

## THE UNTOLD STORY: ANARCHISTS AND THE RESISTANCE IN GENOA

Anarchist opposition to fascism was an opposition that was not circumstantial but went to the very heart of the historical roots of the movement's class-based (and therefore revolutionary) rejection of capitalism and the State. Fascist rule represented a long eclipse which overtook a strong and well-articulated movement – the 500,000 members of the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI), the many pugnacious Camere del Lavoro (Labour Halls) headed by anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist militants, the strong anarchist presence in the Rail Union, the Maritime Workers' Federation as well as in the CGL (General Labour Confederation), plus a specifically anarchist movement mostly rallying behind the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI) with hundreds of groups and premises and thousands of members, and, in *Umanità Nova*, a daily newspaper that enjoyed wide readership among the proletariat, plus dozens upon dozens of publications and reviews attracting contributions from the movement's most clear-sighted intellectuals and militants. A dark tunnel into which they were all thrust, only to resurface decimated and impoverished in the years after the world war, albeit still in a position to reconstitute itself as the Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI) and to publish newspapers and reviews and, above all, stand up – in specific local circumstances – to Togliatti's stalinist Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and its designs on hegemony.

Out of all of this the historians of the movement – on the rare occasions when they have bothered to look at anarchism in Genoa – have highlighted mostly those aspects that lend themselves readily to the creation of myths – the defence of the Sestri Ponente Camera del Lavoro, the distribution to the civilian population of foodstuffs – stolen from the Monterosa alpine division – by the “Pittaluga” detachment, the death of Pittaluga himself on active service, plus the other Genoese comrades who perished in the course of the partisan struggle. Whilst taking nothing away from the value of these episodes and sacrifices, they still need to be fleshed out and placed in context against the backcloth of the successful foothold enjoyed by anarchist ideas and the steadfastness of anarchist personnel in their political and trade union activity even in the workplace. Thus the armed defence by about a hundred workers of the Camera del Lavoro in Sestri Ponente against the onslaught from fascist goons and carabinieri was not some heroic feat but rather the “necessary” outcome of an anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist political and trade union tradition that in the factory seizures just two years earlier had catapulted the 14,000 local USI members into the forefront of the struggles and of the movement.

Sestri Ponente, a working class stronghold – the industrial heartland of Genoa at that time – was anarcho-syndicalist thanks to the efforts of many anarchist and syndicalist workers (ranging from the Stanchi brothers to Caviglia, Piana, Rossi, the Grassini brothers, Angelo Dettori, Mariani, Raspi, Negro and so many others) who had successfully challenged reformist socialism and the far-from-pugnacious attitude of the CGL leadership for the sympathies of the working masses.

Fossati, Fonderia, Cantiere e Proiettficcio Ansaldo and the Rail Yards in Sestri: these are just a few of the names of the big plants, the strongholds where the syndicalist workers' movement, tested but never defeated, staged its last open resistance. The same thing happened also in Cornigliano, Sampierdarena, Bolzaneto and Pontedecimo where outstanding political and organisational efforts were made by other militants such as Bianconi, Ciani, Antonio Dettori, Bigatti, Quintili, Moscardini, etc. These comrades, along with others, were to pop up later in clandestine activities or in exile, in Spain or in the internment camps and they all joined in with the fight that occupied the period between the collapse of fascist rule and the end of the fighting on 25 April 1945. Others such as Primo Palmini, Cesare Rossi and Pierino Pesce would be murdered by a triumphant fascism.

The dark days of fascist rule, from the murder of Matteotti up until fascism crumbled in July 1943 are the hardest years to speak about or reconstruct. What we can say is that there was no diminution of Genoese anarchist opposition to fascism, not even in organisational terms. Although many

comrades were forced into exile or interned or imprisoned, a small core of them held together for clandestine revolutionary antifascist propaganda efforts.

In 1925, the last all-Italy congress of the USI was held, clandestinely, in Genoa. The delegates who took part bore witness to a still vibrant presence in the factories in Sestri Ponente. In 1926, again surreptitiously, in the hinterland of Pra – within the western approaches to Genoa – there a number of meetings of delegates from the main factories in Genoa where the anarcho-syndicalists' influence was still strong. In 1931 – and again in Sestri Ponente – fascist police rounded up numerous comrades for clandestine distribution of newspapers brought in by sea from France. Many of them were interned. In 1937, comrades who had been raising funds and support for the Italian brigades and volunteers fighting in the Spanish civil war were arrested.

All of these which indicates that there was no interruption of the ongoing anarchist opposition to fascism and that the organisational epicentre of these activities was Sestri Ponente and the big factories in the area. It was in Sestri Ponente in June 1942 that there was a clandestine get-together of Genoese anarchists at which they came to initial agreement about marshalling their efforts to restore links between the anarchist nuclei of Upper Italy and to rebuild the organisation in Genoa. It was most likely in the same location that the Libertarian Communist Federation (FCL) was launched and the draft proposals for a United Workers' Front (FUL) worked out. We do not know precisely who took part, aside from Emilio Grassini and Antonio Pittaluga. Caviglia, Pozzi, Antonio Dettori, Sardini and a few other working class anarchist cadres from Sestri Ponente were also involved, most likely. There is every chance that comrades from Piedmont and Tuscany may well have attended too, as well as Pasquale Binazzi whose work as liaison between the various civilian elements in northern Italy was to prove of crucial importance later.

On 16 May 1943 another meeting was held in Augusto Boccone's house in Florence. Boccone, a Genoese, had been living in Florence for sometime by that point. Emilio Grassini and Pietro Pozzi were the Genoese delegates who joined comrades from Florence, La Spezia, Bologna, Faenza and Rome. The meeting witnessed the launching of the Libertarian Communist Federation of Upper Italy (FCLAI) in which the Genoese group was prominent. After the collapse of fascism and events on 8 September 1943 a further meeting in Florence (at which the Genoese delegates were Grassini and Antonio Dettori) gave the go-ahead for the relaunching of Umanità Nova and the circulation of the United Workers' Front (FUL) manifesto to antifascist workers and other parties. This business of rebuilding the movement and looking forward to a revolution arising out of the situation (in which Genoese anarchists were prominent) was matched by the establishment of the first armed anarchist units (the FCL action squads) which would, in a number of areas, grow into libertarian partisan brigades. In Genoa a city-wide libertarian partisan unit was formed on 9 September 1943. Francesco Ogno, Nicoló Turcinovich, Emilio Grassini, Pietro Pozzi and Giuseppe Verardo were to be among the first to organise the core of what was to become the "Errico Malatesta" SAP (patriotic strike teams) Brigade.

Which this nascent military activity was being launched (remember that many anarchists helped set up the GAP (patriotic action groups) squads and paid a heavy price in terms of fatalities sustained) the effort to reconstruct an organisational network inside the factories and delegations from western Genoa and in the Valpolcevera district continued. In virtually every one of the big plants, libertarian nuclei rallied around a few old and prestigious militants (like Caviglia, Bianconi and Moscardini) and would play an active part in the establishment of the earliest clandestine (trade union and political) committees alongside worker militants affiliated to other factions. This activity was especially notable in the various Ansaldo plants, and at the SIAC and Fossati works. The first of the big strikes in the winter of '43-'44 spread outwards from the Fossati works. Our comrades' influence in these agitations is obvious, if only from the critical comments from a number of Communist Party leaders at the time and afterwards.

At the same time, activity was under way in the workers' districts and among their delegations: all

over western Genoa and in the Valpolcevera, anarchist militants were in the forefront of the establishment of the first clandestine district bodies. The efforts of Vincenzo Toccafondo in Sestri Ponente d'Arena and of Carlo Quintili and Francesco Ogno in Cornigliano were especially deserving of mention.

A constant accompaniment to this militant activity was the attempt to come up with a temporary strategy which, taking cognizance of the special nature and limitations of the situation (the fight against the Nazi-fascists), might exploit its revolutionary potential to the full. The proposal for a United Workers' Front (clearly explained in a number of pamphlets from Emilio Grassini), an appeal to the rank-and-file worker militants of the leftwing parties, was in fact part and parcel of a perspective that regarded the initial clandestine resistance bodies as the agents of a revolutionary counter-power along anarchist-councillist lines. It is in this light that we should see the Genoese anarchists' participation in the factory- and district-based Liberation Committees rather than as some supposed accommodation to the pro-democracy programme of the National Liberation Committee of Upper Italy (CLNAI) which regarded the liberation struggle as a second Risorgimento (National Revival).

Since – after an initial period of uncertainty – the worker militants of the other leftwing factions abided by the orthodox policies of their respective organisations, the United Workers' Front project essentially failed as a rallying cry, but it did prove a powerful factor in the recruitment of many young people who went on to join anarchist partisan units or the FCL units. Thus the forces through which Genoese anarchists were preparing to face up to the insurrectionary phase were taking shape. In military terms, these were – - Two libertarian SAP brigades, the “Errico Malatesta” in the Pegli area and the “Carlo Pisacane” in the Cornigliano area, under the command of Francesco Ogno and Nicoló Turcinovich respectively, (with Grassini as political commissar):

- The “Pietro Gori” libertarian detachment under the command of Pietro Mascarino, operating autonomously, as well as in concert with the other Sestri Ponente SAP brigades,
- The “Gaggero” libertarian detachment, under the command of Francesco Ferrando and operating in the Voltri area in concert with the “Piva” Garibaldi Brigade:
- The “Cianchi” detachment (which was to adopt the name of its commander, Gastone Cianchi, killed in action on 25 April 1945) operating in the Valbisogno area in concert with the local Matteotti Brigade:
- The Valle dei Nervi libertarian detachment (commanded by Vittorio Barazzoni and of which Antonio Pittaluga, another fatality of 25 April 1945, was a member):
- Other action squads and local units in the larger plants and in the Pra, Arenzano, Cogoleto and throughout the Valpolcevera districts:
- A considerable presence in some of the Garibaldi SAP brigades which acquired the character of “mixed” brigades – such as the “Lattanzi” brigade (in which Virgilio Mazzoni was deputy political commissar): the “Longhi” from Sestri Ponente, and the “Sciolla” from Sestri Levante.

Anarchist participants had numbers and quality, although they were poorly armed, but they were not so well represented in the partisan campaigns in the mountains (except for the Coduri unit in which many Sestri Levante anarchists served), because, as Grassini wrote, the financial wherewithal to send and maintain partisans in the mountains just was not there, the anarchists being excluded from the Ligurian CLN and therefore cut off from the funding that that CLN procured from “antifascist” industrialists and from Allied aid. As for Genoese anarchist participation in the factory-based and district-based resistance bodies, we have referred to that already. Genoese anarchists had a presence on the vast majority of the district-based CLNs [1] and on the CLNs in the biggest plants in the city [2], even if the practice of modelling these bodies upon the CLNAI (in which Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, Action Party personnel, Liberals and Republicans had a place as of right – because of the need to reflect a sort of “pre-eminence” over other political forces) led to unjustifiable exclusions, such as when anarchists were excluded from the CLN at the Ansaldo plant. Further evidence of the pervasiveness of the anarchist presence at factory level in Genoa was the fact that one Communist, a Christian Democrat and one anarchist (Giovanni Mariani from Sestri Ponente) were

appointed to oversee the coordination of the Trade Union Agitation Committees.

By the eve of 25 April, almost 400 libertarian partisans were under arms (as the clandestine edition of *Umanità Nova*, over 2,000 copies of which were distributed in Genoa on 20 April 1945, testifies) and ready to rise up in the hope of acting as midwives to a revolutionary process and they suffered heavy fatalities (killed in action, shot or sent to their deaths in concentration camps). [3] History records what became of all those hopes, yet out of the resistance struggle emerged a relatively strong and well organised movement, with solid roots in the factories and working class districts and making its stand on the clear-cut positions of class-based anarchism. Political developments over the ensuing years, overwhelming Communist strength and a number of developments within the anarchist movement itself altered that influence and whittled it down to a lively but unproductive witness to anarchist ideas and principles.

It is not easy to come to an evaluation of anarchist participation in the fight against fascism and in the resistance in Genoa. We are talking about a long and articulate process, not without its own internal contradictions, but operating at all times within the context of a revolutionary strategy that was grappling – somewhere between clear-sighted presentiments and inevitable misunderstandings – with an incredibly complex historical period. Central to that process was the attempt to establish that United Workers' Front (FUL) which – although it failed – represented a novel and unprecedented essay in forward planning and political leadership which looked beyond the traditional forms of propaganda and agitation.

To conclude, it remains only to underline the fact that today – in a period of history which may be different but is equally complicated – the need to review experiences goes beyond mere historiography and addresses the broader question of the nature of anarchism and its original, authentic rootedness in the working class. Quite something in a period like the present which is so full of potential and of stimuli, but also of confusion.

## Notes

1. This is a complete listing of the territorial CLNs in which anarchists had a presence, insofar as we have been able to establish from a number of sources:

Sestri Ponente d'Arena, Genoa-Central, Sestri Ponente, Cornigliano, Pegli, Marassi, Rossiglione, Fegino, Voltri, Pontedecimo and Pra.

2. This is a list of the factory CLNs on which there was anarchist representation:

SIAC (Campi), Ansaldo Fossati (Sestri Ponente), Cantieri Ansaldo (Sestri Ponente), San Giorgio (Sestri Ponente), ILVA (Campi), Società Italiana Gas, Ansaldo Allestimento Navi, Ansaldo San Giorgio, Ansaldo Apprendisti (Sestri Ponente), Ceramica Vaccari (Borzoli), Ansaldo Gestioni Industriali, SIAC (Pontedecimo), Bagnara SAM (Sestri Ponente), Piaggio (Sestri Ponente), INA, Costruzioni Meccaniche e Navali, ILVA (Sestri Ponente), Ansaldo Carpenteria, Manifattura Tabacchi (Sestri Ponente), ILVA (Voltri), Ansaldo Cerusa (Voltri), Sime, Biasioli, Fonderie e Acciaierie Liguri, CLN Edili. Although Ansaldo Meccanico, Ansaldo Delta, Allestimento Navi, the railways, the docks and the tram company did not have anarchists represented on their CLNs, they were the theatres of operations of sizeable libertarian groups.

3. As a final testimony to the Genoese anarchists' commitment to the fight against the Nazi-fascists, we offer this authenticated list of 23 Genoese fallen from the period between 8 September 1943 and 25 April 1945:

Pietro Bigatti, Mario Bisio, Natalino Capecchi, Antonio Castello, Giacomo Catani, Emanuele Causa, Gastone Cianchi, Mario Colandro, Mario Dacconi, Domenico De Palo, Otello Gambelli, Attilio Parodi, Antonio Pittaluga, Rinaldo Ponte, Umberto Raspi, Bruno Raspino, Carlo Ravazzani, Ernesto Rocca, Emanuele Sciutto, Dario Stanchi, Walter Stanchi, Cipriano Turco and Rizzieri Vezzola.

Source (*Umanità Nova*, 26 April 1998, Year 78, No. 14)