Between 1926 and 1943, the Fascist regime arrested thousands of Italians and deported them to island internment colonies and small villages in southern Italy. *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini’s Italy* analyzes this system of political confinement and, more broadly, its effects on Italian society, revealing the centrality of political violence to Fascist rule. In doing so, the book shatters the widely accepted view that the Mussolini regime ruled without a system of mass repression. The Fascist state ruled Italy violently, projecting its coercive power deeply and diffusely into society through confinement, imprisonment, low-level physical assaults, economic deprivations, intimidation, discrimination, and other quotidian forms of coercion. Moreover, by promoting denunciatory practices, the regime cemented the loyalties of “upstanding” citizens while suppressing opponents, dissenters, and social outsiders. Fascist repression was thus more intense and ideological than previously thought and even shared some important similarities with Nazi and Soviet terror.

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Ordinary Violence in Mussolini’s Italy

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For Alceste Alvi
## Contents

*Tables and Figures*  
*Acknowledgments*  
*Common Abbreviations in Text and Notes*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Fascist Archipelago</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Squad Violence</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Institutions of Fascist Violence</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Breaking the Anti-Fascists, 1926–1934</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Archipelago</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The Politics of Pardons</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Everyday Political Crime</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Ordinary Fascist Violence</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 The Politics of Everyday Life</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bibliography</em></td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Index</em></td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables and Figures

Tables

1. Projected Expansion of Confino Colonies, April 1928  page 109
2. Common Detainees Assigned to Island Colonies, 1928–1937  110
3. Political Confino Sentences, 1926–1934 (159 of 549 sampled)  171
4. List of Satirical Film Titles (1942)  210

Figures

1. The March on Rome (1922)  36
2. Arturo Bocchini, Fascist Chief of Police (1926)  51
3. Political Detainee Population by Location, 1927–1934  111
4. Political Detainees in Manacles (1927)  112
5. The Island of Ventotene  126
6. Detainee Barracks on San Nicola, One of the Tremiti Islands (1930)  128
7. Political Detainee Population by Location, 1935–1943  132
8. An Unknown Political Detainee Returns Home, Escorted by a Public-Security Official  145
9. Political Confinement Sentences, 1935–1943 (388 cases from the sample of 549)  176
10. Child Receiving Charity and Giving the Fascist Salute (1930)  235
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Although this project has sometimes taken me away from my wife, Lesley Porcelli, it has mostly left us with happy memories, mainly involving our long and short stays in Rome and other parts of Italy, from before we were married up to the present. Most recently, in 2008, when our son Franklin was just three months old, we went to Rome for a month so that I could finish research. The picture we took of him staring up in wonder at the cobalt blue ceiling of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva is perhaps our favorite image of him. No doubt a future project will soon bring our next child, due in just a few months, to Rome.

For me, the personal happiness and professional satisfaction that surrounded my trips to Italy always stood in stark contrast with the sad stories of the Fascist political detainees and their families who are the subject of this study. Alceste Alvi, to whom I have dedicated this book, was a Roman anarchist whose life was ruined by Fascism. The police sanctions inflicted on him by the Fascist regime precipitated the physical and economic decline of him and his wife. By repeatedly arresting, confining, and harassing Alvi, the regime condemned him and his family to years of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and illness. One should not overly romanticize a figure like Alvi. He was probably not a very pleasant person and would have run afoul of the law even if Fascism had
never come to Italy. However, he certainly did not deserve what befell him. More importantly, the physical and economic decline of Alvi and his wife reveal the subtle but insidious ways that the Mussolini regime used violence and coercion to rule Italy. When I first read Alvi’s file in 1999, his case struck me as very sad, but also very ordinary. He was not tortured, imprisoned for decades, or shot. In 2008, I was in Rome gathering a few last bits of archival research when I came across a police report detailing Alceste Alvi’s 1937 suicide attempt – he jumped off of a bridge into the Tiber – along with the letters that Alvi subsequently wrote to Mussolini. The strictures and stigma of political probation, he told his dictator, made finding employment impossible. Consequently, his wife had gone blind; he had an excruciating ulcer; and they now lived apart in separate public dormitories. In his letter, Alvi extolled Mussolini’s greatness, particularly his founding of the Fascist empire after the conquest of Ethiopia. But the letter also made clear that Fascist repressive measures had broken Alvi physically, politically, and psychologically. He begged Mussolini to revoke his probation, but to no avail. Police surveillance of Alvi ended only in 1941, the year he died, certainly prematurely, of unknown causes. The discovery of this last batch of documents suddenly made clear to me the extraordinary and brutal power of ordinary Fascist violence.

Common Abbreviations in Text and Notes

ACS
b.
Confinati politici
Confinati comuni
CPC
DAGR
DGPS
EOA
Fasc.
GIL
MI
MVSN
OCI
ONB
ONMI
OVRA
PCI
PNF
PSI
Sf.
UCP
UPI

State Central Archive (Archivio Centrale dello Stato)
Busta
Personal files of political detainees
Personal files of common detainees
Central Political Registry
Division of General and Confidential Affairs
General Directorate of Public Security
Ente Opere Assistenziali (Fascist welfare agency)
Fascicolo
Fascist Youth Organization (Italian Youth of the Lictors), 1937–43
Ministry of the Interior
Fascist Militia (Voluntary Militia for National Security)
Capillary Investigative Unit (of the PNF)
Fascist Youth Organization (National Balilla Organization), 1926–37
National Organization for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy
Organization for the Surveillance and Repression of Antifascism (secret political police)
Italian Communist Party
National Fascist Party
Italian Socialist Party
Sottofascicolo
Political Confinement Office
Provincial Investigative Office (of the MVSN)