

**THE CIRCULATION OF A «FASCIST LITERATURE»  
IN THE ITALIAN DEMOCRACY. THE CASE STUDIES OF  
GRAZIANI'S «I DEFENDED THE FATHERLAND» AND  
BOTTAI'S «TWENTY YEARS AND ONE DAY»**

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**Abstract**

In an article published in *The Wiener Library Bulletin* in 1951, the historian and former partisan Giorgio Vaccarino broached the subject of the «fascist literature» circulating in Italy. Three years later, the anti-fascist literary scholar Giuseppe Tramarollo revisited the question in *La Voce Repubblicana*, declaring the dissemination of texts with a clear fascist matrix to be a threat to Italian democracy. This essay seeks to shed light on this circulation, which has long been underestimated by historiography and was downplayed by the post-1945 fascist milieu, which sought to portray itself as being excluded from the political arena. Without wishing to overstate the importance of fascist literature in the post-war period, this article aims to describe its characteristics while also highlighting the tolerance of the authorities and the complicity of the publishing market, which, by ignoring political or moral considerations, offered a platform to many fascist personalities.

**Keywords**

Neo-fascism; book circulation; fascist legacy; Rodolfo Graziani; Giuseppe Bottai.

## Abstract

No artigo publicado em The Wiener Library Bulletin em 1991, o historiador e antigo resistente Giorgio Vaccarino abordou a questão da «literatura fascista» que circulava em Itália. Três anos mais tarde, o académico da área da literatura antifascista Giuseppe Tramarollo revisitou a questão em La Voce Repubblicana, declarando-se a disseminação de textos com uma clara matriz fascista era uma ameaça à democracia italiana. Este ensaio procura lançar luz sobre esta circulação, que foi durante muito tempo subestimada pela historiografia e desvalorizada pelo meio fascista pós-1945, que procurou apresentar-se como excluído da arena política. Sem pretender sobrevalorizar a importância da literatura fascista no pós-guerra, este artigo tem como objetivo descrever as suas características, salientando também a tolerância das autoridades e a cumplicidade do mercado editorial, que, ignorando considerações políticas ou morais, ofereceu uma plataforma a muitas personalidades fascistas.

## Palavras-chave

Neofascismo; circulação literária; legado fascista; Rodolfo Graziani; Giuseppe Bottai.

## Introduction

Immediately after the Second World War, the Italian editorial market was flooded with books written by fascists. Looking only at the period 1945-1950, we find that there were at least forty texts that might be categorised as part of this cultural phenomenon. One of the earliest is a memoir titled *La Guerra, questo sporco affare* (War, This Dirty Business, 1946) by Adriano Bolzoni, a militant of the RSI (Italian Social Republic) who later became a film director and screenwriter. The memoir was published by the small Roman publisher De Luigi. Also noteworthy is the collection of articles, *Chi si ferma è perduto* (Who Stops is Lost, 1948), written by a journalist named Giovanni Tonelli for the fascist weekly *La rivolta ideale* who had expressed enthusiastic admiration for Mussolini during the dictatorship (Pardini 2008).

There were also several early attempts at historical reconstruction, although these were highly substandard in terms of methodology. In 1947, Ugo Manunta, a journalist with close ties to Mussolini, released *La caduta degli angeli* (The Fall of the Angels). Another publication of the period was *La Repubblica di Mussolini* (The Republic of Mussolini)

by Felice Bellotti, who had served in the Italian SS from 1943 to 1945 (Hale 2012: 474-476).

There were also two contributions by Mussolini's widow, Rachele Guidi. The most important one, *La mia vita con Benito* (My Life with Benito), which was realized with the help of Giorgio Pini as ghost-writer, dates back to 1948 and appeared for one of the most prominent Italian publishing house, Mondadori (Luzzatto 1998: 147). Pini, who had been the editor-in-chief of the Duce's newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, between 1936 and 1943, authored in his turn two volumes of memoirs (Pini 1950a and 1950b) after the war. Even Mussolini's valet, Quinto Navarra, published in 1946 his memoirs with the help of two prominent figures in the Italian cultural scene who for many years had been closed to fascism: Leo Longanesi and Indro Montanelli (Liucci 2016: 41).

Furthermore, the aftermath of the war witnessed numerous notorious forgeries. One example were the alleged memoirs of Roberto Farinacci, one of the most violent and intransigent exponents of fascism (Di Figlia 2007), who was killed during the wave of summary justice at the end of the conflict (Dondi 1999). In the supposed memoirs Farinacci expressed regret for his wrongdoings. The respected publishing house Angelo Rizzoli printed the book without hesitation but was later ordered by the Court of Milan to destroy all copies<sup>(1)</sup>. Another noteworthy forgery was the fictional Churchill-Mussolini correspondence, which included documents claimed to have been signed by Mussolini, as well as letters from Victor Emmanuel III, Hitler, De Gasperi and Churchill, among others (Franzinelli 2015: 7, 13). Finally, there were the fake diaries of the Duce himself, created not only for monetary gain but also to propagate a sympathetic portrayal of him, these diaries were so well received in post-1945 Italy that Bompiani, another major publishing house, reprinted them in 2010 (Franzinelli 2011).

Despite several studies attempting to provide an overview of these so-called «black memoirs» (Isnenghi 1989; Liucci 1996; Germinario 1999; Chiarini 2009), the impact of fascist literary production on shaping the public memory of fascism (Chiarini 2005; Focardi 2005 and 2020) remains insufficiently explored. Historiography have not been prepared to challenge fully the fascist rhetoric, which has managed to present itself as marginal

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(1) See Verdict of 22 July 1955, Ufficio d'Istruzione penale of Milan Tribunal in AS – BNR, ARC 20.74 “corrispondenza varia Lettera f-g”, folder no. 2 “Farinacci Mola Adriana”.

and even excluded from the political and cultural sphere of republican Italy, despite the fact that this was not the case (Turi 2013). This article aims to fill at least some of the gaps in our knowledge by focusing in particular on the most significant publishing activities and the contents of certain examples of this «fascist literature», as the Piedmontese scholar Giorgio Vaccarino labelled it in the *The Wiener Library Bulletin* (1951) (a newsletter that closely monitored the resurgence of far-right movements in the public sphere).

Naturally, there is no wish to overstate the importance of fascist literature in the post-war period, but this article wants to illustrate how actively the fascist front took part in the «war of memory» (Focardi 2005) which started in the very last hours of the conflict. The expression «war of memory», used in the Italian context by historian Filippo Focardi, refers to the process of re-elaboration of those events that had just occurred: the dictatorship, the world war and the civil war. This process of re-elaboration involved all the anti-fascist political families, such as the Communist, the Socialist and the Catholic, as well as the so-called «anti-fascist front» (Lupo 2004), whose representatives opposed fascism and even more anti-fascism. But, as the article will illustrate, in that «war of memory» the fascist too had a role. Hence the need to focus the analysis on the period 1945-1950 ca. It was in fact in those years, marked by the initial phase of the Cold War, when a new, at least presumed, threat appeared on the public scene, the communist one, that the first wave of the re-elaboration of the past took place.

But the article is not only intended to give an account of the salient aspects of the fascist literature, it wants also to highlight the tolerance of the authorities and the complicity of the publishing market that by ignoring political or moral considerations, offered a platform to many fascist personalities. It will do it through the analysis of two significant case studies: the book *Ho difeso la patria* (I Defended the Fatherland) written by the RSI Minister of Defence, Rodolfo Graziani in 1948 and *Vent'anni e un giorno* (Twenty Years and One Day) (Bottai, 1949) by Giuseppe Bottai, the former Minister of Corporations and National Education with a controversial biography, both published by the Milanese publisher Garzanti. These volumes differ from each other in terms of contents but also in terms of impact on the readers. Even the life of the two authors both before and after 1945 is significantly different. Yet the analysis of these two books proves particularly valuable to cast light on some patterns of the fascist literature, its circulation and the climate of indulgence towards such a production.

A final introductory note seems necessary (it always is when a work decides to turn to post-1945 fascism), it concerns precisely the use of the term fascism itself. Here the word encompasses those who had embraced the fascist cause, at least in the years 1922-1943, and who were not disposed to reject the political ideology at the end of the conflict, despite any reservations they might have had about Mussolini (such as his decision to ally with Hitler and involve Italy in the war), and even though it was unlikely that fascism would ever regain influence in Europe after 1945.

### **The European context and the specificities of the Italian case**

The establishment of the MSI (Italian Social Movement), a party with clear ties to fascism, immediately following the end of the Second World War (Parlato 2006; Mammone 2015; Tonietto 2019), raises the significant risk of perceiving the Italian case as entirely exceptional. While it is true that Italy was unique in many respects, it is nevertheless essential to place it within a broader framework that encompasses at least the rest of Western Europe. By doing so, it becomes easier to assess accurately the magnitude of the increase in fascist literary production and to approach the ambiguous, if not lenient, stance of the Italian authorities with greater caution.

Let us examine the cases of Léon Degrelle, Maurice Bardèche and Oswald Mosley as examples. Léon Degrelle, a leader of the Belgian pro-fascist Rexist movement and a member of Waffen SS Walloon Legion that fought on the Eastern Front (Conway 1993), was pursued by the Belgian authorities after 1945. He found refuge in Spain, where he spent the remainder of his life (Del Hierro 2022) and wrote two memoirs, *La Campagne de Russie* (The Russian Campaign, 1949) published in France, and *La cohue de 1940* (The 1940 Scramble, 1950), printed in Switzerland. These were banned by the Belgian authorities, and the prohibition on *La cohue* was extended by the Swiss and French authorities upon Belgium's request (Martini 2023).

In France, Maurice Bardèche, one of the most prominent figures of post-1945 fascism and an early Holocaust denier, faced legal consequences for his writings. In particular, his *Nuremberg ou la terre promise* (Nuremberg or the Promised Land, 1948) prompted action from judicial authorities,

who accused him of «apologie de meurtre» (apology for murder), in a rare instance in which the 1881 law guaranteeing the freedom of the press did not apply. Only the intervention of the French President of the Republic, René Coty, prevented Bardèche from being imprisoned (Shields 2007: 57).

On the other hand, in the UK, Oswald Mosley, the undisputed leader of the British Union of Fascists in the inter-war period (Thurlow 1998a), was permitted to reactivate a fascist-inspired party, the Union Movement, and resume his political agenda through the publication of a party newspaper, *The Union*, and several pamphlets (Macklin 2007). Nevertheless, he faced widespread disregard and ostracism. Even within a context that valued freedom of expression and emphasised the strength of democratic culture (which had already been seriously tested in the 1930s), the BBC considered Mosley *persona non grata* for a long time. In fact, the broadcaster did not air an interview with him until 1968, coinciding with the publication of his biography, *My Life* (Thurlow 1998b: 245). The British situation therefore contrasted sharply with that of Italy, where in 1951, one of the country's most popular magazines, *Oggi*, saw fit to feature Benito Mussolini on its cover (Baldassini 2008: 55).

The Italian situation thus stands out for several reasons. Only in Italy could such a significant number of books with a fascist orientation be published. But the Italian case is also unique due to the remarkable ease with which these books circulated. All this is quite astonishing considering the legal measures implemented by the governments of the post-war period to prevent the re-emergence of fascism.

Let us try to summarize them. The Lieutenant Legislative Decree No. 149 of 26 April 1945 not only sanctioned with confinement or internment anyone who committed «acts aimed at encouraging the resurgence, under any form or name, of the dissolved fascist party», but also those who praised «publicly with any written or verbal manifestation the people, institutions and ideologies» that could be linked to fascism (art. no. 3)<sup>(2)</sup>. Two years later, on 3 December 1947, Law No. 1546 applied further sanctions to those who engaged in apology of fascism (and of the monarchy, which had been forced to abdicate following the institutional referendum of 2 June 1946, in which Italians voted for a republican form of government). Article no. 6 specified that individuals who «by means of the press or otherwise, publicly incite[d]» the reestablishment of a

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(2) See Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, no. 51, 28 April 1945.

fascist party would face imprisonment ranging from one to eight years. Article no. 7 stipulated prison terms of six months to three years for those who glorified «persons and ideologies associated with fascism» through the aforementioned means, as well as for anyone engaged in «manifestations of a fascist character» (such as parades in fascist uniform). Finally, in 1952 the Scelba Law – named after its proposer, who served as Minister of the Interior and was a leading figure in the party of Christian Democracy – was introduced to combat the re-emergence of a fascist party or movement, which was explicitly prohibited by the Italian Constitution in its 12th transitory and final provision. The law also targeted forms of apology of fascism.

It is in the long lifespan of the fascist regime that we must therefore look for the causes of this proliferation of so-called fascist literature. Twenty years of dictatorship, to which was added a two-year period marked by civil war, cannot be erased by so-called transitional justice, it matters not much whether the retributive measures enacted were more or less severe (in the Italian case, incidentally, historiography agrees that with the exception of the first months in which the purge was particularly harsh, a lenient attitude prevailed from late 1945 onwards, made evident by the generous amnesty proclaimed in June 1946) (Woller 1997). That many Italians therefore perceived themselves as fascists and wrote favourable or at least sympathetic memories of fascism and felt the need to justify their actions is quite understandable. But how to explain, this sort of contradiction between the seemingly firm stance of the Italian government towards the re-emergence of fascism with the tolerance exhibited by the democratic system towards the circulation of such a texts?

A partial explanation can be found in the more general attitude shown towards the re-activation of fascist movements, attested by the decision to consider the establishment of the MSI in December 1946 as a legitimate act. Those attitude was in its turn strictly linked to the prevailing anti-communist sentiment that characterised the early stages of the Cold War and led fascist formations, and fascism as a whole, to be considered something of a secondary threat, to be opposed on a formal level but without devoting great resources to combat it (Brogi 2011).

It should also be noted the complicity of the judiciary. The measures taken to counter fascist literature appear to have been irregular, targeting only the publication of texts that could unquestionably be attributed to the fascist movement. For example, the editor of the aforementioned

fascist weekly *Rivolta ideale* was accused of apology of fascism because of his articles, and the book written by the then MSI's representative Pino Rauti, *Benito Mussolini*, published in 1955 as a supplement to the fascist magazine *asso di Bastoni*, was confiscated<sup>(3)</sup>. However, texts with a clear apologetic and revisionist bias that were printed by publishing houses that were not directly related to the fascist front were tolerated. After all, in terms of manpower and mentality the judiciary was still linked to the previous regime and this fostered a tolerant attitude in the courts towards defendants accused of acts of apology of fascism (Meniconi, Neppi Modona 2022).

The gradual establishment of a specific legal interpretation also played a role. According to it, penalties for acts of apology of fascism were to be imposed only when such acts materially promoted – where the adverb plays a key role – the reconstitution of a fascist party (Sentence no 1. of Constitutional Court of January 1957). The publication of books, even by nationally renowned publishers, would not fall under this category.

A general underestimation of the phenomenon by the institutions was also decisive. Similarly to how the MSI was not initially recognised as a party with a clear fascist ideology (at least not by Christian Democracy) (Martini 2023: 300-301), the circulation of apologetic and revisionist texts was not at first held to be dangerous. The authorities likely took into account the small number of readers in postwar Italy (Vicari 1957), in so doing underestimating the various ways in which books could (and can) influence people. As historiography and social sciences have clearly attested, books «communicate» even when briefly skimmed, when made available in bookshops, libraries, and party associations, when their contents are summarised in newspapers and magazines (whose sales increased exponentially in the postwar period), or when they are read aloud in social gatherings (Chartier 1989; Darnton 2009, Bellingradt, Salman 2017).

### **How fast can books run?**

The circulation of fascist books in post-1945 Italy was primarily promoted by the MSI. A notable example is the case of the *Opera omnia*

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(3) ACS, MI, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Divisione affari generali e riservati, categorie annuali, 1955, box 39, folder “Neofascismo. Roma”.

*di Benito Mussolini*, a collection of all the writings and speeches of the dictator dating back to December 1901 and his initial involvement in politics. A similar literary effort had been undertaken during the dictatorship, with the Duce himself selecting what to publish and passing the material to Valentino Piccoli and the Milanese publisher Hoepli (Decleva 2001: 124). The project fitted perfectly within the logic of a dictatorship that had created a veritable «consent factory» [*fabbrica del consenso*] (Cannistraro 1975), but something similar was harder to imagine in post-1945 Italy. The new effort was spearheaded by the Susmel family, and initially conceived by Edoardo Susmel, a politician from Fiume (now Rijeka) and councillor of the Chamber of Fascists and Corporations from 1939 to 1943. After Edoardo's death in 1948, his son Duilio, a historian and journalist, continued the undertaking with great determination and published the first volume in the spring of 1951 and the thirty-sixth and final volume in 1980 (not counting eight volumes of appendices).

Apart from Edoardo Susmel's vision and the resolve of his son, the publication of the *Opera omnia* also relied heavily on the determination of the Stianti brothers, Alfredo and Raffaello, who established the publishing house La Fenice (The Phoenix, an evocative name that perhaps hinted at desire for a fascist renewal), specifically for the project, after that both the Milanese publisher Garzanti<sup>(4)</sup> and the smaller Roman publisher Tosi had rejected it<sup>(5)</sup>. The Stianti brothers invested significant sums of money into the venture and designed a book cover featuring Mussolini's relief against a completely black background, aiming to evoke nostalgia and appeal to the sentiments of fascist sympathisers. They were presumably persuaded by the opportunity to support an initiative to which they were politically aligned and by the conviction that Mussolini's words still appealed to many Italians. The *Opera omnia*, after all, served a political purpose. It aimed to provide comfort to fascist nostalgics by presenting them with the words of Mussolini, but it was also able to engage less radical Italians who were curious about the

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(4) AS-BNR, ARC 20.7 "Opera Omnia di Mussolini. Corrispondenza", Folder no. 7 "Corrispondenza G., Garzanti Aldo", See Garzanti's letters of 2 May 1950 and 23 May 1950.

(5) AS-BNR, ARC 20.7 "Opera Omnia di Mussolini. Corrispondenza", Folder no. 4 "Corrispondenza F., Formichella Italo". Susmel's letter to Mussolini family's lawyer, Italo Formichella, 18 January 1950.

dictator's writings and speeches. The absence of critical introductory notes and textual apparatus was therefore intentional, as it discouraged an analytical approach.

The success of the *Opera omnia* was greatly facilitated by advertisements and highly positive reviews from pro-fascist newspapers<sup>(6)</sup>. However, the MSI played an even more crucial role by enabling readers to pay for the collection in instalments. The party apparently made a direct deal with the publisher, with its constituency parties committing to purchasing all the volumes as they became available (Rossi 2003: 164-165). Even as late as 1969, Nino Tripodi, the MSI's deputy national secretary in charge of cultural affairs, continued to recommend Mussolini's writings and speeches in the version edited by Susmel to his comrades (Zinconone 1969).

However, the circulation of fascist and pro-fascist books was also helped by popular publishing houses with efficient distribution systems. Garzanti, despite rejecting the publication of the *Opera omnia* due to cost concerns, did not hesitate to release other books with a clear fascist stance. These included Edoardo Susmel's *Mussolini e il suo tempo* (Mussolini and his Time), published posthumously in 1948, which compared Mussolini's talents to those of Galileo, da Vinci and Columbus (Susmel 1948: 2). Other examples are the memoirs of Giovanni Dolfi, titled *Con Mussolini nella tragedia* (With Mussolini in the tragedy, 1949), and those afore-mentioned of Bottai, *Vent'anni e un giorno*.

It remains difficult to establish how many copies of these books were actually sold. However, it is important to remember that at this time Garzanti was a relatively new publisher determined to compete with more established ones like Rizzoli and Mondadori (Piazzoni 2021: 150). We can therefore suppose that the books would have been on sale in major Italian bookshops. Moreover, in the case of Graziani's memoir, *Ho difeso la patria* we have more precise data. Between 1947 and 1951, eighteen editions were released, and 30,000 copies were sold in the first few months alone<sup>(7)</sup>. Considering that a few decades earlier, between 1926 and 1943, the series of Mondadori thriller novels, *Gialli economici* printed an average

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(6) See, for example, Anna Dinella, "Libri e riviste", *Nazionalismo sociale*, July 1951; Silvio Vitale, "Interventismo di Mussolini", *asso di bastoni*, 12 August 1951; Vittorio Vettori, "Un nuovo scrittore si sta affermando", *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 7 November 1952; Giuseppe Pensabene, "Mussolini scrittore e oratore", *asso di bastoni*, 10 March 1957.

(7) "Come si spiegano 30,000 copie?", *I Libri del giorno*, no. 4-5, May-June 1948, 10.

of 26,000 copies per title and that one of the most successful novels of the period, Riccardo Bacchelli's *Il Mulino del Po* (The Mill on the Po), sold around 100,000 copies in its first four years (1940-1943), the success of *Ho difeso la patria* can be considered really significant (Ferretti 2004: 57-58).

Garzanti was not the only medium to large publisher involved in circulating so-called fascist literature. As previously mentioned, Mondadori did not view the publication of Rachele Mussolini's *La mia vita con Benito* as controversial, despite it constituting a defence of fascism. On the French-speaking market, on the contrary, the book was released in 1948 by Éditions du Cheval Ailé - La Diffusion du Livre, a much smaller company and, more importantly, a publishing house with far-right sympathies. The same publisher, run by the Swiss Constant Bourquin, and created by Jean Jardin, who had previously served as Pierre Laval's head of cabinet (Assouline 2007: 261-264), for example released the afore-mentioned memoir of Degrelle, *La Campagne de Russie*, the leader of the Rexist movement. According to Mondadori, evidently *La mia vita con Benito* could generate considerable interest in the Italian market, thus it was essential to accept the draft without reservations, except for requesting the omission of a few lines from Guidi's dedication that described Mussolini as a «living torch keeping watch over the Fatherland» (Decleva 1993: 389).

Similarly to Garzanti, another young but fast-growing publisher, Longanesi & Co., which was founded by the industrialist Giovanni Monti and the journalist and writer Longanesi, and managed by the latter, offered space to fascists and pro-fascists. Longanesi's provocative nature (Liucci 2016: 60) induced him, for instance, to take the rather eccentric step of publishing a book of rather dubious quality that revisited the 1924 assassination of socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti by fascist hitmen. This murder was a decisive turning point in the history of fascism, as Mussolini took moral responsibility for the act to give his regime a more authoritarian image. The book, *Diciassette colpi* (Seventeen Blows), belonged to one of the fascists' most favoured genres, that of prison literature. It was a memoir written by Amerigo Dumini, one of the killers, who proudly proclaimed his adherence to fascism («I was a fascist, indeed, and I add that I was a fervent, fanatical fascist. And what of it?») Longanesi's intention in publishing this confession was to absolve the fascist regime of any responsibility for the assassination and to accuse the judiciary of having persecuted Mussolini (Dumini 1951: 293).

Longanesi also published Navarra's aforementioned *Memorie del cameriere di Mussolini* (Memoirs of Mussolini's Waiter), as well as Hitler's *Conversazioni a tavola* (Table Talk, 1952) a collection of speeches accurately or erroneously attributed to the Führer. The book was reprinted in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and found some success. Longanesi also published Hans-Ulrich Rudel's *Il pilota di ferro* (The Iron Pilot) in 1956, which went through multiple reprints in the 1960s. After the war, Rudel, a Luftwaffe ace, took it upon himself to help his compatriots affected by the denazification process and keep the Nazi cause alive by writing for the far-right newspaper *Der Weg*, which was quite popular in Argentina, the country to which he had moved. In 1949 he had released his memoirs, *Trotzdem* (Nevertheless) through the Dürer Verlag publishing house, which was also responsible for releasing *Der Weg* and new editions of *Mein Kampf* in German and Spanish (Lee 1997: 114). Rudel's memoirs appeared for Longanesi under the more appealing title of *Il pilota di ferro*, in keeping with the French version of the work, *Pilote de Stukas* (1951), which had been printed by the small publisher Corrêa, and the English version, *Stuka Pilot*, which Mosley launched in 1952 through his own company, Euphorion Books.

A few years earlier, Longanesi had also translated Bardèche's controversial book *Nuremberg ou la terre promise*, under the title *I servi della democrazia* (The Slaves of Democracy, 1949).

Beyond the willingness of large- and medium-sized publishers to release such works, and the support provided by the MSI and the so-called neo-fascist circles in re-launching them, it is worth asking how much impact this phenomenon actually had on Italy's new political direction. Examining two specific case studies might help shed light on this matter.

### **Rewriting history: the examples of the Graziani and Bottai memoirs**

Graziani played a significant role within the fascist system. Despite making every effort to distance himself from the regime in *Ho difeso la patria*, he could never have become vice-governor of the Libyan region of Cyrenaica, which was under the control of the Kingdom of Italy, without being loyal to the dictatorship, let alone take command of the 1935 military campaign against Ethiopia. His subsequent positions

confirm this point: he became Governor of Ethiopia and Marshal of Italy, the youngest general to achieve such an honour. While it is certainly true that his relationship with Mussolini was turbulent, this does not mean that the Duce did not recognise his qualities. At the beginning of the Second World War, the dictator appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the Italian troops, though he later dismissed him when needing a scapegoat. But then, when the RSI came into being, Graziani was appointed Minister of Defence.

It is therefore no surprise that after the war Graziani faced multiple trials for his collaboration with Germany, and *Ho difeso la patria* constitutes the starting point of the defence strategy prepared by his trial lawyers (Colao 2015). In the book, Graziani criticises Mussolini and the regime, but it is important to note that he presents a distorted version of the past. While he exalts fascism for its role in «Italy's expansion in the world» (Graziani 1947: 375), he downplays the prevalent violence associated with the regime, particularly the crimes committed by Italy in Libya and Ethiopia. With regard to his tenure as the governor of Cyrenaica, Graziani admitted to a strategy of concentrating the population in certain areas to suppress resistance, but he argued that violence was not employed, and coercion was limited to causing economic damage to communities (Graziani 1947: 54).

Another sensitive issue dealt with by Graziani concerned the massacre of civilians in Addis Ababa perpetrated by fascist blackshirts after an assassination attempt against him on 19 February 1937 (Ertola 2019: 137-139). The author distanced himself completely from the ferocious and unjustifiable reprisal, and did not hesitate to put the blame entirely on a few fanatics. This is a detail of no small importance that, however, should not come as a surprise given that *Ho difeso la patria* served the purpose of self-defence (Graziani 1947: 141). Moreover, this tactic of attributing excesses of violence to mere troublemakers, which had been used by the regime ever since the Matteotti murder, masked a distinctive element of the fascist ideology, which it would nevertheless have been unwise to acknowledge in the postwar period. It is precisely the functional aspect of the discourse that it is necessary to emphasise. Although the fascist front professed that it was excluded and persecuted by democracy, one of the objectives of these texts was to condition the public debate and to make inroads into the country's political and cultural sphere. But to achieve such a goal, downplaying certain historical facts was expedient.

Finally, in *Ho difeso la patria*, Graziani emphasised values such as honour and patriotism. According to him, his collaboration with the RSI was driven by the goal of preserving Italian honour and avoiding an occupation of the peninsula by the Wehrmacht, which would have put Italy's material resources at risk. He portrays the commitment of the Salò fascists as undeniable and presents Mussolini as someone who «tried to oppose the threatened destructive violence of the Germans with all his vigour» (Graziani 1947: 470-471). In so doing he betrayed the apologetic view of the Duce contained in his narrative.

Overall, *Ho difeso la patria* openly exalts the fascist exploits in Africa and the honour and courage of the Salò fighters, while obscuring fascist crimes and violence, including the involvement of RSI soldiers in numerous massacres perpetrated on Italian soil between 1943 and 1945. It is thus a clear attempt to rewrite history.

Giuseppe Bottai's memoirs and diary, *Vent'anni e un giorno*, can be classified in a similar manner. In the book, the author presents his diary entries leading up to the notorious session of the Grand Council of 24 July 1943. During this sitting, the majority of the fascist hierarchs challenged Mussolini, obliging King Victor Emmanuel III to remove and imprison him, appoint General Badoglio to govern, and dissolve the National Fascist Party. But the pages of Bottai's diary are accompanied by an extensive introduction in which he attempts to reconstruct these events, or to be more accurate, to rewrite history.

An early fascist, Bottai had taken part in the March on Rome (Albanese 2019). He subsequently served as Minister of Corporations (from 1929 to 1932), President of the Social Security Institute, Governor of Rome, and Minister of National Education. In the latter role he notably enforced anti-Jewish legislation strictly. Nevertheless, Bottai also played a significant role in the downfall of the regime by giving a vote of no confidence against Mussolini in the afore-mentioned session of the Grand Council of July 1943. This decision placed him at great risk, as he was condemned as a traitor to the fascist cause following Mussolini's liberation by German troops and his resurgence as President of the RSI.

Despite Bottai's decision to not support the RSI, the Italian government initiated an inquiry into Bottai's role in facilitating the rise to power of the National Fascist Party. Faced with this situation, Bottai decided to go into hiding and eventually joined the fight against Axis forces in person, by enlisting in the French Foreign Legion under the pseudonym of Andrea

Battaglia (Guerri 2019). However, it is essential to clarify that even at this crucial turning point in his life, Bottai did not repudiate fascism. Instead, he was convinced of the need to fight Nazism, which he believed was not comparable to fascism. Furthermore, Bottai was confident that his decision to take up arms and fight against the German troops would work in his favour in the showdown with fascism initiated by the judiciary of the Italian Southern Kingdom<sup>(8)</sup>.

In the postwar period, Bottai no longer felt any emotional attachment to Mussolini, nor was he particularly interested in re-launching his own political career in the MSI. For this reason he took care to differentiate between the behaviour of Mussolini and fascism as a whole (Guerri 2019: 366). This distinction between the dictator and fascism had already been emphasised during the fascist era and became one of the most commonly spread dogmas among Italians, suggesting that Mussolini «would have rectified any mistakes» (Passerini 1991: 69) and «deficiencies of the State» (Duggan 2013: 429). However, in the postwar period, Bottai insisted on this distinction for an entirely different reason, namely to give legitimacy to his own biography. *Vent'anni e un giorno* was particularly severe about Mussolini because his aim was to exonerate himself and regain credibility in the public eye. In the meantime, by distinguishing fascism from Mussolini and directing his criticism exclusively towards the latter, Bottai avoided disavowing his political journey and denouncing the contradictions and criminal nature of the fascist cause. Not by chance, he also emphasised the contrast between Italian Fascism and Nazism. According to Bottai, the alliance with Germany had been counterproductive, not only because it led Mussolini to take part in the conflict, but also because it implied an ideological consonance between the two dictatorships that was not at all demonstrable (Bottai 1949: 72). It is therefore unsurprising that Bottai underscored the international prestige which Italy obtained during the fascist era and the great advances made beyond the Italian borders.

We have elevated the Arab peoples of Libya, we have abolished slavery in Ethiopia, we have given the Albanian people a free constitution

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(8) On 27 July 1944 the Bonomi government enacted the Lieutenant Legislative Decree no. 159, which granted reduced sentences or pardons to former members of the hierarchy who had distinguished themselves by fighting against the Nazis (art. no. 16).

against the tyranny of one of its rulers, we have helped and assisted the Croats in their century-long aspiration for independence, we have given the Slovenians an autonomy they had never had before (Bottai 1949: 322).

But the extremely indulgent and dishonest portrayal of fascism presented both by Graziani and Bottai was not only disseminated through *Ho difeso la patria* and *Vent'anni e un giorno*, but also through a parallel channel: a relevant number of apologetic and sympathetic articles with similar political motives.

In the summer 1949, *Oggi*, which would soon reach a circulation of half a million copies (Pizzetti 1982: 62), published a long reportage titled *Graziani l'africano deluso* (Graziani, a Disappointed African) written by Marcantonio Bragadin, an admiral and author known for popular texts reconstructing the history of the Italian navy. The article praised Graziani, emphasising his expertise and highlighting how his colonial policy in Libya minimised the use of force. Bragadin argued that the deportations of the Gebel inhabitants, an area in the north-east of Libya, to the Sirtica concentration camps should not be considered violent since they involved nomadic populations «equipped and accustomed to migrate» (Bragadin 1949: 10–12).

Even after Graziani's death in 1955, his image was further embellished by the magazine *Le Ore*. Between September and November 1961, the magazine claimed to report on Graziani's memoirs, which had supposedly been «locked away in the drawers of a Swiss notary»<sup>(9)</sup>. However, the text appeared to reproduce what had already been written in *Ho difeso la patria*, accentuating the image of the general who, as Defence Minister of the RSI, safeguarded Italian interests. Thus *Le Ore* reinforced the message that the fighters of the Social Republic deserved to be recognised as genuine patriots.

A similar re-evaluation of Bottai and, consequently, of the fascist cause, came in the columns of *Oggi* in 1948, in a lengthy reportage by Giorgio Vecchietti, Bottai's personal friend. Vecchietti, a journalist from Bologna who began his career in the cultural magazine *Orto*, later becoming co-director of *Primato* alongside Bottai, and eventually working for the national radio-television broadcaster RAI, painted a largely positive

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(9) "Il memoriale di Graziani", *Le Ore*, 19 September 1961, 26. The source has been located in AS – DHII Rome.

portrait of his friend. The article emphasised that Bottai had never taken part in blackshirt raids, stating, «In his fascist curriculum [...] there is no important squad action, nor a crime [...] and not even later, an attitude of rebellion carried through to the end.». The piece also highlighted Bottai's constant efforts to devise and implement measures that would have made fascism more liberal, aiming to «reconcile [...] the violated democratic traditions with the new authoritarian spirit» (Vecchiotti 1948: 8-9). The overall conclusion was that had Mussolini followed Bottai's guidance, fascism would not have descended into aggressive and racist totalitarianism. In this way, the reportage constituted another attempt to present an apologetic recasting of fascism, or at least of some of its actions and supporters, thus paving the way for the thesis that while fascism had been an authoritarian regime, it should not be automatically considered a degenerate political model.

## **Conclusions**

The article tried to illustrate the importance of so-called fascist literature and pro-fascist articles, such as those published by *Oggi* and *Le Ore* and dedicated respectively to Bottai and Graziani. With the term importance, I do not intend the stylistic and literary quality of these texts, but their cultural, and thus political, relevance in the Italian context. Although there was no intention to consider the Italian case unique (a tendency, that of stressing the presumed exceptionalism of the Italian case, which has certainly proved counterproductive for the understanding of Italian history in the broader European history), I have attempted to illustrate the reasons why in Italy there were so many volumes sympathetic to the Fascist era, and so many works written by fascists (in the broadest sense of the term). The article thus has attempted to fill a gap. Several scholars had already shed light on this literature but they had not entirely grasped its impact, in contrast to what had already been understood by Giorgio Vaccarino in 1951 and three years later by the anti-fascist literary scholar Giuseppe Tramarollo. The latter on 17 December 1954 published an article in the newspaper *La voce repubblicana*, in which denounced the proliferation of the Susmel *Opera omnia* and other fascist texts and noted that contemporary history education in schools and universities did not cover the *ventennio*, allowing the fascist community

to fill the void (which it did enthusiastically) (Tramarollo 1954). In fact, despite their defeat, the fascists managed to propagate their own version of history and that version – Tramarollo believed, an opinion shared by this article – inevitably influenced the broader process of constructing the Italian public memory. After all, considering the persistence of false myths about fascism and Mussolini in Italy’s public memory today – as evidenced by recent statements from the President of the Senate, Ignazio La Russa, who called the third Bozen battalion that fell victim to an attack by Roman partisans on 23 March 1944, a «band of semi-retirees» – it is evident that the circulation of fascist texts must have had an impact although the fascists had to contend their vision of history with the narratives developed by the anti-fascist front<sup>(10)</sup>.

Furthermore, I believe that this production had another crucial role. It helped the fascists to maintain a sense of themselves as a living and active «emotional community» (at least on a national level, though expanding the analysis to the transnational level would be interesting) despite the outcome of the Second World War (Rosenwein 2002). That feeling – which has been neglected by historiography, albeit with some exceptions – represented a crucial condition (though not a sufficient one), to secure a political re-activation of the fascist cause, which certainly took place in Italy (think of the long life of the MSI).

The use of two specific case studies made it possible to deepen the level of analysis. The article has illustrated the rhetoric of Bottai’s and Graziani’s memoirs. It thus showed how these books, although different from each other, had a political purpose, namely that of rehabilitating their respective authors and providing a distorted vision of fascism (although non-renouncing, in the case of Bottai, at least some criticism of Mussolini, which however was very fruitful to dissociate fascism from the Duce). It is more difficult to insist on the circulation of the two texts – since the absence of the archives of Bottai and Graziani’s publishing house, Garzanti, archives that have been destroyed – but at least in the case of *Ho difeso la patria*, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a real best-seller. Eventually, we cannot forget the bigger picture: the large circulation of articles dedicated to Bottai and Graziani that amplified the theses of the two fascists.

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(10) <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/la-russa-via-rasella-pagina-tutt-altro-che-nobile-e-polemica-AE8pXBCD> (last access: 23 May 2023).

In the end, this operation of rewriting the past carried out by the fascist galaxy has managed to contaminate democracy, since a distorted vision of the past leads to misleading perceptions of the present. And it is not by chance, I believe, that even today, as the most attentive scholars on the subject are noticing, the newly emerging extreme right is particularly inclined to construct an alternative view of history, primarily through the internet and web platforms, in addition to traditional print media (Hermansson et al. 2020; Valencia-García 2021).

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ACS, MI: ACS, Central Archives of State (Italy), Minister of Interior.

AS – DHI Rome, Duilio Susmel's Archives – German Historical Institute in Rome.

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