

Sven Reichardt, Armin Nolzen, eds. *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland: Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005. 283 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89244-939-3.

Reviewed by Benjamin Martin (Department of History, San Francisco State University)
Published on H-German (June, 2007)



Whatever Happened to “Fascism”? A New Generation Offers a Transnational Response

This book represents a significant event in the comparative study of Nazism and Italian fascism. While several scholars have pursued overarching comparisons of the two movements and regimes, including Robert Paxton and Michael Mann, in fact remarkably little work systematically compares specific aspects of the two countries’ fascist experiences and even less examines their cross-national contact and interaction.[1] This fine volume fills several such lacunae, offering comparative analyses of fascist and Nazi advertising, public fundraising drives, police repression, concentration camps, and military conduct. But it is also at least in part an event, however, because it is not only comparative; several essays also deal with what the Germans call *Transfergeschichte*, or what in the United States is alternately called “transnational” or “international” history.[2] Every essay presents substantial new research, the articles are uniformly well written and, in what is by no means least of their virtues, richly annotated with references to the most recent scholarship in German, Italian, and English. Finally, this volume’s contributors were all, with the exception of the eminent Wolfgang Schieder, born around 1970; the book gives an exciting sense of representing new research directions on which more work can soon be expected.

The editors’ introduction sets the tone with an extended plea for the recovery of the concept of “fascism,” taking as its point of departure Tim Mason’s famous 1988 demand, “Whatever happened to fascism?” In preferring “fascism” to other rubrics, like “totalitarianism,” Re-

ichardt and Nolzen do not want to return to the theoretical debates of the 1970s, which were characterized by heated disagreements over the relationship between capitalism and “fascism,” in which “fascism” was the preferred term with which the political left, and the East German state, referred to German National Socialism. These debates, they argue, were narrowly “economistic,” involved little empirical research and, above all, were conducted in a “provincial” atmosphere, dealing with German National Socialism in a purely German national context. Now, instead, they call for “fascism” to serve as a category of analysis with which to conduct a theoretically informed, empirically grounded examination of comparisons and contacts between the “fascist core countries”: National Socialist Germany and fascist Italy. This approach should help overcome the German national focus and “theory-less empiricism” that, they claim, dominated German scholarly work on Nazism in the 1980s and early 1990s. They hope to accomplish this task in part by forging their own transnational scholarly combination, bringing together the results of the new, largely Anglo-American scholarly work on fascism with the methodological insights of the largely German literature on *Transfergeschichte*.

Aspects of the new research on fascism that they hope to import include the concern with matters of culture and aesthetics, especially the insights this work has offered into what they argue was the characteristically fascist blend of “the politics of violence and the culture of experience” (p. 11). Another aspect is the idea, drawn

from Paxton's work on fascism's five "stages," that fascism must be understood as a "process," rather than as an object with a static set of characteristics. In this way, they argue that scholars should deploy the concept of fascism as what sociologist Robert K. Merton called a "middle range theory." Such a theory can serve, when applied to particular cases, to identify elements and developmental phases of the movements and regimes, while abandoning the grander claims of more general models. The notion of fascism as process also addresses what has long been one of the chief objections to comparisons between Italian fascism and German Nazism: namely, that Nazi racism and violence were *sui generis*, and not illuminated by comparing them with fascist Italy, or, indeed, with anything. But once fascism is understood as a process with stages, the first phases of the Italian and German experiences look very comparable indeed. It is, the editors argue, only in the final phases of radicalization and racist war of extermination that Nazism breaks away from Italian fascism, which was, after all, its predecessor and model. This argument makes the comparison of the first phases at least as valuable a means of understanding Nazism's final phases as any purely German-centered approach.

Fascism, thus understood, can serve as the category through which to apply the methodological innovations of *Transfergeschichte* to the study of the German and Italian dictatorships. As the name suggests, "transfer history" is concerned with the concrete processes by which "transfers"—of "concepts, norms, images, and representations" (p. 17) and, I might add, people, money, and diseases—actually take place. Enriching historical comparisons with an approach that examines "reciprocal influences and processes of change" is urgently to be demanded, "for otherwise possibly important explanations for divergences and convergences of the units of comparison will be overlooked" (p. 18). In the case of fascism, then, it is well known that the young Adolf Hitler admired Benito Mussolini and that crucial aspects of the National Socialist movement and party were modeled on the Italian example. But little work exists on the specific individuals and institutions through which this process happened, or on what effects it had on developments in the two countries.

Two contributions here are specifically interested in the idea of "transfer." Wolfgang Schieder's detailed study, "Faschismus im politischen Transfer. Giuseppe Renzetti als faschistischer Propagandist und Geheimagent in Berlin 1922-1941," chronicles the propaganda activity on behalf of Italian fascist ideology that this "shadow ambas-

sador" (p. 29) carried out in Weimar Germany. Demonstrating the extraordinary access that Renzetti had to Hitler and other Nazi leaders, as well as to powerful German industrialists, Schieder argues that Renzetti was a main conduit for the transmission of fascist ideological concepts, in particular ideas about corporatist social policy, from Italy to Germany, as well as the most important middle-man between Hitler and Mussolini. This exhaustive study, which includes a chart detailing all of Renzetti's frequent meetings with Hitler, shows that Renzetti played an important role in bringing together German conservatives, from the Stahlhelm, the DNVP, and the NSDAP, through institutions such as the "Society for the Study of Fascism," or through evenings at his apartment on the Kurfürstendamm, hosted by his glamorous German-Jewish wife Susanne. Schieder does not show directly what Renzetti succeeded in teaching Nazis about fascism, nor is it clear that Renzetti, who had more access to Hitler than any other non-German, in fact influenced the Führer's ideas. On the other hand, Schieder's conclusion that fascist Italy's presence in Germany served as an ideological and practical meeting point for German anti-democrats is a fascinating contribution.

In "Faschismus als Modell: Die faschistische Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro und die NS-Gemeinschaft 'Kraft durch Freude' in der Zwischenkriegszeit," Daniela Liebscher offers a closely researched study of the relationship between the Nazi leisure organization Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy, KdF) and the fascist Italian organization that served as its model, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (National After-Work Organization, OND). But the strength of this article resides only partly in its documentation of the specific links through which the Nazis followed the Italians' example. Even more significant is that Liebscher places the contact between the two regimes in the broader context of the international interwar debate over social policy, especially the political management of working-class leisure activities. The OND, she shows, was the Italian counterproposal to the plans of the reform socialists who dominated the League of Nations' International Labor Organization, in which Italy continued to participate until 1937. The fascists then used Geneva as a platform from which to present their counter-model to the rest of the world, influencing, among others, the Nazi German observers who later based the KdF on this model. She follows German-Italian interaction in this field through to World War II, when the two Axis powers glossed over their own differences in an effort to propose their workers' leisure institutions as part of "an alternative 'International'" (p. 110). Lieb-

schler's stimulating article shows the strengths that have made "international" history a hot topic. By examining German-Italian contacts in the context of international institutions, Liebscher contributes not only to the history of fascism, but also to the history of social policy in the twentieth century, in which, she shows, Nazi-fascist ideas and institutions played an important role.

Three contributions conduct detailed comparisons of particular aspects of fascist and Nazi policies that aimed to forge social cohesion, focusing on the complex interplay between coercion and consent. Recent years have seen the acrimonious debate over whether or not the fascist and Nazi regimes enjoyed the "consent" of their populations give way to efforts to find new ways of examining this vexed question. This volume features some examples of these approaches, including social and cultural historical examinations of particular Nazi-fascist institutions, from the German advertising industry to the lower levels of Italy's fascist militia. These aim to get closer to the lived experience of fascist dictatorships and to examine the structures that blended regime coercion with the individual initiative of Germans and Italians.

Petra Terhoeven's article, " 'Nicht spenden, opfern': Spendenkampagnen im faschistischen Italien und im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als Disziplinierungs- und Integrationsinstrument," compares donation campaigns in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy as "instruments of discipline and integration." The article compares the Nazis' Winter Relief program (Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes, WHW), in which money, food, and coats were collected door-to-door and distributed to poorer Germans, with the fascists' "Gold for the Fatherland" campaign of 1935. In this one-time effort, Italians were asked to donate gold, especially their wedding rings, in an effort to help the regime combat the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations in the aftermath of the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Granting that the Nazis' annual program was a far longer-lasting initiative than the Italians' one-off campaign, she argues nonetheless that both initiatives highlight the dialectical relationship between consent and coercion that she, following Hans Mommsen (among others), sees as a central characteristic of fascist rule. What these campaigns in particular demonstrate, she argues, is the role played by discursive and symbolic practices in forging new forms of totalitarian social cohesion, in that both created ritualized public invocations of the charged concepts of sacrifice and community. Neither program, she claims, was really about the money: rather, the primary goal of such programs was to mobilize of charity, donation, and sac-

rifice to undermine liberal concepts of individualism and thus "to commit the population to a regime that presumed unlimited rights over the individual" (p. 93).

Terhoeven's comparison of the German and Italian cases valuably illuminates similarities between these efforts to rally the masses around the idea of economic-ethical participation in a stronger national community. But unlike the Italian gold drive, the Nazi *Winterhilfe* was a sustained campaign to redistribute economic resources on a racist, eugenicist, and anti-communist basis. In that sense, a better comparison might be to the programs through which Sweden's Social Democrats created the so-called people's home (*Folkshem*), deploying nationalist rhetoric and eugenic practices to create a non-communist resolution to the social question, but with, of course, rather different results. Economic questions interest Terhoeven less than the cultural and ideological power of the idea of sacrifice for the nation, which she interprets as one result of the European-wide "sacralization of the political" since the late nineteenth century (p. 92). Her well-researched and interesting article suggests, however, that developments of this kind must (still) be integrated in an appreciation of social and economic problems that accompanied these cultural changes. In this case, one might begin by placing the WHW in the context of the worldwide effort in the 1930s to find new state-directed ways of managing wealth redistribution *and* forging greater social cohesion, which were seen as interrelated parts of the period's crisis of social and class relations.

Waltraut Sennebogen examines advertising practices and strategies in the two regimes in "Propaganda als Populärkultur? Werbestrategien und Werbepraxis im faschistischen Italien und in NS-Deutschland." This essay outlines the similar political structures the two regimes created to manage advertising and their attempts to use the economy to create ever-present forms of propaganda. Thus advertising would pursue the ends of the capitalist economy while "penetrat[ing] the daily life of the little man with ideology in an inconspicuous manner" (p. 146). Moreover, Sennebogen highlights the degree to which advertising industries in both countries independently "coordinated" themselves with the aspirations of the regime. One terrific example she has found is a 1941 print advertisement for Cinzano Prosecco, which features a photograph of the company's cellars in Turin, in which seemingly endless rows of black bottles face forward in perfect order. The reference to the orderly rows of fascist "black shirts," cribbing the visual style of Leni Riefenstahl, is unmistakable, and was apparently not paid

for or ordered by the fascist regime. Of course, this sort of example raises more questions than it answers: for one thing, the attempts of advertisers to link their goods to dominant political or social trends are not phenomena peculiar to fascism or Nazism—just think of the recent Chevrolet television ad featuring images of a commemoration of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Moreover, did Cinzano believe that the orderly militarism of fascism was genuinely popular—at least with the middle- and upper-class Italians at whom such an ad was presumably aimed? If so, can the historian take such advertising as evidence that Cinzano was right in that belief? This article cannot answer all of these questions, but Sennebogen is clearly right to claim that advertising should be studied along with the history of state-sponsored propaganda as part of “a new cultural-historical thematic field” (p. 144).

In “Terror und Bevölkerung im italienischen Faschismus,” Michael Ebner offers a richly detailed study of the relationship between the fascist repressive apparatus and Italian society, which he compares to similar institutions in Nazi Germany. After a clear overview of the different institutions of fascist domestic terror, including the Fascist Party (PNF) and Militia (MVSN) as well as the national police (Carabinieri), Ebner draws on police reports of the specific, often rather trivial incidents which led fascist officials to use violence on Italian citizens, or to ship them off to internal exile, known in Italy as *confino di polizia*. His artful presentation and classification of these episodes show the substantial degree to which fascist repression relied on the active participation of “ordinary” Italians. Some used fascist structures to advance personal agendas, like the Roman wife who in 1931 informed on her own husband’s “anti-fascist” utterances, which earned him eleven months in a camp on the island of Lipari (pp. 214-215). Mostly, however, Ebner shows how fascist repression, although almost always justified on the basis of persecuting anti-fascism, was disproportionately applied to the socially marginal, including the unemployed, the poor, those who were drunk in public, or Sinti and Roma. (Ebner’s is, incidentally, the only essay in this volume that refers to Sinti and Roma as Sinti and Roma, rather than as *Zigeuner*, or “Gypsies,” a term as objectionable in German as it is in English.) “The key to the application of fascist repression,” he writes, “is that it was able skillfully to apply dominant social expectations for various purposes” (pp. 221-222). By understanding fascist repression in the context of Italian social hierarchies, Ebner recognizes that the history of fascist violence is, or should be, part of Italian social history. Com-

paring these practices to those of Nazi Germany, he argues that Hannah Arendt’s description of the totalitarian state’s “total” repression of their societies misunderstands a central factor of fascist repression in Italy and Germany. These regimes’ terror was not at all “total,” but rather singled out specific groups, identified as the nation’s political or racial “enemies.” That these targeted groups were already socially marginal is key to understanding why fascist repression not only did not meet more resistance, but why it was able to call upon a good deal of active cooperation.

Another of the important objections to the comparison of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany has been to note the overwhelming importance of racism in Nazism in comparison to its apparent insignificance in Italian fascism. Two essays deal with this issue, contributing to the recent wave of literature that has confirmed, on the contrary, the substantial nature and deep roots of Italian fascist racism, a literature on which the editors’ introductory essay offers a good overview. Thomas Schlemmer examines the Italian military’s participation on the Eastern Front during World War II in his essay “Das königlich-italienische Heer im Vernichtungskrieg gegen die Sowjetunion: Kriegführung und Besatzungspraxis einer vergessenen Armee 1941-1943.” Here he argues that, contrary to the exculpatory narratives offered by veterans of the Italian Expeditionary Force in Russia (Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia, CSIR), the Italian armed forces played important roles in the repressive machinery of the Nazi occupying forces. Italian officers, he shows, passed on German orders to put aside certain categories of prisoners of war, including Soviet commissars and Jews, and hand them over to the Germans. Moreover, drawing on Italian soldiers’ letters home, Schlemmer argues that by the time of the 1941 invasion of the USSR, fascist ideology, including anti-communism and anti-Slavic and antisemitic racism, had penetrated the leadership and soldiers of the Italian military to a far greater extent than has been believed. Although he is unable to quantify his claims, he argues convincingly that a substantial number of the Italians on the Russian Front did not conform to the image of the Italians as confused victims of Mussolini’s unpopular foreign policy, wholly uncommitted to fascist goals.

At the same time, Schlemmer cites as evidence for this claim passages from soldiers’ letters which, while suggesting a commitment to defeating the USSR, do not reflect specifically fascist ideology so much as a generalized western European, Christian anti-communism. This passage is from an Italian soldier’s letter of June 1942:

“Religion and Christian Civilization must triumph over Russian barbarism and the dangerous Jewish-Hebrew-Masonic minorities” (p. 172). This letter’s sentiments do suggest that the myth of the Italian soldier on the Eastern Front as victim needs to be reevaluated; but it does not really show that the Italian armed forces had been “fascistized.” Rather, the fact that both Axis regimes laid so much emphasis on traditional themes, like Christianity and “civilization” versus Soviet irreligion and Russian “barbarism,” points back to the way the regimes sought to mobilize existing prejudices, not unlike the fascist mobilization of traditional class prejudice noted in Ebner’s essay.

Amedeo Osti Guerazzi and Costantino di Sante, in their “Die Geschichte der Konzentrationslager im faschistischen Italien,” offer a painstaking documentation of the system of concentration camps erected in Italy. The scholars, authors of other studies on this subject,^[3] here offer an overview of the origins and development of the substantial but virtually forgotten camp system in Italy. Some fifty-one camps were erected between 1940 and 1943, interning thousands, including foreigners in the country when Italy entered the war, Italian and foreign Jews, and real or suspected resisters to Italian occupation in the Balkans. Drawing on their own and others’ recent scholarship, the authors argue that this system was not a bizarre outgrowth of Mussolini’s Axis partnership with Germany, but instead closely followed legal and organizational measures well established in Italy before the fascists came to power in 1922. The comparison with the Nazi system of concentration camps reveals the Italian system to have been rather mild for most of its internees, including for Jews, until the murderous radicalization of camp policy that took place under the Italian Social Republic, the Nazi-dominated puppet state in northern Italy, from 1943 to 1945. The great exception was for prisoners from the former Yugoslavia: on the Adriatic island of Rab (Arbe), over 10,000 Slovenian men, women, and children accused of supporting resistance to Italian occupation were held in conditions that led to a death rate in some sectors of 19 percent—higher than the 15 percent death rate at the notorious Nazi camp Buchenwald. This empirically rich essay offers valuable documentation, but could do more to integrate this new information into a broader set of questions. What does the existence of an Italian system of concentration camps tell us about Italian history or about fascism, and what is revealed by comparing it to the German case? The degree to which the Italian camp system grew out of liberal-era laws seems highly important, but what does that suggest

about the relationship between liberal and fascist Italy, or about the trajectories of state power in twentieth-century Europe? It is to be hoped that these questions will be addressed more directly in these impressive scholars’ future work.

Several of these essays offer more information on the Italian case than the German. This is understandable, as there is an element of catching up notable in much of the literature on Italian fascism. It is true, as many of the contributors note, that the research into key aspects of Italian fascism lags far behind the extraordinary scholarly output on Nazism. At the same time, it will be interesting to see what emerges from the longer-term scholarly agenda of these younger comparative Italianists, since simply “catching up with the Germans” is probably impossible, and not necessarily desirable. Rather, in the increasingly transnational scholarly field, and the increasingly transnational market in which European scholars are forced to operate, the task will be to use research into the history of fascism and Nazism to investigate broader questions in European social, political, and cultural history, to which the transnational study of Italy and Germany are well poised to contribute. Happily, this excellent volume shows several thematic and methodological directions in which that kind of work is being pursued.

Notes

[1]. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Studies on transnational contact and exchange between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy include: Wolfgang Schieder, “Das italienische Experiment. Der Faschismus als Vorbild in der Krise der Weimarer Republik,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 262 (1996): 73-125; and Andrea Hoffend, *Zwischen Kulturachse und Kulturkampf: die Beziehungen zwischen “Drittem Reich” und faschistischem Italien in den Bereichen Medien, Kunst, Wissenschaft und Rassenfragen* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

[2]. On these terms, along with “global” and “world” history, see “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441-1464, in which no reference is made to the large German-language literature on *Transfargeschichte*.

[3]. Costantio Di Sante, ed., *I Campi di concentramento in Italia. Dall'internamento alla deportazione* (Milan: F. Angeli, 2001); Amedeo Osti Guerazzi, *Poliziotti. I direttori dei campi di concentramento in Italia* (Rome: Cooper, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Benjamin Martin. Review of Reichardt, Sven; Nolzen, Armin, eds., *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland: Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13257>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.