

Emilio Gentile, *E subito fu regime. Il fascismo e la Marcia su Roma*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2012, pp. 319

The "March on Rome" historiography has been marked by deeply conflicting interpretations, reflecting this major historical event's complexity and antagonistic nature. In the book *Le origini del fascismo in Italia. Lezioni di Harvard*, the historian Gaetano Salvemini had shown in the 1940s that the event was little more than an "opera buffa," an absurd display without a revolutionary substance. This perspective portrays the March as a mere theatrical staging, a calculated spectacle orchestrated to create the illusion of a grassroots uprising.²

Over the decades, the interpretation of the March on Rome has undergone a fascinating evolution. Early interpretations, particularly from the 1960s, focused on the political negotiations that paved the way for Fascism's rise. Many scholars viewed this event as Mussolini's masterpiece, portraying him as the central figure and mastermind behind it. This perspective not only suggested that his strategic skills were crucial to the event's outcome but also that the military actions of the Fascists were considered somewhat secondary—being a decorative element rather than a primary force, as argued by Renzo De Felice.³

In the 1970s, Adrian Lyttelton, in his work "The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919–1929," distanced himself from De Felice's political interpretation and established a new direction for analysis. He described the events of October 1922 as a classic example of *psychological warfare*. The fascists seized control of provincial centers by targeting key locations such as prefectures, police

² Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo. Lezioni di Harvard*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1961, p. 611.

³ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista I. La conquista del potere, 1921-1925*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966.

headquarters, railway stations, communication hubs, and anti-Fascist institutions. Their strategy combined military and political tactics, including the calculated threat of violence and the display of popular support, to intimidate the government and persuade it to take power.⁴

An expert on Italian fascism, Emilio Gentile emphasizes in his work *E fu subito regime. Il fascismo e la Marcia su Roma* that the violence associated with the strategic negotiations surrounding the March on Rome was not incidental but a crucial aspect of the Fascists' broader political strategy. Emilio Gentile downplays the significance of the negotiating faction and Mussolini as the sole architect behind the success of the March on Rome. Instead, he highlights the crucial role played by the *squadristi* (members of the Fascist squads) and their leaders, such as Italo Balbo and especially Michele Bianchi, the secretary of the National Fascist Party (PNF), in driving the decision to undertake this insurgent action. He asserts that the squadrist element of fascism was 'the dominant force of fascism'; without it, maneuvering, negotiation, or individual talent for seizing opportunities would not have enabled fascism to come to power (p.133). Gentile notes, "Historically, the militia party instigated the March on Rome; the leader and the secretary merely interpreted its will". (p.134)

The "March" on the capital was, in fact, only the concluding act of a prolonged assault on state power conducted by the fascists starting in 1921. The fascists always followed the same script: they would move en masse into a provincial capital, often mobilizing men from surrounding regions, occupy public offices and government headquarters, railway stations, telephone

⁴ Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919–1929*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 71.

exchanges, and post offices; they would storm military barracks, seize weapons, order prefects and military commanders to hand over power to the leaders of the fascist squads, destroy the offices of rival parties, and dismiss local administrators. During the "biennio rosso" (the "two red years") of 1919-20, the violent surge of political fanaticism and class struggle made Italy appear to be a country on the brink of civil war.

The fascists recognized the military limitations of their militia. However, the "March on Rome" was not just a rhetorical gesture. To influence political negotiations, the insurrection relied on the squadristi mobilizing in cities under Fascist control. They occupied public offices and created widespread confusion, disrupting the government's response. This strategy aimed to facilitate the advance of Fascism toward the capital indirectly, as a direct military confrontation was deemed unfeasible. Furthermore, ongoing negotiations helped strengthen the movement's position, ensuring its success without needing a forceful takeover of Rome.

The violence associated with the fascist movement and the capitulation of the Italian state played significant roles in its success. The violent attacks by fascists against political opponents, along with the authorities' tolerance of such actions, created the impression that fascism was a force for order capable of restoring stability amid social chaos. Gentile's work highlights the importance of examining the interplay between political forces, societal dynamics, and the authoritarian aspirations that defined the fascist movement during its formative years. By focusing on this crucial period, we can gain deeper insights into how fascism transformed from a fringe movement into a dominant political force, reshaping Italy's future and influencing other authoritarian regimes across

Europe. Considered a temporary phenomenon born out of the war, Italian fascism quickly evolved into a mass movement with its ideological goals and structure. It gained influence beyond mere reactionary violence, establishing itself as a force capable of reshaping Italian political and social systems. Its rise captured attention across Europe, becoming an attractive model for other authoritarian movements and spreading its influence beyond Italy's borders.

Gentile said that the novelty of fascism led most opponents and observers to view it as a fleeting movement, lacking its ideology, program, social base, unity, or cohesion—merely a contingent result of provincial groups united by armed struggle against proletarian parties and organizations. Once its role as a reactionary militia serving the bourgeoisie ended, the fascist movement expected to wither due to a lack of inherent vitality or disintegrate from internal conflicts. Few recognized that fascism was not a temporary phenomenon, nor just a mercenary militia against the proletariat, but a mass movement with its own autonomy and ambitious goals. The "March on Rome"—a carefully orchestrated event during which the fascists paraded for over five hours through the streets of the capital in front of Mussolini—was essentially a confirmation of a completed fact: the capitulation of the liberal state to fascist control.

The central thesis of Gentile's book is that the ascent of fascism to power was not the product of compromise, but it was the profound capitulation of the liberal state to the insurrectional coercion of an armed faction, which proffered nothing more than nebulous and ambiguous assurances of reinstating constitutional legality in exchange for its ascendancy. The triumph of the "March on Rome" crystallized the fascists' conviction that they were the exclusive bearers of the national will, thus endowing them with the audacity to govern the nation

beyond the confines of the law, the constitutional order, and the parliamentary system.

Moreover, the offensive launched against the liberal state by fascism from peripheral territories was already present in the work of Angelo Tasca, who insightfully noted that the "idea of a "March on Rome" represented "the natural outlet of the fascist 'offensives' that, increasingly extensive, started from already conquered territories for new annexations." He highlighted how the blackshirts effectively occupied the entire Po Valley and much of Central Italy—Tuscany, Umbria, and the Roman countryside. While Tasca ultimately perceived the "March on Rome" as a mere "parade," his analysis sheds light on constructing a counter-state, alternative fascist sovereignty that emerged primarily in provincial areas.

More recently, Giulia Albanese has emphasized the importance of connecting the events in Rome with the simultaneous actions occurring in numerous cities across Italy. She argues that these various "acts of force" significantly influenced "the geography and impact of the march itself," which challenges the traditional narrative about this pivotal historical moment. This perspective encourages a broader understanding of how fascism consolidated power by considering local and national contexts. Albanese also stated that Mussolini's first government marked the inception of dictatorship in Italy, signifying the decline of liberal institutions.⁵

Gentile argues that the transfer of power to fascism was an unprecedented event, not just a simple change of government. For the first time

⁵ Giulia Albanese, *La marcia su Roma*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2014.

in the history of parliamentary states, a newly appointed prime minister announced that his rise to power represented an irreversible moment, marking the beginning of a revolution intended to last for decades. Furthermore, it was unprecedented for a prime minister of a parliamentary government to lead a state-funded party militia prepared to suppress anyone opposing the fascist regime and its "inevitable developments."

To understand why the political outsiders known as fascists—whom Mussolini called the "gypsies of politics"—were able to seize power in 1922 and establish a twenty-year single-party regime, we need to broaden our perspective. Instead of focusing solely on the event of the "March on Rome," we should examine the underlying dynamics of how they acquired power. This includes shifting our attention from the capital city to the country's periphery. By doing so, we can gain a clearer understanding of the military aspects of the "March on Rome" and the political maneuvers that supported it.

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