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Fascist Violence

History and Historiography

1 Introduction

The fact that Fascism was born out of violence, that it gained power through violence, that it maintained power for over twenty years through violence and that it ended its history in an orgy of extreme violence, is something that can be taken for granted. About the origins of Fascism, Emilio Gentile wrote: “In the beginning there was violence”¹.

Yet fascist violence is a subject that has been studied by the historical sciences only in relatively recent years. The present essay will attempt to give an overview of this brutal history and of the most recent acquisitions of Italian and international historiography on the subject.

The question is: where does all this violence come from; what are the cultural, political, and social roots of a phenomenon that led to a civil war in 1921/22, that unleashed wars of aggression in Africa and Europe, that oppressed the Italian society with a regime that was perhaps not particularly bloody, but certainly violent, and that ended its course with a bloodbath never seen in recent history? And then: what are the characteristics of this violence? What are its developments over the years? What are the characteristics of the Fascist war? Was Fascism able to “forge” a new generation of warriors? Was the regime able to create a “new man”? In this essay I will try to explain how Fascism could transform the Italian idea of violence, and to give an overview of the studies that have given answers, or may be useful to study the phenomenon of Fascist violence.

2 From “squadrisimo” to the Dictatorship

When the Austrian and German soldiers returned from the trenches after five years of war, they found a completely changed society. The *Frontsoldaten* – veterans of trench warfare, subjected to highly brutalizing experiences, convinced that they were entitled if not to a triumphant reception at least to the recognition of their sacrifices – had

¹ E. Gentile, *La violenza paramilitare fascista e le origini del totalitarismo in Italia*, in R. Gerwarth / J. Horne (eds.), *Guerra in pace. Violenza paramilitare in Europa dopo la Grande Guerra*, Milano 2013, p. 128, originally published as *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the First World War*, Oxford 2012.

to face an unprecedented economic and social crisis that pushed them to the margins of society². The war had marked an epochal watershed, the end of the “long nineteenth century” and inaugurated the “short century”, the century of the “European Civil War”. The reaction was either radical pacifism, or a continuation of the war mentality that did not allow for a peaceful return to the new society. As a commander of a German *Freikorps* said: “We laughed when they told us that the war was over, because we were the war”³.

The economic and psychological difficulties of veterans, together with the terror of the Bolshevik Revolution which seemed to be on the verge of overwhelming the traditional state and hierarchical organization of the old continent (the Russian October, the Spartacist uprising in Berlin, the Republic of Councils in Bavaria, the Bela Kun regime in Hungary), led many veterans to join ultra-nationalist, ultra-conservative parties and movements as well as paramilitary organizations⁴. This phenomenon is now well known, not only for the defeated nations, but also for one of the winners of the Great War, Italy, where the movement, and then the Fascist Party, succeeded in giving an organization, a structure, an ideology, and a purpose to thousands of ex-combatants (and many teenagers), angry at the outcome of the conflict and convinced that they had been deprived of the fruits of victory⁵.

The novelty of a militarily organized movement, which made violence the fulcrum of its identity and political strategy, was already clear to their contemporaries. Angelo Tasca, perhaps one of the most lucid observers of the time, collected his analyses of the birth and advent of Fascism in a volume that is still a milestone for the study of violence in the post-war period. Tasca, a former socialist and then communist leader, was the first to underline the reasons which led Mussolini’s movement to victory, that is: the use of paramilitary squads for the destruction not of the “Bolshevik revolution” or the almost non-existent Italian “red guards”, but for the annihilation of any conquest gained by the social-democratic movement. As an entrepreneur said to Angelo Tasca, at the time an advocate of the Socialist party: “You see – We are not afraid of Bombacci [a communist and revolutionary leader]; it is Baldini [a trade union leader] who scares us because, with his Federation of Cooperatives, he has us

² The bibliography on the post-war crisis in Europe is endless. Here we can cite, for example, P. Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford 1975; E.J. Leed, *No Man’s Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge 1979; C. Pavone, *La seconda guerra mondiale: una guerra civile europea?*, in G. Ranzato (ed.), *Guerre fratricide. Le guerre civili in età contemporanea*, Torino 1994, where Pavone writes: “1914 was such a traumatic date because it broke both a political order and balance and a social and cultural order and balance”, p. 93.

³ Quoted in R. Gerwart, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End*, London 2017, p. 124.

⁴ R. Gerwarth / J. Horne, *Guerra in pace*.

⁵ The bibliography on the Italian crisis of the first postwar period is also quite vast. Two studies in particular have focused on the relationship between political and social crisis, violence and the advent of Fascism: F. Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile. L’Italia dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo*, Torino 2009; R. Vivarelli, *Storia delle origini del fascismo*, vol. 3, Bologna 2012.

replaced everywhere”⁶. The use of paramilitary squads was absolutely essential to destroy everything that the workers’ movement had built since the 1880s. According to Tasca, “The ‘punitive expedition’ became, towards the end of 1920, the typical method of the expansion of Fascism”⁷.

The punitive expedition almost always starts from an urban center and radiates into the surrounding countryside. Mounted on trucks, armed by the Agrarian Association or the regiments’ warehouses, the “Black Shirts” head for the place that is the target of their expedition. When they arrive, they start beating all those they meet in the streets, and the ones who are not seen at the passage of the pennants or wear a tie, a handkerchief, and a red scarf. If someone rebels, if you see the slightest gesture of defense, if a fascist is injured or a little beaten, the “punishment” stretches out. They rush to the headquarters of the Chamber of Labor, the trade union, the cooperative, the House of the People, they break down the doors, throw furniture, books, goods into the street, pour out gasoline cans: a few minutes later, everything is in flames. Those who are on the premises are savagely beaten or killed. The flags are burned or taken away as trophies⁸.

The key difference between the Fascist strategy – based on mobile groups, coordinated one with the other, and above all well-armed – and that of the Socialists – anchored to the territory and mainly unarmed – was perfectly described by Tasca, according to whom: “the workers, on the contrary [of the Fascists], clustered around their *case del popolo* like once the peasants’ huts around the castle”⁹. Tasca stressed the extreme violence of the Fascist *squadre*: “The concentration of the ‘squadre’ is always followed by the destruction of the Chamber of Labor, the other union headquarters, the murder or forced removal of local union leaders”¹⁰.

Guido Dorso, Giacomo Matteotti and Antonio Gramsci, together with Luigi Salvatorelli were also observers of the time who immediately understood the novelty of Fascism and its political-military strategy. All these intellectuals had understood how devastating violence was absolutely essential to Fascism, being the basis of its political and ideological identity.

The Fascists themselves extolled violence and claimed its use both during the “black biennium” and in the years immediately following the conquest of power. In 1921 the weekly magazine “Il Fascio”, the press service of the movement, recounted the attacks on the institutions of the Partito Socialista Unitario (PSU) in the Po Valley: “There are too many crimes organized by an entire party that have been prepared since long and triggered by the hate that speculates on the ambitions of the intriguers, of the troublemakers, of the keepers. From Turin to Bologna; from Ferrara to Castellammare; in Modena, it is all a long theory of moral baseness that must

⁶ A. Tasca, *Nascita e avvento del fascismo*, Bari 1982, p. 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 166 f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

disappear”; to continue: “Retaliation is holy; revenge is justice; punishment is necessary”¹¹.

According to Francesco Giunta, perhaps one of the bloodiest *squadristi* of the *vigilia*, Fascist violence was nothing more than a “just reaction” to the methods of the socialists. In 1921 he wrote:

If it is our way of [waging civil war] that offends, we remind you of the dead of Sarzana, Foiano, Empoli, Modena: little Berta who was torn and drowned, the sailors [of Empoli] whose testicles were cut off and their eyes sewn in the Arab way, the young men buried alive and never found again¹².

After the “March on Rome”, one of the first to recount his deeds was Aurelio Maria Rizzo, author of a *Dal diario di un fascista in cammino* (Diary of a Fascist on the road)¹³. From this “diary” it is possible to draw all the rhetorical artifices that justified Fascist violence and which confirm the acquisition of the books on social psychology¹⁴. Fascist violence is “defensive”; it is a necessary reaction to the aggressions that the veterans, the homeland, and victory have suffered since the end of the conflict. Rizzo describes at length the “crowds” drunk with violence and destruction, the “plebs” who want to “do as in Russia and destroy everything that is still healthy and sacred in the country. The “desecrators of victory”, the “bargain-makers of the Italianity of Fiume” (a city that probably few in Italy had heard of before D’Annunzio’s “March”) had to be “driven out” of society through the *squadre*. The Fascists were the only defenders of a country in extreme danger; they were the bearers of a “sacred cause”. They were a small minority of heroes who “were trying to keep up with the masses in the spirit of pillage and revolt”¹⁵.

The demonization of the enemy is evident. Opponents are not considered individual people, a group of individuals with their ideas and ideals; they are the enemy, an indistinct and faceless mass, whose only purpose is destruction. It is the same identical style used, for example, by the members of the German *Freikorps*, so well described by Ernst von Salomon in his famous book *The Outlaws*¹⁶. Through such a demonization of the enemy violence, all violence, is accepted and considered “just”, indeed “necessary”. The aggressors, the Fascists, become the victims. There is no

¹¹ *Il fascismo schianta i fertilizi pussisti della Valle Padana*, in “Il Fascio”, January 21, 1921.

¹² Article titled *Un morto*, from 1921, republished in F. Giunta, *Essenza dello squadristico*, Roma 1931, p. 151.

¹³ A.M. Rizzo, *Rivoluzione. Dal diario di un fascista in cammino*, Roma 1922.

¹⁴ S. Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*, London 2011; R.F. Baumeister, *Evil. Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, New York 1997; C. Gudehus / M. Christ (eds.), *Gewalt. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2013.

¹⁵ A.M. Rizzo, *Rivoluzione*, p. 181.

¹⁶ E. von Salomon, *The Outlaws*, London 1931; originally published as *Die Geächteten*, Berlin 1930.

afterthought, no doubt. Rizzo describes the assault on a socialist demonstration, which leads to deaths and injuries, in the following way:

[...] far away, a very strong column of people advanced singing the red flag.
 They were celebrating: a group of children and women showing off flowers and red handkerchiefs.
 They followed the men armed with scythes, axes, clubs, and rifles. In the middle was Maria Giudice.
 They had put women and children at the opening of the procession.
 What to do?
 The first patrol fired blanks [...]
 A second salvo greeted the roar of those furious beasts¹⁷.

What was evidently a peaceful procession, formed in part by women and children, becomes a horde of barbarians using incorrect methods of combat, that is to say, shielding themselves from women and children. At this point the only way to stop this horde is the use of firearms.

The year 1932, the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, was the occasion for many former *squadristi*, now ministers and undersecretaries, to exalt their accomplishments for the revolution.

The memoirs of Roberto Farinacci, which appeared in 1934¹⁸, are also a continuous series of attacks against “subversives”. Farinacci’s rhetorical scheme is typical of the Fascists which involves the return from the front and the “discovery” of a society in crisis and “in prey to the most terrible subversion”; the need for a violent reaction and therefore the resolute actions of the teams initially composed of a small handful of heroes, who defeat the enemies.

Italo Balbo, in his *Diario 1922*, recounts the march on Romagna, where his “column of fire” devastates the entire territory, without any motivation other than to destroy the “red strongholds”¹⁹.

Bruno Frullini, one of the members of the *Disperata*, the *squadra* to which Amerigo Dumini (one of Giacomo Matteotti’s assassins) also belonged, published in 1933 his book *Squadrisimo fiorentino*, a text in which the attacks are shown without any rhetorical embellishment. For example, Frullini tells us that in 1921, he and some of his comrades went to Siena because “they had nothing to do”. In Siena:

we were expecting Carlo Sestini, Umberto Del Greco, Enrico Uva, at the participation of another town council settlement. Each councilor with his Communist badge was seen tearing it under his nose, we invaded the seat of the Prefecture, and began slapping and hitting [“legnate”], the President of the delegation was also beaten, a notoriously dishonorable Communist²⁰.

¹⁷ A.M. Rizzo, *Rivoluzione*, p. 176.

¹⁸ R. Farinacci, *Squadrisimo. Dal mio diario della vigilia. 1919–1922*, Roma 1934.

¹⁹ I. Balbo, *Diario 1922*, Milano 1932.

²⁰ B. Frullini, *Squadrisimo fiorentino*, Firenze 1933, pp. 74 f.

In each of the pages dedicated to the “actions”, Frullini wanted to draft a list of the participants, sure that his former comrades would appreciate it. It was not a call for accomplices, but a recognition to those who had written the glorious pages of the Italian and Fascist history.

The memoirs of Mario Piazzesi, another Blackshirt leader of *La Disperata* in Florence and then Prefect in the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana / RSI*), are just as clear, though less crude. The descriptions of the punitive expeditions tell of generalized devastations and attacks on entire regions, such as the one against Umbria, where the Florentine *squadristi* literally destroyed everything they encountered²¹.

But the prize for the clearest description of the violence does not go to a Tuscan, but to Raffaello Riccardi, protagonist of the torture and murder of a peasant who had killed a Fascist in a fight. The description of the episode, in Riccardi’s memoir, although sweetened, is that of a cold-blooded murder:

The proud fugitive preferred to surrender rather than get his skin pierced. Those good Fascists committed the imprudence and error of bringing him alive to their commander. They hoisted him up in a car and made him pass, like a trophy, among the Fascists and that part of the population that had remained, fully aware.

The commander interrogated him at the headquarters of the Fascio, in the room that still scented of the flowers of the few crowns that had accompanied Fabi and Fiorelli to their last resting place. A dramatic interrogation with a full confession. Revolutionary sentence. It was perhaps the most revolutionary sentence in all Italy. He who strikes with lead perishes with lead. Not even for an instant did I have the idea of handing him over to the so-called constituted authorities. They served the state that fought against us without exception. The commander called a former officer of the brave, invited him to choose twelve men and ordered him to have the murderer shot, according to the laws of war, behind the walls of the cemetery²².

The autobiographies of the *squadristi* were published up to the end of the Fascist regime²³.

These celebratory autobiographies show that Fascism wanted to carry out the complete overturning of the values at the basis of politics and civil coexistence. Until the birth of Fascism, the political struggle had been peaceful, limited to verbal clashes, violence had been a monopoly of the state that had also employed it indiscriminately, but always to re-establish “law and order”²⁴. When in 1913 a clash between the social-

21 M. Piazzesi, *Diario di uno squadrista toscano. 1919–1922*, Roma 1980, p. 137.

22 R. Riccardi, *Pagine squadriste*, Roma 1940, pp. 154 f.

23 For example, M. Gallian, *Il Ventennale. Gli uomini delle squadre nella rivoluzione delle camicie nere*, Roma 1942; D.M. Tuninetti, *Squadrisimo e squadristi piemontesi*, Roma 1942.

24 According to Renzo De Felice, the first episode of violence that changed the way politics was done, was the attack on the socialist newspaper “Avanti!” in April 1919; R. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario. 1883–1920*, Torino 1965, p. 484.

ists and the republicans in the town of Voltana had ended in stabbings, the ensuing scandal was enormous. During the “Red Week” (June 1914) there was only one death among the police and none among politicians opposed to the socialist, republican, and anarchist movements. There were 13 deaths among the demonstrators killed by the police during the clashes²⁵. The *sindacalisti rivoluzionari* (revolutionary trade unionists), the exponents of the “insurrectionalist” wing of the socialist and Marxist movement, provoked very few clashes with the socialists and never killed or wounded anyone. It was only with Fascism that violence was accepted, violent aggressions against the political enemy became something to boast about, episodes which represented titles of merit that guaranteed prestige and, in many cases, a brilliant political career²⁶. *Squadristo* represents a change not only of political methods, it is an anthropological mutation, where the brute becomes the apex of the new Fascist civilization, the exponent of the “new man” forged by war and then by the regime.

Despite the fact that violence was at the center of any analysis of Fascism during the twenty years of the dictatorship, both by anti-Fascists and Fascists themselves, Italian scholars have almost ignored it until the ‘60s. It was Renzo De Felice, with the first volume of his biography of Mussolini, who raised the problem²⁷.

Fascist violence (whether the regime was considered a “parenthesis” or a “revelation” in Italian modern history) was not a topic worthy consideration, or perhaps it was considered so obvious that it was not even worth talking about. The scars of war, and the memories of the victims of Fascism were still so present and alive in the Italian society that perhaps it was not necessary to retrace its history. Things changed in the second half of the seventies, above all thanks to an English scholar, Adrian Lyttelton, who, talking about the conquest of power by Fascism, put in the foreground the “military component” of the movement, fundamental for its victory²⁸.

A few years later Alberto Aquarone underlined the educational value of the Fascist violence used to arouse enthusiasm and recruit new followers. “The regime, that is, needed violence not only to repress but to legitimize itself over time with the intention of being approved, regardless of the seriousness or otherwise of the threat posed to its stability and its development by internal oppositions”²⁹.

Also Jens Petersen, in an essay published three years after Aquarone’s, highlighted the “positive” function of violence for the movement:

25 G. Candeloro, *Storia dell’Italia moderna*, vol. 8: *La prima guerra mondiale, il dopoguerra, l’avvento del fascismo*, Milano 1989, p. 23.

26 Many former *squadristi* had a brilliant and wealthy career during the Fascist regime. For example, Giuseppe Bottai, Dino Grandi, Francesco Giunta, Roberto Farinacci, Achille Roberto Starace, Tullio Tamburini, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Emilio De Bono, Cesare Finzi, and so on.

27 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*.

28 A. Lyttelton, *La conquista del potere. Il fascismo dal 1919 al 1929*, Bari 1974.

29 A. Aquarone, *Violenza e consenso nel fascismo italiano*, in “Storia contemporanea”, 10, 1979, 1, here p. 147.

The ideology of Fascist violence had its operative organization in the “squadre”. What held the Fascist struggle groups together were neither certain aims or specific political programs, but a common antibourgeois feeling, the dynamics and primacy of action and struggle, and the use of physical violence³⁰.

Petersen’s essay was published in the same issue of the magazine “Storia contemporanea”, with another by Adrian Lyttelton, who reiterated that “Violence was so intrinsically linked to the usual action of the movement, and so pre-eminent in its ideology, that it could not be treated simply as one aspect among others of the history of fascism”³¹.

Speaking of the origins of Fascist violence, in 2003, Angelo Ventrone highlighted D’Annunzio’s function in 1915, with his insistence on inciting the interventionists to “punish the evildoers”, i.e. the neutralists and the Giolittians³². With the progress of the war, and with the birth of countless “action committees” for the defense of the “interior front”, the interventionist bourgeoisie became more and more radical, and it was increasingly harder to denounce the “enemies of the nation”, i.e. socialists and *giolittiani*. This psychosis became more and more irrational and violent with the crisis of Caporetto, when the division between “national” and “antinational” reached its peak³³.

The Manichaeian “friend-enemy” mentality born during the war, and widely exploited by early Fascism, is also emphasized by Emilio Gentile, who also dealt with the theme of the “war party” (*guerra festa*), that is, a war mentality that the Fascists brought even into peacetime³⁴. It is Fascism that exploits, if not creates, the myth of the “two Italies”, the Italy of fighters and interventionists, and the “non-Italy”, of pacifists, internationalists, and socialists.

Squadristo has been the object of specialized work only in recent years. Another German historian, Sven Reichardt, published a comparative study between German SA and the Italian Blackshirts or *Camicie Nere*³⁵. Among the many intuitions reached by Reichardt’s very interesting work, to be underlined is the link between socialist aggression and Fascist violence, which, according to the German scholar, are inversely proportional; in other words, the more peaceful the socialists were, the more aggressive the Fascists were. For the Blackshirts, moreover, violence had the following functions: paralyze the enemy, reinforce their inside compactness, demonstrate their

³⁰ J. Petersen, *Il problema della violenza nel fascismo italiano*, in “Storia contemporanea”, 13, 1982, 6, p. 993.

³¹ A. Lyttelton, *Il problema della violenza nel fascismo italiano. Fascismo e violenza: conflitto sociale e azione politica nel primo dopoguerra*, in “Storia contemporanea”, 13, 1982, 6, p. 965. A synthesis of the debate on Fascist violence in the years: M. Canali, *Repressione e consenso nell’esperienza fascista*, in E. Gentile (ed.), *Modernità totalitaria. Il fascismo italiano*, Roma / Bari 2008, pp. 56–81.

³² A. Ventrone, *La seduzione totalitaria. Guerra, modernità, violenza politica (1914–1918)*, Roma 2003.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁴ E. Gentile, *Le origini dell’ideologia fascista (1918–1925)*, Bologna 1996.

³⁵ S. Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune. Milizie fasciste in Italia e Germania*, Bologna 2009.

own strength. Finally, also for Reichardt, the identity of the Fascists is fundamentally based on hate against the enemy. There is no positive or proactive ideology for the Fascists; their sole aversion to the socialists keeps the Blackshirts together beyond any social or cultural difference. Violence therefore becomes a positive value for the Fascists, who completely upset the value system of liberal Italy³⁶.

Mimmo Franzinelli, author of another study on early *squadristo*, comes to the same conclusions³⁷. Franzinelli also and above all underlines Mussolini's role in exalting violence and inciting the *squadre*.

Matteo Millan, author of the most recent work on the *squadristi*, analyzes the political and personal events of the black shirts after the March on Rome³⁸. The total internalization of violence by many *squadristi* made it very difficult to go back to civilian life. Even after October 1922 there was a continuation of violent actions with sensational cases such as the “Facts of Turin” (December 1922) and La Spezia (January 1923) when the cities were still occupied, with massacres of anti-Fascist militants. Among the most interesting aspects of the reconstruction made by Millan, to be mentioned is the approval given to the squadrist violence by a large part of the Italian bourgeoisie, approval expressed by the great liberal newspapers such as the “Corriere della Sera” or “La Stampa”, expression of the middle classes and the big industry.

The reasons for the “long duration” of the squadrist violence, even after Mussolini's seizure of power, are indicated by Millan in the “incompleteness” of the “revolution”, which did achieve the results desired by the *squadristi* by the victors' alleged “right to plunder”, in their personal interest and, above all, with the *squadristi* habit of violence³⁹.

According to all the studies examined so far, violence is the basis for the identity and political practice of Fascism and was born in the First World War⁴⁰. The soldiers – forced to extreme and brutalizing experiences for over three years, part of an impoverished middle class terrified by the consequences of the war – are unable to return to a civilian context. These veterans – organized by a movement that makes the exaltation of war the basis of its ideology and, at the same time, gives voice to the resentment and frustration of the veterans – find in Fascism the possibility of continuing the “party war” even in peace. These battle-hardened soldiers, many of whom were part of the *Arditi*, the storm troops of the Royal Army, joined the *squadre d'azione* together with very young boys who grew up in a climate of war hysteria, just as in Germany, the former fighters of the *Stoßtruppen* had met in the *Freikorps* with high school students who were too young to have participated in the “real” war. The Manichean vision of a

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

³⁷ M. Franzinelli, *Squadristi. Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista*, Milano 2003.

³⁸ M. Millan, *Squadristo e squadristi nella dittatura fascista*, Roma 2014.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76 f.

⁴⁰ A research on the memories of the *squadristi* is that one by C. Baldassini, *Autobiografia del primo fascismo. Ideologia, politica, mentalità memoria*, Soveria Mannelli 2013.

world divided between friends and enemies, transforms the political adversary into a monster to be annihilated, with the same methods used in the trenches. The political struggle is thus transformed into the continuation of the trench warfare: the squares are conquered not by demonstrations and rallies, but by the use of violence; the cities are “occupied” by the raids of paramilitary squads; discussions are cut short and are won, according to the Fascist Luigi Freddi’s words, with fists⁴¹; political ideals become a religion.

In the following years, as we can see from the memoirs of the *squadristi* published in the Thirties and Forties, violence is exalted and becomes a positive factor, indeed ‘the’ positive factor, of the political struggle. Fascism carries out a sort of anthropological revolution in an attempt to create the “new man”, son of the Great War and ready to fight Mussolini’s wars.

3 Everyday violence during the Regime

Once Mussolini’s government was stabilized, in 1926, as is widely known, it became a dictatorship, more and more personal as time passed. The first step towards dictatorship came as early as 1923, with the inclusion of the Blackshirts’ *squadre* in the state institutions through the creation of the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (Voluntary Militia for National Security). For the first time in Italy a party militia became the police force. As well as representing a novelty and a forcing of the rule of law, the violence of the *squadre*, besides being “forgiven” by the amnesty of October 1923, was also rewarded, with the inclusion in the roles of the state, with the ample possibility of a well-paying career for tens of thousands of former *squadristi*.

The Fascist regime, however, used legal instruments born at the end of the nineteenth century and perfected them. Police confinement began in 1896, and was widely exploited by the regime which, over the course of twenty years, sent more than 18,000 political opponents or suspected political opponents to the small towns in the center-south or to the smaller islands⁴². The innovation of the Fascist confinement resided in its extra-judicial nature⁴³. Officers of the *Carabinieri*, the prefect, and officers of the militia, formed the commission that decided the punishment of the accused.

⁴¹ “The Fist is the synthesis of theory. [Due to] the impossibility of achieving his goal with words. Then the Fascist breaks the socialist’s head and introduces you to his conception”; quoted in E. Gentile, *La violenza paramilitare fascista*, p. 141.

⁴² C. Poesio, *Il confino fascista. L’arma silenziosa del regime*, Roma / Bari 2011. Two case studies are F. Cordova / P. Sergi (eds.), *Regione di confino. La Calabria (1927–1943)*, Roma 2005; M. Minardi, *Nemici in patria. Antifascisti al confino*, Parma 2018.

⁴³ C. Poesio, *La violencia en la Italia fascista: un instrumento de la transformación política (1919–1945)*, in J. Rodrigo (ed.), *Políticas de la violencia. Europa, siglo XX*, Zaragoza 2014, p. 99.

The Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State was another institution appointed to strike down all forms of opposition to the regime. The court was established by Law no. 2008 dated November 25, 1926, following a failed attempt on Mussolini's life. It had to judge anyone who made an attempt on the life of the prime minister or members of the royal family and who, in practice, carried out anti-Fascist activities. Together with the court, the death penalty was reinstated, cancelled by the Zanardelli Penal Code of 1889. The court consisted of a general and five senior officers of the militia, with the clear aim of making it a tool for the defense of Fascism and for the repression of any form of opposition. During its long life (it was abolished in 1943), 15,806 people (891 women) were referred to the Court; 5,619 (124 women) were tried and 4,596 (124 women) were sentenced. Few were the death sentences. Until 1940 there were 29, 9 of which were executed. From 1940 to 1943, 33 people were sentenced to death, 22 of which were actually killed.

All these tools were supported by a myriad of police bodies: the political police, the Carabinieri, the OVRA (a branch of the political police with intelligence functions), the Questura, and the Uffici politici investigativi (UPI). The latter were the political investigation offices of the militia, rooted throughout the territory⁴⁴. This dense network of police not only surrounded the citizens in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, but also carried out its task in a context of illegality and arbitrariness. As the historian Jonathan Dunnage summarized: "Flanked by the Fascist Party, the police oversaw the creation of a highly politicized society that thrived on a notable dose of compulsion, conformity, suspicion, and fear"⁴⁵.

Policemen and Fascist militiamen could move freely, given the unconditional approval of the most violent methods⁴⁶. According to the testimony of Ernesto Rossi, an anti-Fascist who had served several years in Fascist prisons:

The white-collar anti-Fascists in general were not harassed, because the policemen feared the problems that might have come from the direct or indirect relations of the accused with the ruling class [...]. But the poor devils, who were not to be feared because they did not have important protectors, before being interrogated by the magistrate were very often tortured in the most brutal way: imprisonment for several days in the dark, without a cot and without eating, salt water made to drink by force [...], they whipped [...] their naked body; beat their most intimate parts with bags full of sand, pins under their nails⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ On the UPI, see A. Osti Guerrazzi, *Un organo della repressione durante la Repubblica sociale italiana. Gli Uffici politici investigativi della Guardia nazionale repubblicana*, in "Quellen und Forschungen", 86, 2006, pp. 465–490.

⁴⁵ J. Dunnage, *Mussolini's Policemen. Behaviour, Ideology and Institutional Culture in Representation and Practice*, Manchester / New York 2012, p. 94.

⁴⁶ On the police during the regime, see M.R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*, Cambridge 2011.

⁴⁷ Quoted in M. Griner, *La "Banda Koch". Il Reparto speciale di polizia 1943–44*, Torino 2000, p. 225. Ernesto Rossi's testimony is plausible, even if in the dozens of personal files of policemen I examined,

Through these legal or paralegal methods, according to Camilla Poesio:

the theme of violence was central to the Fascist parable. [...] But it was continuous and ever-present, yet it is a form of psychological and symbolic violence that affected millions of people, like verbal violence, aimed at the psychological annihilation of the adversary⁴⁸.

4 The War Violence

Until now, I have analyzed the violence within the state against the enemies of Fascism in Italy. Fascist violence, however, had its greatest expression in external wars and then reached its climax again in the civil war between 1943 and 1945. In the next paragraphs I will therefore examine the violence in the colonial wars, the violence during the Second World War, the violence in the civil war. The question underlying this paragraph is: what were the characteristics of the Fascist wars? Was Fascist violence different from the one expressed by other European armies? Wars in Italy were traditional wars or wars with specifications typical of Fascism? In other words: what is a “Fascist war”?⁴⁹ The colonial wars engaged the regime for most of its history. From the “reconquest of Libya” (1922–1930) to the conquest and then defense of the Empire (1935–1940), the Italian armed forces were engaged in difficult counter-insurgency campaigns, which they led with considerable brutality and committed numerous war crimes. The use of weapons prohibited by international conventions (poison gas), the disproportionate use of force with indiscriminate bombardments of civilians, mass deportation of entire populations were the methods used by the Italians in Africa by order of Mussolini and applied mainly by Generals Pietro Badoglio and Rodolfo Graziani.

Except for the use of gas (even if well-known abroad due to the complaints of the Ethiopians and the presence of numerous foreign observers)⁵⁰, the protagonists never denied the use of violence against civilian populations. In Graziani’s book, *Pace romana in Libia* (Roman peace in Libya), a volume later used as an anti-war manual by Italian officers, the deportation of civilians as a weapon to crush the insurgents was openly claimed:

But soon we had to convince ourselves that more radical measures were imposed, because of the perpetuation of the connivance [of the inhabitants of Cyrenaica with the rebels] under the most

no episodes of violence ever emerge. The personal files are in Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione generale del Personale, Personale fuori servizio.

⁴⁸ C. Poesio, *La violenza en la Italia fascista*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ The most recent book on this topic is M. Alonso / A. Kramer / J. Rodrigo (eds.), *Fascist Warfare, 1922–1945. Aggression, Occupation, Annihilation*, London 2019.

⁵⁰ For example R. von Xylander, *La conquista dell’Abissinia. Aspetti militari ed insegnamenti della prima guerra coloniale moderna di annientamento*, Milano 1937.

refined forms: [...] Due to this, it was finally decided to move the camps to the extreme corner of the western territory (Sirtica)⁵¹.

The policy of the internment of nomadic tribes in concentration camps in the middle of the Sahara Desert, according to the latest estimates, caused about 10% of the total population of Cyrenaica to die. About 40,000 people died in the concentration camps alone, according to the historian Lucio Ceva⁵². Moreover, in order to reach the concentration camps, civilians were forced to go on actual “death marches” with the immediate shooting of those who stayed behind. An official report of the time states:

No delays were allowed during the stages. Those who lingered were immediately passed for weapons. Such a draconian measure was taken out of necessity, reluctant, as the people were to abandon their lands and goods. Even the cattle that were not able to continue the march due to their physical condition were immediately slaughtered by the gregarious nucleus of police on horseback who had the task of protecting and guarding it⁵³.

These strategies were not hidden, but exalted by the Fascist press, which described Graziani as the highest example of the Fascist “New Man” above all for his absolute lack of mercy. The genocidal policy in Cyrenaica was described as follows in a book dated 1936:

Graziani, after having carefully studied the situation, understands that it is not necessary to face the enemy in grand style, but considers it appropriate to isolate the rebellion, dominating, isolating the populations *without any distinction between rebels and non-rebels*⁵⁴.

Violence against civilians was not hidden in Ethiopia, either. The “conquest of the Empire” was an opportunity on the one hand to show off the most modern weapons, and on the other to give the Fascist leaders the opportunity to put themselves to test. On their return, some of them recounted their warlike deeds without the slightest shame. Two books published by the protagonists of the time, Bruno Mussolini and Alessandro Pavolini, have rightly remained famous. Bruno Mussolini was the first-born son of the dictator, and had participated in the war as a fighter pilot. When he returned to Italy, he wanted to tell his experience by publishing the book *Voli sulle ambe* (Flights over hills), where you can read excerpts like the following:

It was a very funny job with a tragic but beautiful effect. [...] A large zeriba [hut], surrounded by tall trees, I couldn't hit it. I had to hit the thatched roof well, and only the third time did I succeed. The poor devils who were inside and saw the roof burning jumped out running like demons⁵⁵.

51 R. Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia*, Milano 1937, pp. 271 f.

52 L. Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate italiane*, Torino 1999, p. 231.

53 Quoted by A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, Vicenza 2005, pp. 178 f.

54 U. Caimpienta, *Il generale Graziani (l'Africano)*, Milano 1936, p. 209.

55 B. Mussolini, *Voli sulle ambe*, Firenze 1937, p. 78.

Pavolini, future secretary of the Republican Fascist Party in 1943–1945, and an aviator in Ethiopia, described the machine-gunning of the Abyssinian as big game hunting⁵⁶.

In Addis Ababa a gigantic monument was built to commemorate the 12th day of Akarit. The monument commemorates the massacres carried out in 1937 by the Italians after an attack on Graziani, then viceroy of Ethiopia. Following the attack, which took place on February 19, 1937, Italian civilians and soldiers were unleashed for three consecutive days in the streets of the Ethiopian capital, massacring thousands of people by any means, including fire. The massacre continued for three days and was solicited above all by the *federale* (chief of the local Fascist party) of Addis Ababa, Guido Cortese who, according to the research of Ian Campbell, gave *carte blanche* to the local Fascists. A journalist present in the Ethiopian capital described the scene as follows

All the civilians in Addis Ababa have taken on the task of revenge, conduct lightning fast with the systems of the most authentic fascist “squadre”. They go around armed with truncheons and iron bars, targeting as many natives that are still in the streets. [...] I can see a driver who, after having knocked down an old nigger with a sledgehammer, pierces his head from side to side with a bayonet. Needless to say, the havoc is being wrecked on innocent and ignorant people⁵⁷.

Estimates range from 600–2,000 deaths according to the Italian government, to 30,000 estimated by the Ethiopian government⁵⁸.

The massacres continued in the following months, this time planned and implemented by the military. Also in this case they were not hidden but exalted by the Fascist government. Graziani, on his return to Italy, was welcomed as a triumphant man. The Great Council of Fascism publicly thanked the Fascists of Addis Ababa, in March 1937 for the “demeanor they held after the attack”⁵⁹.

The myth of the Italian “bearers of civilization”, who had assumed the “white man’s burden” and who behaved in a much more humane way than other European peoples, such as the British, was a myth carefully cultivated both by the democratic Italian government after the war and by the former Fascists, one for foreign policy reasons, the latter to erase their crimes and exalt the memory of Fascism. The first historian, who did not belong to the academy, to tell the history of the Italian crimes in Africa was Angelo Del Boca, who described them in a monumental multi-volume writing; he was at the center of sensational controversy for this reason. His allegations have recently been collected in a specific volume⁶⁰.

After Del Boca’s books other volumes have been published that have deepened the overall strategies of the Royal Army and the violence against civilians. Lucio

⁵⁶ A. Pavolini, *Disperata*, Firenze 1937, p. 266.

⁵⁷ A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, p. 211.

⁵⁸ I. Campbell, *Il massacro di Addis Abeba. Una vergogna italiana*, Milano 2018, p. 409.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

⁶⁰ A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*

Ceva reconstructed the African campaigns with many details⁶¹, and Matteo Dominioni described the massacres of the civilians during the anti-rebel campaigns in East Africa⁶². The Italian violence in East Africa has attracted the attention of British historians who have published books, important mainly because they take up the point of view of the Ethiopians⁶³.

Fascist violence in the African countryside does not seem, at first glance, very different from the one carried out by other democratic states. The policy of resettlement, the disproportionate use of force, the use of the most modern and deadly weapons even against women and children have been used, by all the states engaged in small wars until very recently⁶⁴. The difference, in the opinion of the writer, lies in the society behind the Fascist armed forces. While in democratic states, from Imperial Germany to Victorian England, violence against civilians was a heated political confrontation and scandal⁶⁵ that helped limit violence, in Italy official propaganda exalted the criminals and violence was approved by society. It was not only traditional European racism that allowed crimes against Africans, it was also the state and public opinion by then accustomed to violence that made violence itself a positive value. For this reason, a criminal like Graziani could be shown to the public opinion as a kind of Roman proconsul and as the best expression of the “New Man” forged by Fascism. It was therefore violence claimed by the military, exalted by the regime, and accepted by society.

During the Second World War, Fascism fought two types of war: the war against regular armies, which we could define as “traditional” or “open” war, and the campaigns of counter-insurgency against the forces to free the territories conquered by the Royal Army, which according to modern terminology, can be defined as “small wars”.

In the traditional wars against the French, the English, the Yugoslav, and Soviet armies, the Italians behaved in a substantially correct way. War crimes were few and mostly repressed by military tribunals. This for a number of reasons: fear of retaliation by the enemy, the general aims of the Fascist war, which wanted to “liberate” those territories that were considered Italian (Nice, Savoy, Tunisia), and therefore had to be substantially correct towards the enemies and civilians’ unoccupied territories, the “cultural proximity” against an enemy considered racially equal⁶⁶, or at least not

61 L. Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate italiane*, Torino 1999.

62 M. Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'impero. Gli italiani in Etiopia 1936–1941*, Roma / Bari 2008.

63 A. Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, Asmara 1997; I. Campbell, *Il massacro di Addis Abeba*.

64 On counterinsurgency wars see, for example, G. Fremont-Barnes (ed.), *A History of Counterinsurgency*, vol. 1: *From South Africa to Algeria*, Santa Barbara CA / Denver CO 2015.

65 The violence in Namibia provoked a strong debate in Germany, as did the violence against Boer civilians in the United Kingdom. See D. Olusoga / C.W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust. Germany's Forgotten Genocide*, London 2010; I.V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca NY / London 2005.

66 This is the term used by E. Sica, *Mussolini's Army in the French Riviera. Italy's Occupation of France*, Urbana IL 2016.

too inferior (as in the case of the Greeks and the Slavs), a wish to bring Christian civilization back to the peoples enslaved by Bolshevism (in the Soviet Union).

The attention of Italian military historians has focused mainly on the following campaigns: the campaigns in North Africa, Greece, and Russia have been the subject of numerous studies, starting from those promoted or carried out by the Historical Office of the Army General Staff, and have given back an image of a “traditional” war, where the Royal Army fought in a correct way against other equally “traditional” armies⁶⁷. The influence of Fascism appears only in a minimal form in the way the war is led. The Italian armed forces would therefore seem totally apolitical and alien to any form of criminal violence⁶⁸. Only in recent years have studies approached the theme of occupation and counter-insurgency campaigns, revealing a very different aspect of the Italian and Fascist Army.

The first and important theater of war, as far as violence against civilians is concerned, is certainly that of former Yugoslavia, where the Italians occupied important parts of the territory and fought together with Nazis and the Ustascha. It goes without saying that the Italian violence was widely documented by Yugoslavian historiography. The Slovenian historian Tone Ferenc published a well-documented book on the Italian occupation of Slovenia in 1994⁶⁹, in which he wrote of the “terrifying violence” of the operations against the partisans and civilians of the Italian Army.

But the book that paved the way in Italy in this field was the one by Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*⁷⁰, which, while dealing in general with occupation policies in France, Yugoslavia, and Greece, dedicates many pages to war crimes. The American scholar James Burgwyn focused on Yugoslavia and, of course, on the repressive policies of the Royal Army⁷¹. In Germany, it was Thomas Schlemmer who dealt with occupation policies in the Soviet Union, with a book that dedicates a great deal of space to violence against civilians, and which provoked a scandal in Italy⁷².

One of the first authors in Italy to deal with the subject of war crimes was a journalist, Gianni Oliva, who reconstructed the war crimes of the Royal Army in Yugoslavia in his book *Si ammazza troppo poco* (published in 2006)⁷³, the title of which is a

⁶⁷ The bibliography on the Italian armed forces in the Second World War is endless. The most recent and most useful are: G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935–1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta*, Torino 2008; L. Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate italiane*; M. Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies. Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943*, Cambridge 2000.

⁶⁸ The memoirs published by Italian soldiers who fought a “traditional” war are numerous; those of soldiers engaged in campaigns against the insurrection can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

⁶⁹ T. Ferenc, *La provincia “italiana” di Lubiana. Documenti 1941–1942*, Gorizia 1994.

⁷⁰ *Fascism's European Empire. Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge 2006.

⁷¹ J.H. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic. Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941–1943*, New York 2005.

⁷² T. Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime. La campagna italiana di Russia 1941–1943*, Roma / Bari 2009.

⁷³ G. Oliva, *Si ammazza troppo poco. I crimini di guerra italiani*, Milano 2006. In the Seventies another journalist, Giacomo Scotti, published another volume, almost ignored by the Italian scholars. G. Scotti, “Bono italiano”. *Militari italiani in Jugoslavia dal 1941 al 1943: da occupatori a disertori*, Milano 1977.

quotation from a report by an Italian officer in Yugoslavia engaged in the repression of the communist guerrillas. The following year Eric Gobetti, another non-academic historian, published *L'occupazione allegra*, also dedicated to Italian crimes⁷⁴.

Other books on the subject have been published in the past years, as *Italiani senza onore*, by Costantino Di Sante⁷⁵; *Camicie nere sull'Acropoli*, by Marco Clementi⁷⁶; and mine, *The Italian Army in Slovenia*⁷⁷; as well as the very recent volume by Paolo Fonzi on Greece⁷⁸.

A rather clear picture emerges from the reading of said volumes of what the “Fascist war” was and the reasons for the extreme violence exercised by the armed forces of Fascist Italy during the Second World War.

First of all, the “colonial method” used by the Royal Army: all the officers engaged in the occupation campaigns had had previous experience in the African colonies, and used the same tactics already experimented in Libya or East Africa; the unpreparedness of the troops and the inefficiency of the armament, equipment, and training, which made it very difficult to defeat the partisans, unleashed the anger and frustration of the Italian soldiers, who were therefore fierce against civilians; the orders from above, coming from Mussolini himself or from the top of the Army; the Fascist ideology, which considered useful and legitimate any form of violence to bend the enemy; the Italian military tradition, which saw in the partisan war a form of illegal and unfair combat; a society and a government that approved the most extreme violence. So, as with the wars in Africa, the government exalted and demanded violence, the military claimed it, and society approved it. The “Fascist war” can therefore be defined as a war of counter-insurgency supported by a strong ideological base and waged by colonial methods⁷⁹.

⁷⁴ E. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra. Gli italiani in Jugoslavia 1941–1943*, Roma 2007.

⁷⁵ C. Di Sante (ed.), *Italiani senza onore. I crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negati (1941–1951)*, Verona 2005.

⁷⁶ M. Clementi, *Camicie nere sull'Acropoli. L'occupazione italiana in Grecia (1941–1943)*, Roma 2013.

⁷⁷ A. Osti Guerrazzi, *The Italian Army in Slovenia. Strategies of Antipartisan Repression, 1941–1943*, New York 2013.

⁷⁸ P. Fonzi, *Fame di Guerra. L'occupazione italiana della Grecia (1941–43)*, Roma 2019. In 2010, an important volume with essays by M. Knox, N. Labanca, J. Burgwyn, and D. Rodogno was published: L. Klinkhammer / A. Osti Guerrazzi / T. Schlemmer (eds.), *Die “Achse” im Krieg. Politik, Ideologie und Kriegführung 1939–1945*, Paderborn / München / Wien / Zürich 2010.

⁷⁹ I have already published these conclusions in a recent text: *Strategies of Total Annihilation. German, Italian and Japanese Armies during the Second World War*, in M. Alonso / A. Kramer / J. Rodrigo (eds.), *Fascist Warfare, 1922–1945*.

5 The Civil War

Fascism reached the apex of violence during the civil war. In the period from September 8, 1943, to May 2, 1945, the last followers of Mussolini were guilty of horrendous crimes against their own people. Committed to the repression of anti-Fascism and the Resistance, the Blackshirts unleashed a war against civilians often overtaking even the Nazis in brutality and sadism. In the Italian collective memory, the Black Brigades, the “sad villas” (the buildings where imprisoned partisans were tortured and killed), and the so-called “Fascist gangs” are synonymous with violence and terror. In spite of this, the afore-mentioned foreign scholars have not studied the violence of the Italian civil war, while only a very small number of Italian studies have investigated its causes and reasons⁸⁰.

The first Italian scholar to underline the “something more” [“di più”] of the Republican Fascists was Claudio Pavone, in his celebrated book *Una guerra civile*, published in 1991. Pavone asks a fundamental question:

We should rather focus our attention on the underlying cultural structures that support the two sides in the struggle, so as to ask ourselves why the one is better suited than the other to select the cruel and sadistic and to bring out the darkest drives of the human soul at the level of a politically relevant behavior⁸¹.

Among the answers given by Pavone, who had participated in the Resistance, are “the approach to the final debacle which did not exclude but rather could stimulate ferocity”⁸²; the intrinsic weakness of the Fascist state that led him to flaunt and apply barbaric forms of violence; the “paroxysmal fear of not being taken seriously” by partisans and Nazis; and finally the legacy of the culture of violence inherited from the wars of Ethiopia and Spain. In short, a set of cultural and contingent factors that led late Fascism to unleash an unprecedented violence against the Italian population, according to the typical canons of any civil war⁸³.

Although equally important, Luigi Ganapini’s book *La repubblica delle camicie nere* scatters reflections on Fascist violence throughout the book, making it difficult to understand his hypotheses. Already in his introduction, however, the Italian historian, according to whom “the constitutive violence of all the Fascist movements

⁸⁰ In this article, for space reasons, it is impossible to talk about the Italian collaboration in the Shoah. A bibliography on this topic can be found in A. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’historiographie de la Shoah en Italie, 1995–2015*, in “Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah”, 206, Mars 2017, pp. 25–46. On the Nazi-Fascist violence during the civil war, I would also like to quote: A. Osti Guerrazzi, *I tedeschi e i fascisti*, in M. Carrattieri / M. Flores (eds.), *La Resistenza in Italia. Storia, memoria, storiografia*, Firenze 2018, pp. 77–90.

⁸¹ C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della resistenza*, Torino 1991, p. 427.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 433.

⁸³ On this topic see S.N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Civil War*, Cambridge 2006.

of the century assists them from the beginning”, addresses the theme of violence⁸⁴. Among the reasons for the Fascist violence, extrapolating from Ganapini’s text, we find the desire to redeem the collapse of the regime, the disillusionment for the isolation in which the Fascists found themselves after the armistice, the solicitations of the German comrades, but above all the “Nazification” of the Fascist Republican Party, that is the adherence to the Nazi model, i.e. the “overpowering and cancellation of all rights, or at least its replacement with that right that [...] does not know the pitfalls and tricks of bourgeois legislation, but knows how to punish and reward according to a deep and naive sense of justice”⁸⁵.

The same theme, that of the Nazification of the Party, can be found in Dianella Gagliani’s book *Brigate Nere*. The Fascists, according to the author, felt part of a European militia from the summer of 1944 onwards, therefore no longer of an Italian one. The Italians, and above all the partisans, became absolute enemies and accomplices of the monstrous capitalistic-Bolshevik conspiracy to destroy the European civilization. Against the “rebels” “any ruthlessness was therefore, now, publicly and widely admitted since there were no Italians but enemies in front of them”. The Fascists became so violent that it was not uncommon for the Nazis to intervene to stop reprisals and revenge by the Fascists⁸⁶.

Local studies have fully confirmed the theses of Ganapini and Gagliani. It is not possible, here, to cite all the numerous studies on the single areas published in the past twenty years, however, the book by Adduci on Turin, that of Massimo Storchi on Emilia, that of Sonia Residori on the “Tagliamento” legion, that of Griner on the “Legione autonoma Ettore Muti”, and that of Roberta Mira on the truces between Germans and partisans, deserve at least to be mentioned⁸⁷.

The only book that has specifically analyzed the violence of Republican Fascism is that of Toni Rovatti, *Leoni vegetariani*⁸⁸. Rovatti’s text, which is mainly based on direct Fascist sources and also on trials held after the war, divides the chronology of Fascist violence during the civil war into four periods: the first, which goes from September 1943 to January 1944, is characterized by a partly spontaneous violence due to the chaos of the first months of the occupation and the birth of autonomous or semi-autonomous groups in the provinces; the second period (February 1944 to May 1944) sees an attempt to “soften” on the part of Mussolini, who tried to receive

⁸⁴ L. Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, Milano 1999, p. 9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁸⁷ N. Adduci, *Gli altri. Fascismo repubblicano e comunità nel Torinese (1943–1945)*, Milano 2014; M. Storchi, *Il sangue dei vincitori*; S. Residori, *Una legione in armi. La Tagliamento fra onore, fedeltà e sangue*, Verona 2013; M. Griner, *La “Pupilla del Duce”. La Legione autonoma Ettore Muti*, Torino 2004; R. Mira, *Tregue d’armi. Strategie e pratiche della guerra in Italia fra nazisti, fascisti e partigiani*, Roma 2011.

⁸⁸ T. Rovatti, *Leoni vegetariani. La violenza fascista durante la RSI*, Bologna 2011.

the consent of the population also through greater discipline within Fascism and by curbing the repressive organs; the third period (June 1944 to September 1944) is that of the mass slaughters due to panic over the fall of the front on the Gustav Line and for the anti-partisan operations led by the German troops in retreat often together with the Fascist ones, as well as for the birth of the less disciplined and more violent corps of the RSI, the Black Brigades; in the fourth phase, which corresponds to the last months of the Republic:

The perception that the conflict is evolving at its own disadvantage, the growing sense of isolation and the conviction that the population has betrayed them [...] fuel the violence of the conflict of the armed Fascist divisions [...] demonstrating that the fighters have not felt any form of moderation from above in their behavior⁸⁹.

It is not even possible here to summarize the many suggestions present in Rovatt's book, which represents the first attempt to realize a comprehensive study of the violence of the last Fascism. The picture outlined by all these works recounts the extraneousness of the Fascists, starting from the summer of 1944, to the Italian people. The Fascists unleashed a total war against their own community, to use Adduci's words, because they no longer felt Italian, but part of an elitist European community at the top of which were the Nazis and whose ideal model were the SS. None of these books, however, really reconstructs the "mental frame of reference" of the Fascists, whose elders were born at the turn of the century, who had participated in the First World War, had made their entire subsequent career under the regime, and had fought in Libya, Ethiopia, Spain, and – very often – in the Balkans. People like Renzo Montagna, Gastone Gambara, and Nicolò Nichiarelli had fought in Slovenia during the Second World War. In the anti-rebel operations organized by these officers there is all the experience of violence as well as the military tradition of these previous experiences. The civil war, it seems trivial to say, was a war of counter-insurgency, fought by soldiers who had a long experience of these campaigns fought by Fascism. Graziani and Gambara did nothing more than put their previous military experiences into practice, this time not abroad, but at home. The limit that all the volumes dealing with Fascist violence have, is to ignore the military dimension of the civil war, a dimension that still awaits its historian.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.