

“A man of superior intellect and an excellent soul”.
Giacomo Matteotti as a student in Bologna (1903-1907)
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On the centenary of the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti (1885-1924), the documentary exhibition *“A man of superior intellect and an excellent soul”: Matteotti, a student at the University of Bologna* retraces the university years, the studies and the ties that the future antifascist built in Bologna while a student at the Faculty of Law. The university environment, his relationship with teachers and fellow students, his knowledge of the city surrounding the university, were decisive for the evolution of his ideas. The MEUS exhibition displays papers and other material organised in two themed sections: *Matteotti the university student* and *Teachers and friends from Matteotti’s years in Bologna*. The final part of the exhibition moves from Matteotti’s university experience to his denunciation of Mus-

solini in 1924. The documents come mainly from the Historical Archive of the University of Bologna.

This documentary selection, well represented by the materials then chosen for this catalogue, places Matteotti’s formative years in Bologna at the centre of his life, insofar as crucial for the development of his value system, as well as of the legal, economic and statistical skills that later proved fundamental for his effective administrative action in the Polesine region of north-eastern Italy and for his parliamentary commitment from 1919 onwards. The exhibition helps us understand the roots and convictions that lie behind his subsequent, radical and unabashed opposition to fascism, as well as his predisposition for the pro-international and pro-European

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action pursued after the war. These tools enabled him to perceive Mussolini's nationalist leanings while still in the Socialist Party, the populist traits of his journalistic propaganda, the reactionary, violent and illiberal nature of his movement, and all those factors that were to determine his rise.

Regarding Matteotti's ties with Emilia-Romagna, we should at least recall his relationship with Camillo Prampolini, Argentina Altobelli and Francesco Bellentani, the trade union and political activities carried out in Ferrara, his frequentation of the cities of Emilia-Romagna that hosted socialist congresses (Bologna, Imola, Reggio Emilia, Rimini), and his collaboration with the Unitary Socialists of Parma, Modena, Molinella and Forlì. His most crucial ties, however, were with the city of Bologna. In 1903, Matteotti enrolled in the Faculty of Law and lived with the Gherardi family in Via Fondazza 32. Indeed, to commemorate the centenary of his kidnapping and death, the Bologna City Council has placed a commemorative plaque in this street, which was home almost simultaneously to Anteo Zamboni, Giorgio Morandi and other artists, making it a place of significant historical importance for the city and the nation as a whole.

At the end of his first year at university, in September 1904, Matteotti wrote with his typical enthusiasm to Giulia Gherardi, a young woman belonging to the Bologna-based family who hosted him during his university years: "Now that the horizon has become clear (not blue, as rain continuously threatens), I write to you and beg your forgiveness for my prolonged silence. I waited until today because I wanted to describe a public debate I had with a professor priest, a debate that had to be called off because of the rain. For some time now, I have been actively involved in politics. I am setting up a club, a farmers' league, and participating in lots of debates: the only thing to suffer are my studies!"¹. Indeed, at a time when he was absorbed by his studies in law, criminal procedure, criminal practice and penitentiary science, he was already taking his first political steps in the Polesine area, thus embarking on his inexhaustible work establishing workers' clubs and leagues and organising debates to grant him a better understanding of the peasant world and its expectations. He wrote to Giulia: "I study, I don't kill myself studying, but I study quite a bit, always of course criminal matters. Moreover, I am learning some English, I exchange conversations in German, I read the odd novel in French—and I revise statistics"².

¹ G. Matteotti, *Epistolario 1904-1924*, edited by S. Caretti, Pisa University Press, Pisa 2012, p. 37; attempts were made in vain to trace the heirs of the Gherardi family.

² Ivi, p. 41.

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Later, recalling those years in one of his first letters to his future wife Velia, Matteotti writes: “We lack the foundations. When a young man and a young lady meet, their first conversations must necessarily revolve around their life experiences. She describes her school years and her classmates, he exaggerates his escapades as a student; then he moves on to their musical tastes. She sighs after Fogazzaro, and he after D’Annunzio or Guido Gozzano, and so on and so forth”³. They were married in 1916.

As a student, Matteotti became immersed in Bologna’s turbulent university life—as can be seen from some of the documents on display in the exhibition—, looking closely at the measures adopted to safeguard the poor then being pioneered in Bologna. At the time, the city was booming and modernising, and was very different from the countryside in his native Polesine area. Between 1903 and 1907, a number of old gateways and fortifications, such as those at San Mamolo and Sant’Isaia, were demolished to begin the electrification of tram connections within the city. Large allotments in the suburbs gave rise to neighbourhoods of detached houses in the Art Nouveau style for the new urban middle class. Municipal services grew and evolved with a perma-

nent corps of employees, and a sewerage network was developed, thanks essentially to the work of socialist Francesco Zanardi, the future “bread mayor”, then a popular councillor. His administration soon fell on hard times, thus paving the way for the clerical-moderate administration headed by the marquis Giuseppe Tanari, who, with alternating fortunes, remained in office until 1911, contributing greatly to the modernisation of Bologna. In those years, the first cinemas opened and theatres such as the Duse and the Corso reopened. The year Matteotti arrived in Bologna, the University awarded the barely 30-year-old Guglielmo Marconi an honorary degree in engineering. Shortly before completing his studies, Matteotti witnessed the death of Giosuè Carducci, who had recently been awarded the Nobel Prize, and his replacement as professor of Italian Literature by Giovanni Pascoli. The University itself expanded: by 1907, the Institute of Anatomy and the Institute of Physics were built near Porta Zamboni, as well as the Institute of Mineralogy between Via Irnerio, an arterial road then under construction, and Via Zamboni⁴.

However, the young Matteotti’s attention could not help but wander beyond the city walls, into the bustling Bolognese country-

³ G. Matteotti, *Lettere a Velia*, edited by S. Caretti, Nistri-Lischi, Pisa 2021, p. 43.

⁴ A valuable video clip shot in 1912, made available for the exhibition by the Fondazione Cineteca of Bologna, shows a glimpse of early 20th-century Bologna of the beginning of the 20th century. The clip clearly shows some places of the city as they were known by Matteotti.

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side. At the beginning of the century, cooperatives and labour leagues were springing up; in August 1903, a strike in Molinella, inspired by Giuseppe Massarenti, led to at least 3,000 workers abstaining from harvesting for more than two months. In his first year at university, in April 1904, the eighth congress of the Socialist Party was held at the Municipal Theatre in Bologna, under the direction of Andrea Costa. This saw the maximalist faction of Arturo Labriola prevail against the reformist faction of Filippo Turati and Leonida Bissoleti. The maximalist socialists fomented revolt in the countryside, expressed on 17 September 1904 by a massive general strike that invaded the city. In Bologna, bricklayers, furnace workers, municipal transport and lighting workers, and workers in the main factories all went on strike. The demonstration did not end with the planned rally of Modena-based socialist Gregorio Agnini, but with a charge by the cavalry, the siege of the Chamber of Labour by the army, and the arrest of about a hundred strikers. In the following days, the unrest continued in the countryside with the participation of tens of thousands of farmers. Matteotti's meeting with Argentina Altobelli and his exposure to the female question certainly took place in those years. In 1904, Altobelli was elected to lead the National Federation of Agricultural Workers, in 1908 she joined the Socialist Party's management, in 1912 she organised an anti-militarist rally in

Fratta Polesine together with Matteotti, and in 1922 she contributed to the birth of the Unitary Socialist Party. At the Bologna Chamber of Labour, Argentina worked alongside Ines Oddone Bitelli, who founded the weekly 'La donna socialista', an anti-militarist magazine concerned with the emancipation of working women in politics and work.

This personal bond with Bologna persisted even after Matteotti finished his university studies, and traces of it remain in some of the letters Giacomo exchanged with Velia, who often joined him in the city, as did his mother Isabella Garzarolo. The two young lovers had met in Boscolungo, Abetone, in August 1912 and in the autumn of that year they met again in Bologna. It is a known fact that Matteotti stayed at the Hotel Baglioni on several occasions, in January and in December 1913, and we also know that in March 1914 he was still so absorbed by his studies and legal practice that he frequented Stoppato's my law firm at least until the end of 1915. He later returned to Bologna to face the rise of fascism, also in the fateful year of 1924, mainly maintaining relations with Bologna's Unitary Socialists. In addition to being a university city, Bologna is a thriving centre of culture, and Matteotti took advantage of this by attending theatre performances at the Arena del Sole and visiting exhibitions. Once back in Fratta Polesine, for example, he still heard about the performance in October

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1914, at the Teatro del Corso in Bologna, of his future brother-in-law Titta Ruffo in *The Barber of Seville*. In a letter of 2 March 1914, Giacomo confided to Velia: “Again, I did not thank you, I think, for what you did for me—for your stay in Bologna. You can really tell that kindness and gratitude are not my forte. But you will not hold this against me, because when one loves, there is never a giver or a receiver; indeed, it gives greater pleasure to give than to be loved”⁵.

Matteotti graduated in Law with honours on 7 November 1907. His dissertation was published in 1910 by Bocca under the title *La recidiva. Saggio di revisione critica con dati statistici (Recidivism. A critical review with statistical data)*. This was judged to be his most organic work, also fundamental for understanding the subsequent development of his political action. The young socialist’s education owes much to the professor at the University of Bologna, Alessandro Stoppato who, back in Matteotti’s days as a student, saw him as being a man of “superior intellect and an excellent soul”. Stoppato earned great fame with the Murri trial held between the courts of Bologna and Turin in 1905 for the murder of Count Francesco Bonmartini. As a result, the jurist was able to build a strong academic position, while also pursuing an administrative career in the province of Padua, being

elected MP for the liberal right from 1905 and appointed Senator of the Kingdom in 1920. Professor Stoppato supervised Matteotti’s dissertation and supported its publication; the latter might even have paved the way for him to obtain a university professorship. Stoppato’s wide-ranging academic production must surely have influenced his student as the dissertation included numerous fields later investigated by Matteotti the socialist, such as juvenile malaise and criminality, child protection, the problems of infanticide and clandestine abortions, and recidivism (or the tendency to reoffend) in the weak and the poor.

It has already been mentioned that Matteotti frequented Stoppato’s law firm, located in Palazzo Gotti at Via Zamboni 34, and probably also the professor’s home at Via San Vitale 27. As a practitioner, Matteotti came into contact with Stoppato’s colleague Celso Pizzoli, a municipal councillor and alderman, and one of the promoters of the Bologna Institute for Abandoned Children. Also part of the firm was Lorenzo Ruggi, a future playwright who in those years collaborated in the theatrical sphere with the famous actor and playwright Ermete Zacconi. Therefore, it was not only his life as a student, but also the subsequent relationships he established during his legal practice that broadened Matteotti’s social and cultural interests.

⁵ G. Matteotti, *Lettere a Velia*, cit., p. 60.

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Although he and his old master developed increasingly different political views, the bond between the two remained strong. In 1917, while relegated to Sicily, far from the war front because of his strenuous defence of peace, Matteotti updated Stoppato on his studies and sent him some observations on article 134 of the Italian Penal Code commented on by his former professor. Later, Stoppato shared in the grief of Matteotti's widow, sending Velia a letter in which, in addition to expressing his horror at Giacomo's barbaric murder, he recalled that "[...] He was a first-rate student of mine at university and later frequented my law firm. I knew him, esteemed him and loved him for his superior intellect and excellent soul [...]"⁶.

Matteotti's dissertation is a fundamental element of his legal essay writing, which developed in two phases, between the years 1910-11 and 1917-19. In the introduction, the author provides the key to interpreting his research and the salient features of his method of investigation, clearly defining the concept of recidivism—after briefly expounding on the main stages of legislation, then still based on physical punishment and the death penalty—and identifying the Enlightenment and the French revolution as the heart of the development of European law. The volume is dedicated to Professor Stoppato—"with a grateful

heart to Prof. Stoppato, who has always been benevolently prodigal in his encouragement and advice"—and to his elder brother Matteo.

Matteo Matteotti (1876-1909) had explored the world of political economy and the science of finance before Giacomo and, unlike Giacomo, had studied at the universities of Venice and Turin, alongside Luigi Einaudi. In 1900, he published the volume *L'assicurazione contro la disoccupazione* (*Insurance against unemployment*). Also an administrator with socialist leanings, he preceded his brother in the Provincial Council of Rovigo, was mayor of Villamarzana and school inspector in Fratta, as well as collaborator on the magazine 'La Riforma Sociale'. He had a great influence on his brother and, when he died, Giacomo wrote to his wife that "it was enough for him to relive in me all the anxieties, the work, the dreams, the ambitions of his erstwhile youth"⁷. The dedication that opens the volume *La recidiva* also states: "In memory of Matteo, my brother and friend, whose affectionate eye protected the development of these pages but was unable to see their completion". These pages born in Bologna, give a first glimpse into the pro-European, democratic and reformist Matteotti. Elected town councillor in Fratta Polesine in 1908, he began an intense political activity, with trips to England, Belgium, Holland, France and Aus-

⁶ G. Matteotti, *Il mito*, edited by S. Caretti, Nistri-Lischi, Pisa 1994, p. 94.

⁷ Id., *Lettere a Velia*, cit., p. 83.

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tria, where he visited the local prisons, developing an interest in recidivists and common criminals. The young socialist made these journeys at the urging of his brother Matteo and on the advice of Stoppato. Matteotti's stay in Bologna prepared him for a rich and complex life as a scholar and militant, open to the Europe of the time. He soon became a political organiser, an administrator, a legal scholar and an intellectual, experiences and traits that explain his tenacious opposition to fascism as the noble and dramatic epilogue to a long battle waged in Italy and Europe for the growth of democracy.

Other relations established during Matteotti's university years in Bologna offer further insights into Matteotti's intense life. His fellow student Adelmo Niccolai—a lawyer and MP, and a candidate listed with Matteotti for the Ferrara-Rovigo constituency in 1919—fell victim to a fascist attack in Bologna at the end of that year, and was later nominated deputy mayor by Enio Gnudi shortly before the assault and massacre of Palazzo D'Accursio on 20 November 1920. Niccolai joined Matteotti several times in denouncing fascist violence in the Polesine area. Another fellow student, who also graduated in 1907, was Adone Zoli from Cesena, who was elected MP for the Popular Party in 1921; he then took part in the Resistance and was Prime Minister for just over a year, between 1957 and 1958; as fate would have it, his

tomb is located in the cemetery at Predappio, not far from Mussolini's family mausoleum. Finally, the most adventurous of Matteotti's fellow students was Omero Schiassi. Originally from San Giorgio di Piano, after graduating (also in 1907), he worked as a trade unionist and lawyer, following the disputes of Bologna's farmers, and was elected town councillor in Francesco Zanardi's list in 1914. He too was a victim of fascist aggression, and indeed had to leave Bologna in early 1921. In the spring of 1924 he made his way to Australia on an assignment as a journalist for the Socialist newspaper 'Avanti!'. Here he heard the news of Giacomo Matteotti's assassination, becoming one of the first to commemorate the martyrdom of his former fellow student outside of Italy in a famous speech published in Melbourne, his adopted city, four years after his assassination: *Fascism denounced! To the Australian people and all political representatives!*

Through the papers and documents on display, the exhibition "*A man of superior intellect and an excellent soul*": *Matteotti, a student at the University of Bologna* attempts to illustrate the every-day university life of a generation of soon to be anti-fascists.

In this documentary exhibition, because of the temporal and content caesura adopted, the most famous crime of the fascist period remains in the background⁸. Traces of Mat-

⁸ Indeed, Nelo Risi's film *Il delitto Matteotti* (1956), provided by the Audiovisual Archive of the Workers' and

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teotti's destiny and of the birth of the myth revolving around him can also be found in some of the documents on display regarding Stoppato and Giacomo's friends Niccolai, Zoli and Schiassi, and in particular in their letters to Velia. The uniqueness and richness of this documentation generated in Bologna give food for thought on the great cultural and political stature of this anti-fascist martyr, often overshadowed by a general focus on the last years of his life and on his tragic death. In this context, a series of events set once again in Bologna gain even more significance. The first occurred on 7 November 1907, the day Matteotti graduated. At that time, Benito Mussolini was attending the University of Bologna, not as a student enrolled on a degree programme, but to take two exams to obtain a basic qualification (or licence) as a French and German teacher in secondary schools; the first application was submitted on 10 October 1907 and the university fee paid on 2 November (with Mussolini later passing the exam), while the second was submitted on 1 October 1908 (with Mussolini failing the exam in November). We doubt that they actually met in the corridors of the university, but this coincidence is rather significant.

Another, even more effective anecdote helps us understand the climate of those years. This

refers to the honorary degree in law that the University of Bologna was to confer on the head of government Benito Mussolini at a ceremony scheduled to take place on 23 March 1924. This was postponed a first time insofar as too close to the elections arranged for 6 April under the 'Acerbo' Law and, when rescheduled for November that year, was postponed indefinitely due to the political climate generated by Matteotti's murder. The Faculty of Law meeting of 13 November 1923 had approved the conferment and just a few days later the honourable 'Bolognesi' Leandro Arpinati and Dino Grandi hastened to inform the Duce. Meanwhile, the local academic and political authorities started organising the ceremony, which was to be held at the Archiginnasio, to the delight of Bologna's fascist students and of the many Italian university rectors who had confirmed their presence⁹.

In April 1924, Mussolini published a paper in the magazine 'Gerarchia', written in the guise of an academic lecture: *Prelude to Machiavelli*. The text had no scientific validity, it ignored the literary criticism that had appeared up to that point on the Florentine thinker, and it represented the attitude that Mussolini, by then in government, held towards political culture: pragmatic, tending to draw directly on the ideas of thinkers of the past, in this case the Florentine political philosopher, and

Democratic Movement, was screened at the heart of the exhibition.

⁹ Historical Archive of the University of Bologna, Conferment of the honorary degree on H.E. Benito Mussolini, Prime Minister (22 March 1924), Prot. no. 69.

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to manipulate them without any reference to their literary criticisms, with the clear aim of exasperating and updating their reflections in ideological terms merely to justify the conquest of power and to unequivocally separate politics from morality. We believe that the head of government wished to incorporate this text into the lecture he was to deliver at his graduation ceremony.

Matteotti, who was in London in late April, saw through his intentions with ease, pointing out not just the gross and all too visible misrepresentations made by the improvised exegete of Machiavelli, but also speaking to the British public about the serious anti-democratic leanings that those words revealed, thus helping to weaken the fascist propaganda that had been taking hold in London's conservative circles. His article, entitled *Italian Finances and Fascism*, was published posthumously in the July 1924 issue of the magazine 'The Statist', where he commented that "The democracy of England has lately been entertained by Signor Mussolini's conversion to Machiavellian principles. In his extravagant article on Machiavelli, he makes it clear that force is his sole political guide [...]. One makes bold to wonder whether England, the country of Gladstone and Bright, will appreciate such tyrannical sentiments. I think not". At the faculty meeting of 13 November 1923, called to approve the Duce's honorary degree, Alessandro Stoppato was, not surprisingly, one of three absentees.

The minutes of the Faculty Council, in which Mussolini is stated to have led "an action victoriously opposed to the forces that threatened to overwhelm the existence of the State", makes one reflect on the "acquiescent silence of the scientific community" of the time towards the regime. Some years later, in January 1938, Mussolini had his private secretary Osvaldo Sebastiani write to the rector of Bologna Alessandro Ghigi to confirm "for reasons of principle, his wish that the proposal [for an honorary degree] not be followed up". That message, which forever silenced the proposal of an honorary degree, was sent at the beginning of another painful year marked by the enactment of the fascist racial laws, supported by several professors at the University of Bologna. The University of Bologna made amends for this in 1998 with a memorial plaque, placed at the entrance to the Rector's Office, commemorating the expulsion of professors and students due partly to that "acquiescent silence of the scientific community".

The exhibition, which opened on the commemorative date of 7 November, will come to an end on 3 January. Indeed, the exhibition cannot fail to recall this date: after Matteotti's assassination and the inability of the opposition to stand up to fascism, on 3 January 1925 Mussolini made the famous speech in Parliament that sanctioned the definitive eclipse of the liberal state and of whatever democracy existed and resisted in Italy.