

BOOK REVIEWS

JOHN FOOT, *Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism*
(London: Bloomsbury, 2022)

Fascist studies have gone through an ongoing development during the last century. It is therefore challenging to bring forward innovative contributions to such an extensive field. However, this is precisely what John Foot, a cultural historian of modern Italy, attempts through his most recent monograph, which tells the familiar story of the original fascism from a new perspective. The author clarifies from the beginning that he does not elaborate a canonical narrative, but pursues instead the rise and demise of the phenomenon through 'the stories of real people' (p. 3). The focus of his research lays on the manifestations of violence, central to the ideological substance, political functionality, social aggregation and historical legacy of fascism. The result seeks to re-establish who the fascists and their victims were, creating an appealing account of social history, which reformulates the question of fascist identity and alterity. John Foot's approach provides an inherent degree of granularity, a fragmentary disposition of facts, characters and events and an 'interest in micro-histories, stories and details' (p. 4) that recounts the narrative from below.

The story advances chronologically, beginning with the antebellum, in the climate of unrest surrounding Italy's futile project to craft an empire in Africa. As the World War was ominously approaching, the description lingers on subversion as an endemic factor which undermined the establishment. The emblematic profile of the revolutionary Errico Malatesta, who led violent uprisings in Ancona during the years leading up to war, shows the strength of the anarchist current of that time. Malatesta embodies the charged atmosphere which eventually unleashed the violent forces on the 'red week' of 1914, when general insurrection was in sight. The war was the last straw for this vulnerable society. It brought on a truly 'historical break', as Antonio Gramsci affirmed, and forced on Italy what Foot construes as a 'brutal form of modernisation compressed into four years' (p. 22). It was a traumatic process, which the narrative configures through the filter of violence, either forced on the recruits coerced into fighting shape by the military apparatus, or fostered by enormous strikes in major urban centres such as Milan or Turin. The narrative insists on the 'internal front' during the ever-changing course of the war, from the national debacle at Caporetto (October 1917) to the Pyrrhic victory at Vittorio Veneto (November 1918), amid the political merge of anti-war currents led by the future towering figures of anti-fascist opposition, represented by some very

controversial personalities. The real protagonists of this book are men like Francesco Misiano, the radical antimilitant communist organizer, Giuseppe Emanuele Modigliani, the Jewish socialist reformist and pacifist, Giacomo Matteotti, the influential orator and left-wing leader, as well as several others whose biographical sketches are evoked as examples of an anti-fascist *forma mentis*.

The birth of fascism in Milan, which gained mythopoeic proportions later in the regime's discourse, is deconstructed as an underwhelming affair. Truth be told, fascism never held the upper hand during its first years of existence, when the greater shadows of the left were looming on. Therein lies the origin of the two 'red years' of 1919-1920, framed as 'a heady mix of revolt, democracy and chaos' (p. 41). The *biennio rosso* ruined the rural areas, where peasant rebellions became common, while urban spaces also flowed with uprisings verging on revolution. The network of syndicalist, anarchist, socialist and communist entities created establishments with different degrees of legitimacy and efficiency, coordinated by 'red barons' who undermined central authority and radical maximalists who rose from anonymity to the national stage. The 'red years' set the fascism's rise to power in motion, then the 'black years' started with the vengeance claimed against the purported enemies of the nation. The infamous *ras*, an institution taken from colonial Ethiopia, is contextually described as the regional point where all the available power concentrated (as proven by the case study of Giuseppe Caradonna from Apulia, a local perpetrator of violence connected to organized crime). This local increase in power just before the reign of fascism is explored through the biography of Francesco Misiano, whose trials and tribulations ranged from legal harassment to public humiliations at the hands of fascist paramilitaries, culminating with a 'death sentence' passed upon him by Gabrielle d'Annunzio, an open call for the extrajudicial murder of an elected deputy. These compelling biographical incursions reinforce one of the stronger pursuits of the narrative: the reconstruction of fascism through the fates of its victims.

The research of fascist martyrology's early functions reveals the transformation of Giulio Giordani's death, a non-fascist local councillor killed in a violent confrontation in Bologna's main square in 1920 (the 'Palazzo d'Accursio massacre'). His demise, retold after a hagiographic endeavour, made him into the first important member of the fascist pantheon. Fascism permanently tried to take advantage of violent confrontations, as Foot points out. Furthermore, it was not fit to acknowledge the basic differences in the mixed landscape of the Italian left. The latter followed its own tangled path, fragmented by the socialist-communist divide, which left both sides vulnerable. The fiercely debated elections of 1921 represented a turning point. They claimed hundreds of victims from all leftist factions, while fascist paramilitarism and state structures often worked together. Violent complicities were denounced by people like Matteotti. This led to an increasingly anarchist response based on the 'propaganda of the deed' mantra which had animated left wing terrorism since the *fin-de-siècle*. The consequences were devastating, as proven by the Diana Theatre massacre in Milan. Fascism took it upon itself to carry out 'punitive justice', cynically taking advantage when 'the line between the state and the fascists had become blurred' (p. 88). As fascism ascended, anti-Semitism came to the forefront in the repertoire of fascist negations. Anti-Jewish press

campaigns soon followed. Anti-Semitic and anti-socialist ideological components came together, while prominent Jewish anti-fascist intellectuals were cruelly harassed. This detailed account is an important reminder that, despite its notorious German counterpart, anti-Semitism still played a huge role in the original fascism.

These events all led up to the fascist 'year zero', 1922, when democracy fell under the threat spreading within. The ground event itself, the March on Rome (October 1922) is examined sequence by sequence, to show the complete abdication of the Italian state when put under pressure. The government, the monarchy, the army corps and all other essential institutions retreated instead of crushing fascism. Without any real opposition, fascists created a mythical representation of their foundational moment, barely hiding their violence throughout the march. Once again, the level of detail displayed by the narrative gives a strong sense of historical immersion and authenticity. After he seized power, Mussolini became the biggest existential threat to all who opposed the new fascist order. His public performances gave away an intense feeling of coercion. It was obvious that even legal changes took place when the *squadristi*, amnestied for their actions during the de facto civil war that ravaged Italy, were granted impunity. Violence was organised and put into practice even more, as illustrated by the December 1922 massacres in Turin which targeted communist militias, and caused the left's collapse in its strongest national citadel. Extrajudicial violence was followed by show trials which claimed to expose Bolshevik cabals and delivered harsh sentences. It was by similar means that the electoral scaffolding of the state was tweaked by the fascists, the Acerbo Law of 1924 condemning the voting process as irrelevant.

The fateful assassination of Matteotti is revisited in great detail, with the benefit of rich archival backup. The shocking display of an opposition deputy kidnapped in broad daylight from the centre of Rome, then murdered cold heartedly generated public outrage to a degree the regime had failed to anticipate. Mussolini was forced to take personal responsibility for the crime, proving his determination to navigate his political project towards dictatorship. Approaching an aspect often overlooked by historiography, a separate chapter refers to the attempts at the Duce's life, which Foot suggests are indirect consequences of the 'Matteotti affair'. Three major instances in which Mussolini was almost killed are identified between 1925-1926, all of which could have altered the historical course of the regime. Their occurrence fuelled the paranoid mindset of fascism in power. As was the case of National-Socialism, their failure was instrumentalized to amplify the cult of the charismatic leader, whose image was now invested with the attribute of immortality.

During the following years, the dictatorship kept embedding itself into the fibre of the state, although a persistent sense of vulnerability remained at its core, often highlighted throughout the analysis. Even though any organized resistance was in shambles, violence did not end, as proven by the 1928 bomb attack which barely missed king Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, an episode of carnage exposing the severe dysfunctions of the police state. The detailed account of the investigation dispels the illusion of control which the regime promoted. Quite the opposite, a series of institutional blunders and oversights gave off the image of an autocracy unable to defend itself, whose recourse to violence was as arbitrary as it was futile.

The state of the opposition in all this confusing maelstrom is depicted through the short portrayal of the leftist intellectual Ignazio Silone, a noteworthy PCI cadre and an uncompromising fighter of the fascist order throughout his political, ideological and literary work, who kept the anti-fascist flame alive.

The diplomatic achievement of the Lateran in 1929, delivered by Mussolini as a harmonious alignment between fascism and Catholicism, is explored starting from their shared ground: anti-socialism, a desire for order, political pragmatism. Tentatively, Foot evokes the notion of 'political religion' (p. 193), but perceives it as more of a deterministic undertaking of the fascist regime rather than an ideological decryption. Therefore, he does not pursue this epistemological view any further. The narrative stresses the magnitude of the fascist charisma by approaching the complications it generated as far as the Church was concerned. Mussolini, it is rightly affirmed, was supposed to be 'a deity, an emperor, a man of power – human and mythical at the same time, dynamic but also, it seemed, built very much to last' (p. 194). Furthermore, the historiographical self-representation of fascism and its teleological, deterministic and hermetical reshaping of the past is briefly tackled by evoking Giorgio Alberto Chiurco's massive propagandistic narrative of the 'fascist revolution' of 1919-1922, an expression of fascist propaganda that cultivated a palingenetic rhetoric of historical rupture.

A story of both resistance and violence, Foot's approach conveys the involution of the former, particularly throughout the 1930s. After a decade in power, the regime grandiosely celebrated the *decennale* of 1932, an ensemble of political and cultural events displaying a Janus-like quality, synthesized in the observation that 'Italian fascism was neither entirely nostalgic nor exclusively modern' (p. 198). Indeed, the reconnection with the glorious Roman antiquity was interwoven with the strive towards a utopian future, a temporal dialectic reconciled in the monumental Fascist Exhibition. Through the archival lens, the narrative also shows the spectrum of options then available to the opponents of the regime: some chose exile and anonymity, others continued their anti-fascist pursuits abroad, while several were swallowed by the Soviet gulag after surviving repression at home. The most morally complex cases refer to those who engaged in various degrees of compromise or complicity, with damaging costs, turning them into 'stories indicative of the absolute defeat suffered by the anarchists, socialists and communists in Italy' (p. 203).

The condensation of power in the ever-expanding regime is treated by examining the unforgiving authority exercised by the aforementioned *ras*, whose areas of control resembled medieval feuds. The fascist oligarchy is dissected as a territorialized system, following a logic of plunder akin to internal colonialism. The single opposition against the power of the *ras* was the Duce himself, careful not to allow the concentration of prospective centrifugal forces. Moreover, the fascist imperial fantasies are approached, while their materialisation is pursued through the courses of violence. From the genocidal 'pacification' of Libya to the programmatic destruction in Abyssinia, fascist expansionism is represented as a continuum of massacres. Colonies are justifiably described as training fields for racial legal experiments, spaces of violence where a plethora of crimes against humanity were committed on an enormous scale, without any immediate consequences. To cite the most shocking example, Rodolfo Graziani,

the 'viceroy' of Ethiopia, ordered the extermination of 19,000 locals in Addis Ababa after he survived an assassination attempt, just a fraction of the 750,000 natives exterminated by fascist rule during Italy's empire crafting.

As hinted earlier, the ideological development of fascist anti-Semitism divided itself during the mid-1930s in a twofold process: on the one hand, a void emerged in the antagonistic model of alterity after the destruction of the far left and the Jew-stereotype returned as a convenient ideological choice. On the other hand, there was a political and ideological synchronisation with German National-Socialism which determined the course of the Holocaust. For its part, Italian fascism never tempered its anti-Semitic inclinations, so the infamous Racial Laws of 1938 came on fertile ground, presented in a pseudoscientific manner and enounced in violent speeches by Mussolini in terms of a 'politics of separation'.

As far as foreign policy matters are concerned, Italy's subordinate status to Germany is well established. Therefore, the analysis dwells on imperial expansion, which intensified near the advent of the Second World War through the conquest of Albania (1939). As the war ensued, the hesitance from the beginning left room for upfront military engagement, which was abhorred by the whole population and led to military disaster. The failed invasion of Greece (1940) was resolved only by German intervention; the fall of Ethiopia a year later announced the dismantling of the empire; ultimately, the disastrous invasion of the USSR added hundreds of thousands to an already tremendous human cost of the conflict. Foot legitimately observes that on every front they fought, Italians were 'both victims and perpetrators' (p. 246). The experience of 'total war' is addressed by evoking the inhumane conditions of civilians, which contributed to the collapse of internal order as well as spontaneous protests against the regime. Such a situation could not last. The Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943 found a country unable to defend itself. On 24-25 July 1943, Mussolini was deposed by the Fascist Grand Council he had created to channel executive power. This dramatic episode dispelled all illusions, as 'fascism's fall overturned power hierarchies in a few hours' (p. 256).

The Badoglio interregnum after Mussolini's haphazard arrest revealed the deplorable state of Italy after two decades of fascist rule. The armistice of September 8 1943, followed immediately by German occupation and the sight of the national territory turned into a battleground amounted to such a tragedy that 'it was unclear whether the nation of Italy existed in any meaningful form anymore' (p. 262). After the farcical episode of his SS extraction from captivity, Mussolini survived as the leader of the Italian Social Republic ('the Republic of Salò'), a political relic similar to Vichy, a 'weak, collaborationist administration with little real power, which attracted the most fanatical and most racist elements' (p. 263). Meanwhile, the Nazi occupiers freely exercised terror in the lands under their control, as demonstrated by one of the most infamous episodes of the entire war, the Fosse Ardeatine massacre of civilians as reprisal for a bomb attack which had targeted the occupation forces in Rome, in March 1944.

Despite the extreme levels of violence, resistance did not falter, flourishing instead, while the 1943-1945 period fuelled 'a bitter civil war raged alongside a war of liberation' (p. 265). The same years were also the darkest of the Italian Holocaust, as the destruction of Jews

under the guise of the National Socialist *Endlösung* reached its highest point. Many episodes of deportation, confiscation, looting, and other varieties of inhumane repression show the interweave between native and external agency, which constructed the landscape of the Italian Shoah with a small minority of saviours and a large majority of perpetrators and accomplices. Foot pays close attention to the exaggerations or mystifications of saviours' biographies, several of which have been debunked after decades of research (such as the Giovanni Palatucci controversy, ongoing in Italian cultural milieus). Starting from these ethical complexities, there is a central moral issue concerning the post-war claim that Italy's responsibility was lighter than Germany's and its genocidal measures were presumably taken in a climate of existential threat, while the population intervened in favour of the victims. These 'powerful tropes within popular culture' (p. 273) are rejected upfront as historically untenable, proved wrong time and again by competent research.

Once freedom was attained, there was a new shift in the political dynamic. Fascism turned from the deviser of violence into the subject of it. This change peaked with the capture of Mussolini, his summary execution and the subsequent public exposure of his body in the Piazzale Loreto in Milan, where fascists had carried their punitive measures during the war. The manifestations of violence, albeit morally distinct, followed one another in a *lieux de memoire*. The press accounts of Mussolini's public death are reproduced at length. The magnitude of the collective trauma is revealed by the crowd's enjoyment at the sight of the autocrat's grotesque demise. Certainly, the 'general sense that the rule of law itself had broken down' was not altogether anomic, since it came with the acknowledgment of a restorative metamorphosis, a sense that 'democracy itself was being restored, and expanded' (p. 287). However, such bright expectations could not hide the need to mutilate (often literally) the corpse of fascism for the sake of a new social consensus built on its very remains. As the curtain drew to a close on Italian fascism, the memorial representations of its opposition endured. This led to the posthumous glorification of Matteotti, by renaming public spaces in his honour instead of Mussolini's. It also brought the judicial overturn of heavily politicised cases and moral reparations through the punishment of the regime's atrocious crimes. The aforementioned representations generated the tragicomic postwar saga of the Duce's body, hidden by partisans, stolen by the neofascists, hidden once again, then interred in the family crypt at Predappio in 1957. This, in turn, became a *lieux de memoire*, a place of 'divided memory, fascist kitsch and political controversy' (p. 312), of retrospective tension and potential reactivation of fascism's memory.

The legacy of fascism is still felt deeply in contemporary Italy, as the epilogue proves. It is an ideologically loaded heritage which still shapes worldviews and influences the body politic to various degrees. Many neofascist avatars, embedded in contemporaneous realities, can be identified in Italy over the past years, from the ubiquitous presence of revisionist Silvio Berlusconi to the recent electoral success of Giorgia Meloni. All in all, the deeper meanings of fascism are put into question with increasing urgency, and it is here that works such as the hereby reviewed book prove valuable, as they provide some answers to the numerous questions that are (and ought to be) asked. Either in opposition or in power, both in history

and in memory, fascism was, indeed, inseparable from violence. Violence shaped it into a derailing force of history and dragged it brutally out of the historical scene. Its successors return in different shapes and sizes and they need to be confronted by different means. First and foremost, however, their origins need to be comprehended.

RĂZVAN CIOBANU

razvan55ciobanu@yahoo.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2024.29.1.15>