Revisiting an Assassination: The Death of Carlo Rosselli

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The sad death in exile according to a law that appears almost inevitable for the finest sons of Italy

—Carlo Rosselli

Lovers of Italian film are familiar with Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1970 film, The Conformist; some may even know that the film was based on Alberto Moravia’s 1951 novel of the same title. But few know that the assassinated Professor Quadri in The Conformist was based on Carlo Rosselli. And although there is a street or piazza in almost every large Italian city dedicated to Carlo Rosselli and his historian brother, Nello, killed together in June 1937, few Italians are familiar with their ideas and the significance of their assassination.

Carlo Rosselli (1899–1937) was one of the most charismatic and influential of European antifascist intellectuals. Born into a wealthy Jewish family, and abandoning a promising career as a professor of political economics, he devoted his considerable fortune and ultimately his life to the struggle against fascism. In 1925, he was instrumental in establishing the first underground antifascist newspaper, Non Mollare! While in confino on the island of Lipari for his subversive political activities, he wrote Liberal Socialism, arguing that socialism was the logical development of the principle of liberty. After a daring escape from Lipari in 1929, he made his way to Paris and became the driving force behind a new political movement, “Justice and Liberty.” Rosselli was among the first to arrive in Barcelona after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in which he commanded an armed column of volunteers in defense of the Republic. When Italian fascists discovered Rosselli’s plot to assassinate Mussolini, they declared him

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the regime’s most dangerous enemy and had him murdered, along with his brother, noted historian Nello Rosselli, on a country road in Normandy.

It was not only Rosselli’s active participation on behalf of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War and rumored plots against il Duce that convinced the fascist regime that he had to be eliminated. Rosselli’s heretical conception that the Spanish Civil War had to be expanded into a general, European-wide “preemptive strike” against fascism and Nazism sealed his fate. This conception was best expressed in his famous speech over Radio Barcelona in November 1936, “Oggi in Spagna, domani in Italia [Today in Spain, Tomorrow in Italy].” Three days after this radio broadcast, a report was submitted by the fascist police: “Rosselli is the most outstanding personality of Italian antifascism in the Spanish Civil War . . . and participates in the most important executive committees. He enjoys great popularity among the antifascist soldiers who recently joined to designate him the only possible successor to Mussolini.”

Afflicted with a recurrence of painful phlebitis, Carlo left the Spanish front and returned to Paris in the spring of 1937. He then traveled to the mud-bath resort of Bagnoles-de-l’Orne in Normandy on May 27, taking a room at the Hôtel Cordier just outside the town of Tessé-la-Madeleine. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), the Duke of Ajmone, of the Royal House of Savoy, was also in the resort town. Rosselli’s wife Marion soon joined him, and his brother Nello arrived on June 6, leaving his wife, Maria, and a newborn son, Alberto, in Florence. Nello’s request for a passport had been granted with such efficiency and so quickly (three days) that friends, especially Piero Calamandrei in Florence, were suspicious. Calamandrei warned Nello not to go to France, fearing that agents of the regime were following him and preparing some kind of action against the brothers. Nello could not imagine anything so dramatic; had not Gioacchino Volpe, official historian of the regime and director of the Istituto Storico in Rome, pulled some strings to get Nello permission to use the Library of the British Museum for his research? Nello was more concerned with the newborn Alberto and leaving his other children, Silvia, Paola, and Aldo. Carlo was in France, and Nello felt that both their lives had reached a crisis point; he had to speak with his older brother.

The day of Nello’s arrival, they visited Maison Blanche, the home of the historian Élie Halévy, with Raymond Aron. Carlo had established a daily routine at the spa, taking the cure in the morning, working in his room until the late afternoon, and then going for a drive in the countryside with his Ford car that had been brought from the front in Spain. This routine was duly noted by several spies who had also arrived in the resort town soon after him.