

100 years ago, in early August 1922, the barricades of Parma repelled Mussolini's hordes...

Guido Picelli: The man who routed the fascists!

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At least during the interwar period, when there was a confrontation between the left and the fascists, it was always the fascists who won. And unfortunately, most of the time without meeting a real resistance. However, there has been one important exception. That of the Italian revolutionary Guido Picelli, who, the first and long before any other, understood what fascism is and what it wants, as well as how it must be fought. This Guido Picelli who beat the fascists when he found them on his way. In Parma of the barricades in 1922. And in the Spain of the civil war in 1937. So, who was and what did he do the man who routed the fascists?...

First picture: At the beginning of August 1922, Parma is the only large Italian city that persist in resisting Mussolini's squadristi, already on their way to power. The general strike proclaimed after the bloody attack of the fascists against the city of Ravenna, ends before it begins, by the union bureaucracies in disarray before the threats of reprisals of the fascists. But the workers and the people of Parma do not obey and go on strike. Mussolini charges his right-hand man Italo Balbo with crushing the rebellious population of this "Proletarian Bastion" that was the city of Parma. At least 10,000-15,000 armed fascists from all over northern and central Italy rushe to the city ready for the final assault and the bloodbath they promise to its defenders.

In Parma, Guido Picelli organizes the defense, assigns precise tasks to each and everyone, and implements a meticulous plan of unprecedented urban guerrilla warfare, with successive rows, trenches, ditches, barricades, barbed wire, electric cables, and even improvised minefields, defended by the population of the working-class neighborhoods and the workers of the city under the direction of the 400 more or less armed Arditi del Popolo, those veterans of World War I, whom Picelli has been preparing for combat for 14 months! Those who had weapons fired bullets or threw grenades. The others, old, young, children and especially women, resist with pickaxes, iron bars, stones, crossbars, bricks, boiling oil and... vitriol.

Taking advantage of the benevolent passivity of the army and the gendarmerie, the fascists attack in successive waves for 5 days, but are always pushed back, leaving dozens of dead and wounded. And while Balbo tries to exorcise the evil by writing in his diary "*If Picelli manages to win, the subversives of all Italy will raise their heads again,*" the fascists retreat in an indescribable disorder and their leaders decide to put an end to their campaign, accepting their bitter defeat and their humiliation. But, Picelli appeals in vain to the social-democratic, communist and trade union leaders to take advantage of the victory of the antifascists of Parma and to generalize the example of its brave defenders in all Italy. They all turned a deaf ear and turned their backs on him. Three months later, Mussolini became prime minister, fascism came to power for the first time, and began to inspire a host of imitators throughout Europe, including a certain Adolf Hitler. The tragic aftermath is well known...and alas, a century later it has not yet ended!

Second picture: Spain, first days of January 1937, in the village Mirabueno in the province of Guadalajara. Picelli assumes, only for one day (!), the command of the "Garibaldi" battalion of Italian antifascist volunteers, and wins the only victory of the antifascists on the front of the defense of Madrid: at the head of his men, he launches a lightning attack, breaks the fascist lines, enters Mirabueno, takes dozens of Franco's prisoners and liberates a large part of the highway that connects Madrid to Zaragoza. But, three days later, **Guido Picelli dies from a bullet... "in the back at heart level". A bullet fired from a weapon that does not belong to Franco's fascists.**

To Guido Picelli are organized three state funerals, in Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona. According to the newspapers of the time, 100,000 people attended the funeral in the capital of Catalonia, including the Soviet consul Barcelona Antonov-Ovseenko, the legendary Bolshevik who led the capture of the Winter Palace during the October Revolution. A year later, the old Bolshevik was shot in Moscow...

Picelli and his "Antifascist United Front"

The greatness but also the tragedy of Guido Picelli consist in the fact that, at least at the beginning of the 1920s, he found himself virtually alone to fight against the triumphant fascism. The deep reason for this political solitude was that there was almost no one in Italy, but also everywhere else, able to understand what was, what wanted and what represented the absolute political novelty that was, at that time, Mussolini's fascism and his movement. Thus, the Italian Socialist Party, showing its legalistic illusions, had the brilliant idea of concluding a Pacification Pact with...Mussolini in 1921(!). As for the young Communist party that had just been born, it preferred to excommunicate the so-called "petty bourgeois" who warned against the fascist danger and fought -often with arms in hand- the squadristi, opting instead for the sectarian isolation and the extreme leftism of its then leader Amadeo Bordiga. The logical outcome of the criminal policies of both the Socialist and the Communist parties was that both of them first distanced themselves from and then denounced the popular anti-fascist militia that the Arditi del Popolo tended to become, which for Picelli was only the embryo of the "Red Revolutionary Army" that he himself wished with all his strength because it corresponded to the needs of the anti-fascist struggle and of the workers' movement.

The enormous contribution of Guido Picelli to the theory and praxis of antifascism consists, therefore, in the fact that he understood before all the others, what was and what was looking for the Mussolini fascism. That is to say, that fascism had for *raison d'être* and also as unique program to destroy -by the most extreme of the violence- all, without the least exception, the organizations of the workers, in order to atomize them so that they cannot resist any more in front of the bosses and the bourgeois State. Here is what he wrote before the "glorious days of Parma":

"Fascism, although many have believed in it, has neither spiritual content nor program. Mussolini himself, the leader of the bullies, admitted in an article in the "Popolo d'Italia" of March 23, 1921, that fascism "is not a party, it is a movement". Its only objective is therefore to defend material interests: The well-fed stomachs of the bourgeois, their well-filled wallets and all that they have stolen from the worker, from the poor.

But he has a method: blind, ferocious and barbaric violence. It uses it against the proletarian organizations, against the subversive parties, with the sole aim of subjecting the workers to the will of the bosses, of increasing the working hours and lowering the wages, of destroying the collective contracts and returning to the medieval system of supply and demand, and of transforming once again the peasant into a brute and the worker into a slave."

Having understood that the hordes of Mussolini's fascist thugs did not distinguish between the red (communist), white (catholic) and pink (social democratic and republican) political, trade union or cultural organizations of the workers of the cities and the countryside, Picelli drew the only possible political conclusion: **Unity of the workers and the victims of fascism, beyond their partisan and other differences!** That is, what he himself called "Proletarian United Front"! So, let's listen to him for one additional reason: because what he says is still relevant today and is not always well assimilated by the left of practically all colors:

"To the united front of the bourgeoisie we must oppose that of the proletariat. Only with unity can we prevail, since it is obvious that we are a force, a force that today does not impose itself only because it is divided into several small groupings in disagreement among themselves.

However, the unity itself is certainly not obtained in the political field, and we cannot pretend that whoever follows a precise line renounces his ideas. No. Let each one remain what he is, faithful to his own principles.

(...) The bourgeoisie does not divide and does not discuss, it kills without mercy. The first commandment of fascism is to kill.

That is why, for the time being, we must leave aside criticism and polemics that do not lead to anything, forget the old rancor, go down to the common ground of defense and act.

Polemics divide us, but the common cause unites us.

Workers of the earth and of the workshops, you who suffer and are pursued, all agree, and unite for the supreme effort!

Unity is strength!

Those who today divide the masses are little men, who want to become someone to have the prestige they do not have. They are egoists and speculators, who put their personal interests above those of the community. They play the game of the adversaries and they are traitors.

The salvation of the proletariat can only be achieved by the development of its own effective forces, by unity.

(...) In private and public meetings, in councils, in congresses, in the media, we must demand unity by all means. Tomorrow it may be too late. Those who occupy positions of responsibility in the organizations and who, because of their harmful and stupid sectarianism, are obstructing the unity of the proletariat, must be replaced. They must retire and return to the ranks as simple militants. We have had enough with personal questions. Reaction is raging, and everywhere people are dying."

But Guido Picelli was not satisfied with being the first to correctly analyze the nature and characteristics of the fascist "phenomenon", which was totally unknown until then. He did more than that: as the critical situation did not allow the slightest delay, he hastened to apply his theoretical conclusions. Thus, he gave flesh and blood to his "Proletarian United Front", appointing as his right-hand man the railway anarchist and vice-commander of the Arditi del Popolo **Antonio Cieri**, who turned out to be a brilliant strategist both during the "Days of Parma" and 15 years later, in the

Spanish Civil War, where he also lost his life.

But Picelli did not only recruit the anarchists. He prepared the ground and made sure that militants of the Socialist, Communist, and Republican parties, and even the Catholics of the Popular Party, the ancestor of the Christian Democracy of the post-war period, would find their place in the front line of his “United Front”! Moreover, many of them died as heroes defending the barricades, as for example the councilman of Parma Ulisse Corraza...

To better understand the enormous importance of Picelli’s implementation of the “United Front”, it is enough to remember an indisputable fact, the harmful consequences of which continue to influence our lives: It is because both the German Socialists and Communists refused to form their own anti-fascist united front, that Hitler was able to take power with the tragic consequences we know: the Second World Butchery, the Shoah, and even the persistent weakness and impotence of the German working class to leave behind its historic defeat of 1933, in order to better defend itself and claim its rights.

In fact, at the time when Picelli realized the “united front” in Parma, there was only one other communist leader who proposed the same thing in his country. It was Rosa Luxembourg’s closest companion and first general secretary of the German Communist Party (KPD) **Paul Levi** [\[1\]](#). But, like Picelli, Paul Levi did not have the support of his party, nor even of the Third International, which refused to throw all its (enormous) weight against the Italian and German ultra-sectarians and leftists and in favor of two brilliant but solitary defenders of the “Anti-Fascist United Front”. In the case of Paul Levi, the result was also tragic: consecutive defeats and “lost opportunities” that saw the KPD doing each time what was diametrically opposed to what it should do. That is, insurrections close to putschism when conditions were unfavorable (1921), and refusal to attempt the final assault on power when conditions dictated it (1923)...

It remained for Picelli to draw the final conclusion of his analysis of fascism, that which concerns the practices and means employed to combat the Brown Plague. Given the events that followed and the experiences gained in Germany, Spain and elsewhere to the present day, Picelli’s insight and foresight can only impress even more. Let us listen to him again:

“Fascism can only be fought with direct action and in the streets, because it is only the logical consequence of the class struggle, which, assuming a violent form, turns into a class war.

When fascism appeared, the naïve and those of bad faith told the masses: don’t move, it is a transitory phenomenon, a passing storm. The masses obeyed and remained motionless, and this is how the bourgeoisie was able to continue the armed mobilization of its forces. Fascism declared war and, finding no obstacles, it advanced, occupying and destroying our positions.

The more the proletariat remained motionless, the more it showed itself willing to undergo and bear everything with stoic resignation, the more it bent and the more furious the reaction became. The truncheons and clubs had no scruples. They killed continuously.

Today, we are counting the terrible consequences of the mistakes made by the naïve and those who, in complete bad faith, contributed to creating an unbearable situation in Italy, acting as traitors.

We have always affirmed that fascism, from its birth, must be defeated. Descend into the

field of violence, since it was the first to do so, adopt the same methods and fight it until it is rendered harmless.

And instead of that, even those who had been hit were prevented from defending themselves.

When the proletariat, now tired of suffering and seeing itself dispossessed of everything, created that magnificent defense organization, the Arditi del Popolo, the leaders of the Confederations and the leaders of the various reformist political tendencies hastened to disavow what was the spontaneous proletarian movement, determined by the imperious need to save at least one's life.

(...) What are they waiting for to mobilize everywhere? The Arditi del Popolo, or sons of the people, who form the vanguard patrols of the revolutionary movement, of the red army, are already in contact with the enemy. Now it is up to the bulk of our forces to align themselves and prepare to fight".

And Guido Picelli concludes his anti-fascist call for resistance and struggle with the following dramatic exhortations:

"Arditi del Popolo, shout your terrible Basta! All of you standing up as one man and ready to rescue! Workers of different political tendencies, stand up all of you against the law of the baton! Long live the United Front! Long live the Proletarian Liberation Army!"

Yet Picelli did not simply issue slogans and exhortations. Nor does he blindly trust the improvisations and spontaneity of the masses, however combative and conscious they may be. He knows very well that all this is not enough to face the well armed and well organized Mussolini's fascists. That's why he explains and popularizes the lessons of the victorious fight of Parma, highlighting what he himself calls "proletarian technical-military organization". Here is what he writes:

"To attack us, the bourgeoisie has not created a party, which would not be sufficient, but an armed organization, its army: fascism. We must do the same. Create our own army in such a way that it allows us to resist and defend ourselves. There is no other way. The haphazard and disjointed defense, done until now, has been useless. To give an example and to prove how only with the support of disciplined forces and concerted actions it is possible to stand up to the adversary, it is enough to think of Parma, which was the only city that was able to repel the fascist troops after five days (...)

But, in Parma, the Arditi del Popolo were formed 14 months ago, militarily organized and disciplined. In Parma there was a whole patient work of moral and material preparation. That's why, when the fascist army attacked the city, it found itself, for the first time in Italy, facing another organized and directed army, ready to fight in its trenches and behind the barricades.

This is why Parma did not fall in August. This is how it is proved that fascism, when it finds before it a "strong obstacle", stops and gives way.

Today we are in the middle of a civil war, and this is how the war is fought.

We are a huge but disorganized force. Once organized and disciplined it would become

so powerful that it could destroy fascism, not once but a thousand times. That's what you have to understand.

At the moment, we find ourselves in conditions of inferiority because our front is too divided and narrowed. From the tactical and strategic point of view, we know that the more a front is narrowed, the easier it is for the enemy to concentrate his forces there and to break through. That is why our front must be extended, unified, in order to keep the enemy occupied on a wider line.

We need men with the necessary aptitudes, capable, with an iron will and who, without prejudice of any kind, proceed as quickly as possible, in the big and small cities and in the countryside where possible, to the mentoring of all those who, conscious of the tragic hour and of the historical period that the working class is going through, feel themselves conscious soldiers of the great proletarian cause. Everywhere, according to the possibilities, it is necessary to constitute groups, teams and battalions organically perfect, led by the best elements and in contact with each other by a simple and orderly liaison system.

Only in this way and after the formation of our disciplined and powerful army, we will be able to resist fascism and render it powerless.

Whoever still believes today or wants to make believe that he can find the solution in the simple moral action is either deluding himself or betraying.

Let the Italian proletariat understand the necessity of the red military organization, outside the labor exchanges and the political parties. It is indispensable for the defense and conquest of freedom.

Guido Picelli

L'Ardito del Popolo, Sunday, October 1, 1922

Picelli and the unity of theory and action

What impresses in Guido Picelli's life is his constant and unwavering search for the Unity of theory and action. And his constant refusal of the fatalism and conservatism that characterizes bureaucracies of all kinds. Undoubtedly, these are the main features of Picelli's life and action that explain why he has never been mentioned in the last 80 years, why he remains unknown or almost unknown even to those who are very familiar with the history of the workers' and revolutionary movement of the 20th century. Obviously, bureaucrats know how to take revenge...

Child of the working class districts of Parma and son of a cook, Picelli was destined to become... watchmaker. But he had other projects because from a very young age he loved the arts, and in particular the theater. So he became an actor and traveled around Italy with his itinerant theater companies, when he wasn't playing in the 2-3 silent films that have come down to us. However, the First World War would radically change his life, as it did the lives of millions of young people in all European countries. Pacifist and anti-militarist as he was, he chose to go to the front as a Red Cross nurse, which did not prevent him from being decorated and promoted to officer.

Having lived through the incredible butchery of this war, Picelli became radicalized like millions of other young people, but he chose to react differently: he entered the military academy to study the art of war and to prepare himself for the coming class confrontations, since he already believed that

"Only one war is legitimate and sacred: the war of the exploited against their exploiters."

At the end of the war, Picelli assumes tasks refused by the organizations of the left, in contrast to the fascists who willingly assume them: first, he organizes the young veterans of war, who are physically and psychically mutilated, prematurely aged at their twenty years, crippled, unemployed, poor and despised. So he created the **"Proletarian League of the Crippled, the Disabled, the Veterans, the Orphans and the Widows of War,"** which promoted not only mutual aid but also "revolutionary self-defense". And then, in February 1920, he creates in Parma, his **"Red Guards"** as an embryo of the "Red Proletarian Army" that he wishes to see the day, supported only by some comrades among which his friend Antonio Gramsci. It is thus with these "Red Guards" that Picelli succeeds in blocking in the station of Parma, and after armed confrontations that make wounded, trains full of Italian soldiers leaving for Albania to serve the imperialist and colonial politics of Italy.

Very popular among the people of Parma, Picelli is elected deputy with the Socialist Party but very quickly passes to the Communist Party with which he is again plebiscited. He is 33 years old when he defeats the fascists in Parma, and during the few years that follow until the total prohibition of the parliamentary system by the fascist regime (1926), Picelli escapes-sometimes miraculously- from many assassination attempts, even inside the Parliament! He is arrested and imprisoned several times although he is a deputy of the PCI, he travels all over Italy trying to reorganize the party in difficulty, and continues his efforts to create armed anti-fascist groups. And on May 1, 1924, to protest against the banning of the International Labor Day by Mussolini, Picelli invents another "crazy" action of exemplary resistance: he hoists a huge red flag on the balcony of the Parliament in Rome, provoking a crisis of nerves to the fascists and raising the morale of the antifascists in the whole country. Finally, in October 1926, he is arrested, condemned and deported first to Lampedusa and then to Lipari, and only succeeds in escaping and taking refuge in France, at the beginning of 1932...

Between the Stalinist Scylla and the fascist Charybdis!

Picelli travels all over France, multiplies the meetings, organizes the immigrant workers and the Italian political refugees, until he is arrested and expelled. He takes refuge in Belgium where he does the same things and from where he is also expelled. After a brief stay in Berlin, just before Hitler's seizure of power, Picelli finally takes refuge in the Soviet Union, sure that there he could resume his functions within the exiled party leadership, and enter, as promised, the military academy.

Neither of these things happened. Instead of the military academy Frunze, he is sent to work as an "apprentice" in a bearing factory, and the PCI strongman Palmiro Togliatti ostensibly ignores his calls. Picelli and his wife live in misery, but he does not protest. It is clear that Picelli of the "Anti-Fascist United Front" is, to say the least, "suspicious" in the eyes of the Stalinists who, at that time, implement the criminal policy of "social fascism". Finally, in 1936, he is fired from his job after the party cell of the factory "tried" him on the far-fetched accusation that during the First World War he had been... "monarchist officer"...

Meanwhile in Spain the civil war has begun and Picelli now wants only one thing: to fight in the front line against Franco's fascists. For months, he asks in vain to be allowed to leave for Spain. After many ups and downs, he was allowed to go, and with a false passport, Picelli left the USSR and after crossing Nazi Germany, he arrived in Paris where he met up with former comrades from the time of the Parma barricades, who made no secret of their anti-Stalinism.

It is thus thanks to them that Picelli meets **Julian Gorkin**, founder and leader of the POUM, the very anti-Stalinist "Workers' Party of Marxist Unification" which fights in the first line in Spain with

its armed militias against Franco. A few days later, Picelli arrives in Barcelona and meets the Catalan revolutionary and POUM leader **Andreu Nin** [2], former leader in Moscow of the “Red Trade Union International” (Profintern) and former collaborator of Trotsky. Nin offers him the command of a POUM battalion and Picelli accepts. But, as expected, the news that the legendary anti-fascist Picelli is about to collaborate with Trotskyists and anti-Stalinists mobilize the Stalinist centers that decide to do everything to prevent it. Picelli’s friends and comrades propose him to take command of a unit of the International Brigades, and he, although aware of the risks after his relationship with the POUM became known, accepts. The Italian antifascists of the Garibaldi Brigade welcome him with enthusiasm, but after an intervention of the Stalinists, Picelli is deprived of the command of the brigade, which is done later and only for one day just for the battle of Mirabueno.

Today, almost 80 years later, the “official” version of Picelli’s death remains that the Italian revolutionary was killed by a bullet fired by the fascists. However, the inconsistencies and contradictions of the so-called “eyewitnesses” of his death have always been eye-opening. If today we finally know the truth, we owe it to the Italian historian and filmmaker **Giancarlo Bocchi** [3] and the extraordinary and persevering investigation he carried out for years, making the archives of the Soviet secret services in Moscow speak, and also Picelli’s last companions who saw him killed on January 5, 1937, after having received “a bullet in the back at heart level”.

Three, among many others, eloquent “details” that shed light on this assassination: a few days before Picelli’s death, Soviet fighter planes had attacked the Garibaldi Battalion, killing 6 of its militiamen, and the Stalinists had been quick to spread the rumor that the person responsible for this “mistake” was...Picelli. On the other hand, the Moscow archives consulted by Bocchi, showed that the so-called “eyewitnesses” of Picelli’s death, to whom the “official” version of his death is due, were linked to the infamous NKVD. Finally, the same archives revealed that all the proposals of the high ranking officers, even Soviet ones, of the International Brigades to posthumously honor Picelli with the medal of the Order of Lenin, were strongly opposed by the Stalinists, and more specifically, by the one who was not only Togliatti’s right hand man and Picelli’s sworn enemy, but also a collaborator of the NKVD, on behalf of whom he was snitching on the Italian communists who had taken refuge in Moscow. His name was Antonio Roasio and a secret report from him recalled Picelli’s relations with the POUM leaders, before advising against the award of the highest Soviet honorary decoration to him. By “pure coincidence”, this Roasio was political commissar of the Garibaldi Battalion on the day of Picelli’s death!...

Epilogue

Today, when the extreme right and the neo-fascists are raising their heads and making their dangerous presence felt more and more in Europe, in the United States and elsewhere, we believe that there is no one better than Guido Picelli to express pure, revolutionary, and above all, effective and victorious anti-fascism! It is for this reason that the “rediscovery” of Picelli and his work constitutes more than a simple act of justice to a great revolutionary, who remains scandalously forgotten and unknown for 8 decades. Above all, it is an important contribution to the anti-fascist struggle of today and tomorrow, because ***Picelli has a lot to tell us and teach us about what the Brown Plague is, what it wants and how it should be fought***. This year, a whole century after the glorious “Facts of Parma” of August 1922, which could have radically changed the march of contemporary history and also our lives, if the leaderships of the left had followed Picelli’s example in the interwar period, we have a golden opportunity to get to know the “Antifascist United Front” of the people of Parma and to learn from it. Let’s not lose this opportunity for the umpteenth time. This past has surely a future.

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Footnotes

[1] Although Lenin declared that Paul Levi was totally right, he did not oppose his exclusion from the party when Levi resigned from the post of General Secretary after finding it impossible to follow the disastrous policy of the great majority of his leadership.

[2] Andreu Nin was murdered in 1937 after being brutally tortured by his Stalinist torturers. According to the archives of the KGB in Moscow, opened in 1990, Nin's murderers acted on the orders of Alexander Orlov, head of the NKVD in Spain, who carried out a personal order from Stalin.

[3] Giancarlo Bocchi's book "Il Ribelle" and his documentary of the same title, are the fruits of his long work of investigation on the life and work of Picelli. Both his book and his documentary are fascinating and, of course, valuable for the true history of the contemporary workers' movement.