

Carlo Rosselli Was a Revolutionary Murdered by Fascism

This day in 1936, Italian socialist Carlo Rosselli made his famous Radio Barcelona appeal for anti-fascists to join the struggle “today in Spain, tomorrow in Italy.” He was murdered by fascists the following year, but Rosselli's vision of a free and just society lives on.

Carlo Rosselli’s legacy cannot be reduced to his one published book. (Wikimedia Commons)
On June 9, 1937, Carlo Rosselli and his brother, Nello, were murdered by the French far-right movement La Cagoule on the orders of Italian Fascists. This was a fate that Carlo — leader of [Giustizia e Libertà](#) (GL), alongside Communists Italy’s main anti-fascist movement — had long seen coming.

The 1930s had been a decisive test for militants like Rosselli. Since the consolidation of Benito Mussolini’s regime, they had spent a decade in Paris, a city that had become like a “museum of anti-fascist” exiles. The two possible outcomes were death or what they called *riscatto* — “redemption,” in [Walter Benjamin](#)’s sense. For Rosselli, anti-fascism was about remembering the defeated, actively fighting the common adversary, and laying the foundations for ultimate victory.

Rosselli made this clear on May Day 1937 as he commemorated anti-fascism’s martyrs, in particular [Antonio Gramsci](#), who had died a few days earlier after a decade in a Fascist jail. Rosselli insisted, “The new society is born from pain, just like a baby. It seems the passage to a higher phase of coexistence is impossible before we have reached the depths of abjection.”

But what forms was this redemption going to take? Who were the defeated to be redeemed? And what “anti-fascist revolution” were Rosselli and his movement fighting for?

In Italy, many pages have been written about Carlo Rosselli’s heterodox socialism. Yet parts of his political evolution, especially in later life, remain somewhat obscured by his only published book, *Liberal Socialism* — or rather, the uses made of it.

In this volume, written in *confino* (forced internal exile) over 1928–29 and published in France in 1930, Rosselli mounted a sharp criticism of the Socialists and their tradition. This work was one of Italian anti-fascism’s most important texts; as Norberto Bobbio pointed out, comparing it to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, it is a “reflection born of defeat, such that it appears, beyond its theoretical framing, as a courageous act of soul-searching.”

Yet Rosselli’s legacy cannot be reduced to this work alone. Carried away by the practical struggle, he would not have time to pursue another planned theoretical study on the question of revolution. Yet the 1930s were also a period in which Rosselli’s movement began to make clear what the fundamental characteristics of the anti-fascist revolution would be.

A Terrible Novelty

Defining this revolution was at the heart of the analyses published in the *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* journal, the movement’s weekly, founded in 1932. It gained further definition through outbursts of working-class resistance and seemingly ever more decisive revolutionary moments, from the armed struggle in the [streets of Vienna](#) in 1934 to the Asturias uprising and the Spanish revolution of 1936.

For Rosselli, the shifting definition of the struggle and its objectives was also a matter of moving from “anti-fascism to the moment *beyond* fascism.” In this vein, the *Quaderni*’s first issue in January 1932 expressed the need to move from “a negative and indistinct anti-fascism” to a “constructive anti-fascism that speaks to the fundamental problems of the revolution.”

The GL movement had been founded in 1929 by Rosselli, alongside Emilio Lussu and Francesco Fausto Nitti, after their remarkable, unprecedented escape from the island of Lipari. The means of their arrival in France heralded not only a change of style for exile anti-fascism but also a radical transformation of its tactics.

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Until that point, the traditional parties had proven unprepared for the struggle that had to be waged. Arrangements among the secular, noncommunist anti-fascist parties in exile had succeeded in coordinating the efforts of parties from Italy's pre-Fascist era. But they had not really drawn the conclusions of their defeat by Mussolini's now consolidated regime.

The Concentration for Anti-Fascist Action, uniting such parties from 1927 to 1934, provided further proof of their inability to adapt their repertoire of action, their doctrine, and their political strategy to the new situation Fascism had created. The Concentration presented itself as a foreign-based para-government, the true representation of Italy, awaiting its eventual return to power. Yet even after ten years of battle, it struggled to make anyone understand why, as France's attorney general asked the exiled reformist Filippo Turati, "Italy does not revolt."

For this reason, Rosselli defined GL as the first movement created entirely in order to fight fascism — "because it sees in fascism the central fact, the terrible novelty of our time." He saw other anti-fascist movements as lacking an "active awareness" of the historical process underway — understood as "willingness to face the dangers" of fighting fascism. This observation certainly held true for the years leading up to Mussolini's banning of the anti-fascist parties in 1926 and became particularly stinging at the beginning of the 1930s, when anti-fascism's political impasse became increasingly obvious even to its main participants.

Created to respond to these limitations, GL advocated the overcoming of the pre-Fascist political configuration, presenting itself as a socialist, republican, and liberal "action unit" whose goal was to revive the struggle on Italian soil itself; in November 1931, the Concentration of Anti-Fascist Action gave it a mandate to do so. This meant joining battle on the "only terrain that political logic imposes" — an illegal and violent struggle, if necessary. "We are at war," Rosselli wrote.

Founded on the two imperatives of "thought and action," handed down from the nineteenth-century republican Giuseppe Mazzini, GL presented itself as a "revolutionary movement" that aimed to "overthrow fascism" through insurrection. This "unitary and romantic" phase in its activity demanded closing ranks and taking action against fascism at whatever cost. For Rosselli, "with an opposition divided into a thousand groups and subgroups, with an opposition that does not achieve a fierce unity in struggle, fascism will last a hundred years."

Here there was no space for drafting a political program, which could have prompted tensions over the ultimate ambitions of the different forces in GL's ranks or among those who supported its clandestine struggle in Italy. Not until the arrest of most of the leaders of GL's clandestine cells at the start of the 1930s, mainly in the north of Italy, would it lay the foundations for real reflection on what sense the struggle should take and the alliances this should involve.

“We Are Outlaws”

Carlo Rosselli and GL's members saw their political engagement as a radical rupture with fascism but also with pre-Fascist Italy. They were galvanized in "revolt against the men, the mentality, the methods of the pre-Fascist political world."

This also meant a particular focus on the Socialists, who had been hobbled by their failure to engage in the "courageous soul-searching" that Rosselli demanded already in 1926. The "self-criticism" he insisted upon, even as he asserted his attachment to their cause (following the 1924 Blackshirt assassination of MP Giacomo Matteotti, Rosselli had joined the reformist-socialist party), was indispensable if they were to situate their action within the current historical process and show their "strength and vitality." However, what instead prevailed in this party was passivity — for Rosselli, the fruit of the crystallization of a narrow positivist and determinist doctrine.

In this, Rosselli was very much part of a political generation that also included the revolutionary liberal Piero Gobetti and the communist Gramsci. They had been nurtured on the idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile and the "concretism" of [Gaetano Salvemini](#), and were in open conflict with the old Italian socialism and its bureaucratic paralysis, to which they opposed the "ethical sense of politics," "voluntarism," and "action."

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This generation thus tended toward a rereading or a revision of Marxism, which took on the trappings of an intergenerational conflict. In one 1924 text, Gobetti identified "two anti-fascisms" — that of the

young and that of the old. Rosselli presented his own liberal socialism as “the explicit confession of an intellectual crisis . . . very widespread in the young socialist generation.”

The “old” Socialist Party had, Rosselli insisted, proven incapable of understanding fascism as a phenomenon and therefore of overcoming it. In this, it suffered from the defects of all the conservative parties, “rigid, sectarian, jealous . . . fearful of all sudden innovations.” This uncompromising analysis of the Socialists would be one of the main themes of Rosselli’s understanding of the Italian crisis. Yet he also insisted that there could be no anti-fascist fight in separation from a socialist perspective.

“I am a socialist,” he wrote in Gobetti’s *La Rivoluzione liberale* in 1924, because of a set of principles, of experiences, of the conviction — drawn from study — of the evolution of the environment in which I live; I am a socialist by culture, by instinct, but also — I say it loudly so that certain absolute determinists or shrivelled-up Marxists can hear me — by faith and by sentiment. I do not believe that socialism will be, and that the working class will assert itself in history, through the fatal evolution of things, regardless of human will. To those who speak to me in this language, I reply with Sorel — and here is all my voluntarism — socialism will be, but could also not be.

GL was thus created to make up for the lack of “faith,” “will,” and “passion” that condemned to defeat the only historical force — socialism — whose “permanent and definitive” opposition to fascism was above question, precisely because it represented “the interests of a class that has nothing to do with fascism: the proletariat.” With his reference to Sorel, Rosselli wanted to breathe into socialism a faith in human action that he saw as absent from classical Marxism.

For Rosselli, a renewal of socialism was interdependent with the anti-fascist struggle. In 1932, he wrote, “the hour of all heresies has come,” an hour calling for a “profound reorganization of the forces of the Left . . . preceded and accompanied by a ruthless and opportunistic revision of [their] doctrines.” This need for transformation also seemed connected to the possibilities created by the passing of the baton from one socialist generation to another; the old reformist leaders Filippo Turati and Claudio Treves died in exile in 1932, and rebirth seemed within reach.

Anti-Fascist Revolution

Fascism set young democrats, liberals, republicans, and reformist socialists in a paradoxical situation, confronting them with the need to fight a rearguard action to defend democratic freedoms. Doubtless, the anti-fascist commitment of liberals like Ernesto Rossi or Riccardo Bauer was built on this primary revolt, which was more moral than political in character.

Early in its life, *Giustizia e Libertà* also made these priorities its own. A manifesto distributed in Italy in 1931 defined the GL program as a “transitional program . . . limited to restoring freedom for all and correcting the most serious injustices.”

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Yet this was also the moment when the fight for freedom escaped the historical-theoretical frameworks of the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and instead integrated their legacies into the century of October 1917. Best typifying this generation, combining liberalism with revolutionary politics in this “exceptional conjuncture,” was Piero Gobetti.

During his short life, Gobetti stood for a liberalism rooted in the concrete experience of struggles from below, which he saw most fully expressed in the factory councils in Turin and the soviets in Russia. Gobetti termed the workers’ movement “freedom in the making” and the October Revolution “an affirmation of liberalism,” because it broke “a centuries-old slavery” by creating an “agrarian democracy” — a state in which “the people have faith.”

Gobetti’s magazine, *La Rivoluzione liberale* — a title which itself stirred much perplexity across the political spectrum — was, in this sense, truly a “program of action,” firmly rooted in his understanding of October 1917 and the concrete experience of the Italian factory occupations of 1919–1920. Autonomy, anti-bureaucratic demands, voluntarism, “free initiative from below,” and the historical role of the individual rather than “the mass” — these made up the inner secret of Gobetti’s libertarian and revolutionary brand of liberalism. Here a freedom “which liberates” was indissolubly linked to social revolution and the realities of the twentieth century.

Rosselli himself drew deep on this liberalism. Thus, if in 1930 he saw “the revolutionary conquest of

freedom [as] the indispensable premise,” and in 1932 underlined the revolutionary character of democratic demands in the “concrete situation of Fascist Italy,” in 1934 he forcefully argued that the freedom GL fought for was the freedom “of the toiling masses,” which also meant “the duty to use power, once conquered, against the exploiters and reaction.” From the “struggle for bread and more humane living conditions, identified, for all social classes and especially the working class, with the struggle for freedom,” Rosselli passed to “freedom in the fields, in the factory, at work. Human freedom. Integral humanism.”

In 1934, faced with a skeptical Leon Trotsky, Rosselli insisted on these Gobettian influences. Rosselli and Gobetti shared a similar definition of fascism — a political phenomenon that they situated fully within the processes of Italian history. Gobetti wrote insightful pages pointing to the inextricable link between Italian history, fascism, and what many authors then called the “Italian character.” Rosselli soon refined this idea by speaking of a “gradual degeneration” passing from the post-unification period to Fascism. If Fascism resulted from the moral, political, and cultural immaturity of Italians — a “lack of character” — the building of a new political order must inevitably proceed via a revolutionary struggle, at first based on the example of active minorities, then “spreading to vast strata of the population.”

“For Rosselli, only politically conscious, active minorities could lead the revolutionary struggle.”

A Mazzinian, romantic, and elitist conception of political struggle drawn from the previous century was thus also part of the political moment in which Rosselli thought and acted. It would be reductive to consider his talk of active minorities only in relation to the political heritage of the Risorgimento (Italian unification), though he certainly drew heavily on this. Rather, the revolutionary anti-fascist struggle had to take account of the terrain in front of it, an Italian society commanded by a “mass reactionary regime.” There was no hope that an amorphous mass lacking political coherence would itself set in motion. For Rosselli, only politically conscious, active minorities could lead the revolutionary struggle. He had no hesitation in pointing to Karl Marx, “a solitary researcher in the British Museum,” and Lenin, who firmly believed in the “essential role of the revolutionary minority forged in the illegal struggle,” as examples to follow. Rosselli did not believe that the revolution could be unanimous; rather, it had to be plural and creative. “The revolution is not the conquest of the levers of command by a small minority,” he wrote in 1936.

The revolution is a ferment, a reversal from below, a social crisis, an economic, political and moral crisis. The revolutionary party must not conceive itself as a small state but rather as a microcosmic society, with all the plurality, intensity, and richness of motives proper to a free society.

Thus, the revolution is the product of voluntary and conscious self-organization from below — especially embodied, in Rosselli’s eyes, by Russia’s peasant-soldiers. But if there was no doubt that the October Revolution is the “indispensable starting point for any revolution in Europe,” it could not be a model for Italy to follow. “Revolutions [could] not be imported,” but could be adapted.

Rosselli thus postulated a radically democratic and profoundly Italian revolution, defined as the encounter between October 1917 (which he distinguished from the “dictatorial atrocities” that followed) and the heritage of a West returning to the sources of early nineteenth-century freedom struggles. “The revolution was for Marx,” he wrote in 1934,

like for all the revolutionaries of the last century, synonymous with the emancipation of the human person and a full federalism. The conclusion is clear: if it does not want to degenerate into a new statolatry, into more ferocious barbarism and reaction, the Italian Revolution must raise — over the rubble of the capitalist fascist state — society and federations of associations, as free and varied as possible. . . . Man, not the state, is the ultimate end.

Rosselli never imagined that Italy could go without a revolution; in fact, most anti-fascists shared this view. Only a few old liberals still thought, in the 1930s, that it was possible to “send the regime packing with its cap in its hand” and restore the constitutional legitimacy of the Italian state. For fascism had “its roots in the Italian subsoil” and was indissolubly linked to World War I and the counterrevolutionary role the bourgeoisie had given it in the post-1918 political, social, and economic crisis. In short, since fascism was “both a class reaction and a moral crisis,” “only a profound revolution [could] bring down . . . the economic, moral, and political causes that have made it so easily victorious.”

Class Politics

Throughout the 1930s, Rosselli applied himself to identifying the actors in this revolution, and the political forces indispensable to its success. This quest led him to reject ever more categorically the classes that he blamed for supporting fascism and instead make the proletariat the “living force” of the revolution.

This had not always been so. In its first manifesto distributed in Italy, the GL spoke of a “transitional program . . . that can be accepted by all, from the socialist and communist worker to the antifascist bourgeois.” But if, in 1932, Rosselli pointed to the petty and middle bourgeoisie “whose savings and function must be safeguarded,” he now spoke of the peasantry and the working class as the driving forces of the revolutionary process. Among the fundamental reforms to be made during the revolutionary crisis were the creation of a republic, agrarian and industrial reforms (for which he foresaw “light compensation”), and the nationalization of the big private credit banks.

Yet by 1934, he restricted the driving force of the revolution to the workers, peasants, and intellectuals “who share its ideals and destiny” while maintaining the objective of a two-sector economy — “a socialist organization of industrial production and a semi-socialist organization of agrarian production . . . that respects the freedom and dignity of man,” he wrote to Gaetano Salvemini in 1936.

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The anti-fascist revolution was ever more clearly proletarian, and anti-fascism synonymous with anti-capitalism. This anti-capitalism, he maintained, was not abstract but “concrete and historical,” based on the observation of contemporary liberal democracy and the subsequent conviction that it had exhausted its historical function. Rosselli called for a preventive revolution to ward off another war. The gradual radicalization of Rosselli’s political thought led him to review GL’s potential allies in the anti-fascist revolution. He never underestimated the Communist Party of Italy (PCI), the only other force that had a clandestine presence in the peninsula. He was also conscious that the USSR offered a myth useful to the anti-fascist struggle.

Yet Rosselli refused to wear any blinkers. Precisely in the name of the ideals that guided the anti-fascist struggle, he challenged the pure and simple exaltation of the USSR and vigorously denounced Stalinism. In the June 12, 1936, issue of *Giustizia e Libertà*, taking up Victor Serge’s words in his letter to André Gide published just two days previously, he asked a question vital to any serious opposition to fascism: “How can we block the way [to fascism] with so many concentration camps behind us?”

Nonetheless, Rosselli had no doubt that the PCI would be indispensable to the coming revolutionary struggle, and defended this position despite the tough conflicts that set him against a major part of GL. He never gave up on it, despite the conflicts with the PCI both in the time when it cast reformist socialists as “social-fascists” and then when Palmiro Togliatti’s party made its appeal to “Blackshirted brothers.”

Before his death, Rosselli advanced the principle of creating a unitary or single “party of the proletariat” — to his eyes, the sole condition for the success of the proletarian revolution. It seems that this proposal sought to organically combine the different forces of the workers’ movement, yet it also remained a hybrid formula. It was not a united front, which would presuppose that the forces involved, and especially the vanguard party, would “strike together” but “march separately.” Nor was it a popular front, since it excluded any interclass alliances.

For historian [Guido Liguori](#), it is precisely here that Rosselli’s main radicalization occurred, “more political than theoretical.” Rosselli conceived this organic union as the prelude to a “progressive fusion of the various fractions of the proletariat.” This new party presented itself as a new synthesis, “a kind of anticipation of the future society,” already partly realized in GL.

Over time, Rosselli gave the anti-fascist revolution a more distinct character; at first a moral and political affair, it became social and proletarian in nature. The borders within which the sought-after revolution would take place were also considerably widened — it moved from being an Italian revolution to a European one, and from a preventive revolution reacting to Adolph Hitler’s triumph in Germany, to what Rosselli would call the “permanent revolution of spirits.”

On June 9, 1937, the murderous hand of the La Cagoule group put an end to Rosselli’s rich political

reflection. His thought sometimes had to grope in the dark, and sometimes took backward steps. Yet Rosselli always sought to tie the experiences of the past to horizons for the future. When Rosselli's funeral was held in Paris that June 19, a crowd gathered and surrounded his wife, [Marion Cave](#), and his friends in struggle. As the strains of Ludwig Van Beethoven's seventh symphony, Rosselli's favorite, rang out, it seemed that his brutal death and the looming defeat in Spain were sounding the death knell of anti-fascism. Yet that was not how Italy's future would turn out.