SCENES FROM A CIVIL WAR
ESCENAS DE GUERRA CIVIL

by JOSÉ CARLOS MARIÁTEGUI
translated from the Spanish by JUAN CARLOS AGUIRRE
Periodically, we seem to witness fleeting revivals of the times when Guelphs struggled against Ghibellines.¹ As in those times, there are now in Italy two camps waging a furious and gruesome battle. And although we call them fascist and socialist instead of Guelph and Ghibelline, they intermittently rekindle those medieval days in this thought-provoking and evocative country. They’re absorbed in a struggle of ensnarement, ambush, retaliation, and vendetta.

The State claims to be impartial in this struggle. But it happens that one of the warring parties dubs itself the defender of State authority. And so the other warring party rejects the claims of its rival’s ally, the State.

The two factions aren’t equally well known outside of Italy. As one of them, fascismo, is new to distant publics, it seems fitting to shed some light on its history.

Il fascismo was founded in 1919² by Benito Mussolini, who founded the Fasci italiani di combattimento in Milan, which in 1921 would become the Partito Nazionale Fascista. But this group had a precursor in the 1914 Fascio d’azione rivoluzionaria interventista, a WWI interventionist movement in which Mussolini was active.

¹ Guelph and Ghibelline refer to the two famously antagonistic political factions which, in what is now northern Italy, were fiercely divided during the 13th and 14th centuries on whether allegiance was owed to the Pope (as the Guelphs believed) or to the Holy Roman Emperor (as the Ghibellines did).

² In March 1919, Mussolini founded the Fasci italiani di combattimento in Milan, which in 1921 would become the Partito Nazionale Fascista. But this group had a precursor in the 1914 Fascio d’azione rivoluzionaria interventista, a WWI interventionist movement in which Mussolini was active.
Mussolini and other enthusiastic supporters of intervention in order to promote an expansionist and nationalist platform not only against those in the government who, in their judgment, diminished the value of Italy’s victory in the war, but also against those who had opposed intervention. In short, they were equally opposed to Francesco Nitti’s pacifism as they were to Giovanni Giolitti’s neutralism.

Fascism represented a spiritual sequel to the emergence of Gabriele D’Annunzio.

The name *fascismo* derives from the word *fascio*, which during the war referred to the block of national political forces in Italy whose counterpart in France was called *union sacrée*. In Italy’s parliament, there was no *union sacrée* of parties, but instead a *fascio* of parties. In other words, what we would call in Spanish an *haz* or “bundle” of parties. So the word *fascismo* has, by virtue of this origin, a nationalist and war-oriented sense.

Benito Mussolini, who brought *fascismo* to life, came out of the rank and file of the socialist party. He was editor-in-chief of *Avanti!* He broke away from socialism during the war because his interventionist ideas led him to join the campaign for Italy’s participation in the war. To support this campaign, he created the Milanese daily *Il Popolo d’Italia*, which today
serves as the official mouthpiece of fascismo. Mussolini possesses a dazzling talent for polemical writing, and is an eloquent supporter of both Gabriele D'Annunzio the condottiere and Gabriele D'Annunzio the politician.⁸

At first fascismo operated on a platform focused on foreign policy. It waved the flag of maximum territorial expansion. It extolled the annexation of Fiume and Dalmatia.⁹ It glorified the D'Annunzian gesture.¹⁰ It took care to forcefully awaken in Italy that same feeling of victory that gave rise to France's current parliament.

It was later, when this nationalist program consolidated an ardent and fighting multitude around the various fasci, that fascismo began its armed attack against socialism. Throughout, it situated its actions on a purely nationalist terrain. It characterized its aggressive activities as an affirmation of Italian patriotism against the internationalist doctrines of socialism and anarchism.

The fascista phenomenon has since taken on a much greater importance. Today fascismo is an anti-revolutionary citizens' militia. It no longer represents just the sentiment of victory. It is no longer just a prolongation of war fever. It now denotes an assault by the bourgeois classes against the rise of the proletarian

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8. The late medieval term condottiere traditionally refers to a leader of mercenary soldiers.

9. The status of Dalmatia, a region of what is now Croatia, was a source of contention in Italian politics during and after World War I. During the conflict, Italy had hoped to annex all of Dalmatia from Austria-Hungary, but international peace accords ultimately allowed Italy only a small portion of it. Mussolini would lead an invasion of the territory, by then part of Yugoslavia, in 1941. Fiume, now Rijeka, is a port city on the Adriatic coast over which Italy struggled to gain control after World War I.

10. The grand gesture alluded to here refers to the events of 1919, when Gabriele D'Annunzio and hundreds of his followers occupied the port of Fiume and claimed it for Italy. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti deployed the Italian navy and thereby successfully expelled ultranationalist D'Annunzians. In 1924, under pressure from an Italian government now firmly in Mussolini's grip, Yugoslavia ceded the city of Fiume to Italy. Fiume returned to Yugoslavian control following the 1947 Peace Treaty of Paris.
classes. The bourgeois classes use the fascist phenomenon to go out and face off against the revolution. Weary of nervously awaiting the revolutionary offensive, they ditch their passive approach and react preemptively to the revolutionary act. The conservative forces are sure of being able to thwart the revolution once and for all by storming it before it sets out to seize political power.

The socialist forces are not fully participating in the struggle. The socialists taking up arms against fascismo do not represent all the militants from the proletarian groups—just the most fanatical and militaristic of the lot. In other words, the vanguard of socialism.

A majority of socialist elements opposes these skirmishes, which, to their thinking, uselessly drain the lifeblood of the proletariat. This majority believes that armed violence must be used only in the decisive assault on power.

The State cannot, of course, be strictly impartial. It can neither approve nor condone the terrorist methods of fascismo: setting fire to camere di lavoro offices, sabotaging the socialist presses, assaulting rival organizers and propaganda-peddlers, etc. But what is relevant to the fascist movement is a movement of the classes who want to preserve it against the
classes who want to destroy and take its place. Fascismo is the illegal action in defense of the State’s survival taken by the conservative classes, fearful of the insufficiency of the State’s legal action. It is the illegal action of the bourgeoisie against the possible illegal action of the socialists, namely the revolution.

These shared primary interests make it apparent that a single camp brings together the fascisti, who brought about Italy’s entry into the war, and the giolittisti—the supporters of neutrality at all costs who, before the war, were accused by the fascisti of treason, and who later, during the war, were branded defeatists.

Fascista activity in the coming elections will largely focus on the prime ministry, as it will be directed, within the monarchic sector, against Francesco Nitti, Giolitti’s adversary in that sector and the politician now preparing to storm the ministry, but whose domestic and foreign platform does not widely differ from Giolitti’s. The two statesmen share more or less the same understanding of the present moment and possess the same ability to address it.

But the fascisti won’t budge on Nitti. They won’t forget that Nitti was for them the one who diminished the value of Italy’s victory in the war. They would rather forget that Giolitti was the enemy of intervention.
TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: From May 1920 to April 1922, a young José Carlos Mariátegui worked out of Italy as a correspondent for the Lima-based daily El Tiempo, which published his series of regular dispatches on Italian cultural and political life. To English-language readers, he will be more familiar for his Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality, a 1928 landmark collection in which Mariátegui decouples Marxist historical analysis from its eurocentric orthodoxies.

Mariátegui’s Italian chronicles showcase the writer’s earliest political thought, and they predate the more mature political writings of his most productive years, marked by the publication of La escena contemporánea in 1925.

Mariátegui arrived in Italy in late 1919 and would remain there in a semi-voluntary exile for almost four years. In May 1919, he founded the leftist Peruvian daily La Razón, which denounced the nascent dictatorship of Augusto B. Leguía. By August of that year, La Razón ceased publication under pressure from the regime, which also proceeded to award Mariátegui a scholarship to study in Italy, thus effectively sending him into political exile.

Mariátegui’s dispatches from Italy survey a country in political and economic upheaval, still unable to resolve the internal conflicts that had both given rise to and resulted from its entry into World War I. They also bear witness to the rise to power of Mussolini’s fascist movement amid the turmoil of Italy’s infamous biennio rosso (“The Two Red Years”) from 1919 to 1920.

In these writings, Mariátegui consistently places quotation marks around the term “fascism” and its derivations, conveying the sense of newness and foreignness that the terms still carried when he used them in Spanish. In this translation, I communicate this sense of semantic unfamiliarity through the use of
corresponding Italian words for fascism and related terms.

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