

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

A discussion on *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe*, by Filippo Focardi, Rome, Viella, 2020. With Valeria Galimi, Philip Cooke and Filippo Focardi

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Introduction

The centenary of the March on Rome has prompted Modern Italy's Contexts and Debates section to focus on the public uses of history in reference to interwar Fascism. We are looking into the 'Past, Present, and Future of the Italian Memory of Fascism', to borrow the title of Guido Bartolini's interviews that were published in our issue 27 (4), 2022. While commemorations and anniversaries shouldn't inherently influence academic research agendas, a broader understanding of public memory can help us to understand the current political mood in Italy. For example, it can explain why the centennial and other comparable 'fascist' anniversaries now have little meaning for most of the Italian public and are scarcely addressed by politicians. Indeed, most Italians seems to suffer from political amnesia. The condition is so serious that not even a dramatic occurrence such as the victory of the proudly post-fascist *Fratelli d'Italia* party at the election of September 2022 has proved able to cure it. Happening just a few days before the centenary of the March on Rome, the electoral results were surely expected to elicit a strong reaction by left-wing politicians and intellectuals – perhaps a mass demonstration, like the one that took place in Milan on 25 April 1994, in the aftermath of the first victory of Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing coalition, when another post-fascist party, *Alleanza Nazionale*, took power. Yet nothing of that sort has happened in 2022. Why?

In the Italian case, political amnesia seems to be due to a sense of inevitability. When Berlusconi won in 1994, the antifascist paradigm was still alive and reasonably well: hence the public backlash. The victory of *Fratelli d'Italia*, in contrast, has symbolically represented the definitive triumph of the 'anti-antifascist' political tradition. This cultural shift has been many years in the making, and thus no one was genuinely surprised when it finally materialised. A string of successes in cultural battles that were waged precisely at the level of public memory had paved the way for the Right's eventual and somehow inevitable victory. Revisionism and the belief in 'shared memories' (also at a European level) undermined the antifascism paradigm. The efforts to equate Fascism with Communism were utterly successful across Europe. In Italy, fascist soldiers fighting with the German army were given as much recognition as antifascist partisans fighting with the Allies.

The discussion on Filippo Focardi's *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* touches upon many of the issues that had been influencing public memory in the last

30 or so years. An associate professor in Contemporary History at the University of Padua, Focardi is a leading historian of memory studies in Italy. His publications include *La guerra della memoria* (2005) and *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano* (2013), among many others. His latest volume deals with the ‘memory wars’ in Europe, and the relationship between memory and national identity.

Valeria Galimi, University of Florence

The subtitle of Filippo Focardi’s book, *Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe*, highlights four problematic topics around which, in recent times, extensive and controversial discussions on representations of the past have arisen in Italy.¹ The book launches a new series from the Ferruccio Parri National Institute (of which the author is the director), and is organised along two thematic axes: the first is entitled *The Alibi of the Bad German* and the second *After the First Republic: Conflicting Memories, Reconciled Memories and Memories in Transition*.

Focardi has already produced numerous and very useful works on these topics. I will just mention two of the most successful: *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome/Bari, Laterza, 2005) and *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, which had various reprints and two translations into French and German (Rome/Bari, Laterza, 2013). Furthermore, Focardi has never lacked a strong focus on the comparative dimension, often inserting an analysis of the Italian case in relation to Germany, or in a broader European and international framework (see, among others, Focardi, Contini and Petricioli 2010; Focardi and Groppo 2013; Di Michele and Focardi 2022; Focardi and Lagrou 2021).

The theme of memory is a thread that runs through the author’s work. Here, he revisits earlier topics, updating and expanding on previous work. Focardi defines the ‘construction site’ as a method whereby the historian examines ‘identity mechanisms behind the policies of memory, deconstructs them, identifies that real battle for memory which is always taking place in the processes of definition of collective identities, aware of the intrinsically conflictual nature of social constructions’ (p. 9, in preface by Paolo Pezzino). Through further analysis of subsequent repressions, inventions and falsifications, we see that memory is in constant transformation.

The volume does not ignore the urgent contemporary situation. In fact, Focardi’s introduction is dedicated to the debate, which was very lively in the Italian media in the months before this book went to print, regarding the potential ‘return of Fascism’. He starts with an analysis of some recent events and polls and discusses contributions by other scholars. On one side, we have the position of Emilio Gentile, for whom it does not make ‘any sense, neither historical nor political, to argue that today there is a return of Fascism in Italy, in Europe or in the rest of the world’ (Gentile 2019, 5). On the other, scholars such as Andrea Mammone (2015), Federico Finchelstein (2017) or Enzo Traverso (2017), who, albeit from different positions, show the transformations of the category of Fascism, its ideological contamination with populism, and its transnational connections. Focardi concludes that ‘it seems correct and appropriate to raise the question of the cultural heritage that a great transnational historical phenomenon such as Fascism has left after its disappearance, beyond the restricted (but not negligible) spheres of those who explicitly continue its experience and lesson in various forms’ (p. 27). It is in the context of this debate on the actuality and persistence or otherwise of the phenomenon of Fascism and its cultural heritage in today’s world that Focardi situates the ten contributions gathered in the volume.

Due to the plurality of the topics dealt with, it is not easy to summarise the many observations that Focardi makes. I will highlight a few of his ideas in these notes. The first essays focus on what is called the ‘alibi of the bad German’, which acts as a

counterpoint to the ‘myth of the good Italian’, and which has long been deconstructed by historiography. These essays allow the author to revisit one of the central nodes of his work, that is, the comparison between the historical experience of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, as well as the structuring of a national public memory, in relation to the experience of Fascism and the Second World War. Focardi offers an analysis of the construction of the two opposing myths (‘good Italian’ and ‘bad German’) starting from what the author calls the ‘vice of confrontation’, as well as a discussion of the failed trials and consequent failure to punish Italian war criminals.

This part of the book closes on a matter of great importance, namely the issue of compensation for Italian military internees and the reopening in the mid-2000s of the trials of German war criminals, with the attendant repercussions and tension in Italian-German relations. In this context, an Italian-German Historical Commission was established, operating between 2009 and 2012. Focardi reconstructs with great insight the complex situation of the origins, functioning and results of the Commission, which had among its objectives the building of a ‘common culture of memory’. With regard to this, much remains to be done given that the Commission – as Focardi notes – ‘limited itself to indicating that in the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” and the Resistance lies the origin of the prejudices and stereotypes that still weigh on the mutual perception of Italy and Germany’ (p. 147).

The essay at the intersection of the two parts of the volume is dedicated to the memory of the Shoah, and in particular to an analysis of the German executioners and the Italian saviours. Here Focardi returns to an analysis of the theme of ‘good Italians’ and ‘bad Germans’ in relation to the persecutory measures against Jews and their memory. In these pages, he presents an interlinked portrayal of the evolution of public memory, the main passages of the historiographical debate on the racial laws of 1938 and their application in Fascist Italy, and the changes that have taken place both in public opinion and in politics since the 1990s.

It is worth dwelling on Focardi’s concluding remarks which, taking up the words of Simon Levis Sullam, note that Italy ‘seems to have passed from the “era of the witness” to the “era of the saviour”, without passing through the “era of the executioner”’ (p. 188). The balance sheet presented here of the results of Remembrance Day activities is inconclusive and underlines the risks of a process that has changed the ‘balance of power’ between the memory of the Shoah and the memory of the Resistance, where the latter seems to have suffered ‘a loss of meaning and relevance’ (p. 191). At the same time, Focardi’s argument is absolutely convincing that the attention to anti-Jewish persecutions and the Shoah in Italy does not seem to have dented Italian preconceptions and clichés about Italy’s role, so much so that President Mattarella had to correct partial readings and trivialisations of the responsibilities of Italian Fascism. It should also be emphasised that even if recognition of the racial laws of 1938 is now frequent in the public space, what is still missing is a connection between the responsibilities of Fascism and the responsibilities of Italian society, which still seems to be regarded as a ‘country of rescuers’. In fact, as Focardi tells us, it is ‘still largely permeated by a complacent idea of Fascism and by the acquittal myth of the “good Italian” prodigal helping the ill-understood Jews hunted down by the “bad Germans”’ (p. 191). Much work remains to be done to dismantle this interpretation.

In the second part of the volume, Focardi examines ‘conflicting’, ‘reconciled’, and ‘in transition’ memories. It is less important to take part in the complex debates in Memory Studies, in which it is not always easy to orient oneself, than it is to see memory in action in some circumscribed contexts. For this reason, Focardi’s volume adds to recent works in Italy on the risks, aporias, and the ineffectiveness of ‘bad memory’, as well as the conflicting relationships with history, such as those by Marcello Flores (*Cattiva memoria*).

Perché è difficile fare i conti con la storia, Bologna, il Mulino, 2020) and Valentina Pisanty (*I guardiani della memoria e il ritorno delle destre xenofobe*, Milan, Bompiani, 2020).

Focardi chooses the ‘politics of memory’ as his focus, taking a more political and less cultural perspective, which is interested in decision-making processes, rather than the reception or effectiveness of memory, or in the communicative and social supports upon which memory is structured and spread. In short, as Pezzino notes in his preface, Focardi seems interested in public memory defined as a memory ‘which supports the rites of civil coexistence’ (Pezzino, preface, p. 8).

The chapters of this section analyse the ‘war of memory’ in the years of political transition in the 1990s until the end of the Berlusconi era (2011), and on the 70th anniversary of the Resistance and liberation (2014–15). In particular, Focardi presents an analysis of the ‘antifascist paradigm’, both on the part of the Italian Right, in search of new legitimations, as well as by circles of the Left, which offered varied responses, from mobilisation in the name of antifascism to what the author defines as the ‘subdivision of memory’, up to the attempt to overcome ‘opposing memories’, in particular with the establishment of the ‘Day of Remembrance’ in 2004. On this point Focardi comments: ‘It is precisely the commemoration of the victims of *foibe* that constituted the privileged terrain for building a new “pacified” public memory’ (p. 220).

Focardi also examines the activity of the Quirinale ‘to rediscover the homeland’, focusing on the presidencies of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and Giorgio Napolitano, but also assessing the presidency of Sergio Mattarella.

In the concluding chapter, Focardi presents a very careful examination of European memory and its transformations since 1989. He meticulously reconstructs the commitment of European institutions in promoting the memory of the Shoah, first of all as an intervention to counter the emergence of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, but also in the debate on anti-denialist legislation. Focardi emphasises that after the expansion of the European Union to the East, anti-totalitarianism has become a pillar of community memory policies, through the equating of Nazism and Communism (p. 317). The chapter closes with some observations about the challenges and risks of a common European memory.

Regarding the debate on ‘bad memory’, Focardi asks how one can and should develop ‘good memory’. The most effective route he identifies is via the education system, through the training of teachers and the use of new textbooks with a European, transnational and global history perspective. ‘Therefore, not a single memory descended from above, but an effort to spread an adequate historical knowledge in all EU countries, attentive as much to contexts and peculiarities as to exchange processes, as a prerequisite for a plurality of European memories founded not on the self-victimisation of individual nations but on the shared recognition of the historical, traumatic and suffering path that has led to today’s Europe’ (p. 327). This may be a wish, but at the same time it offers a methodological path to making ‘good memory’ in today’s world.

Philip Cooke, University of Strathclyde

Filippo Focardi’s work initially came to widespread attention in 2005 with the publication of his *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi*. This important book, which has rightly assumed almost biblical status amongst scholars and students in Italy, traces the history of the vicissitudes of Resistance memory through the lens of politics. The book is divided into two parts – Focardi’s compelling, subtle and extended introductory *saggio*, followed by an anthology of texts comprising, above all, speeches given by major political figures. These carefully chosen texts reflect the construction, development and challenges to the antifascist paradigm over the *longue durée*.

The final section dedicates particular attention to the first years of the twenty-first century, when the then president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, played a key role in what Focardi terms the '*rifondazione della memoria della resistenza*'.

As Focardi describes in the preface, the book had its origins in a conference held in Bad Homburg in 2000, where he presented a paper about key Resistance anniversaries (25 April, 8 September, 25 July and 24 March) and the speeches of politicians delivered on these occasions. The paper was subsequently published in German. Focardi's connection with Germany, however, predates the year 2000. During the late 1990s, under the supervision of Brunello Mantelli at the University of Turin, Focardi researched and wrote his doctoral dissertation on *La Germania vista dall'Italia, 1943–1949*. Indeed, Germany and its relations with Italy during and after the Second World War constitute the core of Focardi's scholarly enquiries. His best-known book *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, published by Laterza in 2013, traces the complex process of the formation and sedimentation of a binary opposition which has provided the foundations on which the memory of the Second World War in Italy has been built. The book's impact can be measured by the fact that it has been translated into both French and German, and an English version will be published by Manchester University Press translated by Paul Barnaby.

In addition to his two key monographs, Focardi has also published a large number of articles and book chapters, the majority of which deal with the Italy/Germany nexus, and its configuration in memory. Some of these have appeared in translation in English or German. In the book under review, ten of these publications have been revised, and in many cases expanded, in order to form a 'workshop' of memory – the first volume in the flagship series of the Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri published by Viella.² Collections such as this can sometimes appear in the UK as a rather too convenient vehicle for a REF submission, but this is not the case with *Nel cantiere della memoria*, which has a unity and coherence meaning that it is far more than the sum of its parts. As a result of careful editing by Focardi, the book has an inner logic which means that, in order to get the best from it, it should be read from beginning to end, with each individual chapter reflecting what has gone before and pointing to what comes after. In many ways it is reminiscent of Rossellini's *Paisà*, where each short story that makes up the film carries forward the thematic elements which have preceded it. In a short review it is difficult to do justice to the riches that Focardi's workshop contains, so rather than attempting the impossible task of discussing all ten chapters, I will concentrate on those in the first part, which are organised under the general heading of the 'alibi of the bad German'. The second part of the book, comprising, like the first, five chapters, addresses conflicts of memory, reconciled memories and memories in transition, and while the issues tackled go back to the Second World War, the debates are largely confined to the years of the so-called Second Republic.

The first chapter, while originally conceived as a stand-alone piece, acts as an effective introduction to the whole volume, introducing key concepts, such as the 'bad German' and the 'good Italian', but also reflecting on moments of Italian history which, if not fully eclipsed in the postwar period, have been much elided. These absences from the Italian 'master narrative' include the dirty war against the resistance to Italian occupation in Slovenia, Croatia, Dalmatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, and the Soviet Union, where Italian soldiers pursued a 'war against the civilians', punctuated by executions, the burning of entire villages, massacres and deportations of men, women and children. One, sadly not isolated, example was the massacre carried out in the Greek village of Domenikon, where 145 males were executed in a reprisal for a partisan attack.

Far better known than the Domenikon reprisals, is the massacre of Italian soldiers on the island of Cefalonia, a topic which Focardi covers extensively in the eighth chapter of

the book (pp. 259–285). In this introductory chapter, Focardi refers briefly to the film *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, as well as to the highly successful *Mediterraneo*. These pages are the only occasion Focardi confronts the issue of the representation of the 'good Italian' in film. To be fair, Focardi's interests are declaredly in the area of the interaction of politics and history (indeed he teaches in a department of political science at the University of Padua), but it could be argued that closer attention to film would only help to add even further weight to the compelling arguments that the book proposes, and also help to address why certain stereotypes have become so entrenched in Italian memory, and why (perhaps) historians have failed to puncture these commonplaces. Another potential absence which some readers might note is the lack of any discussion of the theoretical dimension of memory studies. Concepts such as collective memory, and more recent developments such as post-memory, prosthetic memory, and indeed agonistic memory, do not find any space in Focardi's text. In many ways this is better than the obligatory reference to the seldom read, and even less frequently understood, work of Maurice Halbwachs, but I could envisage that those scholars of memory whose work takes a theoretical slant, might be somewhat perplexed by Focardi's no-nonsense philosophy.

In the conclusion to this first chapter Focardi reflects that historians in Italy and at an international level have done a great deal to deflate the myth of the 'good Italian', by bringing to light unpunished crimes committed in the colonies and during the Second World War, by emphasising the existence of concentration camps, and by exhuming the racist policies (and indeed acts) used against Slavs, Africans and Jews. At an institutional level, however, and despite a number of diplomatic initiatives towards Slovenia and Croatia fronted by Giorgio Napolitano during his presidency, Focardi argues that there is still a great deal of work to be done 'in order to develop an Italian memory which is neither reticent nor victim-centred, but rather self-critical and responsible and capable of going beyond myths which are too easily exploited' (p. 58). While I agree entirely with this exhortation to develop such a memory (the first of many such eloquent appeals throughout the book), the extent to which the work of historians has helped to change perceptions remains a moot point: hence my earlier reference to film. In Italy there has long been an impassioned debate about the role of historians, and the extent to which they should be responsible for shaping public opinion, but whether their books, television and press interviews and, in recent times, interventions via Zoom and Facebook, have had much effect remains a moot point. Certainly, the annual polemics around the *Giorno del ricordo* of 10 February, which this year saw new lows in the shape of the vilification of the historian Eric Gobetti, suggest that many Italians, and not just those of the far right, continue to see the *foibe* and the Dalmatian exodus without even the remotest understanding of the historical context in which those events took place.

I would also add that the depiction of the Italian occupation of parts of Yugoslavia in the English language historiography still tends, *pace* Focardi, towards an irenic view. Consider, for example, the interpretation offered by Stevan Pavlowitch in his 2021 book *Hitler's New Disorder: the Second World War in Yugoslavia*. Following the rapid occupation of Yugoslavia in April 1941, observes Pavlowitch, 'Hitler wanted to destroy forever the "Versailles construct that was Yugoslavia. Serbs were to be punished; Croats brought over to the Axis; Slovenes Germanised or dispersed". Italy, on the other hand, "had views about what was Italian by historic right, and what should be within its vital space"' (p. 21).

The above comparison of Italy with Nazi Germany, in which the nefarious excesses of the latter conveniently exculpate the lesser evils of the former, is at the centre of the second chapter entitled '*Il vizio del confronto: giudicare il fascismo con il metro del nazismo*'

(pp. 59–94). As Focardi outlines at an early stage, this comparative approach, which sought to underline the differences between Nazism and Fascism, has had a long and inglorious shelf-life, embraced by broad sections of antifascist culture, as well as by the ranks of the so-called anti-fascists. The former sector is epitomised by the noted Crocean formula of Fascism as a parenthesis. This is a well-known, and of course much contested interpretation, but little is known about its origins and early circulation. Accordingly, Focardi digs deep into Croce's writings and speeches, as well as an interview given to Cecil Sprigge in March 1945, in which it was claimed that the war was imposed on the Italian nation by Fascism, a 'foreign regime' (Croce's term). For Croce, then, the Italians were the victims of Fascism and the war. Not surprisingly, the Crocean topos was enthusiastically embraced by the Italian press, such as the Roman weekly *Domenica*, which described Fascism as an 'accidental infection', while Nazism was a 'hereditary illness of the German people' (p. 62). Croce's reading, Focardi shows, was in turn taken up by leading Actionist intellectuals, including Carlo Dionisotti, who were disciples of the Neapolitan philosopher, but also by Marxists and Catholics, keen to find evidence for the intellectual parabola which led from Luther to Hitler. Ultimately, De Felice's attenuated interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism, and indeed Fascist anti-Semitism, is seen as having its intellectual roots in Croce's intellectual position.

Unsurprisingly, the demonic figure of Hitler proved fertile ground for the defenders of Mussolini. While Hitler was compared to Nero, Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, Mussolini was seen as a latter-day Cola di Rienzo, essentially a decent chap. The topos of the '*buonuomo Mussolini*' has its origins in the writings of Indro Montanelli, and in particular his 1947 book which used the expression in its title. Montanelli was, however, particularly attached to this idea and was still peddling it in his column in the *Corriere della sera* up to his death in 2002. As the chapter continues, Focardi demonstrates how the '*vizio del confronto*' became a widespread phenomenon, with manifestations at many intellectual levels. Particularly interesting in this context is Focardi's discussion of texts written by non-Italians, such as the Swiss-German journalist Emil Ludwig's *The Moral Conquest of Germany* and the German economist Wilhelm Röpke's *The German Question*, both of which drew a clear line between Fascism and Nazism. Of course, as Focardi is quick to point out, there were distinctions between Nazism and Fascism, but what most interests him is how these distinctions were used for political ends, such as avoiding a punitive peace, but also to legitimise antifascism, seen as a force born of the absence of popular consensus for the Fascist regime.

In the next section of the chapter Focardi reflects on how Italy's 'essentialist' take on Nazi Germany and the characteristics of the German people has resurfaced periodically, such as during the *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s, interpreted in schematic terms in the Italian press coverage, or following the publication of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* which, despite its grotesque thesis of the ineluctably eliminationist mentality of the German people, was evidently well-received and sold well in Italian translation. A more recent manifestation of Italy's schematic understanding of Germany was Berlusconi's colossally ignorant statement in 2014 that, as far as the Germans were concerned, the *lager* had never existed. The chapter finishes with a comparison furnished by Focardi himself, who argues that while Germany has sought, sometimes painfully, to come to terms with its past (the so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), the same cannot be said for Italy, despite notable advances in historiography, of which Focardi provides a number of examples.

In the third chapter of this first part, Focardi considers the issue of Italy's unpunished war crimes. In a trenchant phrase (one of many) Focardi observes that only a '*pugno di malcapitati*' (a handful of unfortunate wretches) ended up being put on trial in Greece, Yugoslavia or Albania following the September 1943 armistice declaration. All the rest

'got off scot free' (p. 102). Unlike the other signatories of the tripartite pact, Italy managed to guarantee impunity for almost all of her war criminals, who avoided extradition and punishment for their actions. How, Focardi asks, was such an outcome possible? The answer lies, above all, in the strategy of the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (dominated by career Fascists), a strategy which Focardi outlines with his customary clarity. Further aided by the notable slowness of the Italian judicial system, which allowed extraditions to be delayed *sine die*, the Italian war criminals were also assisted by external factors. While the British were, in the main, keen to see an Italian Nuremberg, the Americans, whose suspicions of Tito were part and parcel of the anti-communist paranoia of the times, were against them. And the Americans, unsurprisingly, won the argument. As Focardi shows, there was an attempt as late as 2013 by the energetic military prosecutor, Marco De Paolis, to initiate an investigation into the massacre of Domenikon, but it never reached the courts. While the judicial route is now definitively closed, Focardi concludes with another appeal to his colleagues: 'the path is still open for ... historians to reinsert the dark page of Italian war crimes into Italian historical memory' (p. 114).

The two final chapters of part one are dedicated firstly to the issue of damage payments to the Internati Militari Italiani, and the closely related issue of the trials of war crimes perpetrated in Italy by German soldiers, and secondly to the memory of the Shoah. The issue of the trials, the exemplary role of De Paolis, and the controversial episode of documents hidden in a 'cupboard of shame', are all quite familiar topics, but it is the discussion of the consequences of these episodes for Italo-German relations which are at the heart of the chapter. Focardi devotes ample space to the difficult diplomatic repercussions, and to the workings of the joint historical commission, chaired by Wolfgang Schieder and Mariano Gabriele. Though much criticised at the time, there have been concrete outcomes, such as the online atlas of German massacres in Italy, a research project led by Paolo Pezzino (who provides a helpful preface to the present volume). Other initiatives have followed, and in 2022 a multi-lingual exhibition opened at the Casa della memoria in Milan which takes a young German on a 'Journey through the Italy of the Second World War'. These, and other joint projects, the likes of which are unthinkable in post-Brexit Britain, merit the highest encomia.

Focardi's 'workshop' is clearly an important and timely work, which helps readers understand what lies beneath what can appear to be an unfathomable and stormy sea. As with his work on 'the good Italian' and 'the bad German' I can only hope that a translation will follow. Such a volume would be particularly useful for undergraduate students of history, most of whose linguistic skills do not, sadly, extend to German or Italian.

Filippo Focardi, University of Padua

I would firstly like to thank the journal *Modern Italy* for organising this opportunity for reflection and discussion around my book *Nel cantiere della memoria*. I would also like to thank my colleagues Philip Cooke and Valeria Galimi for their thoughtful and insightful readings, which offer an effective and comprehensive synthesis of the contents of my work and raise several important issues which I am pleased to address.

Cooke traces the main stages of my scholarly journey through the sequence of major monographs. He correctly locates the 'heart' of my research in Italo-German relations during and after the Second World War, and more precisely in the effects of these relations in the shaping of Italian public memory in connection to Fascism and the experience of the war. In my opinion, the memory of both the former and the latter were in fact developed and disseminated by Italy's political and cultural elites. For this, they used as a pillar the repeated and distorting comparison with a certain demonising depiction

of Nazism and the German soldier, which produced ‘by contrast’ a benevolent image of Fascism and a self-absolving narrative of Italy’s actions in the war as an Axis power. On the centenary of the March on Rome, it would be appropriate for Italians to remember that it was Italy that gave birth to Fascism, an anti-democratic model that fascinated the European Right and German Nazism itself. That Mussolini would later follow his disciple Hitler on the path of wicked and criminal wartime adventure was thus no bump in the road resulting from the Duce’s miscalculations, as many in Italy still believe. Rather, it was the fruit of a common direction of travel of two distinct but consanguineous totalitarianisms.

Here, I would like to note that, when initiating my studies many years ago, I had two points of reference in Enzo Collotti and Jens Petersen. Collotti, with whom I graduated in Florence, was one of Italy’s leading Germanists and a distinguished historian of European fascisms and the Second World War. Petersen was the head of the contemporary history section at the German Historical Institute in Rome for many years, and is a scholar attentive to Italy and Germany’s mutual perceptions and portrayals, with whom I was in close contact at the beginning of my scholarly career. My research owes much to their influence, although I believe I have developed an original approach and pathway. There is no doubt that, as both Cooke and Galimi note, my point of observation is located in the ‘area of the interaction between politics and history’ (to use Cooke’s words), with a particular focus on the genesis and development of the politics of memory, on which I dwell particularly in the second part of the volume, and generally with a perspective, to paraphrase Galimi, that is more political than cultural. I certainly position myself in a peculiar way when compared to the *nouvelle vague* of cultural history studies. I believe, however, that this has allowed me to achieve some otherwise unattainable results.

As I have recalled on other occasions, in my view it would certainly have been possible to write a book such as *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano* using a cultural history approach. This would probably have resulted in an excellent text, rich with references to literature, the visual arts, television, and film. However, it would have missed the opportunity to understand the true origins of the depiction of the good Italian vs. the bad German. After 1943, these lay in the willingness and ability of the political and institutional elites of monarchist and antifascist Italy to utilise an already partially established cultural heritage (consider the anti-German legacy of the Great War) for foreign policy purposes considered vital at the time – in other words, in separating the fate of a defeated Italy from that of its former German ally. This imprinting has marked national memory; no doubt, I would add, thanks in addition to the rapid and pervasive sharing and dissemination of such a narrative in popular culture through the mass media.

This awareness with respect to the construction and political use of memory may explain, at least in part, a deficit correctly noted by Philip Cooke, namely the lack of attention paid to the theoretical debate that animates contemporary memory studies inspired by cultural history. Indeed, I find some reflections interesting, such as those of Anna Cento Bull on the concept of agonistic memory (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016), or those of Michael Rothberg on multidirectional memory (2009). However, I have not yet identified any studies that have effectively implemented them to understand and interpret the unusual context of Italy. For this, I continue to find fertile the traditional strand of reflection centred on the concepts of public and political uses of history and memory, from the earlier reflections of Nicola Gallerano (1995), to the very recent one offered by Gianluca Fantoni in his volume on the history of the Jewish Brigade, in which he gives a precise definition of the concept of the political use of history (Fantoni, 2022, 9–10).

I would add that a greater focus on theoretical debate may probably also have been disadvantaged by my historiographical *modus operandi*, which Valeria Galimi calls the ‘workshop method’. This is a hands-on technique that traces, almost step by step and

over time, the evolution of public memory, with particular attention to disputes over the civil calendar and the political and institutional dimension more generally. In my opinion, this is very relevant to the Italian case, as I believe the role played in the last 20 years by the presidency of the Republic, from Ciampi to Napolitano to Mattarella, demonstrates.

This does not detract from the fact that a closer look at the cultural dimension – such as that urged by Cooke with reference to cinema – is also certainly appropriate and desirable in my view. It could not only enrich and support the basic analysis I conduct, but it is also useful, if not indispensable, in answering some fundamental questions that have been correctly advanced by my two attentive readers. I refer to the question of the persistence over time of certain self-congratulatory and self-absolving narratives and stereotypes inspired by the stereotype of the ‘good Italian’. I also refer to the issue of historical research lacking incisiveness in orienting public debate in Italy, and more generally to what has been deemed historical common sense. The two issues are, moreover, intertwined.

Where do we stand with the myth of the ‘good Italian’? The question posed by Valeria Galimi can be answered by first noting the gap that persists between Italian and international historical research, which the myth has increasingly exposed over the last quarter of a century. It can also be answered by the public discourse that still struggles to confront this dark chapter of Italy’s past, from the atrocities of Italian colonialism to the Fascist wars of aggression and the failure to punish Italian war criminals. Is this because of the inability of Italian historians to speak to the general public? This theory should be tested through a deeper analysis of both the different vectors through which historical knowledge is disseminated and public memory, considering for example schools, television, cinema, literature, comics, museums, social media, and more. It is an open field of research. In recent years, we have been witnessing significant efforts in the field of public history to bridge the gap between scholarly research and public discourse, particularly by a younger generation of historians, many of whom have academic backgrounds but sit outside academic circles. I refer, by way of example, to figures such as Carlo Greppi, Francesco Filippi and Eric Gobetti, who have a strong presence in networks of communication (editorial collections, newspapers, TV, social media), and are active in promoting knowledge of Fascism in a way that is attentive to its oppressive and criminal aspects.³

In the face of an almost militant commitment, with some positive effects for the communication of history (generally unrecognised by the academic community), my feeling, expressed in *Nel cantiere della memoria*, is that Italian society’s reckoning with its experience of Fascism – this is essentially the issue – nevertheless remains a distant goal yet to be achieved, largely because it is hampered by powerful and persistent political conditioning. Consider the debate surrounding Rai’s decades-long suppression of the airing of the documentary *Fascist Legacy*, or the fact that historical programmes on Italian war crimes only began to be aired during prime time on public television in 2015, before once again disappearing from the schedules (Focardi 2020, 111). It was also significant that the Italian mass media was silent on the apology proposed in 2009 by former Italian Ambassador Gianpaolo Scarante to the families of the victims of the Domenikon massacre in Greece, an important symbolic gesture. This was obstructed to the last by the Ministry of Defence in the interest of protecting the good name of the Italian military. It is no less significant that during a period in which profound changes were made to the Italian civil calendar, now marked by a plurality of memorial days dedicated to a wide array of victims (of the Shoah, the foibe, the Mafia, terrorism, multilateral peacekeeping missions, and so on), there has been no space for days dedicated to the victims of Italian colonialism and Fascism. In October 2006, two proposals put forward in this regard immediately foundered.

In summary, a line of inquiry using a cultural history of memory approach (which I have tried to follow, for example in the chapter devoted to the memory of the Shoah),⁴

undoubtedly still needs to be pursued. However, in my view, the need to consider and analyse the wide range of uses as well as the political conditioning of memory remains, considering in addition that in recent times the picture has become even more complex due to the overlapping of the national dimension with the European dimension. The latter has been marked by the memory politics promoted by the European Union, which centres on the Shoah and an anti-totalitarian paradigm that equates victims of Communism with victims of Nazism. This paradigm has been explicitly referenced by the Italian Right with regard to the memory of the *foibe*, using not by coincidence the inappropriate but telling term ‘Italian Shoah’. It thus becomes necessary to study the multiple interactions between the cultural and political dimensions of memory, using a framework that is not only Italian but also European. There is, in short, much work to be done. The workshop, as always, remains open and as industrious as ever.

Notes

1. See the contributions of Tullia Catalan, Carlo Greppi, Maurizio Ridolfi and Guri Schwarz on the various ‘memorial days’ in Italy published in issue no. 296 of *Italia contemporanea* (August 2021), with an introduction by Focardi (2021).
2. For reasons of transparency I should declare that I am a member of the editorial committee of the series, which has so far published three volumes, the most recent of which is Santagata 2021.
3. The Fact Checking series edited at Laterza by Carlo Greppi has become an important, albeit controversial, cultural tool.
4. See De Luna 2011.

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