

– and celebrated an antifascist Resistance with little reference to what it resisted. In the chapters that follow, Corner meticulously debunks myths spanning the politics, economics and social structures of Fascist Italy. For example, the second chapter deconstructs the idea of ‘good-natured Fascism’, identifying violence – its physical manifestation and its latent threat – as ‘one of the defining and structural characteristics of the regime’ (p. 36). In the run-up to the centenary of the March on Rome the question of Fascist violence attracted increased scholarly interest, resulting in new research from Giulia Albanese (2019), John Foot (2022) and Matteo Millan (2022) that documents the regime’s systemic use of violence. What these books make clear is the role that the simple threat of violence played in the establishment of the regime and throughout the *ventennio*. As Corner writes in Chapter 3, ‘it was consensus *within coercion*’ in Fascist Italy (p. 50).

‘Things were better when HE was in charge’ – a refrain often heard in neofascist circles today – is the title of the fourth chapter, in which Corner argues that not everything that happened under Fascism was down to Fascism alone. In this, the longest of the seven chapters, Corner presents Fascism as a class regime and shows that the benefits still lauded by Fascist sympathisers (many credit Mussolini for the introduction of pensions) were highly hierarchical in their application. Corruption, falling wages in industry, and the low consumption of calories in the families of labourers left the poorest poorer than they had been before *il Duce* took power. Chapter 5 argues that the racial laws, antisemitism and colonial atrocities were not, as some far-right sympathisers have argued, some of ‘Mussolini’s mistakes’ in pursuit of an alliance with Hitler or down to his desire to compete with European colonialism, but consequences of an ‘inevitably expansionist’ (p. 117) and racist regime. The final two chapters address the myth of Mussolini as a modernising force, showing among other things the failure of land reclamation (‘a good idea done badly’, p. 136), reflect on the lure of the past amidst recent uncertainties, and point us towards the threat of Fascism online today.

Corner’s work shows that the normalisation of previously damned dictators takes place in the space left open when history and memory diverge. His book is an effort to realign the two, exposing these myths for what they are. Reflecting on how myths created by the regime have taken on a life of their own since its demise, Corner remarks (p. 144) in characteristically elegant fashion: ‘We still hear the cheers; we no longer suffer the strait-jacket of social control.’ One can only hope the more people read this book, the quieter those cheers will become.

doi:10.1017/mit.2023.1

## 16 ottobre 1943

by **Giacomo Debenedetti, Milan, La nave di Teseo, 2021, 112 pp., €12.00 (paperback with flaps), ISBN 978-88-346-0464-9**

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Giacomo Debenedetti penned *16 ottobre 1943* – the first written memory of the Italian Shoah – when the fate of the Jewish people apprehended by the Nazis in the Roman

Ghetto was not yet certain. Debenedetti himself was not a victim of the roundup: during the occupation of Rome, between October 1943 and May 1944, he had taken refuge in Cortona. The story was first published in December 1944 in the Roman magazine *Mercurio*, and then republished in French in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* (1947) and reprinted in Leonardo Sciascia's *Galleria* (1955). Also in 1944, Debenedetti published *Otto ebrei*, narrating how, during Police Commissioner Pietro Caruso's trial, the Commissioner of Public Security Raffaele Alianello declared himself the protector of Jews.

Now, writes Mario Andreose in his 'Editorial note', Debenedetti's children have allowed these two texts to be republished in a new form by La nave di Teseo, complemented by a drawing by Alberto Savinio, by Debenedetti's portraits of Felice Casorati and Carlo Levi, and by additional notes by Alberto Moravia, Natalia Ginzburg and Guido Piovene. The publishing house is also working on a wider programme of reissuing Debenedetti's works (p. 10), so there is more to come.

The strength of Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943*, like Alessandro Manzoni's *Colonna infame* and Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, resides in its choral nature – a fitting choice, according to Moravia, since racism is a mass ideology. Debenedetti collected the tragic stories of the Roman Jews, whose voices sometimes detach themselves from the chorus to tell their individual experiences. As in a Greek tragedy, the scene opens on a serene ghetto, on the evening of Friday 15 October 1943, when the Jewish community is preparing to celebrate Shabbat. The calm is interrupted when a woman, Celeste, tries to warn the community that the Nazis will soon come to take them away. No one wants to believe her, considering her '*una chiacchierona, un'esaltata, una fanaticca*' ('a chatterbox, a hothead, a fanatic') (p. 19). But there are other reasons why she is not believed. Three weeks earlier, on the evening of 26 September 1943, the Nazi general Herbert Kappler had threatened the presidents of the Jewish Community of Rome and of the Union of Italian Communities. He had accused the Jews of Rome of being doubly guilty: 'as Italians, traitors against Germany', and as Jews, '*eterni nemici della Germania*' ('Germany's eternal enemies') (p. 22). Therefore, the Reich required them to give more than 50 kilograms of gold in exchange for their security in little more than a day and a half. Despite the impossible deadline for collecting this monstrous amount of gold, the Jewish Community succeeded. Unfortunately, the deal was a lie to lull them into a false sense of security.

On the morning of 16 October, hundreds of Nazi soldiers materialise on the pavements of the ghetto, rounding up women, men and children. The story is a chorus of the pain of the Jewish experience, in the families rounded up, pushed forward with the barrels of machine guns, although no one puts up any resistance other than cries, requests for mercy, bewildered interrogations. Through the eyes of Mrs Laurina S., on whose testimony Debenedetti dwells the longest, we learn of the peremptory orders of the Nazis who deliver a note to each family, warning them to be ready for departure in 20 minutes. The end is deportation: at dawn on Monday, the Jews are loaded into vans and taken to the Roma Tiburtina station, where they are stowed on the cattle wagons that we now know as symbols of the Shoah.

If *16 ottobre 1943* zooms in on the Nazi cruelty, *Otto ebrei* reminds us of the Italian Fascists' often unacknowledged responsibility in the persecution of the Jews. At the end of January 1944, Pietro Caruso assumed the functions of Police Commissioner in Rome, intensifying the operations of hunting down the Jewish people. The massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine, in which Caruso plays a fundamental role, is even more sadly famous than the roundup of 16 October 1943: the killing, on 24 March 1944, of 335 civilians and Italian soldiers, political prisoners, Jews and common prisoners, in retaliation for the attack that the partisans organised against the Nazis in via Rasella. Debenedetti does not recount the massacre itself, but uses it as background to reflect on Fascism, anti-fascism, and the Jewish condition: in *Otto ebrei*, he evokes the figure of Raffaele Alianello, a

witness at Caruso's trial. Alianello declared that he had ten names cancelled from the list of condemned prisoners at the Fosse Ardeatine: two chosen at random and eight names of Jews. According to him, these eight Jews owed him their lives.

Debenedetti reconstructs Alianello's logic. Alianello wants to prove in the court of public opinion that he was one of the good guys. If the most characteristic connotation of Fascism was the persecution of Jews, he will offer the most incontrovertible connotation of antifascism: the protection of the Jews (p. 59). Debenedetti disqualifies this double game: you cannot transform black into white, massacre into magnanimity. A reflection, perhaps, also on the ineffectiveness of postwar justice and purge processes. Crimes against Jews became very difficult to prosecute after the amnesty issued by Minister of Justice Palmiro Togliatti in June 1946, and many criminals were not convicted.

La nave di Teseo's new edition of these two stories is welcome and necessary. Debenedetti's message is important today more than ever to fight resurgent racist discourse. The publishing house perhaps missed an opportunity to add to the tributes in the book one from a present-day historian: such an engagement would have further enhanced the long-standing documentary value of Debenedetti's book. Nevertheless, the edition is clear and easy to read, and the two tales are short and poignant, making the book a good educational tool for students.

doi:10.1017/mit.2023.2

## ***The Many Meanings of Mina: Popular Music Stardom in Post-war Italy***

**by Rachel Haworth, Bristol, Intellect Press, 2022, xix + 240 pp., £80.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-789-38560-1**

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At the 2022 Sanremo Festival, there were at least two notable Mina-related events: the third night was opened by the host Amadeus paying tribute to Italian president Sergio Mattarella, sworn in for his second term that day. Amadeus recalled that Mattarella had attended the singer's legendary last concert in 1978. The tribute ended with the orchestra striking up Mina's 1962 hit, 'Grande, grande, grande'. This nod to the deep roots of Mina in Italian postwar history, through the fandom of the country's now-octogenarian president, was supplemented the next night when, among the artists performing covers, emerged the eventual winners Mahmood and Blanco. The young pair (Blanco was only 18) chose to perform Gino Paoli's 'Il cielo in una stanza', a huge hit for Mina in 1960. The emotional cover showed the enduring relevance of Mina, summed up by the spectacle of Gen Z icon Mahmood wearing a Fendi skirt and knee socks, singing one of the great songs of the Italian postwar songbook, at the nation's biggest national-popular event.

Rachel Haworth's monograph is the first substantial analysis of Mina's career, and builds on her longstanding work on the singer. It considers the multiple facets of Mina's star persona and the mechanisms of its construction over time, from her emergence in the late