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978-0-521-76213-7 - Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy

Michael R. Ebner

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Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy

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.

Michael R. Ebner is Assistant Professor of History at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. He is the 2000–1 recipient of the Rome Prize in Modern Italian Studies from the American Academy in Rome. From 2001 to 2002, he was a Whiting Fellow at Columbia University.

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For Alceste Alvi

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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

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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.

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Common Abbreviations in Text and Notes

ACS	State Central Archive (Archivio Centrale dello Stato)
b.	Busta
Confinati politici	Personal files of political detainees
Confinati comuni	Personal files of common detainees
CPC	Central Political Registry
DAGR	Division of General and Confidential Affairs
DGPS	General Directorate of Public Security
EOA	Ente Opere Assistenziali (Fascist welfare agency)
Fasc.	Fascicolo
GIL	Fascist Youth Organization (Italian Youth of the Lictors), 1937–43
MI	Ministry of the Interior
MVSN	Fascist Militia (Voluntary Militia for National Security)
OCI	Capillary Investigative Unit (of the PNF)
ONB	Fascist Youth Organization (National Balilla Organization), 1926–37
ONMI	National Organization for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy
OVRA	Organization for the Surveillance and Repression of Antifascism (secret political police)
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PNF	National Fascist Party
PSI	Italian Socialist Party
Sf.	Sottofascicolo
UCP	Political Confinement Office
UPI	Provincial Investigative Office (of the MVSN)