

# The Death of Italian Liberty

## The Fascists Exposed

By H. N. BRAILSFORD

**M**ANKIND has a wonderful facility in growing accustomed to the monstrous. For two years now Fascism has tyrannised over Italy. Its rule has grown no milder because of the timidity of the opposition. The freedom of the Press is gone; the right of meeting does not exist; the workers have lost the weapon of the strike and Parliament is a shadow. To all of this, apparently, a great people could grow accustomed. But suddenly last June there happened the outrage which seemed for a moment to shake the Dictatorship. Many obscure victims had paid with their lives for their fidelity to their Trade Union, their Co-operative, or the Socialist Party, and unaccounted thousands had been beaten or wounded. But the killing of Matteotti stirred the nation's conscience. He was not an obscure victim; a man of steady courage, with cool judgment rare in Southern lands, and a record of disinterested service, rare in any land, this Socialist deputy was universally respected. He had been threatened openly, in print, with physical violence, by a Fascist newspaper, a few days before his end. No one could doubt that some of the heads of the party, if not the Dictator himself, had ordered the murder. The motive, moreover, was obvious; Matteotti was about to expose in the Chamber a series of Fascist financial scandals. The horror of this cold-blooded crime, the kidnapping at noonday in a Roman street, and the brutal manner of the killing left a scar on the mind of the Italian people. It looked for a moment as though the end of the tyranny might be near. Despotisms have sometimes ended in this way. Tarquin the Proud oppressed the masses of Rome for a generation with onerous wars and forced labor; but it was the outrage on Lucretia which moved them to expel the family of tyrants.

### Ex-Soldiers in Revolt

The summer passed, however, and nothing decisive happened. Month followed month, and the trial of Matteotti's murder was always postponed. And now a new outrage has aroused the country. Rome was on holiday, and the Fascist Militia was celebrating the second anniversary of the coup d'etat by marching past the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Suddenly, with revolvers and cudgels, a detachment of the Dictator's partisan army fell upon a body of the ex-Service Men's League (Combattenti) who were demonstrating at their side. The feud had been ranging for some weeks: these allies were too independent. The loss of life was not, it seems, very terrible, but the scandal of this open brawl among the armed partisans of Order, round the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, made another scar on the nation's mind. To obliterate it the Dictator took the usual steps of confiscating newspapers in large numbers, and forbidding all public meetings.

Will there this time be a sequel? The ex-Service men have many deputies in Mussolini's packed Parliament, and they are in revolt. So, too, in some degree are the tame "Liberals" who had rallied to the Dictatorship and shared the spoils of office. The Chamber is reassembling as I write. The difficulty is that the Opposition (Socialists, Republicans, Popolari and Radicals) had walked out after Matteotti's murder, and vowed never to return so long as the Fascist Militia continued in being, to terrorise Italy. Experience in many countries where it has been tried suggests that this method of passive absence is never an effective weapon against despotism. The semi-Fascist malcontents of the majority have made overtures to the Opposition to return—but apparently without result as yet. The idea was that the passing of a vote of "no confidence" might embolden the King to assert himself after two years' toleration of the usurper. The Constitution gives him the

uncontrolled right to dissolve the Chamber and to order new elections. That would be of little use, if the Militia continued to terrorise the electorate. But might not the King, if he had once made up his mind to act, call upon the regular Army to dissolve the Fascist Militia? The regular Army, it is said, is loyal to the King; the officers have lost their earlier enthusiasm for Mussolini, and they are jealous of the Militia. This rather simple plan may underestimate the Dictator's capacity for counter-action, and yet there is a possibility that one day it may be tried and possibly with success. It is, I daresay, a good plan on paper, but it is a significant index of the cowed helplessness of his people. No one dreams of a revolt.

### A Cowed People

No one so much as talks of a general strike. No one proposes to make any effort whatever, to shake off the tyranny. The King, it seems, must act for the people, and the army must back the King. It was otherwise in Garibaldi's day. He led, and dragged King and army after him.

By what slow process of decay did the Italian people drift into this position? Revolutions succeed as much by reason of the weakness of the Government which they overthrow as by reason of the strength and violence of the new forces. That is true of Russia, and it is no less true of Italy. The average comment on Mussolini's success went no farther back than the years of disorder which immediately preceded it. The Reds, under Muscovite inspiration, chattered of revolution, and in a sense began it, partly by the tumultuous seizure of land from oppressive rural magnates, partly by the "occupation" of a few factories and ships, and generally by using a good deal of mass terrorism, and by the abuse of the weapon of the general strike. For a real seizure of political power they were not ready, and they wholly neglected to prepare for it by arming. They bluffed; they boasted; they alarmed, but they never really meant revolution. The disturbance, however, to the normal life of Italy was so great that the average man was ready to welcome any deliverer.

### Fascist "Stability"

Mussolini was slow to see his chance; he began by combating the "anti-patriotism" of the Left, but Fascism in its early days was anti-clerical, anti-monarchical, and even so far anti-capitalist that it approved of the occupation of the factories. It was the failure of that experiment which showed it the way to power. It took money from the capitalists, it accepted arms from Giolitti's Government; and when once it had begun to destroy the whole workers' movement (Trade Unions and Co-operatives as well as the political side) it soon went "the whole hog" by allying itself with the Church and the Monarchy.

The truth is that the Fascist attack on democracy succeeded only because democracy in Italy had sunk to a low grade. The moral is driven home with power and eloquence in Guglielmo Ferrero's study of recent events (Four Years of Fascism, Translated by E. W. Dickes. P. S. King and Son, 7s. 6.). The author's work on Roman history placed him in the front rank of his countrymen, and this book by its courage, its broad outlook and its literary skill is worthy of his fame. The book is much the ablest of the many which the strange phenomenon of Fascism has called forth. His central thesis is that Parliamentarism in Italy, which began its life on the English model, had been subtly and almost imperceptibly changed into a sort of "dictatorial Parliamentarism." A single man, leaning on the Court and supported by a strong personal following, corrupted the sovereign people by all the arts of artificial pandering and reduced Parliament to a mind-

less and apathetic confusion of parties. Giolitti was the worst and the most successful of these "bosses," managing elections, corrupting deputies, mixing groups, eliminating all principle from politics, and in effect, though usually by gentle methods, destroying any effective opposition. The weakness of this sham democratic State was revealed, firstly by its tolerance of d'Annunzio's coup at Fiume, and then, because it dare not govern direct, by the disastrous expedient of arming the Fascists to suppress the Communists.

Ferrero's book traces the origin of Fascism. The indispensable sequel is the book which the murdered Matteotti wrote in the last month of his life. The Labor Publishing Company has performed a great service by issuing an adequate translation by Mr. E. W. Dickes of the Fascists Exposed at the low price of 2s. 6. It is a chronicle of the first year of the Dictatorship, told without a word of rhetoric and almost without comment—bare facts, honest records, official figures and almost nothing else. We summarised it at same length when it first appeared in Italian, in our issue of March 28. It disposes of the legend that the Fascist Dictatorship has created general prosperity.

### Years of Destruction

Prices have risen, rents have been decontrolled and have risen 40 per cent: wages have fallen by 10 to 13 per cent. As a measure of the growing poverty of the workers it is significant that the monthly total of pawnshop transactions has almost trebled since the coup d'etat. On the other hand profits have risen, and so have Stock Exchange quotations. Direct taxation has been so manipulated as to spare the rich, and the Eight Hours Day has been whittled away by administrative exceptions till it survives only in name. Strikes are permitted only to the Fascist Trade Unions, and seem to be carried out solely as a means of extorting contributions from capitalists to the party funds. Perhaps the saddest result of these years of violence is that the superb constructive work of the Socialist Co-operatives, which in some parts of Italy had almost brought about the peaceful extinction of the middleman, the contractor, and the exploiting farmer, has been utterly destroyed. The same fate has befallen the Socialist municipalities, which have been suppressed by autocratic decree. The sanction for all this, as page on page on these records show, has been and still is, the cudgel, the revolver and the bomb. Fascism is Bolshevism upside down, in its violence and contempt of democracy, but, unlike Bolshevism, it has no constructive purpose, and it serves the few and not the mass. If by sympathy and understanding and honest publicity, our Labor movement can do anything to hasten the end of a dictatorship which degrades the Italian nation, it is our duty to help without stint or hesitation.

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### THE TASK OF THE HOUR

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property and its politics. Hence we fight reaction, either in the ranks of capital or labor; and add the reasons of the few, who may haply be, "invariably right" to the swiftly gathering crisis of reality. It is alone Capitalist property that holds the proletariat in its desert wilderness of misery and degradation. It is the colossal ignorance of the proletariat to social organisation that binds it to the idols of property. Thus the final issue is the breaking of that ignorance before social society can become a reality. And despite the bows of promise, in the cloud wreck of the 'Neo's' that task is the task of the hour.

THE END.