

ITALY, AN INVADED NATION

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SOME weeks ago I was sitting beside Fiorello La Guardia, the Mayor of New York, at a gigantic mass meeting in Madison Square Gardens, where thirty thousand citizens had assembled.

All the flags of the invaded countries made their appearance on the stage, one after the other . . . The blue and white Greek flag for which Byron, and a chivalrous Italian, Santorre di Santarosa, died during the first war for Hellenic independence; the blue, red and white Yugoslav flag which I saw floating in Macedonia during the First World War side by side with our Italian flag, in our common struggle against Germans and Austrians for the liberation of Serbia; the Polish flag, the French flag, the Dutch flag, the Norwegian flag, all symbols of noble European nations with whom democratic Italy had always been most cordial friend.

When the pathetic scene came to an end, dynamic La Guardia rose and thundered, while 30,000 persons were still keeping a religious silence:

"One flag is missing, the flag of Italy! Italy also is an invaded country!"

Deeply moved, I rose and clasped his hand. I felt at that moment how a most loyal American citizen could still be helped—for the discovery of deep moral truths concerning Italy—by the inheritance of his Italian blood.

Almost all the invaded nations have a Quisling: there is one in Oslo, Norway, one in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, one in Zagreb, Yugoslavia again, although if I am well informed, not a single Quisling has been found for Poland or for Belgium. But our Italian Quisling, Mussolini, is the worst of all, not only because the resistance of Italy might have been infinitely easier, had he not been a traitor to our country, but also because he was the first to bring openly a great nation on Hitler's side.

What is the truth about Mussolini? I think that I may give it with complete sincerity, since Mussolini has been asking me for years to come to any sort of agreement with him; ten times, in the vulgarity of his mind, he has asked me to state him my price. To this I always answered, simply, to his great surprise "I do not want anything, except this: to be free, and

that my country is free." This is the honest truth about Mussolini, as I tried in vain to tell Austen Chamberlain when he came to Italy, after Matteotti's murder: Mussolini is a very mediocre man, but he is the author of a discovery which he passed on to his former pupil and present master Hitler: "A lie is a lie if timidly expressed; it remains a lie if you repeat it only a dozen times; it becomes a gospel truth when you repeat it ten thousand times." He is probably the greatest artist in political propaganda who has ever existed. It was he who invented the legend that he saved Italy from Bolshevism—which was not true in the least, since he himself admitted and wrote a few months before his arrival in power that no Bolshevist danger existed in Italy.

But such a lie was a god-send to Belgravia ladies and Wall Street business men, who were trembling day and night about a pretended Communist danger—and who wanted to adore a saviour.

Now they know what sort of a saviour they got—with war let loose in the world—and let us not forget that Hitler would never have gone to war if he had not been sure to have Italy on his side.

As far as forty-five million Italians are concerned, all the misrepresentations of Fascist propaganda are now unable to conceal this crude fact: that as long as Fascism remains in power, there are two alternatives for Italy; either defeat by the United Nations or to become a German protectorate.

Was it ignorance or treason which opened the frontiers of Italy to German invasion? In my opinion, the former dictator, at present mere Hitlerian *Gauleiter* of Italy, reached a point where he had to choose between the salvation of a noble country like Italy and the salvation of his own régime; he chose his own régime.

No honest Italian is to be found in Italy any more who confuses Italy with Fascism; no one any more dares to assert that one cannot fight Mussolini without betraying Italy; contempt and hatred of the régime are universal in Italy, where they now pay the penalty for not revolting at once when they were forced in 1926 to live in complete slavery.

Among all the crimes Mussolini is guilty of in the present war, the two which seem most horrible to the moral conscience of the Italians are these:

The war against our Eastern neighbors, the Yugoslavs, and the cruel oppression imposed by Fascist generals on whole

regions inhabited by Croats and Slovenes, who are guilty of imitating what our Italian ancestors did in the first half of the nineteenth century: our ancestors resisted German invaders; they resist now, with an equal courage, Fascist invaders; (although, alas, with a certain lack, here and there, of the generous universalistic outlook that made so great the generation of Mazzini and Cavour).

The other Fascist crime is the invasion of Greece and the cooperation with the Germans in forcing upon the Greek people the curse of a general starvation; to-day, in Greece, thousands of old Greek men and women are dying from hunger in their villages and cities. And, in spite of that, the Greeks are so humane, so generous, that—with an emotion mingled with humiliation—I have received letters from Greeks recently escaped from Greece, telling me, honestly, naively, how grateful they were to certain Italian officers, to certain Italian soldiers, who had given them, secretly, food and money, and who had helped them to escape to Cyprus or to Turkey. If Mussolini knew the names of the Italian officers and soldiers who saved Greeks from starvation and death, he would have them immediately shot.

And Mussolini is right, from his own point of view: he may remain in power only in an Italy disarmed, terrorized, watched day and night by the German Gestapo and its Fascist sister, the Ovra.

Some of us, Italians, were ready until a recent past to forgive Fascism and its accomplices many of their crimes and errors; but we can never forgive them this war—and its horrors.

We cannot forgive—it is our duty not to forgive—the horrible cruelties against Greeks and Yugoslavs.

But we cannot even forgive certain unspeakable cruelties against the Italian soldiers themselves.

For example, when Mussolini allowed his master Hitler to use as cannon-fodder the lives of some 60,000 Italians, whom—it is now revealed—Hitler put into the deadliest attacks against Stalingrad, hoping that his Germans might more prudently enter the streets of the heroic Russian city passing over piles of Italian bodies.

Or when Mussolini—it happened only a few weeks ago—put his armies in Egypt under the command of the too much lauded Rommel; this German general organized the sudden flight of his precious Germans towards Libya, and left the Italian divisions without trucks, without tanks, without food, to fight

a desperate rear-guard resistance, in order that the soldiers of the "superior" race might safely save their skins.

How could we forgive such treason against our honor, against our blood? All these crimes are the consequence of the crime number one: to have entered this war where even a Nazi-Fascist victory would have meant disaster for Italy. But I think that it will be equally impossible to forgive the necessary accomplices of Mussolini when on June 10th, 1940, he declared war on France and Great Britain. At the end of 1940 I was living on a property of mine on the French Riviera, not far from the Italian frontier. Some most important and most distinguished Italians approached me for a joint supreme attempt to spare Italy an unjust, anti-Italian, inglorious war; they were hoping that the king might be persuaded to oppose the war. Of course I joined them, adding—for my part—that Mussolini was wrong in his belief that England would capitulate as, alas, it was beginning to seem probable that certain French generals would be only too ready to do. We asked the king to spare Italy and even the monarchy a crime and a shame.

The result—although some of the names were most imposing? Complete silence, complete indifference.

My readers have probably felt how deep is my sympathy for the invaded nations, specially for the nations occupied by Italian troops, most of whom, I am sure, dislike their job. I ardently wish the resurrection and the prosperity of these countries which have been our best customers (and Mussolini's stupidity was so great as not to discover that it does not pay to shoot one's customers).

But the best way for these nations—as for greater nations—to serve their future, is to think of a new Europe, which cannot be any more the Europe of the past, with its armed frontiers and its customs walls. We must, of course, be each of us good Italians, good French, good Poles, etc., but the new fact is that in his own soul nobody can say this any longer, merely: "I am an Italian, I am a Yugoslav, I am a Greek . . ."; tomorrow it will not be enough; the nations whose leaders will think in terms of a narrow nationalistic past will lose any moral influence in the post-war world.

Fascism has obliged men to choose. And our sufferings will not have been in vain if we have discovered the following two supreme truths:

1. From a national point of view: that Freedom is a right which must be preserved and deserved by each generation.

2. From an international point of view: that the States of yesterday, watching suspiciously at their frontiers, have become anachronistic; that all of us—small and great—must accept tomorrow, with joy, a superior international law making it impossible for a few demagogues and criminals to start again wars, which are unforgivable crimes against humanity.

The Italian people, at least, have understood; and my best wish is that certain other invaded nations may understand just as well.

What is needed, now, is that the democracies discover how to approach loyally and honorably the soul of the Italian nation. Certain recent official British broadcasts show that it is not so easy.

Italy, throughout her long centuries of history, has shown to the world downfalls that looked final and resurrections that proved her indestructible vitality.

So it happened after the downfall of the Roman Empire; so it happened after the destruction of our free Communes; so it happened after the Habsburg domination; so it might be tomorrow after the downfall of the Nazi hegemony, barely covered by the Fascist mask, if only the Italians are made sure that the "new world" of which so much is spoken stands as the permanent truth of the future.