

THE FASCIST CHALLENGE DISSECTED

Common destiny: dictatorship, foreign policy, and war in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. By MacGregor Knox. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xiv + 262. ISBN 0-521-58208-3. £19.95.

Hitler's Italian allies: royal armed forces, fascist regime, and the war of 1940–1943. By MacGregor Knox. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xiv + 207. ISBN 0-521-79047-6. £16.95.

The Italian *Duce*, Benito Mussolini, encapsulated the bellicose angst of a generation riven by ideological ruptures and marked by the mechanical slaughter of the 1914–18 trenches. For such individuals, conflict, violence, and aggression, and not discussion, debate, and diplomacy were the means of asserting their unique notion of nationhood. Ostensibly influenced by a *mêlée* of *pensatori* and ‘sensitives’ like Nietzsche, Pareto, and Sorel, Mussolini forged his crude brand of revolutionary radicalism founded on the ‘bonding’ nature of violence, and the notion that a ruthless elite should now lead the bovine poets that, according to him, constituted the Italian people, to a glittering imperial glory.

War, naturally, played no small part in driving this frightening, yet heady, exercise in brinkmanship called *fascismo* forward. And war, successful, pitiless, and brutal, was what Mussolini believed Italy needed if it were ever to recapture the magnificence of its Roman, imperial past. One need only examine the *Duce's* words to realize how much he revelled in, and glorified, the concept of war, and how central it was to his ideological movement. Italy, he assured the Italian Senate in 1925, must be ready to fight even if a climate of disarmament prevailed: ‘One cannot think, honourable Senators, that an eventual war tomorrow in Europe would spare us the sacrifice. We need to get ready. Nor can one think that the war starts and leaves us the time to get ready. War can fall on us suddenly.’ And in 1939, after Mussolini had waged war continuously for two decades in Libya, Italian Somaliland, Ethiopia, Spain, and Albania, the message had not changed: ‘We need to arm. The order of the day is this: more cannons, more ships, more airplanes. At any cost, with any means, even if we need to make a *tabula rasa* of all that we call civilian life. When one is strong, one is dear to friends and feared by enemies.’

Shortly after Mussolini thundered out his call to arms, and his equally impassioned demands that Italy ‘march to the oceans’ and liberate itself from Anglo-French ‘incarceration’ in the Mediterranean (in a speech made to the Grand Council in February of 1939), fascist Italy found itself at war for real. Not, this time, against poorly equipped indigenous Arabs or Africans, nor against women and children asphyxiating on clouds of phosgene and mustard gas delivered courtesy of the *Regia Aeronautica*. In 1940, Italy faced real foes, the British and, briefly, the French: well armed and skilled in the art of modern warfare. This time Italy, despite its ‘alliance’ with Hitler’s Germany, did not come out victorious. This time national catastrophe and humiliation ensued in a truly operatic fashion. Military disaster followed military disaster, until the Italians themselves, destined to fight one terrible ideological civil war that lasted well beyond 1943–5, first removed Mussolini, then saw him rescued by Nazi paratroops,

govern again, and ultimately hanging mutilated at a suburban Milanese petrol station – a victim of the very violence he so readily espoused.

The question is, what have historians made of all this? In the post-war quest to study and assess the causes and courses of the Second World War, the Italian armed forces, if not their political leadership, have virtually been ignored amid the morbid scramble to scrutinize Hitler and his evil war machine. A small coterie of academics, divided into wildly incompatible and frequently hostile cliques, has attempted to throw light on fascist Italy's military and diplomatic debacle, but with limited and, more often than not, disappointing results. One can readily discount the outpourings of the Renzo De Felice/Rosaria Quartararo school on the basis that, for them, war never formed a part of fascism's ideological dynamic. A kindred spirit of the De Felice camp, James Sadkovich, did, in the 1980s, attempt to study the fascist war machine in action. Unfortunately for him, Sadkovich's work, exclusively secondary source based, attracted its fair share of ridicule as he attempted to demonstrate that, variously, the Italian fleet defeated the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, and that the German military were as incompetent as their Axis partners. Other Italian works often failed to shed any effective light on the failures of something as fundamental as the true nature of foreign and military policy in Mussolini's Italy. Official histories published by the various military historical branches, provided great detail on the campaigns themselves, but avoided making any correlation between the diplomatic policy pursued by the fascist regime and the objectives and performance of its armed forces in wartime. Only the various studies of Giorgio Rochat, and especially the renowned Lucio Ceva, have succeeded in reconstructing, at least in part, the grand design of Mussolini's military thinking. Ceva, in particular, has generated a significant number of research-driven monographs and scholarly articles on various aspects of fascist militarism although he, too, has not always made full use of the vast array of sources available in Italy and abroad. 'Anglo-American authors', whom Sadkovich once rather unfortunately labelled 'racist' and 'ethnocentrically convoluted', have, on the whole, produced more credible and balanced work on fascist foreign policy and the Italian armed forces than he was ever able to. Brian Sullivan remains worthy of note owing to his colossal, yet sadly unpublished, doctoral thesis on Mussolini and his relations with the Italian military between 1922 and 1936, as well as one excellent article extrapolated from it.¹ However, Sullivan was unable to access the requisite documentary holdings at the foreign ministry, army, and navy archives in Italy that would have made his work so much more effective. His contemporary and fellow American, MacGregor Knox, did, in part, succeed in accessing key documentation for the fascist period for his thesis, and subsequent book, *Mussolini unleashed*, originally published in 1982. As a consequence Knox generated a new image of Mussolini. He rejected the De Felicean 'responsible statesman/conservative autocrat' approach, as well as any notion, as propagated by Denis Mack Smith in *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, of Mussolini as a clownish improviser of policy. Rather, *Mussolini unleashed* presented a new image of the *Duce*: warlike, ambitious, and calculated; determined to wage wars and conquer empires.

Such views did not, it must be said, endear Knox to many in Italy. There, he was commonly criticized for his 'preconceived' ideas which frequently went against the grain of a received wisdom that, in Italy, cosily continued to present Mussolini as a 'great man', and the armed forces under fascism as mere instruments of national

¹ B. R. Sullivan, *A thirst for glory: Mussolini, the Italian military and the fascist regime, 1922–1936* (PhD thesis, Columbia, 1984).

defence against Bolshevism. But Knox has, rightly and to his credit, sustained his 'demonification' of the *Duce* up to and including his latest publications.

Common destiny represents the fruit of two decades worth of Knox's comparative research into the origins and nature of the German and Italian revolutionary right-wing ideologies, and in particular their external ramifications. Many of the essays have already been published either in English or Italian, but it is useful to have a 'collected works' available to those unfamiliar with his work. The two core articles contained in the volume, 'Conquest, foreign and domestic' and 'Fascism and Italian foreign policy', demonstrate, on the one hand, the similarities/differences between the Italian and German regimes, and, on the other, show how Mussolini wedded Italy to Hitler's Germany in order to pursue aggressive, expansionist programmes. In 'Conquest, foreign and domestic' Knox rightly terms Hitler and Mussolini's brand of revolutionary politics 'millenarian' (*Common destiny*, p. 109), given their messianic promises of national renewal and salvation. He might have made a little more of the debates and arguments surrounding the respective needs of Nazism and fascism to 'harmonize the internal and external' (*Common destiny*, p. 109), by extending his analysis to all areas of Italian society rather than just the Church, upper classes, and governing elites (*Common destiny*, pp. 83–7). Nevertheless, Knox rightly concludes that both Hitler and Mussolini planned for a great war as a supreme national catalyst that would consolidate their revolution at home (*Common destiny*, p. 110), and he emphasizes how, in Mussolini's case, the 'new fascist', created in a pseudo-Orwellian social laboratory, would act as the mechanism that would so radically transform Italy and its people (*Common destiny*, pp. 66–7). In Hitler's case, the revolution was already more advanced; 'Germany's greater concentration of Aryan stock would carry it to victory' (*Common destiny*, p. 77).

Knox's enquiry into the extent to which Mussolini's foreign policy constituted a continuum of pre-fascist yearning for a great national war ('Fascism and Italian foreign policy', *Common destiny*, pp. 113–16), links succinctly with companion volume *Hitler's Italian allies* which both assesses the consequences of the great imperialist quest of the 1930s, and the question of whether the resulting Italian military failure was inherent in an inherited, national culture. Mussolini most certainly did see alliance with the Hitler dictatorship as the means of securing an Italian Mediterranean empire; this imperial dream constituted the one thread of continuity which, argues Knox, linked the *Duce* with the policies of his predecessors (*Common destiny*, pp. 145–6). But, having said that, a full and in depth analysis of Italo-German relations during the interwar period is still to be written, as Knox himself readily admits (*Common destiny*, p. 110 n. 1).

Knox demonstrates, remorselessly, the political, technological, strategic, operational, and tactical defects of the Italian military once at war alongside Germany. *Hitler's Italian allies* is justifiably critical of the Italian performance in the Second World War, although what marks the study as different is its attempt to explain this not as a fascist failure, but an Italian one (*Hitler's Italian allies*, pp. x and 2–3). In fairness, this is not an entirely new argument or approach, John Gooch, for one, having pioneered this theory as long ago as 1982.² Having said this, Knox's book does extend the argument considerably, and provides valuable, comparative data on most aspects of the Italian military at war. He successfully brings out the tortuously complex elements of a frequently unfathomable Italian cultural mindset, that help explain the reasons for national catastrophe between 1940 and 1943. Parochialism, raw material shortages,

² J. Gooch, 'Italian military incompetence', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5 (1982).

incompetent industry, the 'myopia' that disfigured the Italian military, and so on, are all factors, concludes Knox, that Mussolini and fascism inherited (*Hitler's Italian allies*, p. 170). Added to this the crippling provincial, north–south divisions that characterized, and still characterize, Italian society, hardly helped matters. As Knox notes, basic human communication in war could only be hampered by the 'Mutually incomprehensible or barely comprehensible dialects' that made up Italy's national lexicon (*Hitler's Italian allies*, p. 27).

Knox's works provide a good compendium for those interested in studying the central element of the Nazi–fascist political credo – war. Their publication comes at a time when Mussolini's efforts to subvert the geopolitical status quo is receiving considerable and, it must be said, long overdue attention. Fortunato Minniti and Enzo Collotti have both recently published creditable studies of fascism's place in interwar, international politics.³ It is to be hoped that, in due course, additional studies in this field will emerge, and that the historical community will one day have at its disposal a multi-volume assessment of Italy in the interwar period as well as in the Second World War. Such an assessment must consider the primordial urge that propelled Mussolini and Hitler forward, for in the words of Christopher Marlowe, 'Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast.'

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³ F. Minniti, *Fino alla guerra: Strategie e conflitto nella politica di potenza di Mussolini, 1923–1940* (Naples, 2000); E. Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza: Politica estera, 1922–1939* (Milan, 2000).