

New (and old) challenges in the study of neo-fascism. The turning point of 1945, the limitations of political history and the vulnerability of the category

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The growing popularity of far-right groups in the global political landscape has led to a substantial rise in the number of studies on neo-fascism in recent years. However, these studies contain several flaws, partly because the very category of neo-fascism is problematic and has been used excessively in public debates to describe a wide range of personalities and parties. Nonetheless this literature review argues that the quality of research on neo-fascism has improved through the adoption of certain good practices in recent scholarship, including the tendency to reinterpret the turning point of 1945, to move beyond an event-driven analysis and to adopt a transnational approach.

Key words: neo-fascism, far right-wing parties, Italian Fascism, transnational history, cultural history, political history

It is more urgent than ever to reflect on the state of research on neo-fascism, which has many evident limitations. In particular, it relies too heavily on an event-driven approach, a shortcoming that has only been partially compensated by the recent focus on cultural history. Furthermore, the limited consideration of gender studies prevents a comprehensive understanding of how fascism, based on the cult of virility, could adopt a rhetoric of victimhood after 1945. Nevertheless, a progressive renewal has taken place. In the 1980s, the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) was joined by other political groups with radical views, primarily the French Front National,¹ and in the

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¹ See, for example, Christopher T. Husbands, *Contemporary Right-Wing Extremism in Western European Democracies: A Review Article*, "European Journal of Political Research", 1981, n. 9, pp. 75–99; Joseph Algazy, *La tentation néofasciste en France de 1944 à 1965*, Paris, Fayard, 1984; Id., *L'extrême-droite en France de 1965 à 1984*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989; Piero Ignazi, *L'estrema destra in Europa. Da Le Pen a Haider*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2000 (1st ed. 1994). Older works that are worth citing include Petra Rosenbaum, *Il nuovo fascismo: da Salò ad Almirante*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1975 and Franco Ferraresi, author of *Studi sul radical-*

early 2000s, groups that can be traced back to the far right became a constant presence on the international political scene, albeit with different destinies.² In addition to journalistic reports,³ which had a certain merit in themselves, studies based on more solid documentation and a more refined methodology tried to capture the various forms of post-1945 fascism and trace its history. These were followed by research focusing on fascist ideology, the continuities and discontinuities between the various generations that adhered to fascism and its impact on Europe and the wider world.⁴

It is also urgent to consider the tension affecting this field of study, even if only indirectly. This tension is rooted in the undoubtedly problematic tendency to use the category of fascism (and related topics) to interpret certain contemporary political and cultural phenomena and positions. More or less direct allusions to fascism can be found even outside the Italian political context,⁵ although the Lega–Movimento 5 Stelle coalition government (June 2018–August 2019), and even more so the current right-wing government led by Fratelli d’Italia, which shows significant continuities with the MSI and Alleanza Nazionale, have led several scholars to emphasise the topicality — in the broadest sense — of fascism in Italy.⁶ Others have expressed scepticism

ismo di destra I. La destra radicale americana nell’interpretazione neo-pluralista, “Studi di Sociologia”, 1974 n. 3–4, pp. 286–323 and *Minacce alla democrazia: la destra radicale e la strategia della tensione in Italia nel dopoguerra*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1995.

² See Paul Hainsworth (ed.), *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, London, Bloomsbury, 2000; Cas Mudde, *The ideology of the Extreme Right*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000; Pierre Milza, *L’Europe en chemise noire*, Paris, Fayard, 2002; Elisabeth Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005.

³ Dennis Eisenberg, *L’internazionale nera: fascisti e nazisti oggi nel mondo*, Milan, Sugar & Co, 1964; Angelo Del Boca, Mario Giovana, *I figli del sole: mezzo secolo di nazifascismo nel mondo*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1965; Franco Giannantoni, *Varese in camicia nera*, Varese, Ed. a cura dell’Anpi, 1972. A more recent work that is worth mentioning here is Uki Goñi, *Operazione Odessa: la fuga dei gerarchi nazisti verso l’Argentina di Perón*, Milan, Garzanti, 2003 (1st ed. 2002). Journalistic enquiries continue to be published, some of which still prove to be valuable: Paolo Morando, *Prima di Piazza Fontana: la prova generale*, Bari, Laterza, 2019; Id., *L’ergastolano: la strage di Peteano e l’enigma Vinciguerra*, Bari, Laterza, 2022; Id., *La strage di Bologna: Bellini, i NAR, i mandanti e un perdono tradito*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2023; Maurizio Dianese, Maurizio, Gianfranco Bettin, *La strage degli innocenti: perché piazza Fontana è senza colpevoli*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2019.

⁴ See C. Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, cit., p. VII.

⁵ Donald Trump’s first election as US president has led several scholars to question the threat of a more or less explicit reassertion of fascism. See Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: a warning*, New York, HarperCollins, 2018; Federico Finchelstein, Pablo Piccato, Jason Stanley, *Will Fascism Win the US Election? “Project Syndicate”*, 30 October 2020, www.project syndicate.org/commentary/trumpian-threat-of-fascist-authoritarianism-after-election-by-federico-finchelstein-et-al-2020-10 [last accessed 25 August 2023].

⁶ At the time of writing this literature review, the most recent book on the Italian case is David Broder, *Mussolini’s Grandchildren: Fascism in Contemporary Italy*, Pluto Press, London, 2023.

regarding the use of the category of fascism for the post-1945 era. However, if the fascist experience really ended with the fall of Mussolini and Hitler, as suggested by Alberto De Bernardi and Emilio Gentile (despite using different perspectives and methodological approaches), and fascism 'died' with the end of the Second World War, the question arises as to the scientific value of works shedding light on neo-fascism.⁷

The reconstruction of this debate is beyond the scope of this literature review, but it is worth noting that not all the participants have developed such clear-cut theses. Although some contest the generic and instrumental use of the term fascism,⁸ they do not dispute its legitimacy in describing the European and global history of the 1950s or in drawing comparisons with the so-called strategy of tension that plagued the Italian peninsula between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s.⁹ Others continue to use the category even in the present, giving it greater or lesser political weight — depending on the case — in the current configuration of the far right.¹⁰ Yet a general reflection on the most recent publications seems useful, as it offers insight into a comparison that somehow risks calling the legitimacy of research on neo-fascism into question — a reflection that obviously also takes into account the intrinsic ambiguity of the category of neo-fascism itself.¹¹ While the term is used here because it can effectively indicate the shift of attention towards the post-1945 era, it remains difficult to define. As Andrea Mammone, one of the leading experts in this field, has observed, 'neo-fascism' serves both to evoke the original ideology (i.e. the cult of violence and authoritarianism, the belief in one people's superiority over others and the desire for the regeneration of a national community) and to allude to the processes of recontextualisation, ramification and refor-

⁷ Alberto De Bernardi, *Fascismo e antifascismo. Storia, memoria e culture politiche*, Donzelli, Rome, 2018, p. 120. Emilio Gentile's position is more nuanced; he recognises the persistence of fascism in the MSI as well as in scattered formations and political actors today. *Chi è fascista?*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2019.

⁸ Think, for example, of Roger Griffin, even if his definition of generic fascism (*The nature of Fascism*, London, Pinter, 1991) contributed to the legitimisation of studies on neo-fascism. In a recent introduction to a new journal focused on the far right, Griffin raised several doubts about the wide and instrumental use of the category in the current political debate. See Eliah Bures, *Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field*, "Journal of Right-Wing Studies", 2023, n. 1, pp. 33–36.

⁹ Cfr. P. Ignazi, *L'estrema destra in Europa*, cit., and C. Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, cit.

¹⁰ For example, Stanley Payne in *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, New York, Routledge, 2003 (1st ed. 1995), p. 496 points out the paradox that there were more fascist formations after 1945 than in the inter-war period, although he gives them little weight, unlike R. Griffin, *The nature of fascism*, cit., p. 146 and Nigel Copsey, *Fascism... but with an open mind: Reflections on the Contemporary Far Right in (Western) Europe: First Lecture on Fascism* — Amsterdam — 25 April 2013, "Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies", 2013, n. 2, pp. 1–17.

¹¹ See the emblematic considerations of Walter Laquer in *Fascism: Past, Present and Future*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 7. Laquer admits to using the category of neo-fascism not so much because he fully supports it, but because there are no valid alternatives.

mulation that have characterised this political experience since the immediate post-war period, as well as to the political and cultural actors who have implemented them (and perhaps continue to do so).¹²

In addition to summarising the latest research on neo-fascism, this literature review aims to fill a gap. In fact, very few studies examine the events that happened after 1945, let alone interact with research on the period between the two world wars.¹³ The main purpose is therefore to outline the current state of the art, but rather than being exhaustive, I will explore some innovative trends of recent years and highlight some unresolved issues on which I believe it is important to start reflecting. Studies focusing on the Italian case will receive particular attention. However, I do not aim to oppose Italian and international historiography. To do so would be anachronistic, and it would ignore the fact that the ‘emotional community’ of fascism has perceived itself as a transnational entity ever since the immediate post-war period.¹⁴ This was a necessary condition to first survive and then relaunch itself after the end of the war. Hence, it seems counterproductive to focus exclusively on the Italian peninsula. It would be more useful to use international research that has explored fascist regimes outside Italy, as well as to consider those works that have touched on themes such as post-1945 reconstruction, the Cold War and decolonisation — all decisive historical periods in which the evolution of neo-fascism can be observed.

The chosen chronological span is extensive, beginning at the close of the Second World War and ending in the turbulent 1970s. This decade would have deserved an analysis of its own, given the number of publications on it, but also because it intersects with one of the most important crossroads in contemporary Italian history: the strategy of tension. While the latter was not solely the result of neo-fascist forces, this is not enough to skip this historical period aside or to stop earlier. Rather, this literature review aims to examine the long-term development of the neo-fascist universe (and inevitably also its progressive distancing from so-called historical fascism), as well as to interweave different periods of neo-fascism that I believe raise common questions and therefore similar methodological reflections.¹⁵

¹² Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 15. Precisely because neo-fascism is an ambiguous category, many scholars prefer terms such as post-1945 fascism, post-fascism, the far right or, more simply, fascism. However, these are not real synonyms, at least not in the case of ‘post-fascism’, which reflects a kind of conscious overcoming of fascist ideology and, consequently, a process of modernisation and moderation of one’s political agenda (Cfr. Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, London, Verso, 2019). On the other hand, the ‘far right’ seems to refer to a broader whole, that is, an area within which fascism is located but does not occupy it entirely, and it will be used here in this sense.

¹³ See for example Stefano Cavazza, *Worldwide Fascism. Italian Historians in an International Debate*, “Ricerche di storia politica”, 2022, special issue, pp. 41–54.

¹⁴ On the concept of ‘emotional community’, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Worrying about Emotions in History*, “American Historical Review”, 2002, n. 107, pp. 821–845.

¹⁵ For an explanation of why the broadest possible chronology is essential for understanding the far right, see Johannes Dainger, Moritz Florin (eds.), *A Transnational History of Right-Wing* Copyright © FrancoAngeli.

The turning point of 1945

When discussing other forms of fascism around the world, it is impossible to avoid taking about the impact of the turning point in 1945 on the fate of fascism and the problematic nature of the neo-fascist category. The book on fascist movements in Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) edited by Nicola Karcher and Markus Lundström invites us to look at 1945 from a different perspective. The end of the war, or, rather, the collapse of the Fascist and Nazi regimes in Italy and Germany and the subsequent unravelling of the so-called collaborationist governments, undoubtedly also marked the everyday lives of the fascists in this part of Europe, both in the present and in the future. However, political ideas and actors continued to circulate. In other words, 1945 was just another stage in the evolution of fascism, driven by the constant conditioning of the political arena, even of the most moderate circles.¹⁶ One of the most striking cases is that of Per Engdahl. A leading figure in the Swedish fascist movements of the 1930s, Engdahl managed to remain a transnational point of reference even after 1945. He stimulated the reactivation of a network that, in turn, led to the establishment of the European Social Movement (ESM), one of the most important and long-lived international fascist organisations after the Second World War.¹⁷

In this regard, Joe Mulhall's *British Fascism after the Holocaust* (2021) is even more intriguing. According to Mulhall, the history of fascism in Great Britain was not defined by 1945, but by the years 1939–40, when Britain declared war on Germany (September 1939) and Defence Regulation 18b (1940) was implemented. The latter led to the decision to intern Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and many of his supporters, suspected of forming a kind of fifth column for the Axis forces. While it is true that the two-year period marked the end of political activism for some fascists, for others it was the beginning of a process of radicalisation.¹⁸ Moreover, prison allowed the British fascists to perceive themselves not only as a community of the defeated,¹⁹ but also as exiles in their homeland, which made them perfectly in tune with those fascists who would soon be affected

Terrorism. Political Violence and the Far Right in Eastern and Western Europe since 1900, New York, Routledge, 2022.

¹⁶ Nicola Karcher, Markus Lundström (eds.), *Nordic Fascism. Fragments of an Entangled History*, New York, Routledge, 2022.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Åsbrink, *When Race Was Removed from Racism: Per Engdahl, the Networks that Saved Fascism and the Making of the Concept of Ethnopluralism*, "Journal of the History of Ideas", 2021, n. 82, pp. 133–151.

¹⁸ Joe Mulhall, *British Fascism After the Holocaust. From the Birth of Denial to the Notting Hill Riots 1939–1958*, New York, Routledge, 2021, p. 29.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *La cultura dei vinti*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2014.

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by the purging measures.²⁰ Despite the difficult living conditions, especially in terms of hygiene and sanitation,²¹ the freedom enjoyed by the British fascists imprisoned in the camps put them in a position to redefine their political agenda at an early stage. In other words, the resurgence of the British far right in the 1970s with the National Front, and again in the 1990s with the British National Party, was due to fascism, which had seemingly been marginalised. Paradoxically, however, it gained renewed momentum from the experience of internment, which eventually led to the formation of a new party in 1948: the Union Movement.

Mulhall's take on the category of neo-fascism is also interesting. He argues that the prefix 'neo' alludes to a discontinuity, to a departure from a previous period that remains to be explored. This does not mean that we should ignore what came before. For example, only from the second half of the 1940s, Mosley emphasised his pro-European stance as a reaction to the initial stages of the Cold War and decolonisation. More simply, we must avoid taking them for granted.²² There is much more to explore in terms of persistencies and discontinuities, which alone would justify more scholarly attention being given to the immediate post-war period and that of the 1950s.

In those years, the MSI gained ground,²³ becoming the most influential post-1945 fascist party in Europe. At the same time, the international fascist network was reactivated, giving rise to two distinct organisations: the aforementioned ESM and the New European Order (NOE). Perhaps more importantly, magazines began to circulate that evoked the deeds and behaviour of those who had fought for the fascist cause during the war, but they also described the inevitable generational tensions of the time and proposed a future agenda. They included *Défense de l'Occident*, directed by the Frenchman Maurice Bardèche, Mosley's *The Union* and, on the Italian side, *asso di bastoni*, *La rivolta ideale* and *Cantiere*, to name just a few.²⁴ These years were furthermore marked by a wealth of publications that sought to influence *how* the recent past was described.²⁵ Not everyone agrees on the actual impact of

²⁰ Andrea Martini, *Defeated? An analysis of Fascist memoirist literature and its success*, "Journal of Modern Italian Studies", 2020, n. 25, pp. 295–317 and Jonathan Preda, *Le discours victimaire de l'extrême-droite en France depuis 1945: entre minimisation et trivialisation des crimes du nazisme*, "RevueAlarmer", published online 20 September 2021.

²¹ J. Mulhall, *British Fascism After the Holocaust*, cit., p. 29.

²² Graham Macklin, *Failed Führers: A History of Britain's Extreme Right*, London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 92–178.

²³ Nicolas Lebourg, *Les Nazis ont-ils survécus? Enquête sur les internationales fascistes et les croisés de la race blanche*, Paris, Seuil, 2019, pp. 116–123 and 128–129.

²⁴ On the Italian magazines, see Giuseppe Pardini, *Fascisti in democrazia: uomini, idee, giornali (1946–1958)*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2008 and Elisabetta Cassina Wolff, *L'inchiostro dei vinti: stampa e ideologia neofascista, 1945–1953*, Milan, Mursia, 2012.

²⁵ For an overview, see Mario Isnenghi, *La guerra civile nella pubblicistica di destra, "Rivista di storia contemporanea"*, 1989, n. 18, pp. 104–115; Raffaele Liucci, *Scrivere e ricordare*. Copyright © FrancoAngeli.

these texts within the broader process of creating a public memory,²⁶ although it seems to be underestimated. However, even assuming that their circulation was limited to neo-fascist circles, they still allowed fascism to view itself as a living political cause despite its defeat.²⁷ Moreover, some of these volumes gave rise to denialist literature, which would grow in the following decades.²⁸ Think, for example, of *The Jewish War of Survival* by the Brit Arnold Leese (1946) or Bardèche's *Nuremberg ou la Terre promise* (Nuremberg or the Promised Land, 1948) and *Nuremberg II ou Les Faux Monnayeurs* (Nuremberg II or the Counterfeiters, 1950).

Hence, the recent publications that examine this chronological framework, albeit from different perspectives, are a welcome addition to the literature. With regard to the Italian case, at least two important studies complement Giuseppe Parlato's *Fascisti senza Mussolini* (Fascists without Mussolini, 2006) and Antonio Carioti's *Gli orfani di Salò* (The orphans of Salò, 2008), two earlier works that can be credited for shedding light on this period. I am referring to *La genesi del neofascismo in Italia* (The genesis of neo-fascism in Italy, 2019) by Nicola Tonietto and *La scoperta della destra: il Movimento sociale italiano e gli Stati Uniti* (The discovery of the right: The Italian Social Movement and the United States, 2019) by Gregorio Sorgonà. The former stands out for its extensive archival resources, including documents produced by the Allies. This reminds us that the events of the immediate post-war period took place in a country affected by the evolving international situation and, therefore, the early stages of the Cold War. The latter investigates the — internally heterogeneous — positions of the MSI in relation to the US.

Next, there are studies that focus their analysis on regional or local levels. In this regard, exploring the periphery has produced important findings in studies on historical fascism, particularly in relation to key issues such as consensus and the regime's ability to implement the anthropological revolution it had

dare Salò. La Repubblica sociale italiana, tra storia, memoria e letteratura, “Studi piacentini”, 1996, n. 20, pp. 35–70; Francesco Germinario, *L'altra memoria. L'estrema destra, Salò e la Resistenza*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999 and Roberto Chiarini, *L'ultimo fascismo. Storia e memoria della Repubblica di Salò*, Venice, Marsilio, 2009.

²⁶ Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Resistenza e postfascismo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1995; Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Fascismo e antifascismo. Rimozioni, revisioni, negazioni*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2000; Roberto Chiarini, *25 aprile: la competizione politica sulla memoria*, Venice, Marsilio, 2005; Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: la Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005; Id., *Nel cantiere della memoria: Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe*, Rome, Viella, 2020.

²⁷ Angelo Ventrone, *Il fascismo non è una causa perduta. Ricordi e rimozioni nei vinti della Repubblica sociale italiana*, “Meridiana”, 2017, n. 88, pp. 133–154. See also my own publication, *Fascismo immaginario. Riscrivere il passato a destra*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2024.

²⁸ Dan Stone, *Fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust: challenging histories*, New York, Routledge, 2021.

aspired to.²⁹ This approach is far less common in the study of neo-fascism, both among researchers interested in its subversive and terrorist dimensions, who often neglect the importance of understanding local variables, and among those who want to write a history of the MSI.³⁰ Firstly, there is the problem of sources. As far as the MSI is concerned, its archives have not been properly preserved. While there is a wealth of archival collections of important political figures at a national level, mostly preserved by the Ugo Spirito and Renzo De Felice Foundation, the situation at a provincial level is extremely critical. With a few exceptions,³¹ researchers interested in the MSI's local activities must therefore rely on alternative sources, such as prefecture and police records, often kept in state archives, although these only provide a partial view of the subject as they tend to focus on public order and national security.

The neglect of the 'local' is also based on a methodological premise that is taken for granted (wrongly, in my opinion): that of dealing with a monolithic, highly centralised party. In this sense, it is worth mentioning Luca La Rovere's and Raffaello Pannacci's studies on the MSI and on the FUAN in the province of Perugia (which lasted until the mid-1970s),³² respectively, as well as Michelangelo Borri's reflections on fascism in Tuscany (which, instead, ended at the MSI's National congress in Viareggio on 9–11 January 1954).³³ They help explain the relationship between the party — in all its facets — and the territory, as well as providing starting points for future prosopographical analyses of the cadres of the various federations. Furthermore, their analyses remove the monopoly on such reconstructions from the protagonists (who tend to use apologetic tones and abuse the aforementioned victim paradigm).³⁴

²⁹ See, at least, Paul Corner, Valeria Galimi (eds.), *Il fascismo in provincia: articolazioni e gestione del potere tra centro e periferia*, Rome, Viella, 2014.

³⁰ On the lack of local studies on the MSI, see Giuseppe Parlato, *Destra e neofascismo in Italia. Il contributo della storia locale*, in Luca La Rovere (ed.), *I "neri" in una provincia "rossa": destra e neofascismo a Perugia dal dopoguerra agli anni Settanta. Atti della Giornata di studio* (Perugia, 5 dicembre 2018), Foligno, Editoriale umbra, 2020, pp. 15–37. Important exceptions include: Roberto Chiarini, Paolo Corsini, *Da Salò a Piazza della Loggia. Blocco d'ordine, neofascismo, radicalismo di destra a Brescia. 1945-1974*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1983 and Roberto Bonente, *Il ritorno dei "vinti". La nascita del Movimento sociale italiano a Verona*, in Emilio Franzina (ed.), *Dal fascio alla fiamma. Fascisti a Verona dalle origini al MSI*, Sommacampagna (Vr), Cierre edizioni, 2010, pp. 139–187.

³¹ In recent years, the Spirito Foundation has acquired the archival heritage of the MSI sections of Latina and Rieti, as well as that of the Roman Trieste-Salario district.

³² Luca La Rovere, *Il Movimento sociale italiano a Perugia. Dalla resilienza alla politica (1947-1969)* and Raffaello Pannacci, *Dal Circolo D'Annunzio al ghetto. Trent'anni di Fuan a Perugia (1947-1979)*, in L. La Rovere, *I "neri" in una provincia "rossa"*, cit., pp. 147–178 and 179–197, respectively.

³³ FUAN stands for Fronte Universitario d'Azione Nazionale (National University Action Front). Michelangelo Borri, *Il Movimento sociale italiano in Toscana, dalla nascita al congresso di Viareggio. Appunti per una ricerca*, "Società e storia", 2023, n. 179, pp. 63–89.

³⁴ See, for example, two reconstructions of the MSI's activities in Verona: Movimento sociale italiano-Desta nazionale (ed.), *Destra nazionale: 50 anni di vita missina veronese*, Vago di Copyright © FrancoAngeli.

Some of the most underestimated sources are precisely the life stories of fascists in the post-1945 period, despite the presence of the above-mentioned archival collections of political figures, which have by now been inventoried and valued, and deserve to be explored in greater depth. I am thinking of the personal collections of Mario Cassiano, Concetto Pettinato and Augusto De Marsanich, which are preserved at the Spirito Foundation, or Giorgio Pini's precious personal collection (held at the Central Archives of the State), which extends beyond 1945 and sheds light on both the phase in which the fascists were purged and subsequent periods. An exception to this oversight is a work by David Bernardini on the eccentric Edmondo Cione, *Per una destra cattolica e nazionale* (For a Catholic and national right, 2022), based on documentation held at the State Archives of Naples. Looking beyond national borders, an excellent biographical analysis was conducted by Graham Macklin, who published an important biography of Mosley in 2007. Unlike Robert Skidelsky's famous 1975 biography, it was characterised by depth and methodological rigour,³⁵ and it focused on the post-1945 period.³⁶ In more recent years, Macklin has written about other personalities of British fascism who gained notoriety after the Second World War, including Arnold Leese and A.K. Chesterton.³⁷ But it is the transnational dimension that has made the most important progress in recent years, shedding light on the reactivation of fascist networks, their short- and long-term impact, and the preconditions that made their reconstitution possible.

Narrating the long journey of fascism from a transnational perspective

Some scholars who have sought to outline a transnational history of post-1945 fascism tend to focus on particular alliances. These include the Italian-Spanish one, which dates back to the inter-war period. It is of particular interest due to the intense contacts and reciprocal influences. However, it underwent a profound redefinition after the conflict ended.³⁸ There was also an Italian-French partnership, which brought together different organisational structures

Lavagno (Vr), Dex - Tipografia La Grafica, 2000 and Paolo Danieli, *Verona a destra. La destra veronese dal dopoguerra al Terzo Millennio*, Rome, Settimo Sigillo, 2018.

³⁵ Robert Skidelsky, *Sir Oswald Mosley*, London-New York, Macmillan, 1975.

³⁶ Graham Macklin, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the resurrection of British Fascism after 1945*, London, Tauris, 2007.

³⁷ G. Macklin, *Failed Führers*, cit.

³⁸ Matteo Albanese, Pablo del Hierro, *A Transnational Network: The Contact between Fascist Elements in Spain and Italy, 1945–1968*, “Politics, Religion & Ideology”, 2014, n. 15, pp. 82–102; Matteo Albanese, Pablo Del Hierro, *Transnational Fascism in the Twentieth Century: Spain, Italy and the Global Neofascist Network*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 and Pablo Del Hierro, *The Neofascist Network and Madrid, 1945–1953: From City of Refuge to Transnational Hub and Centre of Operations*, “Contemporary European History”, 2022, n. 31, pp. 171–194.

capable of reciprocal contamination (dominated by the MSI and, on the French side, by smaller groups),³⁹ and the alliance between European fascism and the American far right.⁴⁰ Conversely, others have chosen to provide a general overview of these networks, focusing on their origins, protagonists and developments. Furthermore, they have described the various national authorities' positions on these organisations, although this aspect has — in my opinion — not yet been fully explored.⁴¹

Leaving aside the intrinsic problems of the transnational approach as outlined by Nancy L. Green,⁴² I believe that the most common error in the analysis of post-1945 fascist networks consists in overestimating their importance and available resources. Both the ESM and the NOE played a relatively important role on the global political scene, thanks also to the decision of the MSI — the most important post-war fascist party — not to (formally) take part in either organisation, despite its initial interest in the ESM, which chose Rome for a preparatory meeting in March 1950.⁴³ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that reactivating a network ensured the survival of the fascist cause. In fact, if the methodological accuracy of recent studies, particularly Gerald Steinacher's research,⁴⁴ has made it possible to deconstruct the very *naïve* image of a black international, debunking the myth of a monolithic, influential organisation that saved the Nazi-fascists with the complicity of Peron's Argentina,⁴⁵ these same works have highlighted the extensive support enjoyed by fascists, Nazis and collaborationists.⁴⁶ But these networks had another important function: putting fascist ideas back into circulation. This was a cultural 'journey',⁴⁷ capable of attracting interest even — if not above all — among the so-called populist governments and those led by military juntas in Latin America (or at least some of them),⁴⁸ and of influencing the political and cultural arena more

³⁹ Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015; Pauline Picco, *Liaisons dangereuses: les extrêmes droites en France et en Italie (1960–1984)*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016.

⁴⁰ Martin Durham, *White Hands across the Atlantic: The Extreme Right in Europe and the United States*, in Id., Margaret Power (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Transnational Right*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 149–169.

⁴¹ N. Lebourg, *Les Nazis ont-ils survécus?*, cit.

⁴² Nancy L. Green, *The Limits of Transnationalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019.

⁴³ Andrea Martini, *Travelling to See, Reading to Believe: Being Fascists after the End of the Second World War*, "Contemporary European History", 2023, online first, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁴ Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: how Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴⁵ U. Goñi, *Operazione Odessa*, cit.

⁴⁶ P. del Hierro, *The Neofascist Network and Madrid, 1945–1953*, cit.

⁴⁷ Matteo Albanese, *Neofascism in Europe (1945–1989): a Long Cultural Journey*, New York, Routledge, 2023.

⁴⁸ Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Oakland, University of California press, 2017.

broadly. Some scholars claim that this contamination persists, despite groups claiming proximity to fascist ideology having low electoral weight.⁴⁹

However, beyond demonstrating the continued relevance of the fascist cause today, which echoes the aforementioned debate, I believe that insisting on the material conditions and outcomes of this ‘journey’ is the most fruitful aspect of a transnational history of neo-fascism. It allows us to avoid a purely event-based history that, in the case of transnational history, would lead to nothing more than a list of contacts between political actors from different countries. This is what makes Olivier Dard’s studies so interesting.⁵⁰ Other than the scholar’s decision to broaden the perspective to encompass the wider universe of the far right, what is striking is his focus on ideologues and, even more so, *passeurs* and *vulgarisateurs*, that is, the people who made it possible for certain works or political programmes to circulate, sometimes across multiple borders. This is the case of Franco Freda, a neo-fascist from the Veneto region who played a leading role in the Piazza Fontana massacre of 1969 (to which I will return), but also the founder of the Ar publishing house, which revived Bardèche’s ideas.⁵¹ In fact, a transnational history of fascist cultural products would be important to consider. One example is a recent article by Pablo del Hierro on fascist networks in the 1960s and 1970s, which examines the impact of magazines such as *Défense de l’Occident* and *Nation Europa*, as well as the French publisher Les Sept Couleurs (founded by Bardèche).⁵² Del Hierro demonstrates that the journey of fascist ideas was characterised by a multiplicity of itineraries and, probably, destinations. One of these is already well-known: it concerns the Italian far-right groups active between the late 1960s and the 1970s.

A history of neo-fascist terrorism — or perhaps more a crime story?

The 1995 publication of *Minacce alla democrazia* (Threats to Democracy), written by the sociologist Franco Ferraresi, shows that the first in-depth studies of the strategy of tension and, in this case, the neo-fascist component that played a decisive role in its execution were by no means a recent trend.

⁴⁹ Claudio Vercelli, *Neofascismo in grigio: la destra radicale tra l’Italia e l’Europa*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021.

⁵⁰ Olivier Dard (ed.), *Doctrinaires, vulgarisateurs et passeurs des droites radicales au XX siècle (Europe-Amériques)*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2012 and Id. (ed.), *Références et thèmes des droites radicales au XX siècle (Europe-Amériques)*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2015.

⁵¹ Pauline Picco, *Franco G. Freda: idéologue, éditeur, activiste*, in O. Dard (ed.), *Doctrinaires, vulgarisateurs et passeurs*, cit., pp. 148–149.

⁵² Pablo del Hierro, ‘From Brest to Bucharest’: *Neofascist Transnational Networks during the long 1970s*, “European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire”, 2022, n. 29, pp. 520–547.

However, it is equally evident that ‘a vast memoirist and autobiographical literature’ has long overshadowed scientific research,⁵³ and that the actions of so-called red terrorism ultimately diverted the attention of scholars, despite the quantity and lethality of terrorist violence attributable — in part or in full — to the far right between 1969 and 1982.⁵⁴

The problem is not just a lack of interest, but also the ‘unfinished elaboration’ of the strategy of tension in historiography.⁵⁵ While there seems to be an abundance of chronicle-like reconstructions, even of high quality, they struggle to combine a microanalysis aimed at reconstructing the plots behind each specific attack and explaining the outcomes of the related judicial proceedings with a more in-depth reflection. Nevertheless, it is crucial to place a single event within a broader historiographical debate: for example, the level of political agency of far-right groups in those years in relation to the national and international political landscape, and the radicalisation process that led to those attacks.⁵⁶ In recent years, this gap has been partially filled by some valuable publications. An important trailblazer was *L’Italia degli anni di piombo* (Italy in the leaden years, 2010), edited by Marc Lazar and Marie-Anne Matard Bonucci. Although it did not abandon a popular but problematic ‘journalistic’ construction, namely that of the leaden years,⁵⁷ it sought to present a comprehensive history of the 1970s that encompasses both red terrorism and the political violence of the neo-fascist right, without resorting to the simplistic and unsubstantiated thesis of convergences between opposing extremisms. Mirco Dondi’s *L’eco del boato* (The eco of the blast, 2015), which focuses on the strategy of tension (1969–74), is also highly relevant. Dondi identifies a discontinuity in terms of individuals and political objectives in subsequent subversive actions, characterised by a greater degree of armed militancy. In doing so, he accurately describes the intersection of the different worlds of the neo-fascist right, on the one hand, and conservative-reactionary circles and state apparatuses, on the other, as well as the circumstances that paved the way for it.⁵⁸

Another interesting analysis is that by Guido Panvini. While he stressed that ‘the action of far-right groups’ cannot be separated from a dense ‘field of

⁵³ Giovanni Mario Ceci, *Il terrorismo italiano: storia di un dibattito*, Rome, Carocci, 2013, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Donatella Della Porta, Maurizio Rossi (eds.), *Cifre crudeli. Bilancio dei terroristi italiani*, Bologna, Istituto di studi e ricerche Carlo Cattaneo, 1984, Table 14, pp. 64–65.

⁵⁵ Mirco Dondi, *L’eco del boato. Storia della strategia della tensione. 1965-1974*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2015.

⁵⁶ Barbara Armani, *La produzione storiografica, giornalistica e memoriale sugli anni di piombo*, in Marc Lazar, Marie-Anne Matard Bonucci (eds.), *Il libro degli anni di piombo. Storia e memoria del terrorismo italiano*, Milan, Rizzoli, 2010, pp. 207–223.

⁵⁷ G.M. Ceci, *Il terrorismo italiano*, cit., pp. 14–15.

⁵⁸ An interesting study in this regard is Giovanni Mario Ceci’s work on the years of terrorism as seen through the eyes of the CIA: *La CIA e il terrorismo italiano: dalla strage di piazza Fontana agli anni Ottanta (1969-1986)*, Rome, Carocci, 2019.

forces' mainly animated by corrupt state apparatuses, at least since the second half of the 1960s, he also insisted on the need to explore the political repertoires and cultural references that gave rise to neo-fascism.⁵⁹ Indeed, we cannot 'dismiss' the neo-fascist universe as a purely nihilist force determined to assert 'one's own self against everything else', as Renzo De Felice suggested in his *Intervista sul fascismo* (Interview on fascism, 1975). The nihilist element was certainly present, as was the inclination towards political violence. As Panvini observed,⁶⁰ the latter was a prerequisite for the terrorist actions that began in 1969, but it was accompanied by a more rational and constructive mindset, keen on fostering an authoritarian shift in the country (albeit with different outcomes over time). If, indeed, the neo-fascist front was initially inclined towards a clash with the state because it 'considered [the latter] to be compromised with the "party-dominated degeneration"', hoping, however, 'to provoke a reaction from the "healthy bodies" within it', from 1974–75 onwards, 'the frontal attack on the institutions was established, hoping for the outbreak of a "long lasting" civil war'.⁶¹

A study that adopts a transnational and cultural approach is Galadriel Ravelli's article about the magazine *Confidentiel*, which was published by the self-declared Institut européen de recherches et d'études politiques, founded at the end of 1978.⁶² Although the magazine was only published from 1979 to 1981, with just eight issues printed in France and even fewer in Italy, Spain and Argentina, it offers interesting avenues for research. In fact, *Confidentiel* marks the latest stage in the ongoing reconfiguration of the fascist front following the collapse of its last important 'hub': the Spanish one.⁶³ Latin America was the fascists' new earthly paradise, as we may deduce from the life story of Stefano Delle Chiaie, the founder of Avanguardia nazionale and one of the protagonists of the strategy of tension. From the second half of the 1970s until the end of the 1980s, Delle Chiaie spent his life between Chile, Argentina and, above all, Bolivia, even if trying to make an impact in Europe remained his main objective. What is even more interesting is the analysis of the French version of *Confidentiel*, as it sheds light on the evolution of the subversive right, attracted by Alain De Benoist's Nouvelle Droite. It is precisely this rapprochement that favours the collaboration of a wider circle — the conservative right — with a

⁵⁹ Guido Panvini, *La destra eversiva*, in Giovanni Orsina (ed.), *Storia delle destre nell'Italia repubblicana*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2014, p. 214.

⁶⁰ In this sense, an essential study is *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa. La violenza politica nell'Italia degli anni Sessanta e Settanta (1966-1975)*, Turin, Einaudi, 2009.

⁶¹ G. Panvini, *La destra eversiva*, cit., p. 232.

⁶² Galadriel Ravelli, *Strategies of Survival: Reviving the Neo-Fascist Network Through a Transnational Magazine*, "European History Quarterly", 2022, n. 52, pp. 65–86.

⁶³ The fact that the end of Franco's regime marks a turning point that should be investigated in greater depth is also mentioned by A. Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy*, cit., p. 43.

less radical approach. This is evidenced by the contributions of an exponent of the British Conservative Party, Geoffrey Stewart-Smith, and those of Bernard Hamel, a French journalist and an expert on the geopolitics of South-East Asia.⁶⁴

While Ravelli focuses on the fascists' survival strategies after the collapse of Franco's regime, when they were hit by legal measures and the banning of several organisations (strategies that would be worth comparing with those deployed immediately after the Second World War), Caterina Prever has recently investigated another, equally fascinating period: that preceding the Piazza Fontana massacre and the subsequent radicalisation of various Italian far-right groups. Prever's article revolves around members of the Veneto cell who were close to Freda and formed part of the 'riverbed of Ordine nuovo'.⁶⁵ On 3 May 2005, the Court of Cassation found them responsible for the terrorist attack in Milan on 12 December 1969, after other judicial proceedings had already established their responsibility for 17 other attacks between April and December of that year.⁶⁶ Prever's description of the group's development and progressive radicalisation allows her to deconstruct the image of the neo-fascists as mere 'puppets of the "deviated" secret services' and of the 'occult powers'.⁶⁷

Particular attention is paid to Freda, who, in 1963, published an anti-Semitic and negationist pamphlet entitled 'Manifesto of the Ar group', a group he founded at the same time as establishing a publishing house of the same name. This Manifesto was one of the first signs of the group's radicalisation, stemming from their dissatisfaction with the MSI's political repertoire, considered to be excessively moderate. Prever insists precisely on the need for the group to form itself — and renew itself with respect to what the MSI was propagating — in order to activate those antibodies that would prevent potential contamination by the dominant materialistic culture. This explains why Freda organised group readings in which he devoted considerable time to Plato and Evola, published texts from an anthology of Palestinian poems (praising the authenticity of the Palestinian cause and its fighters in his preface) and gave space to the writings of the Nazi theorist Hans F.K. Gunther and novels published in a series called 'The Winged Horse', including Gustav Meyrink's *The Green Face*, which was steeped in esotericism.⁶⁸ The name of the series inevitably

⁶⁴ G. Ravelli, *Strategies of Survival*, cit., p. 82.

⁶⁵ The definition is taken from the sentence of the II section of the Court of Cassation, no. 470/05 of 3 May 2005, cited by Caterina Prever, *Intensificare la "presenza ideologica" dell'estrema destra in Italia: l'attivismo culturale di Franco Freda e del gruppo di Ar (1963-1969)*, "Italia contemporanea", 2023, n. 302, p. 114. It should be noted that Freda always denied any involvement in the Veneto cell of Ordine nuovo.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 115.

⁶⁸ Ivi, pp. 132-133.

calls to mind the Éditions du Cheval Ailé, a Franco-Swiss publishing house active in the immediate post-war period.⁶⁹ Prever argues that these cultural practices and ideological references played a key role in the activation of a ‘field of political presence’,⁷⁰ which affected the entire right-wing spectrum in those years and, more generally, republican Italy, since at least some of the members of that circle were responsible for heinous attacks. In doing so, they made the history of the strategy of tension an integral part of the history of fascism *tout court*.

Finally, it is worth mentioning Tobias Hof’s analysis of the circulation of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* alongside Evola’s works. Hof considers these readings to be a decisive turning point in shaping the ideological and cultural heritage of the far right (or at least part of it), causing it to partially distance itself from the fascism of the *ventennio*.⁷¹

Giving the history of neo-fascism a place in post-war global history

Alongside the expansion of scholarly research on so-called neo-fascism, what can be described as a reconfiguration of the narrative of post-1945 history — particularly of the post-war period — has taken place.⁷² This reconfiguration engages with the affirmation, or — in some cases — the re-affirmation, of democratic culture in various parts of the globe, beginning with Western Europe (with the notable exceptions of Portugal and Spain), and it seeks to depict this process in a more complex and detailed manner than was customary in the past. Far from defining post-war history as the result of a linear and almost predictable path, recent studies stress the complexities of this path, highlighting its convoluted nature and the multiple variables that have influenced its outcome, despite the presence of other factors

⁶⁹ Founded by Jean Jardin, Pierre Laval’s cabinet director, the Éditions du Cheval Ailé had launched the memoirs of Belgian collaborationist Léon Degrelle and the French translation of Rachele Mussolini’s biography, *La mia vita*. For more information, see A. Martini, *Travelling to See, Reading to Believe*, cit., p. 12.

⁷⁰ C. Prever, *Intensificare la “presenza ideologica”*, cit., p. 130.

⁷¹ Tobias Hof, “Of Hobbits and Tigers”: Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Italy since the mid-1970s’ in J. Dafinger, M. Florin (eds.), *A Transnational History of Right-Wing Terrorism*, cit., pp. 174–196.

⁷² Richard Bessel, Dirk Schumann (eds.), *Life after Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Ian Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945*, London, Atlantic Books, 2013; Pepijn Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe. Political Actors and the Formation of the Postwar Model of Democracy in France, West Germany, and Italy*, London, Routledge, 2017; Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back. Europe 1914–1949* (2nd ed.), London, Penguin Books, 2016, pp. 470–522; Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal. Civilizing Europe after Second World War*, London, Profile Books, 2020; Martin Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age: 1945–1968*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020.

that could have favoured different scenarios. In giving an account of the intricate nature of post-1945 history and the dynamics that shaped it, emphasis is placed on the Cold War, the political decisions of individuals and parties, the complex process of decolonisation and so on. However, the reaffirmation of a far-right culture — especially its fascist element — is struggling to gain a foothold in these works.⁷³ The category of fascism thus runs the risk of disappearing even from the most effective and solid post-1945 narratives, only to reappear in certain geographical contexts and historical turning points (e.g. the French-Algerian operations of the Organisation Armée Secrète and the strategy of tension in Italy). Alternatively, it is used to describe specific political groups such as the Front National, the MSI and even the Nazi skinhead movement, which were prevalent in Germany (and beyond) in the 1990s. Yet such reappearances are inadequate as they fail to explain the actual conditioning capacity of fascist ideology and fascist movements on the global, European and Italian scene, and how various countries positioned themselves in relation to the re-emergence of fascism itself.

It seems to me that the affirmation of a new threat to Europe in the form of communism, coupled with the change in international geopolitical logic following the clash between the US and the USSR, caused the governments to underestimate the fascist phenomenon, while various countries used ideas and human resources traceable to the fascist political universe precisely for anti-communist purposes. Nevertheless, these deductions seem to conceal a more complex history that deserves to be investigated as much in its national dynamics as in its transnational and international ones. For example, it is essential to understand the considerations and measures that individual nations developed to tackle the resurgence of fascism, but unlike timely research on specific case studies and chronologies,⁷⁴ these issues do not seem to be adequately addressed (least of all from a comparative perspective).⁷⁵ In a similar vein, it is important to not only account for the transnational dimension of fascism, but also for the process through which the security forces began to address fascism as an international phenomenon.

⁷³ Important and illuminating exceptions are those of Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000 (2nd ed.), pp. 288–292 and P. Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy*, cit.

⁷⁴ For the Italian case, it is worth citing the article on the regional commissions of inquiry on the problems of neo-fascism, active in various regions between 1974 and 1975, by Michelangelo Borri, Valerio Marinelli, *The Extreme Right and the Democratic Institutions in Italy. The response of the regions to a national and trans-national phenomenon (1973–1975)*, “Modern Italy”, 2023, n. 28, pp. 230–245 and the previous study dedicated to the Umbrian case by Valerio Marinelli, *Il neofascismo in Umbria, 1969–1975: la Commissione d'inchiesta della Regione*, Venice, Marsilio, 2019. Also interesting is the British case study examined by David Renton, *Fascism, anti-fascism and Britain in the 1940s*, Hampshire, MacMillan, 2000.

⁷⁵ Andrea Martini, *The Re-emergence of Fascism and Its Impact on European Democracies in the Immediate Postwar Period*, “Journal of Contemporary History”, 2023, n. 2, pp. 287–310.

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In conclusion, it is of paramount importance that this history is reintegrated into the broader context of European and global history. Provided this step is not exploited for political purposes, it could help to reduce the tension surrounding the study of neo-fascism.

Translated by Andrea Hajek