

## Gaetano Salvemini: An Anti-Fascist in Cambridge

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank you all for attending our first History Graduate Student Association Conference. As treasurer of the group I am very proud and excited about the fact that this conference came together and it is turning out to be a success.

Today I will be presenting some of the main themes of my thesis which I will be defending next Wednesday, entitled *Gaetano Salvemini: A Lesson in Thought and Action*, and tying it into the overall topic of this panel, the cultural effects of war, and the conference, the value of historical work. This topic could not be more fitting as Salvemini always considered himself first-and-foremost an historian, although he may be better known as a political polemicist; although I consider him, above all, a crusader for democracy.

Salvemini was born on September 8, 1873 in Molfetta, in the Puglia region. To those of you unfamiliar Puglia is the heel of the boot. The South, referred to as *il mezzogiorno*, was an area of Italy politically and socially separate from the elite north. Illiteracy in the south was very high, and being a person of intelligence left very few options. In the fall of 1890 Salvemini left all that was familiar to him to travel to Florence for a scholarship interview. He was fortunate enough to win the last of twenty scholarships to study at the University of Florence. If this did not happen Salvemini's life may have been radically different, and, for a person of his intelligence, would have included a life in the church. Although he always considered himself a Southerner, Florence would always be a second home.

Salvemini spent his life as a political activist but was always dedicated to his academic career. His roots in southern Italy made him into a pragmatic and pessimistic intellectual, yet he had a contagious zest for life and was always quick to laugh. Salvemini experienced more than his fair share of tragedy and often suffered from illness, yet the work that he produced during his lifetime is the envy of many scholars. The main objective of my thesis is to prove that Salvemini had a major impact in his fight for democracy against the Fascist regime, that his tenacity was instrumental in encouraging post-World War II Italy to adopt policies he had fought for his entire adult life. These policies included democracy, universal suffrage, elimination of the monarchy, and prevention of future dictatorships.

Salvemini did very well at the University of Florence and his professors encouraged him to enter academia. It was also during this time that Salvemini was getting very involved in the Socialist Party. Salvemini followed his professors' advice and began looking for jobs. His teaching brought him to different parts of Italy. He began his career in secondary schools before landing a position at the University of Messina, in Sicily. This afforded him the opportunity to teach in a university but in many ways separated him from the more politically active parts of the country. A devastating earthquake struck southern Italy in 1908 killing over 100,000 people including Salvemini's sister, wife and five children. The body of his youngest son and wife were never found. Salvemini hung on to hope that his son was still alive and would turn up. Salvemini always carried some of his children's things and an old photo of his family.

Shortly after the death of his family Salvemini's friends encouraged him to pursue politics, maybe as a way to take his mind off things. Salvemini quickly learned of the corruption in Italian elections, especially in the South. His first major enemy was Giovanni Giolitti, long time Italian politician, and in Salvemini's opinion a corrupter of Southern politics. Salvemini

fought this corruption head on, even getting involved in the elections nearly at the cost of his life. He was an early advocate of universal suffrage and this advocacy caused a rift in the Socialist party, of which he was a member, and then caused him to leave the party. Salvemini served a two-year term in Parliament, immediately following World War I, but found out quickly a political career was not for him.

When World War I broke out, Salvemini advocated Italian entry on the side of the Entente. Salvemini's intention was the defeat of German tyranny, and the creation of a democratic Europe. Salvemini was among the "pre-Wilson" Wilsonians who applied similar principles to the current border disputes. He favored Slav independence, which kept him on the fringe as Italians were trying to gain lands surrounding the Adriatic. With the increase of nationalistic fervor this pushed him even further out of favor. When Benito Mussolini, still a Socialist, moved from the party's pacifism towards intervention, Salvemini congratulated him, yet Mussolini's ultimate purpose was to create revolution.

The end of the war changed Italy for the worse. With the legend of the "Mutilated Victory," and progress toward democracy blocked, Italians became restless. Mussolini took advantage of this crisis and changed the course of Italian society for more than twenty years. Salvemini was among the first and most outspoken opponents of the nascent regime. The advent of Fascism not only altered the course of Italy, but also of the life and work of Salvemini. Fascism, and destroying it, became the focal point of his career.

Salvemini's main purpose was to fight the incredibly effective Fascist propaganda machine. He wanted to debunk the myths propagated by the regime and expose Mussolini and Fascism for what they really were. It was said of Salvemini: "before Salvemini could possibly

become an anti-Fascist, Fascists were, from the very beginning, strongly anti-Salvemini, and, when eventually Mussolini came into power, Salvemini's place in the ranks of the opposition was already well established."

In 1925 Salvemini was wrote for the clandestine journal, *Non Mollare*, with twenty-two issues appearing in the first ten months. The journal was dominated by Salvemini's writing. In March the journal blamed the King for allowing Mussolini to violate Italy's free press law and Salvemini's opposition to the monarch increased. In the spring the Fascists "unleashed a more malicious offensive against Salvemini."

As time went on, even the university became a more hostile environment for Salvemini. In March 25 he was scheduled to give the keynote address commemorating his former mentor, Pasquale Villari, but Fascists used their "influence" and convinced the faculty to rescind the invitation. In April the Fascists decided to crack down on *Non Mollare*. They arrested Salvemini in June and held him for little over a month while awaiting trial, which opened on July 13. The court listened to the pleas, postponed the trial to an indeterminate date, and ordered his immediate release. After his release his lawyers were beaten, and one died as a result. An amnesty issued for July 31 set Salvemini free. Late at night on August 1 he left Genoa by train, the guards beside him. As the train pulled into Milan at three in the morning and the guards were sleeping, Salvemini grabbed a bag and 350 page government document. He ran and hailed a taxi, gave false directions, hailed a second taxi to his destination and left Italy to begin two decades of exile.

Salvemini spent the years from 1925 to 1932 primarily in England and finally settled down in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1933. He traveled frequently to France during those years

and participated actively in the antifascist struggle in both countries. He was close to Carlo Rosselli, also from Florence, and cofounded *Giustizia e Libertà*, the best-known of the interwar antifascist organizations. In 1927 and 1929 Salvemini conducted two lecture tours of the United States. During these tours the Italian government interfered through officials of the Consulate. These officials also sent reports on Salvemini's activities to Italy. These actions by the Fascist government are proof of the importance of Salvemini's actions because of the impact he had on American public opinion.

Salvemini's primary objective during his lecture tours in the United States was to attack the Fascist regime. The Fascists worked hard with local Italian consulates to have opponents sit in on these lectures and disturb and counter Salvemini's reports. Professor Bruno Rosselli was present at a luncheon of the Foreign Policy Association at Copley Plaza in Boston to defend Mussolini against Salvemini's attacks. Rosselli was eventually chosen "as the ideal person to answer Salvemini's attacks on the Fascist regime...becoming the consulate's adviser on this issue ...and Salvemini's chief gadfly during his lectures." The embassy set it up so there was someone to rebut Salvemini almost everywhere he spoke. The New York Times reported a disturbance at one of Salvemini's talks in New York. The report indicated fifty persons were escorted from the hall and in the resulting chaos a young reporter was stabbed.

These trips allowed Salvemini to earn an income and continue his struggle against Fascism. During his second voyage Salvemini taught at Yale and the New School for Social Research. He went to Cambridge, Massachusetts to meet George La Piana, an Italian specialist on church history teaching at Harvard. Besides becoming very good friends with Salvemini, LaPiana introduced him to some of the best American historians of the period, including Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. In fact, it was Schlesinger, chairman of the Harvard history department, who

initially asked Salvemini in 1929 to come to Cambridge to teach a semester as a visiting professor.

Before leaving for Europe, a young man named Lauro De Bosis passed by to meet him. A young monarchist and liberal, De Bosis headed the America-Italy society, considered by Salvemini to be a Fascist front. De Bosis overcame Salvemini's reluctance to see him by explaining that he had dropped his early philo-Fascist ideas. During that conversation, De Bosis told Salvemini that he planned to fly over Rome to drop leaflets urging the Italians to oppose the Fascist regime. Salvemini cited the dangers involved, but did not discourage him. In October 1931 De Bosis carried out his dangerous mission. Leaving from Marseilles, he reached Rome but disappeared on his return flight to Corsica, probably having run out of fuel. Following his death, his fiancée, Ruth Draper, endowed a chair at Harvard University in De Bosis' name. Draper made sure the chair would go to Salvemini. Salvemini was very thankful to Draper for the position and commented "It was the permanent solution to my economic problems," Salvemini would remain at Harvard from 1934 to 1948.

Salvemini wrote three major works and countless essays on Fascism. Despite his anti-Fascist views, his writings serve as excellent scholarship about Fascism. Salvemini was such a prolific writer that his friends often wondered when he slept. It is even more difficult to understand how he did all his writing when one considers that he was often battling illness and required ten hours of sleep every night. Salvemini aimed to debunk Fascist myths set forth by the regime's propaganda machine. Fascism had a head start on Salvemini on the international stage, and, therefore, he was very much fighting an uphill battle; but as one author has said, Salvemini would "emerge as perhaps the most penetrating student of Mussolini's Italy as well as one of the most acute observers of the world scene." The three books are: *The Fascist*

*dictatorship in Italy* (1927), *Prelude to World War II* (1932), and *Under the Axe of Fascism* (1936). These books encompass Salvemini's general theories on Fascism, and his articles reiterate these theories. One of the major strengths of Salvemini's writing was his use of primary Fascist sources. Salvemini's work explains how Fascism came to be; the violent nature of the movement; foreign policy (or lack thereof); the failure of the economic policy; and the false statistics used by the regime to demonstrate its success. Salvemini showed that Italians were not living the grand life the propaganda claimed.

As Salvemini settled in at Harvard he worked to expose Fascist activities in the United States. He communicated with members of the American government and gave them reports he was collecting on this activity. *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, posthumously published, details the information Salvemini collected. Also, as World War II came to a close he was concerned with what would happen to Italy. From the time he left his native country he knew future policies would be dictated by Britain and the United States. During World War II he wrote *What to do With Italy?* explaining what he thought should happen to post-war Italy.

Salvemini's time in the United States and the experience of living through Fascism caused him to reconsider some of his earlier theories. In a very influential piece, the Introductory Essay in A.W. Salomone's *Italy in the Giolittian Era: Italian Democracy in the Making, 1900-1914*, he rethinks his previous criticisms of Giolitti. Expressing no regret, he admits, because of his American experience, that he could have been more moderate in his criticism. Giolitti was a corrupt politician, but not more so than other politicians. Salvemini agrees with Salomone that democracy was in the making during the Giolitti years and needed more time to evolve. The rise of Fascism put an end to this growing democracy. Salvemini also

notes that previous interpretations of Giolitti as any type of dictator were mistaken, especially given what followed him.

Salvemini was a true warrior for democracy and never let any chance go by to explain to Fascist sympathizers why they were mistaken. He was unrelenting in his fight and was never willing to compromise. Salvemini's inability to compromise explains why he never gained widespread, public acclaim. It was a fault of his, but a trait admired by many of his closest friends and students. It is this characteristic, however, that leads this thesis to conclude that Salvemini was victorious in his fight and had an important impact on post-war Italy. His unflinching ideals for democracy gave generations of Italians hope for a bright future, and it can be argued that he had an important influence on establishment of the Italian Republic on 2 June 1946.

Salvemini's life was a rollercoaster ride of success and failure, tragedy and triumph; a man full of love and laughter yet firmly grounded in his Southern pragmatic and often pessimistic roots. Salvemini's passion and tenacity made him a true warrior for democracy, and his intelligence and attention to detail made him into Fascism's greatest enemy. All the while he never forgot about his peasant upbringing and the people for whom he fought. Salvemini always remained a Southerner and never quit his fight for Il Mezzogiorno. A peasant from his home region, stopped Salvemini on the street one day and said to him "you never betrayed us." This stuck with Salvemini and he even wanted it put on his tombstone. Salvemini never enjoyed a place on center stage, because his polemicist attitude precluded a widespread following.

After much prodding from friends Salvemini took a trip to Italy during the summer of 1947. He returned to Massachusetts in late fall, he found himself proud by the resilience he

found in his countrymen. Soon after his return to Massachusetts, 15 December 1947, Salvemini received a letter from David Owen, of the Harvard University History Department, stating that Harvard would not be renewing Salvemini's contract. Salvemini was seventy-four years old and Harvard stated that in no case had a professor taught after seventy-five, and very rarely after the age of sixty-six.

The ideas Salvemini had long fought for were coming to fruition. The new Italian Republic adopted a constitution that went in effect on 1 January 1948. It included many of the principles Salvemini held so near to his heart. The new government was to be voted on with universal suffrage, which included women for the first time. The monarchy was abolished and provisions made it difficult to amend in order to prevent a dictatorship from forming. "The new republican constitution represents the first deliberate effort by the Italian people as a whole to guarantee their freedom and common welfare within a constitutional framework." A preamble and a bill of rights, which together make up about one-third of the constitution, "protect the individual against the encroachments of the state and promise him those benefits which are today recognized as one of the main functions of government." This is not completely Salvemini's doing, but his fight against Fascism and his influence were important.

Salvemini was restored to his position at the University of Florence in November 1948. He began his last lecture, "as we were saying last time." Salvemini taught for a few more years, but the cold Florence winters were taking their toll on the aging professor. He moved to Sorrento to live with friends. There was never a shortage of visitors to see him. Salvemini passed away on September 6, 1957 at the age of 83. His last words were recorded by friends; "To die smilingly,...this is what I should like...I could not have foreseen a more serene death

than this.’ He drifted off to sleep; then awakening a moment before he died, he said, characteristically, ‘I am not dead yet.’”

In a letter to the editor of the New York Times, “Tribute to Gaetano Salvemini,” an admirer wrote of Salvemini: “a man quite without fear...His stamina was tested in combat with Mussolini during the days of the Black Shirt rise to power, but afterward even more searchingly in the long years of exile...We must not forget him, one of the historians who live and make history as well as write it.” It is clear that Salvemini had a great impact on many people. It is not often that a person who pledges his life to academia also makes an impact by actively participating in current affairs. Salvemini’s life’s work left in its wake a timeless legacy in the fight for freedom.

It was my intention to summarize my thesis to illustrate the themes of both this panel and the overall theme of the conference. War will inevitably affect the overall culture of the countries involved. Europe was in turmoil for most of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It does the historian no good dealing with “what ifs” and it would be impossible to follow the evolution of Italian democracy had the two world wars not happened. The fact is Europe was engaged in war and the result for Italy was the establishment of a Republic on 2 June 1946, and a constitution that was effective on 1 January 1948. Salvemini was influential in creating a negative history of Giolitti’s years in power, but with careful reanalysis and the work done by Salomone this political history was put into a new light. This is a testament to the fact that historical work is of great value, and in most cases needs more than one look to come to accurate conclusions. I believe Salvemini teaches us a valuable lesson, we will always study history with bias, but it is imperative that one is aware of these biases and work within their limits.