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Anti-Zionism and the Italian Extreme Right

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There are few issues that better illustrate the unresolved condition of the Italian right in the postwar period (neo-fascist in identity, democratic from necessity) than that of its stance on Israel, the Jews and Zionism. In the aftermath of the fall of fascism, the right had no difficulty in combining the defence of anti-Jewishness with domestic anti-anti-fascist policies and a foreign policy that was hostile towards the ‘allies’ of 1940–1945. Yet as soon as political competition became oriented around pro- and anti-communism, the right was, over time, driven to play down the recollections of fascism and specifically its antipathy towards Israel, not to mention its anti-Zionism. The exacerbation of the Middle East problem and the right’s foreign policy response to it led to a further evolution in its stance, eventually culminating in a definitive end to any ambivalence on the issue with the birth of the ‘National Alliance’. From that point onwards, anti-Zionism found support only in the utterances of neo-Nazi skinheads and the banners of rowdy fans at the ‘northern end’ of football stadia.

Keywords: extreme Italian right; fascism; neo-fascism; memory of fascism; anti-zionism

Introduction

It is only in the last twenty years that antisemitism has become a central theme in Italian historiography. An analogy can be drawn in the case of the right in the Republican era. This issue similarly had to await the late 1980s to be investigated in a scientific manner. It is therefore no surprise that in practice there is just one study (Scipione Rossi 2003) that addresses the relationship of the postwar right with antisemitism in a systematic manner.

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The thesis to be developed in this article is that the decline of antisemitism on the part of the Italian right, and in general the evolution of its attitude towards the Jewish Question and in particular towards Israel, is influenced by the methods (and the timing) with which the right has allowed the prevalence of political over cultural thinking. Given that reference to the historical and cultural heritage of fascism is a constant of the moral and ideological horizon of the Italian right in all its forms and nuances, it is to be expected that the right would feel a specifically political need to join in the game of democracy so that the antisemitic obstacles implicit in the heritage of the fascist era might gradually be cleared away. Neo-fascist by identity, the Italian right becomes democratic from necessity. In other words, the right's identity as a force that is ideologically, like fascism, an alternative to both capitalism and communism makes it into an anti-system force, and therefore one that does not recognise – and therefore opposes from the outset – the Republic that was born from the Resistance. Its anti-system character necessarily deprives it of authority, of democratic credentials: this condition manifests itself in its incompatibility – moral rather than political and institutional – with the remaining parties, which precisely by opting for the anti-fascist choice have chosen the unavoidable precondition of democratic co-existence. The political ghetto in which the right finds itself is the handicap against which it will fight in vain until it can shed its 'nostalgism', which is the *raison d'être* of its exclusion.

It will be understood at this point how the right began to abandon its original antisemitic slant when, taking advantage of the changed national (the centrism of the 1950s) and international (the Cold War) political climate, it decided to join in the game of democracy. The logic of blocs required a right-wing movement to ally itself with the West, and the anti-communist option entailed a pro-Israel standpoint. Precisely because this U-turn in respect of the past entailed a contradiction of identity, its evolution had to be a slow process to avoid conflicts with the true 'faithful'; it was completed only with the transition from the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) to the Alleanza Nazionale in 1994–1995.

Harking back to fascism

When speaking of the extreme Italian right, at any rate for the whole of the so-called 'First Republic' (1948–1994), it is as well to start by clarifying an original characteristic of this period: a characteristic that was, however, destined to have repercussions on the political system itself. In Italy, unlike almost all other European democracies, there existed a firm and stable cultural, ideological and political link between all the political manifestations of the right, whether extreme or moderate, party or movement. This link helped in an important way to characterise, in an anti-systemic fashion, the political system itself, structuring it in a tripartite form: with a centre (the only part that was allowed to govern and did so legitimately),¹ plus a right wing and a left wing, each of which was without authority, thus preventing a 'physiology' of alternating government in a republican democracy.²

The link that brings together the whole variegated constellation of the right was the recognition of fascism as an indispensable source of inspiration – however much this may have been interpreted in a wide range of terminology and phrases – for its own political universe. The consequence was that a substantial 'circularity' of political culture was built up between all the utterances of this political grouping. We find this 'circularity' above all

in what, in accordance with the vocabulary of political writing, is defined as either a ‘movement’ or a ‘party’. This refers to various informal associations: cultural and metapolitical (such as the Ordine Nuovo di Rauti (ON), in operation from the beginning of 1956); extra-parliamentary and anti-parliamentary (e.g., the Movimento Politico Ordine Nuovo of Clemente Graziani, which emerged in 1969 as an offshoot of ON when the latter rejoined the MSI, and Stefano Delle Chiaie’s Avanguardia Nazionale, founded in 1959); and subversive (e.g., the Fasci di Azione Rivoluzionaria that emerged in the aftermath of the fall of fascism; the National Front of Prince Junio Valerio Borghese, protagonist on 7 December 1970 of an attempted *coup d’état*; Costruiamo l’Azione, Nuclei Armati Proletari and Terza Posizione – all instigators of an armed *spontaneismo*, or attitude in favour of grassroots initiatives, at the heart of the ‘years of lead’³ around 1980). It also refers to the only institutionalised organisation that was expressly ‘of the right’: from December 1946 to 1995, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), transformed in 1972 into the MSI-Destra Nazionale (MSI-DN) following the unification of the MSI with the shadowy remains of the Monarchy Party, which was in operation continuously from the time of the fall of fascism in the inner circle of representative institutions. More generally, the ‘circularity’ subsisted between the deep sentiments of the so-called ‘people of the right’ and all their utterances on any political matter.

Biographical destinies relating to people and generations, individual and collective as a mark of their identity, and the programmatic purposes and directions of the party: all these ideas are firmly, if not always expressly, entrenched in the ideal, political and programmatic heritage left by fascism. This applies to all fascism, both – to use the distinction made by Renzo De Felice – in its ‘regime’ form (the Mussolini dictatorship of 1922–1943) and in the form of a ‘movement’ (the *fascismo delle origini*, 1919–1921, and the Republic of Salò, 1943–1945).⁴ The nature of this attachment to fascism has taken various forms, but for an entire period of fifty years or more, as long as the MSI existed (and resisted), harking back to the previous Mussolini experience continued. It could transmute into a harmless feeling of nostalgia, without other political implications, for the ‘heroic’ – if innocent – ardour of youth. It could be inspired by a more fervent wish to revive the fortunes of an authoritarian regime. It could be motivated by a generalised fanciful form of youthful rebelliousness. It could inspire a subversive project aimed at drawing a line under the ‘inglorious’ page of the anti-fascist republic, daughter of political ‘betrayal’ and military ‘dishonour’, and consequently serve to re-launch the ambition of going ‘beyond’ both communism and liberalism.⁵ Yet harking back to the fascist era remained firmly entrenched and imperishable: sometimes serving as no more than a sentimental source of comfort, sometimes instead as an historical and archetypically political anchorage-point, sometimes as a source of ideological sustenance.

The recollection of fascism as the rationale for the neo-fascist identity

If, as suggested above, looking back to fascism was a constant of the MSI’s history, and more generally of the entire galaxy of Italian neo-fascism, we should now note how the recollection of the movement waned over a period of nearly fifty years. It is well known that the formulation of memories is never a neutral operation: it has political connotations and is in fact orientated by the ‘programmatic and organisational will to preserve those cultural and political roots with which one can identify oneself’ (Halbwachs 1987). In other words, a certain circularity interposes itself between identity and recollection of

a political subject: when there is a change of identity (e.g., in the face of new environmental challenges), this circularity manifests itself as a reformulation of the recollection and, in reverse, a new vision of the past can lead to a correction of the identity. Thus by verifying the recollection elaborated by the Italian extreme right, we can establish to what extent and in what form the shackles of fascism remained in existence and, in consequence, whether the neo-fascist identity (and with it the antisemitic or simply anti-Jewish identity) of the extreme right lessened or even disappeared with the passage of time.

Throughout its history, the MSI never had the power or even the capability to refashion the struggle of defeating fascism by trying to encompass in its own recollection the rehabilitation of the conquered, as well as the arguments of the conquerors. This is why it never embraced democracy, whether as a value or as a practice. So long as it was on the political scene, the ‘party of the flame’ never managed to divest itself of the contradiction between an unlawful identity that led it to cultivate an ‘alternative’ recollection and the need to tone this down or at any rate to display publicly a recollection more attuned to the ‘forgetful recollection’ of the non-fascists. All that it achieved was an unresolved oscillation between the proud reaffirmation of its own past (including the Republic of Salò) – even if largely a symbolic ritual that was for the most part practised within the restricted circles of the ultra-faithful, thus sheltering it from publicity – and a superficial effort aimed at eliminating the political significance of memories of the RSI.

As far as fascism is concerned, the former MSI members entrusted the re-theming of the awkward obstacle of their recollection more to the devices of rhetoric than to the cogent consistencies of historical and political judgement. To simplify, such devices constituted recollection from an historical perspective, from a relative perspective and from a human perspective. These three different devices were all useful to maintaining the same rhetoric of an enduring nostalgia that was never fully resolved. In other words, the extreme Italian right never felt a duty to affirm that, however many extenuating arguments (or partial acknowledgements) they might put forward as an excuse for fascism, it was politically – and remains – an illiberal and (by vocation) totalitarian doctrine and regime, and as such was incompatible with the declared liberal option.

Recollection from an historical perspective

This was a long-lived and tenacious stance that, not by chance, outlasted the MSI itself. Traces of it remain in the desire of the ‘neo-fascist *pentiti*’ (as we may call the former MSI members who signed up with the Alleanza Nazionale) to sidestep the problem, unloading the political weight of a troublesome past on to the shoulders of Italians of the fascist era and the interpretative stance on to the shoulders of historians. This approach was used in the immediate aftermath of the fall of fascism by those ‘nostalgists’ who were determined to preserve the memory of the Duce unchanged, if not in the light of day then at least in their hearts. From the moment of its birth, the MSI adopted the approach in an attempt to avoid being crushed by the pincers of the parties that drew up the Italian Constitution and were waiting for the MSI to profess loyalty to fascism, so as to spring on it the illegality rule (as prescribed by the Constitution, which expressly forbids ‘the reconstitution of the Fascist Party’, echoed in an ad hoc law of 1952, designed by the Christian Democrat Minister of the Interior Scelba).

The principal route for escaping this impasse (keeping alive the memory of Benito Mussolini’s ‘imperishable teachings’ while at the same time not triggering, to his detriment,

the prohibition on the ‘reconstitution of the Fascist Party’) had been outlined by Giorgio Almirante, the longest-serving (1969–1987) and most charismatic leader of the party. He stated: ‘We consider . . . that fascism is not in fact a finished experiment or a doctrine that has been filed away. . . . It represents an ensemble of truths that belong, crucially, to the history and evolution of the Italian people.’ He also added in partial extenuation of his restoration project: ‘We . . . take care not to attribute to the MSI the mechanical function of uncritically extolling all fascism and opposing all anti-fascism *en bloc*’ (Almirante & Palamenghi Crispi 1958, 10–1).

The reluctance (or incapability) of the neo-fascists to see fascism in an historical perspective has involved the entire world of the extreme right, including the so-called ‘intellectuals’ in this field. If we leave out of consideration the literature, as bulky as it is repetitive, that has flowed from the pen of so many prolific ‘recollectionists’ and just as many tireless polemicists,⁶ we find no trace of serious historiographical comment on the subject by the neo-fascists in the entire fifty years of their life. Apart from not speaking about this subject, given their misfortune of bearing a shameful escutcheon, the other method used has been to distance themselves from it by reference to the *Zeitgeist* of that era, to a context determined by the course of history; in this way, responsibility for the blackest stains can be avoided. Putting things into an historical perspective is one way, like any other, of not ridding oneself of an embarrassing past, yet not assuming responsibility for it either. This is not a problem if, for example, the legacy of fascism includes a resistance to any return to authoritarian government. ‘Dictatorship,’ argued the MSI secretary De Marsanich in 1951, ‘is not a systematic concept of political thought, nor a programme of government, but simply a fact. Dictatorship must be considered as a necessary step . . . an autobiographical period of history that can come up again and repeat itself in a nation – one is careful to reassure one’s contemporaries – only centuries later.’⁷

The invitation to view things from an historical perspective in the case of the MSI was translated politically into a Pilate-like formula of ‘not repudiating and not restoring’. This is the equivalent of saying that particular page belongs to Italian history; as such it cannot be erased, so it should be accepted as it is without making pointless efforts to reappraise it. More or less along the same lines, Fini, after MSI merged into the Alleanza Nazionale, stated that ‘the time has come to consign fascism to the unbiased judgement of history’ (Locatelli and Martini 1995, 200) (as if this absolved the followers of neo-fascism from expressing a *political* judgement on their former *historical* mentor).

Recollection from a relative perspective

If the stumbling-block cannot be moved out of the way, it can at least be cut down to size. This often seems to have been the mantra of people who have been historically engaged by the right in commenting on the fascist period. There have been numerous pretexts for carrying out an operation of this kind. First and foremost, there has been the historiographical acquisition – challenged over a long period by anti-fascist historiography – of the ‘consensus’ enjoyed by the Fascist regime at least after the conquest of the Empire (as if the quantity of the supporters could somehow alter the quality of the proposition). Second, there has been the classification of the ‘war of liberation’, if not entirely then at least in part, as a ‘civil war’ (as if the recognition of the supporters of the Republic of Salò as combatants could redeem the cause for which they were fighting). Third, there has

been the assertion by the aristocracy of the ‘idealist motivation’ of many young people who took the side of the Republic of Salò – the ‘conviction that they were saving the honour of their country’, their decision to ‘continue the struggle against the Anglo-Americans, even though their fate was sealed’, ‘their spiritualistic outlook as opposed to Soviet Marxist materialism and American economism’⁸ (as if the good faith of a few individuals could change the character of the historical trend of the ‘ideological war’ for which the army of Salò was fighting). Other examples include the reference to many blameless victims who were on the Fascist side – ‘Italians killed by other Italians’ or ‘shot by the so-called Anglo-American allies’, who were also victims like those who were ‘vilely butchered by the Nazis,’ and references to an ‘epoch of sectarianism and hatred’ – the ‘seven brothers of the Govoni family, all of them Fascists, ... shot by the Partisans just like the “seven Cervi brothers”’ (Gasparri 1994; Fini 1994) (as if personal martyrdom had anything to do with the grounds for the martyrdom).

More generally, the argument has been deployed that the page of fascism should be read within the book of totalitarianism, within which the page of communism also has a legitimate place. This book is now closed, and therefore there is no point in digging up the past, at any rate if one wants to leave behind the ‘spirit of the civil war’ and be ‘united in reconstruction’ (Bocchino 1994; Fini 1994; MSI-DN 1994, 8–9). ‘One cannot ask any of the parties to admit that they made the wrong choice’ (D’Asaro 1994, 2–3). So two wrongs make a right, or a trouble shared (yesterday) is a trouble halved (today).

Recollection from a human perspective

Another useful rhetorical device for weakening the political burden of fascist memories, which the right has used as an appeal to show compassion for the dead, overlooks proper consideration of the merits of the case: ‘It was not only the anti-Fascists who died during the civil war. Many young people also died fighting for the Italian Socialist Republic.’ This was the argument put forward by the *Alleanza Nazionale* newspaper (after the burial of the MSI), during the wave of emotion aroused by the tragic images of death that came into Italian homes with the televised footage of *Combat Film* (Berezin 1996). A nation that truly wishes ‘to overcome the hatreds of the past and restore its spirit of unity’ cannot have ‘Category A and Category B dead’ (Gasparri 1994) (as if the reasoning of the heart could blot out the reasoning of the mind).

The MSI: Neo-fascist in identity, democratic from necessity

The persistent harking back to fascist identity is the critical starting-point for finding our way through the history of the extreme Italian right in all its erratic complexity. We should not, however, infer from this that the right followed a linear, homogeneous and constant direction concerning Zionism and the state of Israel, as it did regarding racism and foreign policy. However fickle and bizarre neo-fascism may have been in relation to ‘historical fascism’, where it was well-known as a master of both acrobatic changes and complete incoherence (and precisely for this reason capable of being at one and the same time both racist and anti-colonialist, in favour of revolution and of order, monarchist and republican, anti-clerical and clerical), it never dared to emerge from the ‘groove’ carved out by its historical model, which in some respects was hardly fascist at all. The movement

led by Mussolini was opposed from the outset to having its hands tied by principles. Mussolini argued that 'fascism is life and life is movement' and his options were (relatively) unshackled by ideological axioms; they could be varied (obviously within certain limits) depending on the dictator's assessments of his political opportunities. This applied even to the 'question of Zionism'. In the course of the Fascist era there were fluctuations of policy over this issue that were wide-ranging and in some ways contradictory, leaving anyone looking at the history able to draw the conclusions they wish.

A further, and perhaps decisive, factor behind the Italian extreme right's inconsistency and changeability has been its role as a force that is estranged from, if not hostile towards, democratic culture, yet at the same time one called upon to operate within a democracy. As a consequence, the right finds itself in a condition that has been defined as 'incapacitating' and paradoxical. Incapacitating because, if it wishes to exist, the right has no choice but to cultivate its own identity (anti-system as it is), but, at the same time, if it wants to survive in a democracy, it must adopt systemic behaviour. Paradoxical because, if the right wants to find the resources that are useful for survival in a hostile environment (emphasised in the 'anti-fascist preliminary question' established by the Constitution of 1948 itself), it must hold on to its (neo)-fascist 'diversity'; yet, precisely for this reason, it excludes the possibility of overcoming it and thus of exploiting the resources offered not just by the parliamentary game, but, more generally, by democratic integration into republican institutions. In this way a duality has been established between loyalty to fascism and outgrowing it: this duality has accompanied the entire existence of the Italian right and has promoted either the first or the second element, according to whether the issue has been the quest for identity or political calculation, ideological acculturation or electoral propaganda, the needs of the movement or those of the party.⁹

There are few issues which better illustrate the unresolved condition of the Italian right (neo-fascist in identity, democratic from necessity) than the Israel-Jews-Zionism-racism theme.¹⁰ The theme highlights the right's historical and ideological identity as well as the orientation of its domestic and foreign policy. Yet whereas the former remains fixed, the latter has changed according to national and international circumstances. Thus, in the aftermath of the fall of fascism, the Italian right had no difficulty in maintaining a link between its identity and its policies so long as the ideas and political thinking influenced by the struggle against Nazi-Fascism remained valid in both the national and the international contexts. These policies combined the defence of anti-Jewishness (to some degree also the defence of anti-Zionism and, in extreme cases, although with great embarrassment, the defence of the actual race laws of the Fascist era and opposition to the state of Israel) with domestic anti-anti-fascist policies (and thus diametric opposition to the government, the republic, the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party as well as the rejection of the 'democracy of parties') and a foreign policy that was hostile towards the 'allies' of 1940–1945 and the 'plutocratic powers' of the United States and Great Britain, which were freely associating with the heart of communist subversion in Moscow. All this was consistent with the aspiration, never discarded by the right, to breathe life into a 'third way' that would be an alternative to capitalism and communism and equally hostile to both.

Yet as soon as the anti-fascist solidarity within Italy's political scene broke up in 1947 and the political framework became based (unequivocally from the 1950s) on the anti-communist stance of the government and the pro-communist stance of the left opposition, the right was driven to espouse to an ever greater extent the politics and ideas

of anti-communism and thus to play down any recollections of fascism that would undermine its image: specifically its antipathy towards Israel as an ‘outpost’ of the West, not to mention its anti-Zionism and the race laws of 1938.

From hostility to support of Israel

The next step towards toning down, if not abandoning, the original fascist matrix was prompted by the evolution of the right’s foreign policy as a consequence in particular of the worsening of the Middle East problem. In 1967, with the Six Day War, the MSI made an unequivocal choice in favour of Israel and dampened down its original sympathies for the Arab world and Islam, for the Palestinians and the Egypt of Nasser, now accused of being a ‘crypto-communist’ (MSI-DN 1968, 14). From this moment onwards, the intellectual and political fascist legacy of anti-Jewishness, anti-Zionism, pro-Arabism (Mussolini’s ‘sword of Islam’) did not disappear, but withdrew into an underworld of youth and extremism: extremism that was mainly extra-parliamentary, but often very close to or indeed concealed within the party (through the battle over ideas and culture being fought in the journals circulating around the heirs of Evola and the followers of Rauti).

The problem of the moral and political legacy of the Fascist era was not conclusively overcome until the birth of the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN). In the motions approved at the Congress of Fiuggi (1995) we find the ‘explicit and definitive condemnation, without appeal... of all forms of antisemitism and anti-Jewishness’, whether or not ‘disguised by a propagandist gloss of anti-Zionism or anti-Israel polemics’. ‘Racial hatred is a form of the cruellest totalitarianism: it is the lack of recognition of the dignity of someone who is “different”, an outsider, a foreigner’ (MSI-DN 1994, 9). From that point on, racism and anti-Zionism found supporters and space only in the violent utterances of neo-Nazi skinheads or the banners of rowdy fans at the ‘northern end’ of football stadia.

There followed highly symbolic gestures of reparation from the greater part of AN, in particular – and with great prominence – from its leader Gianfranco Fini, the president of the party that was heir to the MSI. On 11 December 1993, he paid homage at the mausoleum of the Fosse Ardeatine. Yet more embarrassing (in the context of a political world that had evolved in nostalgia for times past) were two instances in 2002. On 15 April numerous representatives of AN took part in the ‘Israel Day’ organised in Rome by Giuliano Ferrara’s daily paper *Il Foglio*,¹¹ which sympathized with the centre-right, but could not be charged with going along with the nostalgic world. Then on 13 September, Fini, at the time Deputy Prime Minister, gave an interview to the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* in which he explicitly assumed ‘the responsibility’, in the name of the entire population of Italy, ‘for what happened in Italy after the passing of the race laws’, asking for ‘the pardon’ of the Jewish people (Primor 2002). This interview procured him an official invitation from the Israeli government to visit Jerusalem on 15 October. The reconciliation between the Italian right and the people, as well as the state of Israel was brought about officially by this visit. The reconciliation was sanctioned and shared on a very wide scale by public opinion with the broadcasting of a television drama dedicated to Giorgio Perlasca, a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, who during the Second World War pretended to be the Spanish consul in Budapest and in this guise had managed to shelter and thus save thousands of Jews who were fleeing the country.¹²

Fascism between the integration and persecution of the Jews

To examine in more detail the attitude adopted by the extreme Italian right concerning anti-Zionism, as well as antisemitism (to venture onto strictly political terrain) in its dealings with Israel, we should start with the right's inheritance from the Fascist era. Fascism, and Mussolini in particular, did not assume – in this matter as in so many others – a single, consistent position.¹³ The Fascists oscillated between two extremities: on the one hand, the hope that Italian Jews would be integrated into Fascist Italy, and on the other, their open persecution.

The first position was symbolised in Mussolini's statement: 'Italy does not recognise antisemitism and we believe that it never will . . . , in Italy no distinction whatsoever is made between Jews and non-Jews. . . . As for the new Zion, Italian Jews have it right here, in our delightful country, which, moreover, many of them have heroically defended with their own blood.'¹⁴ The second position can be identified in the promulgation of the 1938 race laws, with an increasing persecution of Jews that was to reach its height in the Republic of Salò.¹⁵ Item III of its draft constitution, drawn up by the Education Minister Carlo Alberto Biggini, envisaged that 'Italian nationality could not be acquired by those of the Jewish race' or by 'coloured races': this was to be sanctioned even from the juridical point of view by the downgrading of Jews to being a subject race (Garibaldi 1983, 371–2).

The oscillation between these two extreme policies affected the regime and the intellectual elite, as well as sections of the press which during the Fascist era expressed views that were unequivocally antisemitic and anti-Zionist. Yet, despite oscillation between these extremes, the pendulum tended to swing ever more in an antisemitic direction. In short, there was a range of standpoints differing in degree, yet, at the same time, always confined within a paradigm that was unfavourable to the Jewish world and became increasingly oriented towards extremism.

Before it became the choice of the Fascist regime, antisemitism was a sentiment that was spread across Italy, as it was across most countries of the Old Continent. It was of course a 'sentiment', for the most part inarticulate and elusive but deep-rooted, whose most ancient foundations lay in the anti-Jewish prejudice of the Catholic matrix and that latterly found energetic reinforcement in a new prejudice: the populist viewpoint that equated the Jew with the speculative capitalist.¹⁶ Fascism and its ideology radicalised and exploited this prejudice. On the one hand, fascist ideology played on a form of 'meta-historical' nationalism that was futuristic in its scope and extended its space or territory beyond national frontiers. This served to give life to, and to legitimise, ambitions of supremacy and domination over other peoples. On the other hand, fascist ideology, by supporting a sentiment that was markedly anti-egalitarian and Darwinistically overbearing, associated itself with an inexorable logic of violence and aggressiveness as well as war-mongering. This is not to suggest that fascism adopted antisemitism and anti-Zionism as a form of doctrine, but it opened the door to their exercise in politics.

It was the exigencies and the calculations of policy (especially foreign policy) that swung the pendulum ever more towards antisemitism. First the Ethiopian adventure, then the cosyng-up to Hitler's Germany, removed any option of blurred positions and favoured a gradual alignment of fascism to the racist creed: an alignment that became complete with the promulgation of the notorious race laws of 1938.¹⁷ True, in Italy the enormities of Germany were not matched in either atrocity or extent, but that does not detract from the fact that the policy followed by Italy involved numerous arrests, deportations,

expropriation of possessions and internment in concentration camps, as well as specific and binding enunciations of a systematic policy of persecuting Jews. For example, in the 18 points of the 1943 Verona manifesto, 'those belonging to the Jewish race' were demoted to the status of 'foreigners'. They thus ended up by being regarded in law as 'enemy aliens'. The leader in the hate campaign against Jews was a champion of racism, Giovanni Preziosi, responsible for the Office for Problems of Race, who suggested, among other things, the creation of a genealogical identity card to certify the 'racial purity of citizens'.¹⁸

Neo-fascism and antisemitism

At the end of the war, this was the sort of legacy that the survivors and the nostalgists of the Fascist regime found themselves having to manage. However troublesome and compromising that legacy might have been, none of them rejected it or blacked it out. In some ways, the same indecisive oscillation occurred for a long time in neo-fascism and, after an interval, an analogous fascist route was followed again, yet this time in the opposite direction. The fascist right may have been damaged twenty years earlier by the low level of acceptance of the idea of the 'different' (the Jew) in the lowest depths of his persecution; but in the postwar period the neo-fascist right rose (slowly and hesitantly) from the abyss of antisemitism and anti-Zionism (which was part of the stock-in-trade of opposition to the new state of Israel) to a pinnacle of anti-racism. The axis that brought fascism to perdition may have been its close co-operation with Nazism; but it was primarily anti-communism that caused neo-fascism to abandon its anti-Israel stance. Subsequently, and in the longer term, it was the quest for integration into the Republic and the West that ensured the full acceptance by neo-fascists of the values of pluralism and tolerance.

The legacy of the Fascist regime, despite representing – quite apart from the values it espoused – an insurmountable obstacle to neo-fascism's re-entry into the democratic (and thus also political and parliamentary) process, remained a firm element of the image and political horizon of the postwar extreme right. This, while not permitting loyalty to its own history, nonetheless allowed that 'history' to be somewhat variable and even contradictory. In the postwar period, the disordered ranks of neo-fascism came fully back to life, reinterpreting the spectre of their forefathers' opinions in the light of the new political framework that emerged after the war. There was a repetition of the oscillation between the opposite poles of benevolence and enmity towards Jews and Israel, these being the only two modalities that were permitted by the democratic 'physiology' of the anti-fascist republic and the international framework dominated by the victorious powers.

There were those who put on an act of self-criticism, declaring feelings of 'repugnance' for the wrongdoings of a regime that was guilty of 'odious persecution of the Jews'¹⁹ and using this as grounds for showing sympathy towards the birth of the new state of Israel.²⁰ There were those who, even having been in the forefront of supporting the Fascist regime – such as Cesare Rossi, deputy leader of the Fascist Party at the time of the Matteotti murder – then had no difficulty in acknowledging that antisemitism was the 'greatest brutality' of Fascism, even though there was an attempt to offload the responsibility onto Hitler's Germany and the fatal attraction that it exercised on Mussolini's Italy (Rossi 1960). And, by contrast, there were those who betrayed strong racist and antisemitic sentiments. Enzo Erra, a prominent exponent of neo-fascist extremism, had no compunction in writing: 'No civilization other than the white race has

given us the example of pioneers...who held sway over peoples. Here we have the superiority of our race.²¹ There was a persistent antisemitism in newspapers that were close to, if not within, the MSI itself. In the official fortnightly magazine for young members of the MSI it was not hard to find compromising references to the blackest pages of Nazism, indeed explicit attempts to play down the Holocaust that were worthy of inclusion in any anthology of 'denialist' history.²²

From the beginning, however, the MSI tried not to expose itself (however vaguely) by taking up positions that were too compromising. When looking back at the past, the party confined itself to seeking to lighten the Fascist regime's responsibility, resurrecting the theory of 'good Italians'. The official MSI newspaper took refuge in facile 'feel-good' rhetoric to the effect that 'no people were as good and generous-hearted as the Italians'. It thus bore out the theory according to which 'even after 1939 the Jews [were said to have had] a great deal of protection in Italy'.²³ The MSI also refrained from adopting discriminatory measures against Jews. At the time of its foundation it did not list 'being of the Israelite race' as one of the 'unworthy actions' towards the country that rendered a person ineligible for membership (MSI-DN 1983, 127); by contrast, this was expressly indicated as an impediment to joining the FAR (Fasci di azione rivoluzionaria) – the clandestine group that set out to revive the fortunes of fascism and was dissolved in the early 1950s. The party, however, introduced an example of discrimination when it drew up a hierarchy indicating the 'Roman Catholic apostolic religion' as the 'State religion'. In this way it sidelined other beliefs, even though it made a commitment to show them 'due respect' (MSI-DN 1983, 127–45).

Two outcomes from the connection with fascism: Pro-Jewish and anti-Jewish attitudes

What distinguished the movement from the party, and therefore extremists from moderates of the extreme right, was less the confirmation or rejection of the fascist cultural matrix than the different forms offered by this matrix, and the degree of attention given to making it compatible with the domestic and international political framework of the postwar era. Whether the birth of the state of Israel was to be regarded with sympathy or vengefulness, it was necessary to deal carefully with the Arab-Israeli question in such a way as to safeguard the autonomy and identity of a political tradition. The MSI recognised the creation of the new state, but at the same time was not slow to express concern about the fate of the 'holy places'. In particular, it perceived the concession of a homeland for Jewish people to be a manoeuvre by the victorious powers of the Second World War (Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union) to fulfil their colonial objectives: these powers were using the aspirations of the Jews to get their hands on the Mediterranean. In short, it was still the same old idea of the 'third way', different from and opposed to the way of plutocratic capitalism or the communist expansion of the Soviet Union.

Without scruple or shame is how one could describe the positions taken up by the hardliners. Giorgio Freda, a person who was connected with subversive groups and later implicated (though subsequently acquitted) in the Milan massacre of 1969, spoke of 'a policy of robbery, assassinations...and genocide carried out by Jewish colonialism in Zionized Palestine' (Freda 1972). Pino Rauti, the leader of Ordine Nuovo, an intellectual and politician of great influence with young supporters of the MSI, turned on its head the minimalist interpretation according to which Fascism allegedly adopted racist policies

‘in servile imitation’ of Nazism, claiming that it was an ‘autonomous fruit of the Fascist regime’. From this stemmed an anti-Israel option (Rauti and Sermoniti 1977, 269–83) that manifested itself among extreme neo-fascist fringes in open praise of the Al Fatah *fedayeen*, who were portrayed as heroic fighters.

The oscillation between the pro- and anti-Israel positions lasted for as long as the history of the MSI. The polarisation, however, became accentuated during the period before the MSI, having unreservedly espoused the cause of Israel, was driven to dispel all doubt in the matter of racism. The decisive push that drove them to flush out the toxins of antisemitic and anti-Zionist culture was not so much internal as external. It came less from the difficult process of ideological revision (aimed at re-founding its own identity) than from the need to make the most of the opportunities offered by national and international political developments. Anti-communism was the driving force that triggered the abandonment of the original pro-Arab postures embraced at the moment of the MSI’s birth, in keeping with Mussolini’s aspiration to become the ‘sword of Islam’.

The process speeded up with the development of ‘centrism’ in Italy and, in international relations, the intensification of the hostility between West and communist East, followed by decolonisation, which was perceived by the extreme right as the fruit of a conspiracy thought up by communism to spread its influence in the world. The events in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya provoked alarm about the communist threat to the very survival of European civilisation. Finally, the Six-Day War established a definitive gulf between the MSI and support for the Arab cause. Only then did the MSI, which in 1956 had been pro-Nasser by virtue of opposition to Great Britain, glimpse the shadow of ‘crypto-communism’ behind the Egypt of Nasser, who now became the ‘dictator in the pay of Moscow’, and declare Israel to be a ‘bulwark against communism’ (Michelini 1967). More or less simultaneously, the MSI party leader Giorgio Almirante condemned the Fascist regime’s race laws.²⁴ Almirante, former editor-in-chief of the magazine *La difesa della razza* at the time of the Republic of Salò and self-styled ‘executioner’ (as he described himself in his memoirs), now recalled the shelter offered to him by a Jewish friend in April 1945. Just before his death, Almirante denied in an interview with the journalist Fiamma Nirenstein that he had ever been antisemitic. His opposition to Jews, so he said, had been of a solely ‘cultural’ nature (Nirenstein 1987). Nevertheless it fell to his successor, Gianfranco Fini, to remove the last shadow of antisemitism. In 1988, on the occasion of a televised party political broadcast, he made a binding affirmation: ‘I am not a racist, nor is MSI-DN.’²⁵ However, the celebration of the official burial of the right’s antisemitism and anti-Zionism (at least as institutionalised in the party) had to await the birth of AN and the rediscovery of anti-fascism.

Conclusion

The MSI’s antisemitism, for the most part not thought through but passively drawn from the Fascist legacy and yet still in operation (explicitly in a few ways, implicitly in many) until the party’s death, was eventually transformed into an acclaimed abandonment of all forms of racism, antisemitism and mistrust of the Jewish cause and in particular of Israel, as ratified at the Congress of Fiuggi, which founded the Alleanza Nazionale. Its passing concluded a journey that had lasted for fifty years. The transformation was not, however, the outcome of the cultural maturing – or torment, if you prefer – that developed

in close contact with the democratic atmosphere of Republican Italy, during which the assumptions of intolerance and abuse of power towards the stranger-enemy were overcome. Rather, there was an overriding political anxiety on the part of the extreme right to free itself from the ghetto in which it found itself, given that it was debarred not only from governing, but also from being accepted in institutional political circles or being able to rise above antisemitic inclinations of a cultural nature. This explains the slow pace of the evolution (slow because of the need to avoid an identity crisis in the 'people of the right') and the close link between adjustments in the pro-Israel (rather than pro-Jewish) direction and MSI's alignment in the pro-Atlantic direction.

The priority given to the need to have access to and enjoy the institutional resources offered by democracy, following the fall of fascism, prompts two questions in conclusion. First, would policies favourable to the inclusion of the nostalgist right have favoured its earlier democratic integration? Second, was the sentimental and moral obstinacy of a large number of former MSI militants not so much chameleon-like behaviour of anti-democrats disguising themselves as democrats as an inevitable heritage of the past that could be dispelled only through a lengthy process of acclimatisation to democracy?

Translated by Jennifer Radice

Notes

- [1] On the concept of legitimisation, see the observations set out by Cafagna (2003).
- [2] For a complete picture of the problems inherent in the extreme right in Italy's history, see Ignazi (1989); Chiarini (1995); Parlato (2006).
- [3] The text worth mentioning on subversion by the right is Ferraresi (1995).
- [4] As has been noted, Renzo De Felice, the author of the most comprehensively documented biography of Mussolini, has introduced into the consideration of Italian fascism the distinction – originally contested, but now almost unanimously accepted by historians – between 'movement' and 'regime'. With the first term he is referring to the spirit of fascism – and to the historical phase – that interprets its 'revolutionary' vocation (i.e., its aspiration to transcend both capitalism and Communism in favour of a fanciful 'third way') and a more moderate vocation that tended to effect a compromise with the so-called 'strong powers' of Italian society at that time (the monarchy, the Church, the military top brass, the economic and financial establishment, etc.) (see De Felice 1975, 27–30).
- [5] For the course of the historical judgments made by the neo-fascist world at the expense of the Resistance movement and the political process that led to the foundation of the 'Republic, born of the Resistance', see Germinario (1999); Chiarini (2005, 48–58).
- [6] A review of the most important works in the 'recollectionist' genre can be found in the introduction by G. Parlato to Costa (1997, xvi; see also Germinario 1999). For a good representation of most neo-fascist history writing in its militant and rather uncritical nature, see the main work of Pisanò (1965–1966), who is assiduous and persistent in his quest 'not to forget'.
- [7] *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 22 and 26 June 1951.
- [8] See the advocacy of the 'RSI cause' pleaded by Franz Maria D'Asaro in *Secolo d'Italia* of 28 April 1994 in the article 'Sopravvisuti ad un mondo che non c'è più'.
- [9] An identity drawn from fascism (and therefore anti-democratic) and a requirement to emancipate itself from the political ghetto to which it was confined: these are the two limits that have characterised the 'accursed' fate of the Italian right and have contributed to a troublesome arrangement that afflicts the national political system with two extreme wings (right and left) without authority, and a legitimate and therefore dominant centre (see Chiarini 1991, 581–600).
- [10] The most complete study of this subject was carried out by Scipione Rossi (2003).
- [11] The list of participants is in *Il Foglio*, 18 April 2002.
- [12] On Giorgio Perlasca and his political rediscovery by the MSI-DN, see Scipione Rossi (2003, 266–72).
- [13] Fabre (2005) suggests that Mussolini was always antisemitic, from the time of being a socialist.

- [14] *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 19 October 1920.
- [15] For an illustration of fascist thinking on antisemitism after the race laws, see PNP (1940) *Il secondo libro del fascista*, Roma, where the racist creed is set out as a fundamental tenet.
- [16] For some stimulating observations on the multifarious 'components' that one finds in fascist antisemitism and more generally in the 'alchemic compound' of which it consists, see Bidussa (1994).
- [17] For a general outline of antisemitic policies and specifically the persecution of Jews carried out by fascism, see Sarfatti (2000).
- [18] For a detailed examination of the policies and legislative and administrative action taken by fascism, especially in the RSI years, including a substantial bibliography, see 'Per uno studio della persecuzione antiebraica (1943–1945)' in Ropa (2000, 13–56; see also Caracciolo 1986).
- [19] *Rataplan*, 10 August 1946. This and subsequent quotations from militant right-wing newspapers are taken from the study by Scipione Rossi (2003).
- [20] *Ordine Sociale*, 18 May 1948.
- [21] *La Sfida*, 4 April 1948.
- [22] *L'Assalto*, 18 November 1949; but also *Lotta Politica*, 15 April 1950 and *Asso di Bastoni*, 1 January 1950.
- [23] *La Rivolta ideale*, 9 and 16 December 1948.
- [24] Televised press forum on 23 February 1967.
- [25] The text of the interview given by Fini at the party political broadcast on 23 May 1988 can be found in *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 25 May 1988.

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