

## Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation

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Patrizia Dogliani

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**Reviewer:**

Philip Morgan

It is to the credit of the editors that there are no dud contributions in this volume of essays. They hang together well, considering how varied in quality and miscellaneous in content these arranged collections or published proceedings of conferences, often are. There is often a sense of *deja vu*, since some of the contributions recycle and rework, if not rehash, material and arguments which have been published in other articles and books. The theme of the book is the study of how Italians...have remembered the Fascist past, integrated their memory into a changing present, and somehow thus sought to illuminate a path to the future. It takes in various forms of historical memory and representation, for some time now the fashionable vehicles of social history, from the private recollections in oral testimony of peasants, women and emigrant workers, to the official commemoration of past events in public monuments, and film and TV.

The book provides a telling commentary on the uses, or abuses, of history, and in this sense, adds to Richard Bosworth's impressive range of historiographical works, which are always interesting, lively and combative. What underlies the volume and drives it on, is the belief that Italians have not yet honestly come to terms with the Fascist and wartime past, and the book is pessimistic that they will ever do so, or be allowed to do so.

In the first place, various contributions in the book show that there was far from being an alleged Marxist hegemony over Italian culture in the post-war years, an assumption which is absurdly out of line with a post-war Italy dominated politically from the right of centre by the Christian Democrat party and culturally by a popular consumerist culture adapted from the USA. Leftist culture had a short-lived airing in the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, and was never dominant even in this period. An establishment left wing, anti-Fascist historical perspective on the Fascist era and the war, was no more than an Aunt Sally to be set up and shot down in the 1970s and 1980s by the anti-anti-Fascist historians around Renzo De Felice, the author of the ponderous multi-volume biography of Mussolini, still thankfully seeking an English translation. It is the conservative historical reading of Italy's difficult recent past, continued and refashioned by De Felice's school

of value-free, objective history, which is the target of the book. Bosworth, here as in his other historiographical studies, hankers for history with a moral sensibility written in, rather than written out.

In the second place, and this emerges from Crainz's article on TV programming of documentaries on Fascism and the war, as well as Dogliani's study of public memorials, the historical recall of the country's Fascist past has now entered a post-Fascist phase, matching the recent changes in Italy's political landscape, where history becomes entertainment, a commercialised and packaged heritage past, a painless nostalgia for how it once was, which is bound to convey a sanitized and conflict-free version of that past.

What comes out of the book is the extent to which Italians remembered their Fascist and wartime past by forgetting it. David Ward reads Carlo Levi's novel, *Lorologio*, as an expression of the failure of what was the quintessential anti-Fascist Resistance movement, the Action party, to reshape post-war Italy on the basis of the Resistance experience and a complete break with all of Italy's pre- and post-1922 past. This defeat also buried the Actionists' historical interpretation of Fascism as a revelation of Italy's past, rather than an unwelcome and unexpected parenthesis in the country's development, the Crocean view which prevailed. Patrizia Dogliani contrasts the very focused way in which the Fascist regime fascistised the public memorials to war, so as to identify Fascism with the nation, with the tentativeness of the post-war Italian states memorialization of the Resistance and the second world war. Glenda Sluga's article on the public monuments and memorials in the contested north eastern border regions of Venezia Giulia highlights the exception to this rule. Here, public remembrance was intended to secure these areas for the nation by drawing on anti-slav nationalism and anti-communism, and the official remembering of crimes against Italians by anti-Fascist communist and slav resisters again buried the realities of political and national conflicts in the region during the Fascist and wartime periods. Incidentally, Glenda Sluga refers on two separate occasions to the collapse of the Italian *Fascist* government in September 1943, which is an interesting view of Badoglio's administration! Ruth Ben-Ghiat's study of the neo-realist films of the immediate post-war period, and Richard Bosworth's of Bertolucci's political films of the 1960s and 1970s, reveal that only some aspects of the wartime Resistance were conveyed in film, and a Marxist viewpoint was not prevalent. The neo-realist film makers, who, of course, made their careers under Fascism, contributed to the creation of the post-war myth of the Resistance as a national crusade against foreign occupation, and in portraying ordinary Italians as acting out of character during the war because of the baleful influence of the German occupier and their abnormal drug-abusing, sexually deviant Italian collaborators, diverted responsibility for the horrors of Fascism and war to forces external to normal Italian society.

Some of the other studies, which deal with popular memories and recollection in different contexts (peasant communities, Italian workers in Nazi Germany, women in Resistance and Fascist and Fascist Republican organizations, Greeks living through the Italian occupation of their islands), suggest an ambiguous mix of experiences and behaviour which do not fit the conventionally polarised categories of collaboration and resistance, confirming the results of the pioneering work done with oral testimonies by Luisa Passerini. Roger Absalom finds that peasants both sheltered and betrayed escaping Allied POWs and Italians evading the military and labour drafts of the Nazi occupier and the Fascist Salo Republic, actions which were probably motivated by a basic peasant survival strategy rather than by political or ideological choices. Some of Nicholas Doumanis' Greek interviewees remember the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese as benign, at least until De Vecchi's more overtly Italianising governorship after 1936, though it is clear that these memories have as much to do with their perception of the islands post-war reintegration with Greece and the current way of life, as with Fascist rule. These case-studies on popular memory show up the intrinsic appeal and difficulty of using oral accounts as historical sources, which often cannot support the weight of the conclusions made from them. But in throwing a light on the nuances and sheer untidiness of human responses to big events, where people were both participants and observers, such studies make their own contribution to destroying the equally pervasive and reassuring myth of post-war Italian culture, that the Italians, despite everything (Fascism, war, occupation, civil war, which were perceived post-war as things which happened to Italy, like the plague), remained *brava gente*, or decent people. To do this is definitely something, even if it sits rather uneasily with Richard Bosworth's own lyrical homage to the idea of *italiani*, *brava gente*, which concludes a previous historiographical exploration of Italian identities, *Italy and the Wider World, 1860-1960*

It strikes me that his work and that of his fellow authors here, is best incorporated with, rather than opposed to, at least some of the work of De Felices anti-anti-Fascist school. It was hardly reassuring for the Italians self-image to have a major historian arguing that Mussolinis regime rested on a broader basis of consent than that suggested by the common post-war presumption of the country being forcibly occupied by Fascism, or that the Fascist Salo Republic could put out roughly the same number of fighters as the Resistance did in 1944, while the *attentiste* bulk of the population tried to find ways of surviving the conflict. Both sides, even with different perspectives and motivations, are helping to produce more nuanced, less predictable, understandings of what it was like to live with Fascism and war, and in that sense, are helping Italians to take stock of an unpalatable recent past.

It is, perhaps, too easy for a reviewer to find gaps in what, after all, is an interesting, challenging and complete book. But it would have been even better with contributions on Fascist Italys African empire, and on the way the 1945 liberation of Italy has been celebrated or marked in the post-war years, though I have a feeling this may already have been done. Finally, and this is asking a lot, a more comparative approach or awareness, especially in relation to the Vichy syndrome in France and the *Historikerstreit* in Germany, would have been illuminating, and would have helped the reader to assess the significance and distinctiveness (or not) of what was happening in Italy. To take a small, banal example: Patrizia Dogliani makes the point that it was usual to add the names of second world dead to existing war memorials. But this was also done in the UK, where there arguably none of the sensitivities involved in commemorating the dead of a divided nation in a Fascist war. The comparative or, at least, cross-national approach has been tried, with a particular focus on novels and film output, in G. Bartram, M. Slawinski, D. Steel (eds.) *Reconstructing the Past. Representations of the Fascist Era in Post-war European Culture* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996). But the quality of the contributions is more patchy than those contained in this volume.

Due to outstanding work commitments the author has not yet been able to respond to this review.

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