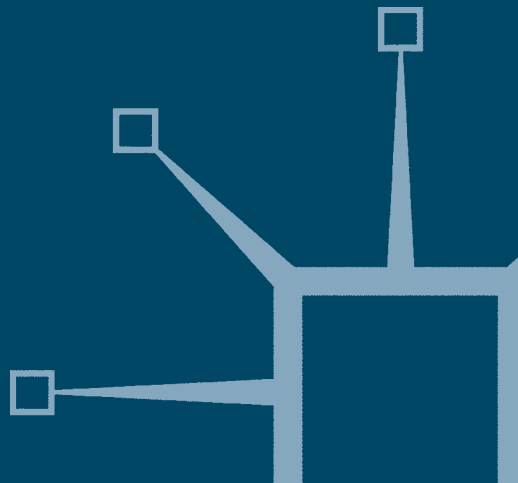


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Also by George Talbot

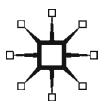
ESSAYS IN ITALIAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY IN HONOUR OF
DOUG THOMPSON, ed., with Pamela A. Williams

MONTALE'S 'MESTIERE VILE': THE ELECTIVE TRANSLATIONS FROM
ENGLISH OF THE 1930s AND 40s

Censorship in Fascist Italy, 1922–43

George Talbot

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George Talbot, Hull, November 2006

List of Abbreviations

ACS	Archivio centrale dello Stato (Rome)
b.	busta
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BCI	Banca Commerciale Italiana
cat.	categoria
CEKA	Secret police
co	carteggio ordinario
cr	carteggio riservato
DAGR	Divisione affari generali e riservati
DG	Direzione generale / Directorate generale
DGPS	Directorate General of Public Security (Direzione generale di pubblica sicurezza)
DPP	Divisione polizia politica
EIAR	Ente italiano per le audizioni radiofoniche
f.	fascicolo
FP	fascicoli personali
Gab.	Gabinetto
GIL	Gioventù italiana del Littorio
IRI	Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale
LUCE	L'Unione cinematografica educativa
Mat.	Materia
MCP	Ministero di Cultura popolare
MI	Ministero dell'Interno
MiCup	Ministry of Popular Culture (Minculpop)
NAZI	German National Socialism
OMNI	Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia
ONB	Opera nazionale Balilla
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PNF	Partito nazionale fascista – National Fascist Party
RSI	Repubblica sociale italiana – Salò Republic
SASP	Società anomina Stefano Pittaluga
sf.	sottofascicolo
SPD	Segreteria particolare del duce
SSR	Servizio speciale riservato
UC	Ufficio criptografia

UCI	Unione cinematografica italiana
UTPN	Ufficio tecnico di propaganda nazionale

1

Introduction

Historiography, politics and the idea of commonsense

The legacy of Fascism continues to cast a shadow over modern Italy. This is demonstrated by the ample coverage of its history in scholarly and popular media; and the sorts of questions about coercion or complicity which they have provoked among contemporary German historians have analogues in the case of Fascist Italy.¹ Daniel Goldhagen's controversial anthropological reconstruction of German 'commonsense' in the Nazi period, presents an argument for the eventual rise of the Nazis drawing on a number of factors, principal among them a deep-seated anti-Semitism spread wide in German society. According to this argument, anti-Semitism combined with other factors such as a smarting defeat in the Great War, the crippling economic consequences of that military defeat and the settlement at the Treaty of Versailles, which with a widening of suffrage created conditions sufficient to enable the acceptance of a profoundly anti-democratic model of consensus. Out of this emerged a generation of willing executioners. Few historians would accept that things were quite so simple, but the debate the book engendered has had repercussions outside of German history. The Italian case is different in many ways from the German one, not least in that the Fascists achieved power far earlier, and the common wisdom brings anti-Semitism into the Italian model far later, dating it to the Race Laws of summer and autumn 1938.

Robert O. Paxton, however, in his stimulating comparative study of Fascism in Europe has argued recently that the assumptions about German anti-Semitism need more careful analysis, and that other European countries actually had far more anti-Semitism latent in their *mentalité* than did Germany.² The rise of the Nazis, he concludes, was

not an inevitable consequence of the social, cultural and economic factors at work in Germany. Equally Giorgio Fabre has demonstrated that the roots of Mussolini's own anti-Semitism extend well beyond Hitler's suggestive influence in 1933 and other Italian historians, among them Enzo Collotti and Michele Sarfatti have demonstrated the existence of a spontaneous anti-Semitism in parts of the Italian population which cannot be attributed to the theatrical ravings of a couple of dictators.³ Some historians and TV pundits in Italy, nonetheless, while critical of the record of Fascist Italy have drawn comfort from the fact that whatever wrongs the Italian Fascists may have committed, at least they were not directly responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and other marginalized minorities. Such a view is difficult to reconcile entirely with the archival evidence presented by Mimmo Franzinelli in his *Delatori* (2001).⁴ Other historians, less critical of the Fascists, continue to praise various social and educational improvements achieved during the *ventennio*. The Fascists' direct spiritual descendants, the *Alleanza nazionale*, have occupied ministerial portfolios in two Italian governments since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Their leader, somewhat to the dismay of some of his supporters has now accepted publicly that Fascism was a 'male assoluto' or an 'absolute evil'.⁵

In the case of Italian historiography, the late and extremely industrious historian Renzo De Felice has inspired several schools of thought which have in common the view that the early and mid-1930s were essentially 'years of consensus' in Italy, with the vast majority of the Italian population giving their willing allegiance to a benevolent tyranny.⁶ Repressive measures, he accepted, were certainly necessary for the early survival of the dictatorship, but after the plebiscite of 1929 they were brought to bear only on adversaries of the regime. De Felice set these years of consensus between 1929, the year of the Lateran Pacts with the Catholic Church and 1936, which marked Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War. In his view, reconciliation with the Church brought the first phase of Fascism to an end and established the regime in the minds of the king's loyal subjects as their natural temporal power, whose protectionist economic policies insulated the country against the worst effects of the Wall Street Crash and ensuing Depression and then, in defiance of the League of Nations inaugurated a new empire across the Mediterranean, in a popular attempt to turn back the clock to Roman times. More critical historians argue that reconciliation with the Church allowed a brutal, rapacious but short-sighted imperial programme to be cloaked in the convenient

mystification of a civilizing mission, which could be interpreted with characteristic Fascist ambiguity as bringing either imperial values to Africa or the light of Christianity to the darkness of superstition.⁷

In cultural terms, Philip Cannistraro argued that the regime put in train a progressive programme which attempted to bring culture to the workers, the peasants and other groups traditionally marginalized in Italian society.⁸ It did this by means of 'theatre for the masses' and a socialization of the intellectuals, in the interests of bringing to an end the symbiotic relation between culture and wealth.⁹ He argued that unlike in Nazi Germany, Mussolini and the Fascists tolerated a plurality of artistic and cultural expression as part of that cultural programme. There were neither extensive book-burnings nor campaigns against degenerate art in Fascist Italy. On these points Cannistraro was mostly correct: there was no modern-day Bonfire of the Vanities in Piazza della Signoria, or any other public space in Italy, although Socialist books certainly were burned by *squadristi* in isolated incidents during the early phase of Fascism. That does not mean that the powers of the state as censor were significantly fewer than across the Alps as we will see.

There are those who take a less subtle and nuanced line than De Felice or Cannistraro and argue further that Mussolini's anti-Semitic campaign and alliance with Nazi Germany were the tragic mistakes which have obscured an authoritarian but otherwise relatively benign regime. This view has been advocated with insistence especially in the media over the last 30 years. It has been advanced most recently by Marcello Staglieno, a popular historian writing in the Mondadori *Storia* series, who has emphasized the positive aspects of Fascism, such as land reclamation and job creation through extensive public works.¹⁰ His is far from being a new thesis in Italian historiography: indeed it largely repeats the regime's own propaganda.¹¹ Aside from the occasional diatribe against the role of the Italian communist party (PCI) in the resistance, Staglieno has put forward, again, the comforting view of Italian history according to which it was really the Nazis who were responsible for the racist policies and the war which toppled Fascism.¹² But for the seduction of Hitler, according to this view, Mussolini's regime could have lasted as long as Franco's in Spain. In other words, Mussolini and the Fascists bear little responsibility for the *Endlösung* and the cataclysm of the Second World War.¹³

Issues of memory and forgetting have been aired now for over a decade in often heated public debate over the resistance, often on the broadcast media, over whether the period 1943–45 should be regarded

as a civil war and how it should be commemorated. Claudio Pavone, in his preface to the second edition (1994) of his seminal *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della Resistenza* (1991), has described the context in which his book appeared and indeed helped to inform:

Discussion of the Resistance risked sinking into indifference. The debate had often been punctuated by radical critiques which sometimes came close to outright condemnation. There were serious-minded efforts at critical understanding, usually from parts of the Left, but these never achieved consensus as commonsense, and they were knocked off course not by reasoned argument (although there have been contributions of this kind too) but by the mere redefinition of terms, thinly veiled by colourless platitudes.

All this generated a defence strategy on the part of upholders of the Resistance who, caught off their guard, felt slighted and offended. The dispute between the detractors and the hagiographers, which serious historical research thought it had left behind, suddenly flared up again. Despite all the claims that the matter had been resolved, it became evident just how deeply felt is the historical and civil problem of the war and the Resistance. At the same time, we have risked generating more heat than light, to the point of public spectacle in the form of televised show-downs.¹⁴

In the intervening decade plans have been brought forward by government ministers, and then dropped, to name a street after Giuseppe Bottai, in a transparent attempt to rehabilitate Fascist hierarchs.¹⁵ Italian television audiences have been treated to ever more emotive documentaries on the *foibe*, atrocities allegedly perpetrated by Communist resistance fighters in Istria which involved throwing their opponents to their deaths in deep limestone caverns, bringing such issues into the ambit of 1990s examples of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

There are several important political and methodological issues at stake here. The traditional and sentimental presentation of *italiani brava gente* ('good-natured Italians') is being pressed into service in the media to demonstrate the truism that there were victims on both sides of the contest over Fascism.¹⁶ The argument then goes on to take the relativist turn, urging that if there were victims on both sides, then there must have been right on both sides, and therefore it is impossible to regard one side as right and the other as wrong. To be a victim, however, is not necessarily to be in the right. This needs to be borne in

mind when watching and listening to what has been characterized by some historians as the *anti-anti-Fascism* which has come to dominate the Italian media representation of Italy's twentieth-century past.¹⁷ A rose-tinted view of the Fascist past can be made to stand up only by taking a very selective approach to evidence, and filtering out or dismissing evidence which contradicts that interpretation in order to shape an understanding of 'commonsense', to use Pavone's term, later taken up independently by Goldhagen and Robert Gellately in the German context. These practices correspond alarmingly to interpretations of contemporary history put forward by the Fascists themselves in the 1930s, and which I will be characterizing as aspects of censorship in action, something far more insidious than book-burning. The pages which follow are intended as a contribution to an understanding of 'commonsense' as promoted by Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, by examining the interplay between that concept of 'commonsense' and the various forms of censorship which at times shaped it and at other times were shaped by it.

Studies of Italian Fascism are, understandably, dominated by the figure of Mussolini and some of the more discerning of them have demonstrated ways in which the regime set about using text and image to create a myth of him as the embodiment of commonsense.¹⁸ He may well have coined the term 'totalitarian', and even if he did not, it is now fatally linked to his regime. The concept of totalitarianism presupposes an underlying consensus, a commonsense. Not many would argue against the interpretation that he set about re-balancing the social contract between the individual and the state, harnessing human and technological resources against personal freedoms, creating mass forms of socialization and culture, and establishing a personality cult which dominated that state for over two decades. Given that he had inherited a ruined economy in 1922 and raised expectations inspired by D'Annunzio's rhetoric of a 'mutilated victory', what else, his apologists argue, could he have done in the circumstances? As this book is not an essay in counterfactual history, I will not attempt to answer it here.

Any state, but more especially a dictatorship, will rely on censorship to limit the public's horizon of expectation and therefore to shape consensus. It would be naïve to believe that this does not hold to some extent for democratic states too, but in many ways the process is more visible in democratic states which now have Freedom of Information legislation. No regime, however, to my knowledge, has left to posterity the mass of archival, documentary and visual evidence which we have inherited

from the Italian Fascists. Patient sifting of documents in the Archivio centrale dello Stato in Rome's EUR district yields up detailed information of censorship policy and its implementation, ranging from phone tapping, to sequestration of private mail, to daily *veline* (carbon-copy instructions) for newspaper editors and broadcasters, to networks of police informers engaged in spying on their neighbours, foreigners and occasional passers-by; not to mention casual denunciations from members of the public. De Felice's contention that repressive measures became less prevalent after 1929 is less convincing when checked against the archival evidence. The evidence, some of which is set out in this book, may not all constitute censorship as such, but a totalitarian state which has embarked on policies of systematic censorship will inevitably also develop corrupting practices of surveillance to carry them through. One of the uses of such surveillance in Fascist Italy was to assess the extent to which censorship was working. The mass of information collected and archived by the censors and the police provides the historian with a vast source of evidence for what the Italian population really thought, and it is evidence which is far more reliable than the often self-serving retrospective accounts by former protagonists and the accounts which come down by means of oral history.

My hope for this book is that it will provide a comprehensive overview of at least part of the very large mass of archival evidence generated by acts of censorship and the closely-related practices of surveillance. It draws on recent scholarship, especially work published in Italian, as well as my own work in the archives. The early Fascist impulses to silencing opposition were violent in nature. Once the Fascists were established in power, the initial impulses found an institutional place in various pieces of illiberal legislation and in police structures inherited from Liberal Italy. Both the legislation and the police forces came to be modified and moulded into something quite different from the Liberal inheritance. The police forces under Arturo Bocchini (from 1926 to his death in 1940), and especially the *divisione polizia politica*, developed very extensive archives on individuals, movements and what might be described euphemistically as 'security problems'. The Prime Minister's Press Office (*Ufficio Stampa*), was eventually transformed into the Ministry for Popular Culture (whose official abbreviation was *MiCup*, but which is generally known by the slightly ironic title 'Minculpop'), via the Under-Secretariat for Press and Propaganda and later the Ministry for Press and Propaganda (modelled on Goebbels' initiative north of the Alps). In its various bureaucratic incarnations it was scarcely less diligent in its archiving of files. Most of

these police and Minculpop files are now available for consultation in the *Archivio centrale dello Stato*, and they have been drawn upon extensively in the pages which follow.

There is some excellent recent work in Italian on Fascist censorship, spying and policing by scholars such as Mauro Canali, Giorgio Fabre, Mimmo Franzinelli, Nicola Tranfaglia, and others.¹⁹ It is not generally available to an English-speaking audience. Where this book differs from their work, and from those of earlier contributions to our knowledge of censorship by Maurizio Cesari, Aurelio Lepre, Lorenzo Greco and Loris Rizzi is that it deals systematically with a wide range of different forms of censorship, rather than concentrating on a specific aspect such as literature, the press, or military censorship.²⁰ Aside from the work of these authors, there is surprisingly little explicit coverage of censorship in the existing body of work on Fascism, especially that written in English. This is all the more surprising given that much recent scholarship has tended to focus on culture rather than politics, taking Fascist texts and ideology often at face value.

Culture, myths and definitions

Censorship inhabits an intersection between culture and politics. Implementing a totalitarian vision has to involve both filtering out images and messages held to be deviant by those exercising power as well as the other side of the coin, promoting images and messages which constitute the acceptable norms on which society is to be organized. In the memorable formulation of Curzio Malaparte, a dissident Fascist, in a totalitarian state everything which isn't banned is compulsory. I want to consider different kinds of censorships in this book because it would be misleading to think of 'Fascist censorship' as a straightforward monolithic term. Both noun and adjective are almost equally mercurial. Before examining definitions of 'censorship', it may be helpful to map out the terrain of culture and politics. David Forgacs has drawn some distinctions within the term 'culture':

A study of twentieth-century culture, particularly in its relations with the state, cannot afford to ignore the fact that modern cultural products are characteristically made to be distributed and sold on markets beyond the local level – regionally, nationally or internationally –, that they tend to be made using technologies of mass reproduction and distribution, and that all this affects the ways in which the state intervenes in relation to them.²¹

He illustrated this proposition with the example of film production. Films are expensive to make. They require extensive financing. A state wishing to stimulate the creative and cultural industries, for reasons of prestige or regeneration, can promote the interests of production companies by providing them with soft loans or tax breaks, for mutual benefit, as has been done successfully by various other governments since, authoritarian and democratic ones. The Fascists in the 1930s belatedly created very favourable economic conditions for the Italian film industry. A government can also apply protectionist tariffs to defend the interests of domestically-produced films. This is precisely what the Fascists did in the 1930s in order to promote the interests of Italian film-makers in the face of competition from Hollywood. Competition of this sort, of course, was not simply an economic matter. The Italian government had invested in its domestic films, directly or indirectly, and these productions, to a significant degree encoded Fascist commonsense and values for transmission on to the large screen. Hollywood values, regulated by the Hays code, became contentious for Fascist Italy only when international relations deteriorated from 1935 because of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War and Italy's alliance with the Nazis. Hollywood values came to be perceived as more of a threat to the Fascist way of life because they represented America, potentially an enemy. Hollywood values, in themselves, could be accommodated or imitated in the Italian film industry.

The distinctions drawn by Forgacs apply with even more force to newspapers. The State's interventions in setting the news agenda and trying to control it are likely to be more co-ordinated but also more subject to risk, given the real-time nature of news stories. Mussolini came to power in 1922 with a well-developed practical grasp of journalism, newspaper management and media funding. He had been editor of *Avanti!* in his days as a Socialist, before expulsion from the party for his espousal of interventionism in 1915. At that point he set up *Il Popolo d'Italia*. In his capacity as editor of *Avanti!* he had come into contact with censorship as practised by the Liberal state through the offices of the local prefects, who were no friends of Socialism. Among Mussolini's allies in 1919 was Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leader of the Futurists who was also no stranger to the prefects. Marinetti participated in both the founding meeting of *squadristi* in Piazza San Sepolcro on 23 March and the movement's first 'spectacular', three weeks later.²² He has left a text which is both a witness statement and a participant report of the latter:

One, two, three, twenty, thirty revolver shots. A volley of stones and flying cudgels. Cudgels hitting their mark. *One for all, Arditi!*

The cordon of *carabinieri* breaks up and disappears. [...] Leaving us poised and ready for action. Then, like a flash, pell-mell towards the enemy. They break apart. Lots of them, gripped by terror, dive for cover. [...] The revolver fire, which now has the rat-tat-tat-tat of the infantry, resounds down Via Dante. We stop in front of the Teatro Eden. The battle has lasted an hour. [...] We reform our column which, half an hour later, having broken through more cordons of troops, reaches Via San Damiano and attacks and sets fire to the offices of *Avanti!*. We throw furniture out of the windows but we don't find Serrati, the editor, skiving as usual and far away from the struggle. Pinna, the Futurist, was one of the first to break in to the *Avanti!* rooms and he was wounded in the hand. Many others wounded. The column now lording it over reconquered Milan marches back to Piazza del Duomo chanting '*L'Avanti!* is finished' and carrying the wooden insignia of the burned-out newspaper, which was then given to Mussolini at the offices of *Il Popolo d'Italia*.²³

In Marinetti's vivid account, this could be the treatment for a movie scene. The violence is valued aesthetically; but it was real enough for those on the receiving end of it, as was the implied complicity of the *carabinieri* who made themselves scarce, leaving the way open to the mob. Marinetti's description of 'the first victory of Fascism' captures the exhilaration felt by *squadristi* as they set about destroying the nerve-centre of the enemy newspaper and bringing a trophy back to Mussolini, and it contains, even in this fragment, some of the characteristics which Roger Griffin has identified as hallmarks of Fascist texts:

Any Fascist text of substance will reveal a recurrent set of images and themes relating either to the condemnation of the decadent, liberal notion of decline, weakness, crisis, anarchy, or to the celebration of the reborn, post-liberal nation of regeneration, strength, stability, order which Fascism aspires to be creating – and very often to the gulf which divides the 'old' Italy from the 'new'. Ideal-typically, therefore, each contrasting permutation of Fascism manifests an identical mythic core of 'palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism'.²⁴

Marinetti's was one of the earliest Fascist texts, and there is certainly implicit condemnation of weakness and decadence, and celebration of strength and bravado. The early Futurist strain of Fascism, however, did not aspire to creating the stability and order that pervades later Fascist rhetoric of the sacred state. Marinetti's model and his language

drew on the rhetoric and shared experiences of trench warfare. In 1919 he belonged among the Intransigents. To cite Griffin again:

The precondition of the national rebirth was [...] a revolution in culture. Instead of reflecting, celebrating even, the fragmentation of world-views into a myriad personal outlooks, private ways of seeing and idiosyncratic experiences or values, culture would, so Fascist idealists trusted, once more come to embody the total vision and ethos of the whole people. Instead of forming a separate sphere of social life divorced from politics, economics and sciences, and bracketed by association with art, religion and leisure, it would again be inseparable from them all, nourishing and harmonizing them. Contemporary life itself would become a living *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, with the Italian people as both its performers and spectators.²⁵

There are some fairly obvious dangers in taking a text such as Marinetti's account of the destruction of a printing shop and reading it as a 'total vision and ethos of the whole people'. Firstly Marinetti was a well-educated creative writer and a performance artist with an internationally notorious reputation. This is therefore not an account from below. It is violence transformed into art, mediated by an experienced manipulator of audiences. It is not spontaneity. The military terminology he deployed in this text and more especially in his performances was a provocative call to arms for the veterans of the trenches, many of them barely literate, who were now returning, with the right to vote, to a shattered economy. Marinetti was aware of the audience for which he was performing: Intransigents *avant la lettre*. He was exploiting a military rhetoric and harnessing the sentiment of the trenches against the non-interventionist Socialists who had stayed at home along with the big business interests which were alleged to have made profit out of the war.²⁶ Secondly, there has been greater emphasis among cultural historians on the *intentions* of the Fascists and how they interpreted what they read in the pages of Gustav Le Bon, Georges Sorel, Vilfredo Pareto or their divulgators, rather than on the effects and consequences of their actions. The *squadristi* who wrecked the *Avanti!* offices in April 1919 may conceivably have thought they were expressing a popular will by their action. In an objective sense, what they thought they were doing is an irrelevance: what they actually did was strike a physical blow against a newspaper, and cultural interpreters might just as easily read that action as a symbolic attack on the free press.

The official, authorized, vision of the Fascist state, the palingenetic myth, required not just passive acceptance by the people: it required their active participation, and a good number of the recent books on the subject have detailed the forms assumed by this active participation or 'communion' with the state, with individuals cast as both performers and spectators.²⁷ There is further potential for controversy here. 'Myth' is a term used quite loosely – perhaps surprisingly so – by a number of cultural historians. For the Fascists of the First Hour, the notion of myth derived specifically, if not always directly, from the writings of Sorel, and that notion was quite precise in Sorel's work, even if it may now appear somewhat bizarre. According to Roberto Maggiori, a minor Fascist ideologue of the time:

Whereas in common parlance myth is a form of fable, or an historical deed transformed by fantasy, in the language of Sorel it becomes not a description of things but an expression of will, the ideological content of a programme of action. Utopia is that which has been or which is to come, an optical illusion projected on to the past or the future; myth, on the other hand, is that which must be, or better still an imperative which aims unfailingly towards its realization.²⁸

Without some appreciation of Giovanni Gentile's philosophy of Actualism, of which Maggiori was obviously an adept, passages such as the one above are unlikely to have much meaning, or even to make sense at all. Maggiori, writing in 1939, was not talking about myth as a form of coercion or consensus building. It was both something more complex and more profoundly simple: it was the bedrock of 'common-sense'. David D. Roberts, in an admonition to some cultural historians, has written:

Myth is especially tricky, because even Sorel's concept is widely misread as a manipulative notion, whereas for Sorel it entailed a kind of primitivism: bound up with pre-rational commitment and belief, myth could only well up from below. Familiar though it is, the notion of elites consciously using myths to mobilize masses was absolutely antithetical to Sorel's notion. [...] To be sure, the Sorelian idea could be taken from its original context to stimulate others – Mussolini, for example – to make manipulative use of myth. But the distinction is important to any attempt to understand the connection between intellectual innovation and subsequent political departures.²⁹

This is a valid distinction, but while there might be heuristic value in interpreting the attack on the *Avanti!* offices as an example of Sorelian myth, of commonsense in action, it is also true that this direct action had been whipped up by manipulative rhetoric and that the mythologizing accounts of it, such as Marinetti's, sought to manipulate the crowd further, inculcating in the Italian masses a spirit of intransigence. Embracing a myth must constitute an act of faith, and so scepticism, irony, satire and dissent had no place in the official vision of Fascist culture. In Mussolini's own contemptuous dictum, which effectively personifies a scapegoat of scepticism and dissent: 'I prefer the *squadrista* who takes decisive action, to the doddering professor'.³⁰ The satirist was even less welcome.

Censorship and surveillance

The work of many recent scholars has dealt with the various uses of culture in the forging and sustaining of a Fascist identity for the Italian masses. Chief among these has been Emilio Gentile, distinguished ex-student of De Felice, who has argued consistently over the last 30 years for Fascism's being an attempt at anthropological revolution, a forging of the new man, and perhaps even the new woman (though she was rarely at the forefront of attention). Gentile has asserted that:

The regeneration of Italians was, for Mussolini, a genuine obsession that accompanied him until the collapse of the regime. He saw the anthropological revolution as a personal contest between himself and the Italian people, whom he held in rather low esteem.³¹

According to this view, Fascism's 'totalitarian pedagogy, its propaganda, its educational monopoly over the young generations, its mania for a capillary organization through which to organize Italians, its rites, its parades, symbols and style of behaviour, as well as its racism, anti-Semitism, social reform, and anti-bourgeois campaign', even the Second World War itself were a part of the projected, and ultimately failed anthropological revolution.

Well perhaps they were. The problem with intentions is that they are most readily measured in the actions which follow from them, and actions may be open to more than one interpretation. Gentile is certainly no apologist for the regime, but a concentration on nebulous intentions, and a willingness to suspend disbelief, and take Fascist texts at face value may be a dangerous approach to evaluating the historical

record. To be fair to Gentile he has also accepted in his writings that the rhetoric of Fascism was as successful as it was because it was underpinned and enforced by its dark side. This dark side was constituted by an organized structure of state power, guided by a set of rational, sober, cynical and often brutal policies, implemented by the security forces, the civil service, a tightly-regulated media industry and the school system, as well as a network of spies, informers, paramilitaries and part-time censors. It is this dark side which we will explore in the chapters which follow, rather than the positive side of spectacle, parades, 'Fascist Saturdays' and theatre for the masses. Before that we need to clarify what we intend by the term 'censorship'.

On one level, censorship was the instinctive reaction of the *squadristi* after their founding meeting in Piazza San Sepolcro, as we have seen, but systematic studies of its operation have been limited mainly either to literary culture or to military and civilian correspondence. These are clearly important spheres of activity but censorship had wider ramifications, and more subtle levels of power, which crossed government ministries and which had effects on virtually every sector of the population, whether or not the people were aware of them. The opening of archives and the deaths of just about all those involved in the murky world of censorship and espionage, taken together, allow us a broader and quite dispassionate view in order to understand the policy and operation of censorship in Italian Fascism.

Prima facie, censorship is an instrument of suppression, and as I have already indicated, it certainly is not unique to totalitarian states. Postal censorship was introduced in twentieth-century Italy by a Liberal government, using a royal decree (*regio decreto* no. 689) during the Great War on 23 May 1915. That decree had not been repealed when Mussolini came to power seven and a half years later.³² According to a modification made in July 1915, civil censorship had been dropped except in areas which were considered subversive. The boundaries of these ambiguous areas were to widen considerably under Fascism, as we will see. In essence though, this royal decree ushered in an instrument for dealing with military correspondence, and it ran in parallel with similar provisions in the other belligerent state armies. What was its purpose?

At its crudest, military censorship was of course a repressive instrument. Its intention was to prevent soldiers, wittingly or otherwise, sending home from the front scraps of information which might compromise military operations. Words or larger parts of letters might be blacked out by the censor before the message could be delivered. In

more extreme situations a letter might be suppressed altogether. This is common practice in every state during times of war. Censorship of this kind can be judged successful if information is kept from people. The more that can be hidden away, the better. It would be reasonable to call this *preventive censorship*. Numerous examples will follow in this book. It would later be extended to cutting telephone lines and then to jamming foreign radio stations and cutting or banning foreign films. Even in advanced western democracies, we are familiar with the beeping out of unacceptable language on radio and television broadcasts. Until relatively recently, the voices of members of a proscribed organization could not be heard on British or Irish radio and television. Their words had to be dubbed.

But there is more to censorship than its *preventive* function. In Italy, phone taps were authorized as early as 1903 by a Giolitti government. A state, once it has developed the habit of snooping on its people, can use the intelligence it gathers at its listening stations to gauge the morale of its troops, or in the case of civilian censorship, the morale of its subjects or citizens, as well as keeping tabs on where they are and what they are getting up to. Mussolini's state machinery was engaged in an increasingly sophisticated, intrusive and secretive practice of *informative* censorship from within days of his coming to power, in what was still nominally a Liberal administration rather than the totalitarian one which he was bent on establishing. Informative censorship is more qualitative than quantitative and can provide an evidence base on which to formulate social or cultural policy, or track down 'subversives'. As Rizzi has put it:

Censorship is not just repression and a prohibition on speech, it also produces knowledge, a knowledge built up by means of a minute examination of everything written by the military and civilian population. Censorship is not just the suppressing of dangerous information which is essential to the safe-keeping of military secrets or harmful to public spirit, it also collects all that information on the morale, on the political sympathies and on the living conditions of the military and civilian population which is useful to those in power to enable them to control the home front and the soldiers under arms.³³

This qualitative interpretation of censorship came to be used by the Fascist state and in its totalitarian aspirations, as did its preventive interpretation.

The third strand of censorship is the *productive* one, in which censorship can be seen (or perhaps to put it better, cannot be seen, except by those trained to find it) in the construction of positive messages. In other words, productive censorship is that which cannot be seen but which gives shape to presentations of the *duce*, or the Italian landscape or stories in the news. It can be detected in *Istituto Luce* newsreels, in the *telefoni bianchi* films of the 1930s, and very graphically in suppressed images of Mussolini, recently published by Mimmo Franzinelli and Emanuele Valerio Marino in *Il duce proibito* (2003).³⁴ In this function, censorship goes hand in hand with propaganda.

The powers of extensive censorship, however, gave the Fascist regime a novel problem to resolve in the early 1930s, the 'years of consensus'. On the one hand they wanted to maintain the firm grip of control they had established over a decade in power on setting the political agenda in the domestic press through censorship. On the other, they wanted a differentiated domestic press, a scenario in which Italian newspapers maintained distinct identities, while retailing substantially the same censored news and uncritical editorial interpretation, so as to reinforce a commonsense Fascist view of the world.

Methodologies and intentions

How then does 'commonsense' relate to censorship and propaganda? Commonsense is more a matter of culture than of politics, and it is likely to be dominated by media presentation and opinion-making in all its varied forms, rather than by open and rational political debate. The question of who controls the media and who sets its agenda is of course a political one. It applies to other opinion formers too, such as the churches, schools, youth organizations, popular entertainers and others. So culture, power, and politics interact on various levels. Mussolini was helped to power because the king and enough of his subjects had little faith in democracy. The political culture of the day rejected democracy with the failed entity of Liberal Italy.

Recent work on Italian Fascism has concerned itself with the question of whether the myths of culture or of politics should be given primacy in its interpretation. This debate, which has widened out to embrace art historians, literary and cultural historians, geographers and anthropologists, has helped to deepen our understanding of sets of assumptions, conscious or otherwise, which were present in Italian society in the 1920s and 1930s. From the work of cultural historians, guiding theories have emerged which involve the ritualization, aestheticization and

‘sacralization’ of power. Following in the wake of Emilio Gentile there are stimulating North-American cultural historians, such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Marla Stone, Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Emily Braun and Mabel Berezin who have shed important light on these processes.³⁵ This has proved an extremely fruitful model for cultural historians working in related disciplines as well as for more traditional historians who have claimed the primacy of culture over politics in the study of Fascism.³⁶ These scholars have examined the construction of the sacralized state in the terms Fascism’s own rhetoric: re-born phoenix-like out of the ashes of the Great War, and ritualized by religious discourse and public spectacle.

Another related strand of recent work looks at the construction of masculinity. A seminal text here is Luisa Passerini’s *Mussolini immaginario* (1991) and there are several North-American Italianists working in this area such as Karen Pinkus and Barbara Spackman, following in the wider European traditions of George L. Mosse and Klaus Theweleit.³⁷ These latter scholars have dealt more with Germany than with Italy of course, and in the Germanic context Mosse has argued that in the 1930s ‘respectability provided society with an essential cohesion that was as important in the perceptions of men and women as any economic or political interests’.³⁸ In this case, to codify ‘respectability’, nationalism and sexuality combined to generate a virulent racist mix of anti-Semitism and homophobia. Respectability for Italian Fascists may have assumed some slightly different forms but a conception of the body was central to both the German and the Italian interpretations, and we will pursue this point further in a later chapter.

The background context to the consensus argument put forward by De Felice, Cannistraro and others is Italian imperial expansion in the 1930s. This pits Fascist ideological constructs of ideal manliness and virility against representation of its opposite, or Other, that is to say Black Africa, regarded as poor, backward and alien. These various images, particularly regarding the covering or disclosure of nakedness, involve evaluation of the messages encoded in those representations in terms of intention, category of text, technological medium, media language and demonstrable or likely audience response. Censorship and propaganda are inextricably linked to such presentations.

Mussolini (or perhaps it was his tame philosopher Giovanni Gentile) wrote in the *Dottrina del Fascismo* (1932) in the *Enciclopedia italiana* that:

For Fascism, the push towards empire, national expansion, is a manifestation of vitality. Its contrary, the stay-at-home, is a sign of

decadence: peoples who rise [*sorgono*] and rise again [*risorgono*] are imperialist, peoples who die, renounce life.³⁹

Consciously implying an affiliation with the *Risorgimento* in his use of verbs, Mussolini was enunciating a variation on his familiar theme of virility, which was, according to Barbara Spackman not simply one of many Fascist qualities:

The cults of youth, of duty, of sacrifice and heroic virtues, of strength and stamina, of obedience and authority, and physical strength and sexual potency that characterize Fascism [were] all inflections of the master term virility.⁴⁰

We recognize in that characterization the various still photographs, paintings and drawings of Mussolini himself as hero, 'the invincible *Man*', to cite another recent commentator who in turn is quoting Giuseppe Prezzolini.⁴¹ Prezzolini was writing in 1913, almost a decade before Fascism found itself in power, and even before the beginning of the Great War, indicating that the myth of Mussolini as redemptive hero had long roots. Describing developments of a decade later Emily Braun has written of Mario Sironi's early 1920s representations of Mussolini that:

In the early twenties, Sironi still depicts Mussolini as an earthbound politician in Blackshirt garb or parliamentary suit; yet already at work are the myth of his more than human prowess and the emphasis on physical might in the achievement of his aims. Mussolini's malleable face – the exaggerated protrusion of the jaw and furrowed brow – could border on the grotesque, making him easy game for the infamous anti-Fascist caricatures by Gabriele Galantara (1865–1937) in the pages of *L'Asino* and *Il Becco giallo*. By contrast, Sironi pictures the middle-aged future dictator with a youthful visage, his features bearing a fearful symmetry.⁴²

Clearly we could multiply the illustrations of this point almost to infinity of Mussolini once he had become the *duce*. The object of the exercise is to demonstrate the power of charisma in the presentation of an image of power as a phenomenon of nature, or a matter of commonsense.⁴³

Mussolini had imbibed Max Weber's concept of charisma, probably not directly, in his disordered reading during the early decades of the twentieth century. According to this concept, the charisma of political