



Richard J. B. Bosworth. *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 644 S. \$55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-959478-8.



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R. Bosworth (Hrsg.): The Oxford Handbook of Fascism

Anyone looking for an up-to-date introduction to fascism is soon overwhelmed by the many books and articles on the subject. In recent years, two broad tendencies have emerged in the study of fascism. Some scholars are concerned with the quest to identify the 'fascist minimum', a rather inward-looking perspective increasingly isolated from mainstream twentieth-century political, social and cultural history. At the same time, other historians rightly insist that fascism can only be understood properly if firmly placed in the context of modern politics, culture and society. This handbook firmly subscribes to the latter tendency. Edited by Richard Bosworth, a leading historian of Fascist Italy, it brings together essays written by a fine cast of English-speaking and some Italian experts to provide a comprehensive overview of fascism, from its inauspicious ideological origins before the First World War until today.

Bosworth's aim with this handbook is to provide an up-to-date introduction to the latest scholarship on fascism. In his concise introductory essay, Bosworth, somewhat polemically, outlines his reservations about Emilio Gentile's and Roger Griffin's interpretation of fascism as

a 'apolitical religion', a sophisticated approach pioneered by George Mosse and developed further by Gentile (p. 3-5). True, the 'apolitical religion' approach probably gives too much coherence to a relatively loose set of ideological scraps; I would also agree with Bosworth that a superficial 'apolitical religion' approach, without analysing the political impact of fascist ideas, runs the risk of taking fascist pretensions at face value, something which Gentile certainly does not do.

At the heart of the essays is the question to what extent fascist ideology expressed itself in its historical context. Bosworth and the contributors rightly point towards the limits of fascist pretences to create a totalitarian society, confirming what historians of Nazi Germany, such as Martin Broszat and Ian Kershaw, argued in the 1970s: that there was a gap between image and reality. Bosworth is sceptical towards historians who focus on fascist ideology. If Bosworth is right to criticise Griffin for a tendency to offer too neat a definition of fascism, he is mistaken to dismiss Gentile's work so summarily: to do so is not only to under-estimate the diversity and originality of the celebrated Italian scholar, but also to

miss the significance of fascist myths, symbols and culture that he has so forcefully emphasised.

As with all edited volumes, the individual contributions vary in quality, although almost all essays reliably cover the ground and often provide lots of food for thought. Divided into five parts of uneven length, the book begins with four essays on fascism's origins before the establishment of the *Fasci di Combattimento* in Milan's Piazza San Sepolcro on 23 March 1919, the world's first formal fascist organisation. In the aftermath of the Great War, fascism was not inevitable, of course, but a lethal cocktail of ultra-nationalism and militarism brought it to the fore in Italy and other states.

For good historical reasons, the second part of the book, the longest and perhaps most substantive one, deals with Italy, the world's first country to be ruled by fascism and a fascist dictator. It was here that many far-right movements across Europe, such as Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists, a fringe group in the early 1920s, looked for inspiration and for models of how to take over power. Violence was central to Fascism, as the essays in this section underline. The huge gap between Fascist propaganda and the socio-political reality of Fascist Italy is developed very clearly in John Pollard's excellent investigation of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Fascism. Catholicism remained extremely strong in Italy under Fascist rule. For this reason Mussolini and the regime used religious symbols that were extremely comprehensible to most Italians, steeped in Catholicism (p. 183). So the new political religion, whose origins have to be seen in the *Risorgimento*, co-existed with Catholicism. Despite all Fascist pretences, it never had a monopoly over Italians.

Part three offers comparative essays on Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. This comparison is, either implicitly or explicitly, central to any debate on fascism, with Nazism being portrayed as a unique form of a racial dictatorship and Fascist Italy being seen as a relatively inefficient and therefore quite harmless regime. The essays in this section reject such facile thinking. Of particular importance is Robert Gordon's clear examination of race. He concludes that racism was an integral part of both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany which is why he sees fascism as essentially racist (p. 315). Perhaps more could have been said in this section about the increasing political, economic and cultural entanglement between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, only touched upon in H. James Burgwyn's traditional diplomatic account of the

Axis alliance. Contacts between the two most powerful fascist regimes, always full of tension, went far beyond a merely political or ideological alliance, as a number of German historians have amply shown. On this approach see the essays in Sven Reichardt / Armin Nolzen (Eds), *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland. Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*, Göttingen 2005; see also Lutz Klinkhammer / Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi / Thomas Schlemmer (Eds), *Die Achse im Krieg. Politik, Ideologie und Kriegsführung 1939-1945*, Paderborn 2010.

Part four, dedicated to 'Others', examines fascist movements and regimes in interwar Europe. This is perhaps the handbook's most uneven and unfocused section, owing to the diversity of European interwar fascism. Still, most of the individual chapters are excellent. To what extent, one wonders, did the fascist movements and regimes discussed here refer themselves to the template of Fascist Italy, the world's original fascist dictatorship? This section includes a stimulating essay by Rikki Kersten on Japan's relationship to fascism. While Japan after 1931 indubitably shared some of fascism's core aspects, Kersten cautions against imposing the European concept of fascism on Japan. One wonders to what extent, then, fascism was a European phenomenon, modelled on the Italian template, and to what extent it makes sense to speak of global fascism, recently examined by Federico Finchelstein. Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism. Ideology, Violence and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*, Durham, NC 2010.

The volume ends with a section on 'reflections and legacies'. As all the individual contributions have shown, quite rightly, historians must pay close attention to the specific historical backgrounds in which fascism emerged rather than trying to distil some ideal-type definition of fascism. In this way, Bosworth and his contributors firmly and rightly emphasise that the history of fascism needs to be integrated with the political, social and cultural history of the twentieth century as it is far too important to be relegated to the increasingly isolated field of 'fascist studies'. More space could perhaps have been devoted to a more balanced and nuanced assessment of the school associated with Emilio Gentile and the new German historiography on relations between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Yet, these are all relatively minor criticisms. Because of its breadth and depth, this lucid and in many ways excellent handbook will be one of the first ports of call for anyone interested in the history of fascism.

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