

The Nation.

December 13, 1922

p. 65

The Black Shirt Revolution

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Rome, November 1

THE strong state has arrived in Italy. It has been on the road ever since the failure of the factory seizures in September, 1920. The abortive general strike of August 1 of this year served to spur the forces of reaction more quickly down the path of destiny. The internal disruption of the Socialist Party removed the last obstacle. Sunday, October 29, 1922, the strong state arrived with a bang. Its advent has been heralded in Rome by an ever-growing horde of hungry Fascisti armed with canes, table-legs from wrecked labor headquarters, burly tree-roots, rifles, and machine-guns. Its installation has been featured by the sacking of newspaper offices and Wild West shootings.

Our rooms are directly across from the Great Forum whose shattered columns bear mute witness to the futility of human violence—and its apparent inevitability. We are also next door to the Camera del Lavoro for the province of Rome. For three nights bands of marauding Fascisti have stood outside and pumped the magazines of their rifles into the windows, or have recklessly shot at the lights in the adjoining houses. Two nights ago a flower-pot, on the *terrazzo* above us, was struck—sent crashing into the air-shaft. Last night at about nine o'clock, during an interval in this firing, my wife and I, being obliged to go into the city, were shot at without warning as we stepped from the *portone*. Three times this impromptu fusillading has ended with the battering in of the front entrance of the labor headquarters. While the soldiery looked on, papers, furniture, and typewriters were hurled into this narrow street of the White Cross. This evening, even the doors and window sashes were wrenched loose, until the edifice now stands black and raw, lit by the flickering flames from the wreckage in the cobblestones over which the firemen, with their tiny, red, old-fashioned fire-engine and thin hose, are casually spurting a feeble stream of water.

Similar attacks were made upon every other labor and radical headquarters and upon all the anti-Fascist newspapers including the Nitti dailies *Epoca* and *Passe*. The furniture and records of the Republican headquarters were burned in the Piazza Colonna across from the new white loggia and beside the pedestal of the triumphal column of Marcus Aurelius with its quaint pictorial spiral. Marcus Aurelius that noble and well-intentioned persecutor of Christians were he to look down from his column (where now towers a statue of Paul, a saint of the religion he despised) would doubtless find his suave and gilded philosophy quite in tune with the scene beneath his eyes.

Down the streets still hurtle armed lorries, and every gutter-snipe is abroad with the tricolor, blood-lust in his eye protected by his black shirt, his orange collar, his skull and-cross-bones symbol, and his red fez. In the theaters the Fascist anthem is played deliriously, while "black-shirts" climb upon the seats to spy out and maltreat all those who fail to lift their arms in the Fascist salute or to wear the proper smile of joy over the occasion.

But these are the inevitable results of the shiftlessness of a dishonest bureaucracy that has for decades catered to very violent party in order to remain in power, and whose soldiery during the present crisis has watched these acts

of vandalism—which have occurred in every corner of Italy—with amused indifference. These are the inevitable results of loosing forty thousand (certainly not a hundred thousand as the press has stated) irresponsible and semi-organized youngsters upon the capital. Fearing to disturb the American myth of a recuperating Europe, our press-agents gloss over these events; if such disorder had happened in a Spanish-speaking country of the New World, we should have instantly landed marines, under the cloak of the Monroe Doctrine, to preserve order. As it is, this violence, which is one piece with that which has been upsetting Italy for three years, but indicates the extensive disintegration that has taken place and the future dangers inherent in the precedent established by the Fascist *colpo di stato*.

Fascism is one pendant of a European tendency toward the destruction of political democracy of which bolshevism is the counterpoise—a tendency that began with the war and which is far from drawing to a close. And yet not too great importance should be attached to Latin revolutions sentimentally cloaked with the symbols of constitutionality. We have learned from Mexican politics that such occurrences bear a striking kinship to American elections. In the first place, in few countries except Italy could a virtual civil war take place without irresistibly sweeping into its vortex the bulk of the population. But in Italy—where neither government nor law have ever been highly esteemed—militant minorities have always determined the swing of the pendulum. Public opinion—to the extent that it exists—is usually registered by piazza demonstration, on the basis of a tradition that runs back to the days of the Roman Republic, the tradition of the *comitium*, the *vox populi*.

And who will venture to say that the Fascist Government does not answer to public opinion, does not represent the Italian people? Now that revolution has happened, everybody is madly, hoarsely Fascist. Even American press agents have not found their conversion difficult. After all, public opinion is a nebulous thing, largely dependent in its immediate manifestations upon the program of the moment. At this moment Fascism may represent the spiritual forces of the Italian nation quite as well as a chamber of jarring Deputies put in power by 40 per cent of the voters numbering in all but one-eighth of the population.

Far more important than the means by which the Fascisti rode into power is their program; and still greater importance attaches to the company they keep. Now that Fascism has completely identified itself with the strong-state idea, the early words of Enrico Corradini, the founder of the nationalism of the pre-war period, become increasingly important, especially as his movement has been swallowed up by Fascism and he has given his unqualified indorsement to Mussolini. Enrico Corradini declared in his striking book, “Il Nazionalismo Italiano,” published on the eve of the Great War, that “Italian nationalism is merely the socialism of the Italian nation in the world.” His repeated cry has been: Italy is a proletarian country oppressed by the capitalist nations—England, France, and the United States; just as the methods of the working-class are sabotage, strike, and revolution—internal war, so the weapon of Italy must be external war or the preparation for war.