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# Benito Mussolini: Bad Guy on the International Block?

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- Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2007), 273 pp., €16.00 (pb), ISBN 9788842084228.
- John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Italian Armed Forces and Foreign Policy, 1922–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 651 pp., \$35.00 (hb), ISBN 9780521856027.
- Giuseppe Pardini, *Roberto Farinacci, ovvero della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007), 475 pp., €28.50 (pb), ISBN 8860870666.
- Alessandro Roselli, *Italy and Albania: Financial Relations in the Fascist Period* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 272 pp., \$85.00 (hb), ISBN 9781845112547.
- Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 504 pp., \$110.00 (hb), ISBN 9780521845151.
- Donald Sassoon, *Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 187 pp., £14.99, ISBN 9780007192427.

On what may have been the still evocative day of 1 May 2008, *The Economist* reported that Rome had a new mayor. The politician celebrating electoral victory was Gianni Alemanno, a member of Silvio Berlusconi's rightist coalition through the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) party. This group had emerged during the 1990s from what had until then been called the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, Italian Social Movement) under the astute leadership of Gianfranco Fini, a man soon to be minister of foreign affairs and deputy prime minister. At the time of writing Fini holds the crucial office of president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and stands as the most obvious potential successor to Berlusconi as chief of the Italian right. Fini's journey out of Fascism, with his public renunciation of antisemitism and his full endorsement of democracy (but more reticent positioning on Fascist crimes against Arabs, Ethiopians, peoples of the Balkans, Marxists, the liberal rule of law and contemporary historical revisionism) has been recounted often enough and will not be repeated here.

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As the detachment of Italian neo-fascism from history proceeded, Alemanno followed his leader, if, perhaps with some doubts, given that the new mayor is married to the daughter of Pino Rauti, a fanatical preacher of Fascist revival who was accustomed to argue fervently that Fascism constituted the real 'revolution; in political institutions, in economic and social structures, and in world view'.<sup>1</sup> In Rauti's understanding, the only problem about the Fascist dictatorship was that, until its last manifestation from 1943 to 1945 as the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), Mussolini's regime had not been Fascist enough. Only then, Rauti claimed, did the Duce, along with all those who chose the RSI in a clear-eyed manner that was 'ethical, political and philosophical', find 'an absolute and superior serenity'.<sup>2</sup> Others might deny or betray that word *sociale*, so significant in its appearance in the name of the MSI and quite a few other institutions of the post-war Italian right. But, for Rauti and his fans – extremists like the young Alemanno – *sociale* was code for a radical Fascism that regretted nothing about the last stages of the Second World War.

Even if cheering supporters at the *Campidoglio* greeted Alemanno's election in 2008 with the chants and 'Roman salutes' of once upon a time, it is unlikely that either Italy or its capital are about to live through a second bout of Fascism, an ideology which, in any case, is ludicrously outmoded as practical politics for a member of the European Union in our globalised present. Yet the Alemanno story does have historiographical resonance in drawing attention to the deepening gap between much Italian interpretation of the years of dictatorship from 1922 to 1945 and that common in the English-speaking world. The literature on Mussolinian Fascism continues to expand but, at least in some sectors of contemporary Italy, courteous democratic debate is replaced by an irritated hostility about continuing foreign negativity towards that regime which was, its critics remember, the 'first ally' of Nazi Germany, as well as the pioneer European dictatorship of the twentieth century.

It is true that much revisionism of the Berlusconi years is hard to take seriously. The slew of biographies and memoirs devoted to praising 'good Fascists' mostly fall well below acceptable academic standards. The typical argument, as for example in a study of the Fascist party secretary, Achille Starace, written by journalist Roberto Festorazzi, may be that this or that Fascist chief was 'a war hero, no doubt a man of power but one with some generosity, . . . a loyal and fundamentally honest hierarch, generous in devoting himself without reserve to the idea in which he believed'.<sup>3</sup> But the quality of the research base of such works, and the decisions about which facts to include and which to exclude, are too blatantly slanted to make much impact on scholarship.

Yet, in that Italy where the right reinforces itself in national power and the left seems to have lost its intellectual credibility and purpose, revisionism spreads. A fine example is Giuseppe Pardini's massively detailed study of the career of Roberto

<sup>1</sup> G. Rauti, *L'immane conflitto. Mussolini, Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill, Hitler* (Rome: Centro editoriale nazionale, 1966), 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 190–1.

<sup>3</sup> R. Festorazzi, *Starace: il mastino della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Milan: Mursia, 2002), 10. Mursia continues to specialise in publishing such revisionist works.

Farinacci, *ras* or boss of Cremona throughout the dictatorship and, at least in his own view, ‘*puro e duro*’, absolute in his commitment to radical Fascism. In so far as the task of the historian is the Rankean one of reading the archives and reporting from them ‘what actually happened’, Pardini’s book must be hailed for its scholarly labour. Certainly, after the book’s publication no one can comment on Farinacci without some reference to its content.

The problem in it, and it is a huge one, is the interpretation. Pardini is a sedulously friendly biographer. Indeed, his Farinacci is always right (to parody the regime slogan *Mussolini ha sempre ragione*). In his initial attraction to politics before 1914, Farinacci, we learn, stood for a ‘socialism “without hatred”, aiming at elevating the working class to a “level that was genuinely human and social”’ (p. 6). After war service, Farinacci turned to Fascism as a response to socialist violence in his hometown, believing that ‘real socialism must be anti-Bolshevik’ and so virtuously pledged to oppose Italy’s clerical and Marxist foes (p. 26). By 1921, Pardini assures his readers, Farinacci stood four-square for ‘the idea of the Patria, its safety and future’; everything else must be second to the nation. Over the next months, with Pardini ignoring the mayhem in which local Fascists indulged, Farinacci achieved (and thereafter retained) a ‘personal consensus . . . deeply rooted throughout the region’ and, unlike some squadrists, he was ‘humble as in the past, modest as always’ (p. 91).

By the time of the March on Rome and the Fascist acquisition of national power, Cremona had allegedly become ‘tranquil’ politically and socially, even if Pardini admits that Fascism was then still local in essence and Farinacci, for one, ‘had not yet matured a clear governmental programme’ (p. 91). However, he was, it seems, establishing himself as ‘the pure and disinterested champion of Fascist orthodoxy’, and the enemy of under-the-table dallying with the new government’s Marxist enemies (p. 94). What was happening here, Pardini urges, was that Fascism was displaying two rival souls. Wheeling and dealing, ‘corruption’ and back-sliding from ideological rigour were to mark the track of Mussolini in office. Intransigence and determination to impose a needed modernising ‘revolution’ on Italian society, to nationalise its masses, to unite its classes, to enhance its power, characterised the line of Farinacci.

The murder of the reformist socialist chief, Giacomo Matteotti, in June 1924 was not the responsibility of the Cremona *ras*, Pardini argues, but was rather ‘extraneous’ to his ‘mind-set and *modus operandi*’ and that of his idealistic friends (p. 131). In the aftermath of the killing, Farinacci, convinced that Mussolini himself bore no guilt for the crime, became the legal advocate for the killer Amerigo Dumini and accepted elevation in 1925–6 to the role of party secretary out of purity and disinterest, and the need to press forward with the drastic fascistisation of the state (a policy to be blocked at every turn by the Duce) (pp. 154, 162).<sup>4</sup> Once Farinacci had lost office, throughout the succeeding years he was, and he was seen to be, the potential anti-Mussolini. Helped by colleagues such as Giovanni Preziosi, the

<sup>4</sup> Farinacci’s plagiarism of his law thesis is admitted but explained away by Pardini with Farinacci’s own line that the matter was then not a crime but rather was quite a habit in Italy (see Pardini, *Roberto Farinacci*, 118 n., 306).

defrocked priest and vicious antisemite (Pardini ignores such matters), who admired his ‘political resolution, moral intransigence and incorruptibility’ (p. 190), Farinacci long remained the representative of a ‘pure, real and revolutionary Fascism’ (p. 227).

By the 1930s Farinacci favoured closer ties with Nazi Germany, fearing that communism and its Jewish sympathisers constituted ‘a general and universal threat to Europe’ (p. 378), but, Pardini adds, the prominence of Preziosi and of antisemitic preaching in Farinacci’s newspaper and journal did not win over the Italian public, while the Jews of the country themselves rejected Zionism in great part. Moreover, Pardini notes guilelessly, many of Farinacci’s best friends were Jews. Once the Axis came formally into existence, Farinacci, we learn, nobly clung to the ideal of ‘loyalty and faith to the last’, while hoping that the New Order would through war achieve ‘revolution’, a new ‘Fascist and Nazi European civilization’ (p. 406). To the bitter end, Pardini maintains, Farinacci remained popular and admired among Fascists, old and young. In April 1945, ‘in a climate of ferocious hostility’, he died bravely. What then did not perish was ‘the myth that this man represented for whole generations of Fascists’. Farinacci was (and, Pardini implies, is) ‘Fascism’s Apostle’ (p. 459).

This remarkable assault on the established view that Farinacci was a corrupt and murderous provincial boss, a rough and tough *squadrista* entirely lacking in ideological grandeur and, however cynically, the advocate in Italy of some of the worst aspects of Nazism, appears in a series directed by the neo-conservative Francesco Perfetti, himself a prolific author and editor of revisionist works.<sup>5</sup> The series is entitled ‘The Library of *Nuova Storia Contemporanea*’, a journal linking the more rightist heirs of the great historian of Fascism, Renzo De Felice, founder and editor of *Storia Contemporanea*.<sup>6</sup> Pardini’s book is telling testimony to the interpretation of the Fascist years being purveyed by those nearest to power under Berlusconi (and Fini), and the ongoing series shows that there is every likelihood that the tendentious case argued by Pardini about Farinacci, with its eager exculpation of Fascist crimes and failures, will be pressed further over the next years.

Better known internationally than Perfetti and his friends is De Felice’s successor to a chair at Rome University and, in many ways, his scholarly heir, the ostensibly apolitical Emilio Gentile.<sup>7</sup> A pertinacious advocate of the view that Fascism endeavoured to impose a ‘civil religion’ on Italians and did so with some ‘totalitarian’ success in an attempted ‘anthropological revolution’, Gentile has recently turned his attention to that Rome where Alemanno has been installed as mayor and where a generation of Fascist administration has left a vast architectural legacy. Gentile’s *Fascismo di Pietra* does not endorse the revisionism of Pardini and Perfetti. Yet it is, in its own way, of little help in comprehending Fascism or its legacy in Italy.

<sup>5</sup> For one example see F. Lucifero, *L’ultimo re: i diari del ministro della Real Casa 1944–1946*, ed. A. Lucifero and F. Perfetti (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), where Perfetti, in his introduction (xxxii–xxxiii), hints that a monarchist victory might have been stolen by republicans during the poll in June 1946.

<sup>6</sup> For the intellectual and sociological background, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> For his own pietas to his predecessor, see E. Gentile, *Renzo De Felice: lo storico e il personaggio* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2003).

Indeed the book has few surprises to those familiar with its author's work, with Gentile tracing, in his familiar ponderous style with a fondness for long quotations ostensibly 'speaking for themselves' that characterises much Italian academic writing, 'the striking and indelible imprint that Benito Mussolini's regime left on Italian soil for future centuries'. 'Rome and empire', Gentile adds, 'were the most frequently used words in Fascist rhetoric. They expressed myths that seduced lay people and Catholics, civilians and the military, simple minds and superior ones' (p. v).<sup>8</sup>

Here, as often in Gentile's summary of his intent, it might seem that he is saying that the regime was a 'success'. Yet he does on occasion stress that the story is complicated. In their early days, many Fascists, Mussolini included, felt contempt for Rome as a place that was corrupt and un-modern, the unlovely home of the Vatican and cosmopolitan tourists. Only in 1921, Gentile argues, did *romanità* (the Roman spirit) 'become the principal symbolic base of Fascism', with Mussolini himself acting as the 'chief agent' of the process (p. 43). In office, it took no time for the Duce 'to demolish as much as possible of the real and present Rome that disgusted him' (p. 69). Fascist archaeology aimed at the conquest of time, whereby streets such as the Via dell'Impero (Empire Street), running from the Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum, gave concrete expression to 'the continuity between the ancient Roman spirit and the Fascist one' (p. 88). Doubtless, Gentile concedes, there were personal and practical divisions among the regime experts, be they archaeologists, artists or architects. Nonetheless, all were harnessed to Mussolini's project of pushing a Fascist religion.

In May 1936, victory in Ethiopia genuinely entailed a 'mystical fusion of the Duce and the crowd in Piazza Venezia' (p. 127). Thereafter, however, Fascist *romanità* somehow began to petrify. Mussolini himself increasingly turned into a 'living statue' (p. 131), and the plans to make the new suburb of 'EUR' (Esposizione Universale di Roma, Rome Universal Exhibition) into 'a wholly and integrally new Rome' were thwarted by the world war. In any case, Gentile contends opaquely, 'for Fascism, the imperial idea did not mesh with imperialism or colonialism and the conquest of new territories. Rather, it sprang from the ambition to create a new civilization that must rise in the twentieth century as a universal model and so repeat what Roman civilization had been in the ancient world' (pp. 198–9).

With Gentile having made plain his accustomed line about the grandiose intentions of the regime, he opts in a curious final chapter to indulge in an imaginative reconstruction of Mussolini's thought processes in his office in the Palazzo Venezia on the night of 24 January 1942, when the Fascist future was becoming clouded. Yet the results of this unwonted stylistic flourish are scarcely novel. 'Far from what many think', Gentile states in an epilogue, 'it was not ancient Rome that Romanised Fascism, but it was Fascism that fascistised ancient Rome, its history, myth, and even its monumental remains, finding value in and exploiting [such memory] according to the needs of the newly Fascist Rome'. Three generations later, he concludes in

<sup>8</sup> English-speaking readers might like to compare B. Painter, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), which is not dissimilar in its argument.

his last sentence, ‘of the Mussolinian ambition in the totalitarian laboratory to forge modern Romans, the words and the myths have vanished. Only the monuments of “the fascism of stone” remain’ (p. 258).

Here, as almost always in regard to Gentile’s historical argumentation, an automatic question arises about the over-simplification that so palpably lurks among the binary opposites that compose Gentile’s favoured didactic technique. In reality, a critic might note, during the Duce’s period of office Mussolini and/or ‘Fascism’ were only two of the forces trying to wring useable pasts from Rome’s many histories. Catholics, foreign admirers and visitors, nationalists (who were not always just Fascists), working-class Romans with their narrowly suburban pasts and presents,<sup>9</sup> each did not entirely endorse the regime’s construction of history and most, after 1945, were able to refurbish their favoured past and, at least ostensibly, cleanse it from Fascist accretion. So, too, with Alemanno *sindaco* and with contemporary Italian revisionism rampant in the present literature, it is by no means clear that Fascist myths are dead and buried and only buildings and streetscapes linger.

If Gentile’s interpretation of his country’s dictatorship has led to an historiographical dead end, what of English-language writing about the regime? Here work varies in its intent and quality. ‘Fascism’ remains a subject that preoccupies secondary schools in Britain, as well as many undergraduate courses there and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. To meet this market, publishers remain alert to the value of pithy summations.<sup>10</sup> One recent example is Donald Sassoon’s *Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism*. In its brief pages Sassoon argues two lines, each far from Gentile’s assertions about Fascist profundity, but, ironically given Sassoon’s leftist politics, not entirely at odds with some of Pardini’s interpretation. For Sassoon, Mussolini ‘had given up on the “revolution” well before his train approached Rome’ and brought him to the prime ministership (p. 11).<sup>11</sup> The Duce’s secret was ‘spin’, not ‘reality’. Mussolini, Sassoon contends, ‘appeared to be effortlessly superior to all his Italian political contemporaries, and to a large extent, he was. Though he was constantly prey to self-doubt, the image he conveyed was that of a man possessed by a ferocious optimism, an absolute conviction that history was on his side – and the image was what mattered’ (p. 143). Despite this power, Sassoon is sure that the dictator in the making ‘could have been stopped at any time’ during his rise to power (p. 12). The liberals are therefore the target of Sassoon’s attack; their commitment to ‘freedom’, he remarks acerbically, ‘had always been only skin deep’. And, by October 1922, ‘Italy had turned out to be a “failed” state which could not be governed in the traditional way’ (pp. 102, 141). Unlovely dictatorship was the result, even if, Sassoon explains, in such a regime, ‘especially one in which the conventions are always

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the specificities of the area around San Lorenzo, destined to be bombed in July 1943, see L. Piccioni, *San Lorenzo: un quartiere romano durante il fascismo* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> For a lively example see G. Finaldi, *Mussolini and Italian Fascism* (Harlow: Pearson, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> The brevity of this work is a striking contrast to the massive D. Sassoon, *The Culture of Europeans* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

changing, power . . . [would be] the result of a constant and extenuating negotiating process' (p. 23).

This conclusion is not always shared in the literature, however. There it is easy to find not so much phrases about a failed liberal state as the view that Mussolini was a 'rogue' element among the inter-war European powers, a dictator ready to employ 'weapons of mass destruction', whose tyranny should have been opposed and not appeased. Macgregor Knox is the leader of the school that pursues this preemptory view and, after much delay, he has now published the first volume of a study that brings together his analyses of Mussolini and Hitler, Fascism and Nazism, Italy and Germany as what George W. Bush might call the 'bad guys' on the international block during the inter-war period.<sup>12</sup> 'National histories', Knox is ready to concede, 'are unique; all societies travel their own *Sonderwege*. But', he hastens to add, 'by the end of the long nineteenth century, Italy and Germany, despite their many and varied differences, had evolved common features not shared with their eastern or western neighbours',<sup>13</sup> features that threatened the world order. Germany was driven by 'expectations of the German national apocalypse, enthusiastic commitment to the total subordination of the individual, myths of charismatic leadership, megalomaniacal external claims, and hatred of ethnic enemies both external and internal'. Italy was possessed by the same 'powerful and supremely dangerous' hopes, and only held back from destructive action by its relative lack of modernity compared with its German neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

These national delusions were made worse by each nation's experience of the First World War. Mussolini was, from start to finish, a 'revolutionary', determined to pull down the old order, an apostle of 'redemptive violence'. "That fearful and enthralling word: war" was thus wholly consistent with his innermost beliefs.<sup>15</sup> His arrival in power with the March on Rome was, Knox is sure, only a start. The dictator's fervent belief was, as he put it, that 'the revolution comes later'.<sup>16</sup>

A portrayal of the Duce's active pursuit of his nationalist dystopia through a succession of aggressive wars has been left by Knox to his promised second volume that will continue the paralleling of the Fascist and Nazi stories. No doubt it will pursue a hard line. Knox seems to enjoy berating what he perceives as historiographical appeasement of dictators; any suggestions about Mussolini's 'purported opportunism or lack of convictions merely reflect his flexibility and the authors' lack of discernment', he maintains.<sup>17</sup> Yet, when it appears, his second volume will be read with interest, except perhaps by Italian revisionists, and will find

<sup>12</sup> The gap between English-language-speaking and Italian interpretation of Fascist diplomacy may be enhanced by the presence of Francesco Perfetti as academic head of the archives of the Italian ministry of foreign affairs.

<sup>13</sup> M. Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 302–4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

a place in debates about Fascism and its chief, and about the general problem faced by our discipline in estimating whether and when words matter more than deeds.

Both receive due attention in the major monograph written by John Gooch on the relationship between the Fascist military and the regime's foreign policy. Mussolini takes centre stage, although Gooch's understanding of him is nuanced compared with that of Knox. This Duce was 'single-minded and brutal but also politically competent and certainly not a fool . . . Like Stalin his calculations were rational, though their rationality was not that of a Chamberlain or an Eden', Gooch remarks with what might be read as English patriotism (p. 2). Nonetheless, for Gooch, the 'broad motive forces' of Fascist foreign policy were established by 1922. Any twists in the road thereafter were caused by events, by Mussolini's willingness to pursue tactical advantage rather than mindlessly unleash wars and, Gooch states with some potential contradiction, by the fact that, 'though the aspirations of the new regime were grandiose, precise details and clear political direction were absent' (p. 52).

What looked like relatively normal international behaviour may have been deceptive. Mussolini's 'diplomacy during the latter part of the 1920s was chiefly directed at fashioning a springboard from which to launch the first stage of Italy's expansion overseas', Gooch contends (p. 62). Yet domestic factors could not be denied. Mussolini joined Farinacci in talking up the need to fascistise the military, but the Duce remained alert to implications for his own power and so 'had no intention of letting the army slip from his control into party hands' (p. 72). There were other complications. Budget restraints hindered the navy's expansion. Italo Balbo, the *ras* of Ferrara put in charge of the new air ministry, talked flamboyantly but to doubtful purpose. 'The exact role of the air force in the event of war was unclear when Balbo came into office and remained so through his period of office' (p. 101).

Although Gooch claims that, by the end of the 1920s, 'Mussolini was already moving cautiously towards Berlin' and happily contemplated a 'quick war against Yugoslavia' as his ideal (p. 122), still nothing much happened until the figure of Hitler loomed over the horizon. From 1932 'Mussolini began to put into effect the project for which he had been preparing during the previous decade but which he had been forced to delay – the expansion of Italy and the assertion of her right to be numbered as one of the great powers.' In a Europe grown encouragingly unstable, 'the Duce was attracted to Hitler both by the specific promise of an uncontested future for the Alto Adige [Alpine German-speaking territories granted to Italy at the end of the First World War and the object of irredentism for every German nationalist except Hitler] and by the much broader notion that Hitler might be his partner in manufacturing the "new order" Mussolini wished to impose on Europe' (pp. 189–91).

During the next years, Gooch admits, the path to a German–Italian alliance in world war was a little bumpy. Yet the two dictatorships were linked by 'common overtly revisionist international agendas, a visceral suspicion of bolshevism and the prioritisation of military preparations' (p. 316). Much for Italy was decided in the war with what Gooch in an old-fashioned British manner calls 'Abyssinia'. Thereafter



Mussolini, in one or other cranny of his mind, may not have entirely written off the potential of a deal with Britain and France. But the reality was war. 'At the start of 1939 Fascist Italy aggressively tied its future to that of its ideological partner, Nazi Germany' (p. 451).

Italy's would not, however, be a victorious or a genuinely modern war. When, in September 1939, the Duce pulled back from the brink and, for nine months, seemed ironically to be replicating the uncertainties that had beset liberal Italy about which side to join and when in world conflict, military chiefs were 'left operating in the dark and did not know what Mussolini intended to do' (p. 495). Nor were matters clarified by Italy's entry into the war in June 1940. Rather, Fascist Italy was already lurching towards disaster. The dictator had 'thought of wars and his soldiers, sailors and airmen planned them, but a lack of clear direction meant that his wishes did not mesh with their designs and his choices ultimately did not square with their capabilities'. What brought the regime and the nation to 'this pass', Gooch concludes with an interpretation that Knox has made a name arguing,<sup>18</sup> 'was not bluff, nor even straightforward incompetence, but a combination of individual inadequacies and multiple institutional failures on a massive scale' (pp. 521–2).

The detail of Gooch's book is new but the argument less so. *Mussolini and His Generals* is a piece of 'intentionalist' history in the sense that it sees the dictator as a man with his country's destiny in his hands, but nonetheless is curiously 'structuralist' in declaring that the weakness and backwardness of Italian society, the lack of success of both liberals and Fascists since the Risorgimento in nationalising the masses and achieving economic modernity, held any Italian in a straitjacket of 'failure'. Bismarck's aphorism that the new Italy had 'a large appetite but very poor teeth' hangs over Gooch's study.

More modest in its ambit and in its willingness to risk general explanation is Alessandro Roselli's study of Italo-Albanian financial relations through the dictatorship. Roselli is a banker, long the representative of the Banca d'Italia in London and now retired. He is also a 'man of culture' as is more readily understood in the European than the English-speaking world, and the original of his book came out in Italian in 1986. The new edition includes new research, and quite a few pages are devoted to recounting the detail of trade between the two countries and their banking connections.

In this regard, Roselli includes information both about liberal Italy's dealings with that Albania that was born as a nation-state of some kind in 1912 and about the tracking of Albanian gold in post-Fascist Italy. The story is thus to a degree one of continuity.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, whoever ruled in Rome, 'Italy was not deterred from pouring capital into Albania by the country's limited capacity to repay it' (p. 51).

<sup>18</sup> See M. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed 1939–1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> There is a major new biography of Italy's ambitious Liberal foreign minister, Antonino Di San Giuliano, 1910–1914, a man with deep interest in Albania and an important figure in any assessment

Eventually, the Fascist regime tired of its sometime client, King Zog and, on Good Friday 1939, imposed its own rule through an invasion that was meant to replicate the lightning strikes that Nazi Germany had used against Austria and the rump of Czechoslovakia. Roselli remains a little vague about the motivation for this aggression, stating that he lacks the sources to appraise further the common rumours about the thirst for financial gain that drove Mussolini's son-in-law and minister of foreign affairs, Galeazzo Ciano, and his friends to take Italy to Albania. Whatever the short-term motivation for Albania's seizure, Roselli remarks, somewhat disarmingly, the 'union of realms' that was proclaimed between the two states did not alter 'the nature of the economic and financial problems which dogged their relationship' (p. 108). He acknowledges the launching of a 'vast programme of public works' (p. 110), but scarcely analyses the actual achievements of Italian rule, either economically or socially. Fascist Albania therefore remains an enigma in any assessment of the nature of 'Mussolini's empire' or in any attempt to compare its fate with the brutal rule imposed on conquered territories by its Nazi partner.

Vastly more ambitious and significant is another Italian work now translated into English, Davide Rodogno's study of the results of Fascist war, *Il Nuovo Ordine Mediterraneo*, with its title inadequately rendered as *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*.<sup>20</sup> The Italian original appeared in the excellent series by the publishers Bollati Boringhieri, a house that marked its entry into the topic of Fascism in 1991 with the challenging and still debated work by Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile*, a study that might also with advantage have been translated into English.<sup>21</sup> Certainly the appearance of Rodogno's work in translation is welcome. His book deserves my implied comparison with Pavone as one that is and will be of lasting significance in debates about the character of the Fascist regime.

The Italian edition has already been widely commented on in English-language journals and a full review here may therefore be superfluous. Suffice it to say that Rodogno argues a detailed case for the view that 'the Fascist project for territorial conquest and occupation of Mediterranean Europe' was a serious matter. As he explains in his introduction, 'the totalitarianism of the Fascist regime – which was less radicalized than that of the Third Reich – would conquer a living space in which the *uomo nuovo* [new man], the conqueror born of the revolution, would prosper' (p. 8). Too many past historians, he complains, have 'either ignored the Fascist imperial project or treated it in reductive terms'. Rather, he contends, the Italian dictatorship, in 'close kinship (but not . . . [in] identity)' with the Nazis, genuinely aimed at a 'new civilization' wherein all would have to recognise that 'territorial expansion was to be the logical outcome of the Italian race's spiritual and demographic supremacy

of the continuity of Italian expansionist hopes. See G. Ferraiolo, *Politica e diplomazia in Italia tra XIX e XX secolo. Vita di Antonino di San Giuliano 1852–1914* (Rome: Rubbettino, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> In this instance, Cambridge University Press has not done well with its translator, and readers with Italian will prefer the original: D. Rodogno, *Il Nuovo Ordine Mediterraneo: le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa (1940–1943)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

in the Mediterranean'. To be sure, he adds, 'the purpose of Fascist expansion was not to annihilate the subject population. It was instead to affirm a "natural right to expansion" while also obeying a moral obligation to "civilise" the territory occupied' (pp. 44–6). It may be true, Rodogno acknowledges, that, until 1939, the wish for grandeur 'bred a proliferation of nebulous projects, [and] labyrinthine theories on the organization of the *spazio vitale* [living space]' (p. 50). Yet, from 10 June 1940, Fascist war was real and was meant to be revolutionary.

Mussolini dictated it. He 'exercised overriding decision-making power and control as military leader or, one might say, *condottiere*'. 'In the occupied territories, Mussolini (like Hitler) delegated some of his powers to trusted technocrats – lieutenants – many of whom did not belong to a ministry and periodically returned to Rome to confer with him. They received instructions and guidelines on the policies to implement in the conquered territories whence they returned to work "towards the Duce"' (p. 113). At the Duce's command, Fascist actions were harsh. In Dalmatia and Slovenia, for example, annexation meant 'violent denationalisation [of the locals], involving deportations, resettlements and the eradication of the customs, culture, language and indeed the inhabitants' (p. 84). Fascism, in other words, launched itself into 'a colonial-type war in a European setting' (p. 167).<sup>22</sup>

The remaining two-thirds of Rodogno's book are devoted to specific accounts of what actually happened in the various zones of Italian control. There he finds little evidence for the case argued some time ago by Jonathan Steinberg of the 'banality of good' in policy towards the Jews, for example (pp. 362–4).<sup>23</sup> For Rodogno, the Italians were anything but *brava gente* (nice people). The only check to their murderous ambitions were the realities of the failure of their war: 'Disorder, disobedience and amorality increased as time passed and sometimes allowed the persecuted to break the law: hence, in certain cases, what appeared to be humanitarian action . . . resulted in fact from the corruption of soldiers and officers' (p. 402). All in all, Rodogno pleads in his conclusion, the Fascist war was an 'endeavour to achieve the Utopia and the Uchronia of the New Order' and so deserves 'serious study' for its radically totalitarian purpose (p. 411).

Macgregor Knox endorses Rodogno's findings on the back cover of the English translation and it is not difficult to see why. Rodogno's account of Italy's war is emphatic that it was the occasion for a dictator to work his malign and murderous purpose towards a dystopian empire. Yet still there are reasons for doubt and debate. Time and again, Rodogno himself has to admit that Mussolinian 'plans' were shipwrecked by the reality of Italy's military inferiority, by its subordination to its Nazi partner and by the ramshackle nature of the Fascist campaign, riddled as it was by personal and institutional divisions. Few, except for today's revisionists, would want to argue that Italians were not guilty in the war of murder, rape and pillage. Yet much of Rodogno's case does seem excessive and too ready to take words at face value. At least to your reviewer, what remains most intriguing about the Fascist story

<sup>22</sup> General Mario Roatta's note '3C' of 1 March 1942 confirmed this vicious racism (pp. 335–8).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–1943* (London: Routledge 1993).

and what is in turn its continuing interest for the discipline of history is its mixture of messages and behaviour. No doubt Mussolini was a 'bad guy' and yet his rule was not beyond human ken. In its combination of violence, contradiction and 'failure', the Fascist regime may reveal more about the general character of dictatorship than does Nazi Germany. Similarly, in the multiplicity of histories that survive under its rule despite the attempt at 'totalitarian' repression, it may offer the chance to reflect on the way in which, even under a tyranny, human beings retain the hope and reality of agency. 'Total' mind control is easier to talk about than to impose.