

Revolutionary Groups: Some Parallels

IN these days of protest and revolution, of civil violence and calculated disobedience of laws perpetrated in the name of social justice, contemporary America is increasingly confronted with organized groups of discontented individuals who are alienated from the historical left as well as from the right. Operating outside of the nation's constituted structure and traditional institutions, these groups — among which we might include the SDS and the Black Panthers — have set up certain moral imperatives which by their very nature exclude the participation of the majority of citizens. The danger of such isolation, of course, is that it tends to prevent them from engaging in meaningful reform and they are liable in the long run to become the tools of forces they cannot control.

Recent history is not lacking in similar examples. A case in point is provided by Ferdinando Cordova's valuable study, *Arditi e Legionari D'Annunziani* (Mardilio Editori: Padova, 1969). Cordova's book is a scholarly and exhaustively documented study (based on material in the Italian archives) of two such political groups and how they became instruments of Fascism and Mussolini. The *Arditi* (the "bold ones") were special attack squads of Italian soldiers created in 1917 to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare during World War I. In many ways not unlike the Green Berets, they undertook the most difficult and dangerous missions on and behind enemy lines, thus enjoying a perilous existence and a prestigious reputation for courage and daring.

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WITH the coming of peace in 1919, these soldiers found themselves particularly unable to reintegrate into the ranks of civilian society and resume the pattern of normal life. Disillusioned over Italy's "lost peace" and dissatisfied with the established order, which they blamed for their problems and those of Italian society, they created a political organization (The National Association of *Arditi*) and joined instead the ranks of those who sought the overthrow of the existing government. They therefore resumed in the streets the struggle they had formerly waged on the battlefields, with violence against the opposition and cries for the creation of a new state. Their targets were at the same time the socialists, the Catholics and the government. In so doing they eventually succeeded in alienating themselves from all sections of the Italian political scene. Significantly, while they acted in the name of patriotism, they were by no means conservative reactionaries. Their ideas were for the most part undefined and their political preparation was limited, but because of their protests for reform and their extra-legal methods they constituted a revolutionary force. "It has been demonstrated," notes Cordova, "that patriotism and revolution must not always be at opposite ends. The same violent form of the *Arditi's* actions . . . had an essentially subversive character, a fact which became immediately clear to those who scrupulously supported constitutional forms . . ." (p. 49).

Consistently refusing to compromise with the existing state (something which Mussolini did not hesitate to do when it suited his purposes), the *Arditi* temporarily joined forces with the Fascists in 1921. Once they discovered that the Fascists had their own programs which allowed little room for the *Arditi*, they broke with Mussolini and in 1924 merged with the National Federation of Legionnaires. The Federation, consisting of veterans who had participated in the expedition against Fiume in 1919, recognized the poet-soldier Gabriele D'Annunzio

as their leader. D'Annunzio's "regency" at tempted to gain the support of Italian workers by advocating syndicalism and proletarian rights, but his personal dictatorship and his flirtations with Mussolini gave little substance to the rhetoric. Together with the *Arditi* they established the D'Annunzian Spiritual Union and proclaimed their independence of both Mussolini and all other political movements. Their independence, however, was short-lived, for once Mussolini had firmly established himself in power he eliminated the D'Annunzian Union as he did all non-Fascist movements. In 1926 the Union was abolished by order of the Fascist regime.

BOTH the *Arditi* and the D'Annunzian Legionnaires have been characterized as "Leftist" movements by Cordova because they advocated social and economic reforms and the organization of workers into trade unions. But their refusal to operate within the context of legal opposition, their use of violence and military action against the state and against existing political parties,

and their inability to mobilize the workers into a genuine party, all ultimately contributed to their failure and to the Fascist seizure of power.

While the social and political activism of groups like the SDS and the Black Panthers are aimed at demands for social justice, their real significance is demonstrated by the means which they employ to achieve their ends. Despite the strenuous efforts of some historians who have been characterized as New Left or Radical to legitimize these movements in the tradition of an American radical past, objective inquiry into that past lends little validity to their contentions. A basic reality of our history has been the lack of extreme radical groups operating outside the political system which might have left a significant impact upon American life. Important political and social changes in America have often been the result of third parties such as the Anti-Monopoly Party and the Progressives. It is to be remembered, however, that these movements were political *parties* which operated within, and sought to play



"Liable to become the tools of forces they cannot control."
(Black militants halt construction work in Pittsburgh.)

their part in the amelioration of, the American political system — not to replace it with utopian systems.

Ideologically and methodologically opposed to these forms of political action were the militant activities of organizations like the Silver Shirts and the Christian Front of the depression years, whose use of street violence would not be unfamiliar to present day observers. They, too, saw fundamental problems in American society and sought to solve these problems by direct and independent action. Nor should it be forgotten that both Mussolini's *squadristi* thugs and Hitler's brownshirts justified their violent brutality with revolutionary rhetoric.

BEARING in mind the different contexts in which the *Arditi* and the SDS developed, it is instructive to draw certain relevant parallels between them. The social origins of their original adherents came from the middle class and from what could be described as socially "in" groups. Yet at the same time they both exhibited a marked alienation from their previous generation and the "establishment" for which it stood. The outraged attacks of the *Arditi* against traditional political parties in post-war Italy, and the SDS assaults on university campuses as well as the disturbances at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, all have a common denominator: they represented deliberate and direct offensives against the established sources of power. Disillusioned with conventional methods of protest and impatient with the slow pace of the democratic process, both the SDS and the *Arditi*

rejected the "system" which they blamed for the social ills of their day. In a nation rent and divided by an unsavory war, the two groups called for an entirely new and revolutionary state. Nor did means vary greatly with these organizations: the Weatherman faction of the SDS, replete with helmets and weapons, can easily find precedent in the European context.

Ideology, in the larger sense, means little to extra-legal groups which subsist only on their own moral categories. Indeed, it is questionable whether "morality" would have been or is an acceptable term of reference for either the *Arditi* or the SDS militants. The deep ideological clashes which have split the ranks of the SDS in recent months testify to their unwillingness to accept even traditional revolutionary approaches to social and political problems. Moreover, their rejection of conventional socialist and Marxist positions in favor of the more extreme and "unrevised" Maoist line, reveals clearly the growing exclusiveness of contemporary radical movements.

WHILE in retrospect it is easy to point out why and how the *Arditi* failed to achieve their goals, it is not yet possible to make a judgment on the ultimate success or failure of the SDS and similar groups in present day America. Historical parallels lose their validity if carried to extremes. Nevertheless, the dilemma of the *Arditi* provides a severe and thought-provoking lesson in the limitations of revolutionary politics, a lesson which should not be lost upon our generation.