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Philip V. Cannistraro. *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921-1929*. West Lafayette: Bordighera Press, 1999. 124 pp. \$12.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-884419-27-0.

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Much of the Italian-American community (both academic and lay) remains fixated on the problems generated by HBO's television series *The Sopranos*, and the pervasive image of supposed Italian-American criminality. Less attention has been paid to another phenomenon, more disturbing even if more circumscribed by time: the Italian American community's support of Mussolini and fascism. That lacuna has now been filled by a short, though important, work by Philip V. Cannistraro, Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. An expanded version of a long essay that originally appeared in Renzo De Felice's journal, *Storia Contemporanea*, in 1995, *Blackshirts in Little Italy* is a study combining immigration history, contested political loyalties, and the emergence of an Italian American identity in the early years of the twentieth century. Based on extensive archival research—including the Archivio Centrale dello Stato and the Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri in Italy, and the National Archives and FBI records in Washington—Cannistraro meticulously reconstructs a lost epoch. Italians in America were torn: sentiment and nostalgia demanded loyalty to a nation that had—in effect—rejected them politically, culturally, and economically; their new country presented generous opportunities, but at a price.

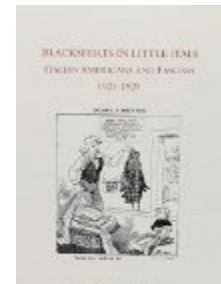
Unlike earlier studies which have dismissed the influence of fascism on Italian Americans, Cannistraro shows how the fascist government made strident efforts to recruit both leading prominenti such as Generoso Pope (publisher of *Il Progresso* and other Italian-language newspapers) as well as the masses. Mussolini's representatives in America shrewdly played on the anxious (and new-found) nationalism of the Italian Americans. Fascist rhetoric appealed to Italian Americans, many of whom were suffering from overt discrimination; harking

back to the glories of ancient Rome, Italo Balbo's flying squadron, and the Duce's declaration of an "African Empire" were powerful ingredients in an ideology of compensation. It wasn't an easy task, though. Although fascist *squadristi* could commit arson and murder with impunity in Italy, Mussolini's representatives and the Fascist League of North America had to tread softly in America. Besides the tradition of democracy and free speech, fascist penetration was limited to some extent by the efforts of Italian and Italian American anti-fascists such as Carlo Tresca and Gaetano Salvemini and organizations such as the Mazzini Society and the ILGWU.

It is disappointing that the study ends in 1929 with the dissolution of the Fascist League of North America, for the next two decades saw conflicting emotions and politics among Italian Americans. An argument can be made that many politically active Italian Americans supported Mussolini and fascism, especially in 1935-1936 with the "victory" over the Ethiopians. Italian fascist intervention in the Spanish Civil War and the growing alliance with Hitler's Germany tempered that support, while Italy's declaration of war against France on June 10, 1940, was met with widespread disapproval this side of the Atlantic. When the United States declared war on Japan, Germany, and Italy, Italian Americans universally declared allegiance to their new homeland. After the war, fascism was transformed—for some—into a "culture of nostalgia" in which Mussolini's only mistake was his alliance with Hitler. It is to be hoped that Cannistraro's excellent study will act as a catalyst for other scholars to pursue these neglected pages of history.

Note

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