

“The Assassination of the Rosselli Brothers”

On the 9th of June 1937, in the French spa town of Bagnoles-de-l'Orne, the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, were savagely murdered by right-wing thugs. The perpetrators were members of the far-right French clandestine group *La Cagoule*. The act was sanctioned by the Italian Fascist government in exchange for, “one hundred semi-automatic Berretta rifles.”¹ Carlo Rosselli was the epitome of the resistance; he was the “*enfant terrible*” of anti-fascist expatriates.² This essay will briefly summarize their ideology and actions, and highlight what led up to their assassinations and its aftermath.

Carlo and Nello were born a year apart, 1899 and 1900 respectively. Their family was wealthy and of Tuscan Jewish heritage, which played an active role in the *Risorgimento* – Italy’s unification movement. Their mother, Amelia Pincherle Rosselli, was a renowned playwright and fervent supporter of republicanism. Having a strong sense of country, both served in the First World War where they tragically lost their older brother, Aldo. After the war – the brothers became academics and leftists partially due to the influence of the renowned socialist and historian, Gaetano Salvemini. Carlo would become an economist and a man of action, while Nello would grow in to a historian and a man of books.³

The brothers shared an ideology called Liberal Socialism, with Carlo on the more radical side when it came to praxis. Rossellian socialism lands somewhere in-between J.S. Mill and Errico Malatesta. While Carlo was writing his political *Magnus Opus*, “Liberal Socialism,” Nello argued to his brother that this ideology was already present in the milieu of libertarian socialism in post-*Risorgimento* Italy.⁴

Homologous to socialists of the libertarian spirit, Carlo argued: “Socialism is only the logical development, up to its extreme consequences of the principle of liberty. Socialism... concrete emancipation of the proletariat, is liberalism in action, liberty for the poor.”⁵ Their socialism was the antithesis of Lenin’s – decentralized, autonomous, and federal. In a critique of Leninism he exclaimed: “all appear open to the dangers of bureaucratic elephantiasis, intrusiveness of the state and the dictatorship of incompetence, the flattening of each individual freedom and

¹ Blatt, Joel. "Carlo Rosselli's Socialism." In *Italian Socialism: Between Politics and History*, by Spencer M Di Scala, 80-99. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. p.89

² Pugliese, Stanislao. “Death in Exile: The Assassination of Carlo Rosselli.” In *Journal of Contemporary History*, July 1997, Vol.32(3), p.305

³ Spini, Giorgio. "Florentine Antifascism: The Jewish Milieu." In *Italian Socialism: Between Politics and History*, by Spencer M. Di Scala, 100-104. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. P. 101

⁴ *Ibid*, p.101. Note: For some background on the foundations of anarchism in Italy check out: “Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892” by Nunzio Pernicone. Nello wrote a seminal book on Carlo Pisacane, and an important monograph on Bakunin and Mazzini.

⁵ Carlo Rosselli, “Liberal Socialism” in Joel Blatt, p. 83

autonomy, to the absence of creativity in the leaders, as the performers.”⁶ He insisted socialism must be of a “democratic method.”⁷ But in order for this type of socialism to occur, imperative are changes within the individual.⁸

Rossellian socialism also had an ethical dimension, he maintained: “There was no ‘Marxist ethic’... only one ethic... of Socrates, Christ, and Kant.” This synthesis with the political, he believed, could be traced back to “Greek Rationalism and the messianism of Israel.”⁹ The latter was most likely Nello’s contribution.¹⁰ This moral universality in politics would also function as the motivating factor for their anti-fascism.

What ignited the brothers’ to act against Mussolini was the assassination of the socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti.¹¹ In January of 1925, this led the brothers and others to found one of the first anti-fascist newspapers, *Non Mollare*.¹² After its repression, in the following year Carlo would also found a second anti-fascist journal, *Il Quarto Stato*, with Pietro Nenni.¹³

Carlo’s political praxis did not end with writing. In the later part of 1926, with future Italian president, and future Italian prime minister – Sandro Pertini and Ferruccio Parri – Rosselli plotted and succeed in helping the leading Reformist Socialist, Filippo Turati, escape Italy.¹⁴ This daring move led to Carlo’s arrest and imprisonment on the island of Lipari. During his two and a half year long tenure on the island, Carlo consummated his political theory and wrote “Liberal Socialism.” With the help of comrades, in the summer of 1927, Rosselli and some fellow prisoners dashingy escaped Lipari by boat to then French colony of Tunisia.¹⁵

Post-Lipari, Carlo Rosselli would go on to become one of the most important and militant anti-fascists. In 1929 – with Emilio Lussu, Alberto Tarchiani, and Ernesto Rossi – Carlo founded *Giustizia e Libertà*.¹⁶ The organization contained multiple tendencies, ideologically and in performativity, and was arguably the most important anti-fascist organization in Europe. The

⁶ Ruini, Andrea. Translation by L. Gulotta. THE LIBERAL SOCIALISM OF CARLO ROSSELLI. October 28, 203. <http://www.thisamericancommentary.com/posts/the-liberal-socialism-of-carlo-rosselli-by-andrea-ruini-translation-by-l-gulotta>.

⁷ Blatt, p.83

⁸ Ibid, p.84

⁹ Ibid, p. 82

¹⁰ Spini, p 101

¹¹ Pugliese, Stanislaw. “Carlo Rosselli : Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile.” Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 40 Note: As time went on, Nello tended to avoid direct confrontation with the fascist state. Matteotti was murder in June, 1924.

¹² Ibid, p.81 Note: In English this translates to “Don’t Give Up.” The founders were: Nello Traquandi, Tommaso Ramorino, Carlo Rosselli, Ernesto Rossi, Luigi Emery, and Nello Rosselli. They were part of the Salvemini intellectual circle of early to mid-twenties Florence.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 122

¹⁵ Fellow exile, Francesco Fausto Nitti, published the tale of his and Rosselli’s escape from Lipari in his book: *Le nostre prigionie e la nostra evasione* (Our Prisons and Our Escape).

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 123

group believed in a diversity of tactics for combating Mussolini and fascism. One stunt included dropping anti-fascists leaflets from a plane over Milan.¹⁷ However, they were not afraid of violence and plotted several assassinations against Mussolini to no avail.¹⁸

In 1936, Carlo Rosselli went to Spain to join the civil war on the Republican side. He claimed this was an: “opportunity to transform anti-fascism from a negative, passive idea into a positive, active force.”¹⁹ Rosselli, rightfully so, believed fascists only understood force and that the war presented anti-fascists the opportunity to combat fascism on equal grounds.²⁰ Along with the anarchist, Camillo Berneri, Rosselli, founded an Italian anti-fascist column. On the 7th of November, from Barcelona, Carlo gave the most important speech his life. It was transmitted to Italy via radio. He cried “Oggi in Spagna, domani in Italia.” It was this militant and open call to arms against fascism that most likely costed him his life.²¹

In the following spring of 1937, Carlo was visiting the spa town of Bagnoles-de-l'Orne to alleviate the pain of his phlebitis.²² Carlo was already under watch by the Mussolini regime through a mole in his organization, dubbed Togo, who claimed, “Rosselli is without a doubt the most dangerous of all the exiles.”²³ The rural country town provided the assailants the perfect opportunity to do a quick job. The Rossellis were driving their routine route – which was noted ahead of time by the fascists – when they noticed a car on the road.²⁴ This would be the last time they ever pulled over. Carlo was the victim of multiple stab wounds. Nello was also shanked, but since he put up a fight the assailants shot him as well.²⁵ The murders then took Carlos’s car and unsuccessfully tried to blow it up. Two days later the bodies were found and the story was fleshed out by an eye witness account from a local women.²⁶

The immediate aftermath of the Rossellis’ death was sensational. It was estimated that the funeral had over 100,000 attendees.²⁷ However, what was not clear was who the assassins were. The fascist press tried to link it to leftist in-fighting.²⁸ At that time, this claimed seemed reasonable due to murder of Berneri by Stalinists in Spain. Regardless, it soon became clear that the *Cagoule* were behind it. In fact – they had been stalking the Rossellis for months.²⁹ An investigation went on, and members of the clandestine organization were arrested. Unfortunately, the French courts could not find a connection to the Italian state, and when the Édouard Daladier

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 135-6

¹⁸ Blatt, p.86-7

¹⁹ Pugliese. “Death in Exile,” p.307

²⁰ Ibid, p.307

²¹ The speech: <http://www.storiaxisecolo.it/antifascismo/Guerraspagna1.htm>

²² Ibid, p.310

²³ Blatt, p.88

²⁴ Pugliese. “Death in Exile,” p.311

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, p.313

government came to power, the case was halted to ease tensions between Mussolini and the French state.³⁰

With the opening of the Fascist archives, solving the mystery of why the *Cagoule* committed this assassination became clear. First and foremost the *Cagoule* would receive, “one hundred semi-automatic Beretta rifles.”³¹ The *Cagoule* desired a violent right-wing coup of the French government, these weapons would help. On top of that, they sought after an alliance with the Fascist Italian government.³² A state official, Filipo Anfuso, served as the middle man between the *Cagoule* and Mussolini’s son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Foreign Minister of Italy.³³ Since this was close to Mussolini’s inner circle, the possibility of the *Duce* calling the order himself is most likely.

Like many anti-fascists before and after them, the Rossellis – especially Carlo – were willing to pay the ultimate price for freedom and what they believed was right. This moral outlook derived from an ethical synthesis from the best of western thought. Like others in the libertarian socialist tradition, they insisted that ethical and moral values must intertwine with politics and political theory. That is what led them to be anti-fascists. Their martyrdom ought to inspire anti-fascists for the generations to come.

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³⁰ Ibid, p.313-15

³¹ Blatt, p. 89

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.