

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 340

6 May 2021

**John Gooch.** *Mussolini's War. Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935-1943.* London: Allen Lane, 2020. ISBN: 9781643135489.

**Victoria de Grazia.** *The Perfect Fascist. A Story of Love, Power and Morality in Mussolini's Italy.* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780674986398 (hardcover, \$35.00).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E340>

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Italian fascism has always been an area of interest for a large group of American and English historians, who have made it their chosen field of enquiry and the subject of important works of interpretation. To mention only a few of the many possible examples, it is enough to think of the studies on the mass organizations and satellites of the Italian National Fascist Party (PNF), and their crucial role in consensus building;<sup>1</sup> of the investigations into the “parallel wars” waged by Italy while in a position of total subordination to its Nazi ally;<sup>2</sup> and of the research on the regime’s cultural policy and its images, in the teeming production *by* and *for* the people that marked the propagation of the regime’s symbolism from the moment it came to power.<sup>3</sup> These works are all very different, but they share the desire to confront modernity and the revolutionary temporality ushered in by the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini. They are works that have profoundly influenced the Italian historiographical debate and helped restore a European, if not international, dimension to the fascist period, freeing it from

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<sup>1</sup> Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass-media* (Roma: Laterza, 1975); Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Golsan, ed., *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992); Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 19 BL and The Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and the Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

parenthetical readings which held that the totalitarian state was a temporary “accident” on the road to shaping post-unification Italy and the result of authoritarian distortions resulting from the country’s belated unification in 1861.<sup>4</sup>

In 2020, two distinguished historians renewed their focus on interwar Italy, tackling one of the issues that is today most in vogue among scholars of the period in question: the attempt to extend the analysis of the fascist universe beyond its leaders and their public stance by taking into account their experiences, reciprocal relations, feelings, aspirations and, as far as possible, their private behavior. What unites the two authors, who deal with subjects that are different and not at all comparable, seems to be their dissatisfaction with the reconstructions made of the events on a factual plane. While these works are undoubtedly sophisticated, they seem to rule out any investigation of the motivations behind the actors’ personal and political choices or any reflection on the non-logical nature of human behavior and interactions.

Taking as their starting points “a story of love, power, and morality” (Victoria de Grazia) and the permanent war that Mussolini imposed on Italy from 1935 to 1943 (John Gooch), both authors bring the general context to life, complicate it, and, as de Grazia effectively sums up in the introduction to *The Perfect Fascist*, investigate “how Italian fascism really worked” (9).

“For a long time, Italy has almost been absent from international military historiography about World War II,” are the words used, in a recent historiographic review, by Nicola Labanca, one of the leading scholars on the relationship between war, the armed forces, and society in Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As exceptions to this trend, the author pointed to the work of Denis Mack Smith,<sup>6</sup> MacGregor Knox,<sup>7</sup> and John Gooch,<sup>8</sup> which had the merit of studying the Italian military institutions in the inter-war period, reconstructing their functioning, their relations with the civilian world, and the process of *fascistization*, as well as their actions in the different theaters of war and their position in the Rome-Berlin Axis. After devoting a major book to *Mussolini and His Generals*, Gooch approaches the wartime universe of fascist Italy from a new angle, combining the results of previous archival research with the desire to broaden his gaze to the years prior to Spring of 1940, the period when Mussolini abandoned Italy’s status of non-belligerent and belatedly decided to participate in the war. Rather than concentrating on one of the kingdom’s armed forces, or on one of the conquests underlying the planned construction of a “new Mediterranean order,”<sup>9</sup> Gooch proposes an interesting periodization of the fascist wars, which takes up and relaunches the one used fifteen years ago by the Italian historian Giorgio Rochat in *Le guerre*

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to Benedetto Croce’s 1944 view of “fascism as a parenthesis” in Italy’s history. For a critical review, cfr. Pier Giorgio Zunino, *Interpretazione e memoria del fascismo. Gli anni del regime* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000); Alberto De Bernardi, *Una dittatura moderna. Il fascismo come problema storico* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Italian Studies on Italy in World War II* in Marco Maria Aterrano and Karine Varley ed., *A Fascist Decade of War. 1935-1945 in International Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020): 190.

<sup>6</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Le guerre del Duce* (Roma: Laterza, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 1982; Knox, *Common Destiny*, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> In his huge body of work, we should at least remember, with special reference to Italy: Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870-1915* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals*, 2007; Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell’Italia fascista in Europa (1940-1943)* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

*italiane 1935-1943*.<sup>10</sup> In the nine chapters comprising the narration, this is presented as a continuum, from the initial Italian successes (the conquest of Ethiopia, the participation in the Spanish Civil War and the invasion of Albania) to the country's inexorable decline, after the Duce decided to enter the Second World War, that was punctuated by the failed campaigns conducted in numerous zones—southern France, North Africa, the Balkans, Greece, and the Soviet Union—before the fighting landed in Sicily and directly involved the territory and main cities of the Italian peninsula.

The argument put forward in *Mussolini's War* is that, when examined as a whole and in their implacable succession, the victories and defeats of fascism seem to swing between material limitations caused by economic difficulties, with scarce resources available to raise wartime production, and cultural deficits tied to the mindset of a governing class that was incapable of grasping the strictly military aspects of war. They were inclined to interpret it in political-ideological terms as if defeating enemy armies had nothing to do with their level of preparation, with their equipment or with all the diplomatic and strategic assessments that accompany a declaration of war and its development over time. Conscious of the need for a functional restructuring of the Royal Army, Navy, and Airforce to make them competitive for the future battles on land, sky, and sea, the Duce and his generals (first and foremost Rodolfo Graziani, Ugo Cavallero, and Vittorio Ambrosio) implemented a modernization plan. They used organizational methods that made their model largely ineffective, constantly delaying the program and attending to it by fits and starts without the required coordination between the different branches of the relevant defense and industrial sectors.

Beyond its reassuring propaganda, this plan was ill-suited to seriously preparing the country to enter a war that had little to do with the dynamics of the First World War and that called for a completely different commitment and a completely different set of logistical skills. The road “from triumph to collapse,” evoked in the book's subtitle, was moreover marked not only by inefficient military innovations and inadequate financial support for the production of weapons and munitions. It was also primarily guided by Mussolini's vision of the conflagration triggered by the German invasion of Poland: a combination of his failure to understand the differences with the First World War and of belief in the idea that war was, “in its essence, ‘the struggle of spirit and will’” (9).

It is therefore not surprising that alongside his detailed reconstruction of war operations, supported by documentation from the Italian and German military archives, the author offers his reflections on the mindset of the protagonists, who were unsuited to implementing the total mobilization employed both by the enemy Anglo-American powers and by the Third Reich, on whose tactical and strategic skills Italy became increasingly dependent. Scrupulously cross-checking the written histories that have in the last decade reconstructed the fascist policies of occupation in the different war-zones,<sup>11</sup> Gooch also underlines the fact that by establishing a sort of compensation for its military shortcomings, the Italian war-effort became more and more ideological. It was colonial in the North African desert, ethnic in the Balkans, and anti-Bolshevik in the Soviet Union, and had consequences that went beyond the wartime chronology and that were to have a profound influence on the local populations and on their memory of the regime's violent practices of forced Italianization.

From Gooch's book it emerges that Italian fascism's war was ultimately an experience traversed by a catastrophic temporality and by a web of plans that lacked inter-communication: Mussolini's hyper-political mentality, his faltering confidence in his Chiefs of Staff, the difficulties encountered by the latter both in terms of the availability of resources and of the leadership of the armed forces, and the misunderstandings with Nazi Germany's allies. All of this occurred in an intricate puzzle, the

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane. 1935-1943* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005). It is worth noting that in 2020, at the same time as the publication of Gooch's book, Routledge brought out a collective volume in which different authors again put forward the idea of an uninterrupted fascist war, extending it to 1945: Marco Maria Atterrano and Karine Varley ed., *A Fascist Decade of War*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Emanuele Sica and Richard Carrier, eds., *Italy and The Second World War. Alternative perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

pieces of which must be kept in mind in order to avoid branding the Duce's behavior and decisions as "mad" (411) and thus extrapolating them from history and making them alien to any possible historical understanding.

Based upon her profound knowledge of fascist Italy, Victoria de Grazia also deals with a military man and a tragic period of time.<sup>12</sup> *The Perfect Fascist* tells the story of Attilio Teruzzi (1882-1950), a professional soldier who, in 1920, left the army and joined the fascist movement in 1920. He had a brilliant career, serving in a range of important roles both before and after the fascist rise to power. Teruzzi served as deputy-secretary, in 1921, of the PNF; member of parliament in 1924 (re-confirmed in 1929 and 1934); deputy secretary of the Interior (1925-1926); governor of Cyrenaica from 1926 to 1928; Chief of Staff of the Volunteer Militia for National Security (MVSN) from 1929 to 1935; lieutenant general and inspector of troops during the Spanish Civil War; deputy secretary for the Colonies from 1937, and Minister for Italian Africa from 1939 until the collapse of the regime, when he joined the *Repubblica sociale italiana* (Italian Social Republic), without holding any of official responsibilities.

Although centering on the experience of one individual, de Grazia's book can be regarded not as a traditional biography but as a research study that attempts to use the reconstruction of a personal experience to reflect on everyday life under fascism. This is done by scrutinizing the historiography that tried to deal with the feelings, interrelations, and forgotten aspects of official politics and the private lives of the men and women who lived through fascism in Italy and were involved in it.<sup>13</sup> By analyzing the papers in the Weinman family archive, the fascist documentation kept in the Rome military archives and the central state archive in Rome, the author traces Teruzzi's life story, constantly interweaving the political and social context and adopting a particular point of view which is the key to her research: the story of Teruzzi's marriage in 1926 to a Polish-born industrialist's daughter, Lilliana Weinman, a Jewish American opera singer that he met in Milan where she was living in order to continue her opera training. After a few years the marriage led to a separation (1929) and to a tortuous procedure to invalidate the Catholic marriage rite.

De Grazia makes a detailed reconstruction of the relationship between Teruzzi and Weinman, focusing on the motives leading to the courtship and marriage: love at first sight; the expectations generated by a man well on the way to success and a woman admired in fascist circles for her charm and her exotic modernity; and the couple's debate on the best strategies to survive in the fascist universe, with its constant requests to side with one faction or the other and its continual internal clashes. Under examination, too, are the reasons the relationship failed: Teruzzi's anti-Semitism and his emotional restlessness were probably not understood by Lilliana, who undertook a long battle with the Catholic Church to prevent the marriage from being annulled. This is the story of a successful Italian man, one who was torn between the duties of his faith in fascism and the drives of his emotional life, and a "new woman," who gave up a promising career in the opera world to play the role of wife to a *perfect* notable. Despite its favorable beginnings, the union was not able to survive the daily grind of life in Mussolini's Italy and the regime's racial prejudices, leading to a break-up and a legal war that had lasting effects on the lives of the former spouses.

During his mission to Spain under Caudillo Francisco Franco, Mussolini's man in fact met another woman, Yvette Maria Blank, with whom he established a relationship and had a child, Mariceli. Blank, who was probably Romanian, was also Jewish; despite the complexity of their relationship, which degenerated over time, Teruzzi took his paternal responsibilities seriously, continuing to frequent the mother and daughter and attempting to adopt the girl in order to protect her from the

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<sup>12</sup> Among her main works, see: De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 1981; de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 1992; De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto, eds., *Dizionario del fascismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002-2003); De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, Penelope Morris, Francesco Ricatti and Mark Seymour (eds.), *Politica ed emozioni nella storia d'Italia dal 1848 ad oggi* (Roma: Viella, 2012); Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Joshua Arthurs, Michael Ebner, Kate Ferris (eds.), *The Politics of Everyday Life in Fascist Italy. Outside the State?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

effects of Italy's 1938 Race Laws. He was not successful, however, due to the enduring validity of his marriage to Weinman and to the status of illegitimacy attributed, in Italy, to any child born out of wedlock. The new love story narrated by de Grazia occupies the late Thirties and moves through the years of the fall of fascism, Teruzzi's participation in the Italian Social Republic, and his postwar imprisonment (he was sentenced to 30 years on the island of Procida), which ended with an early release in 1950, and death a few weeks after his newfound freedom.

As well as offering a chance to reflect on justice in the transition period after the fall of fascism in Italy and on the fate of Mussolini's party officials in the years of the founding of the present-day Republic (in particular, their contribution to the creation of neo-fascist movements and parties), the second part of the book completes and interacts with the first. The author argues that starting with the private life of historical figures means keeping in mind the conventional aspect of general interpretations and specifically confronting, as Claudio Pavone suggests,<sup>14</sup> "the two indissoluble faces of totalitarianism.' The one face was its violence: the laws and legal principles it broke in its efforts to sustain itself; the other its moral and political claim to reimpose law and order in the name of the greatness of the nation by usurping the power of the state. Once the fascists had seized the power, this second claim perpetuated itself in the greatly aggrandized sphere of government power at Mussolini's command" (425).

The nonlinear behavior of one who, at first sight, would seem to embody the model of the perfect fascist ultimately prompts us not to interpret the "total" character of the state and the plan for anthropological regeneration, or the *new man*, as immobilism or the lack of internal dialectics in interwar Italy. Instead, bearing in mind the *subjectivity* of the protagonists and the "web of dependency in which human beings are immersed"<sup>15</sup> seems to be a way to avoid simplifications and to verify the coherence of fascist self-representations, which were more titanic and immovable than the social and political reality underlying them.

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<sup>14</sup> Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War. A History of the Italian Resistance*, trans. Peter Levy and David Broder (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Sabina Loriga, "Tolstoi dans le scepticisme de l'histoire," *Esprit* 315:6 (June 2005): 6-25, here 13.