

1-30-1950

## Report From Britain, 30 January 1950

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### Recommended Citation

Silver (1907-1988), James W. (James Wesley), "Report From Britain, 30 January 1950" (1950). *Reports from Britain, 1949-1950*. 25.  
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REPORT FROM BRITAIN  
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Aberdeen, Scotland  
January 30, 1950

No one realizes better than I how wrong first impressions can be and how futile generalizations based on a three weeks visit to a country of nearly fifty million people, especially when the observer neither speaks nor reads the language. But in Italy I was lucky in having as interpreter the highly voluble George Carbone, an expert on local history who has been in the land of his ancestors since last October. I did talk at length with several people who spoke English, from the manager of a good sized corporation to the shoe shine boy who had picked up most of the American expressions which do not bear repetition.

At least a dozen business men told me that they do not, cannot obey the law. They agreed that if an enterpriser were to fill out all forms honestly and pay all the taxes levied that he would soon go broke. There is considerable hope of a revision of the Italian tax structure but until that comes, as one store owner put it, the business man "must be looking to subterfuge to survive." It was the Italians, I was told by a man who kept on good terms with Mussolini, the Germans, the Americans, and the present government, "who taught the Germans how to graft."

Under such a system business statistics must be largely meaningless because so much is never reported. Even pay envelopes, in some instances, are increased by "under the counter" methods to avoid the higher social taxation which automatically comes with greater wages. An official of an American corporation, unsuccessfully prosecuted for evasion of taxes, was asked after the trial by his Italian lawyer; "But where do you keep your other set of books?"

You might gather from this that some business men, looking back to the more orderly days of the 1930's, would be talking of Mussolini in terms of approbation. I am sure this is true but to what extent I do not know. One obviously well-off person not only spoke of the "good old days" but blamed the partisans for most of the damage that came to Italy during the war. According to Carbone, convulsion in Italy could lead to a combination of monarchists, ex-facists, and disgruntled middle class powerful enough to set up another fascist state.

The day before we left Italy, government police in Modena played right into the hands of the Communists by killing six strikers, five of whom were under twenty-two. One of these was

the third son of a widow who had lost her other boys in the war. You can imagine what the propaganda machine of the Commies did with a story like that. A sympathetic work stoppage which delayed the Silvers at the French border for twenty-four hours indicates how a few key workers may disrupt an industrial country. Apparently the Communists concentrate their efforts in the Modena-Bologna-Reggio area where disturbances may paralyse transportation and communication systems which link Rome and the north of Italy. Two eminent Italian historians believe that sooner or later there will be an attempted Communist coup in this section, but Carbone, who talked at length with them, doesn't think that the present revised government can be overthrown by force, particularly in view of the recent landing of enough American equipment to outfit twelve divisions.

Italy, though not exhausted by the war as were Germany, Russia, and Britain, will for a long time remain in an explosive condition. There are too many Italians for the country's resources. Unemployment at the present is dangerous only in the South, agricultural and held in a state of colonial economy. In all sections wages allow only subsistence living and the workers are aware of unbelievable luxury for the few. Pension plans are a farce and factories do not take on men in their forties. Child labor laws are largely ignored. On top of this is the inescapable fact of animosity between the people of the North and the South. North Italians, who cannot in many cases be distinguished except by speech from Germans, Britons, or even Scandinavians, consider themselves overwhelmingly superior to their brethren from the South and constantly refer to them as terroni, a term of opprobrium similar to clodhopper.

In perhaps no other country in Europe does the church play a stronger role than in Italy. I heard numerous complaints, though, that the de Gasperi government was more interested in rebuilding churches and religious shrines than in the construction of desperately needed housing.

One morning spent in a cutlery factory which employs some 700 workers convinced me that efficient production is not a monopoly held by the United States. In this plant highly skilled artisans make their own dies, grinding and polishing machines, and drop forges. Steel comes from several countries in Europe and the finished products are sold in every part of the world. Italians are particularly good at getting the best out of poor materials.

A well made butcher knife which the Italian concern sells for one dollar retails in America for five times that figure. Of this only forty to fifty cents may be attributed to the tariff which does, however, by means of specific rates, keep out the cheaper products. The Italian shipper claims that he is obstructed more by unnecessary red tape than by the actual duty he has to pay.

Several manufacturers told me that Italy never again needs to bow to Britain in the production of such items as machinery, woolens, automobiles, and railroad and electrical equipment. Lack of adequate power has held up expansion of industry in Italy but the availability of electricity is increasing and rumor has it that Italy has great oil resources yet untapped.

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