

Giacomo Matteotti's Murder and the Rise of the Totalitarian State

I. I., (May 24, 2014)



Presented jointly with NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, Centro Primo Levi and the Consulate General of Italy on the 90th Anniversary of Matteotti's murder and Italian National Day June 2 | 6:00 pm | Round table | 8:00 pm | Film screening -Il delitto Matteotti, by Florestano Vancini @ NYU, Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò | 24 West 12th Street

The barbaric murder of Matteotti, committed on 10 June 1924, marked the end of the so-called 'legalistic' period of the Mussolini administration. Prior to that date, Mussolini had been skillfully navigating between opposite pressures that were being brought to bear by intransigent currents of Fascism, on the one side, and from moderate sectors of Fascism, on the other. The hardliners were guided by a totalitarian conception of the political struggle, a point of view that would be satisfied with nothing less than the establishment of a single-party regime; they considered the moderate outcome of the March on Rome to have been a betrayal of the Fascist revolution, resulting as it had in the formation of a coalition government that included men and political parties to which they were firmly opposed.

The other, more moderate Fascists, to the contrary, considered the revolutionary period of Fascism to have come to an end with the formation of the Mussolini government, and upheld the need for a 'normalization' of Italian political life. Aligned with the moderate Fascists were the liberal political groups, allies of the Mussolini government, who demanded a more determined suppression of political violence, as well as a return to the presence in the Italian political process of the traditional dialectic between the majority and various opposition parties. The head of Fascism had made concessions to both alignments, and was pursuing a strategy of 'duplicity.' That strategy allowed him on the one hand to display a purely formal respect for the political procedures and the institutions of the liberal state, along with a certain degree of tolerance of the criticism leveled by the opposition forces; at the same time, of course, he was encouraging the use of violence and was establishing his own secret police, the so-called Fascist Ceka (modeled on the Russian Cheka), created for the purpose of carrying out actions to intimidate the most active anti-Fascist leaders. Between 1922 and 1924, therefore, a very specific political atmosphere had taken form. Despite Mussolini's repeated assurances of his respect for the rule of law, acts of violence had continued to be perpetrated against the opposition.

It was Mussolini himself, as early as the period immediately following the March on Rome, who had insisted on the establishment of the Ceka. He did so because he considered the liberal institutional context, within which he realized he was forced to operate for the foreseeable short term, as an obstacle to the hegemonic and totalitarian prospects of Fascism. The need for Fascism to work around the *garantismo* ('respect for civil rights') of the liberal system had been nicely summarized in a statement he made, a few days after he formed his government. He had explained to his closest colleagues that "all governments undergoing a transition need certain illiberal branches to take care of their adversaries," and also that "control of the official agencies of the state" would allow the Fascist government to "drape a cover over all its illegal acts of violence."

One particular source of concern for the Mussolini government was the relentless activity of Matteotti, the young secretary of the Partito Socialista Unitario (PSU, or unified Socialist party). That party had been established, twenty days prior to the March on Rome, by the social-reformist component led by Turati, in a breakaway from the PSI. Matteotti was born in Fratta Polesine on 22 May 1885. After taking his degree in law at the University of Bologna, he joined the Socialist party at the turn of the twentieth century.

Matteotti's attitude toward the Fascist government was always rigorously intransigent. He was unwilling to consider any truce, any accords, or collaboration of any kind between Socialism and Fascism.

He had begun traveling earlier than most, developing a personal culture that was cosmopolitan and open to the influences of the most mature European Socialism. He was one of the few to grasp on a profound level the laws of economics and of finance, and, as has been written, "he read corporate balance sheets the way other people read crime novels." For these gifts, he was used by his party in the parliamentary commissions on economic and financial activities.

During the session of 30 May 1924, the Chamber of Deputies was the site of serious incidents. The Fascist government, in violation of established parliamentary procedure, accepted and followed until then, had proposed an approval en masse of the newly elected members of the majority. Matteotti had at that point taken the floor and, after depicting an unsettling national panorama of violence and criminal behavior, he had provocatively demanded the blanket annulment of the elections. Matteotti's speech was repeatedly interrupted by furious and extended reactions from the majority, but the young Socialist parliamentarian had refused to be intimidated, and had courageously continued his speech to the very last word. As he was exiting the Chamber of Deputies, to his colleagues, who were eagerly congratulating, it is reported that he replied, "Now you need to get ready to hold a wake for me." [From: Mauro Canali, *Il Delitto Matteotti*. Il Mulino, 2000]



Mauro Canali is professor of Contemporary History at the University of Camerino and specializes in the history of the Fascist control and police system. He is the author of the first comprehensive study on the history of the Fascist political police (*Le Spie del Regime*, Il Mulino, 2004) and of *Il Delitto Matteotti*, (Il Mulino, 1997). Among his essays in English are *Mussolini and His Myths*, in "Sinnverlust und Sinnfindung am Anfang des 20". Jahrhunderts, a. c. Karin Wolgast – Königs & Neumann – 2011; *Crime and Repression*, in *Oxford Handbook of Fascism* a.c. Richard J. B. Bosworth – Oxford University Press – 2009; *Ignazio Silone and the Fascist political police*, in "Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 2000 vol. 5, n.1; *Matteotti Murder and the Origins of Mussolini's Totalitarian Fascist Regime in Italy*, in "Journal of Modern Italian Studies" - 2009 vol. 14. In 2006 Prof. Canali was a visiting professor at Harvard University. He is a member of the scientific committee of "RAI Storia" and collaborates with the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, *Nuova storia contemporanea* and *Liberal*.

Spencer Di Scala received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Columbia University. He is full professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Among other works, he has published three books on Italian Socialism, a book on European political thought, a book on modern Italy, *Italy from Revolution to Republic, 1700-Present* that was a selection of the History Book Club and has gone into four editions, and *histories of Europe in the twentieth century* in 2004 and 2013. His book on the Italian Prime Minister during the victory of World War I appeared in 2010: *Makers of the Modern World: Vittorio Orlando. Italy*. His two-volume history of Twentieth Century Europe, *Europe's Long Century*, appeared in 2013. He has also published more than 250 articles in professional journals, newspapers, and encyclopedias. In 1995 the Republic of Italy conferred on him the title of *Commendatore (Commander)* in the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic. He was elected President of the Dante Alighieri Society, the largest Italian-American cultural organization in New England, in 2009.

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