

Citation style

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We all now realise that fascism was a very serious business indeed, and historians have been treating it seriously for some time, even its maligned claim to be totalitarian. Historians have also moved way beyond the still lingering popular perception that Italian Fascism was somehow less radical, less totalitarian, less 'fascist' than German Nazism. This book, which repeatedly gives us the fascist regimes' self-representation of the hugely ambitious totalitarian project to reshape societies in the fascists' own image, is really pushing at an open door. I have evidently been too long in the field to be enthralled by yet another summary of a fascist youth leader's speech, or of a youth organisation's manual of instruction, or of the rapturous reception of a gymnastics display by the *Balilla* or Hitler Youth. You do not necessarily need a sense of humour here; but a bit of irony would help.

To take a small but representative example, the book records a seriously hilarious encounter in 1931 involving a hand-picked team of Fascist Academy of Physical Education students, who were invited to the United States to experience the physical and personal training methods of an American health and fitness and life-style coach, one Bernarr MacFadden. I would not be human if I was not suppressing the first giggle. The meeting of body and mind of these two sets of health and cultural entrepreneurs is handled with a strait-laced and po-faced seriousness in an account which reports without commentary or analysis the various contemporary stories of what went on. Not surprisingly, the book concludes that the visit had been an amazing success, and the propaganda aims (of both sides) had been realised: 'the students ... wearing their elegant uniforms and showing their fit bodies, demonstrated the strength of the Fascist regime to the Americans, to the Italian immigrants, and to the world' (p. 58). Well, that's all right, then.

You only have to poke a little to bring out the sheer pretentiousness of the fascist 'new man' rhetoric, which denotes, in its own way, the sheer pretentiousness of fascist plans to engineer a new society into existence. This, in itself, contributes in some way to an analysis and understanding of the impacts of totalitarian organisation and propaganda on those who passed through and led these fascist youth organisations. But the book self-consciously excludes impacts from its consideration, and wants to concentrate on the organisational relationship between Italian Fascist and German Nazi youth. It is really unfair, I know, to criticise a book for not doing what it never set out to do. But whether, or the extent to which, a decade or so of totalitarian organisation and propaganda actually produced a generation of committed fascists is precisely where the scholarly interest in fascism is at the moment. There has been a stream of very worthy Italian and Anglo-American studies of fascism's 'cultural revolution' which simply take the representation as the reality; this book is an addition to that list.

If the book occupies familiar ground, then it does offer a fresh perspective in being genuinely comparative, and in focussing on the training of leaders of the two fascist regimes' youth organisations. In these respects, some interesting and plausible parallels and contrasts emerge which make it clear that in youth organisation, the Nazis followed where the Fascists led. The Fascist regime set up a customised national training institute for the formation of the country's future youth leaders, something which the Nazi regime later emulated. But the first small batch of German students only started their training in early 1939. The Fascists, from a very early stage, made use of the school system, and expected school teachers to become youth organisation leaders, and later, of course, graduates of the youth training schemes to become physical education teachers in schools. In Fascist Italy, until the late 1930s, youth organisation was still a state ministerial responsibility in the shape of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, and the ONB's integration with the public educational system was an obvious way of making good the lack of sufficient cadres for the regime's youth bodies, a shortage which extended generally to the other capillary and mass-mobilising organisations.

The Nazis, in contrast, adopted a more hand to mouth solution to the same problem of the lack of current cadres, and applied the 'leader principle' to young people themselves. The young were to lead the young, and would be self-selecting from their behaviour and performance at youth camps, exercises, and excursions. The last place the Nazis wanted to

form their young and their leaders was in a decrepit state school system pervaded by over-intellectualism and the wrong spirit and values. Starace, the leader of the Fascist Party in the 1930s, similarly distrusted the capacity and will of state schools to form Fascists, and this was one reason for the Party assuming full unified control of youth organisations from 1937. The book makes clear that the interaction between Fascist and Nazi youth organisations and their leaderships in the 1930s provided mutual stimulation and modelling in youth development, training and indoctrination. The Nazi respect for and desire to learn from the Fascist education of youth carried on into the war years, when they were rivals for dominance within a mooted European fascist youth federation, which was evidently a pointer to a future European New Order.

The issue of whether fascism was, or became, what it endlessly said it was, is a really intriguing one, which poses difficult methodological problems for historians to resolve. Given the voluminous production of self-justifying material in a totalitarian system, mined to the point of exhaustion in this book, you have to make the most of the regimes' muted and internal self-criticism of its own work. Bottai is certainly mentioned in the book, but not in his role as editor and contributor to *Critica Fascista*, a journal widely read among university students and devoted to the question of how best to form Fascism's future elites in a way which did not produce a robotic conformism. The Italian regime's slogan was that 'book and rifle make the perfect fascist'. As this book makes clear, there was a lot of sometimes rushed, sometimes more considered training and learning schemes devised for potential youth leaders and their charges, some of which required study as well as gymnastics. There was at least an internal debate in late 1920s and 1930s Fascist Italy about how best you prepared the leaders of tomorrow, which goes to the very heart of totalitarian re-education. This book emphasises the anti-intellectualism which pervaded the training of youth leaders in Nazi Germany, which sometimes makes you feel that it was really a matter of making the best of the rather poor quality of the cadres available. Was there no Nazi equivalent of Bottai, no sense of training both mind and body, no allowance for criticism and debate which was likely to generate a deeper and more lasting commitment to the regime? It was the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* (GUF), the Fascist regime's university students' body, which was meant to replenish the country's elites. This finds a parallel with the formation within the German SS of a body of highly intelligent, highly motivated university-educated young Nazis, who went on to staff the SS agencies throughout occupied Europe during the war. Most *Gufini* passed into the offices of the Fascist regime's corporative empire, but that is another story. Again, one gets the sense that by concentrating on youth leaders, the book is bypassing the bigger story. You also have to access memoirs, diaries, memories, jokes, graffiti, informal and formal cultural output; the kinds of sources which require very careful handling, and psychological, sociological, and anthropological as much as historical insights and skills. We get a glimpse of this treacherous and fascinating terrain in the final chapter to the book. Here, the author tackles the question of whether or not there was a need to 're-educate' Italian and German youth after 1945, and delves into the play of memories and remembering-and-forgetting. Here, the author concedes that the memories of participants of youth organisations and of youth leadership training schemes 'complicate the history of the youth organisations' and 'give a more nuanced picture of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany' (p. 213). Quite; but that nuance is what is historically interesting, and is what this study needs more of. It is rather unambitious to limit yourself to confirming what we knew anyway, that both fascist regimes were committed to the formation of the 'new man'.

A book with this tight a focus needs to be more proficient than it is in bringing out the wider significance of its findings. It would be great to know how the author thinks his comparison of fascist youth movements contributes to our understanding and interpretation of, say, generic fascism; the Pact of Steel and the Axis relationship between the two fascist powers; the Fascist International; the fascist appropriation of the idea of Europe during the war years; and of the still relatively submerged issue of pre-war trans-national youth and cultural

movements, non-fascist as well as fascist, which saw 'youth' as the basis for a European-wide reconciliation between peoples, and had as one of its outcomes collaborationism in wartime Nazi-occupied Western Europe.

Author's response

The reviewer seems to have very fixed and critical ideas about the type of history I practice. As we have our differences about how one should approach the history of fascism in Europe I think it would serve little purpose to try and refute his criticism. I accept this review - which I hope could have given more space to the main arguments made in my book - but I do not wish to comment further.