

A Century Since the March on Rome

January 24, 2023



Meant to consecrate the arrival in power of Benito Mussolini, and the culmination of two years of fascist violence and its gradual penetration into the machinery of the state, the March on Rome began on October 27, 1922. For the next twenty years, it would be celebrated every October, making it the “founding” event of the new regime, a key element of the “national revolution” that Mussolini said he had begun with the founding of the *Fasci di combattimento* in March, 1919. One hundred years later, the “return” of fascism has never seemed so close again in Italy. Ignazio La Russa, a historic member of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and one of the founders of *Fratelli d'Italia* in 2012, is now president of the Senate, thanks to seventeen votes from the ranks of the opposition, including that of former council president Matteo Renzi.

A proud collector of busts of Mussolini, La Russa said in September, 2022, “we are all heirs of the Duce.”¹ Lorenzo Fontana, “the new standard-bearer of Christian fundamentalism,” both homophobic and racist, and a supporter of the Greek fascist group Golden Dawn, is President of the Chamber of Deputies.² The formation of the government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the first woman to hold the position, as the national and international press has repeatedly pointed out, has confirmed the gloomiest of forecasts. The names of the ministries should also get the attention of informed observers: Economic Development and *Made in Italy*; Education and *Merit*; Family, *Birth*, and Equal Opportunities; Agriculture and *Food Sovereignty*. And, in the palette of those chosen to compose the new executive, note the presence of Francesco Lollobrigida, brother-in-law of Giorgia Meloni, who in 2012 inaugurated a mausoleum to Rodolfo Graziani, the ‘Butcher of Fezzan,’ general of the Republic of Salò, the fascist regime established on September 23, 1943 by Mussolini in the part of Italian territory occupied by the Germans.

The idea of Italy that the new executive intends to promote, a government presented by Meloni as “fully representative of the popular will,” was clearly expressed on October 25, 2022 during the inaugural speech of the President of the Council (Meloni chose to use the title in the masculine form). The obligatory reference to the passage of the racial law, defined as “the lowest point in Italian history,” and more generally her remarks on her relationship with fascism (“I have never felt any sympathy or closeness to anti-democratic regimes, to any of these regimes, including fascism”) attempted to relegate fascism to the past. She seems to have forgotten, though, about her refusal to remove the tricolor flame from the logo of her party, and more generally reality of her militancy in neo-fascist ranks, which she still proudly claim. Her discourse generally links to the history of post-

war neo-fascism (“I come from a history relegated to the margins of the Republic”), and openly targets anti-fascism, in the name of which, she said, “innocent young people were killed with a wrench,” thus making those opposed to fascism as the real and only danger to democracy. And finally, she used a femonationalist,³ right-wing, pseudo-feminist discourse that appeals to the values of “Western civilization” and to her Judeo-Christian roots as the basis of her identity politics.⁴

Post-fascism, understood as the continuity of fascism in its transformation, is today in power in Italy ... as if nothing had happened. An anomaly? No doubt, considering the millions of pages that Italian historiography has dedicated to fascism and the debates that it provokes. And yet, as Francesco Filippi wrote in an effective book entitled, *But Why Are We Still Fascists?*, the “rumors” about fascism and its history persist, not only in the very minority of those who continue to commemorate with a raised arm the October March on Rome, but more generally in Italian society as a whole. Giorgia Meloni referred in her inaugural speech to the “national pacification that the democratic right has always desired.” She continued, “The political community from which I come has always taken steps towards a complete and conscious historicization of the 20th century.” Perhaps it is time to look at how Italian society has dealt with its past in order to better grasp the apparent anomaly of a victory for post-fascism.

A Past that Won't Go Away

The daily *Il Tempo* published a photo of Benito Mussolini on its front page with the headline, “It’s the Eternal Mussolini, the Man of the Year” while the election campaign for the 2018 national elections was in full swing. The article accompanying the photo was written by Marcello Veneziani, a sharp pen of the Italian right and author of a small book on the culture of the right. “A duce,” he wrote, “who has been dead for more than seventy years is full of more vitality than the president in charge.” Veneziani presented Mussolini as the unifying element of the country in the face of the proclaimed anti-fascism of an Italian political class “without faith or law.”

A few weeks earlier, Maurizio Sguanci, an elected member of the Democratic Party of Florence, wrote in a post on Facebook: “No one in Italy has done more in 20 years than Mussolini.” We could give countless examples. Such as that of Pier Luigi Biondi, member of *Forza Italia* and mayor of the city of L’Aquila, chatting in a Facebook group emblazoned with the colors of the flag of the Republic of Salò; or that of Genoa City Councilor Sergio Antonino Gambino, who, at the end of April, 2018 commemorated the dead of the Republic of Salò with the passive support of Marco Bucci, mayor of the city since June, 2017; or that of the city council of the city of Todi, where sat a member of *CasaPound*, a movement defining itself as fascism for the third millennium, decided not to support the celebrations of April 25 (day of the insurrection of Milan in 1945 and ever since the anniversary of the liberation of Italy), claiming that they would be “too political” or that of the two schools that merged in the town of Noicattoro (Bari) joining their two names, giving birth to the school A. Gramsci-N. Pende; a senseless decision that combined the name of Antonio Gramsci, the Communist activist imprisoned by Mussolini and symbol of anti-fascist struggle, with that of Nicola Pende, eugenicist doctor, early fascist, and theorist of “race” praised by the Fascist regime.

Of course, one could argue that more than seventy years have passed, that there are almost no witnesses left, or that the generational leap has accentuated what the historian Alberto de Bernardi once called the “fragility of the social roots” of anti-fascism and its “growing difficulty” in constituting and nourishing a “shared memory” of the past, after the end of the Cold War.⁵ But isn’t the indifference towards the history of fascism, precisely in the country that saw its birth, the most palpable sign of what the historian Angelo d’Orsi, called, in *Il Manifesto* (June 16, 2018), “ignorance,” attributing to it two different meanings: “A ‘weak’ meaning, elementary: not having knowledge about the past; a basic ignorance with regard to the facts of the near or distant past. And a ‘strong’ meaning, that is to say, to know and not to take into account”?

Memory Fades, Forgers Repaint History

This ignorance, in the strongest sense, tinged with indifference, is an indication of the weight of the political grammar of the Italian right over the last thirty years. How can we fail to appreciate the victory, for a generation, of the great cultural revision carried out by the “plural right”? From the moment it came to power in the early 1990s, it placed the systematic destruction of anti-fascism as a political and cultural reference high on its agenda. A “motley group of arrogant politicians and intellectuals who have renounced their duty,” as the historian Gabriele Turi wrote, have imposed their reading of the history of contemporary Italy⁶; a reading that sees in a “Communism camouflaged as anti-fascism” the only real danger that would have threatened, and, for some, could still threaten, Italian society; one that has made anti-Communism and its corollary anti-anti-fascism, its historical paradigm. An operation facilitated by distance from facts, which inevitably produced the revision of the canons with which they had been analyzed until then; by the death of its most important actors, some of whom were historians; and by the arrival on the political scene of a generation whose parents had not lived through fascism.

This rereading of the past is not, however, simple revision, “an indispensable moment of historical research,” but rather revisionism. For it is based on a “moral-historical” orientation that most often aims to condemn previous interpretations on the basis of a “political battle.” It is true that since 1989, a symbolic year if ever there was one (with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the bicentenary of the French Revolution), all European societies have been affected to varying degrees by a revisionist wave that placed revolutionary phenomena in the dock. In Italy, however, revisionism was made possible by the decomposition of the post-war political field; by the disappearance of the “Republic born of resistance,” making the indistinctness into which the values and utopias attached to the experience of anti-fascist struggles even more blatant.

Renzo De Felice is undoubtedly the figurehead of Italian revisionist historiography, like the philosopher and historian Ernst Nolte in Germany. This revisionism is based on the idea that “the history of fascism was somehow taken hostage by the culture of the Italian left, hegemonized by the CP.”⁷ His mission is to delegitimize the historiographic production of historians with a Communist background or sympathies and to condemn what De Felice called the “fetish of anti-fascism.” In the preface to his biography of Mussolini, *Mussolini l'alleato, Vol. 1, 1940-1943*, the Italian historian severely criticized this “essentially ideological (and often openly and aggressively political) historiography,” while emphasizing the shortcomings of the anti-fascist parties, which he considered to be a mere reissue of the National Fascist Party: a minority in Italian society, they would have imposed themselves on the country despite their lack of a popular base. The revisionist interpretation attacks the Resistance, criticizing in particular the support given by non-Communist anti-fascists to the Communist Party, which would have given the latter the democratic credentials it needed. Thus, De Felice, in the book interview *Rosso e Nero*, wrote: “Neither the Fascists, nor the anti-Fascists, nor the Communists, nor the anti-Communists are legitimate in explaining to people what happened and how important it is for the history of Italy today. And besides, people don't trust them anymore, they consider them to be the peddlars of myths they don't believe in anymore and to which they attribute a good part of the situation that Italy is in today.” In the name of a “de-ideologized,” “dispassionate,” “serene,” and, above all, “disinterested” history, the revisionist reading of the past and, in particular, of fascism, anti-fascism, and the Resistance, has taken hold. This rereading was easy to impose since it was part of a long tradition which, since the autobiographical writings of fascist hierarchs were published at the end of World War II, tended to depict fascism in reassuring terms: a regime “outside the cone of darkness of the Shoah,” at best a “lesser evil,” at worst nothing like German National Socialism.⁸

In this reading the Italian fascists only made the “irreparable mistake” of allying themselves with

Hitler and entering the war, but whose “honest and hard-working people, physiologically and unconsciously fascist because it was normal that way,” were all in all “good people” (*Italiani brava gente*). A common opinion spread among the petty and middle bourgeoisie, well rendered by the figure of Gennaro Jovine, a character in the play by the Neapolitan Eduardo de Filippo, who only aspires to live in peace and waits for the “night to pass” (*adda passà ‘a nuttata*). In this sense, the means of communication (general public press like *Gente* and *Oggi*) and above all television, are the extraordinary vehicles of both “identity” and “memory,” and have played a cardinal role in the process of collective self-absolution. Re-perpetuating the “rehabilitating vulgate” of the “good man” (*buon uomo*) Mussolini, Italian television became a vector of an “indulgent memory” of the regime, offering the reassuring vision of a fascism presented as “necessary” to the “redemption of national identity” and to the subsequent struggle against Communism. This “Italian ideology” spread with all the more ease because it had been made its own, in part, by Christian Democrat governments, and so was received with complacency outside the borders of the Peninsula.

The self-absorbed tendency of the Italian media, however, became more pronounced in the 1980s, when the image of a fascism “with a human face” and an anti-fascism “blind” to other enemies of democracy, began to spread. In 1987, De Felice, Mussolini’s biographer, insisted in two interviews conducted by Giuliano Ferrara, soon to be a loyal supporter of the right-wing politician Silvio Berlusconi, on the need for historiographic revisionism in a period of “political innovation,” calling for the laying of the foundations of the Second Italian Republic.⁹ The cultural and political baggage and traditions of struggle of the Italian labor movement were seen as obstacles to these projects of “innovative” transformations. The Socialist Bettino Craxi, president of the Council in the mid-1980s, was the “protagonist of this new ‘zeitgeist,’” to which De Felice clearly referred. The delegitimization of anti-fascism was also used to undermine the foundations of the Constitution, which had emerged from the Resistance, with the declared aim of founding a new, presidentialist republic, free of the utopias of the post-war period.

The Italian media not only accommodated this transformation, but in a way directed it. When Gianfranco Fini modernized the MSI to make it a more presentable political formation, he never tired of repeating this idea: the program of *Alleanza Nazionale*, the new movement which came out of the Fiuggi Congress in 1995, was entitled, “Let’s think of Italy, the future is today” (*Pensiamo l’Italia, il domani c’è già*). Fini called for a “national reconciliation” that would go beyond fascism and anti-fascism. The implicit bias of this position, as philosopher Norberto Bobbio has pointed out, was that it *de facto* put fascism and anti-fascism on equal footing—an erasure of differences that takes the form of a “retroactive reconciliation.”

A Murky Pond

Renzo De Felice died in 1996. In the meantime, revisionism reached its “supreme stage,” becoming *inversism* (a radical inversion of values), as it was called by Angelo D’Orsi. This “new historiography” has been particularly successful in the re-reading of the Resistance. One thinks of the extraordinary diffusion of books on the “lies” of the Resistance, its “dirty” war, and its “crimes,” by Giampaolo Pansa, who proudly declared himself a revisionist. Neither better nor worse than the others, fascists and anti-fascists, Resistance fighters and fighters of the Salò Republic, are all represented in this historiography as equally guilty and therefore equally innocent; a topos taken up by Giorgia Meloni in her inaugural speech. Wasn’t the objective that De Felice set for Italian historiography in his last book to establish “a general framework that places the Resistance and the Salò Republic in a unified history of Italy,” thus avoiding the implications of specific involvement in one of the opposing camps in terms of socio-political imaginary, ethics, worldview, and objectives?¹⁰

In addition to this historiographical offensive, the right-wing has mobilized repertoires of political action to erase “the misdeeds and infamy of fascism” from memory and history. Of course, one

recalls the statements of Berlusconi, insisting that Mussolini was a “great statesman” who never killed anyone and sent the anti-fascists on vacation and denounced the “permanent civil war” waged by the Communists in the peninsula; an expression taken up again by Giorgia Meloni (*The Washington Post*, May 27, 1994).

More important were the attacks on school programs. In 2000, the regional government of Lazio, led by Francesco Storace (National Alliance Party), appointed a commission of experts to censor “factionous” school textbooks. In 2002, the same political agenda targeted “the ideological vision that has often altered irrefutable historical facts for political purposes” at the national level, in the name of a “non-ideological” reading of history.¹¹ In the same year, *Forza Italia* writer and politician Gianni Baget Bozzo announced his intention to abolish April 25 (the Anniversary of the Liberation, Anniversary of the Resistance) as a national holiday, while National Alliance in the Liguria Regional Council proposed to cancel public funding to the Institutes of Resistance History scattered in the north of the Peninsula, in order to create a single regional Institute of Contemporary History.

In 2008, Marcello dell’Utri announced in a thunderous YouTube spot that “the history books are still too conditioned to the rhetoric of the Resistance, they will be revised, if we were to win the elections. This is a thesis that we will address with particular attention.” A year later, he stated: “Mussolini, an extraordinary man and of great culture, lost the war because he was too good: He was not at all a dictator like Stalin” (*Repubblica*, May 5, 2009 quoted by Mimmo Franzinelli). In March, 2011, five right-wing senators proposed, in the name of “freedom of opinion,” to repeal Article XII of the Italian Constitution, prohibiting the reconstitution in any form of a fascist party.

This *inversism* would not have been able to impose its mark on the common opinion of the *Ventennio* if it had not also been emulated by the left, which has shown itself to be receptive to a rereading of the past, in particular of the period of resistance and anti-fascism, calling for the creation of a “shared memory,” which was to be the basis for the legitimacy of the alternation of governments of the two political poles that have been fighting for power between 1994 and 2018. A key moment in this rallying was the speech by Luciano Violante, in 1996 in the Chamber of Deputies. Elected from the left after the electoral victory of the so-called Olive Tree (*Ulivo*) led by the former Christian Democrat Romano Prodi, he then became president of the Chamber. An ambiguous speech linking understanding for the “children of Salò” to the need to found a “national” narrative of the history of the Italian Resistance, but a speech in line with the transformation of the Communist Party into the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS - Democratic Party of the Left) at its 20th Congress in 1991. The PCI, which became the PDS, then resolutely broke away from the simple idea, recalled by the Marxist intellectual Rossana Rossanda, of a “left thought in terms of equality” and emancipation, to join the Social-Democratic (PDS) governing party, and then the conservative Democratic Party, whose secretary, Achille Occhetto, said, “We are now something else,” and later in 1991,

[F]rom now on we will only answer for the merits and mistakes of the PDS. I hope that today it is clear to everyone that the emblematic choice of the Berlin Wall was not the result of an improvisation, but the great metaphor of the end of an era in the East, but also in the West.... Without a clear vision of the historical moment, this turning point would have been impossible. With this effective understanding of the new era that was opening up before us, we won the right on the ground to say, now that’s enough. Let’s move forward (*L’Unità*, October 27, 1991).

A few months before Luciano Violante’s speech, Francesco Rutelli, the “left” mayor of the city of Rome, decided to add his stone to the monument of “national reconciliation” by suggesting to name a street after Giuseppe Bottai, the Fascist Minister of Education who had led the persecution of the Jews in schools and universities starting in 1938.

Bertrand Méheust describes our time as a “soft apocalypse,” in which the incantatory invocation of the past, and in particular of the “murderous violence” of Nazism and fascism, “exempts our society from the radical examination of conscience which it would be well advised to carry out as soon as possible.”¹² He then defended the nostalgia of a time when solidarity, resistance, struggle, and above all, hope were the experience and horizon of all those who fight for a radically different world.¹³ However, the “sea of hope” represented by the war of resistance has gradually—but no less brutally—turned into an indistinct puddle.

Today, revisionism seems to have won the day, if not in historiography, at least in widespread public opinion. Perhaps then, in order to resist the irresistible, it is necessary to get to work and reeducate the Italian population about its own history. The threats against those who play a fundamental role in this work can only be an incentive to continue tirelessly on this path.

Notes

1. Tommaso Coluzzi, “Ignazio La Russa dice che siamo tutti eredi del Duce,” *Fanpage*, 15 Sep. 2022.
2. Renato Fioretti, “Governo Meloni, si salvi chi può,” *MicroMega*, 25 Oct. 2022.
3. Sarah Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Right. The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.
4. “Il Presidente Meloni alla Camera dei Deputati per le dichiarazioni,” Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Governo Italiano, Oct. 25, 2022.
5. Alberto de Bernardi, *Una dittatura moderna. Il fascismo come problema storico*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2001, p. 1
6. Gabriele Turi, “La storia sono io,” *Passato e Presente*, N°52, Jan.-Apr. 2001, p. 83.
7. Angelo D’Orsi, “Dal revisionism al rovescismo,” in Angelo del Boca (ed.), *La storia negata. Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2010, p. 333.
8. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation,” in Helmut Dubiel, Gabriel Motzkin (eds.) 2004, *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices in a Comparative Perspective*, London, Frank Cass, p. 137.
9. Renzo De Felice, “De Felice e il superamento dell’antiFascismo”, *Corriere della sera*, Jan. 8-Dec. 27, 1987; in Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi*, (Bari, Laterza 2005), pp. 252-254.
10. Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato. II. La guerra civile (1943-1945)*, Turin, Einaudi, 1997.
11. “Risoluzione 7-00163. Approvata dalla VII Commissione della Camera l’11 dicembre 2002”.
12. Bertrand Méheust, *La nostalgie de l’occupation*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2012).
13. Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le retour du tragique*, (Paris, Seuil, 1967).