
Introduction

How do Italians remember fascism, Mussolini and the life in Italy during the fascist years? What do Italians know of the fascist concentration camps that were set up all over Italy between 1940 and 1943, directly influenced by Mussolini's race laws that he introduced in 1938? The vast majority of Italians, particularly those who did not live through the Second World War, have come to understand this important part of their history through what was taught at school and what was written by influential historians, authors and journalists of the time, and those who followed.

Gabriele De Rosa's *Storia Contemporanea*,¹ the backbone of the high school curriculum in all Italian schools for the last forty years, devotes many of its chapters to the Second World War but not a single sentence to Mussolini's race laws or the fascist concentration camps. It merely mentions, very briefly, the fascists' and the Catholic's Church's opposition to Hitler's racist politics.

The main text for the *media* schools (middle schools) in Italy, *Il libro Garzanti della storia*, in its contemporary volume, mentions the race laws in such a way as to imply that these belonged to Germany. The reference to the race laws reads:

This new link between Italy and the Nazi super power created much doubt, even for some of the important Fascist exponents and contributed to the decrease in popularity of the Regime mainly because Fascism imitated some of the extreme aspects of Nazism, that were foreign to the Italian traditions like the persecution of the Jews (race laws of 1938).²

Neither of these two texts would have persuaded Italian students to try to find out more about the racist politics that existed in fascist Italy. Even when school pupils studying history went on to university, would they have had much more information about fascist race laws? The second volume of Massimo Salvadori's *Storia dell'età*

contemporanea covers the period 1914–45 and has been one of the more important textbooks for all degree-level students since it was first published in 1990. Salvadori places fascist racism firmly at a subordinate level to Nazi racism and implies that the 1938 race laws came about only as a consequence of the evolving links with Germany. Salvadori states: ‘Only in 1938 did Fascism come up with racist theories and assumed an anti-Semitic position; this position would come to indicate, in a definite way, the subordinate character of Fascism towards the supremacy of Nazi Germany.’³

For a more elaborate and comprehensive picture of the fascist era and the understanding of the 1938 race laws, one needs to read the influential works of historians such as Renzo De Felice, on a national level, and George Mosse on an international level. Renzo De Felice was one of the most important historians of fascism and is known as ‘the biographer of Mussolini’, as he dedicated much of his life to writing an eight-volume biography on the dictator. In his book, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, first published in 1961, he produced an impressive insight into the differences between fascism and Nazism as well as the differences between the forms of racism implemented by the two different regimes. De Felice was instrumental in moving forward the thinking about fascist racism and pronouncing it as different to that of the Nazis. However, De Felice’s belief that the two regimes, and their forms of racism, were not the same was borne out of the conviction that fascist racism was a more diluted, and less calculated, form of racism compared to the destructive Nazi racism. He also maintained that Mussolini (and Italy) needed the race laws, at that time in history, to control the indigenous populations in their colonies. He implied that Mussolini’s race laws and their implementation were not part of some strategic plan, and that eventually they would have produced some positive outcome. At one point he even suggests that Mussolini’s introduction of race laws was merely a way of gaining and maintaining his friendship with Hitler; he states:

With the adoption of the race laws, Mussolini wanted to achieve a number of objectives. One of which was to give Fascism a new dynamism. Another was to fulfil a gesture of friendship towards Germany and Hitler in particular, but also, and this was another reason why he did this, he wanted to take

the opportunity, for the sake of the Italian public to underline the differences between Fascism and Nazism. Namely a character not biological but 'spiritual' that he professed to give to Fascism and his insistence that as far as the Jews were concerned, his slogan was 'discriminate but not persecute'. Yet another objective that pushed Mussolini into proclaiming himself racist and therefore issue the race laws, was his desire to regulate upon the relationships between Italians in Africa and the local population. He wanted to avoid the 'undignified' behaviour that would have led to an outbreak of mixed marriages.⁴

Even though Renzo De Felice provoked all kinds of unfavourable reactions internationally, whenever one of his publications was issued, particularly if it was another volume of Mussolini's biography, his influence on how fascist racism is viewed remains. This view of fascism and its racism was further perpetuated by historians such as George Mosse, one of the leading writers of the Nazi and fascist regimes. Mosse, in the following description of fascist racism, demonstrated that his views were close to those of De Felice:

He was not racist; like Adolf Hitler he was a consummate politician but unlike Hitler he was not weighed down by an enormous ideological baggage or an apocalyptic vision. Hitler judged every important problem in an eschatological manner, and his solution had to be, in his eyes, absolute and 'definitive'. For Mussolini, the future was something indeterminate that with the virtue of a vague concept of the new Fascist man, would have certainly assumed a positive solution. This way of thinking allowed him to bring a cynical and flexible position to the whole racist question.⁵

To what extent were these historians correct? Was the racism legislated and implemented by Mussolini such a diluted, often harmless, version of what was happening in Hitler's Germany? Did Mussolini just use these race laws to control the people of the colonies? This book will show that this is not entirely true, and that the racism legislation issued by the fascist regime was just as calculated, the application of the race laws just as racist and destructive to human rights and life. Through the production of a

comprehensive picture of the development, structures and outcomes of the fascist concentration camps, established between 1940 and 1943, this book will dispel a number of these myths. Through the details of the way the camps were controlled, how they were linked to camps set up for military prisoners of war, who was sent to them, how the internees lived, who controlled how they would live and how many died, it will become evident that many of the historians' views of fascist racism were not entirely correct.

The idea of this book began in the summer of 1991 with a trip to Poland and a visit to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. It was at the museum there that I first realized that there had been concentration camps in Italy prior to 1943 and that there had been a number close to where my family lived in central Italy. My initial reaction, as of many Italians, was one of disbelief that the camps had even existed, and then a further reaction when I realized that these camps were set up not just for those perceived as enemies of fascism but also for those who were merely Jewish, as had happened in the Nazi concentration camps. On my return to my undergraduate studies at the University of Rome, I set about trying to find out as much as possible about the fascist concentration camps by speaking to a number of my tutors, including Renzo De Felice.

The research for this book began with a search of all the sources available within the State Central Archive in Rome, the Public Records Office in London and a number of principal archives in larger towns such as Campobasso, Isernia and Sulmona. The material uncovered in these places was extensive but incomplete; many of the original documents referred to, or mentioned in the material, were not available or lacked detail. Therefore, I went in search of material with more detailed information and found many original documents in the local archives of the smaller towns and villages of the places where the camps had once been. The material about the fascist concentration camps, within these small archives, was rich and informative, and the resident archivists were surprisingly helpful, but the documents were very often disorganized and stored in unusual places – in one case, the files concerned with the fascist concentration camps were stored in the archivist's home.

I spent many months in these local archives, systematically sifting through all the material and putting it into a logical and chronological order. Documents that were naturally related to each

other were found in separate boxes, and by bringing them together I started to make sense of what I was finding and the picture the documents were creating for particular camps. Some of the most important of the documents found were telegrams and memoranda that were directives from the Interior Ministry in Rome, with precise instructions to the camp director about how the camps were to be run. One of the archives that produced the greatest number of original documents for this thesis was that in the town of Casacalenda in the province of Campobasso. The camp at Casacalenda, set up to house only women internees, was used as a template in this research and a reflection of what was happening in other camps at the time. In addition, it was evident from the directives (telegrams and memoranda) found in Casacalenda that these were sent not just to the director of this camp but to all the camps operating at that time.

In the first two chapters of this book, the context within which the civilian concentration camps were established is set out by examining the characteristics of fascism in Italy, its conception, racism and differences to Nazism. I then explore the idea that the two types of racism legislated and practised in these two regimes need to be treated separately, as, despite some similarities, their aims or outcomes were different. The book continues with the picture of the essential political and cultural features of fascist racism, the Jewish situation in Italy, and a comparison of the fascist race laws of 1938 with the Nuremberg Laws. From this opening contextual picture, the research explores the idea that fascist racism, through the establishment of the concentration camps, found a way of implementing the race laws and solving the 'Jewish problem'.

Who was sent to the fascist concentration camps for civilians? This question is dealt with in Chapter 3. Without a doubt, most of the people sent to these were Jews. Not just Italian Jews, but also, and above all, foreign Jews. These were refugees who had fled Germany and Austria following the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws, or refugees from Eastern Europe who travelled through Italy, perceived to be neutral, on their way to other countries. In addition, Chapter 3 gives a brief insight into the application of the political confinement laws in Italy as an instrument of political racism, showing that there were many connections between political confinement and the camps. This is followed by a comprehensive account

of the concentration camps for civilians established during 1940 and 1943, which deals with internment orders, declarations and testimonials from interned Jews; classification, taxonomy, locations, and special tenders inventory of the camps; and rules and regulations.

The detailed treatment of the concentration camp at Casacalenda emphasizes the calculated application of the system that was created by the establishment of the civilian concentration camps and served as a model for other concentration camps in Italy, established under similar controls. The chapter ends by examining the concentration camps that were established for military prisoners as well as those that were set up after 1943, which served as an important comparison between those administered by the fascist regime and those of the Nazi model.

Finally, the research explores the attitudes towards the fascist concentration camps of three important organizations in Italy – the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Émigrés Delegation and the International Red Cross – that influenced the context within which these camps were permitted to operate. This book refers to a number of important documents related to visits by Nuncio Apostolici that show that these organizations were aware of the existence of the camps, the reasons people were interned there and the living conditions they had to endure.

NOTES

1. Gabriele De Rosa, *Storia Contemporanea* (Bergamo: Minerva Italica, 1985).
2. Aldo Garzanti (ed.), *Il libro Garzanti della storia: dalla restaurazione ai nostri giorni* (Milan: Garzanti, 1976), vol.3, p.318.
3. Massimo Salvadori, *Storia dell'età contemporanea* (Turin: Loescher Editore, 1994), p.710.
4. Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p.viii.
5. George L. Mosse, *Il razzismo in Europa – dalle origine all'olocausto* (Bari: Laterza, 1980), p.215. Originally titled *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*.