

BORGHESE

Neo-Fascist Youth Squads Stir Up Italian Political Cauldron

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ROME, Feb. 10—Italy is suddenly alive with demands for an end to the crescendo of political violence which has struck in a dozen cities since Christmas.

The belatedly burning issue of law and order adds to the woes of Premier Emilio Colombo, whose six-month-old coalition government is struggling for survival in the face of its own internal divisions and a range of knotty economic and social problems.

Most of the current popular outrage is directed against small bands of neo-fascist youths, dubbed "squadristi" after the ram-paging squads of toughs with truncheons who helped Benito Mussolini to power 50 years ago.

Today's self-styled urban commandos seem increasingly to prefer home-made bombs to the once-standard street equipment of bricks, iron bars and bicycle chains. They pride themselves on secrecy and speed in executing hit-and-run attacks against the persons or property of Communists and other opponents.

Throughout the peninsula, the neo-fascists have taken the initiative—and the headlines—from young Maoists and anarchists who, though lately rather quiescent, are old hands at "squadristo."

Shrill left-wing rhetoric along with politically expedient moans from moderates have inflated the neo-fascist upsurge far beyond its true importance. Italy's basic situations are not endangered. In seeking to create a "climate of chaos," the rightist extremists have in fact provoked a backlash of nearly unanimous public revulsion against their tactics. That in turn had moved the harried Colombo government to promise a crack-down on so-called para-military violence.

The first dramatic step was a ban on all public demonstrations in the entire province surrounding the city of Reggio Calabria on the Italian toe. Since last July, Reggio has been waging a virtual people's rebellion against Rome because the smaller city of Catanzaro was designated capital of the newly created region of Calabria. Neo-fascists have spurred the fighting at the barricades. It is widely assumed that extreme right-wing industrialists have provided the money to sustain the revolt.

Thus far, six persons have been killed and hundreds injured. General strikes have made the port city's always miserable economic situation desperate.

The government ban on demonstrations was accompanied by "total mobilization" of local security forces, who now number 15,000 men, or one for about every dozen Reggio inhabitants. It was imposed after a sneak grenade attack on a peaceful left-wing crowd in Catanzaro last week. A bricklayer was killed and 13 others injured. This escalation of violence shocked Italy as nothing had since the bombing of a Milan bank in December 1969, which left 14 persons dead.

With no one yet charged for the grenade assault, a wave of anti-fascist feeling has nonetheless swept the country.

The constitution bans "reorganization of the former Fascist Party under any name and in any form." The weak and poorly organized Italian right today has no potential Mussolini, although elements of his mystique thread through the neo-fascist ranks.

The former dictator is openly admired by Giorgio Almirante, the 56-year-old secretary of the neo-fascist parliamentary party—the Italian Social Movement (MSI). The party claims 400,000 members, a quarter of them young people. It received 1.8 million votes in the last elections, about 5 per cent of the total cast. Its 37 deputies and senators are

often obstructive and unruly in the legislative chambers.

The neo-fascists are making some political capital with their constant warnings that left-wingers in Colombo's Christian Democratic Party, and leftist socialists in the ruling coalition are preparing a "sellout" which would allow the Communists a slice of national power.

Two months ago, Almirante proposed a national anti-Communist front in which his party would play a key role. "The rise to power of Communism must be blocked," he said in an interview with the Turin newspaper La Stampa. "Alone I can't do it, but neither can the others without me."

Since then, the MSI has repeatedly denied charges that it was directing squadrist attacks. Responsible observers, however, assume that the party gives covert support to some of the 20 extraparlimentary groups of neo-fascists, totalling perhaps some 5,000 active members, now believed to be operating in Italy.

Of these, the most aggressive has been the National Vanguard, which began life at Rome University several years ago and spread to many deep southern cities, most notably Reggio. It specializes in vicious attacks on individual Communists, and says 50 such "actions" were carried out in Rome alone last year. Police maintain that the total membership of this determinedly clandestine group is no more than a fifth of the 1,500 "commandos" it claims.

About 1,000 neo-fascist youths in 20 provinces belong to the better-known National Front, headed by Junio Valerio Borghese who describes himself as a farmer interested in politics. During World War II, Borghese, now 64, commanded the famous X Mas torpedo boat squadron,

which scored most of Italy's few anti-submarine victories against the allies.

Later X Mas, still led by Borghese, was transformed into a ground security force known for its brutal treatment of anti-Mussolini Partisans. For this activity, the rotund commander eventually spent four years in prison. The National Front claims a major role in Reggio's seven-month-old rebellion.

Smaller secret squads exist on many campuses, made up of young extremists impatient with the run-of-the-mill protest marches, sit-ins and fist-fights with Communists staged by such acknowledged offspring of the MSI as Young Italy (69,000 members) and the University Front for National Action (20,000 sympathizers).

Now back in the MSI fold after an ideological quarrel is the New Order, a militant group whose members dress as Nazis and wear the two-edged axe symbol of the collaborationist Vichy regime in France.

Left-wing newspapers alleged last year that New Order agents had gone to Athens to arrange support from the Greek colonels for an impending military coup in Rome. Photographs were published purporting to show youngsters receiving military training at a secret New Order camp in the Italian hills.