

Italy's Frankenstein and His Monster

By T. R. YBARRA

ITALY has a Frankenstein. His name is Benito Mussolini. The machine created by him, which, like Frankenstein's famous monster, is steadily getting beyond his control, is the patriotic-political movement known as Fascismo.

Scarcely a day passes in Italy without the chronicle of somebody shot by a Fascista or a Fascista shot by somebody. Affrays between the Fascisti and their foes—Italian Socialists and Communists—are getting so common that some Italian newspapers hardly devote any space at all to them—familarity, they argue, breeds contempt among their readers for such trifles. But when one of these fights, brought on all too often by Fascisti, results in somebody getting shot or beaten to death, even the most indifferent editors have to sit up and take notice. And scarcely a week passes in Italy without at least one of these mortal affrays.

The truce recently made between the Fascisti and their enemies has been broken again and again. The Fascisti are on the warpath. They are going about in squads, armed to the teeth, more defiant than ever, looking for trouble. Their fingers, literally, are on the triggers of their revolvers. And Benito Mussolini, the man who, more than any one else, brought Fascismo into being, is powerless to control them.

Mussolini is now a member of the Italian Parliament, elected by a tremendous majority, and he would be much happier and less apprehensive if the unruly youths who elected him would behave better. In his speeches he counsels more moderation, less promiscuous shooting; in his newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, he frowns editorially upon the excesses of the Fascisti, and exhorts them to be less prone to blaze away at their foes.

But they won't heed him. They keep on blazing away as promiscuously as ever. Socialists, Communists, innocent bystanders—all alike fall victims to their bullets. The machine created by the Italian Frankenstein is on the rampage. And Italy is getting rather "fed up" with it. Yet there was a time when Fascismo undoubtedly was beneficial to Italy—practically every Italian not an extreme Socialist or an out-and-out Red will agree to that.

After the close of the war, Italian Socialists and Communists got out of hand. It is little more than a year ago since workmen took control of a number of factories, ousted their employers, made good their control with cordons of armed guards, and turned the commandeered premises into regular military strongholds, bristling with machine guns. In those days Italian Reds talked openly of overthrowing the Government and putting Italy under a Soviet régime; again and again they hung the red flag from public buildings—actually on the City Hall in some Italian cities!—as a sign that the Utopia of Lenin and Trotzky was about to extend itself to Italy. Excited Reds scribbled "Long Live Lenin!" on countless walls and public buildings and churches all over the country. (Think if you saw that on St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Grand Central Station!) Every day they became bolder, more arrogant, more filled with the spirit of violent revolution.

In Italy, as elsewhere in the distracted post-war world, it was the extremists, the preachers of change, who were the militant party; the conservatives, the believers in law and order, vehement as their words might be, were not conspicuous for action. The Government's measures were essentially for defense—timorous police work. It seemed afraid of the extremists. Those who broke heads in street brawls, who put bullets through rivals, who seized factories—those who acted, in short—were the extremists.

Then—suddenly—these extremists found themselves face to face with something quite as bellicose and lawless as themselves.

A new element of violent action stepped into the field. It presented the strange anomaly of men banded together to uphold law and order and conservatism by methods undistinguishable from those of bank robbers and hold-up gangs. This new element was Fascismo. It was the creation, primarily, of Benito Mussolini. Originally a Socialist, he had come out of the war with a glorious record, filled with feelings of intense patriotism. At once he adjudged the Italian extremists—Socialists and Reds alike—to be Italy's greatest menace. He called upon his countrymen to organize against them, to down them by their own efforts, instead of waiting for

offensive. They who had been aggressively militant found themselves up against a force even more militant and aggressive. The most daring young men in Italy, boys who had shown themselves heroes in battle against Austria, leaped into the new fight with all the zest and temerity which youth has so often, under other circumstances, put at the service of revolution.

The forces of Italian revolution were cowed; the extremists scuttled to cover. What with the growing belief in Italy that Sovietism had failed in Moscow and the aggressive tactics of the Fascisti, the Reds lost ground every day. The establishment of Lenin's Italian branch of

—too often mere boys of 16 or 17—who rushed into the ranks of Fascismo did not do so in support of conservatism, but in that spirit of ardent nationalistic patriotism which is one of the characteristics of youth in every country. Many of them had helped win Italy's war; some had a share in d'Annunzio's dramatic Fiume expedition. They saw their newly united Italy as a shining, triumphant figure. So that when a noisy rabble spat upon her flag, reviled her soldiers, and cursed the war, these youths rose in defense of the national ideal, not in defense of social conservatism. It was not so much the Communists as Communists, still less the Socialists, who

Moreover, this same observer pointed out, while the rise of militant Fascismo undoubtedly helped to re-establish order in Italy, it was not the only, or even the principal, factor. The workmen's communistic experiment in running the factories collapsed, not because they were forcibly dislodged, but because they found the thing could not be done without capital and the whole mechanism of capital. And it must be remembered that the commission of Italian Socialists sent to Russia to investigate Bolshevism returned with a highly unfavorable report, and that Lenin, who had had great hopes for Italy, eventually 'excommunicated' the Italian Socialist Party.

"There is a basis of sound common sense in the Italian people," continued this same American observer, "and I am convinced that, even at the moment of greatest confusion, all but a small disorganized minority desired order. And in an unusually clear-thinking race—such as the Italians are not popularly supposed to be, but are—the majority certainly never desired a communistic régime for their country.

"If the Government had only been a little stronger and had only had a little more faith in the essential sanity of the Italian people, the whole extra-legal phenomenon of Fascismo might, I think, have been avoided. Fascismo played its part in the re-establishment of order, but that part, I think, has been overestimated. It was like a dash of cold water in the face of a man who is feeling faint. Though the water helps, he will probably recover of himself if left alone, while, if you continue to throw cold water on him—in buckets, in vats, in tons—for an indefinite time, he will probably catch pneumonia."

Benito Mussolini is constantly calling upon his violent followers to calm themselves. He seems to realize that the machine of his creation may eventually do Italy and himself more harm than good. But the Fascisti keep right at their lawless work.

The following tragic occurrence of a few days ago, which caused a deep horror in Italy—though it was merely one of many similar happenings—is typical of the sort of thing that is getting beyond the endurance of the great majority of Italians:

A party of Fascisti went from Cremona, in Northern Italy, to a near-by town to attend a meeting. They traveled on a big motor truck, and the Cremona authorities, fearing that they would indulge in some sort of violence unless watched, sent some policemen after them in another truck, with instructions to follow the first truck closely. The meeting passed off without trouble, and the two trucks started on their way back to Cremona. Owing to tire trouble, the truck carrying the policemen was forced to halt, and the truck of the Fascisti continued on its way, freed from surveillance.

They soon came upon three men standing in the road beside a motor car in trouble. At sight of the Fascisti, the three men started to run away as fast as they could over the fields by the road. The Fascisti pursued and overtook them. It turned out that the three were a well-known Socialist Deputy of Cremona and two other Socialists. There is conflicting evidence about exactly what happened when the Fascisti overtook the Socialists; what is perfectly clear, however, is that the Socialist Deputy was beaten to death with a club by one of the Fascisti, a boy of 10.

The Socialist newspapers of Italy howled with rage at this brutal murder. Mussolini in his paper promptly disavowed sympathy with the crime. Later, however, other versions of what happened got abroad, and Mussolini became more belligerent against the Socialists, though without expressing approval of the murder.

Mussolini certainly seems embarrassed by the doings of the more violent Fascisti. Fascismo—that is, its original, patriotic phase—helped to put him into the Italian Parliament. It may prove to have been for him the cornerstone of a brilliant political career. Its later development may well involve this Italian Frankenstein, at the outset of his career, in irretrievable political disaster.



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Government action. The result of his impassioned exhortations was the organization, all over the country, of the *Fasci di Combattimento*—bands of men, mostly young, prepared to go to any length to save Italy from the radicals, who seemed to be bringing it constantly nearer to Sovietism.

The followers of Mussolini exacted from their foes an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; they gave blow for blow, shot for shot. They did not wait to defend themselves against the aggression. They went out after the Reds, raided their lairs, broke up their meetings in halls, dispersed their gatherings on public squares, threw their processions into confusion, howled down their orators. If the Reds showed fight, the Fascisti gave them all they wanted—and a lot more, too—with fist and cudgel, cold steel and cold lead.

The Italian situation underwent a complete change. From being on the offensive, the extremists suddenly found themselves on the de-

Utopia was indefinitely postponed. But here things began to get more complicated. The Fascismo movement began to lose something of its spirit of patriotic crusade and get rather muddled and besmirched. The original elements composing it a goodly percentage of mere riffraff had been added. Too many acts by Fascisti began to savor more of terrorism than patriotism; it looked as if some of the Fascisti had grown to like the exciting sport of man hunting for its own sake. Suspicion of underlying personal grudges began to tarnish some of their exploits; it began to look as if some of those whom they beat, wounded or murdered had incurred their hate, not because of seditious activities but because of the mere fact of being Socialists or Communists. Life on Italian streets and roads began to be altogether too hazardous for ordinary passers-by.

"Whatever is said of Fascismo," an American who has spent years in Italy told me, "should not be too black and white. Qualifications are necessary. For example, the youths

committed the excesses which these young men particularly detested, as it was the anarchistic, unprincipled, merely destructive rabble, the thieves, rowdies and gangsters, who always emerge from the slums of cities whenever a Government is weak and social change is in the air.

"A Fascista would be murdered in some town, probably by some society-hating criminal, and then the Fascisti would immediately organize a 'punitive expedition,' rush to the place on motor trucks, sack the Town Hall (if, as in many Italian localities, the town administration happened to be a Socialist one), burn the workmen's co-operative, and shoot or beat all persons in their path who were, or whom they suspected of being, Socialists or Communists. Hundreds of such raids were carried out. 'Who,' thoughtful Italians began to ask after a time, 'pays for all these expensive motor trucks and the gasoline consumed? Certainly not these university students, these penniless ex-Lieutenants! Can it be that special interests are involved?'"