

Alexander J. De Grand. *L'Italia Fascista e la Germania Nazista*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999. 159 pp. LIT 18.000, cloth, ISBN 978-88-15-06228-4.

Reviewed by Elia Casali Vendemini

Published on H-Italy (December, 1999)

The main aim of A.J. De Grand's research is to establish, if possible, strong connections between the Italian and the German experiences of a 'fascist' form of government. There has been a long debate about this topic, over whether, and to what extent, Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes were similar to each other and part of the same type of "generic fascism" (p. 9). De Grand attempts to sum up the historiographical controversies and to reach his own conclusions from an outsider's perspective. He tries to understand how the two regimes faced similar problems, and how they organized their form of government.

In De Grand's opinion, fascism was considered by many as an answer to the political and social transformations that took place at the beginning of the twentieth Century. At that time the state was unprepared to face the new challenges: general elections, the crisis of the bourgeois political organizations, the development of the socialist movement into parties and trade unions, and the discontent of the traditional industrial and land-lord elites with the parliamentary system. In both Italy and Germany the economic difficulties and the Great War increased the political and social unrest; as a result "the process of decomposition of the middle class political order" (p. 16) was accelerated. The 'rump victory' in Italy and the military defeat in Germany fuelled class conflict and pitted the younger generation against the older one; while the latter, which controlled the state,

seemed incapable of resolving problems, the former was struck harshly by unemployment and economic crisis.

The author spots two main similarities between the Italian and the German case. He sees the first in the origin and in the initial development of the two regimes, including the ways that led the PNF and the NSDAP to power and the second, in how they structured the organization of the state once they came to power. De Grand affirms that they both tried to create a new society in order to give an answer to the inadequacies of nineteenth-century state, and in the process of this "revolution," they both had to face the resistance of the social and economic status quo on which they partly relied. There was only one solution, according to the author: the two regimes had to abandon a large part of the radical elements of their programs in order to reach political stability and settlement with the existing elites. The Italian and German fascist movements tried to build a different kind of national unity, based not on the "common good" but on other principles knowing that their countries were internally fragmented.

De Grand asserts that both the PNF and the NSDAP originally were political movements without a strong central direction. Their members could join other associations and there was no strict ideology to which they were required to adhere. Furthermore, the author affirms that their beliefs were very similar. The negation of parlia-

mentary and democratic political order, the exaltation of violence and of physical strength, the "revolutionary project" of a new society, a new spirituality through the negation of materialism and the ecstasy of irrationalism. Their Weltanschauung rejected the socialist concept of "class." They saw, instead, a different fissure in society—one that on the one hand divided those who produced (on the battlefield as well as in the factories), and on the other those who did not (the politicians, Great war profiteers, and the pacifist socialists). What emerges from De Grand's research is that the PNF and the NSDAP were not the only parties which tried to get votes from the "productive" class; they also had to look for support where they had no competitors, appealing to conservative society, the middle class and the small and large landholders as the natural opponents to Bolshevism.

Another very interesting aspect that emerges from De Grand's study is that the PNF and the NSDAP came to power in a very similar way. Their violent propaganda increased social struggle everywhere in their countries. They pushed the socialists to react to their provocations and this strategy transformed the political confrontation into a literal fight for power. The polarization of society produced by this violent behavior benefited the fascist parties. De Grand affirms that a very important element constituting fascist political success was that the ideology of both the PNF and the NSDAP, even if potentially revolutionary, wasn't clear, while the socialists seemed to be much more convinced of their own goals. In addition, while the middle-class elites thought that it would be easy to keep control of the fascist parvenus to power, Mussolini and Hitler used their political strength to impose conditions and vetoes on their involvement in the government.

After the PNF and the NSDAP came to power they both needed some time to establish and enforce their rule over the country. Here De Grand spots some differences between the Italian and

the German cases. Since the early 1920s in the case of the PNF, and the early 1930s in that of the NSDAP, the two fascist movements trod parallel political courses but with a different degrees of intensity. Whereas Mussolini encountered many forms of resistance and had to co-exist with other competitors for power, such as the Italian monarchy or and rivals even inside his own party, Hitler, proved very strong right from the beginning and he brought his plans very nearly to completion, controlling the party and the country much more thoroughly than Mussolini could. In De Grand's opinion, the two political movements were not so dissimilar to each other, and both of them could have attained the most pervasive form of totalitarianism if only they had had equal opportunities to achieve complete control over the country.

The most relevant differences between the two fascist regimes lied, in De Grand's opinion, in their differing attitudes towards culture and religion. Inside the PNF There was no uniform agreement on religious matters. In Italy the Catholic Church exercised strong influence on the people, while in Germany it constituted a weak regional power. Furthermore, the leaders of the NSDAP were generally unfriendly towards any sort of Christian religion. The author insists, however, that a settlement with the Church of Rome had to be found in Germany as well as Italy because in both countries there existed a strong Catholic party, the Zentrum and the Partito popolare respectively. The fundamental nature that the two concordats reached, however, was very different. In Germany the accord barely conceded the right of existence to the Catholic Church's regional organizations; in Italy it gave the people the option to be both fascists and Catholics. In Italy, in De Grand's opinion, those who were religious could continue to take part to the political life of the country, while in Germany the Nazi regime *de facto* excluded them, imposing decisions which could not be harmonized with a true Christian faith (such as

racial persecutions, abortions, euthanasia, sterilization).

In Italy the strong presence of Catholic religion and organizations influenced Mussolini's regime even for policies concerning women. Although the fascist ideology intended to abolish class struggle by establishing a new corporative society, its ideas about the role of women in such a society remained very conservative. Several social reforms completed women's integration into the regime, but on a submissive level. In Germany, Hitler had similar beliefs about the role of women in Nazi society but he never tried to force them to stay home, indeed, he supported their participation in industrial production and their political commitment, even if he never allowed their total political involvement in the regime.

What De Grand wants to affirm in his analysis is that despite these marked differences in the achievements of the two fascist regimes, both Mussolini and Hitler had similar ideas on how to shape the structure of the new state. The keystone of the fascist political system was the leader: every person and every group, every lobby, lay beneath him on the same level. This was the "corporative fascist state," where each power group was to be represented by a lobby and where the supreme leader dealt with any problems and conflicts which could arise among the various interests without requiring them to be submitted by any formal or legal procedure. As De Grand explains, the "rebellious fascist mentality" (p. 53), could hardly adapt to the traditional way of government. This meant a proliferation of institutional bodies answerable to the leader, which Mussolini and Hitler created day by day to deal with specific matters; this practice developed because they feared any kind of strong and permanent power other than their own. This system of government, in the author's opinion, where many institutions overlapped and clashed with one another, was extremely chaotic, and only the leader could keep it working.

De Grand affirms that the fascist corporative state, which was presented by Mussolini and Hitler as the 'third way' between capitalism and communism, never came succeeded because of the middle and upper-class' resistance and because of their opposition to the workers' representation in factories. In the industrial sector, a process of cartelization took place that favored the factory owners. In the agricultural sector, both regimes helped production and sustained the prices of the most important goods (especially wheat) by putting them under state control. If this aid initially pushed up the prices and helped the economy, over the long run, it became a brake on the expansion of the sector. The economic depression and the Second World War put pressure on the two fascist regimes who turned towards strict regulation in every economic sector: from 1936 on, the Author points out, in both the industrial and in agricultural sectors there was a call for "autarchy," or self-dependence for the nation. This was partly achieved through the direct intervention of the state in the national economy and, eventually, through the creation of a military economic system.

On the very controversial matter of racial and religious discrimination and persecution De Grand sees that Mussolini's ideology was not incompatible with that of Hitler; this is clearly shown by the fact that at the end of the 1930s the Duce aligned with Hitler on this matter. It is true that the Italian dictatorship was more conservative in its application than Hitler's reign of terror proved; it was closer to Spanish totalitarianism than to the German. But in Italy, De Grand concludes, the fascist experience has been less extreme not because of the "inherently good Italian nature," but because of "a series of structural and institutional limitations which blocked radical and racial versions of fascism from dominating," even if "Mussolini sought to remove [them] as he edged towards war on the side of Hitler" (p. 106).

De Grand's study seems a quite accurate and complete analysis of the topic, even if in general terms. The author's personal knowledge of fascist history proves very valuable in this book, where he tries to sketch a comprehensive, comparative perspective of Italian and German totalitarianism. *L'Italia fascista e la Germania nazista* is very useful general reading for those who intend to study the topic at an introductory level. The book though might lack interest for the more specialized scholar as it adds nothing really added to the existing historiography.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Elia Casali Vendemini. Review of Grand, Alexander J. De. *L'Italia Fascista e la Germania Nazista*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3632>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.