

Luigi Reale, *Mussolini's Concentration Camps for Civilians. An insight into the nature of fascist racism*, London: Valentine Mitchell 2011, pp. 194.

by *Matteo Stefanori*

With this book, Luigi Reale presents to the Anglo-Saxon public an aspect of Italian history almost unknown at an international level and too often filtered through stereotyped images of Italians during the War and of the alleged softness of Fascist Regime. Already from the cover, the author makes the aim of the book very clear, in fact, above the title *Mussolini's Concentration Camps for Civilians*, there is the picture of two Italian women inside Mauthausen nazi lager. In the introduction, the author asks himself, in a rhetorical way, how little we know about the Fascist concentration camps and how little Italians themselves still know about Mussolini's apparatus of repression against civilian or military populations, or individuals persecuted for reasons of race. To this end, Reale doesn't hesitate to suggest the responsibility of Italian historians, which, for too long, have presented – and published in the textbooks – Fascist racism as a “diluted” and gentle form of the racist and anti-Semitic politics adopted in Germany, or at the most, as a way to regulate the relationship with indigenous populations of the colonial territories, conquered in the '30s. So, the author intends to catch the characteristics of Fascism's racist and anti-Semitic politics, as a specific phenomenon of that form of regime. Reale develops his analysis through the study of a particular aspect of the Fascist dictatorship, that is the setting up and the functioning of the concentration camps, created between 1940 and 1943: therefore, they appear as an instrument not only of political repression, but also of racial discrimination against civilians and ethnic and religious minorities.

There are five chapters to the book: in the first part, he analyzes the characteristics of Fascist racism and antisemitism, focusing on the race laws of 1938; in the second one, the politics of internment, confinement and concentration in the camps implemented by the regime from 1940 onwards. The first two chapters focus on analogies and differences between Fascist and Nazi racial and anti-Semitic politics. The author discusses the law promulgated in Italy on November 17th 1938, in order to outline its main characteristics; then, he compares it with the Nuremberg laws, in order to highlight the different purposes at the basis of the two laws¹. Reale claims that, if for Nazis

¹ The reference text used by the author is the documentation contained in a Fascist publication of the time, inside which both laws are mentioned: “Le leggi razziali tedesche – La difesa della

the racial issue rest on biological factors linked to the myth of a pure Aryan race, in Fascism, 1938 laws are the result of a political calculation, that was consistent with the functioning of the nationalist state and therefore more based on political/cultural principles than of “blood”. Just according to these different characteristics, in the author’s opinion, Nazism found in the practice of extermination a solution to the danger of a genetic contamination of pure German blood, while Fascism, between 1940 and 1943, created a system of camps «with the goal of isolating and removing all civilian rights from their largest minority group, the Jews» (p.51). A similar statement is then developed in the two following chapters, in which he analyzes in detail the politics of confinement and internment implemented by the Fascist regime. Reale suggests a list of the different camps opened by Italian civil and military authorities during the first three years of the War in Italy and in the territories occupied by the Italian army, intended to receive different kind of internees: war prisoners, civilian populations (particularly Slavonics from the Yugoslav occupied territories), ethnic and religious minorities, such as Gypsies and Jews. Through the specific analysis of some facilities (such as Casacalenda camp in the province of Campobasso, reconstructed thanks to the documentation found in the local archives) and the in-depth examination of the rules and of the guidelines at the base of their daily functioning, the author shows the characteristics of these instruments used by the regime, in order to put into practice its repressive and racial politics. The last part of the book focuses on the functioning camps between 1943 and 1945, that is during the Nazi occupation of the peninsula and, finally, on the activity of some organisations which helped internees in the camps, such as the Holy See, the International Red Cross or the Delasem (the main Jew rescue organisation).

At the end of his study, Reale reaches the conclusion that Hitler and Mussolini set up concentration camps for different reasons; in fact, the racist politics of the two dictatorships evolve, as we already said, in two different directions. However, according to the author, Fascist racism is not only a theoretical phenomenon or a mild form of Nazi derivation: «the [racists] laws found a concrete and destructive practical application with goals that were original in nature» (p.160). As attested by the concentration camps opened in Italy between 1940 and 1943, Fascist racism has a practical and specific application against civilians and minorities, especially those who are seen as enemies of the state, such as the Jews: «the racism legislation issued by the fascist regime was

razza del mondo”, in *Quaderni della scuola di mistica fascista “Sandro Italico Mussolini”*, (Milan: A. Nicola & Co.),1940.

just as calculated, the application of the race laws just as racist and destructive to human rights and life» (p. 3).

The merit of Reale's book is to offer to the anglo-saxon public an analysis of the nature of Fascist racism and anti-semitism, partly revising the most popular historiographical interpretations, especially abroad, and helping to debunk the false myth of the alleged kindness of Italians in war (such as the stereotyped image of the "Italians good people" – "Italiani brava gente" in Greece and in the Balkans or of the watered-down Fascist violence).

But then, it is surprising (and a little bit confusing) Reale's choice of not updating the bibliography with the studies published, not only in Italy, in the last two decades. This missed attention to the most recent results achieved by the historiography, especially in Italy, makes Reale's work inaccurate in some parts, because it doesn't consider new documents, new interpretative keys and the debate they generate. Actually, it is not very clear if the choice not to take into account most of the researches published in the last years is voluntary or not: the book is infact the reworking of the author's graduation thesis, dating back to 1994, result of his studies at Rome University La Sapienza and at London King's College. If Reale quotes only a few of the most recent works on the subject, however, at the same time, he proves to follow the evolution of the facts, like when he pieces together fragments of the trial against an Italian concentration camp's prison guard and he communicate his death, occurred in 2010!

Considering this, it is just the fulcrum of the research that is very penalized; infact, the reconstruction of the system of the camps set up in Italy between 1940 and 1943 and the draft of a complete list of the facilities known hitherto, can no longer be defined as a totally original element published "for the first time" (p.158): a scientific comparison with the important contribution on the subject by Carlo Spartaco Capogreco² (published in 2004 by Einaudi, one of the main Italian publishing houses), for example, would have been good for the content of Reale's work, adding some useful informations about the research already carried out by the author and clarifying some aspects of the law, of the typology of the internees and of the functioning of the camps. Even the reconstruction of Casacalenda camp, as original as it is, because it is based on unpublished archive documents, doesn't add nothing to that we already know about internment of foreign civilians, Jews and not, in Italy and about

² Carlo Spartaco Greco is the author of an exact reconstruction of the system of the camps set up in Italy and in the occupied territories during World War II (C.S. Capogreco, *I campi del duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940-1943)*, (Torino: Einaudi), 2004.

the laws against them, during the War³ 3. The reference to the recent Italian historiographic debate on the subject of racism/anti-semitism/Fascist repressive system would have enhanced the part concerning the peculiarities of the laws of 1938, their link with the colonial laws, the more or less “biological” criteria inside them⁴ 4. The last part, concerning the functioning camps during the Nazi occupation and the repressive instruments used against civilians and Jews in 1943-1945, clarified by recent studies on Salò Republic, would need an updated bibliography.

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³ For example, the important (but never mentioned) study by Klaus Voigt on the politics towards the foreign Jews (K. Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf: Exil in Italien 1933-1945*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1989-1993; italian translation K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, (Florence: La Nuova Italia), 1993-1996.

⁴ For example, the works by Roberto Maiocchi or by Michele Sarfatti, but also those by the french historian Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci on the political use of Fascist anti-semitism. R. Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1999; M. A. Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italie fasciste et la persécution des juifs*, Perrin, 2007; M. Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, (Torino: Einaudi) 2007 (English translation: M. Sarfatti, *The jews in Mussolini's Italy: from Equality to Persecution*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), 2006).