

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Between 1940 and 1943, with the decisive military assistance of its German ally, Fascist Italy conquered a number of territories in the Mediterranean area of Europe: a part of metropolitan France, Corsica, southern Slovenia, south-western Croatia, the Dalmatian coast, Montenegro, most of Kosovo, western Macedonia and a large part of Greece and its islands. The expression 'conquered territories' denotes those that were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy and those occupied following an armistice or administered by military governors, as well as territories of allied states in which Italian troops were stationed. It is important to specify from the outset that the case of Albania – a territory occupied before the outbreak of the Second World War, and in circumstances radically different from those of subsequent conquests – will be given due consideration in this book, but the short-lived occupation of Tunisia will not be treated.

On examining the historiography on Fascist occupations in Mediterranean Europe, one notes the presence of striking lacunae but also of a number of pioneering studies: the three volumes by Oddone Talpo on Dalmatia, the works by Tone Ferenc and Marco Cuzzi on Slovenia, by Jean-Louis Panicacci on Menton, by Romain Rainero on the relationships between Italy and Vichy France, by Mark Mazower on Greece and especially the numerous studies by Enzo Collotti and Teodoro Sala on Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> The works of Daniel Carpi, Léon Poliakov and Jacques Sabille, Michele Sarfatti, Jonathan Steinberg, Klaus Voigt and Susan Zuccotti have concentrated on matters concerning the Jews, with the occupation acting as a backdrop to their researches.<sup>2</sup> Yet no comprehensive analysis of Italy's

<sup>1</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*; Ferenc, *La provincia 'italiana' di Lubiana*; Cuzzi, *L'occupazione italiana della Slovenia*; Panicacci, *Les Alpes Maritimes*; Rainero, *Mussolini e Pétain*; Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*; Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*; Collotti and Sala, *Le potenze dell'Asse e la Jugoslavia*; Sala, 'Programmi di snazionalizzazione del "fascismo di frontiera"'.  
<sup>2</sup> Carpi, 'Rescue of Jews in the Italian Zone of Occupied Croatia'; Carpi, 'Notes of the History of the Jews in Greece'; Carpi, *Between Mussolini and Hitler*; Panicacci, 'Les juifs et la question juive dans

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

occupation policies has been attempted. This, therefore, is the purpose of this book; an endeavour prompted by the following remarks by Collotti and Renzo De Felice:

[While] it is important to acknowledge that Fascism failed to achieve its objectives, it is of equal importance to identify Fascism's components and its projects . . . understanding their history in relation to the regime's aspirations and achievements.<sup>3</sup>

Still lacking is any study on Italy's reasons for going to war or, more generally, on how it conceived the post-war 'new order' and the place and role within it of Fascist Italy, and on how [Mussolini] contrived to curb National Socialist ambitions and assert his vision or, at least, carve out a role for himself amid those ambitions.<sup>4</sup>

The documentation on which this book is based is conserved in the archives of the Italian Army General Staff, the historical and diplomatic archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central State Archives, the historical archive of the Bank of Italy, the archives of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, the archive of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Greek archives. Much of the material has never previously been published. However, it should be borne in mind that the documentation available is not exhaustive: a large quantity of archival material has been lost (for example, the documents of the War Commissariat for the occupying armies and those of the *Fabbriguerra*<sup>5</sup>) because numerous local authorities burned registers, reports, correspondence, ledgers and lists, as well as numerous other documents as soon as the armistice was signed. Research is also hampered by Italian law, which does not permit consultation of documents on, for example, war crimes. I would finally stress that, even after decades of collation and organization, numerous other Italian archives are still closed to researchers. Those of greatest importance for the present study are the diplomatic archives on Albania, those on the

les Alpes Maritimes'; Picciotto Fargion, 'Italian Citizens in Nazi-Occupied Europe'; Poliakov and Sabelle, *Jews Under the Italian Occupation*; Sarfatti, 'Fascist Italy and German Jews in South-Eastern France'; Shelah, *Un debito di gratitudine*; Steinberg, *All or Nothing*; Voigt, *Il rifugio precario*; Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*; Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, the Jews*.

<sup>3</sup> Collotti, *Fascismo, fascismi*, pp. 165 and 17. Gerhard Schreiber has written (here translated into English from the German): 'Ideas have to be taken seriously, no matter how abstruse and remote from all possible realization they may be. This applies not only to Hitler, and it means not only a rejection of the kind of downplaying of Hitler's programme which has often been, and still is, attempted on the grounds of its remoteness from reality . . . As for historical relevance, this stems from the fact that even the most unrealistic planning is, in itself, also real, and that ideas, if given half a chance of realization, seldom remain mere ideas. In other words, they reveal the dimension of volition, i.e. what moves history forward, and usually influence it more powerfully than that which has manifestly taken place' (Schreiber, 'Political and Military Developments in the Mediterranean Area', p. 301).

<sup>4</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Fabbriguerra* (short for *Commissariato Generale per la Fabbricazione di Guerra*) procured raw materials and allocated them among factories requisitioned for the war effort.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

war tribunals, the censored letters of soldiers, the files of the various Fascist economic ministries and the archives of the Foreign Ministry's general directorate for trade.

As regards secondary sources, the literature on the French, Greek and Yugoslavian resistance movements does not concern itself with the role of the Italians in the occupied territories. It sometimes omits them entirely from events and often caricatures Italian occupation policy. It depicts the Italian occupiers as amiable and indifferent to a war which they did not feel to be their own, and as fraternizing closely with the occupied populations, forming sentimental attachments and friendships. It thus seems that comparison with the brutal and ruthless Germans is impossible, or else that the Italian occupations were nothing but occupations on Germany's behalf. But is this really the case?

The book divides into two parts. The first examines Fascist Italy's relationships with Germany, its plans for expansion in the Mediterranean area, actual occupation, the co-ordination of policies, and the 'conquerors'. The second part explores the various aspects of occupation policy, relations with the governments of the occupied countries, economic penetration, the forced Italianization of the zones annexed, collaboration, repression, the internment of civilians, the 'refugee question' and the so-called Jewish Question. The treatment is organized thematically, and each chapter proceeds by examining in parallel, and sometimes comparing, events in the various territories conquered. The reader is advised that aspects of this historical period pertaining to the occupied territories which have already been examined by historians will only be outlined here. I refer to the conquest – the western Alps (June 1940) and the Balkans, the wars against Greece (26 October 1940–23 April 1941) and against Yugoslavia (6–12 April 1941) – and to the period following the armistice of 8 September 1943.

The first chapter reviews the main phases of development in relations between Italy and Germany, and demonstrates that the Fascist regime had failed to achieve its objectives even before the conquest of its European territories. The chapter examines the relationship between the two Axis powers and argues that Italy's diplomatic, military and economic subordination to its ally substantially altered Fascism's plans for Mediterranean domination. It describes the principal features of the Italians' reaction to Nazi encroachment on 'their' living space and reconstructs the perceptions entertained by Italian diplomats, Fascist Party hierarchs and senior German army officers.

The second chapter addresses the following questions: what were the ideological, political and economic motives for the conquest and domination of the Mediterranean? What geopolitical configuration of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Mediterranean would have come about after the war, which the regime believed it would win? How would territories falling, in one way or the other, within the Fascist sphere of influence have been governed? The chapter furnishes definitions of the expressions *nuova civiltà*, *nuovo ordine* and *comunità imperiale*, or the geo-political space in which the satellites of the Fascist empire would orbit under the motive principle of the nation's ethnic unity (one people for one nation).

The third chapter examines the discrepancies between intentions and outcomes in the territories ruled from Rome, and it classifies the territories conquered into annexed provinces and militarily occupied territories. It shows that Italy's expansionary plans clashed with complex local realities, and also that the geographical extent of the territories which the Italians were able to occupy depended on the benevolence of the Germans. The new frontiers were ill-considered boundaries which severed social, political and economic ties among the occupied zones. They posed both strategic and administrative problems because of territorial discontinuity and because different regimes obtained in contiguous zones of occupation.

The fourth chapter describes how the conquered territories were administered. It examines the roles of Mussolini, the organs of the state, and the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF, National Fascist Party) in co-ordinating policies in Rome, and also the role of 'the men on the spot' (to borrow an expression from historians of the British Empire). It then dwells on the administrative tasks of the Regio Esercito (Royal Army) and examines conflicts of jurisdiction. Although the subject of the book is military occupations, its concern is not with the preparedness of the Regio Esercito; and it does not assess the military and strategic capabilities of its commanders, the technological level of its armaments or the strategies adopted for the campaigns of conquest. On these matters the reader is referred to the studies by Lucio Ceva, MacGregor Knox, Fortunato Minniti, Leopoldo Nuti and Giorgio Rochat.<sup>6</sup>

The final chapter – entitled 'The conquerors' – in this first part of the book examines the experiences of more than half a million Italians in the occupied territories between 1940 and 1943. For more than fifty years, historians have concentrated on the occupied populations as the victims of aggression by the Axis powers. Numerous studies have been published on national liberation movements: some have exalted the romance of national

<sup>6</sup> Ceva, *Le forze armate*; Ceva, 'Vertici politici e militari'; Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*; Knox, *Common Destiny*; Minniti, 'Profili dell'iniziativa strategica italiana'; Nuti, 'I problemi storiografici connessi con l'intervento italiano'; Rochat, 'Mussolini chef de guerre'; Rochat, 'Appunti sulla direzione politico-militare della guerra fascista'; Rochat, 'Lo sforzo bellico'; Rochat, *L'esercito italiano*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

histories; others have elaborated on epics of resistance; yet others, more recently, have examined the vicissitudes of civil societies under the Nazis. But none of them has analysed the experiences of hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers in the occupied countries, where they remained for more than two years confined in military enclaves, subject to military rule and discipline, and far from their homes, their families and their jobs. Little study has been made of the impact of everyday reality on the occupiers, on their morale, sanitary conditions and relations with the occupied populations, or of their racism, or above all of the role of Fascist ideology in the Italians' treatment of the populations under their control.

The second part of the book examines the policies pursued in the occupied territories. The sixth chapter analyses the exercise of authority and relationships between the occupying power and the executive and administrative branches in a first subset of territories: those occupied militarily and which possessed a government. The economic exploitation of the countries occupied – the topic of the seventh chapter – is undoubtedly a new departure in the literature on Fascism. Setting aside the thorny question of the consequences of this exploitation,<sup>7</sup> the chapter describes the 'projects' (i.e., the regime's long-term objectives) and their 'realization' (i.e., the short-term exploitation) of the occupied territories. It takes due account of the role of the Germans in the Fascist economic space and examines the expenses arising from occupation and the obstacles encountered by the conquerors as they set about exploiting the dominated territories industrially, commercially and financially.

The eighth chapter concentrates on the forced Italianization of the annexed territories, singling out four distinct yet interconnected dimensions: the ethnic and racial mapping of the territories; the erasure of national identity and the internment, transfer and expulsion of native-born residents; the 'Fascistization' of the latter (especially those of younger age) through education and the 'totalitarian' action of all the organs of the state and the Fascist party; and the colonizing of further provinces.

The ninth chapter addresses the theme of collaboration. It is founded on the conviction that the division of the occupied societies between those that collaborated and those that resisted is simplistic and obsolete. Studies such as Philippe Burrin's *La France à l'heure allemande* (1995) or Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (1991) have shown that there was a grey zone of accommodations and compromises that encompassed the actions of the majority of the occupied populations. The

<sup>7</sup> On this, see the brilliant study by Etmektsoglou-Koehn, 'Axis Exploitation of Wartime Greece', which examines the heavy responsibility of the Axis for famine in Greece.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

upheavals brought by defeat induced not only individuals but also entire strata of societies to seek a *modus vivendi* with the occupiers, and they did so for the most diverse of reasons. There were in fact various degrees of compromise, so that lumping the few collaborationists, Yugoslav Četniks, Greek gendarmes and French prefects into a single category would be inappropriate. Distinctions must be drawn between those who fought side by side with the occupiers for ideological reasons and those who collaborated to secure the means for their survival, between those who provided military assistance and those who enlisted with the voluntary anti-communist militia.

The penultimate chapter compares the provisions and application of the rules on public order issued by the authorities in the occupied territories and the criteria used when they conducted round-ups and took reprisals. It analyses differences among the methods used to put down rebellions, compares the treatment of rebels in the various zones of occupation and conducts a geographical survey of the concentration camps for civilian internees.

The final chapter interweaves the 'refugee question' with the 'Jewish question'. It argues that, for a certain period of time, Jewish refugees who fled into the Italian-occupied zones to escape persecution or deportation were treated in entirely the same manner as all other refugees. They were refused entry or escorted back to the border and consigned to their persecutors. With reference to Italian policies towards Jews, Poliakov has written:

'The action of the Rome government displayed a plurality of motives – what is known as the permanent national interest, some remote calculation, a vague quest for reassurance and even a latent Germanophobia – all certainly played a part. The fact still remains, however, that it was the attitude of the Italian people as a whole that determined the position adopted by the government. It was responsible for the mindset of those charged with deciding what action to take, who forced . . . Mussolini himself to oppose German demands . . . [There was] a profound incompatibility between the two Axis partners.'<sup>8</sup>

Poliakov's thesis could have been the point of departure for new research on the topic as early as the 1960s, given that the bulk of the documentation had already been microfilmed and was available to scholars at that time. Analysis of the 'plurality of motives' would probably have led to abandonment of a genocide-centred view of events and to the recontextualization of the history of the Greek, Yugoslav and French Jewish refugees within the Fascist occupation. It would also have prompted examination of Italian policy within the framework of relations with the Germans and with the

<sup>8</sup> Poliakov and Sabelle, *Jews Under the Italian Occupation*, p. 44.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

other occupied countries, in the light of the particular circumstances of a territorial expansion *sub condicione* and amid the contingencies of war. In this sense, the chapter is revisionist because, as Pierre Milza puts it, historical analysis applied to the contemporary age should conceive itself as a sequence of established 'truths' to be subsequently re-examined in the light of new sources, new questions and new revelations.<sup>9</sup>

The documentation in my possession belies the claim that 'Mussolini's government did not release a single Jew to the Nazis for deportation.'<sup>10</sup> And it prompts investigation of the circumstances in which Jews were consigned to the Germans or to collaborationist governments, or expelled. Was there really a concerted effort to rescue the Jews, planned from upon high, coordinated by the various branches of the Italian administration and pursued on the basis of a humanitarian imperative? Can we describe Italian policy as 'rescue of the Jews during the Holocaust',<sup>11</sup> as 'humanitarian deliverance' or even as establishing a 'debt of gratitude' towards the occupiers by the 'saved'?

Although military occupations are ancient phenomena, they have only recently been subject to study. They can be distinguished into two main types: classic military occupations and those that can be described as 'Napoleonic'. Both ensue from a military victory. The former serve to weaken the adversary and their purpose is neither the physical incorporation of the occupied territory into the occupying nation nor the cultural assimilation of its identity. They are temporary arrangements, and it is assumed that they will conclude with a peace treaty or with cessation of conflict. In the latter case, the occupier imposes its political, social, cultural and economic system on the occupied territory and society. Napoleonic occupations had this feature, and in certain respects so did those by Japan and the Soviet Union. Distinctive of occupations of this kind is the eschatological missionarism of the occupiers. Driven by the conviction that they alone possess the truth, they impose not only their hegemony but also their value systems and beliefs, the purpose being to 'save' the occupied population, which has no other option but submit to their 'liberators'.

The occupations by the Third Reich do not match this definition. The main purpose of the Nazi conquests was to acquire territories whose inhabitants were then to be removed, except for those who could be Germanized and some others for use as slaves. The expulsion of the peoples inhabiting

<sup>9</sup> Milza, *Mussolini*, p. vii.<sup>10</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, p. 54.<sup>11</sup> The subtitle to Herzer, *The Italian Refugee*.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the *Lebensraum*, the settlement therein of only populations with German blood, and the genocide of the Jews were essential components of the project to accomplish the 'racial catharsis' of Nazi Europe.

And the Fascist occupations? They shared certain features with classic occupations and also with Napoleonic ones; but ideologically they were akin to the Nazi occupations, although they were much less radical in intent (during the implementation phase). Of course, if we consider only the outcomes, it is difficult to decide what was distinctively Fascist about the occupations of Mediterranean Europe. Violence and brutality were not unique to them. Suffice it to consider – in more recent times – what the United States did in Vietnam or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan: two superpowers whose armies failed to defeat the guerrilla movements ranged against them despite the advanced technological means at their disposal.

Consequently, if we are to adumbrate the distinctive features of the Fascist occupations, we must go further than mere acknowledgement that Fascism failed to achieve its objectives. We must also identify the components, aspirations and 'projects' of the Fascist domination of a part of Mediterranean Europe, however short-lived it may have been.

Emilio Gentile has written that Italian Fascism was a political and cultural revolution. It sought to destroy the liberal regime and to construct a new state in the unprecedented form of totalitarian organization of civil society and the political system.<sup>12</sup> The totalitarianism of the Fascist regime – which was less radicalized than that of the Third Reich – would conquer a living space in which the *uomo nuovo*, the conqueror born of the revolution, would prosper. Though the circumstances of this conquest and Italy's peculiar status in the Axis profoundly conditioned the extent and nature of its *dominio*, we should not forget that the regime did indeed partly achieve its 'historic objective' of territorial expansion. The Fascist project for the territorial conquest and occupation of Mediterranean Europe cannot be ignored, therefore. Instead, it must be examined with care and framed within the history of the Fascist regime, of Italy and of the Second World War.

<sup>12</sup> Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, p. 13.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART I

*The time of idiocy*

There are exceptional moments in the life of an individual in which the inhibitory centres seem to relax their control over the irrational and unreflecting impulses of the spirit and mankind lapses into error. Similar circumstances arise in the lives of nations. While in normal times a wise man errs seven times a day, in emergencies he does so seven times seven. The unwise now come to the forefront and their stupidity, no longer restrained by fear of the judgement of others, reaches the heights of absurdity. In times of war, as in periods of revolution, there is no possibility of choice and in the general turmoil the scum rises to the surface. This is the case of the excesses committed in revolutionary uprisings and it also explains why error is the norm in warfare, so that the side which commits fewer errors is victorious; or, better, the side more able to exploit the errors of its adversary. It is inevitable that in a country so unprepared for war as Italy a staggering array of follies will be committed.

Luca Pietromarchi, unpublished diary, 14 March 1942

*Prologue**The conquered territories*

On 10 June 1940 Italy entered the war on Germany's side. Between the end of that month and November 1942 the Italians occupied or annexed various territories in Mediterranean Europe, but they were able to do so always and only by virtue of Germany's decisive military intervention on their behalf.

After the armistice of 24 June 1940, the Italians occupied a number of French *communes* along Italy's western frontier, among them Menton. In April 1941, the defeat of Yugoslavia led to its territorial partition among Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and Albania, and to the creation of the two independent states of Croatia and Montenegro (although the independence of the latter was short-lived), while Serbia was occupied by the German army.

Between May and June 1941, the Italians annexed the cities of Kotor and Split, while a number of towns in the interior were incorporated into

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84515-1 - Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War

Davide Rodogno

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the province of Zara (Zadar), which had been Italian since the First World War. These three cities – Kotor, Split and Zadar – formed the Governorate of Dalmatia. Ljubljana and its province constituted what was called the Italian Province of Ljubljana, while territories in the Kupano, a strip of land between Slovenia and Croatia comprising the small town of Suak, were merged with Italy's province of Fiume.

Again with regard to the Yugoslavian territories, it was decided at the Vienna conference (21–24 April 1941) that Montenegro should become a protectorate of Rome. The same fate was decreed for Croatia, although there was no protocol or treaty to sanction that decision. Albania acquired a large part of Kosovo and the western area of Yugoslavian Macedonia (the rest went to Bulgaria), while it extended its frontiers northwards into the Montenegrin region of Metohija. Although Germany imposed no restrictions on Italian ambitions officially, it made sure that zones of key importance to the Reich's interests did not end up in the possession of Italy or its satellites. It was for this reason that it backed Sofia's claims in western Macedonia (the zone of Ohrid and Skopje) and directly occupied zones with mineral or other natural resources (northern and eastern Kosovo, for example). In the summer of 1941, the western and central part of Croatia, including broad swathes of Bosnia and the whole of Herzegovina, as well as Montenegro and the western Sanjak, were militarily occupied by the troops of the Italian Regio Esercito.

Greece was occupied by the Axis powers after it had been defeated militarily as a consequence of German intervention in April 1941. The troops of the Regio Esercito, which between 20 October 1940 and 23 April 1941 had sought in vain to defeat and invade Greece, occupied almost all Hellenic continental territory except for the wealthy province of Greek Macedonia, which had been taken over by the Germans, and Thrace, which had been annexed by Bulgaria. The Italians occupied numerous Greek islands as well: the Ionian islands – administered by civil commissioners who prepared the way for annexation – the Cyclades and the (southern) Sporades.

Finally, from 12 November 1942 onwards, the Regio Esercito occupied Corsica and eight French *départements* lying to the east of the Rhône; it also occupied the principality of Monaco. The Italian occupation of all these territories officially came to an end with the armistice of 8 September 1943; but the Italians withdrew voluntarily from some of them between the spring and summer of 1943 following accords with the Germans.

Many of the militarily occupied areas were part of Fascism's imperial 'project'. They pertained to its ambition for *spazio vitale*, or 'living space',