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## A Bold and Dangerous Family: the Italian brothers who resisted Mussolini

Caroline Moorehead's absorbing biography tells the tale of Nello and Carlo Rosselli.

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By [Ian Thomson](#)

In 1929, Italy's most influential anti-Fascist, Carlo Rosselli, founded the clandestine Justice and Liberty movement, then the country's gravest threat to Mussolini. Members were known as *giellisti* after the movement's initials "g" and "l" (for Giustizia e Libertà); they espoused an ideal of democratic socialism and aimed propaganda against Italy's Savoyard monarchy (then cravenly pro-Fascist), as well as Mussolini. By the early 1930s though, with the Marxist Antonio Gramsci in jail and other leading anti-Fascists (Giacomo Matteotti, Giovanni Amendola) murdered, all Italy lay under the dull hand of Fascist conformity. Anticipating arrest, Carlo and his younger brother Nello fled to France.

One spring day in 1937 they were found murdered on a country road in Normandy; their carotid arteries had been severed. At a stroke, Italy was deprived of two intransigent and courageous Resistance figures. Their funeral cortège was followed to the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris by more than 200,000 mourners. Justice and Liberty was forced underground, but five years later it re-formed as the Action party, which was feared and loathed by the blackshirts. Its cautious socialism and intellectual integrity would vitally influence Italy's armed resistance to the German occupation in 1943-45.

Fourteen years after the murders the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia – best known for *The Women of Rome* (1947) – published his acutely disturbing novel about the Rosselli murders, *The Conformist*. Although Moravia, who was related to the Rossellis on their mother's side, had reluctantly undertaken clandestine work on behalf of Carlo Rosselli in Paris, his attitude to Mussolini remained one of patrician condescension. (Fascism, Moravia told me in an interview in Rome in 1985, was “really a very boring movement”). He avoided Mussolini's dragnets at home in Italy by travelling abroad in some style. That was not the Rosselli way of undertaking anti-Fascist combat.

Moravia gets a rather bad press from Caroline Moorehead in this absorbing biography of the Rosselli brothers. A scion of the Venetian-Jewish Pincherle family, Moravia was scarcely 21 when his first novel, *The Time of Indifference*, appeared in 1929. The book irked the Fascist authorities for its portrayal of complacency and double-dealing in Mussolini's Rome. Its assault on bourgeois morality was courageous for the time, yet for many years Moravia kept silent on the Rosselli murders. Why? The brothers' mother Amelia was convinced that Moravia had done so out of “opportunism” if not “weakness”.

Amelia had literary pretensions of her own, writing a number of successful plays and children's books. She presided over a distinguished intellectual milieu in her native Venice and, later, Florence, where she aligned herself with Filippo Turati, the “grand old man” of Italian socialism, and the austere moralist Piero Gobetti, founder in 1922 of Italy's first anti-Fascist weekly, *Rivoluzione liberale*. Gobetti's clarion-call for “liberty” looked back to Italy's 19th-century Risorgimento patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, whose visionary writings defended the subject peoples of Europe against rule by outsiders. As an exile in London for 25 years, Mazzini had moved from one boarding house to another, keeping the curtains drawn in daylight for fear of detection.

In the early 1920s, the Rossellis, too, sought safety and patronage in London, mingling with left-leaning society hostesses and Fabian Society members (among them George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell and Sidney and Beatrice Webb). By now the Rossellis were convinced Anglophiles; England was seen as a bastion of civil liberties, equality and reason. During his time in London, Nello researched a biography of Mazzini, which was published in 1927. Mazzini might easily have been caricatured as a devilish, El Greco-faced *guastafeste* (killjoy); Rosselli extolled him as a Voltaire of a new age of national liberation. Without Mazzini's political ideas on free nationality and nationalist awakening, the organisation of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (from the dissolution of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires to the unification of Germany) might have taken a different course.

Moravia, typically, had letters of introduction to Lady Ottoline Morrell and others in the by-then almost defunct Bloomsbury set. He met Nello and Carlo in London, along with the Turin-born artist and doctor Carlo Levi, who later found fame as the author of *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Spies were everywhere. The first nucleus of British Italian Fascists was founded in London in 1921, Moorehead relates. Members saw the cult of *ducismo* as a more virile alternative to the “effeminate” world of flappers, leftist poets and dithery parliamentarians.

Cosmopolitan, polyglot Jews such as Moravia and the Rossellis were viewed by Mussolini and his disciples as self-regarding, supranational types inimical to the sturdy Blackshirt bond of race and nation. They should be eliminated.

By the end of his life, Moorehead writes, Carlo Rosselli had been watched by no fewer than 42 of Mussolini's agents. In 1927 he was sentenced to *confino* – internal exile – on the remote prison-island of Lipari off Sicily (now a holiday destination). He languished there for two years before escaping to France via Cap Bon in Tunisia. Much of this is chronicled by Stanislaw G Pugliese, in his 1999 biography of Carlo Rosselli. According to Pugliese, Rosselli was less a political theorist than a “public moralist”; the betrayal of socialism in Stalin's Russia was as heinous to him as Italian Fascism.

The Rossellis might have disappeared from history altogether had Bernardo Bertolucci not turned Moravia's novel into the acclaimed film *The Conformist*, starring Jean-Louis Trintignant as a Fascist police informer on the trail of Professor Quadri (a thinly veiled Carlo Rosselli). Rarely has Fascism appeared so simply horrible as in that 1970 film. The Rossellis had been murdered, it seems, by a group of Jew-baiting, right-wing French extremists set on the political "rejuvenation" of their country through the jingoist trinity of *travail, famille, patrie*. The assassins in fact belonged to a prototype Front National outfit called the Cagoulards (some of whom were friendly with the very young François Mitterrand) and, most likely, in the pay of Mussolini's agents. As Stalin said: "No man, no problem." 1

*Ian Thomson is the author of "Primo Levi: a Biography" (Vintage)*

### **A Bold and Dangerous Family: the Rossellis and the Fight Against Mussolini**

Caroline Moorehead

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