

Rebellious Spirit

Maria Occhipinti and the Ragusa Anti-Draft Revolt of 1945

edited by Paul Sharkey and Anna Key

Ragusa, Sicily, 1945. Mussolini's fascist regime had fallen apart, with many of his backers turning 'democratic' and hoping to prevent a revolution with the help of the allied armies and Communist Party. After five years of war, their attempts to create a new Italian army are met with evasion and resistance.

Maria Occhipinti began the Ragusa anti-draft revolt of January, 1945 by laying down in front of an army truck carrying arrested draftees, who then escaped. A four-day insurrection followed, with the rich dispossessed, until the Italian army was able to retake the city.

Maria Occhipinti served nearly two years' prison for her part in the revolt. Afterwards, she travelled endlessly, seeking her own freedom – and a free world. Here we present texts on the 1945 revolt, anti-fascism in Ragusa and the lives of both Maria Occhipinti and fellow Ragusan anarchist rebel Franco Leggio.

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Letizia Giarratana, Franco Leggio and Stefano Fabbri

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Edited by Paul Sharkey and Anna Key. Translated by Paul Sharkey and Gloria Italiano
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Back cover: Maria Occhipinti in 1945.

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What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal shares of the good things in life would work better than this one.

Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new 'revolutionary' bosses are no improvement: 'ends' and 'means' (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

1945, WHEN THE SICILIAN PEOPLE DECLARED "WAR ON WAR"

There are still a few hundred people still around today who figured in the most recent violent "revolution" experienced in Sicily: the revolt against the December 1944-January 1945 draft. Now pretty much in their eighties, for the past sixty years they have clung to lively recollection of it, its ramifications, secrets and the deep imprint it left on their consciousness.

To appreciate that this was not a localised disturbance, one need only know the scale of the deserter trials held across Southern Italy after 25 April 1943: there were 200,000 such trials. That figure sums up not only the extent of the people's insubordination but also the severity of the crackdown that it attracted and, of course, the failure of the army rebuilding policy of the government of liberated Italy.

The draft order went out on 23 September and applied to the levies born in the years between 1914 and 1924, people already hard hit by the war: families stricken by bereavements and misfortunes and fugitives who had just made it home from imprisonment, exhaustion and unspeakable adventures.

In Sicily, a year and a half after the cessation of hostilities, post-war recovery was proving slow and dramatic: there had been no improvement in the people's circumstances. They were hungry and unemployed and beset by masters, old and new: the Mafia was still ruling the roost and making hay out of its new-found friendship with the British and American Allies; lots of politicians and civil servants had simply turned their coats and held on to the same posts. The government's agricultural policies – the stockpiling of grain, the 'people's granaries', followed by the outrageous attempt to compensate for the latter's failure by the impounding of 50% of produce, had simply hit the less well off strata of society, leaving the latifundists [big landowners] smug and untouched as they fed the black market: the government was showing itself to be powerless to enforce its own decisions: the presence of Communists in the cabinet (Gullo was the minister of agriculture) did not appear to add enough weight to impact upon the socio-political establishment. The populace, disillusioned with promises of change, rebelled, giving rise to what often turned out to be violent protests, culminating in attacks upon and arson of town halls, warehouses and barracks: the security forces responded as they always had. All of which fed into a widespread perception that the new state was no better than its predecessor and that the monarchy was one of the major sources of Fascism and the war and therefore an obstacle to any overhaul.

But, come the Salerno turnaround, pushed by the Comintern under Stalin's guidance, the Communists' political line had taken an unexpected turn leading to

a change of tack: participation in a government of national unity, with a resultant jettisoning of the revolutionary struggle to alter the power arrangements in Italy; from it there also came the decision by the PCI leadership in late December 1944 to push on to the reconstruction of a "great Italian army". All of which had given rise to a degree of confusion among the Communist grassroots and leftwingers many of them having difficulty identifying with the changes imposed by their own leaders. Especially the decision to collaborate with the bourgeoisie and with the monarchy and to drop the antifascist struggle policy and support for the partisan movement in the Centre-North of the country in the form of the raising of volunteer groups. This was the backdrop against which an event occurred that may well have been crucial to relations between the populace, the parties and the state: on 19 October 1944 upwards of 30 people – many of them little more than children – were slaughtered in Palermo as the army responded to a demonstration against the rising cost of living. Which put paid to any chance of legitimising the government of national unity's army.

The draft was to prove a failure and this was no accident: of the 74,000 called up throughout Sicily, only around 14,000 reported for induction, whereas 60,000 preferred to desert, this being a logical consequence of a widespread effervescence that was to affect every town and district, showing itself in a variety of forms – marches, rallies, attacks on recruitment offices and town halls. Yet again the government's response would be in the traditional vein: swoops on streets and homes, arrests as it hunted down the draft-dodgers. 6 January saw unforgettable scenes in the city of Ragusa. There, as troops were rounding up males fit to serve, Maria Occhipinti [who was 23 years old and five months pregnant at the time] used her own body to block the progress of an army truck, leading to the escape of those rounded up, whereupon the troops opened fire on the crowd, killing one of the rebels. Within a short time, the entire city was in revolt: the women egged the men into reacting; the rebels armed themselves and took over Ragusa, throwing up barricades and roadblocks on the outskirts: this was an armed uprising with dead and wounded on both sides.

There were flare-ups in virtually every township in the province of Ragusa: especially in Comiso where the rebels established a short-lived republic. At the same time there were armed clashes elsewhere around the island: further peasant republics were set up in Naro and Palazzo Adriano: it would be virtually impossible to list the events and locations involved in a revolt so spontaneous and widespread, except for Piana degli Albanesi where, at the instigation of the Communist branch which had resigned from the Party, the populace set up a people's republic that was to endure for two months and was only drowned in blood. A lot has been said and written about these events: for a number of years

all the talking and writing came from the winning side which was able to spread confusion and misrepresentation regarding the draft-refusal revolt which found itself labelled as reactionary, fascist and separatist: as if weariness with war and loss, hunger and poverty was susceptible to political labelling. Only a few of the protagonists and a few historians have tried to offer a version of events that comes closer to the truth. The revolts of the "draft-refusers", in addition to their well known social motives, were traceable to the Sicilian people's anti-militarist tradition, dating back to the introduction of compulsory military service at the behest of the House of Savoy in 1860; Sicilians had always done their damndest to resist war and the army. Even though the intention now was to take on the Germans, the army was still regarded as a blight still in the hands of the same old fascist generals and still under the control of the House of Savoy. Besides, the grassroots members of the parties of the left, the revolutionary communist, libertarian and anarchist groups were part and parcel of the revolt, itself a guarantee that it could resist any attempted manipulation by fascists. They were answered with the one that the anarchist Ciccio Calamusa gave at one gathering of Ragusa peasants: "No go, and no going back" and "We can play the partisan right here!" We can state with certainty that the fascists were forced to play along with the spontaneous revolt and not the other way around, no matter what some historians have argued: those fascists evaporated as the fighting escalated and the repression started. As regards the separatists, in some areas such as Catania, their youth groups took part in the revolt but their leaders disowned them and called for a return to order: at best the disturbances exposed their utter inadequacy when it came to leading a popular uprising with a pronounced social character. In terms of scale and complexion, the "draft-refuser" revolt was the only real resistance movement to emerge in southern Italy.

And there were features that were not susceptible to slick manipulation:

The leading role played by the women who were the real driving force behind the troubles, the spirit and brains that pushed the men into refusing the draft and into reacting against the war and not simply enduring it as they had a year before.

The people's self-organisation – for armed defence, distribution of food, health services, people's jails guarding captured soldiers and the people's canteens.

All of this, particularly in Ragusa, took place thanks to the spirit of freedom and climate of solidarity and mutual aid that informed the rebellion. Afterwards, month- and year-long terms of imprisonment tried to blot out the revolt and in this they were partly successful. But they did not succeed in blotting out the feeling and memory of it.

Pippo Gurrieri

Sicilia Libertaria (Ragusa) January 2005

Latest: Swayed in part by a 300-signature petition raised by the Ragusa Anarchist Group, the city authorities in Ragusa have just decided to rename the Rotunda in the Via Maria, Ragusa after Maria Occhipinti. The renamed street is likely to be inaugurated this September but Sicilian anarchists will hold their own ceremony while marking the 30th anniversary of *Sicilia Libertaria* in September.

From *Sicilia Libertaria*, March 2006.

NO TO THE DRAFT!

Maria Occhipinti and the Ragusa revolt of January 1945

On 25 April we Italians mark our country's liberation from the Nazi occupation, that being the date when Milan was liberated and the occupiers driven over the borders. But Italy's liberation was no overnight affair, nor was it over in a few days. Parts of our country were "liberated" well before 25 April 1944.

Allied forces landed in Sicily on 10 July 1943 and rather easily and quickly managed to fight their way up the peninsula as far as the gates of Rome.

The Cassibile armistice on 8 September [1943] had led southerners to believe that the war was over and so every serviceman felt that he was within his rights to quit his unit and head for home.

Plainly this was only an illusion because between late November and early December 1944 postcards started to arrive ordering all young men between the ages of 20 and 30 to report to their military districts in order to rejoin the fighting, this time on the side of the Allies and against the Nazis, in order to liberate the rest of Italy.

For a young man, being called up to the front at a point when your country is at war is probably a normal enough thing and is accepted just because that is the way things are. Heading for home in the belief that it is all over, reimmersing oneself in civilian life and then, within a few weeks, listening to talk of picking up "mess kit, spade and blanket" to rejoin the fighting struck most of the ex-soldiers as unacceptable. So virtually all of those called up turned a deaf ear and carried on with their new lives.

But you know, when the country calls, a man must answer the call and if he does not, the State's summons turns that much more forceful. In this case the State sent in the carabinieri to search out the draft-dodgers house by house.

The Sicilian and the southerner generally is not much given to grandstand opposition. The old saying "*caliti juncu ca passa a china*" (grin and bear it) fairly sums up the temperament of southerners.

This time, though, this was not the case, for only 20% of those called up reported to the district offices. The remainder took to the hills or made themselves scarce, hiding from those who intended to send them back into the front lines, especially in south east Sicily, where they had help from the local women and older folk.

In Ragusa, some who received their call-up cards pretended that they had not: some, seeing the carabinieri arrive, went into hiding; others, realising that hiding would do no good, fought to resist the draft.

The revolt in Ragusa (and its province), described as the "refuse the draft" revolt was shortlived and a 23 year old woman in the fifth month of her pregnancy became its protagonist and symbol.

Maria Occhipinti, for such was her name, was born in Ragusa on 29 July 1921. She had had three years of elementary schooling and then, as was common practice in those days, she had quit school to go off and train as a seamstress.

Ever since her adolescent years she had felt different from her contemporaries but, even so, she married at the age of 17 and lived a life much the same as so many other women of her day.

The war and her husband's departure for the front had changed her whole life: she started to go out and to deal with matters that had formerly been the concern of her husband. She had started to educate herself again, had started to read (Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* had opened her eyes to the lot of the disinherited) and had caused something of a scandal by joining the Camera del Lavoro (Chamber of Labour) and the Communist Party, refusing to kowtow merely because she was a woman.

Then the war had ended and the soldiers started to come home and then the draft cards had started to arrive.

The young men who had just returned home had no desire to set off again and the women, albeit not knowing how, were keen to hold on to their husbands and sons. There were discussions on every street corner and rallies were held in the city squares to shouts of "We're not cannon-fodder!" Maria Occhipinti was frequently sounded on her opinion of this or that suggestion of ways of dodging the draft.

At around 10.00 am. on 4 January, she was at home when she heard screaming from the local women. "Come out, come out, come out on to the street, you who know how to talk, you who can make yourself heard and have courage. Come and see the big truck ferrying away our children!" The truck was a large army truck into which all of the young men who just happened to be in the artisans' workshops at the time were being bundled. Maria approached the carabinieri and tried to persuade them to let the young men go. But the goons (as

she calls them in her book *Una donna di Ragusa* published in 1957 by Luciano Landi Editore and reissued by Feltrinelli in 1976 and by Sellerio in 1993 and from where the quotations used in this article have been lifted) refused to budge, so Maria Occhipinti threw herself down on the ground in front of the wheels of the truck and said: "You can kill me but you shall not pass." One of the soldiers said they should run her over because orders were orders. In the meantime other people drawn by the hubbub had approached the truck and in no time at all a huge crowd had surrounded it. The authorities, fearing the worst, had ordered that the youngsters be freed and the latter made themselves scarce.

Occhipinti's act spread around the place like wildfire and by that evening lots of people were dropping by her home to thank her and she was the talk of the town.

The following day, a sexton had the effrontery to ask an officer why on earth they were redrafting the young men when they had had their fill of the war by then. The officer's only response was to draw a grenade from his pocket and to throw it at the sexton, blowing him to pieces.

That was the trigger for the revolt. Weapons appeared everywhere and the so-called "a Russia" district was overrun by the rebels whilst the police controlled the rest of the city.

On the morning of 6 January 1945 a band of rebels mounted a blitz against a roadblock on the road into Ragusa. The fighting lasted into the afternoon before the soldiers surrendered.

The news spread around the province and the revolt spread to towns like Comiso, Vittoria, Giarratana, Monterosso and Agrigento.

In Ragusa, after some initial celebrations by the rebels as the military were routed, the fighting resumed and the numbers of dead and especially of the wounded began to grow.

Aside from police headquarters and a few other buildings, the city was now in rebel hands. However on the afternoon of 7 January, further army reinforcements arrived from outside and by 8 January order had been restored.

The rebels were arrested; some managed to escape and over several days the troops did as they pleased in the city. Maria Occhipinti was arrested a week after that and was interned on Ustica where she gave birth to her daughter Marilena before she was moved on to the Benedettine prison in Palermo.

The revolt in Ragusa province claimed 18 lives and left 24 wounded among the carabinieri and troops and 19 lives and 63 wounded on the rebel side.

INTERVIEW

On her return to Ragusa after her years in prison, Maria Occhipinti met with a hostile reception. Her family disowned her and the Communist Party washed its hands of her. She joined the local anarchist group and when she left Ragusa again her only contacts with the city of her birth were her contacts with her anarchist comrades.

So we asked Letizia Giarratana and Pippo Gurrieri who run the Sicilia Punto L publishing house to tell us about Maria Occhipinti after her departure from Ragusa.

Pippo: On her return to Ragusa, she found that her husband had taken up with another woman and she faced a lot of prejudice because she herself had been on the run for some days with another of the rebels, Erasmo Santangelo, and this had generated lots of rumours about her relationship with Santangelo, whereas she always insisted that nothing of that sort had happened between them.

So she came back to Ragusa but her husband, partly on account of these prejudices and partly because she had done time in jail and partly also because he could not support her rebel stance and her continual search for intensity and that rage of hers that had become commitment, could not stand it and broke with her once and for all.

Letizia: Yes, Maria stayed on in Ragusa and joined the anarchist group. She did a variety of things at that time, giving talks and writing in the press. But when the group's leading lights, including Franco Leggio, emigrated, she left too. In her book she mentions the departure of Franco Leggio and family at the end of 1949 as one of the things that prompted her to quit Ragusa too ("Franco took it into his head to move to Naples where he knew comrade Grilli [...] Grilli invited me to holiday at his house. His invitation was a dream come true for me, partly because with comrade Leggio gone, Ragusa was like a graveyard" (see *Una donna libera*, [A free woman] Sellerio Editore).

Off she went and joined Franco in Naples before setting off on a journey that took her to Milan, Switzerland, Paris, London, New York, California, Hawaii, Morocco, back to Italy and then back to the United States again. Right up until the eighties she had practically no fixed abode of her own. No sooner was she settled, having found work and a home than she felt bored and was off in search of new experiences somewhere else.

Pippo: Which just goes to show her great hunger for knowledge and how she did not feel as if she belonged to just one place. Her never-ending quest finished in the mid-1980s when, returning from her latest trip to the United States where she had gone to sell the house left to her by the elderly American socialist whom

she had married in order to earn citizenship, she settled down in Rome where she bought a house in San Giovanni.

In Rome she frequented the feminist groups and figures from the world of the arts, culture and cinema. Then in the 1990s Parkinson's disease started to attack her until death overcame her in August 1996.

Letizia: After the publication in 1957 of *Una donna di Ragusa* [A Woman from Ragusa] she carried on writing and setting down her adventures in a diary she kept up to the very end. A massive tome of about 700 pages covering a period from 1946 until just before her death. She titled it *My Pilgrimage Through the World*. After some years of dithering, Sellerio Editore decided to publish it but changed the title to *Una donna libera* [A Free Woman] and asked her daughter to revamp the text to make it more readable and fluent. That book came out in 2004 at 350 pages and recounts the second part of Maria's life story. We get to know the real Maria Occhipinti during this time. Because the first 40 years of her life were the years when she was just discovering the world and her anger and grappling with the reality of war. The latter half are the years when her indomitable rebellious spirit came into its own. Just think: her own daughter found it too much to take and made a life for herself in Canada. They met up in Rome several years later.

What sort of a woman was Maria Occhipinti?

Letizia: A real tank of a woman! A whirlwind of a woman. Anybody standing near her was bowled over by her personality. She was somebody who could not sit still; it was as if there was a volcano boiling up inside her. A very strong personality, so much so that everyone who met her was touched forever by her.

She was hard and tough, but extremely sensitive. Physically, she was heavily built and when was talking about something she was always very emphatic. But at the same time she was so soft that she wrote poetry and liked cuddles. She was both these things at once.

And, but for the "No to the draft" revolt, what sort of a woman would she have been?

Letizia: Hard to say. She might have become one of the countless women who spend their lives repressing themselves, but we'll never know. Remember that even before the revolt there were the stirrings of rebellion within her and the revolt in which she starred was the spark that set everything alight. In all probability, her personality would have come out in any case.

Pippo: I'd like to add here that she also wrote poems and that none of them have been published, except for thirty that were published in a book written by the French researcher Ismène Cotensin and published by us at Sicilia Punto L Edizioni.

How did she spend all the years she travelled the world?

Letizia: No matter where she went, the memory of January '45 in Ragusa stayed with her. She always carried that inside her and no matter where she went, some door would always open to her because there was always somebody who had read her book and knew her background and would give her a job. That book was her calling card.

And wherever she went she immediately tried to contact leftwing and anarchist movements. Apart from when she moved to Hawaii, she took an interest in local social issues everywhere she went.

And was her choice of location random?

Pippo: Very random. Often it was down to curiosity alone. The image of the mother and daughter at the beginning of the movie *Chocolat*, showing up some place and settling there comes to mind. Maria chose the location at random, looking for new experiences.

And what was her relationship with Ragusa?

Pippo: Her relationship with Ragusa was one of the keynotes of Maria's personality. Her ties to the Ragusa of the revolt could not be broken and her ties to the city were strong, but she had a hate relationship, a love-hate relationship with Ragusans. When she quit Ragusa she swore she would never set foot there again because she felt that she had been scorned and humiliated. And in fact for very many years she did not return. Something like twenty years, I believe.

Letizia: She came back in 1976 with Piero Forcella who wanted to make a documentary for Italian TV. On that occasion she gave lots of scathing interviews about Ragusans. For instance, she deplored the fact that Ragusan girls cared more for appearance than for substance. She used to say "it's the brain rather than the flesh that should matter".

And what remains of Maria Occhipinti today?

Pippo: A number of doctoral theses and several people for whom Maria Occhipinti and the Ragusa revolt are matters for research. And there are lots of copies of her books left. Plus the honour and the burden of never having thrust the anti-militarist revolt on January 1945 into oblivion. And for the past year there is a square here in this city called after her, the Rotunda in the Via Roma although so far, notwithstanding a decision by Ragusa corporation, the Catania Deputation for Homeland History has yet to give this the go-ahead. If all goes well, come the tenth anniversary of her death on 20 August this year, we will be there to put up a plaque, just as we erected one in the Piazza San Giovanni to the labourers butchered by the fascists on 9 April 1921. But in addition to all that, the figure of Maria Occhipinti will go down in history as one of those who helped raise consciousness in this place.

Meno Occhipinti, From www.ondaincerta.info

THE BENEDICTINES

[In the Palermo women's prison, run by Benedictine nuns, Maria Occhipinti served her time in...] A large dormitory with cement-blocked windows, the type you can find in any other prison, and there was a stifling stench as in a hencoop. The washing was hung indoor where the sun never reached. While waiting our turn at the wash tub, we would stand there hugging our dirty pile of baby togs. There were no cradles. The mothers and the children slept together on miserable urine-soaked pallets made of lumpy smelly horsehair. [...]

We never took a bath. Once I complained about this to the Mother Superior who granted us audiences on Thursdays. The Reverend Mother had a soft gentle voice, tremulous and endearing, but deep inside she was just the opposite. Heavy-set, old and decrepit, she was always escorted by two nuns. She would welcome us with feigned tenderness, make us promises galore, but we never obtained a single thing from her. [...]

Seeing that I wore a Communist badge and kept pictures of Stalin and Lenin near my bed, they gave political significance to my every gesture, and so insisted that I bow to them, but it was entirely my conscience that dictated my actions, not political or party principles. [When being punished] my inmate-friends brought me food, and I didn't suffer too much. Whenever I found a piece of coal I would write on the wall: DOWN WITH THE HYPOCRISY OF THE NUNS! JUSTICE WILL TRIUMPH! and other such phrases. [...]

One night around ten o'clock, from my gate I heard someone moaning. It was an inmate in labor. The guard let her lie on the bed while a warden went to call the midwife. A new being was about to be born, but there was no hot water. The kitchen was locked and the guard could not open it, nor could she waken the nuns. As usual, we managed to adapt to the circumstances. We were not to produce any smoke and there was little paper. In order to waste no time, I held the basin close over the flames with my hands, while another woman placed the pieces of paper underneath. Towards the end, I could feel my fingers burning. At times like that we all helped each other with love. We washed both mother and child but she caught an infection and it was a miracle that she survived. [...]

Whenever the nuns called me an atheist or a non-believer, I always answered that I was far more religious than they. They knew very well that each evening I shared with a friend the piece of bread I earned by preparing the altar cloths or sewing the Mother Superior's linen [...] Having chosen to suffer when I was a young girl, I had stood before the altar in the Ecce Homo Church and implored God for his thorns, his cross, his martyrdom. This was why I always went to extremes in everything, because I had modeled myself after Christ, and

Communism, for me, was none other than a way of sacrificing myself for the love of others.

Maria Occhipinti, translated by Gloria Italiano.

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INTERVIEW WITH FRANCO LEGGIO, SICILIAN ANARCHIST AND ONE OF THE RINGLEADERS IN THE RAGUSA UPRISING OF JANUARY 1945

What was the background to the Ragusa revolt?

It should be stressed that at the time the fascists and monarchists were keeping themselves busy and we, thinking that they were up to something, were preparing for any eventuality and engaging in agitational work as well as arming ourselves. At the time, I was in the sanatorium in Ragusa recovering from a touch of TB and I used to slip out to attend meetings and take part in activities. We had set up some action groups. From day one right up until the end of the revolt, I never went back.

The fuse was lit in December 1944 by Badoglio's decree drafting men to carry on the war, but this time under Allied colours. The rebellion was instinctive, especially among the women, because the draft cards required the young men to report to the nearest army barracks. Besides, they were supposed to present themselves with blankets and even a spade.

The cards were soon being burnt in the street and at the beginning of the demonstrations some fascists were involved, but we denounced their presence. Meetings were held in a field on the outskirts of the city, a place known as "*a ciusa*" (the enclosure) where we would gather by night. I particularly remember one fascist ring-leader, Rocco Gurriero, being exposed and thrown out. A speech by him designed to turn the discontent to the advantage of his "comrades in the north" in the Saló Republic was cut short by Franco Calamusa. After an address by our comrade Calamusa, the watchword "No go" which had been adopted up until then was expanded by the addition of "and no going back", and this motto soon became "we'll be partisans right here".

Meanwhile the police, carabinieri and army units were carrying out house to house searches for draftees and were rounding up all the 18 year olds. On the morning of 4 January 1945, a patrol ventured into the "Russia" district – so called because it was especially "red" – and in one room they came across a group of lads who were then arrested and bundled on to a truck. This provoked outrage

among the women, and when they saw their lads being dragged away they ran to fetch Maria Occhipinti. Maria had set up the Communist Party's women's section in Ragusa which had hundreds of members but by this point she had left the party in order to launch, together with Erasmo Santangelo, a dissident communist group. It was Maria who rushed out of her house and threw herself under the wheels of the truck just as the driver was starting up the engine: the other women were then able to free the five lads who, protected by the crowd, were able to dodge the draft.

In the meantime some youngsters from the group to which I belonged were ferrying some model '91 rifles and hand grenades stolen from a farmhouse belonging to clericalists and monarchists. However, the carabinieri stumbled upon them and when they were called upon to halt they opened fire.

Decisions were plainly being taken without the involvement of the parties. Was this a spontaneous confluence of revolutionary spirit and the yearning for liberation?

Yes. The mobilisation started right then and there and by that evening about three hundred of us were armed and at our usual meeting we decided to attack a roadblock near Beddio, an important road junction. The next day we visited the homes of local residents to orchestrate the operation and urge everyone to bring along any weapons they might have access to. The following morning, after a fire-fight, the soldiers were disarmed.

Were women involved as well?

As reported in the book *Una donna di Ragusa* (Landi Editore, Florence 1957) Maria Occhipinti was involved in the attack.

And then what happened?

We got word of an army convoy coming in by road from Catania. So we made suitable preparations and halted and captured the entire convoy. In this way we took possession of three trucks, a few crates of hand grenades and rifles, a heavy machine-gun, other gear and rations. Furthermore, we took, in all, fifty prisoners (including about ten carabinieri or Finance Guards) who were then handed over to a few of us and taken to the aqueduct.

And the rest of you headed for the city centre?

Exactly. First we occupied the bell-tower of the church in the Via Ecce Homo where we set up a heavy machine-gun. From there we could control the street that divided the city in two. Down at one end there was a school building with a five man military patrol posted on the balcony; they had a heavy machine-gun too and could dominate the area to the north and south. Our problem therefore was to find a way of neutralising that position.

How did you manage to reach them unseen?

We could scarcely stroll down the pavement, of course. So we scuttled from house to house along the adjacent, upmarket Via Roma, bursting into the homes of many of the local toffs and crossed the rooftops until we were facing our target. From the courthouse, no less, from a floor overlooking the balcony on which the soldiers were stationed, we threw a hand grenade that blew off the door of the schoolhouse. Spotting the danger, the members of the unit surrendered to us. Then the army barracks was also seized.

Meanwhile, further prisoners were taken by other rebel groups who had risen up spontaneously. The revolt was spreading like wildfire throughout the whole city; patrols were being disarmed and so were the ex-fascists and the carabinieri barracks and police headquarters were surrounded. By then we were in control of the place.

The landowners were stripped of their possessions so we had what we needed in the way of provisions.

What was the Communist Party's attitude?

The secretary of the regional CP federation, Gerolamo Li Causi, who was also on the national leadership, was drafted in as a matter of urgency. He was plainly opposed to what was going on but there was nothing for him to do but register the complete chasm separating him from the party's rank and file, so he withdrew to the federation premises and did not show himself outside.

And what was the political make-up of the rebels?

The Communist Party rank and file were with us, but most of the rebels were ordinary folk or mine-workers well known to our group. In fact the level of consciousness in the mines in Ragusa where I, for one, had worked from the age of 14, had always been quite high. Then in 1944, by night when I was in hospital we worked together with the anarchists Mario Perni (a miner) and Pino Catanese (an assistant type-setter) on the manuscript "*La Scintilla dara la Fiamma*" (From the Spark will come the Flame), a handbill that was distributed among the skivvies at the mines and that undoubtedly helped pave the way for the coming revolt.

Is there anything in particular that sticks in your memory?

I remember that we disarmed a certain Puleo, a one-time captain with the fascist militia, and locked him up in his room under guard. He had removed his uniform but was still yearning for the old days even after the regime's downfall.

How did you cope with the prisoners?

There were about 200 of them and the problem was how we were supposed to feed them. I have to say that something extremely significant happened here: the families of the workers and peasants, who often had sons serving in the army

in the north, sized up the plight of the captured military and started to bring them food on their own initiative. As for ourselves, we set about finding them civilian clothing because our intention was to set them free and chase them back to their homes.

What was the impact of the Ragusa uprising on the outside world?

In Catania an attack was mounted on a court martial but that was an isolated event. On the other hand, the revolt spread through the provinces to Vittorio, Comiso, Acate, Modica, Sicli and Monterosso. In some places, such as Giarratana, the local garrison was disarmed, the landlords stripped of their reserves of grain and corn and these were distributed free of charge to working class families, especially under the supervision of comrade Bartolo Nasello. As a rule, the tax offices and district army posts were put to the torch.

After securing control of the city, what steps did you take to protect the gains you had made?

We tried to seal off access roads and fortified the Annunziata district in order to bar the way to possible reinforcements. Shortly after that in fact, the first platoons started arriving from Catania and Syracuse supported by a plane that overflowed our positions. They were from the "Savoy Division".

The first skirmishing started and we soon ran out of ammunition for our two heavy machine-guns. We started also to run low on other ammunition so that after four days and nights the fighting petered out completely and we were obliged to retreat in the face of enemy gunfire. The troops, once they got inside the city, set about enforcing a crackdown and rounding people up.

In her book, Maria Occhipinti quotes government figures for the uprising throughout the province talking about 18 carabinieri and soldiers dead and 24 wounded and 19 rebels killed and 63 wounded, but adds that the real figures could be considerably higher. What is your recollection on this score?

The number of the dead was never discovered for sure. We set out to carry out a survey in the city but they never came up with any precise figures. There was talk of 5 or 6 dead rebels and 11 (although there was also mention of 17) military dead in Ragusa alone.

L'Unità [the CP mouthpiece] only reported the uprising after the military had intervened and never even bothered to mention the dangers inherent in the great freedom of action accorded to the armed forces. On 9 February, its treacherous headline read: "Rumblings of fascist backlash. The Sicilian landowners versus the people and versus Italy."

And what impact did the repression make?

Over three or four days the troops went crazy in the city. Storming through homes, they dragged away all the men they could find and took anything else

that caught their eye – food, blankets, knickknacks, etc. No one was spared abuse, not even the women, and once taken to police headquarters, many of those arrested were obliged to undergo torture.

Even so, many managed to escape. Some fled to other cities where they later put down roots. Even in our own group, there were those who emigrated to Latin America. I and others went to ground until the heat died down. At which point, with the comrades safe, I managed to slip back into the hospital, none the worse. There the director initially decided to throw me out on my ear but after intervention by other doctors I was readmitted but required to stay put. I did so and I was discharged that June.

Up to that point the police had not had any evidence against me; but the carabinieri, suspecting that I had been involved in the riots, came looking for me. Both the doorman and the sister in charge of the ward (who went as far as to swear on the Bible in order to protect me) had insisted that I had not been outside. Shortly after that, however, I was turned in by a telephone call from a female doctor who insisted that on the days of the fighting I had absented myself from the hospital, exiting through the window. I was arrested in my home and promptly dispatched to jail where I served 16 months. Not that there was any trial for I was a beneficiary of the so-called "Togliatti amnesty" (the amnesty that also spared the fascists from punishment).

And after your time in jail the 'La Fiaccola' group was formed?

Up until then, whilst anarchist, our group had been informal. While I was inside I had support from Giuseppe Fiorito from Catania and from counsellor Albanese who gave me every possible assistance. When I was freed I went in search of them. Then, on a trip to Syracuse, I dropped in on Umberto Consiglio and through him learnt that there was an old anarchist comrade in Modica – Giuseppe Alticozzi. During a get-together in Ragusa I put it to them that we should call our group 'La Fiaccola' That was in 1946.

We promptly began establishing contacts with other comrades around Sicily and on the mainland. Through Alfonso Failla we also established links with Placido La Torre, Gino Cerrito and others from the Messina group. We had left a fair number of comrades behind in the sanatorium in Ragusa and with their help we raised from the patients what we needed to publish the one-off publication *La Diana*. Then we stepped up our propaganda, organising lectures with Failla, Consiglio, Carbonaro (from Bologna) and others.

And after she had served her 22 months, Maria Occhipinti joined our group which then affiliated to the South-Eastern Sicilian Anarchist Federation.

Interview by Stefano Fabbri in *A Rivista Anarchica*, No 140, October 1986.

THE RAGUSA MASSACRE IN 1921

Farm labourers returning home from the fields on 9 April 1921 joined the crowds waiting in the square opposite the San Giovanni Batista church in Ragusa to hear an address from the socialist deputy Vincenzo Vacirca who had returned to Italy from America in 1919. Some ex-servicemen led by Filippo Pennavaria and blackshirts marched into the square for a meeting on an upstairs terrace in the Circolo Agricolo a short distance further along. They heckled and insulted Vacirca and a balustrade from the terrace “fell” into the square before the fascists opened fire on the crowds. Around thirty of the “filthy reds” were hit and three – Rosario Occhipinti, Carmelo Vitale (both killed outright) and Rosario Gurrieri (who survived until June) – were killed. The forces of law and order made no move to intervene.

One of the earliest fascists on Sicily, Totó Giurato, (one of the founding members of the fascist group launched in Ragusa on 11 June 1920) described the events like this: “There was turmoil among the enemy as they scurried for the sides of the great square where, coming under sustained gunfire, thirty socialist victims were brought down, two of them perishing on the spot whilst the rest, gravely wounded, gasped for breath and tried desperately to drag themselves through the blood.” Shops pulled down their shutters and people barricaded themselves inside their homes. The following day, fascist goons from Comiso and Vittoria flooded Ragusa, wrecking the Camera del Lavoro, the socialist youth branch and the city hall. Socialist officials elected only weeks before were forced to sign resignations.

A commemorative plaque was unveiled in the square on 25 April 2002.

Adapted from *Sicilia Libertaria* No 209, May 2002 which had a four page insert marking the 1921 massacre and the unveiling of a commemorative plaque to the victims. The insert was drawn up by the AGAFAR movement [AntiGuerraAnti-FascistaAntiRazzismo - Anti-War, Anti-Fascism, Anti-Racism] that April.

THE ANCESTRY OF ANARCHIST ANTIFASCISM IN AND AROUND RAGUSA

One of the first people to talk about fighting back against the spreading fascist attacks was the anarchist Giorgio Nabita who stated: “The people ... have no option left but to answer force with force.” With him as the driving force, an anarcho-communist group was formed in Vittoria and libertarian activity enjoyed a small resurgence in the Modica and Ragusa areas. Towards the end of 1921 the anarchist Giuseppe Alticozzi returned from the USA to Modica. His employers were bullied into letting him go and one of the cafes where he worked as a waiter was shut down in February 1923 on the grounds that it was a den of antifascism. Alticozzi then left for France, only to be frog-marched to the Italian border by French police in late 1926 and he was arrested in Ventimiglia and handed over to the OVRA and charged with complicity in Gino Lucetti’s attempt on Mussolini’s life the previous September: he was shunted from prison to prison before finishing up in prison in Rome and being bound over for 2 years.

In September 1929 an anarchist from Vittoria was deported from France: this was Angelo Ferrara who was first interned, then sentenced to seven months for insulting the head of state (Mussolini). In August 1930 he got a further 2 years and 7 months plus a 1,666 lire fine for attempting to leave the country by irregular means and was finally committed to a workhouse in June 1934.

Nabita was being kept under close surveillance by the regime. He was held for a fortnight to pre-empt possible attacks marking the wedding of Prince Umberto of Savoy, one of 25,000 “subversives” taken into custody throughout Italy.

In Vittoria a non-denominational antifascist group was founded, one of its members being Tano Biazzo, a libertarian trade unionist and engraver from that town. On 14 August 1931, Nabita wrote: “The people are opposed to the government and there will come an uprising just as soon as circumstances permit.” Because of his hostility towards Socialists and Communists, Nabita rejected overtures from an upcoming younger generation of antifascists. He himself was arrested as part of a general crackdown on antifascists in 1935. That same year, Angelo Ferrara managed to leave Italy, only to be arrested on re-entry. Giuseppe Alticozzi found work in Modica in a bar across from the fascist headquarters and was subjected to verbal abuse and manhandling and was forced to drink castor oil on a regular basis. Tano Biazzo was cautioned by the authorities in 1937. Giuseppe Giurdanella, an anarchist from Comiso, was arrested and interned in 1939.

In Ragusa, anarchist Antonio Calamusa became a rallying point for antifascist groups made up of Communists, anarchists and socialists until he was interned.

A visit to Ragusa by Mussolini led to Nabita and Alticozzi being taken into preventive custody. Nabita died of an illness on 26 January 1940, aged 61. There was a massive turn-out for his secular funeral. In 1941 Alticozzi was arrested again and interned for a year, found work in Comiso on his release in 1942 but was moved on by the authorities.

In 1943 some youngsters from Ragusa who had grown up near Antonio Calamusa set up a revolutionary antifascist group; they were Franco Leggio, Ciccio Dipasquale, Pino Catanese and Mario Perna. Two were arrested while leafleting.

In the Ragusa revolt, anarchists such as Franco Leggio and Mario Perna played a part alongside dissident communists like Erasmo Santangelo and rank and file leftists such as Maria Occhipinti.

Adapted from *Sicilia Libertaria* No 209, May 2002

THE LIFE OF AN ANARCHIST: FRANCO LEGGIO

Even as the December 2006 edition of *Sicilia Libertaria* was coming off the presses of the Tipografia Moderna, comrade Franco Leggio's eyes were closing for the very last time on his bed in a side ward at the Opera Pia in Ragusa Ibla. That was on 15 December 2006. The very same date on which, 37 years previously, another comrade - Giuseppe Pinelli - was sent flying from a window on the fourth floor at Milan Police HQ three days after the Piazza Fontana bombing.

Franco's death signifies not just that we have lost a little bit of history but also that those of us who were active alongside him for any length of time have lost a little bit of ourselves.

It was the Piazza Fontana outrage and the crackdown on the anarchist movement that had prompted Franco to return to Ragusa once and for all after twenty years away from Sicily (albeit that he never really left the city where he popped up with frequent, productive initiatives). He had set himself the task of bolstering anarchism's foothold in his homeland because Southern Italy, especially in those days, had turned into the stamping ground of reactionaries; its finest sons had been forced into emigrating and the haemorrhaging of militants had become too great. This was what attracted so many of us high-school youngsters and apprentices to the very idiosyncratic anarchism of Franco Leggio, the long-haired grown-up with the clear ideas about revolution and rebellion who, though in his 50s was always surrounded by young people and who was living proof that our enthusiasm was not the fleeting enthusiasm of youth.

Last June (2006) he took a heavy fall, probably as the result of a further stroke: his precarious health, precarious ever since February 1993 when his body had

been sorely tried by a series of strokes, was now seriously undermined. He was now robbed of what remained of the independence that had enabled him to live alone all those years, and to spend a few hours a day dropping in on us every day and for the four afternoons a weeks that we opened; to take part in nearly every venture mounted by Ragusa's anarchists; to spend hour after hour immersed in his reading; never to miss a single dispatch of *Sicilia Libertaria* from our centre. Recuperating initially in hospital he was then transferred to the convalescent home attached to the GB Odierna hospital, thereby returning to the sanatorium where he had recuperated way back in 1944 from the TB he had contracted during the war and from where he would sneak out in order to plan and lead the revolt in early January 1945 against the draft. Now, though, he had no heart for reading any more; he was just waiting for *Sicilia Libertaria* to come out, always insistent that he got his copy. And when the comrades and youngsters would insist that he get back to reading again, in order to occupy his time in hospital, it was in the knowledge that he would not be coming home and he always answered that he preferred to think instead.

In late November, with his health rallying ever so slightly, he was moved to a convalescent home in Ragusa Ibla. Where his comrades followed him and where he was lovingly cared for by the attendants and volunteers. Around 8 December his condition started to deteriorate. He was in a lot of pain. It was common knowledge that he would not be going home and perhaps he realised that himself. He passed away on the morning of 15 December while one last attempt was being made by one of his dearest comrades to get him to swallow a vitamin drink.

He had gradually become an anarchist in the late 1930s. Born in 1921, he had not been exposed to revolutionary political movements: but his rebellious spirit was apparent everywhere, at work, and in the company of young people: he learnt about anarchists in 1937 from reading a scurrilous article about their role in the Spanish revolution. He was immediately drawn to them. Along with some of his contemporaries he had begun to read maverick writings and joined small clandestine antifascist groups. His work in the mines brought him into contact with the harsh realities of working class life in Ragusa and with persons who despised the regime. In order to give the slip to police surveillance, he decided to join the navy where he spent the war years undergoing punishments and transfers before returning to Ragusa with TB.

The "Don't go!" revolt found him among the protagonists alongside young libertarians like Pino Catanese and Mario Penna and so many other working class men and women who rejected the militaristic policy of the government of liberated Italy and minister of Justice Togliatti. Young libertarians drafted a

hand-written manifesto *La scintilla dara la fiamma* (The Spark Will Produce the Flame) that they distributed among the miners, urging rebellion. And as soon as the uprising erupted he was to the forefront of it, implicated in courageous episodes. After the surrender and even as the repression was hitting the region hard and the army making arrests by the hundreds, he managed to slip back into the convalescent home where he was protected by the doctors and nurses who insisted that he had never left the place during the revolt. That June, thanks to a mark, he was arrested and given a 16 month sentence; only to be freed by Togliatti's amnesty.

Now in contact with Sicilian anarchists such as Fiorito from Catania, Consiglio from Syracuse, Pino from Barcellona, then Alticozzi from Modica, followed by La Torre, Cerrito, Frada from Messina and Schicchi from Palermo, he and other young anarchists launched the La Fiaccola anarchist group. He would soon be joined by another protagonist of the anti-draft uprising, Maria Occhipinti whose fate was to be linked to his own and to that of the anarchists and who was to bring the enthusiasm of so many women into the Ragusa group's fight against religious obscurantism, prejudice, oppression and poverty.

By the end of the 1940s he was back working in the mines and with some young anarchists had built up quiet support that in 1949 enabled them to resist 200 dismissals and continually outflank the local Camera del Lavoro and Communist Party by promoting an all-out strike involving seizure of the workings and self-management of them during two months of the most intense social struggle that saw him pit thousands of miners and their families against hundreds of police and soldiers in defiance of reformist bureaucrats who ultimately agreed to 40 dismissals. Franco was not one of the 40 but he was to be sacked shortly afterwards by way of retaliation. For a whole month he mounted a back-to-front strike, turning up for work every day only to be stopped by the police, obstructed and eventually paid off with a 70,000 lire bonus that he declined. After that, he emigrated to the mainland.

With his family, he moved to Naples where he tried his hand at all sorts of jobs. It was at this point that he separated from his wife whom family pressures had forced into having their children baptised. After that he was off to Livorno and Genoa where he worked with the anarchists of Puglia, launching countless political ventures and publishing projects with an especial focus on the South: publications like *Conoscersi e comprendersi*, *Ribellione*, *L'Agitazione del Sud*. But above all he was to link up with Spanish anarchist guerrillas carrying on the clandestine armed struggle, especially the likes of Facerias. And with Cipriano Mera, the "bricklayer general" living in exile in Paris. There were exciting time of concrete solidarity with the Spanish struggle even in Italy, in the shape of

support operations mounted with young anarchists from Milan, Piedmont, Tuscany and Liguria. When, in July 1960, a revolt erupted in Genoa,¹ Franco was there with the Genoese anarchists, but even then he was thinking of going home to Ragusa, where he had retained a slim foothold by publishing newspapers and one-off publications alongside anarchists from Modica and a few Ragusans like Mario La Perla.

Within the movement, he was anti-organisation but from time to time would choose his partners on the basis of strict conditionality, critical spirit and an itch to be active. He was always open to the new and was not inclined to be afraid of youthful muddle; he was more inclined to take it on and tease out the libertarian content of this. Thus he took an interest in and showed curiosity about beatniks and provos, hippies and extra-parliamentary movements. His cavalier approach to confrontation and his moral rigour, political intransigence, learning and intellect meant that the young were always drawn into his orbit.

Meanwhile he launched the *Anteo* series of publications and the La Fiaccola² imprint, based in Ragusa: publication of anti-clerical texts was to result in his being charged and tried, to seizures and prison sentences: such a courageous undertaking could scarcely expect an easy life in the 1960s. But Franco battled blithely on, giving as good as he got to the "clerico-fascist porcupines" as he used to describe the bench and all reactionaries. La Fiaccola had a stormy existence but it weathered the storm.

When he finally came back to live in Ragusa once and for all, even as the whole world was erupting with the joy of revolt, the groundwork was laid for the emergence of an anarchist youth movement. Franco had charisma and was an enthralling, great communicator. He side with the young without any great moralising and did not create distance but actually banished it. This was looked at askance by his political contemporaries on the left who kicked up a stink when they saw how many youngsters surrounded him and who sat around the table with him in the Mediterraneo bar. Besides, as far as we youngsters were concerned, getting Franco's opinion on something was a morale-raise and it was

¹ The clashes between antifascists and fascists in Genoa in 1943-45 were especially vicious. The city was awarded the "gold medal of the resistance". In 1960, in return for supporting the Christian Democrat government of Fernando Tambroni, the neofascist MSI party asked for and was granted leave to hold its national congress in Genoa. This triggered a massive protest, general strike on 30 June 1960 and revolt by outraged ex-partisans, trade unions and other leftist groups.

² La Fiaccola means The Torch/The Firebrand.

as if we were walking beside History, for he had a past and a future with which others could not compete.

Those were the ten best years of my own life and probably in many another life. Years of growing up amid thousands of teenage problems, political responsibilities that we could face because we knew that Franco was there, ever ready with advice or to lend a hand: he even bore our whingeing when we were too young. Even those who just flitted through the group could not help but keep up their connections with the man. Meanwhile he soldiered on with his publishing ventures, disappearing for months at a time but leaving his door open for any passerby; putting up with infamous charges and arrests involving himself in major national ventures from the demonstrations on behalf of Valpreda³ and Marini, to festivals and symposia and he helped to enrich our experience. Ragusa, the south of the south, became a place of pilgrimage for comrades from all round the world who came to seek him out: Japanese, Americans, French people and folk from all parts of Italy. He definitely did not need to leave home to get to know the world.

In Catania he had tried to launch a bookshop, L'Underground, with the local comrades. Then he had launched the review *Anarchismo*, taking charge of its publication and remaining connected to it up until 1978. He refloated the bookshop in Ragusa and *Zuleika* was launched in 1978 in an effort to counter the ebbing tide of the movement. The birth of that newspaper was also his handiwork as he encouraged us in the writing of it and to stand fast and reflect: he helped improve its contents. For years he had injected part of his character into *Sicilia Libertaria* by means of polemics, suggestions and analyses. As long as he had the energy to do so.

Then came the Comiso missile campaign. We were all caught up in that and Franco more than any of us: from 1981 up until the end of the '80s, he missed only six months (which he spent in Ragusa jail from February to August of 1983, paying the price for his courage in supporting Giovanni Marini who was standing trial in Salerno and Vallo della Lucania for the murder of a fascist). His was an "exemplary" arrest designed to "pick out" the authoritative objectively most

³ Valpreda: The anarchist dancer whom the state tried to implicate in the series of "anarchist" (but actually neofascist;state) bombings in Rome and Milan in December 1969. After Pinell "fell" from the 4th floor at police HQ in Milan, Valpreda was left as the main target of the police-state attempts to pin things on the anarchists, despite all the evidence of a neo-fascist trail to be chased up.

dangerous ringleader of the opposition to the construction of the missile base in Comiso. And how his absence was seen and felt!

In 1986 the bourgeois courts could not cope with this anarchist's dogged defiance of them. No judge was spared his darts every time he faced some charge in the wake of the Marini trial. There was a golden circle of magistrates who had been "vilified" in his letters. Until they finally decided to remand him for psychiatric reports. An act of provocation that could not be allowed to pass, and it was not: Franco invited them to send in the armoured cars to collect him from his home and a wave of solidarity swept through Italy. No examination was ever conducted: it was all too obvious that Franco's only lunacy was that he was an anarchist, a lover of freedom and a ferocious opponent of injustice.

I realise that these few lines cannot do sufficient justice to such a rich life wholly committed to the anarchist ideal. I take consolation from the fact that Franco's overpowering personality will remain etched in the hearts of any who knew, respected and loved him.

His coffin was displayed at the Società dei libertari (Libertarian Club), which he had always thought of as home. Surrounded by black and black-and-red flags, with a copy of the latest edition of *Sicilia Libertaria* tucked under his arm, surrounded by flowers and wrapped in the love of his comrades. So many people showed up, anarchists from the provinces and from Sicily, comrades from the establishment left and non-establishment left, so many former comrades who never forgot him, plus his neighbours and relatives. Together we carried him from the premises as far as the Piazza S. Giovanni, where so many rallies and demonstrations had taken place and where a brief, emotional oration from myself saluted him one last time, as those present wept to the faintly voiced strains of *Addio, Lugano bello*.

His body was cremated in Bari on Thursday 28 December 2006.

Pippo Gurrieri, *Sicilia Libertaria*, No 258 January 2007

THE MAFIA

A review of C. Ruta's book *Politicia e mafia negli iblei* (Edizioni La Zisa, Palermo 1997) mentions that, although the Mafia was fairly well confined to western and central Sicily (thereby missing Ragusa in eastern Sicily), mafia influence has been felt there to varying degrees. For example the Ibla region (which includes Ragusa) was, like elsewhere in the island, afflicted with banditry in 1943-1946. There was one gang living in the La Marza swamps and known as the Cuckoo Gang; it was made up of people on the run from the law, deserters and draft dodgers. There was another gang made up largely of students and based in Ibla in a cave under the Arezzo hospital. These gangs engaged in rustling and thievery but there was no history of kidnapping.

"Maria Occhipinti [...] mentions a few low key presences in her book *Una donna di Ragusa*. In particular she mentions a certain Cassarino and Lauretta, known mafiosi from San Paolo. They took part in the "No go" revolt in January [1945] and, once in jail on criminal charges and probably in cahoots with the prison and court authorities, they made accusations against and earned one of the leaders of the revolt a seven year sentence for alleged extortion. This, however lightweight the instance, points up a far from secondary feature of the Mafia, its flexibility of response to circumstances: with the rebels one minute and siding with the powers that be the next."

From: www.leinchieste.com/seguitolibri2.html

ALCATRAZ - UNCLE SAM'S DEVIL'S ISLAND EXPERIENCES OF A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR IN AMERICA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR BY PHILIP GROSSER

Philip Grosser was sent to Alcatraz because he didn't want to murder anyone, even on government orders. He was a Boston anarchist and anti-militarist who refused to be drafted into the slaughter of World War One. He was, in his own words, 'not a very good example to other drafted men', and stayed a stubborn rebel who could not be turned into a soldier. As an anarchist he denied the government's right to run or throw away his life. For that reason he had to face the inhumanity of authority defied.

Grosser's account of his time inside is an early exposé of official brutality in America's most notorious prison. It's also a powerful account of resistance and endurance. The original pamphlet was first published by Grosser's friends after his death in the 1930s. It's been expanded with letters by, to and about him from the Alexander Berkman papers at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. They shed a little more light on the life of a rebel who could be counted on in the struggle for human freedom.

"Phil was one of the finest comrades it has been my good fortune to meet. And well I remember his stand during the war. I know all the humiliation and tortures he had to go through because of his loyalty to a high ideal." – Alexander Berkman

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