
Reviewed by Richard J. B. Bosworth (University of Oxford)

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**Memory/Memories**

Filippo Focardi is the best historian of the debates and squabbles, sage agreements and continuing ruptures over what most accept are Italians’ “divided memories” of their country’s history and especially those of what I have long called “the Italian dictatorship” of 1922-45. *Nel Cantiere della Memoria* brings together much valuable work on the field published by Focardi over the last decade and a half.

Perhaps there is a problem in such re-publication. In a welcoming preface, Paolo Pezzino explains that the book is launching a series to be published by Viella under the auspices of the Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri and Rete degli Istituti per la Storia della Resistenza e dell’Età Contemporanea. But, as I read the book, I wondered at what audience it was directed. Focardi writes better than many Italian academic historians and, as we shall see later in my review, there is plenty worth deep consideration in his text. But it is more about historiography than history and there are many patches of repetition. Renzo De Felice’s views about Mussolini and his regime at this, that, or the other moment turn up regularly for suitable and deserved challenge. Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and his presidential attempt to reconstitute a Mazzinian tradition (no mention of Fascist Mazzinianism from him or Focardi) get a chapter to themselves, but there are other mentions elsewhere. If the book is meant to be an aid to undergraduate or early graduate students of contemporary Italian history, then there is no problem. But Focardi’s study, in its current framing, may be too focused on repetitive debates greatly to appeal to scholars or to what in the Anglo-Saxon world is called the “trade market,” ideally composed of intelligent women and men of the street. We shall need to see what the later books in the series are like. But I am not sure that *Nel Cantiere della Storia* offers an ideal starting model, if the series aims, as it should, at providing expert account of the past to challenge the merely opinionated (and often silly and dangerous) views spread on social media.

Enough of grouching, all the stranger since in most ways I agree with most of Focardi’s assessment of Italians’ wranglings with their recent past. The book, divided into two grand sections, contains ten chapters and a brief coda. The first part has the unifying theme of “the myth of the ‘bad German’” (and the countering “nice Italian”). The opening two chapters ponder the meaning of Fascism and Nazism and the behavior of Germans and Italians, whether apart or as co-belligerent allies. War crimes are surveyed, while the processes,
domestic and foreign, through which Italy avoided having its military and political officers sent before their own Nuremberg, are described (chapter 3). A fourth chapter goes into recent times by viewing the sometimes rude exchanges between German and Italian politicians on what indemnity surviving Italian internees of 1943-45 might be given (and how often Germans still recall an Italian “betrayal” in September 1943, perhaps with echo of early twentieth-century racial science). In the last chapter of the first section, Focardi traces the deepening influence of the Shoah to become the all but preeminent memory of the Second World War. His story will not seem surprising to anyone who knows Peter Novick’s trenchant The Holocaust in American Life (1999), a surprise omission from Focardi’s generally full and multilingual footnotes.

Focardi’s narrative has already quite often gone past 1990. But, following a principle that the ghost of Croce might pronounce to be “all memory is contemporary memory,” the second part examines arguments since the fall of the First Italian Republic, along with the Berlin Wall and (European) communism. Case studies review the attitudes of President Ciampi (chapter 7) and of the fate of memory of atrocity on Cephalonia (chapter 8), along with a reflection on the 70th anniversary of Liberation in 2015 (chapter 9), now inevitably becoming a little dated as we await memory sales on the hundredth anniversary of the March on Rome (October 28, 1922), Corfu crisis (August-September 1923), kidnapping and murder of Matteotti (June 10, 1924), and imposition of a “totalitarian” (Italian-style) dictatorship (January 3, 1925). Focardi finds space to reflect on the (limited) extent to which the EU has been able to craft a “European” memory of the Second World Wars (chapter 10). His first chapter (six overall) in this segment offers a more general narrative of controversies since 1990.

Focardi is best known in the English-speaking world for his admirable attempts to counter the cozy and pernicious myth of “italiani brava gente” by exhibiting in detail how Italians were murderers, too. In reality, he demonstrates, they were not reliably dissimilar from their Nazi German allies and, if you believe the numerous theories of “fascism,” in quite a few senses co-agents of the worst of modern ideologies. Perhaps Focardi’s most graphic case is the microcosm of the Greek village of Domenikon (pp. 40-41), where the Italian occupiers exacted a punishment of sixteen locals executed for every Italian lost to partisans. It was a rate, as Focardi does not underline, well above the Nazis’ notorious murder at the Ardeatine Caves of (slightly more than) ten for one after the March 1944 partisan attack in the Via Rasella in Rome.

Similarly, Focardi does not exempt Italians of participation in the Holocaust. Rather he is emphatic about the vicious racism, by 1938 legislated as anti-Semitism, in the story of Mussolini and his Fascist regime. Once De Felice seemed all but to pardon Italians for any guilt over “Auschwitz.” Focardi convincingly rebuts that argument.
Yet a critical reader will also find omissions, great and small. One of the latter that I found especially irritating was Focardi’s brief treatment of Roberto Benigni’s film *La Vita è bella* (1997), seen as part of a 1990s revival of attention to Italian participation in the Shoah. We also hear that it is “the all-time greatest success of Italian films in the U.S.” (p. 181). *O tempora o mores*, I am inclined to add, if that is so. What I most noticed about the “history” represented in Benigni’s work is that the concentration camp, the “Auschwitz” of its portrayal, is liberated by a white American soldier (presumably an Italo-American?) in his tank. Should not everyone always be reminded that the real Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, was freed by the Red Army of a Soviet Union that may have lost as many as twenty-seven million of its subjects in the war (the great majority to the Germans and their allies, but quite a number to the regime)? The real Auschwitz, in other words, ended in complex ambiguity and not in some simple high morality. *Nota bene*.

But there is a much more blatant omission, typical of the Eurocentricity, the metropolitan obsession, of the vast majority of Italian history-writers and memory-mongers, and their debates. It is an omission that is all the more worrying given that Italian populists and new/old rightists use the “threat” of extra-European immigration as their chief vote winner and, therefore, the chief basis of that they maintain are the lessons of history. My tally of the premature deaths for which Mussolini’s regime was responsible totals one million. Of these, I reckon about half were killed in the Italian Empire, especially Libya and Ethiopia.

Focardi does mention the dreadful story there (pp. 97-98), giving some place to the fine work of such able historians as Angelo Del Boca, Nicola Labanca, and Matteo Dominioni (this last cuts my own total in Ethiopia by one hundred thousand, but anyone will admit that the numbers cannot be firmly set there, nor estimate how many were lost to black-on-black killings by *ascari*, unmentioned by Focardi). But he nowhere goes into the detail of Italy’s colonialist record. There is, for example, no placement of Ian Campbell’s *The Addis Ababa Massacre* (2017), with its compelling subtitle, *Italy’s National Shame*; in this monograph, Campbell brings new evidence to bear in alleging that, in the three days after the assassination attempt on Graziani by two Eritreans (February 19, 1937), thirty thousand Ethiopian men, women, and children were bestially murdered.

Any full reckoning with the costs of Italian imperialism might need to include Liberal times, as, for example, the death rate of Libyan prisoners “confined” on the Tremiti Islands before 1914. After 1922, the empire became to some degree the plaything of members of the Savoy dynasty as well as Fascists. Maybe the “gentleman” (of an ex-murderer kind) governor of Libya, Italo Balbo, deserved to have his policies and their memory scrutinized closely. Roberta Pergher has done just that in her *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire* (2019) as has, less convincingly, Patrick Bernhard in his almost Noltean claim of Italy providing a model to the Nazi imperial genocides in the East. Pergher is missing from Focardi’s notes and so is Shira Klein’s very different *Italian Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* (2018), which reveals some surprisingly positive memories of the dictatorship among its Jewish survivors.

Perhaps each of these American books came too late for listing, and they should be noticed in my review merely to indicate that debates, Italian and foreign, about Mussolini’s regime continue. But what must be emphasized and approved is Focardi’s overall argument that Italians have far too easily forgiven and forgotten their imperial record, before and after 1922. Pondering empire does of course raise problems. The ideal comparators for the Fascist dictatorship are not Germany or other “fascists” and “totalitarians,” but rather the empires of (authoritarian) Spain and Portugal, and liberal democratic Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States. This last is
of course the great sponsor of neoliberalism, so globally hegemonic since the fall of communism, and responsible for pushing into emigration so many extra-European peoples from their all but “failed states,” seeking sanctuary even in Italy. If Italians are to deepen and enrich their historical memories through the 2020s and following a global pandemic, it will be best if they can be persuaded to think globally (Italian-style). In regard to this task, *Nel Cantiere della Storia* sets out some basic historiographical detail about a past tyranny. But much more work and thought remains to be done.

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