

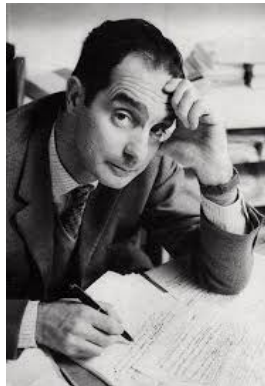


**The Leader Is Always Right**  
The Political Education of Italo Calvino  
By Jerry James

*I believe that all men should be involved in politics. And writers, too, inasmuch as they are men. I believe that our civic and moral conscience should influence the man first and then the writer. It is a long road, but there is no other.* — Italo Calvino



*Benito Mussolini (1883-1945).  
Premier, Fascist Italy*



*Italo Calvino (1923-1985)  
Italian Writer*



*Joseph Stalin (1878-1953)  
Premier, Soviet Union*

For the first 33 years of his life, Italo Calvino was under enormous pressure to conform from two authoritarian dictators, each with true believers who declared that *The Leader Is Always Right*. Or else. One, Benito Mussolini, he despised. The other, Joseph Stalin, he admired. At first.

Born to two Italian agricultural scientists in Santiago de las Vegas, Cuba, Calvino (who thought his unusual first name sounded “belligerently nationalist”) grew up in San Remo, Liguria, on the Italian Riviera in the far northwest of Italy. Years later, Calvino, now a partisan fighting the Nazis in the Ligurian Mountains, would use the *nom de guerre*, “Santiago.”

Calvino said his father “had been in his youth an anarchist, a follower of [Russian anarchist Peter] Kropotkin and then a Socialist Reformist.” His parents were believers in the parliamentary democracy system espoused by Giuseppe Mazzini, a leader of Italian unification (*Risorgimento*). They were also freethinkers, who would not allow their son to be given any religious instruction.

Because they were lifelong fighters against their traditional enemies of Crown and Catholicism (Roman), the Calvinos were better prepared than most for Italian Fascism. But as they warily watched Mussolini, his forces were also watching them.

How had Mussolini come to power? What was his Italy like? How did the young Calvino engage with it? What led him to Communism? And out of it?

## Italian Fascism



The slogan: “Mussolini is always right.”

In 1870, after years of struggle by Italians like Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi, Italy was unified for the first time since Ancient Rome — but as a kingdom, not a republic.

Less than 50 years later, Benito Mussolini was a socialist journalist, wounded in World War I. When Italy’s allies failed to deliver the territories to which he thought she was entitled, he founded the National Fascist Party (PNF) on November 10, 1921.

Mussolini dreamed that fascism would once again make Italy ruler of the Mediterranean, seeking *spazio vitale* (vital space). But first, the PNF would march on Rome, led by its paramilitaries, the Blackshirts.

King Victor Emmanuel III named Mussolini prime minister in 1922. In the years to come, perfectly legal acts would turn the Kingdom of Italy into a fascist dictatorship, led by the *Duce*, Benito Mussolini.

(If all this sounds like Adolf Hitler was taking notes, he was.)

In 1925, the Calvino family returned to an Italy they no longer knew, an Italy where *The Doctrine of Fascism* would eventually proclaim:

Fascism is for the only liberty which can be a serious thing, the liberty of the state and of the individual in the

state. Therefore, for the fascist, everything is in the state...

## Not Quite War

Mario Calvino was professor of tropical agriculture at the University of Turin. His son Italo grew up on an agricultural station outside nearby San Remo.

Young Italo was educated at an English nursery school and a Protestant elementary private school. He was kept out of fascist youth groups for as long as possible.

Calvino’s earliest memory was of a Marxist professor, who had been beaten by the Blackshirts. “I remember clearly that we were at dinner when the old professor came in with his face beaten up and bleeding, his bowtie all torn up over it, asking for help.”

The Calvinos were angered by Mussolini’s signing of the 1929 Lateran Treaty, creating Vatican City as a home for the Roman Catholic Church. It was a perfect merger of Crown and Catholicism (Roman). But what could they do? The Leader Is Always Right.



*Italo & Floriano Calvino with dog, parents Mario & Eva & maternal grandmother San Remo, 1930*

Mussolini was so successful at bringing law and order to Italy that he was praised by Winston Churchill, Sigmund Freud and George Bernard Shaw. And the trains ran on time, at least when outsiders were watching.

The New Roman Empire extended itself into Africa, most notably in its crushing defeat of Ethiopia. And yet... somehow Italy's late-coming friend in fascism, Adolf Hitler, had managed to so turn things around that the *Duce* was now the *Fuhrer's* junior partner.

No matter. Just as long as war in Europe would hold off until Italy was ready, sometime in 1942, perhaps.

### War



*Mussolini (L of C) freed from Gran Sasso*

Hitler didn't wait. World War II began on September 1, 1939. Only when Mussolini decided the Nazis would soon win did Italy declare war (June 10, 1940).

The Italian forces, who had already lost at least 10,000 troops in Africa, found themselves beaten almost everywhere. The Nazis watchfully stationed soldiers in Italy, waiting for the day that came soon after the Allied landings in Sicily (July 10, 1943).

On July 25, Victor Emmanuel summoned Mussolini to the palace and fired him. The ex-*Duce* was promptly arrested and carted off to Gran Sasso, in a region of Italy known as "Little Tibet." There, he would be held until he could be turned over to the Allies.

The Nazis were not pleased. They were even less pleased when the new government negotiated an armistice that was more like a surrender (September 3). Being Nazis, they

promptly took over, occupying the entire country and disarming the Italian armed forces, as the government fled Rome.

An elite Nazi squad swooped down on Gran Sasso, freed Mussolini and installed him as the head of the newly created Italian Social Republic (PSI), which grandly claimed the northern half of Italy. Mussolini was only a puppet of the Nazis, now, and he knew it.

### Partisans

But the PSI lacked an army. They got one by announcing that anyone who refused to be conscripted would be shot. Facing this fate, the Calvino sons, Italo (20) and Floriano (16), chose to join the partisans, those quasi-military groups fighting not only the Nazis but also their own fascist countrymen.

To the Nazis, the partisans were *Bande*, gangs to be exterminated. (Perhaps 50,000 Italian partisans died.) And to the Nazis, partisan = Jew. Of the 8,000 Italian Jews who died during the Holocaust, most were murdered during the 20 months of the PSI.

The Calvino brothers joined one of the Garibaldi Brigades, which had been formed by the communists. In later years, "Santiago" found it difficult to write about the next 20 months in the first person. "[I was] a young middle-class lad... politically unprepared, with no real experience of life."



*Italian Partisans*  
*Perhaps 100,000 of these were women*

The Calvino parents were detained. Mario was threatened with execution 3 times. Each time, Eva was forced to watch. She never flinched. The fascists never fired.

Calvino later asked himself if he had been a Stalinist. He concluded that at 20, the Joseph Stalin he knew was the Stalin who had stopped Hitler at Stalingrad, then marched on Berlin. He knew nothing of the 1930s.

Like Mussolini, Stalin was always right. But on April 28, 1945, Mussolini was summarily executed by partisans, as he attempted to flee to Switzerland. Stalin died in bed.

### **Postwar Communism**

When WWII ended, Italo Calvino had known only 2 forms of government: fascism and the communism that had defeated it. In the parliamentary democracy that postwar Italy finally became, he chose the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the second largest in the nation, which could now rise to power through the will of the people.

Factionalism in the party prevented that from happening. And what Calvino gradually learned about Stalin made it even worse, even if one could excuse the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact as a ruse to gain time.

Then, in February 1956, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a criminal. Calvino wrote, "...I felt as if I had been set free."

So did the Working People's Party of Hungary, which proceeded to throw out the Stalinists. Calvino saw in this, "...the confirmation of our hopes... a turning-point of historical significance."

It was, but not in the way he thought. On November 4, 1956, Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest. There would be no deviations from Soviet Communism. None. The Leader Is Always Right.



*Soviet Tanks in Budapest, November 4, 1956*

Surely the PCI would now protest! When it did not, Calvino made up his mind to leave the party, which he quietly did in 1957.

Calvino had begun as an Italian Neorealist, writing stories about partisans. Then, he wrote of a man split in half, even as he was. Now, his works would tend more and more toward the fabulous. Calvino would continue to be political — he distrusted John F. Kennedy as a Catholic politician — but he had had far too much of The Leader Is Always Right to hew to any party line.

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