

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/Honoring-Anti-Fascist-Resistance>



Anti-fascism

Honoring Anti-Fascist Resistance

- Features -



Publication date: Sunday 12 April 2026

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

ON APRIL 29, 1945, Rossana Rossanda joined the massive crowds gathered on the Piazzale Loreto in Milan, Italy, where, more than 26 years earlier, Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement began its wretched existence. [1]

Rossanda, soon to enter the Communist Party of Italy (PCI), now witnessed the incredible and ghastly final act of Mussolini's time as a traitor to the socialist workers' movement, as the first fascist dictator and as a puppet of Adolf Hitler's genocidal Nazi regime. Her recollections of that moment are worth quoting in their entirety:

In Piazzale Loreto, I looked at the bodies of Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci, hanging upside down. They looked flabby; someone had taken pity on Petacci and tied her skirt above her knees; their faces were bloated and anonymous, as if they had never lived, cadavers that had not been cleaned up by undertakers.

A furious crowd jostled around them, howling women, men with white faces, shouting, at last able to vent all their feelings of hatred and helplessness. Somebody had carried out justice on their behalf, and there was some sneering, a lot of rage. Twenty years had been overturned. I left; maybe the ritual was necessary, but it was terrible. [2]

Despite the grim end, Mussolini and his entourage met (she emphasized that, despite the ritual of vengeance, a standard of decency had been maintained, at least with Petacci), Rossanda nonetheless affirmed in her memoir that this was "liberation, the liberation. The end of terror, the end of an era; Now we would start afresh." [3]

The Italian Resistance, of which she had been a part, had played a vital part in halting Fascist terror and had captured — and executed — the man who had unleashed so much misery and death on Italy, the larger European continent, and North and East Africa.

Living across the ocean in exile in Mexico, Victor Serge, the anarcho-Bolshevik and onetime member of the International Left Opposition, followed news of the same momentous event. He entered several pages into his notebook after a grocer born in Italy showed him a headline announcing Mussolini's demise.

The execution of Mussolini and his entourage demonstrated to Serge "that Nemesis finally struck where she should strike, blindly, justly." [4] After being unable to stop the disappearance of so many comrades — more than a few of them at the hands of the Stalin regime, he recorded his own shock. "The punishment of executioners astounds me, like something I could no longer believe in." [5]

The punished included Nicola Bombacci, a schoolteacher and former member of the Italian Socialist Party, who had journeyed to Petrograd during the Russian Civil War and had marveled at the accomplishments of the Bolshevik Revolution. Eventually, though, he made an ignoble peace with Mussolini's Fascists.

In the closing months of World War II, Serge learned, Bombacci became "one of the executioners of the men who defended the hopes of his youth." [6] Having bound his fate to that of Mussolini, Bombacci's lifeless body hung beside him on the Piazzale Loreto.

A Tribute to Resisters

Rossanda's poignant recollections and Serge's unflinching observations from that time draw us back to the spring of 1945, to reports that Mussolini and Hitler were both dead. The news broke amidst the horrifying footage taken from the recently liberated Nazi concentration camps like Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, Bergen-Belsen, Flossenbürg, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, and Dachau.

The downfall of these inhuman dictatorships stemmed in no small part from anti-fascist resistance movements that had emerged in locale after locale after 1939, with many rooted in earlier battles. The history of the anti-fascist resistance occupies a critical place in the larger history of the international socialist workers' movement.

Yes, women, men and children did resist the Mussolini and Hitler dictatorships and those who collaborated with them. This article, written in the aftermath of the usual national celebrations of Allied victory in World War II, is a brief tribute to those who combated the fascist plague outside of the conventional militaries.

If "the Resistance" is readily invoked in today's discourse, it is rarely done in a way that illuminates what women, men and children accomplished against fascist counterrevolution between 1922 and 1945.

Instead, disparagement of heroic narratives of resistance, often driven by reactionary politics, became prominent after the Cold War. This was true especially in France and Italy where, undoubtedly, national myths of resistance had been fostered.

As the late Belgian-born socialist historian Marcel Liebman, who lost a brother during the Holocaust, asserted so forcefully:

The desire to debunk and demystify has led to new forms of mystification: there were neither victims nor executioners, there was neither resistance nor collaborators, neither cowardice nor heroism — just a display of human mediocrity heightened by a few poetic touches, courtesy of the artist. [\[7\]](#)

What the 21st century Left requires is a critical history of resistance to fascism. In the cases of Italian Fascism and National Socialism, socialists, communists, anarchists and trade-unionists had fought against these vile movements years before World War II.

The same held for Austrian leftists who experienced, first, the onset of the Christian Social dictatorship in Austria in 1933-34 and the crushing of the February 1934 uprising, then Nazi Germany's annexation of the country in March 1938.

In 2022, I became friends with Franz Leichter, a decades-long Democratic member of the New York state legislature. His mother and father, Käthe and Otto Leichter, both Jewish, were prominent figures in the left wing of Austrian Social Democracy. Käthe, once a champion for working-class women in Austria, was arrested by the Gestapo and was murdered in March 1942.

Many Spanish radicals, who had suffered defeat at the hands of Francisco Franco and his German and Italian backers, continued the struggle in French resistance groups. A few thousand were deported to the dreadful

Honoring Anti-Fascist Resistance

Mauthausen concentration camp following the fall of France in June 1940.

For thousands of others, it was the Second World War which transformed them, bringing them into resistance activity. Tito's partisan force in Yugoslavia expanded to some 800,000 strong, 100,000 of them women who, breaking fiercely with traditional roles, served as armed fighters.

In Greece young men and women flocked to EAM/ELAS (the National Liberation Front/Greek People's Liberation Army). The vast majority joining ELAS were males between the ages of 15 and 25. Often they were farmers or agricultural workers, incensed by the Italo-German occupation of their country. They came straight from their villages into leftist politics.

Jews, no matter where or who they were, resisted just by staying alive. My own admiration runs deepest for those who fought back against fascism without prior political or military experience. Risking everything, they frequently assumed a nom de guerre and exhibited enormous capacity for learning quickly (not least with firearms and explosives). By war's end, they had absorbed an ethos of discipline, sacrifice and resolve.

Underground Leaflets, Intelligence, Sabotage

Oppositional action took different forms. Anti-fascists printed and distributed leaflets and issued opposition newspapers. They destroyed communications equipment and sabotaged railroads and the trains that traversed them. Putting everything on the line, they ambushed German patrols and planted and hurled bombs.

For the Allies in France, the Low Countries, and Italy, resistance groups provided invaluable intelligence on German positions and the movement and strength of German forces. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, estimated that the assistance the Allies received from the French underground as part of the invasion of Normandy in June 1944 was worth 15 divisions.

They sheltered Allied airmen shot down by the Germans. In the case of the little-known operation on Rab Island in the Adriatic in the fall of 1943, Yugoslav partisans rescued more than 2000 Jews detained by the Italians. Resisters fought in militias and small groups, as well as much in larger forces (e.g. the Soviet Union, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Albania), and, in some cases, joined conventional military units.

Some like Adolfo Kaminsky, working feverishly in a clandestine laboratory in Paris, forged documents (e.g. birth certificates, ration cards, and passports) that saved the lives of thousands. Unbroken in spirit, anti-fascists operated in the Nazi camp system, creating durable networks, notably in the Buchenwald concentration camp, extensively documented by the Austrian leftist and Auschwitz survivor, Hermann Langbein.

Deserving of the greatest respect were figures in the Jewish resistance, like the Bundists Marek Edelman and Jankiel Wiernik, who helped to organize uprisings in places as inconceivably hellish as the Warsaw Ghetto and Treblinka extermination camp in April and August 1943, respectively.

The strike, the classic weapon of the proletariat, was wielded against Mussolini and Hitler on multiple occasions. Among the first strikes were actions by miners in May 1941 in Belgium and northern France on the first anniversary of the German invasion of the two lands.

In March 1943, after the Red Army's crushing victory over the Germans and other Axis forces at Stalingrad, FIAT workers in Turin, Italy, defied the Mussolini regime and laid down their tools (some 800 workers were eventually arrested).

Honoring Anti-Fascist Resistance

Not to be left out of this discussion is the example of Denmark's working class. After three years of their country's cooperation with the Germans, Danish workers initiated a strike movement in 1943 where roughly 400,000 withdrew their labor.

Perhaps the most inspiring strike action came fairly early in the war in the Netherlands, when the Nazis deported several hundred Jews from Amsterdam to concentration camps. In response, the Dutch trade unions and Communists called for a general strike. The Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front, headed by former Trotsky supporter, Henk Sneevliet, agreed to back the effort.

During two days in late February 1941, a general strike shut down Amsterdam. Though vicious German repression ended the strike, what happened there fused solidarity, a core principle of proletarian socialism, with the ancient ideal of care for your neighbor.

People still gather every February near a statue of a dockworker erected to commemorate the event.
The Politics of Militancy

Attention to the actions of the resistance groups can easily overtake consideration of the ideas advanced under the banner of anti-fascist militancy. Yet there was an "intellectual resistance," to borrow a term from James Wilkinson.

Walter Benjamin, the German Jew and Marxist who committed suicide on the Franco-Spanish border in September 1940, demanded a critique of idealized notions of "progress" that had hindered socialist politics in the preceding decades.

David Rousset, the French Trotskyist incarcerated in Buchenwald and Neuengamme, coined the term "concentrationary universe" to capture the nightmarish world of the SS-run camps. (Yet after World War II he eventually accepted financial support from the CIA.)

French Communist Charlotte Delbo, who lived through Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück, authored a powerful series of texts about the burdens of survival. The Belgian Trotskyist, Abram Leon, penned a fascinating examination of the "Jewish Question" before he perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944.

Leon's comrade Ernest Mandel, liberated by American troops from a German forced-labor installation, ultimately wrote *The Meaning of the Second World War*, the still authoritative Marxist interpretation.

Although the initial publication of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* was orchestrated by Palmiro Togliatti and the PCI, they came to exert a trans-generational impact on leftists with their analyses of hegemony, the state, and wars of position and maneuver.

At the time, though, who could rival for its influence the earthquake that was Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism? Even though Sartre downplayed his own involvement in resistance activity, his radical conceptions of ontological freedom and responsibility spoke directly to the yearnings for transformation in a post-fascist Europe.

All of this said, "resistance thought" shows no sign of losing its influence on an international Left confronted by a moment of grave danger and, at the same time, possible reconstitution as a mass political force.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

Honoring Anti-Fascist Resistance

It is difficult for us to imagine the jubilation that resistance fighters experienced in the spring of 1945. The words of Rossanda and Serge inch us toward a modicum of comprehension. While millions lay dead and the European continent was devastated, classical fascism had been demolished. There was much to celebrate.

The possibility of a new epoch of what Marx called “societal reconstruction” seemingly loomed. And yet it would not last. If the best hopes and aspirations of these resistance fighters still remain unrealized, it is up to us to deliberately and carefully appropriate their legacy for the socialism of the 21st century.

Notes

[back to text](#)

[back to text](#)

Victor Serge, *Notebooks 1936-1947*, eds. Claudio Albertani and Claude Rioux, trans. Mitchell Abidor and Richard Greeman (New York: New York Review Books, 2019), 501.

[back to text](#)

[Ibid.](#)

[back to text](#)

[Ibid.](#), 506.

[back to text](#)

Marcel Liebman, *Born Jewish: A Childhood in Occupied Europe*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2005), 163.

[back to text](#)

Other Sources Consulted

Kaminsky, Sarah. *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life*. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Los Angeles: DoppelHouse Press, 2016.

Kerenji, Emil. “Your Salvation is the Struggle against Fascism’: Yugoslav Partisans and the Rescue of Jews, 1941-1945.” *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 1 (February 2016): 57-74.

Mazower, Mark. *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation 1941-44*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Patt, Avinoam. *The Jewish Heroes of Warsaw: The Afterlife of the Revolt*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021.

Pavone, Claudio. *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*. Edited by Stanislao Pugliese. Translated by Peter Levy with the assistance of David Broder. London: Verso, 2014.

Wieviorka, Olivier. *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Wilkinson, James D. *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Source: September-October 2025, [ATC 238](#).

Honoring Anti-Fascist Resistance

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] Photo: Italian partisans fighting in Milan, April 1945.

[2] Rossana Rossanda, *The Comrade from Milan*, trans. Romy Clark Giuliani (London: Verso, 2010), 84.

[3] [Ibid.

[4] Victor Serge, *Notebooks 1936-1947*, eds. Claudio Albertani and Claude Rioux, trans. Mitchell Abidor and Richard Greeman (New York: New York Review Books, 2019), 501.

[5] Ibid;

[6] Ibid.

[7] Marcel Liebman, *Born Jewish: A Childhood in Occupied Europe*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2005), 163.