



CARLO TRESCA

PORTRAIT OF A REBEL

by Nunzio Pernicone



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Nunzio Pernicone

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First published in 2005 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 1-4039-6478-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pernicone, Nunzio, 1940–

Carlo Tresca : portrait of a rebel / Nunzio Pernicone.

p. cm.—(Italian and Italian American studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-6478-5

1. Tresca, Carlo, 1879–1943. 2. Anarchists—United States—Biography. I. Title.
II. Italian and Italian American studies (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm))

HX843.7.T73P47 2005

335'.83'092—dc22

[B]

2005043186

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: November 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

Carlo Tresca

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Hofstra University
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November 2005

Acknowledgments

A former colleague once remarked that my work on Carlo Tresca was an act of “filial piety,” that is to say, he believed I had elected to write about this remarkable rebel in order to please my father. Since that was an impossible task, it would be more accurate to say that my interest in Tresca and Italian anarchism derived from the stories my father related about the days when he directed an amateur theatrical group (what Italians call a *filodrammatica*) that performed plays to help raise funds for Tresca’s *Il Martello* and other Italian radical newspapers. My adolescent awe of Tresca assumed its first academic expression in a graduate seminar paper. Tresca has been part of my professional life ever since. From its inception to its present form—what is left of an original manuscript that exceeded 1,100 pages—my biography of Tresca is the product of a lengthy and arduous undertaking often interrupted for years by the vicissitudes of personal and professional life.

However, if this biography had been of more recent origin, I would never have had the opportunity to benefit from the rich recollections of Tresca’s family members and more than a score of comrades and individuals with whom he associated, the majority of them now deceased. Of the former, I owe an incalculable debt to Beatrice Tresca Rapport, Peter Martin, Burnham and Claire De Silver, Harrison De Silver, and Andrew Canzanelli, all of whom provided personal knowledge, correspondence, and other vital materials. Among Tresca’s many close comrades, political associates, and others who furnished invaluable information through interviews and correspondence, I must thank Vincenzo Alvano, Max Ascoli, Roger Baldwin, Michele Cantarella, Egidio Clemente, Alberto Cupelli, Mario De Ciampis, Sam and Esther Dolgoff, Joseph Genco, Joseph Ienuso, Valerio Isca, James T. Farrell, Jack Frager, Eleazar Lipsky, Nancy MacDonald, Vincenzo Massari, Morris Milgram, Vanni Montana, Felix Morrow, Charles Poggi, Giuseppe Popolizio, Hugo Rolland, Raffaele Schiavina, Norman Thomas, and Luigi Quintiliano.

I must also extend sincere thanks and appreciation to the professional colleagues and independent scholars who have provided insightful suggestions as well as access to their research and historical materials, notably, Paul Avrich, the late Philip V. Cannistraro, Spencer Di Scala, Robert Helms, Gary Mormino, Salvatore Salerno, Michael Miller Topp, Mary Anne Trasciatti, Alan Wald, and especially Dorothy Gallagher, who generously shared her files.

The research for this book could not have been undertaken without the resources made available to me by various archives, libraries, and repositories. I would like to express special thanks to Rudolf J. Vecoli and Joel Wurl, the director

and curator of the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota; to William Le Fevre, director of Reference Services at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University; to Julie Herrada, curator of the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan; to Peter Filardo and Erika Gottfried at the Tamiment Institute Library, New York University; to Peter Vellon at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, New York; to Rudolf de Jong and Maria Hunink at the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam; to Mario Missori and the staff of the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome; and to the staffs of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence; the Istituto Antonio Gramsci in Rome; the Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli in Milan; the Archivio di Stato dell'Aquila; the Boston Public Library; and the National Archives, Washington, DC, and Suitland, Maryland. Special thanks must also go to Ombretta Missori, who found materials for me in L'Aquila and Sulmona that escaped my search.

I am also grateful for the fellowships and grants that have been awarded to me in support of my work on Tresca by the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the Immigration History Research Center, the Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation, the Dunning Fund, and Drexel University.

To Brendan O'Malley, former editor at Palgrave, I would like to express my gratitude for the courage and intelligence he exhibited by contracting a scholarly book not destined for the best-seller list. Among the current team at Palgrave, my thanks and appreciation for their indispensable assistance extend to assistant editor Melissa Nosal, editor Alessandra Bastagli, production manager Erin Ivy, publishing director Samantha Burrige, and to copy editor Maran Elancheran at Newgen Publishing and Data Services.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my wife Christine Zervos, who provided love, moral support, and technical expertise throughout the long years I spent immersed in my work. Without her periodic rescue missions, I surely would have written this book on a typewriter rather than a computer. And finally, I must acknowledge the warm companionship of the feline members of my family (Alpha, Midnight, and Sunshine), who invariably draped themselves on my documents or keyboard rather than less essential areas of my desk.

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Introduction

On the evening of January 11, 1943, Carlo Tresca left the office of *Il Martello* (*The Hammer*), the newspaper he had published in New York for twenty-five years, and started walking toward a nearby restaurant for a late supper. As he crossed the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 15th Street, a mafia hit man emerged from the shadows of the wartime dim-out and fired two shots, which killed him instantly. In homage to his slain friend, the former Marxian intellectual Max Eastman wrote: "For Poetry's sake, for the sake of his name and memory, Carlo had to die a violent death. He had to die at the hand of a tyrant's assassin. He had lived a violent life. He had loved danger. He had loved the fight. His last motion was to swing and confront the long-expected enemy. So let us say farewell to Carlo as we hear him say—as he surely would if the breath came back—'Well, they got me at last!'"¹

"Carlo Tresca was the last of the line of 'old school' radicals or revolutionaries"²—so wrote the renowned socialist Norman Thomas after his friend had been gunned down. Thomas's accolade recognized Tresca's place among the most famous subversives who had challenged America's established order during the previous 125 years: Johann Most, Eugene V. Debs, Daniel De Leon, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Mother Jones, William "Big Bill" Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, John Reed, and William Z. Foster. The passage of time has dimmed history's memory of Tresca and so many other radicals and dissenters of his generation. At the pinnacle of his career, however, Tresca was a well-known and much beloved figure, especially in New York, where he had achieved iconic status as the "Town Anarchist." His murder was front-page news in every New York daily and other newspapers across the country. The investigation of the crime was eagerly followed by the press for many months thereafter, with repeated calls for the intervention of the FBI and other federal agencies.

Media attention of this intensity and duration was not simply a function of the sensational manner of Tresca's demise; it reflected the grudging respect and admiration he had acquired in his twilight years even from former adversaries and critics. For several decades, Tresca had been perceived by defenders of the status quo as a dangerous anarchist, an enemy of the state and bourgeois capitalism. And they were correct in this perception. No armchair revolutionary, Tresca meant business, fighting for several decades in the trenches of class warfare, to use one of his favorite images. The fear he inspired in his heyday was aptly described by the eminent labor historian David Montgomery: Tresca was "one man who actually

incarnated the conservatives' fantasy of the agitator who could start an uprising with a speech.²³ With his charismatic personality and powerful oratory, Tresca was capable indeed of sparking rebellion among striking workers and political demonstrators with a single speech, and he did so numerous times throughout a tempestuous and transnational career spanning more than five decades in Italy and the United States.

Identifying Tresca as a "revolutionary" only begins to define his life and career. Those who knew him intimately—Norman Thomas, Max Eastman, Arturo Giovannitti, John Dos Passos, and a host of others—were unanimous in their portrayal of Tresca as a man who defied categorization, whose uniqueness in terms of his personality, lifestyle, and political career was such that the only label befitting him comfortably is *sui generis*—one of a kind. Certainly few, if any, twentieth-century radicals in the United States were as colorful and flamboyant in their persona and lifestyle as Tresca. In his prime, he cut a romantic and dashing figure, sporting a Van Dyke beard, a broad-brimmed hat, a black cravat, and a long-stemmed pipe. His warmth, good nature, and charm were augmented by his inimitable manner of speaking English—Italian with English words, some said. Complementing his colorful physical appearance and larger-than-life personality was a voracious appetite for living, every component of which—spaghetti, wine, tobacco, parties, playing cards, practical jokes, and affairs with women—he indulged in prodigious quantities.

But cohabitating within this epicurean, fun-loving, and eternally affectionate human being was a formidable adversary who devoted more than fifty years to the struggle against oppression, injustice, and exploitation. At various stages of his career, Tresca called himself a socialist, a revolutionary syndicalist, and an anarchist, but he never truly fit into the conventional categories of radical typology. Arturo Giovannitti, the radical poet who was Tresca's close comrade for nearly forty years, wrote that "he liked to call himself an Anarchist, and if that term connotes a man who is absolutely free, then he was an Anarchist; but from the point of view of pure doctrine he was all things to all men, and in his endless intellectual vagabondage he never really sought any definite anchorage or moorings."²⁴ Unorthodox and free of dogma, Tresca was a "rebel without uniform," according to his friend Max Nomad, a freelance of revolution for whom personal independence and freedom of action were indispensable.²⁵ Action always outweighed ideology for Tresca. An instinctive revolutionary, with inexhaustible energy and indomitable courage, Tresca lived for action and the fight. Leading striking workers and mass demonstrations, challenging police, hired detectives, and company thugs, engaging Fascist Blackshirts in pitched battles in the streets of Italian American communities—such activities suited the requirements of his soul.

Perhaps the most distinctive features of Tresca's career as a revolutionary activist were its transnational focus and multidimensionality. After his revolutionary apprenticeship in southern Italy and his emigration to the United States in 1904, Tresca never lost his interest in the political and social developments of his native land, and during the 1920s and 1930s his main objective was the subversion of Fascism in Italy and its defeat within the Italian American communities of the United States. Both before and during the Fascist era, however, Tresca was involved

in multiple spheres of action, often simultaneously. He distinguished himself as an independent publisher of several radical newspapers, a tribune who led thousands of striking workers and protest demonstrators, an antimilitarist, an advocate for civil liberties, a benefactor of victims of political persecution, the leading Italian anti-Fascist of his era, a staunch anti-communist, and ultimately a strong defender of democracy.

Born in 1879, Tresca was the *enfant terrible* of his hometown of Sulmona, in the Abruzzi region of Southern Italy, severing ties with the bourgeois class of his birth and conducting class war against local notables by means of his newspaper and leadership of peasant and artisan societies. His slash-and-burn style of mucking journalism resulted in several convictions for libel. He chose emigration over prison. En route to the United States, Tresca spent a few days in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he chanced to meet his future nemesis, Benito Mussolini, then an aspiring socialist leader in exile. The future Duce of Fascism considered Tresca insufficiently revolutionary; Tresca sized up Mussolini as an opportunist and a poseur.

Once settled in the United States, Tresca quickly emerged as a key figure in the world of Italian immigrant radicals, establishing the pattern to which he adhered for his entire career. Combining his talents as a journalist and direct actionist, Tresca became a one-man guerrilla movement, leading Italian strikers against their American capitalist exploiters and attacking with his muckraking skills the *Camorra Coloniale*—his term for the triumvirate of Italian consular officials, rich and powerful notables (*prominenti*), and Catholic priests, who dominated Italian immigrant communities in their own interests. Although he always remained grounded in the subculture of Italian immigrant radicals, Tresca, as a freelance strike leader for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), extended his activities from the insular world of Italian immigrant workers to the broader and more diverse universe of American radicalism, labor, and progressive causes. His critical role in the defense campaign to liberate the imprisoned leaders of the 1912 textile workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and his activities in the great Paterson silk workers' strike of 1913 and the Mesabi Range iron miners' strike of 1916, transformed Tresca from an obscure foreign-born radical into a nationally recognized and feared revolutionary.

Tresca's militant opposition to World War I resulted inevitably in government suppression of his newspaper, legal proceedings that nearly sent him to prison, and efforts to deport him, which continued for many years. Despite his own difficulties following the war, Tresca was able to utilize his connections with prominent Americans on the Left to aid Italian victims of political persecution. In this way, he played an important role in the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti during the initial phase of their tragic odyssey. The postwar atmosphere of fear and repression, however, restricted the scope of Tresca's activities, especially in the labor movement. Henceforth, Tresca would be deemed "too radical" by unions officials who feared that his participation in a strike would automatically provoke police intervention.

But curtailment of Tresca's labor activities provided him more time and opportunity to partake in the campaign that became the true hallmark of

his career—resistance to Mussolini and the spread of Fascism within Italian immigrant communities. Tresca in the 1920s had no peer among anti-Fascist leaders, a distinction recognized by Mussolini's political police in Rome who dubbed him the "*deus ex machina* of anti-Fascism," the man upon whom the movement depended more than any other. Fascist efforts to control Italian American communities through consular officials, the *prominenti*, and Italian parish priests—the same triumvirate that Tresca had fought before the war—were ignored and indirectly supported by American officialdom, which considered anti-Fascists like Tresca to be "Reds" and far more dangerous than Fascists. Washington and Rome not only saw eye to eye on this issue, they colluded in a scheme to frame Tresca on trumped-up charges—sending a two-line advertisement in his newspaper for a book on birth control through the mails—and deport him to Italy into the waiting arms of Fascist jailors. But they failed to consider Tresca's legion of American associates and friends, and the backlash to his frame-up resulted in a commutation of his prison sentence by President Coolidge and a wave of bad publicity for Mussolini's regime. By the end of the 1920s, as Norman Thomas observed, "more than any single man in New York or the United States, Carlo Tresca blocked the rise of blackshirted Fascists who terrorized the streets of Italian American districts. This was a great and too little appreciated service to American democracy."⁶ During the Great Depression, when Italian American Fascism became more deeply entrenched and popular support for Mussolini reached its height, Tresca never relented in his battle against Fascism's menace to his fellow immigrants and his adopted country.

By then, Tresca's crusade against the forces of totalitarianism had assumed a second dimension, as he committed himself to all-out resistance against Stalinism and its interventions abroad. Although for practical reasons he had collaborated with the communists during the anti-Fascist resistance campaigns of the 1920s, Tresca had always opposed the Soviet regime as a brutal tyranny, and after the counterrevolutionary campaign Stalinists conducted in Spain during the civil war, he became an implacable foe, combating Stalin's minions in the United States as forcefully as he did the Fascists. Tresca threw down his gauntlet before the Stalinists in 1937, assisting the John Dewey Commission that investigated and rejected the charges leveled against Leon Trotsky during the Moscow purge trials. Thereafter, Tresca specialized in exposés of the crimes committed by the Soviet secret police (OGPU) in Europe, Mexico, and the United States. His most famous public joust with the communists occurred in 1938, when he charged the OGPU with having kidnapped and murdered Juliet Stuart Poyntz, formerly a major figure in the American Communist Party and by now a reluctant OGPU operative.

By the early 1940s, in poor health and depressed over the death of his two brothers, Tresca entered the twilight of his career, but he never ceased fighting his enemies, striving above all to prevent communists and former supporters of Mussolini from gaining admission to wartime anti-Fascist organizations, such as the Mazzini Society and the Italian American Victory Council formed by the Office of War Information. Tresca waged this battle with his customary militancy and courage until his assassination.

Tresca today is remembered only by the precious few Americans and Italians who are knowledgeable about the history of radicalism, the labor movement, and the antitotalitarian struggles of left-wing activists in the United States. Historical memory inevitably falls victim to the erosive power of time. Moreover, Tresca was not the kind of individual usually included in history books intended for general consumption. He was a social rebel, a nonconformist, a political subversive, an all-around troublemaker in the eyes of those who ruled America. He advocated the overthrow of state and church, the abolition of capitalism, and the establishment of a libertarian society—not exactly the beliefs and values embraced by mainstream America today or in the past. What should be recognized, however, is that in the course of pursuing revolutionary objectives that could never be fulfilled, Tresca excelled as a heroic warrior, battling against Fascism, communism, and the worst aspects of capitalism. Thus the source of Tresca's greatness and historical importance as a revolutionary lies not in the quest for a societal transformation that he ultimately realized could not be achieved, but in the ceaseless and uncompromising fight for liberty, social justice, and human dignity that became his true mission. The memory of Carlo Tresca is therefore worthy of resurrection and respect, and achieving that end is the purpose of this biography.

Revolutionary Apprenticeship

Gently spread across the Valle Peligna and commanded on two sides by Apennine massifs in the Abruzzi region of Italy is the town of Sulmona, birthplace of the Roman poet Ovid. At one end of the Corso Ovidio, Sulmona's main artery, stands a bronze bust of another native son, Carlo Tresca. Sculpted by Minna Harkavy, this statuette bears the inscription, "Carlo Tresca: Socialist Exile, Martyr of Liberty." Until recently, most Sulmonese know little more than that about the young firebrand who challenged the town's rich and powerful at the turn of the century and then emigrated to the United States.¹

Born on March 9, 1879, Carlo Tresca was the sixth of eight children raised by Filippo Tresca and Filomena Fasciani, offspring of very prominent Sulmona families.² The Fasciani were professionals and artists, well known for the music school that bore the family name. Don Filippo was one of Sulmona's leading notables at the time of Carlo's birth, having inherited considerable land holdings as well as a carting firm and stationery store. Uninterested in business, he deferred management of his estates to his mother and the stationery store to his wife. A heavy-set, cigar-smoking gentleman, Don Filippo enjoyed the physical pleasures of life, a trait he passed on to Carlo. His principal avocation was politics. Aligned with the Marchese Mazara against the Barone Sardi De Letto, the heads of the factions that alternated control of Sulmona's municipal government, Don Filippo was Mazara's political strategist. At home, he was the archetypal southern Italian paterfamilias, an autocrat who commanded obedience and respect, while yielding considerable authority to his wife in domestic matters. Austere and distant toward his children, Don Filippo rarely bestowed signs of affection like hugs and kisses, but behind the authoritarian facade was a good-hearted, loving man.

Donna Filomena, in contrast, was emotional and demonstrative, devoted to her children and the Church. Whereas her husband rarely set foot inside a church, Donna Filomena was a paradigm of Catholic conviction in its most superstitious and pagan form. Since religious devotion in southern Italian women was expected and encouraged, lest their minds and bodies seek forbidden outlets, Don Filippo and his sons left her faith unchallenged. Yet Donna Filomena's religious devotion did not prevent her from functioning in the real world.

The Trescas resided in an old palazzo at the Via San Cosimo No. Nine: three stories high with a stone facade, a large central courtyard, and a cavernous wine

cellar. Carlo's fondest childhood memories were of harvest time, when peasants from his father's estates gathered in the courtyard to make wine and olive oil, clean grain, sort fruit, and slaughter pigs. He loved to mingle with these peasants, who sang sentimental folk songs, played games with him, sat him on their laps, and told stories. Childhood intimacy with peasants contributed to his lifelong ability to interact comfortably with men and women of the working classes.

Carlo's youth manifested many of the characteristics that defined him as a mature man and a radical: rebelliousness against authority; the need to lead and attract attention; enjoyment of action and the fight; and the love of fun and good times. The root of Tresca's rebelliousness, he explained, was the "tyrannical patriarch," Don Filippo: "He sowed the seed of revolt in my heart." As rebellion against Don Filippo was impossible, Carlo turned his "unconscious feeling of revolt against anyone who exercised authority." Carlo was never motivated to apply his intelligence and study in school. He detested homework and resold the textbooks his parents were required to purchase. His greatest satisfaction was derived from challenging the disciplinary powers of his teachers, disrupting the classroom with pranks, and leading other boys in bouts of collective mayhem. Punishment never dissuaded him.

Only by age fourteen or fifteen did Carlo awaken to the need for education, a prospect dimmed by the Tresca family's precarious finances in the 1890s. During the "tariff war" between Italy and France, trade between the two countries was reduced by half, and Italian wine producers—the French imported great quantities of Italian wine, refining and selling it as their own product—were hard hit in the South. Before the tariff war ended in 1892, the decline of exports and falling prices (accelerated by the spread of *phylloxera*) ruined tens of thousands of Italy's wine-producers.

Don Filippo was among the casualties. Difficulties resulting from Italy's economic travails were compounded by his habit of cosigning loans for friends who were forced to borrow during the tariff war, loans that were never repaid. With economic decline now irreversible, Don Filippo accepted defeat and lapsed into depression and inactivity. His wife assumed direction of all business affairs, saving every spare lira for her son Ettore's medical school education. Luisa, the oldest child, married a minor postal official. Her younger sister Anita assisted with household chores, but spent most of her time making shirts surreptitiously, lest neighbors discover the family's true circumstances. The fourth child, Beatrice, a religious ascetic, devoted herself to prayer and fasting; she would die a few years later. Carlo's younger brothers, Lelio and Arnaldo, were still boys when adversity befell them. Brother Mario, nearly four years older than Carlo, was handicapped by severe myopia and worked in the stationery store wrapping packages. Ettore received his degree in medical surgery from the University of Naples in 1892. Quiet, dignified, and beloved by all who knew him, Ettore was always the "big brother" to whom Carlo could and did turn in times of trouble, especially financial. Ettore became the municipal doctor of the town of Introdacqua, a few miles from Sulmona. The terrible health and wretchedness of the workers and peasants he treated in local hospitals prompted Ettore to join the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI).