

Common Destiny Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

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Author:

MacGregor Knox

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Reviewer:

Philip Morgan

I came to review this book with a great deal of anticipation. MacGregor Knox has been working for a long time on a comparative analysis of the fascist dictatorships, and is one of a line of US or US-trained historians who have breathed life into the recent study of contemporary European history by using a comparative approach. I was, therefore, disappointed to find that this was not the long-awaited comparative history of Italian Fascism and German Nazism in power, but something rather less than a half-way house, a collection of his articles and essays which have already appeared elsewhere. Of the six chapters, including the conclusion, two essays are new and written for this volume, one is an English language version of something which originally appeared in Italian, one is an article from the *Journal of Modern History*, and two are taken from contributions to edited books. The previously published four pieces were apparently revamped or rewritten for this volume. But, having looked at two of the original versions, they do not seem to have changed that much.

So what is the point? Something for the RAE? Surely not a *festschrift*, since the author is, thankfully, still a working career historian? These mean-spirited questions perhaps need to be addressed to the publisher, rather than to the author!

That said, I must say that I enjoyed reading MacGregor Knox's work again. As for the new pieces, the first is an overview of the factors, both structural and conjunctural, which made Italy's and Germany's national state formation different from other West European countries, and so helps to make intelligible fascism's coming to power in these two countries, and not elsewhere. The second is the German companion to the already published essay on the combat performance of the Italian army during the Second World War. This argues that the greater fighting effectiveness and resilience of the German army up to 1944-45, were down to a combination of a long standing Prussian-German combat training and tradition emphasising initiative and independence on the field of battle, and the Nazis' ruthless revolutionary egalitarianism, which rewarded

'performance' above all else. The idea that the German army was an 'ideologically' driven force, and that this explains its tenacity, reminds us of how much, and how effectively, MacGregor Knox's body of work revolves around the analogies he draws from the experience of the French Revolution and revolutionary wars, when the unprecedented and lethal radical connection of war and revolution, external conquest and internal subversion, became such a threat to the 18th century European order. The author hammers away at the theme that Mussolini and Hitler followed ideological foreign policies, saw ideological affinity in the Axis as making for reliable and trustworthy alliance partners, and treated foreign and domestic policy as one. His work should be required reading for all De Felicians, who implausibly have Mussolini pursuing a moderate foreign policy of 'equidistance', while simultaneously attempting to make Italians warlike through the 'totalitarian' state, views which have been reproduced in Richard Lamb's recent book, *Mussolini and the British* (London: John Murray, 1997).

The new pieces in this volume are written with the broad sweep *brio* of the older ones, and achieve what the best of comparative history offers, the illumination of both sides of the comparison. The author's demolition jobs on the attempts to conceptualise fascism, which preface one of the new essays and one of the old, are well-taken, since the aim is to justify a comparative historical approach, rather than an *a priori* generic one. But he is generally too dismissive of any concept 'that united Nazis, Action Française, the Romanian Iron Guard, and the Estonian Association of Freedom Fighters...' (page 54) For one thing, not all historians of fascism would include Action Française or the Estonian Association of Freedom Fighters in the stable of fascist movements, which, I suppose, makes MacGregor Knox's point in another way. But it still seems rather gratuitous, especially when his own work has, in effect, allowed us to generalise about the two major fascisms and treat the regimes they created as revolutionary war-mongering dictatorships for which war was both means and end. Comparative history may yet be the way to revive the concept of fascism, with a small 'f'.

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