

BOOK REVIEW

La ‘rivoluzione nazionale’. I nazionalisti, il fascismo e la fine dello Stato liberale (1919–1927)

by Donatello Aramini, Rome, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2023, 356 pp., €26 (paperback), ISBN 9788893772587

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Donatello Aramini’s book follows a large number of publications on fascism that have recently appeared to mark the centenary of the March on Rome in 2022. The relevance of *La ‘rivoluzione nazionale’* is clear from its very first pages, as it constitutes solid research that analyses nationalism – or, better, nationalists – and the complex process of hybridisation that led to their convergence with, and eventual absorption by, fascism. The narrative is organised chronologically and divided into six thematic chapters. Fluency is undoubtedly a strong element of the book, which is pleasant and easy to read, while not hesitating to go into the details of events.

The central themes of the volume are the development of nationalism and fascism as distinct phenomena and the analysis of their relations and intermingling in Italy in the period from 1919 to 1927. Despite this chronological span, however, the book does not fail to contextualise the evolution of nationalism in the nineteenth century: from the criticism of liberal and democratic principles to the diffusion of cultural and scientific doctrines imbued with racism and the glorification of the myth of the nation in opposition to both parliamentarianism and the internationalist labour movement. In order to articulate his research, Aramini draws from the historiographical ‘classics’ on fascism, especially the works of Renzo De Felice and Emilio Gentile, which the author demonstrably knows well. In this regard, however, it would have been helpful to make greater use of some more recent studies – such as, for example, research by Michael Ebner on fascist violence – which are relevant to Aramini’s analysis.

The attention that the author gives to the biographical paths of several crucial figures, such as Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni, and Alfredo Rocco, which makes it possible to reconstruct events through the use of multiple sources. Indeed, press sources and archival documentation are combined with the private correspondence of various protagonists in the narrative as well as memoirs, such as those of Alfredo Misuri, Raffaele Paolucci di Valmaggione, and Federzoni himself. In the case of private correspondence and memoirs, it might have been useful and interesting to offer the reader a more detailed account of these sources to clarify some potentially controversial aspects related to the context in which they were produced and, consequently, to their reliability.

The first part of the volume traces the origins of Italian nationalism and fascism, the nature of their relationship, and the progressive change in the balance of power between these two movements. Aramini describes the fusion that took place in 1923 as the result of an extremely complex process in which nationalism represented much more than a

simple ‘travelling companion’ of fascism. The author highlights the ideological differences that immediately distinguished the nationalist movement from the Mussolini movement, paying particular attention to the different characters of nationalist and fascist violence. Although the relationship between the Blueshirts and the Blackshirts initially appeared to be a ‘negative collaboration’ (p. 80), this did not prevent the nationalists from playing an important role in the first Mussolini government. The nationalists saw fascism as ‘an intransigentism that restored state authority’ (p. 15), a means to re-establish internal order and the centrality of the nation and to recover a leading role for Italy internationally. Accordingly, the prominent position of former nationalists within fascism caused quite a few discontents in the more ‘movementist’ or revolutionary fringes of the Partito Nazionale Fascista. These complaints were always rejected by Mussolini, who recognised the effort made by the nationalists in support of the fascist reform project, including through the adoption of liberticidal initiatives. However, from a nationalist point of view, this should have happened in the name of an ‘authoritarian normalisation’ (p. 214), leading to the birth of an ‘oligarchy of the best men’ (p. 301) rather than to the absolute power of the dictator.

The second part of the volume is particularly interesting as it highlights how, faced with the progressive fascistisation of the nation, some former Blueshirts began to understand the danger of a series of nationalist ideological contributions to the fascist movement – such as the conception of fascism as the heir to the Risorgimento or as a true expression of the strong and valiant young generation forged by the Great War – that played a part in the establishment of Mussolini’s personal dictatorship. The strengthening of the Duce’s power and the dictator’s cult of personality went hand in hand with the institutionalisation of the liturgy and the symbols of fascism and helped to highlight the totalitarian nature of the regime. This was not a project of national restoration, but the starting point for a radical anthropological revolution. Interestingly, as the author well emphasises, the former nationalists’ growing awareness of Mussolini’s revolutionary project did not produce among them any real distancing from, or hostility towards, fascism. Rather, it manifested itself in the form of a ‘denunciation that took place inside and not outside the regime’ (p. 312). Belief in the Duce also remained particularly strong, showing that not even the former Blueshirts were immune to the dictator’s personal fascination.

Aramini’s work convincingly illustrates the path that led many nationalists to gradually move towards more radical political positions, until they ‘took off the blue shirt they were still wearing, to gradually put on the black one more and more resolutely’ (p. 318). From this point of view, *La ‘rivoluzione nazionale’* has the merit of presenting nationalism as a crucial bridge between the liberal past and fascism, as well as a catalyst that favoured the absorption of traditional forces and their – more or less effective – fascistisation, thus making the Italian totalitarian experiment possible.