

Giorgio Fabre, *Il razzismo del duce. Mussolini dal ministero dell'Interno alla Repubblica sociale italiana* (Roma: Carocci, 2021), pp. 568.

by Michael A. Livingston

A Fascist and a Racist: Thoughts on Fabre's *Il razzismo del Duce*

Once an obscure academic specialty, fascism has become, as Italians might say, *di moda*. When not accusing various politicians (including some Americans) of being fascists, scholars debate the meaning of the term, its relevance to contemporary events, and even whether it should be spelled with a capital “F” (indicating a direct tie to Mussolini’s regime) or a small one (indicating a more generic, broadly defined phenomenon). I myself attracted a surprising number of hits when I posted an article addressing the comeback of what I labeled “The Other F-Word,” including (*inter alia*) a five-point scale for evaluating who did, and did not, qualify.¹

One of the many debates about fascism is whether it necessarily encompasses a racist or ethnically exclusionary philosophy. In theory, it might be possible to adopt many or most of the historic features of fascism—an organic state, a charismatic leader, a totalitarian organization of political and social life—without excluding anyone on the basis of race, gender, or similar ideas. Indeed, such a claim is frequently advanced regarding Mussolini himself, who (it is said) was not especially racist or antisemitic early in his career, and became so only under the pressure of his alliance with Hitler beginning in 1938. The participation of a not insignificant number of Jews in the Fascist² Party, prior to that date, is often cited as evidence for this proposition. A popular book and movie,³ which made much of some Jews’ support for the Duce (notably in Ferrara), lent further credence to this theory.

Giorgio Fabre is having none of this. In a previous book he traced Mussolini’s racism and antisemitism from his origins as a socialist through his rise to power in

¹ Michael A. Livingston, “*The Other F-Word: Fascism, The Rule of Law, and the Trump Era*,” SSRN Abstract No. 3272256, October 24, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3272256>, accessed November 17, 2022.

² I use the capital spelling when referring to Italy itself.

³ Vittorio De Sica, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (orig. *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*) (1970).

1922.⁴ In this new, comprehensive volume he completes the story. According to Fabre, Mussolini was not only a committed and virulent antisemite: it was a defining feature of his career, a philosophy that he believed in for reasons of ideology as well as political convenience. Nor did Mussolini become an antisemite because of his exposure to Adolf Hitler: he was one before he met the latter, and—had he and his regime survived—likely would have remained one afterward, as well.

Much of this story has been told before, but there is a difference between making an offhand observation and cementing it with facts. This Fabre accomplishes with a vengeance. The book is too long (over 500 pages) to list all of the examples, but a few will suffice.

First, the book demonstrates, beyond any reasonable doubt, Mussolini's personal involvement in the drafting and application of the Race Laws, to the point of his personal "M" notation on decisions that resulted in the classification of individuals as Jews or "aryans" and (after 1943) in arrest, deportation, and death of those affected. (There was only one "M" that mattered in Fascist Italy: as if to emphasize this latter point, Mussolini used a characteristic type of pencil in characteristic colors.). To dramatize this story, Fabre devotes an entire chapter to the case of Oscar Morpurgo, in whose case Mussolini intervened on several different occasions, ranging from his original classification as Jewish to his final deportation and death.⁵ Nor was this case exceptional: while omitting the same level of detail, Fabre notes numerous other cases in which the Duce made similar, often fatal interventions.

When he did not make the decisions himself, Mussolini personally chose the people and the institutions that did, frequently creating new or overhauling previously existing institutions, like the Race and Demography Office (*Demorazza*), which was responsible for administering the laws, or the so-called

⁴ Giorgio Fabre, *Mussolini Razzista. Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita* (Milano: Garzanti Libri, 2005).

⁵ Giorgio Fabre, *Il Razzismo del duce. Mussolini dal ministero dell'Interno alla Repubblica sociale italiana* (Rome: Carrocci Editore, 2021), Chap. 1. Morpurgo, an industrialist from a prominent family of Fascists and military heroes, had been granted "aryan" status in 1941; this and other favorable decisions were subsequently revoked, and he was killed in Auschwitz in 1944. *Ibid.*, 38. Accessed October 31, 2022, <http://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-web/persona/detail/person-5565/morpurgo-oscar.html>

Committee of Racial Scientists, which provided the original rationale for enacting them.⁶ Together with making one wonder about Mussolini's delegation and management skills, all this makes it clear that the familiar refrain in Fascist Italy ("If only the Duce knew what was happening!") was no more than self-deception: he did know, and indeed was personally involved in many of the most egregious decisions.⁷

Second, the book argues that Mussolini, even before he came to power, devoted substantial energy to racial theories in general and antisemitic notions in particular. Never one to omit detail, Fabre catalogues no fewer than eight different stages of the Duce's racial thinking, in particular his efforts to reconcile Nazi Germany's "Nordic" racism with Italy's Southern European location and historically polyglot population.⁸ The ultimate resolution of this tension—a sort of "Aryan-Mediterranean" racism that left a majority of Italians on the good side but Jews, Ethiopians, and others on the bad one—is perhaps less significant than the fact that Mussolini devoted so much attention to the problem in the first place.⁹ The fascination with racial theory also involved Mussolini and his close associates in a lengthy series of discussions with German racial theorists, both before and during the war: a debate that was largely resolved in the latter's favor when the Germans occupied northern Italy after September 8, 1943.

This last sentence suggests a further point about the timeline of Italian antisemitism, and the supposed difference between pre-1943 policy (said to be discrimination but not persecution) and that after the German Occupation (which indisputably involved systematic persecution, deportation and death). Consistent with prior researchers, myself included, Fabre finds this to be a less than convincing distinction. This is true for two related reasons. First, as noted above, Mussolini continued to be involved in decision-making, with regard to Jews and other matters, during the period from September 1943 until his death in April 1945,

⁶ Ibid., Chap. 14, 21.

⁷ A subsequent chapter raises the question of whether Mussolini knew that deportation was, in most cases, synonymous with death. It concludes that—while his knowledge may not have been complete—he almost certainly knew the overall plan. Ibid., Chap. 24.

⁸ Ibid., Chap. 9.

⁹ For a systematic study of racial ideology in Fascist Italy, including the ongoing conflict between so-called Nordic and Mediterranean racism, see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

when he served as the leader of the Salo' Government (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana, RSI*). That he shared power with the German authorities in this period does not obscure his own guilt. Second, even when the Germans and the Salo' Government went beyond preexisting policy, including the deportation and extermination of more than 7,000 Italian Jews, they did so on the basis of records and ideological commitments carried over from an earlier period. In many cases the same people and institutions were involved, sometimes using the identical stationery with the word "Royal" or "Kingdom" neatly crossed out (the King was now in the South and, at least nominally, on the Allied side.) The foremost expert on the subject, Liliana Picciotto, has estimated that more than half of the arrests of Jews after 1943 were conducted by Italian rather than German authorities.¹⁰

Overall, Fabre has written a major work that, together with his earlier volume, will likely become the "go to" source on the subject of Mussolini's antisemitism, particularly where the political as opposed to the legal or juridical side is concerned. I don't know if an English translation is planned: if not, it would seem that at least some kind of summary of Fabre's insights and conclusions would be worthwhile.

It is of course possible to ask if we need this level of documentation, or (more bluntly) whether the ongoing fascination with Mussolini might not be directed elsewhere. There is something a tad morbid about the endless stream of materials on the Holocaust and the Nazi and Fascist regimes, generally. But a book like this remains important for several reasons. The first, of course, is Holocaust Denial, both the stronger form (the Holocaust never actually happened) and the weaker (it happened but it wasn't such a big deal, things like that happen all the time). A book like this, in detail and using original sources, is invaluable in refuting such claims.

Another, related reason concerns Italy specifically, and the oft-heard claim (in rough paraphrase) that "Mussolini was no bargain but he wasn't nearly as bad as Hitler." This claim, parodied by a famous exchange in *Finzi-Contini*,¹¹ likewise

¹⁰ The precise number of Italian Holocaust victims depends on whether the Jews of Rhodes, not Italian-speaking but then considered part of Italy, are included. Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust research center, cites a figure of 7,680 Italian victims, apparently excluding Rhodes. Accessed October 31, 2022, www.yadvashem.org.

¹¹ See *supra* note 3. The exchange is explicit in the film and implicit in the novel by Giorgio Bassani, originally published in 1962.

does not survive Fabre’s work. While Italy is surely very different from Germany—and Fascism from National Socialism—the differences are of degree rather than of kind, and do not in any sense excuse the Duce’s outrages. The lack of a clear line between Italian antisemitic policy before and after the German Occupation, noted by Fabre and every other serious scholar, is another side of this same coin.

A final point relates to contemporary politics, and the growing tendency to discover historical parallels—in Italy and elsewhere—to the Fascist Era. Here, a word of caution may be advisable.

There can be no doubt that recent developments, in both Europe and the United States, bring unpleasant reminders of the 1920s and 1930s and the even worse decade that followed. Putin’s Russia and Orban’s Hungary are two obvious examples. Italy itself seems perpetually to be approaching some kind of democratic breakdown: that one of the principal actors is a party with a more-or-less direct historical link to Italian Fascism makes the danger even more obvious. The Trump Movement in the United States, while too ideologically incoherent to qualify as Fascist, has sufficient features (charismatic leader, nativist imagery, association with political violence) to make one uncomfortable. On an admittedly unscientific scale of my own creation, with Mussolini at 5.0 and (say) Barack Obama at 0.0, I awarded it between 3 and 4 points.¹²

Having said the above—and without in any way excusing Trump *et al.*—there is a danger of overstating these parallels. History can be used, but also abused, and made to conform to a contemporary political agenda. I am old enough to remember the argument that we had to fight in Vietnam because it would otherwise be “another Munich,” and later that we could not fight our adversaries because it would be “another Vietnam.” Contemporary right-wingers may have certain features in common with Fascism, but they are products of a different era and very different political needs. Frequently they result from the breakdown of democratic institutions rather than (as in Germany and Italy) failure of such institutions to take hold, in the first place. Classifying them as capital—or small—f “fascists” makes it hard to appreciate these differences and frame an effective counter-strategy.

¹² See *Supra* note 1.

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Il razzismo del Duce reminds us that Fascism is not a word to be tossed around whenever convenient, but a specific historical phenomenon with a specific meaning and significance. Hitler's and Mussolini's antisemitism was not a generic response to "foreigners," but a specific hatred for a specific group in a specific historical context. It succeeded for an extended period—and almost for much longer—not because of some generic human dislike for the "other," but because hatred of Jews had deep historical roots in Germany and Italy, and appeared rational or even idealistic to the people who promoted it. Much the same can be said of other features of the Nazi and Fascist regimes.

None of this is to deny that today's ultra-nationalism, racism and ethnocentrism have important features in common with the Fascist Era. Nor is it to suggest we should not study and learn from them. But we should do so with an appreciation that Fascism was a historically situated phenomena that took place in a very particular setting with very specific consequences for very specific people. Orwell wrote famously, "He who controls the present controls the past," but he wrote this as a warning, not a suggestion.

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