness. Five months later Churchill applauded the murderous actions of a supposedly post-fascist regime:

In Turin and Milan there were Communist demonstrations which *had to be put down by armed force*. Twenty years of Fascism has obliterated the middle class. There is nothing between the King,

with the Patriots who have rallied round him, who have complete control, and rampant Bolshevism.<sup>39</sup>

The Allied media could not help noticing the hypocrisy of such talk. The BBC scorned the Italian government's 'failure' to remove fascism<sup>40</sup> and America's *Life* magazine warned that:

The clear tendency within the fascist regime is to free itself from Mussolini and the Germanophiles, but to preserve the system. This is the idea of the big industrialists today ... In other words, a change from pro-German fascism to pro-Ally fascism. The fascist hierarchy are very impressed by the successful *volte face* of Darlan ... .<sup>41</sup>

Government repression was met with strikes demanding peace, pay rises, the removal of fascists, and release of political prisoners.<sup>42</sup> Some soldiers mutinied and refused to shoot. Nazi Germany watched the unfolding situation with alarm, and the eight Wehrmacht divisions stationed in the North got ready to take charge. The PCI understood the danger and in August 1943 called on Italians to: 'Prepare to repel any German intervention with force [and] organise the armed collaboration of the people and army ... .'<sup>43</sup> This ran directly counter to the government's aim of salvaging what remained of fascism.<sup>44</sup>

Badoglio could only have repulsed the German threat by rousing the populace, but instead treated them 'as though proceeding against enemy troops'. Denying a people's war meant Badoglio could only tack ineffectually between the imperialist blocs, hoping one would cancel out the other. Even as he concluded a secret peace treaty with the Anglo-Americans advancing from the South he sought continued German backing in the North, telling Ribbentrop: 'If this government collapses, it will be replaced by one of Bolshevik hue.' The Nazi foreign minister also feared that 'power would go to those with left radical ideas'.<sup>45</sup>

Without a peace deal, and caught in a pincer movement between imperialist armies, the suffering of the Italian people continued. Allied bombs rained down on them, with 220,000 Milanese losing their homes in just five days during August 1943. Meanwhile, the Germans were left free to entrench their positions.<sup>46</sup> The government's double-dealing eventually ran out of time. On 8 September General Eisenhower, weary of Badoglio's procrastination, broadcast news of the armistice the Italian government had

negotiated with the Allies.<sup>47</sup> Amazingly, even now Badoglio still tried to sit on the fence. 'We will fight whoever attacks us', he said, without specifying who that might be.<sup>48</sup> Another military order was clearer: 'In no case are you to take the initiative in hostilities against German troops.'<sup>49</sup>

Such hesitancy left Italy's armed forces totally unprepared for the Nazi backlash. The German army attacked, while the King, Badoglio, and all three armed services ministers fled south to safety in the arms of the Allies. Left with no instructions except not to fight<sup>50</sup> the Italian army of one million was eliminated overnight: 615,000 soldiers were deported to concentration camps and 30,000 died.<sup>51</sup> Although the King had finally thrown his lot in with the Allies, his prior actions symbolised the treachery of an entire governing class, and sealed the post-war fate of the monarchy.<sup>52</sup>

Northern Italy was now subject to the full force of German wartime economic policy which consisted of shifting 'responsibility for funding the Nazi war machine to the citizens of conquered lands'.<sup>53</sup> From Italy the Nazis extracted 84 billion lira, out of an annual national income of 130 billion lira.<sup>54</sup> They used Mussolini as an alibi in this enterprise. He was freed in a daring commando raid and installed as head of a puppet regime – the Republic of Salò. Henceforth resisters applied a single term to the enemy: Nazi-Fascist.

After looting the country, the Nazis required: a) its factory production; b) no distractions from the fight against Allied advance in the South; c) manpower for the German war machine. The resistance of the northern workers and peasants deprived them of all three.

The difference between this people's war and imperialist war was eloquently described by Ginzburg of the Action Party, a radical republic grouping:

The formal declaration of hostilities against Germany by the King and Badoglio was a meaningless gesture which did nothing to change the real situation of the time.

The real war against Nazi Germany was declared on 9 September, after the soldiers were officially ordered to abandon their guns. The Italian people seized hold of them and boldly confronted the armour of the German tanks. Thousands of soldiers and civilians headed into the mountains rather than serve the Germans, and equipped themselves for guerrilla struggle following the heroic example of the Russian and Balkan partisans ... The Italian war against Nazi Germany was the war of a people

who aspired to full political and social liberty ... This war was not declared in an exchange of diplomatic notes but written in the blood of heroes who sacrificed themselves each day, who had an impact on the future, who weighed in the balance of history ... .<sup>55</sup>

A female partisan witnessed the birth of people's war in Turin. At the very moment that the King and Badoglio were scuttling for cover, 'the youth launched an assault on the barracks ... and we held a grand demonstration in front of the Chamber of Labour where the workers demanded arms and waved placards saying "Turn Turin into Stalingrad" ... This was the real army of the working class on the move.'<sup>56</sup>

Fighting both Salò and the Wehrmacht gave mass struggle a dual character. It was a battle for national liberation, and 'a true civil war'<sup>57</sup> for 'class emancipation'.<sup>58</sup> Italian conditions favoured such a development. In France the Nazis had collapsed so suddenly at the end that there was no need for the resistance to consolidate its hold before the Allies arrived. By contrast, it took Anglo-American forces from September 1943 to April 1945 to reach Italy's northern frontier. As one British diplomat wrote ruefully: 'The pace of Allied advance has undoubtedly contributed to the birth of an independent government in the North.'<sup>59</sup>

Italy's people's war, which fused workers' action in industry with armed operations, was far more audacious than anything witnessed in Germany or Austria. Valiani, of the Action Party, explains why:

If the movement took the Germans by surprise they gave in and made concessions ... But if the movement did not spread and remained isolated in a single city the Gestapo could focus its attack, raiding and deporting people to Germany. This included members of the improvised committees with whom they had previously negotiated, as well as political suspects. Paradoxically the degree of daring, the spreading of strikes to the largest number of localities, represented a precautionary approach.<sup>60</sup>

Milan became the headquarters of the Committee for National Liberation (CLN), and emulated Turin by staging a classic strike, this time under a German regime. The demand was for a dramatic pay rise, doubling of rations, provision of oil and sugar, no to sackings, an end to curfew, and exclusion of Nazis from workplaces.<sup>61</sup> The stoppage began on 10 December 1943 and within days the Lombard capital ground to a halt.



While employers like Pirelli conceded 30 per cent pay rises, others proclaimed their willingness to meet demands only if the German commander, General Zimmermann, approved.<sup>62</sup> He ordered a return to work. With the workers unbending the SS began rounding them up. So a new demand was added to the list – freedom for those arrested! Now General Zimmermann promised vague concessions, but the strikers were unimpressed: ‘On to complete victory. Your threats do not frighten us. Just give us what we demand and we will return to work!’<sup>63</sup>

Events at the Breda Funk works show the local dimension. After the boss assembled the 6,000-strong workforce to report he would meet their demands in full, and have those arrested released, he asked: ‘Will you return tomorrow?’ The resounding response was still ‘No!’ Perplexed the management suggested the workforce might like to elect representatives to meet General Zimmermann. No-one responded.<sup>64</sup> Eventually a delegation did step forward, but on condition that it would only talk to the management, not the Nazis. This was not honoured. When the delegation arrived at the Breda plant the bosses melted away, the Germans appeared, barred the exits and attempted to begin negotiations.

Eventually, to try and end the strike city-wide, the Nazis offered pay rises of 40–50 per cent, along with improved rations. Still the workers held out! Armoured cars toured Milan’s factories, and soldiers attempted to compel people to return – to little avail.<sup>65</sup> The strike ended after a week, but those involved made it plain they did this because they chose to, not because of Nazi pressure.

Workplace resistance was but one form of the people’s war. Communist-led Patriotic Action Groups (GAP) and Patriotic Action Squads (SAP) operated in the urban setting.<sup>66</sup> In the countryside there were partisan squads. These were headed by seasoned anti-fascists (many of them veterans of the Spanish Civil War), or occasionally soldiers who had reached the mountains under arms before the Germans could capture them.<sup>67</sup> As with the French *maquis*, mass recruitment was stimulated by Nazi-Fascist round-ups and the death penalty for draft dodgers. One young man’s diary described the dilemma facing many: ‘What am I to do? Present myself? Never! ... So here I am, 22, on the run and wondering – will I be shot? Or should I take refuge in the woods?’ Despite his mother being taken hostage he chose a life of ‘seizing arms, munitions, anything that serves the struggle ...’<sup>68</sup> In Pavia alone 50 per cent of those summoned failed to appear.<sup>69</sup>

The effectiveness of the partisans is attested to by numerous sources. The Allied commander, General Alexander, estimated that six of the Wehrmacht's 25 divisions were diverted to dealing with them.<sup>70</sup> From the opposing side, Kesselring, Germany's plenipotentiary for Italy, complained that once 'unlimited guerrilla warfare' commenced in June 1944 the 200,000 to 300,000<sup>71</sup> partisans 'constituted a real menace to Germany's armed forces and played a vital role in the campaign. Eliminating this threat was of decisive importance to us.' He judged that 'the battle against the regular enemy forces and against the partisan bands had equal importance [so] the very best troops had to be used ...'.<sup>72</sup> The guerrillas' claimed 5,449 surprise actions, 218 pitched battles, 458 locomotives destroyed, 356 bridges blown up and 5,573 operations to sabotage power lines and communications, as well as tens of thousands of enemy soldiers killed.<sup>73</sup>

The guerrilla method of the people's war was quite different from imperialist combat. When Giovanni Pesce, a partisan, went to collect weapons from the royal army, an officer demanded to know his grade. Pesce was scandalised: 'Neither the utter collapse of 8 September, nor the partisan insurrection, had shaken this man's rigid view that there must be a fixed and immutable hierarchy.' Another partisan resented the 'social disparity between officers and troops' that he found and contrasted that with 'our formations that are based on absolute democracy'. Guerrillas found 'the institution of the officers' mess incomprehensible. An officer in the Garibaldi [the communist-led grouping] shares bread, board and heating with the other soldiers.'<sup>74</sup> Incomprehension was mutual. General Cadorna, sent north to command the partisans in the name of the King, was shocked by their political engagement and the 'election of officers by consensus of the base' that occurred in some units.<sup>75</sup>

Money was another bone of contention. To the GAP leader, Cichetti, the very idea of receiving a salary was offensive: 'I detested the idea of being paid to be a partisan. I had not seen a lira for six months, but had always been able to make do, without turning to the laws of the market to survive.'<sup>76</sup> Higher pay for partisan commanders was usually rejected because 'we are in a people's war which is fought by volunteers motivated by high patriotic spirit'.<sup>77</sup>

Unlike professional or conscript armies, where political debate is frowned upon, the partisans were simultaneously a prototype alternative state and militia. In August 1944 a typical agreement between various partisan groups declared:

Far from being a miniature replica of the old military structure, the partisan army is the symbol of an independent movement that owes its being to the will of the people, which is in itself an unequivocal political affirmation. The war against the Nazi-Fascists is only the preliminary step on the road towards our ultimate objective; the radical reconstruction of the political, moral and social life of our country... we are fighting for democracy, freedom in the fullest sense of the word, justice, and the dignity and respect that are due to man.<sup>78</sup>

These principles could be put into practice when Axis forces were expelled from entire districts. Fifteen partisan republics appeared,<sup>79</sup> in places like Carnia (150,000 inhabitants), Montefiorino (50,000) and Ossola (70,000).<sup>80</sup> Their administrations were quite unlike those of Salò, or Badoglio's for that matter.<sup>81</sup> In Varzi, for example, mass assemblies elected a local government purged of fascists using direct democracy. Observers saw 'people of every race ... coming and going on the steps of the town hall. There were peasants who wanted permits, who came to collect their share of requisitioned goods, or to protest against an abuse – bourgeois, partisans working class women, many new faces.'<sup>82</sup> Requisitions were paid for in kind, or with partisan 'money', that could be redeemed after the country was liberated.<sup>83</sup>

This financial arrangement also operated in the Republic of the Val d'Ossola<sup>84</sup> where crime was eliminated, a 'Popular University' frequented by all classes was established, Italy's first female Minister appointed, and trade unions restored.<sup>85</sup> It has been claimed that this area 'was the only substantial part of Hitler's occupied Europe to achieve independence, and obtain recognition from Switzerland'.<sup>86</sup> The partisans expected the republic to receive substantial outside aid because its 'capital', Domodossola, was close to Milan and would be a useful launching pad for any Anglo-American offensive there. But the Allied representative on hand was dismissive: 'You must not pretend to be in charge of military operations, like Alexander and Eisenhower ...'.<sup>87</sup> Another explained that the republic's continued existence made it 'not only a rival to the Italian government in Rome, but also a rival to the Italian Army ...'.<sup>88</sup> A partisan leader lamented that 'the indifference shown by the Allies in regard to the efforts at Domodossola, provoked a wave of bitterness'.<sup>89</sup> Without assistance the republic was finally crushed in six days of savage fighting.

Further evidence of tension between the parallel wars emerged in debate over *attentism*. Opponents stood for an immediate people's

war of liberation, supporters wanted to wait for salvation by imperialist armies. Battaglia has paraphrased the arguments. The attentists said: 'It is useless for us to attack the Germans; there aren't enough of us to do any good, and what's more, any attempt we make will simply provoke reprisals: apart from ourselves, the civil population will suffer, and suffer hideously.'

He then lays out the flaws in this logic: 'How could the Resistance increase in strength or extend its scope if it remained completely passive, completely static? Furthermore, what the Attentistes had signally failed to recognize was that, for local, national, sentimental and strictly common-sense reasons, it had become absolutely necessary to fight the Germans.'<sup>90</sup>

A factor impelling independent action was that the Allies denied Italy all rights because it had been an Axis power. Thus Churchill's Foreign Minister was outraged when the Italians replaced Marshal Badoglio: 'A nation which has unconditionally surrendered has no right to present the Allies with a Government chosen by themselves.'<sup>91</sup> Britain was simply not there to free Italy, as Radio London admitted: 'The liberation of the peninsula is not, and cannot be, the ultimate aim of the Allies. It is just a means of defeating Germany ...'<sup>92</sup>

This attitude led some commentators to quip that Italy was now under two occupations. In the South were the Allies supported by a fascist King; in the North were the Germans supported by Mussolini's Salò Republic.<sup>93</sup> Put like this, attentism amounted to either accepting Nazi-Fascism or Allied imperialist domination through the AMGOT (Allied Military Government of Occupied Territory).

The only alternative was a liberation struggle. One form this took was further mass strikes. In the spring of 1944 half a million downed tools in the largest stoppage of the World War. It was directed almost as much at convincing the Allies that heavy aerial bombing was unnecessary.<sup>94</sup>

Another related issue was 'terrorism'. Should partisans target individual Nazis behind the lines, even if it provoked the Germans to murder hostages or civilians, or wait for the Anglo-Americans? A notorious example of the risks involved in terror actions followed the killing of 32 SS guards in Rome. In revenge the Nazis executed 335 Italian hostages at the Ardeatine caves.<sup>95</sup> For the attentists this horrific collective punishment proved the need to hold back, and

some peasants did indeed turn against the partisans for fear their actions could attract reprisals.<sup>96</sup>

The guerrillas were acutely aware of the problem, but had a solution. Valiani, whose Action Party was linked to the Justice and Liberty partisans, explains that urban terrorism aimed to avoid collective punishment and to inspire youth to join the struggle.<sup>97</sup> Whereas Axis troops were under attack at the front, in cities 'terrorism was not directly against enemy soldiers, but against the machinery of police, repression and reprisal. It was adopted, despite the risks, as a method of self-defence.'<sup>98</sup> Successful actions showed the enemy was not invincible. Pavone offers an illustration: when fascist police began an anti-guerrilla operation in one area, the GAP killed 17 of them. As a result 100 out of the remaining 150 deserted their posts, some even joining the partisans.<sup>99</sup>

Demonstrative action was effective as long as it did not substitute for, or become an alternative to, mass actions such as strikes. Partisans dared not become cut off from the wider population on whom they depended for shelter, food, and general support. Awareness of these reciprocal relations helped avoid the pitfalls of terror operations that might have demobilised the masses and left them as passive bystanders. An example of how the link-up could work was given by *Our Struggle* in February 1944. The Germans wished to ship labour and machinery from Italy to assist its war efforts, but the resistance responded: 'Not a machine, not a worker must go to Germany! To achieve this the actions of the mass of workers [will be backed by] armed defence squads (GAP) and partisan formations, [and] will systematically interrupt and destroy communication links with Germany.'<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps the most powerful argument was given by a hostage of the Nazis: 'Don't give up the struggle. Don't let my situation hold you back. If I survive, I survive, but if I must die I will be fulfilling my fate. The important thing is *that you never give in!*'<sup>101</sup> Whatever doubt there might be about using terrorism as a weapon in the people's war arsenal, this pales against the barbarity of indiscriminate bombing so beloved of the Allies.

Regardless of the merits of the debate, attentism suited the Allied imperialist cause. On 10 November 1944 General Alexander, Commander of Allied Forces in Italy, announced that his forces would not advance that winter and that the partisans should stand down, cease offensive operations, return to their homes and await further orders.<sup>102</sup> This declaration had a devastating impact on morale. The guerrillas were battling in deteriorating weather

conditions against enormous Nazi-fascist armies who now had *carte blanche* to attack. Longo, the most prominent communist in the resistance, saw Alexander's move 'as an attempt on the part of the Allied command to eliminate the Italian liberation movement'.<sup>103</sup> In the General's favour it has been argued that the Germans' Gothic Line defences were impregnable and that Allied commanders had 'no political considerations in their minds; they thought solely of the interests of the partisans'.<sup>104</sup> However, Behan finds it strange that Alexander's statement 'was not broadcast in code, as was the norm. Even worse, Resistance leaders were not consulted or informed beforehand...'<sup>105</sup>

To suggest, in a North Italy infested with German and fascist troops, that the partisans cease operations, showed no appreciation of the on-going deportations of labour to Germany, the daily acts of repression against the population, etc. The guerrillas' reply was that 'the partisan war is not, on the part of the Italian people and the patriots who have taken up arms, a mere whim, an idle caprice to be refrained from at will. It arose from the vital necessity of defending our material, moral and social heritage; this is the supreme cause for which we have been fighting and must continue to fight day after day ... The war must go on.'<sup>106</sup> Whether Alexander was motivated by the politicians' distaste for Italian self-liberation or military considerations alone,<sup>107</sup> this episode is a graphic example of the two wars in practice.

Although workers played such a prominent role in Italy, even here the people's war was never a pure class phenomenon. Thus the more astute northern employers realised that bitter disputes with labour invited Nazi intervention, which could lead to their workers (and factories) being shipped to Germany.<sup>108</sup> To forestall this they made concessions and protected 'their' employees.<sup>109</sup> Behan describes the 'ducking and weaving' of Fiat. Even as it produced tanks and V2 rocket parts for Germany it maintained links with US intelligence services, and provided massive funds to the CLN. The resistance leader at Fiat Mirafiori understood how his employers 'had no scruples about facing in several directions at the same time to safeguard their primary interest: profit'.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, in the interests of national unity, the Italian resistance brought together a multitude of parties representing a constellation of class forces. Thus the day after the 8 September 1943 armistice the five main political parties – Communists, Socialists, Action Party, Christian Democrats and Liberals – formed the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia (North Italy National Liberation

Committee – CLNAI). Local committees spread quickly. In turn a centralised military structure – the CVL (Corpo Volontari della Libertà (Volunteers for Liberty Corps) – was set up to oversee partisan activity.

The relationship between the summit and the base of this people's war was complex, and the most important and interesting interaction took place within the PCI's sphere of influence. Although the statistics differ, it is clear the PCI was the dominant force. Spriano suggests that between 80 and 90 per cent of political detainees were communist in the early stages.<sup>111</sup> When the mass anti-fascist movement took off, PCI influence persisted. By October 1944 perhaps five-eighths of the partisans were in the communist-controlled Garibaldi Brigades,<sup>112</sup> and 60 per cent of partisans who died were linked to communist formations.<sup>113</sup> Even political rivals admitted to communist numerical preponderance, with Valiani of the Action Party, the second most important grouping, estimating 41 per cent of partisans were in the Garibaldini as opposed to 29 per cent in his Justice and Liberty bands.<sup>114</sup> The pre-war PCI membership of 6,000 had become 1.8 million by its end.<sup>115</sup>

Working class politics therefore set the tone even for political or ideological rivals. Thus Olivelli, leader of the Catholic Green Flame partisans, took it for granted that:

the age of capitalism that has produced astronomical wealth and led to unspeakable misery, is in its death throes. A soulless regime encouraged the spread of a poverty that was beyond belief, sabotaged the productive efforts of the people, and deliberately provoked man's inhumanity to man; it exalted the cult of might and violence, manifested itself in tyranny and oppression, and burnt itself out in the flames of war. From the final convulsions of this age a new era is being born, the era of the working classes, infinitely more just, more fraternal, more Christian.<sup>116</sup>

The PCI's working-class base encouraged it to reflect the need of the people's war, but its leadership felt other pressures. Since 1926 fascist repression had driven this group into exile (in France and Russia). It was so cut off from its membership that, according to one scholar: 'In most of the towns and villages none of [the rank and file] had any contact with the party apparatus for years...'<sup>117</sup> The top leadership, headed by Palmiro Togliatti, was shaped instead by Stalinism. Togliatti sought to control and channel the spontaneous aspects of struggle into ever more centralised structures – the CLNs,

the CLNAI and the CVL. Such a development was partly driven by the exigencies of war, which required increasing co-ordination as the scale of the fighting grew. It also reflected the PCI leadership's programme. The democratic base and the centralist needs of armed struggle were not inherently antagonistic. Each could strengthen the other. However, the people's war did come into conflict with centralism, because that was driven by Togliatti's pursuit of Russian foreign policy aims.

The most dramatic expression of this occurred in March 1944 when Togliatti joined Badoglio's cabinet. This so-called 'Salerno turn' was totally unexpected. Two months before, a PCI conference in Bari had strongly criticised Badoglio,<sup>118</sup> and the PCI newspaper, *Unità*, ridiculed the idea that the southern regime could fight Nazism: 'How could this government that is terrified of the people, lead a people's war.'<sup>119</sup> During fascism the PCI had suffered terribly from the likes of Badoglio and the King, yet now Togliatti wrote: 'The working class must abandon the position of opposition and criticism which it occupied in the past ...'<sup>120</sup> Not without reason has Broué suggested that the Salerno turn represented 'a Stalinist apparatus brought into Italy from outside, struggling to impose itself from above upon the real party, the true party ...'<sup>121</sup>

Togliatti's policy conformed to the decisions made at the Yalta conference of February 1945<sup>122</sup> when Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt divided Europe into spheres of influence. Since Italy fell into the Anglo-American sphere, the resistance must be sacrificed to honour a deal giving Russia dominance in Eastern Europe. The Salerno turn transformed the PCI's role in the resistance. Class struggle was now to be replaced by 'national unity' with the bosses, the monarchy, ex-fascists, and anyone not overtly in the Nazi camp. The May 1944 edition of the PCI's guerrilla newspaper, *Il Combattente*, insisted that 'every disagreement about the regime we want in our country, every legitimate reform, if it is not urgent, must take second place, be set aside, be delayed until after the victory'<sup>123</sup> What a contrast to its words six months before: 'The struggle of peasants and workers for their immediate demands is sacrosanct, unavoidable [and] must be linked to the armed struggle without which both would sooner or later suffocate.'<sup>124</sup>

Some rank and file activists saw Togliatti's move as 'an act of betrayal'.<sup>125</sup> It 'caused perplexity, especially among those who were in jail for years'.<sup>126</sup> Even prominent individuals such as Amendola admitted: 'as the Central Committee carried out its political activity along the lines of national unity, nearly all the groups with which



it was in contact ... tended not to understand or approve.'<sup>127</sup> Scoccimarro, found Togliatti's views 'absolutely inopportune, and it is to be hoped they are not repeated'.<sup>128</sup>

The staunchly republican Action Party, which had been more middle class, white collar, and moderate than the PCI,<sup>129</sup> was now to its left. Valiani initially thought news reports of the Salerno turn were a forgery, and noted the glee with which Mussolini's Republic of Salò described the PCI as selling out to royalty.<sup>130</sup> The Action Party warned Togliatti that he threatened to split the anti-fascist movement.

One consequence of the Salerno turn was the growth of revolutionary movements outside the PCI advocating 'the class struggle transposed on to an international plane'.<sup>131</sup> By June 1944 the Stella Rossa (Red Star) group, which accused the PCI of betraying the working class and joining the bourgeoisie, had as many members as the PCI in the key industrial city of Turin.<sup>132</sup> Bandiera Rossa (Red Flag) had more fighters in Rome than the PCI. This movement thought the PCI had forfeited its right to call itself communist.<sup>133</sup>

However, Togliatti held a trump card: his association with the USSR and its Red Army, which at that very moment was hurling back the Nazis on the Eastern Front. As Russian forces approached Flossenburg concentration camp a captured Garibaldini inmate described how he 'heard a roar ... Those cannons were the voice of Stalin'.<sup>134</sup> Another prisoner, though an Action Party member, expressed disappointment at being liberated by US soldiers rather than the Red Army. Togliatti's Salerno turn drew legitimacy from the myth that Russia represented 'actually existing socialism', or as street graffiti expressed it, the USSR 'truly relied on the poor, the humble, the proletarians and workers ...'.<sup>135</sup> Before Togliatti's somersault 'the bosses' were described as 'vampires who feed on labour, these profiteers from war and German occupation ...'.<sup>136</sup> Now, wielding Soviet authority, the PCI leadership demanded its Italian followers unite with 'industrialists, intellectuals, priests, ex-fascists ... no-one is excluded'.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, those who raised clenched fists or wore symbols like the hammer and sickle must be dealt with 'severely and made to tow the party line'.<sup>138</sup>

In return for financial support the resistance also accepted the 'Rome Protocols' which stated: 'As the enemy withdraws, all components [of the partisans] will come under direct command of the [Allied] Commander-in-Chief ... and will obey any order issued by him or by Allied Military Government on his behalf, including

such orders to disband and surrender their arms, when required to do so.<sup>139</sup>

There were limits to how far the PCI leadership could move rightwards, because it still had to placate its membership, compete with rival political groupings, and retain bargaining strength in the post-war era. Card-carrying Communist Party members were a minority and partisans were not automatons. Lines of communication and command were tenuous; and formal hierarchical structures rarely corresponded to the anarchic conditions of combat on the ground. So the PCI did not entirely abandon radical language. Squaring the circle, Togliatti still called for an 'insurrection', but it would not be 'socialist or communist but for national liberation to destroy fascism'.<sup>140</sup> Equally, the PCI rejected attentism and Allied efforts to marginalise the partisans'. It encouraged the establishment of CLNs in every village, district and factory.<sup>141</sup> This institutionalisation of the movement was simultaneously a means of defying the AMGOT and royal government, a means of exerting control from above, and a method of organising a more efficient struggle from below. Nevertheless, a tense relationship between people's war and the imperialist war currents within the resistance movement persisted.

By April 1945 the Allied offensive seemed poised to finally break into the North. At that moment the CLNAI issued Directive No. 16, its call to 'national insurrection'. Sounding a note of realism it cautioned that 'the Allies may decide, for one reason or another, to withhold their support, instead of making the contribution for which we have asked'. Nevertheless, 'Partisan formations will attack and eliminate Nazi-Fascist headquarters and effect the liberation of cities, towns and villages ... [We] will proclaim a general strike ... the culmination of the people's long campaign for freedom and the expression of their unshakable determination.'<sup>142</sup>

During the month that the final liberation of Italy took to complete, the two types of war complemented each other, with the Allied armies attacking at the front while partisans struck from the rear. Immense general strikes shook the northern industrial cities and thwarted German plans for a 'scorched earth' policy of destroying the North's infrastructure. Yet the distinction between the parallel wars did not disappear. A good example was the liberation of Genoa, whose story has been told by Basil Davidson, a British Liaison Officer working with the partisans.

Genoa was a port city that, along with Milan and Turin, formed the 'industrial triangle' powering Italian economic development.

In April 1945 there were *over* 15,000 strongly armed Germans in occupation.<sup>143</sup> In a move similar to von Choltitz's in Paris, General Meinhold offered to declare Genoa an open city if the partisans allowed the Wehrmacht to retreat unhindered. On 23 April the CLN decided to prevent Meinhold's forces fighting elsewhere, by making an immediate stand. At this time the partisans numbered some 6,000. Lacking adequate supplies from the Allies, most were minimally armed.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless they fought the Nazis to a standstill and on 25 April 9,000 Germans surrendered unconditionally. Two days later, a 7,000-strong section tried to break out, but eventually surrendered to a force of just 300 SAP fighters.<sup>145</sup>

The CLN had liberated Genoa. At that very moment the US Army appeared in the shape of General Almond. Not speaking Italian he could only address the CLN leadership via the intermediary of Davidson:

'Tell them,' General Almond said, 'that my troops have liberated their city, and they are free men.'

A silence followed: which continued.

The general looked at me with some surprise: couldn't I speak the language?<sup>146</sup>

Davidson, who had fought alongside the partisans and knew what they had achieved, dared not translate Almond's words. He continues:

Then Providence intervened ... There came, from outside that room, the sudden din of shouts and uproar. We rushed through the floor-to-ceiling windows to a balcony giving on that street of arcades.

Looking down, we saw far up that street the dense fore-ranks of a crowd of advancing men, and then we saw it was a column, a column of German prisoners a dozen or more abreast, hundreds of them, thousands of them, marching down that street unarmed but with armed partisans on either side. Then we went back into the salon and General Almond gave me a measuring glance and said, 'All right'.<sup>147</sup>

The example of Genoa was repeated in various ways across the whole of northern Italy. Despite General Alexander's unfortunate statement and the withholding of substantial supplies of weapons

to all but the attentists, the resistance had played a significant part in the liberation.

The irony was that it would be disarmed, not by the Germans, but from within. The working class had often been the spearhead of the movement, but the party to which it was loyal accepted a return to capitalist normality. General Almond had no option but to acknowledge the work of the CLN on the day Genoa was freed, but immediately afterwards Davidson received new words to translate from a British brigadier: 'Tell them, will you please, that the committee, this committee, is dissolved as from tomorrow. All their functions cease. All their responsibilities are assumed by AMGOT.'<sup>148</sup> But the Anglo-Americans lacked the ability to enforce their demands, as Davidson explains:

Those severe Ligurians listened in silence. ... they had reckoned with its coming. That was one large reason why they had launched an insurrection and carried it through. And they were right. What the CLN had foreseen, this CLN as well as other CLNs held good. AMGOT officers might have all the force of the Allied armies at their call, but it proved beyond all practical powers of AMGOT to remove the democratic nominees now placed in positions of responsibility.<sup>149</sup>

The Anglo-Americans could not do it, but as Davidson explains, the political leaders could. They had made commitments and these 'had to be carried through. The democratic nominees were not eliminated; but they had to assist in the elimination of their movement. The CLNs were set aside and left to vanish in futility.'<sup>150</sup> If imperialism robbed Italy's resistance of the opportunity to transform the fundamental structure of society, its achievement was still undeniable, and utterly different to the work of both Axis and Allied rulers. Despite the efforts of the AMGOT, the Italian capitalists, and the ex-fascists, the people's war left an indelible mark on subsequent Italian politics, even if this was mainly reflected through the strengthened position of the PCI that had betrayed it.

