

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**W. Vincent Arnold.** *The Illusion of Victory: Fascist Propaganda and the Second World War.* New York: Peter Lang, 1998. vi + 270 pp. \$47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-1895-7.

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**Published on** H-Italy (September, 1999)

Studies of fascist propaganda have grown exponentially since Philip Cannistraro published *La Fabbrica di Consenso* in 1975.[1] Curiously neglected in this literature has been the role of propaganda during the Second World War. With his book *The Illusion of Victory*, W. Vincent Arnold attempts to fill this gap. The central argument of the book is that the propaganda initiatives taken by the Ministry of Popular Culture ultimately ended in failure, as the regime's insistent belief in victory "failed to survive in a world of objective reality" (p. 11). This inability to deal with the realities of the war was due to the increasing number of military defeats, the lack of a long-term strategy which forced the ministry to react to events rather than anticipating them, and the inability of the regime to centralize and control all mass media outlets.

The strength of Arnold's argument lies in his account of the futile attempts to deal with the often unforeseen developments of the war. Events like the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 caused Italian propaganda to suddenly drop its anti-Bolshevism, a central feature of fascism's self-image until then. Crises such as these were the inevitable consequence of a lack of long-term strategy from the Ministry of Popular Culture. Arnold is adept at demonstrating how this weakness led to an increasing dependence on Nazi Germany in formulating a common propaganda, a relationship which frequently saw Italy take directives from the Germans. For the most part, Arnold's analysis is sound in outlining the various contradictory paths of Italian propaganda, though it would have been intriguing to know if the frequent directives given to the press by the ministry, and Mussolini, were carried out to the letter. Arnold is also a little unfair in criticizing the regime for not having a precise strategy at the outset—wars are rarely predictable.

*The Illusion of Victory* is less convincing with regard to the response of the Italian public to fascist propaganda. While Arnold is not incorrect in denoting the lack of popular enthusiasm for the war, his tendency to treat the Italian public as a single, unified entity is problematic. Relying mostly on reports from the Ministry of Interior from selected cities, and Galeazzo Ciano's diary, Arnold never distinguishes between classes, cities, or regions. He also fails to consider political differences. For example, in chapter 4, Arnold argues that by 1941 Italians were increasingly turning to the Vatican for alternative sources of information on the war. Considering the Vatican's complicity with the regime, one has to question if all anti-fascists, especially the Left, genuinely saw the church as a trustworthy alternative. While at times he offers some evidence, Arnold often seems to rely on personal conviction to explain Italian responses to propaganda. At one point, he argues that the regime's inability to control all mass media outlets "must have limited the effectiveness of the regime's propaganda" (p. 114). This supposition implies that pro-war propaganda could only have emanated from government agencies and it is characteristic of the sharp dichotomy between state and society presented by this book, a dichotomy which ignores the points of intersection between the two. An alternative to this reading is offered in Mabel Berezin's *Making the Fascist Self* which demonstrates how some Italian soldiers from the Greek and Albanian campaigns came to identify with fascist propaganda.[2]

Despite these problems, *The Illusion of Victory* is a well-researched and rich account of the formulation of propaganda during the Second World War which will, hopefully, serve as an impetus to increased investigation into this obscure period of Fascist Italy.

Notes

[1]. Philip V. Cannistraro. *La Fabbrica di Consenso: Fascismo e Mass Media*. Bari: Laterza, 1975.

[2]. Mabel Berezin. *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997.

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**Citation:** Paul Baxa. Review of Arnold, W. Vincent, *The Illusion of Victory: Fascist Propaganda and the Second World War*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. September, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3435>

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