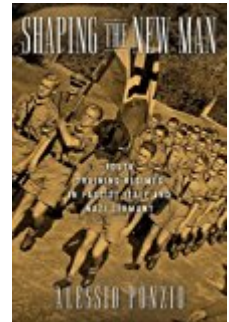


Alessio Ponzio. *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.* George L. Mosse Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. 334 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-30580-2.



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The twentieth-century Nazi and Fascist projects made utopian promises about the creation of perfect societies premised on the subordination of individuals to the needs of a unified nation. Education was an essential tool for realizing these ends. Adults were too tainted by old ideas and ways of thinking to be totally reliable, but youth were malleable. Young people could be sculpted into the “new men” upon which new societies depended for permanence. In *Shaping the New Man*, Alessio Ponzio takes as his subject the “educational machineries” the Nazi and Fascist regimes spawned to do this sculpting (p. 13). Ponzio argues in his entangled institutional history that the resulting Nazi and Fascist youth organizations were not just “red-tape associations” or welfare providers but politically and ideologically crucial components of both regimes (p. 224). Readers interested in these youth organizations will find much to like, though the book’s contribution to our understanding of (lower-case) fascism’s short-term success and appeal is less clear.

Ponzio’s narrative begins in 1921, when the Fascists consolidated power in Italy, and ends in 1945, when both German and Italian regimes ultimately met defeat. Early in this period, the Fascists pioneered the politically subordinated mass youth movement model. The party constructed its first consolidated organization, the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), beginning in 1926. The ONB rationalized and improved the activities of preexisting groups to provide for Italian youth “sport, physical, spiritual, cultural, and professional education,” and “above all, military training” (p. 36). The ONB disbanded in 1938 due to political infighting, but Ponzio finds that its mission and functions carried on practically unchanged under its successor, the Gioventù del Littorio (GIL). Nazi Germany’s Hitlerjugend (HJ) developed later, exploding in size and reach only after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Ponzio argues that the Fascist and Nazi youth organizations shared similar trajectories. For instance, both programs began as violent youth organizations and gradually transformed into machines used by their re-

spective political parties to subdue, discipline, and indoctrinate young people. This transformation corresponded with each party's consolidation of power—the more established each became, the less interested each became in maintaining a volatile and unpredictable youth revolution. War posed severe financial and personnel challenges for the ONB/GIL and HJ during the 1940s. Still, both regimes continued investing money, rhetoric, and faith in youth education, because, according to Ponzio, the mission was vital to the realization of each regime's utopian visions.

Though the ONB/GIL and HJ followed similar trajectories, each followed a distinct path. Racial ideas played a far greater role in the HJ's operations than in the ONB/GIL, for instance. The HJ also fostered a much more anti-intellectual culture than did its Fascist counterparts. Timing also mattered. The "cult of youth" formed a central myth in Fascist ideology from the very beginning; in contrast, this cult was not a central Nazi myth, and youth only began figuring prominently in Nazi propaganda after 1933.

The shifting relationship between the ONB/GIL and HJ features prominently in Ponzio's work. By virtue of its earlier founding, the ONB broke new ground with pedagogical practices and served as a model for the HJ. Fascist primacy eroded through the second half of the 1930s, however. Ponzio finds that the relationship between the ONB/GIL and HJ mirrored that of their parent regimes, with the Fascist role shrinking from "senior partners, to partners, to junior partners, to vassals, and, finally, to racial inferiors" (p. 9). *Shaping the New Man* traces this transition by examining dialogues within each organization about the other group and points of interaction between the organizations, including youth and leader exchanges and protocols within the European Youth Association.

In the end, *Shaping the New Man* is a mixed bag. Ponzio's work is a clear, detailed, and accessible institutional history that updates the dusty

historiography of his subjects. Little about the organization, mission, pedagogy, activities, and leadership of the HJ, ONB, and GIL goes untouched. The book's comparative and transnational methodology improves our understanding of these youth organizations by proving that none developed in a vacuum. Finally, English-language readers can appreciate Ponzio's efforts to bring them an analysis of Italian archival sources.

Ponzio's sources also point to the book's weakness. Most of his primary sources come either from memoirs of those involved in the youth organizations under study or from documents produced by those organizations or their parent regimes. As a consequence, *Shaping the New Man* presents the aspirations and self-representations of those organizations and their leaders. This source base prevents Ponzio from addressing nuances of the organizations' actual social and political influence. For instance, the sources do not tell us anything new about the degree of popular support these totalitarian regimes enjoyed. Too much criticism on this point is unfair because Ponzio did not set out to conduct such an analysis. This is a top-down institutional and political history. Yet Ponzio raises some interesting questions in his epilogue when he explores the postwar memories of men whom the HJ, ONB, and GIL educated. Many of these men did not fulfill the expectations of their ideological educators, leading Ponzio to conclude that the results of these "pedagogical projects" were ultimately "uneven" (p. 224). Here is a fascinating topic for a companion work. Why did these authoritarian organizations fail to mass-produce their ideal new men? Why did supposedly malleable youth resist and reject indoctrination, even within such complete systems? One hopes Ponzio may consider applying his skill, knowledge, and insight in the future to address these issues.

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