

FRANZINELLI, Mimmo. *IL FASCISMO È FINITO IL 25 APRILE 1945*. Roma; Bari: Laterza, 2022. 176 pages.

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Fascism ended on the 25th of April 1945: the title of the book repeats a sentence used to state the fact that fascism in Italy ceased to exist on the day of Liberation from nazifascist occupation, a date which is also a national holiday. But is that really so? Could it rather be a cliché, comfortable to believe in instead of acknowledging a hard truth? The author Mimmo Franzinelli, specialized in studies on fascism and the Italian postwar Republic, in five chapters presents us with a series of events, examples and witnesses that show how fascism never really left and continued to exert its influence at multiple levels: political, legislative, bureaucratic, moral, ideological, customary.

Franzinelli begins his discourse with an unpopular opinion: the majority of the Italians has been an accomplice of fascism, and not a mere victim, as claimed by “*versions that respond to political needs and identity strategies, which have for too long shaped historiographical research and still find strong supporters today*”. According to him, the “*antifascist paradigm*” has amplified the Resistance traits, while diminishing the mass consensus of the regime (pp. 6-7).

After a brief resume of the birth and rise of the fascist movement, the author explains how deep the fascistization of Italy went, producing a corrupt system that was incredibly hard to change, after twenty years of habit of obedience (p. 7). Even more so, as just shortly after the war countless officials, which were ideologically formed or started a career under fascism (even those responsible for major crimes) were pardoned and released from prison. One may find it truly astonishing to uncover a continuity of the state between the dictatorship and the democratic republic, which is the central point of this monography. In the first chapter, for example, the author illustrates the case of the Special court for the defence of the State (*Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello Stato*), established in 1926: many condemned by the court didn't see their sentence annulled at the fall of the regime; instead, they had to wait many years after the war to be free of all accusations. In some cases, they even continued to serve a sentence given to them because they complained about the war and offended the head of State (which was, at the time, no one other than the dictator Benito Mussolini) (pp. 9-11). A reversed situation occurred, for which anti-fascists were persecuted for past sentences and common crimes, while Blackshirts<sup>1</sup> leaders, secretaries and ministers of the National fascist party, informers, persecutors of the Jews, collaborators of the Nazis and war criminals, were all released. This is largely due to the 1946 amnesty,<sup>2</sup> where the legislative interpretations

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- 1 Blackshirts or “Camice nere” in Italian, were the paramilitary force of the fascist movement. Their actions go under the name of “Squadrisimo”, as they marched and acted in squad formations.
  - 2 The amnesty declared on 22 June 1946, also known as *amnistia Togliatti*, after the Minister of Justice and Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti, pardoned minor and political crimes committed by fascists and partisans alike. After a period of chaos and reckoning following the end of the war, the goal of this amnesty was to set a basis for pacification and collaboration between politically opposed sides of Italian society. However, the way in which

given, produced one-sided decisions in favor of the fascist accused. The motivations are presented with rhetorical contortions and tortuous expressions (like a distinction between tortures that were more or less particularly brutal), as everything goes just to make the accused benefit from the amnesty (pp. 16-21). This was all possible, as the author suggests, for two reasons: first, in this period of transition, justice was administered by magistrates that built their careers during fascism receiving awards and benefits, and were able to continue their work thanks to the independence of the judicial order. Secondly, during the brief government of the anti-fascist establishment that immediately followed the end of the war,<sup>3</sup> the purge that was applied was too generic, with the result of punishing the subordinated harder than the more responsible superiors: “*Instead of selective measures against profiteers, propagandists and leaders of fascism, they wanted to punish at every level, without making distinctions in responsibility between leaders, militants and those who supported the regime out of conformism or necessity.*” As the author states, only in recent times, also thanks to the gradual opening of archives, several studies have established the range of the purge’s failure (pp. 15-25).

In the next two chapters, the reader becomes familiar with some individual cases of fascists that continued to act undisturbed, and not only in their personal sphere or minor public assignments. Just to name a few, an opportunistic Gaetano Azzariti goes from being the president of the Tribunal of Race under fascism, to be the first president of the Constitutional court (pp. 36-37), while Massimo Pilotti refuses to make official the electoral victory of the Republic over the monarchy until the king himself leaves for exile, at the risk of causing a new civil war (pp. 41-42).

What happens next, is that these people’s careers go through a selection and removal of memory; paradoxically, under a process of “de-fascistization” that leaves the image of respectable civil servants. The position of power held by this kind of magistrates on one side and the new governments’ incapability of changing radically the laws on the other, resulted in maintaining illiberal norms produced during Fascism, such as the penal code established in 1930 by the minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco, abolished only in 1989 (pp. 43-49). Not only in legislation and in court, fascism has also extended its *longa manus* on police and public security systems: Marcello Guida, perhaps the most relevant example presented in this book, has had a significant role in the history of fascism as well as in the history of the Republic. As a young and ambitious official, he was the director of the Ventotene penal colony, a prison island where the most troublesome anti-fascists were exiled;<sup>4</sup> in the late 1960s, the beginning of a period of terrorist attacks

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it was written left a huge amount of freedom for interpretation, which resulted in overlooking fascists’ responsibilities and transforming the measure into a source of unfairness.

SAPORITO, Paolo. Cultural memory against institutionalized forms of amnesia in post-war Italy: the Togliatti amnesty and *I vinti* by Michelangelo Antonioni. In *Modern Italy: Journal of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy*, 2018, Vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 2-3; see also the volume FRANZINELLI, Mimmo. *L’amnistia Togliatti: 22 Giugno 1946: Colpo di spugna sui crimini fascisti*. Milano: Mondadori, 2006.

3 The government led by the partisan leader Ferruccio Parri and inspired by the Resistance movement, lasted only a few months, until november 1945.

4 This was a regime practice, for which political opponents or citizens that were considered to

and bloodshed in Italy, known as “the years of lead”, Guida was high official of public security and was responsible for misleading the inquiries from right-wing to left-wing terrorism. An anecdote that depicts the dual soul of the Italian republic, sees the socialist and partisan Sandro Pertini, later on president of the Republic, confronted with Marcello Guida in official duties: breaking protocol, Pertini refused to receive Guida, as he could never forget that he was his prisoner at Ventotene, and also because he considered him responsible for the mysterious death of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, used as a scapegoat to blame the left for the right-wing terrorist attack of Piazza Fontana in Milan, occurred on 12 December 1969 (pp. 62-91). As the author argues, “*the substantial failure of the Italian transition has conditioned and frustrated the search for the truth about contemporary history and specifically about fascism [...] This process of knowledge has been hindered by cover-ups and extensive amnesties. And it has had a decisive impact in distorting reality and perception of fascism, this past that does not pass, as it has not been elaborated in a shared narrative and assimilated by Italian society. In short, fascism has not been dealt with*” (pp. 49-50).

The last two chapters focus on the present day, dealing with the connections between neo-fascism and post-fascism<sup>5</sup> in today’s Italy and how right-wing political movements relate to fascism and its memory. The historian doesn’t mince words, as he cites the “fascistoid undergrowth” around the current major right-wing party leaders. This is a sensitive topic, as the current Italian government is led by those who are considered by many to be the “heirs of fascism”. There are politicians and public figures that, with their declarations and actions, bring to the surface a certain nostalgia, while neofascist violent groups, such as Forza Nuova and Casa Pound, can be seen infiltrating protests and making a public display of fascist rituals. Pilgrimages to the Predappio family crypt, where the dictator is buried, are anything but uncommon. In addition, it shouldn’t be forgotten, as the author reminds us, that the right-wing leader and Italy’s current prime minister Giorgia Meloni, frequently presents the figure of Giorgio Almirante, the most coherent politician between fascism and neofascism, as her “spiritual father” (pp. 109-110, p. 132). As a most clarifying example of these persistent ties with fascism, the last part focuses on the political debate around the cancellation of the honorary citizenship that almost every city or town had granted to Mussolini. Given the fact that those titles were all part of the regime’s propaganda and not a spontaneous gift from the city authorities, a detail probably ignored by many, the reasoning most used by politicians and civic administration to not cancel (and in some cases even re-confirm) the honorary citizenship to the dictator, is that it would be a historical forgery. A similar defense of Hitler in Germany, the author states, would be unthinkable (p. 144). This, just as another widespread self-absolving cliché, that of the good Italian and the bad German,<sup>6</sup> is a

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be dangerous, were sent to confinement colonies, usually on an island in Southern Italy.

- 5 Neo-fascism refers to groups that claim to inherit and continue the legacy of historical fascism, while post-fascism labels political movements that have emerged from fascism or are influenced by fascist ideologies, but exist and operate in a democratic system.
- 6 This is a widely used justification in the memory discourse about the Second world war, where Italian soldiers are always depicted in a more positive and human light compared to the German soldiers. It is also strictly related to the expression “*Italiani brava gente*” (Italians

symptom of how Italy has never truly and collectively faced the most terrible chapter of its own history: “*Even today, despite the results of historiography, the Ventennio<sup>7</sup> is trivially dismissed as a good-natured and essentially tolerant regime, led by a politician who devoted himself to the greatness of the Motherland*” (p. 130).

According to Franzinelli, the humanized image of the dictator and its regime has heavily influenced the elaboration of historical memory: a contribution in this matter has been brought by Indro Montanelli, one of the greatest journalists of 20th century Italy, as well as an initial supporter of fascism and its colonial conquest (being later disillusioned and changing sides). However, Montanelli claimed that fascism could not be understood from documents and based its narration on his personal memories and experience. An inadequate and subjective interpretation that has influenced collective imagination, nevertheless. A most recent representation has been offered by the historical novel *M. Il figlio del secolo* (M. Son of the century), by the writer Antonio Scurati and its adaptation in 2025 tv-series directed by Joe Wright. In Franzinelli’s opinion, Scurati’s representation is more well documented compared to that of Montanelli, and only time will tell if it will be able to shake the clichés around Mussolini’s memory (pp.127-129).

In a Europe where radical and xenophobic movements, as well as historical revisionism are very much present, a question arises from time to time: will fascism ever return? Franzinelli’s opinion, shared by other fellow historians, is that the historical fascism as it was between the two world wars, certainly won’t return. However, “*The danger to democracy is not in fact represented by the incurable nostalgic, but by those who may eventually reinterpret reassuring models proposed by some charismatic character, ready [...] to take advantage of confusing situations*” (p. XII).

This monography does not disappoint the claim of its author, which is to debunk a myth (presented with the title) and can somewhat shake from slumber those who believe that fascism is something that belongs to a distant past. A very strong point of this book are the specific, individual examples given; this could have been preferably accompanied by a name index, which is lacking. A rich bibliography closes every single chapter, however the references to the sources are too generic and especially while reporting direct citations, they lack a more precise indication. Overall, the volume *Il fascismo è finito il 25 aprile 1945*, with a title that might as well be considered as “provocative”, is a valid text directed to a wider and diverse audience. Since the book is written in Italian and deals with topics and political issues Italians are more familiar with, a translation in English might be recommended, as to bring people outside of Italy closer to its contemporary history and also to the country’s darker sides.

*Cristina Golinelli*

*(Faculty of Arts, Comenius University Bratislava)*

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good people), a myth that sees the Italian people generally better and kinder even in war and conquest. This aspect has been tackled by Italian historian Angelo Del Boca in a book titled with the same expression followed by a question mark: DEL BOCA, Angelo. *Italiani, brava gente?* Vicenza:Neri Pozza, 2005.

7 The fascist period is commonly addressed as the “Ventennio”, which means “twenty years”.