

Review Article: Italian Fascism

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Reviewer: John Foot

Both these books have their origins in excellent PhD research theses, which have then been adapted into book form. Both books are highly original, well-written and well-organised. Moreover, both volumes are welcome additions to the extremely rich literature on Italian fascism, looking at areas which have previously been overlooked by historians and aiming at new interpretations of the regime through well-worked case studies and focused research.

Simon Martin's interesting and innovative study looks tries to unpack the complicated relationship between Italian fascism and football, and represents one of the first serious attempts to analyse this aspect of the regime.⁽¹⁾ Mussolini was always attuned to the use of popular culture in his desire to hold power and transform Italian society, and sport was a key part of this strategy. Fascists took control of the world of football in the mid-1920s and proceeded to revolutionise the game, building stadiums all over the peninsula and creating a national team which was to dominate the international game for four years, winning two world cups and an Olympic gold medal. The architect of the national team's success was an extraordinary character called Vittorio Pozzo – who never received a penny during his long term in charge of the *azzurri*. Pozzo had fought in the First World War and had an almost military attitude to the game, whilst maintaining a fine tactical acumen that he had learnt in part in England in the 1920s.

Martin shows how the tensions within fascism were translated into footballing policies. Modernist stadiums were built in some cities – like Florence – whilst other clubs plumped for more classical structures, harking back to the Roman Empire. Football also created problems for the regime. Clearly, fandom encouraged regionalism, and created tensions between city rivals. This 'idiotic localism', as one fascist called it, contrasted starkly with the radical nationalism that was at the heart of Mussolini's project.

Football could be, as another journalist quoted by Martin wrote, 'an outlet for the old provincial grievances that fascism has never tolerated'. Much of this was overcome through the triumphalism which surrounded the World Cup (which Italy hosted in 1934) and Olympic victories, which linked up to an imposed fascistisation of the domestic game, where players were obliged to wear fascist symbols, clubs changed their names (such as *Internazionale* – Inter – which was pressurised into becoming a much more Italian *Ambrosiana* – they soon changed back to Inter after 1945), and players gave the fascist salute before games. Complete control of press and radio output imposed certain official versions of sporting events onto a willing public. No journalist dared to question the dodgy refereeing that helped Italy win in 1934. Further problems arose with the use of the children of Italian emigrants in the national team. Although many of these players were integral to the first World Cup victory, an embarrassing incident in 1935 – when three such players escaped to France to avoid military service – took some of the gloss off the Greater Italy ideal which the emigrants were meant to represent. Martin's book is particularly useful in its detailed treatment of specific issues: the role of fascist local leader Leandro Arpinati, the architecture of fascist Italian stadiums (which reflected debates within architecture under fascism in other areas) and key events such as the world cups and the Battle of Highbury – when Italy narrowly lost to England in 1934.

There is much of the story, however, which Martin's book cannot deal with. The Bologna and Florence focus tends to marginalise within the book the two capitals of Italian football – then as now – Turin and Milan. Little mention is made of Juventus – the FIAT team – who dominated the game in the 1930s and won five successive championships, becoming almost as popular as the national team, especially in the deep south of the country. The book also tends to leave out the game of football itself. We get little sense of the actual matches and many key players are simply ignored. Silvio Piola, for example, an extraordinary and powerful goal scorer who inspired the 1938 victory, does not even merit a mention. The comparative points made in the last chapter are very welcome but needed much further development – especially the obvious cases of Spain, Germany and Portugal. Nazi Germany, above all, is hardly mentioned – despite the importance of sport for that regime and the stage-managing of the 1936 Olympics. As such, Martin's book is a very good first step, but perhaps the title is a touch misleading. This is not really an overall history of *Football and Fascism*, nor of the *National Game under Mussolini*, but essentially two very well-worked city-based case studies.

Claudia Baldoli's sophisticated study is all the more laudable for its straightforward style despite being written in the author's second language. The subject of the book is focused but at the same time wide-ranging. The Italian community in Britain has always been small, but also quite highly concentrated – and strategically important in terms of the Italian presence in the world. Baldoli analyses both the policies adopted by fascism towards Italians in the UK as well as the reaction of Italians, and the British to those policies. The main focus of the book is London, but there are also discussions of Italian communities elsewhere.

Baldoli's concludes that, as with Italians in Italy, the regime tried to 'make fascists' out of its citizens who lived abroad. These attempts – through propaganda but also through institutional investment – had various degrees of success and changed in line with the priorities of the regime. A fascinating section looks at the relationship between Italian fascists and Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF). Baldoli underlines the vicissitudes of that relationship and the warped way in which information was passed back to Mussolini in Rome via the Italian Embassy. The story of the support shown by many BUF militants for Italy's imperialist adventures in the mid-1930s is both shocking and extraordinary. Some British Fascists even went so far as to send back glowing accounts from the front in Africa, in which the Italian troops were described as 'crusaders' and a 'revolutionary army'. Baldoli's work also contributes to the on-going debates concerning the 'consent' enjoyed by Mussolini's regime by showing how the 'rebirth of the Roman imperial dream and the myth of Italy's power had a remarkable influence in creating a sense of belonging to a Fascist community' (p. 190).

One criticism of Baldoli's book concerns its timespan. As Antonio Gramsci once wrote about Benedetto

Croce, she 'chose her dates carefully'. We really needed to see how these complicated scenarios worked themselves out with the shock of the declaration of war and internment in 1940. The story, as it stands, comes to something of an abrupt (and untimely) halt. Moreover, further discussion was needed on the Italian anti-fascists in London (and their links to British anti-fascists) and, finally, it would have been interesting to hear from more grassroots sources rather than only from the leaders or official spokespeople involved in this story. We get too little sense of the actual communities, how they lived and their everyday lives in their adopted country. To this end, Lucio Sponza's seminal work (2) should have been exploited more for its insights into the culture and patterns of migration to the United Kingdom. Despite these quibbles, this remains an impressive piece of work.

Notes

1. Although see Robert Gordon and John London, 'Italy 1934: Football and Fascism', in ed. Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, *National Identity and Global Events: Culture, Politics and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup* (New York, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See particularly Lucio Sponza, *Divided Loyalties: Italians in Britain during the Second World War* (Bern and New York, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Dr Baldoli's response:

I would like to thank John Foot for the very kind and thoughtful review. He is right to underline some aspects not covered in the book. In terms of time span, my interest was on Dino Grandi's terms of office at the London Embassy, as it gave me the opportunity to intertwine the different strands that I most wanted to explore: the impact in Britain of the complex and shifting relationship between the Italian Fascist state, the foreign ministry, the embassy, the Italian fasci abroad, the Italian community and the British right (both fascist and conservative). Therefore the story ends when the needs of Italian foreign policy called Grandi back to Italy, and when, also as a consequence of the coming war between Italy and Britain, the Italian community abandoned fascist institutions and prepared for the worst. The impact of war on the Italian community has been brilliantly described in Lucio Sponza's book (*Divided Loyalties*, cited by Foot in his review); more study is certainly needed on Italian foreign policy, the fasci and the British Right during the war years.

A difficult history is that of Italian anti-fascist militants in London, because they were a small minority within the community, almost non-existent if compared with the French, Swiss, or Belgian experiences of the same years. As I wrote in the first chapter of *Exporting Fascism*, their newspaper was shut down as early as 1924, and the only publication in London devoted to Italian anti-fascism, *New Times and Ethiopia News*, published during the years of Italy's aggression and war against Ethiopia, was prompted by the Italian anarchist Silvio Corio and by Sylvia Pankhurst, but received no contribution from Italians in the community.

There are two excellent recently completed PhD theses on aspects that my book has not covered but which are related: Pietro di Paola (Goldsmiths College), reconstructed the life of the Italian (mainly anarchist) Left in the London community at the time when it was particularly lively, from the Paris Commune to the First World War; and Richard Wright (University of Manchester) has thoroughly researched, using oral history, Italians in Britain during Fascism: all those interested on the history of Italian emigration to Britain would find them illuminating.

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