

The Blackshirts' Dictatorship: Armed Squads, Political Violence, and the Consolidation of Mussolini's Regime

by Matteo Millan, translated by Sergio Knipe, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, xi + 247 pp., £130.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-03-222446-6.

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In the year of the centenary of the March on Rome, Matteo Millan's book on *squadristo* and the blackshirts' violence in the aftermath of the March – originally published in 2014 and based on his PhD research – has become accessible to a broader, non-Italian-speaking readership. Specifically revised for the English translation, the book offers a compelling contribution to the recent historiography on the long-overlooked relationship between Fascism and violence and on the debate about coercion and consensus in Fascist Italy. It focuses on the first decade of Mussolini's power and investigates 'how the practice of Fascist violence contributed to making the seizure and consolidation of power possible' and 'how and through what transformations and impacts *squadristi*'s violence influenced and shaped' the Fascist dictatorship and its main institutional features (p. 7).

Organised thematically, the first six chapters of the book show that, between 1922 and 1932, *squadrista* violence played a central role in the rural and urban areas of central and northern Italy that Millan considers, and which include Bologna with its countryside, Florence, Milan, Turin, and Genoa. After the March, political violence was generally 'widespread yet low-intensity' (p. 9) there, and its exercise was instrumental in removing any remaining form of organised opposition, in securing the control of local areas, as well as in promoting the fascistisation of Italian institutions and society. A long-term perspective is adopted in the final chapter, as it discusses the lasting influence of the mentality and practices of the *squadristi* throughout the *ventennio*.

In Chapter 1, Millan investigates the process of 'normalisation' and legitimisation of Fascist violence that occurred in the aftermath of the March. Mussolini's government meant to reform and discipline *squadristo* and its arbitrary violence by disbanding the squads and, after the creation of the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN) at the beginning of 1923, integrating them into the state apparatus. Yet the blackshirts did not always accept this normalisation. The government itself, with a series of amnesties, justified and 'encouraged the perpetuation of practices associated with the *squadristi*' (p. 23), especially during local elections and the deposition of antifascist administrations. *Squadrista* violence thus continued long after the March and, combined with government action, 'significantly contributed to imposing "Fascist order" on the country and to laying groundwork for dictatorship' (p. 33).

Nonetheless, *squadristo* endured some significant changes and transformations and 'adapted itself to the post-March climate, while preserving its coherence' (p. 63), mentality, and violent practices, as evidenced in Chapter 2. Some squads refused to be incorporated into the Militia and disguised themselves as sport or mutual assistance associations. Even when they joined the MVSN, *squadristi* still managed to maintain their autonomy and illegal methods. This was true in the case of Tullio Tamburini, the commander of the Militia's Ferrucci Legion, who 'continued to be the undisputed leader of the Florentine *squadristi*' (p. 48).

Such continuity of practice benefited the government, which could count on the blackshirts' loyalty, experience, and violence to consolidate its power and to promote the fascistisation of the country. Chapter 3 illustrates how instrumental *squadristo* was in the takeover of those areas that still resisted Fascist power after the March on Rome (like Turin or 'red' Molinella in Bologna's countryside) as well as showing the government support at the time of the Matteotti crisis, when the blackshirts attacked with extreme brutality not only left-wing opponents but also bourgeois antifascists. The analysis of the instrumental use of *squadrista* violence expands further in Chapter 4, which addresses how, by penetrating working-class areas like Milan and removing any form of dissent, 'violence – and its perpetrators – were central in creating the fertile ground in which forms of acceptance or even support for the regime could prosper' (p. 116).

If the autonomy and power of the local Fascist leaders – the *ras* – had been beneficial to the Fascist 'normalisation' of the country, in the second half of the 1920s, it became clear that the regime could no longer tolerate alternative sources of power or centrifugal tendencies. Chapters 5 and 6 indicate 1926 as a turning point. Vast-scale purges followed the issue of the new Party statute and the Public Security Laws, and targeted local Fascist potentates and their links to *squadristo*. Expulsions from the Party and sentences to *confino* were inflicted on intransigents and radical factions like the 'Arpinatians' in Bologna, the 'Bonellians' in Genoa, and the 'Giampaolians' in Milan to enforce discipline and eradicate their systems of personal and power relationships. Rather than a rejection of *squadristo* and its violent and illegal practices, these purges were part of the process of centralisation and the personalisation of power which did not admit alternatives to the Party's political line and reinforced the role and cult of Mussolini, in a clear indication of the totalitarian nature of Fascism.

Criminalisation and purges, however, did not determine the end of *squadristo*. Once disciplined and adjusted to the new social and political context, the skills of the *squadristi* remained a valuable resource for the regime, especially after 'the intransigent turn of the mid-1930s' (p. 199). This is exemplified in Chapter 7 by the 'complicated but ultimately successful careers' (p. 226) of Onorio Onori, leader of the infamous *Disperata* squad in Florence, and of Arconovaldo Bonacorsi, the 'model *squadrista*' from Bologna. These examples show 'the functional changes that *squadristo* underwent' and that the experiences and radical methods of the *squadristi* were not rejected by the regime. They proved useful in the Abyssinian campaign, in the Spanish Civil War, and during the Second World War, when warfare exposed the true nature of a dictatorship 'in which violence played a central role' (p. 226).

By focusing on the role of *squadrista* violence in the first decade of Mussolini's power, Millan convincingly demonstrates not only that *squadristo* and *squadrista* practices did not cease with the March on Rome and 'represent one of the essential components of any definition of Italian Fascism' (p. 241), but also that the exercise of violence – as highlighted by Michael Ebner in his seminal work *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (2011) – was not a marginal, transitional, or exceptional Fascist strategy.

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