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Totalitarian Encounters: The Reception of Stalinism and the USSR in Fascist Italy, 1928–1936

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Few scholars have ventured into the realm of the reception and representations of the USSR among Italian Fascists during the years 1928–36; that is, between Stalin’s consolidation of power and the Spanish Civil War. This article contends that far from being absolute antagonists from the very beginnings, many Fascists found aspects of Stalinism and the USSR instructive and impressive. While for some the USSR represented a genuine attempt to revolutionize the social, economic, and cultural structures of everyday life, for others the revolutionary credentials of the Soviets were a sham. It was precisely the complex nature of these interpretations that gave Fascist visions of the USSR their nuance and open-mindedness. Finally, this article argues that the representations that emerged during these pivotal years convinced many Fascists that theirs was the “correct” and “superior” form of interpreting and enacting the totalitarian aspirations embedded in the modern revolutionary tradition.

Introduction

While numerous studies have dealt with the relationship and entanglements between Nazi Germany and Stalinism, few scholars have ventured into the realm of the reception and representations of the USSR among Italian Fascists during the years 1928–36; that is, between Stalin’s consolidation of power and the Spanish Civil War.¹ With the outbreak of the conflict in Spain, Fascist commentary on the USSR was transformed into a reductive discourse of hatred, losing the nuance evident during the 1928–36 period.² With few exceptions, monographs have tended to focus on traditional foreign relations and the political diplomatic history of the period under consideration.³ Perhaps, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat suggested

¹For the former see, for example, Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, eds., *Fascination and Enmity: Russia and Germany as Entangled Histories, 1914–1945* (Pittsburgh, 2012); Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York, 2009); Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York, 2007); and Richard J. Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia* (New York, 2004).

²For these latter years see Marla Stone, ‘Italian Fascism’s Soviet Enemy and the Propaganda of Hate, 1941–1943’, *Journal of Hate Studies* 10/1 (2012), 73–97.

³Tonino Fabbri, *Fascismo e Bolscevismo: Le relazioni nei documenti diplomatici italo-russi* (Padua, 2013); Rosaria Quartaro, *Italia–URSS, 1917–1941: I rapporti politici* (Naples, 1997); Giorgio Petracchi, *Da San Pietroburgo a Mosca: La diplomazia italiana in Russia 1861/1941* (Rome, 1993); Petracchi, *La Russia*

in a seminal essay in 2004, the decades-long underestimation of Fascist violence and brutalities committed both outside and inside Italy helps explain this lacuna. For a long time, Fascism in both professional historiography and popular memory was presented as more benign than Stalinism and Nazism. This had the effect of minimizing Italians' own sense of agency and responsibility for the Fascist regime's atrocious actions.⁴ However, it also precluded a deeper understanding of the very real connections between Fascism and Stalinism and a more nuanced consideration of the mutual representations and receptions. Mention should be made in this connection of Fascist Italy's early official diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1924 and the often cordial period of anti-Versailles diplomacy and mutually beneficial trade relations, despite some ideological clashes.

A mixture of repulsion and admiration was present on both sides. For example, the summit between Italy's foreign minister Dino Grandi and his Soviet counterpart Maksim Litvinov in 1930 marked a new era in diplomatic and trade relations, which continued through the Italy–Soviet Friendship Pact of 1933. Arguably, these developments created the conditions for a rich reevaluation of Fascist perceptions of Soviet ideology and state practices.⁵ It is telling that over 150 books on the USSR were published in Italy during these turbulent years. Top-ranking Fascist

rivoluzionaria nella politica italiana 1917/25 (Rome and Bari, 1982). There are also some who have gone beyond the restricted political diplomatic approach; see, for example, Marcello Flores, *L'immagine dell'URSS: L'Occidente e la Russia di Stalin (1927–1956)* (Bologna, 1990), in which, however, Fascist Italy is mentioned only in passing. There are also some works on the travel writing of Italians who visited the USSR. See, for example, Giorgio Petracchi, 'Viaggiatori fascisti e/o fascisti a modo loro nella Russia e sulla Russia degli anni venti e trenta', *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* 81/1 (2014), 35–57; Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing between the Wars* (New York and Oxford, 2010), 218–25; Luciano Zani, "Fascismo e comunismo: rivoluzioni antagoniste," in Emilio Gentile, ed., *Modernità totalitaria: Il fascismo italiano* (Rome and Bari, 2008), 191–229; Luciano Zani, "Between Two Totalitarian Regimes: Umberto Nobile and the Soviet Union (1931–1936)," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 4/2 (2003), 63–112; the overview by Pier Luigi Bassignana, *Fascisti nel paese dei Soviet* (Turin, 2000); Giorgio Petracchi, "Roma e/o Mosca? Il fascismo di fronte allo specchio," in Vittorio Strada, *Totalitarismo e totalitarismi* (Venice, 2003), 3–37; and Luciano Zani, "L'immagine dell'URSS nell'Italia degli anni trenta: I viaggiatori," *Storia Contemporanea* 21/6 (1990), 1197–1223. In particular, the works by Zani and Petracchi advance our knowledge, although the latter tends to downplay the importance of writers' accounts for the understanding of the image of the USSR in Fascist Italy, while Zani exhibits a rather monolithic, static, and somewhat teleological understanding of the notion of totalitarianism. Furthermore, they do not engage with the latest developments in Fascist or Soviet studies, particularly the fundamental contributions from anglophone scholars.

⁴Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation," in Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel Motzkin, eds., *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices* (London and New York, 2004), 137–53. As is well documented currently, Italians committed numerous atrocities in places such as Africa and the Balkans; see, for example, the fine collection of essays edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism* (New York, 2005); and Davide Conti, *L'occupazione italiana dei balcani: Crimini di Guerra e mito della "brava gente" (1940–1943)* (Rome, 2008). The place of violence in Fascist rule within Italy has been underscored by Michael R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (New York, 2011).

⁵Michael David-Fox, although he does not analyze the Italian case in any great detail, has noted that during this period the Soviet presence in Italy was magnified through exhibitions and cultural exchanges by musicians, and that special attention was also devoted to Italian visitors to the USSR. See his *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York, 2012), 198.

intellectuals such as Giuseppe Bottai were also drawn to the work of Italian writers and engineers who had traveled to the Soviet Union, as was the case with Corrado Alvaro, an influential writer, and Gaetano Ciocca, an engineer who visited the USSR during these years. Given that Fascist Italy was never a monolithic political culture but was, on the contrary, complex and variegated, assessments of the USSR under Stalin's rule were necessarily complex, belying tensions and shifting points of view.

This article seeks to do justice to these complexities, as evidenced in the work of Fascist writers, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians commenting on the USSR during the years under study. Of course, as a revolutionary regime that emerged in reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution, Fascist Italy saw itself in competition with Communism. Nevertheless, many critical figures active in the Fascist period did not reject Stalinism outright but found aspects of it instructive and impressive, calling attention both to its strengths and to its weaknesses as well as to points of admiration and scorn. It is true that not all of these commentators were fervent Fascists. Some of them, such as Corrado Alvaro, had an ambivalent attitude toward Mussolini's regime. However, others, such as Giuseppe Bottai, held major positions in the Fascist hierarchy, while still others, such as Curzio Malaparte, were well-known writers with a broad following in Fascist circles.

For the purposes of this article, "Stalinism" can be understood as a complex experiment that included, among other developments, the building of a gigantic state structure together with the creation of a new state-led Marxist society. Constantly mobilized to engender sweeping socioeconomic, cultural, and even anthropological transformations, Stalin's regime set out to rebuild society from the ground up and to commence time anew through state social-engineering schemes.⁶ Such far-reaching pretensions generated a myriad of visions and responses among Fascists during the mid-1930s with regard to the nature, substance, and character of the changes taking place under Stalinism. The very notion of revolution was bitterly contested during these momentous years. For some Fascists, the USSR represented a genuine attempt to revolutionize the social, economic, cultural, and religious structures of everyday life inherited from the tsarist past. For others, the revolutionary credentials of the Soviets were a sham, representing nothing more than an updated version of the ancient and atavistic "vices" of Russian history and its people. As will be seen, the representations that emerged during these pivotal years convinced many Fascists that theirs was the "correct" and "superior" form of interpreting and enacting the totalitarian aspirations embedded in the modern revolutionary tradition.

Furthermore, complex questions circulated regarding the place of the USSR in the modern era. Was the USSR under Stalin a European or Asian phenomenon? Did the Soviet dictator's regime represent a new civilization, or was it a barbarous expression of brutal domination over a population that was characterized by some Fascists by its supposedly reactionary, passive, and fatalistic character? It was precisely the complex nature of these interpretations that gave Fascist visions of

⁶On the politics of mobilization during Stalinism and how it was closely linked to ideology, violence, and power see the excellent study by David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford and New York, 2007), esp. 189–303.

Moscow their nuance and open-mindedness. In the end, Italian observers were convinced that they were leapfrogging the Soviets in the contest over totalitarian terrain.

This article contends that although often presented as bitterly anti-Marxist and anti-Bolshevik, Italian visions, representations, and reception of the Russian Revolution under Stalin were far more complicated, ambivalent, and ambiguous. Indeed, unlike the Third International and its “official” interpretation of the Fascist experiment, no such standard and official version of Bolshevism was elaborated within the ranks of the Fascist government or intelligentsia. Fulvio Suvich, who was undersecretary of the Italian Foreign Ministry between 1932 and 1936, wrote in his memoirs that Mussolini himself, with regard to Russia, held a “poly-valent” attitude. While the Duce was intransigent in his expression of contempt for communism within the national territory of Italy, he was, according to Suvich, far more flexible with regard to the USSR, showing little hostility or prejudice toward the novel experiment and following its evolution with interest. Furthermore, Mussolini was allegedly impressed with Stalin’s personality and was intent on bringing the Russian experience closer to the so-called “Western” world.⁷ He recognized, moreover, that Fascists and Bolsheviks shared common enemies. In his famous interview with the German Swiss author Emil Ludwig, Mussolini acknowledged, “both we and the Russians are opposed to the liberals, to the democrats, to parliament.”⁸ As such, for Mussolini and many fellow Fascists, Italy and the USSR were competing to dominate the post-liberal totalitarian terrain, each measuring itself against the other in the political arena while contesting the grounds for building a new civilization based on collectivist principles and practices.⁹

The category of “totalitarianism” was interpreted by Fascists during these years in a far more complex and fluid fashion than has long been understood. Indeed, the left/right divide during the interwar period was much more elastic and uncertain than is generally acknowledged.¹⁰ In this article, I propose that a careful and historically grounded, supranational notion of totalitarianism can be usefully applied to Fascists’ understanding of Stalinism and the USSR. Above all, although the idea of totalitarianism was central to Fascists’ self-understanding, we should note that the term was never uncontested but was instead open-ended and controversial; even from 1925 onward, Italian leaders increasingly used it to signal their departure from the liberal tradition. Despite the changing meaning and contested nature of the term during these years, the idea of totalitarianism increasingly served to

⁷Fulvio Suvich, *Memorie, 1932–1936* (Milan, 1984), 24.

⁸Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini* (Boston, 1933), 151.

⁹For Stalinism’s quest to become the beacon of a new civilization see the excellent study by Katerina Clark, *Moscow the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2011). However, Clark does not engage the rivalry between Italian Fascism and Stalinism in this realm.

¹⁰For recent reassessments see David D. Roberts, *Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach to Fascism and Its Era, 1919–1945* (New York, 2016), 202–5; Gerhard Botz, “The Coming of the Dollfuss–Schuschnigg Regime and the Stages of Its Development,” in Antonio Costa-Pinto and Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe* (Basingstoke and New York, 2014), 121–54; and William D. Irvine, “Beyond Left and Right: Rethinking the Political Boundaries in 1930s France,” in Samuel Kalman and Sean Kennedy, eds., *The French Right between the Wars: Political and Intellectual Movements from Conservatism to Fascism* (New York and Oxford, 2014), 227–40.

indicate the path to a post-liberal understanding of mass politics. An emphasis on the need to forge a collective form of political action—increasingly associated with corporatism, as we will see later on—led to a deeper and more meaningful sense of participation in the era of mass politics, combined with a sometimes genuine sense of historical responsibility after the crisis of the First World War.¹¹ Born from the war's ashes, Fascism and Bolshevism represented, in the mind of the Fascist expert on Soviet affairs Pietro Sessa, the only two genuinely new “social revolutions,” along with the only two genuinely “new economic and political systems.” Both were enacted to meet the demands of the people of the twentieth century. Although liberalism rested on an exhausted individualism, Italy and the USSR embarked on establishing the primacy and authority of the modern state, a new sociopolitical arrangement in which “Individual and State, State and Regime have never been so intimately connected as now.”¹² Moreover, Sessa insisted that it would be a mistake to reduce Stalin's state-led five-year plans to a simple economic program. Rather, the *piatiletka* was an all-encompassing and totalitarian departure that aimed to radically transform the political, social, moral, cultural, religious, and private domains of society.¹³ Striking a similar chord, the travel writer Mario Nordio, although admitting the profound differences between Fascism and Stalinism, could not help but notice their epochal communality and collective thrust toward the future: “Rome and Moscow are the sole beacons that build the future in a world that is crumbling under the weight of the past.”¹⁴

As the following pages argue, this combination of old prejudices, combined with genuine interest in and at times sophisticated analyses of the Bolshevik experiment, gave the Fascist visions of Moscow a fluidity, a hybridity, and a complex character. Moreover, in representing Stalinism and the USSR, Fascists altered their perceptions of their own project, and this, to some extent, conditioned Fascism's trajectory in the self-confident totalitarian direction of the 1930s. The Russian Revolution under Stalin forced Fascists to disentangle and clarify their own position vis-à-vis modern revolutionary traditions and to specify the nature of their totalitarian departure. In this sense, Fascist analyses of the USSR tell us more about the Italian experiment itself than about the actual realities of the USSR under Stalin.

¹¹My understanding of totalitarianism is informed by David Roberts's excellent analysis in his *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York and London, 2006), esp. 271–335. Other useful works include Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *Totalitarisme fasciste* (Paris, 2018); Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism* (Basingstoke, 2012); Bernard Bruneteau, *Le totalitarisme: Origine d'un concept, gèneses d'un débat, 1930–1942* (Paris, 2010); Jerzy W. Borejsza and Klaus Ziemer, eds., *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes in Europe: Legacies and Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York and Oxford, 2006); Emilio Gentile, *La Via italiana al totalitarismo: Il Partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista* (Rome and Bari, 2002); and Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York and Oxford, 1995).

¹²Pietro Sessa, *Fascismo e Bolscevismo* (Milan, 1934), 8–9. Along similar lines see, for example, Giuseppe Menotti De Francesco, *Lo Stato Sovietico nella dottrina generale dello stato* (Padua, 1932), esp. 1–23.

¹³*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴Mario Nordio, *Nella terra dei Soviet* (Trieste, 1932), 320. This book was the product of twelve months that Nordio spent in the USSR during 1931.

The limits and potential of Stalinism

After a long journey in the USSR in 1929, the writer Guido Puccio concluded that the Russian Revolution was “one of the most grandiose and disastrous political experiments ever attempted.”¹⁵ The specter of total disarray, destruction, and bloodshed offered by the Soviets impressed many Fascist travelers, journalists, intellectuals, and ideologues in the 1920s as an example of a chaotic revolutionary process that had gone awry. Several interpretations were offered to account for the nightmarish aspects of the contemporary USSR.¹⁶

Some, like the influential Fascist syndicalist and professor of political science at the University of Perugia, Angelo O. Olivetti, attempted during these heady years to offer a “psychological” and somewhat suprahistorical explanation to probe the Soviet experience. According to Olivetti, the professional revolutionaries guiding the destinies of such a vast portion of the Earth were pervaded by a “secular and eminently destructive fanaticism, even worse than traditional religious fanaticism,” and as such, he portrayed the Communist as a “fanatical priest of a bloodthirsty God who demands unbearable human sacrifices.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Olivetti ridiculed the “scientific” and intellectual pretensions of the Soviet experiment, which were purportedly rooted in an outdated economic critique and philosophy of history, a kind of evolutionism and social Darwinism to which few in the Western world could give much credence.¹⁸ At the heart of the “psychology” of the Communist lay an abstract “intellectual authoritarianism” that had nothing in common with the “authentic” revolutionary tradition, from Bakunin to Sorel. Furthermore, under Stalin, the USSR had subjected the masses to a new kind of serfdom for the benefit of the state, in which the fortunes of Soviet workers and peasants chillingly echoed the servitude of ancient Babylonia and Egypt.¹⁹

According to the Olivetti, Communism had always made its appearance in times of immense historical catastrophe and, as such, represented the “embrace between chaos and the apocalypse.”²⁰ He confidently asserted that behind Communism’s message of equality among human beings lay a “negative” principle that emerged in times of deep social and existential chaos. Closely related to this, the principle of universality was only the deceptive and specious appeal that, throughout the history of mankind, had hidden “the most virulent selfishness.” The most licentious individual passions lay behind pretensions to a general love for an abstract humanity, which served as an alibi that gave the individual free rein to indulge his or her hatred “under the appearance of love.”²¹ Communism, seen from this perspective, represented a philosophy of despair. In the case of the USSR, with the crisis after

¹⁵Guido Puccio, *Al centro della macchina sovietica* (Foligno, 1930), 15.

¹⁶Roberto Suster, striking a chord similar to Puccio’s, solemnly proclaimed in a 1928 book that “currently, the revolution is the most grotesque paradox of our time.” See his *Ai margini d’Europa* (Milan, 1928), 107.

¹⁷Angelo Oliviero Olivetti, “Per la psicologia del comunismo,” *Educazione Fascista*, May 1929. For the revolutionary passion and “creed” see James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New York, 1980).

¹⁸Olivetti, “Per la psicologia del comunismo.”

¹⁹Angelo Oliviero Olivetti, “Psicologia comunista,” *La Stirpe*, June 1928.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

the defeat of the Great War, according to Olivetti, men and women felt lost, disoriented, and alienated from their inner selves. Accordingly, the Soviets saw no existential horizon other than the abyss and the destructive power of Bolshevism. In the opinion of Olivetti, wherever the individual saw a loss of his or her energy, creative powers, morality, and will, communism appeared in this historical stage. Thus the conclusion was obvious for the Italian syndicalist: communism was the enemy of a strong and ethical personality, which discouraged the nurturing of men's and women's creative and moral possibilities and was thus, in the strictest sense, not historical but "antihistorical."²²

Others denied the Marxist character of the Stalinist state and societal organization. For the Fascist journalist Mario Sertoli, who traveled on several occasions to the USSR during the years under study, the causes for the lack of a truly Marxian character in the Russian Revolution were to be found in the history of Russia and its supposedly flawed national character. Sertoli depicted Russia as a nation that had never "contributed anything to universal civilization." The Italian journalist added that the fundamentally rapid industrialization pursued by Stalin was neither original nor the "beginning of a national civilization."²³ Sertoli claimed that the Soviets had imitated foreign models throughout the centuries, "childishly exaggerating with a grotesque paroxysm" both the advantages and the defects of the model to be pursued. Rather simplistically, he indicated as examples of this passive imitation the era of Peter the Great, with his frantic attempt at Europeanizing Russia and the alleged Americanization taking place with the Bolshevik Revolution, first with Lenin and then radicalized by Stalin.²⁴

Other observers stressed the impoverished conditions in which the masses lived, caused by the restrictions and privations imposed upon them by Stalin's frantic drive toward industrialization. The navy captain Enea Recagno admitted his profound shock during a visit to Vladivostok. According to Recagno, "A foreigner who visits Russia will note the abnormal state of life, the lack of merchandise and hygiene, and the miserable aspect of the population, concluding that Russia under Stalin gives the impression of a country living in a state of public calamity."²⁵

Although some Fascists decried Stalinism's revolutionary undertakings as simply propaganda, others sought a deeper analysis of the Russian Revolution. For Bruno Spampanato, a Fascist journalist and ideologue who enjoyed very close ties with Giuseppe Bottai, the central question of the day was not the stark, either-or alternative of Rome *or* Moscow, but rather Rome *and* Moscow fighting on separate

²²Ibid.

²³Mario Sertoli, "La crisi in Russia e il piano industriale," *Nuova Antologia*, 16 July 1932. Sertoli was a journalist who wrote several pieces on the USSR during the years under study for prominent Fascist journals and periodicals such as *Il Popolo d'Italia* and *Critica Fascista*.

²⁴Ibid. The argument that Stalinism was pursuing, through other methods, the Americanization of the USSR in its purportedly mechanistic and materialistic character was widely discussed during the years under study. However, this topic goes beyond the scope of the present article and will be the object of another study that I am currently engaged in. For general thoughts on the surprising affinities between Soviet and American economic models see Stefan J. Link's *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Contest over the Industrial Order* (Princeton, 2020).

²⁵Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Affari Politici 1931-1945, b. 1 "Russia," f. "Condizioni della vita in Russia," report sent from Tokyo, 2 Aug. 1931.

fronts against the decrepit Europe of liberal democracy.²⁶ With the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia, which until that point had been absent from modern civilization, made a huge leap forward toward the creation of a new post-liberal modernity and civilizational order. According to Spampanato, the Russian people were finally “becoming protagonists of their history.”²⁷ Spampanato was also impressed by Stalin’s monumental new state, which he described as an exemplary totalitarian–democratic edifice. Above all, he praised it for putting collectivity at the center of the new political regime instead of the crass individualist materialism of the bygone liberal order. For Spampanato, the Bolshevik state commanded great ethical and spiritual importance, serving as a vehicle through which citizens at every moment of their lives could feel themselves to be active builders and participants in the life of the regime. It was, above all, the state’s capacity for nurturing and broadening human agency and ethical capacity in history that most impressed the Italian ideologue. The state was an organism that was allegedly served by the Russian people with an almost religious devotion. In constant mobilization, it enshrined civic virtue within the Soviet system. As a totalitarian, Spampanato lavished praise on the Soviet Union for its compact unity and determined political direction, which opened the path to an ever-brighter future pregnant with possibilities for human development. Educating youth according to Communist precepts, fostering a constant exaltation of the father-like figure of Lenin as the founder of the Bolshevik state, and instilling a sense of discipline and duty, the Soviet state reached out to all worthy members of the totalitarian community.²⁸

Spampanato was not alone in his appreciation of the USSR during these years. Others, such as Ottavio Dinale, a former syndicalist who was very close to Mussolini, conceded the shared genesis and methods of Fascism and Bolshevism, even as he acknowledged that they were at odds with regard to their inspirational principles. Above all, both were revolutionary movements and regimes. Indeed, Dinale claimed, “the two revolutions ... have characterized the historical crisis of capitalist civilization.” Although the Russian Revolution, according to Dinale, initially rested on somewhat utopian and abstract ideals, the USSR progressively moved toward a more precise judgment of the inextricable bonds that united morality, politics, and economy. Dinale noted that this was not a return to capitalism but, rather, an opening up of historical possibilities toward the construction of a *novus ordo*. He added that although this transition would inevitably require immense sacrifices—the suppression of social classes, the destruction of wealth, and other bloody and violent experiments that would bring about the transitory enslavement and sacrifice of an entire people—this would all be worthwhile if it brought about the “transformation of a vast precapitalist and medieval Asian country into a new social organism which, through a leap of centuries, would find itself in the midst of the new civilization.” This was an undertaking that, in Dinale’s opinion, would be an “incalculable contribution to the history of Europe and the world.”²⁹

²⁶Bruno Spampanato, *Popolo e Regime* (Bologna, 1932), 65.

²⁷Bruno Spampanato, “Equazioni rivoluzionarie: dal bolscevismo al fascismo,” *Critica Fascista*, 15 April 1930.

²⁸Bruno Spampanato, “Dove arriva lo Stato,” *Critica Fascista*, 1 Jan. 1932.

²⁹Ottavio Dinale, *Tempo di Mussolini* (Verona, 1934), 164–5.

For his part, the idiosyncratic Fascist Curzio Malaparte, who had edited the influential journal *La Conquista dello Stato* until 1930, was keen on establishing the specific Russian roots of the revolution within the wider context of modern European history. For Malaparte, Marx had merely interpreted the life of men, while Lenin had been crucial in transforming it in a radical fashion through his inexorable logic, which was embedded in the nature of the Russian people and in “true” European morality.³⁰ Indeed, according to Malaparte, the indignation and scandal expressed among many sectors of liberal Europe in the face of the Bolshevik experiment was nothing else than the “most salient symptom of the decadence of the Western bourgeoisie.”³¹ In his interpretation of recent Western European history, Malaparte argued that Bolshevism was the radical negation of Western civilization in its political manifestations. It attacked and condemned the modern liberal mainstream and its feeble and agnostic concept of human freedom enshrined in parliamentary democracy. Meanwhile, it sought, somewhat uncertainly, to preserve what in Malaparte’s view was the future of modern industrial civilization. This future purportedly lay in the development of a strong state in every nation, which would be capable of controlling, disciplining, and nurturing the moral capacities and duties of the worthy members of the national collective. This underscored the fact that for the father of the USSR, revolution was an end in itself. Moreover, Malaparte approvingly reminded his readers that within Communist ideology there was no room for the dispersion, decadence, and disruption of the individualist conception of politics. He provocatively conceded that “within communist ideology, from Marx to Lenin there is not even the shadow of the concept of freedom, whether of speech, of the press, of meetings and reunions, or of thought and conscience.” In short, there was “no respect for individual freedom” at all.³² According to Malaparte, as was understood in modern liberalism, it was nothing other than a bourgeois myth that progressively led nations to degeneration. In dialectical fashion, Malaparte affirmed that what was at stake in the USSR was the building of a new, monumental, and modern state that would be able to transcend the false freedom of the liberal order. To meet this goal, the Soviets would be forced to renounce the myth of liberal freedom and the atomistic conception of politics that such a myth entailed. For Malaparte, only part of the working class had been able to renounce this myth thus far, but this act was in itself the manifestation of a collective and revolutionary expression of a new kind of freedom, which consisted, above all, in the sense of power—the power and mission of the state.

It was the state in its capacity to act as an instrument of collective history making and taboo shattering that determined the fortunes of the revolution, sweeping away the remnants of the past that impeded the new qualitative experience of time and space offered by Lenin and Stalin. Echoing the influence of Lenin, Malaparte went on to insist that the revolution was being carried forward by the enlightened minority of the Communist Party, thanks to the “cold, patient, and inexorable tenacity

³⁰Curzio Malaparte, *Intelligenza di Lenin* (Milan, 1930), 21–2. On Malaparte see, for example, Giordano Bruno Guerri, *L’Arcitaliano: Vita di Curzio Malaparte* (Milan, 2000); and Giuseppe Pardini, *Curzio Malaparte: Biografia politica* (Milan and Trento, 1998).

³¹Malaparte, *Intelligenza di Lenin*, 65.

³²*Ibid.*, 66.

shown by Stalin.”³³ The Italian author had no problem admitting that in 1930 a police state reigned in the USSR, a historical configuration that he justified by the need to purge the nation of counterrevolutionary elements in the population, above all of kulaks or allegedly rich peasants. The kulaks were driven by an individualistic self-identity. They were unable to participate in the grandiose history-making enterprises that were taking place in the USSR. Therefore they had to be removed from the public realm, through revolutionary violence if needed, carried out by the GPU, a “revolutionary police” force, which was “above everyone and everything” and would strike the enemies of the revolution without a shred of pity.³⁴ Malaparte judged that it would be “natural and just” if the USSR were to fulfill its destiny of becoming a post-liberal civilization and state. In the USSR, there was no room for individual privileges of the ancient type. Only political and social privileges were accorded by the state to the working class, which was the driving force of the revolution. First among these was the “immense moral privilege” conferred by the sense of power to refashion the peoples of the Soviet lands. According to Malaparte, a new alternative order was being built by the Bolsheviks, which was “serious, orderly, controlled,” a “perfect order.”³⁵

Although few were as outspoken and enthusiastic as Curzio Malaparte in underlining the Soviets’ totalitarian experiment toward reorganizing society within a framework of illiberal modernity, others observed the “gigantic change” that had taken place with the October Revolution, bringing about a total refashioning of public and private life by “bloodily and radically denying the past.”³⁶ For his part, the *Popolo d’Italia* journalist Mirko Ardemagni stressed that large sectors of the Soviet working class were fascinated by a vision of “a prodigious future world.” The Italian journalist emphasized how an ordinary and linear conception of time had been transfigured by the Bolsheviks, sacrificing the present to an ever-expanding and promising future.³⁷ The tendency to radically accelerate historical time meant that the “present does not seem to be the concern of anyone.” The present was merely an evanescent transitional period between the old imperial regime and the future collectivist civilization.³⁸ Only thus could the sacrifices, deprivations, and resignations of an entire generation be made intelligible. It was as if the Soviet Union was experiencing the “beginning of the world” and the masses, through the constant mobilization and politicization of their existence, seemed to be wrapped up in and willing to contribute to this “collective endeavor.”³⁹

³³Curzio Malaparte, “Nella Russia dei Soviet: La libertà e il potere,” *Gerarchia*, Feb. 1930. It should be noted that this was Mussolini’s “personal” journal.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Gerhard Dobbert, “Lo Stato bolscevico e il suo sistema politico,” *Archivio di Studi Corporativi*, Oct.–Dec. 1932.

³⁷Writing about the temporalization of utopia, Reinhart Koselleck has observed that, in this process, the notion of the future offered compensation for the misery of the present. See his *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2002), 88.

³⁸Mirko Ardemagni, “L’economia sovietica: Un sogno di grandezza,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 13 Sept. 1931. See also by Ardemagni, his travelogue *Russia, quindici anni dopo* (Milan, 1932).

³⁹Ardemagni, “L’economia sovietica.”

Striking a similar chord, the former Nationalist Roberto Suster (coeditor, along with the regime's minister of justice, Alfredo Rocco, of the influential journal *Politica*), although in general a harsh critic of the Soviet experience, nevertheless acknowledged that, along with Rome, Moscow signaled the only original and substantial revolutionary alternative to the postwar crisis. In his opinion, Rome and Moscow were the two "most important and interesting political and social manifestations of the century," and he was convinced that the future of the world depended on the triumph of one of the two new beacons.⁴⁰ Additionally, for Suster, Bolshevism had the great merit of accelerating the demise of democracy and liberalism, opening the way to an illiberal, dynamic, and modern conception of world affairs. He valued its "revolutionary spirit, its critical philosophy, its effort at transformation."⁴¹

Similarly, in the face of the common accusation leveled against Communism that it was an expression of vulgar materialism with no idealistic dimension, others were quick to point out that historical and dialectical materialism did not necessarily entail a purely economic order. As Gustav Glaesser commented, although it was fair to say that Bolshevism represented a version of economic materialism, this was not the full story. For Glaesser, passions, ideals, and indeed a true sense of ethical and historical responsibility lay at the heart of the new order heralded by Moscow. Indeed, the Soviet experiment amounted to a radical new worldview, even to a "novel religion," the "religion of matter."⁴² In this unprecedented sacred order, the cult of science and technology reigned. In fact, Glaesser had no doubt that one of the defining features of Stalinism was its "technological messianism."⁴³ Along similar lines, Corrado Alvaro observed during a trip to Russia in 1934 how the masses were enthralled by a sense of the future. "Russia has become an enormous army of aspirants to technology," Alvaro claimed, "who show an absolute faith in it, almost as if technology alone were capable of cleansing the country of its century-long afflictions." Russians were gripped by "the fetishism of technology."⁴⁴ Other observers spoke of the cult of science and the veritable passion and exhilaration shown toward figures and statistics, which, according to Antonio Palumbo, had taken the place of traditional religious icons.⁴⁵

However, not all commentators were so impressed by the new Soviet religion. It was arguably the important Fascist ideologue Sergio Panunzio who most vehemently decried the "idolatry, the religion of the grandiose factories," which, in his opinion, was at the heart of the spectacular drive toward rapid industrialization in the USSR. In this sense, Panunzio thought that far from being the radical antithesis of capitalism, Stalinism represented its logical continuation and extreme development. As he eloquently observed, in this connection "Stalin and Ford are

⁴⁰Roberto Suster, "Roma e Mosca," *Antieuropa*, April 1929.

⁴¹Roberto Suster, "Il Fascismo ed il Bolscevismo nelle loro influenze sull'assestamento del mondo," *Antieuropa*, May 1929.

⁴²Gustav Glaesser, "Roma e Mosca: sintesi di antitesi," *Antieuropa*, Dec. 1931.

⁴³Ibid. For the huge importance of technology under Lenin and Stalin see the pioneering work by Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917–1941* (Princeton, 1978).

⁴⁴Corrado Alvaro, *I maestri del diluvio* (Milan, 1935), 12, 19–20.

⁴⁵Antonio Palumbo, "Il piano quinquennale della Russia sovietica," *Gerarchia*, Sept. 1933.

equivalent and shake each other's hands."⁴⁶ The Italian intellectual denied Stalinism's revolutionary credentials. Imbued in the religion of matter, they could not, in his opinion, offer radical "spiritual" change. Indeed, Panunzio expressed his conviction that Marx and Marxism were conservative systems and that Communism was increasingly "turning toward the right, whereas Fascism is turning to the left" in terms of its revolutionary potential.⁴⁷

Not all, however, agreed with Panunzio. For example, the regular contributor to Bottai's *Critica Fascista* Riccardo Fiorini argued that Stalinism represented a complex material and spiritual world. From a material point of view, Stalinism found its most representative expression in the five-year plans, which were oriented toward producing a powerful industrial community. In this respect, Fiorini partly agreed with Panunzio insofar as Stalinism resembled Fordism in the adoption of the most advanced theories of industrialization and the continual progress of rationalization and mechanical means of production.⁴⁸

In contrast to many observers of the age who maintained that the Soviet workforce was highly coerced and enslaved, Fiorini praised Stalinism's efforts toward attaining economic prosperity, which allegedly resulted in better working conditions for laborers. Moreover, the Italian journalist spoke of the "historical necessity" of a period of dictatorship that was especially needed in light of the "radical and fundamental character" of the Russian Revolution, which was signaling the passage to a new historical era.⁴⁹ In this sense, Fiorini charged Panunzio with considering only the external aspects of the First Five-Year Plan. Rather than being an end in itself, the *piatiletka* was a means not only to the betterment of working conditions but also, and more fundamentally, to revolutionizing and greatly improving the intellectual, cultural, and moral character of the Soviet masses. Although Fiorini admitted that the violent campaigns against religion and traditional familial and gender structures were insulting to "our Latin soul," he invited his readers to overcome their "Western" mind-sets and see the Stalinist experiment through its own internal structure and logic. In this realm, he had no doubt: "the communist program goes beyond the mere reign of matter and invades that of the spiritual realm."⁵⁰ Moreover, he insisted that Rome and Moscow had embarked on the creation of a new post-liberal world order, dismissing the possibility of a Fascist crusade against Bolshevism as nonsense and contrary to Fascism's revolutionary nature. Indeed, Fiorini predicted that Stalinism was in the process of giving up many elements of the Soviet experiment's "theoretical integralism," which opened the path to a form of balance not "far from our own." Finally, he predicted that Rome and Moscow, although they had originated from "opposing ideological" poles, would eventually find themselves "united."⁵¹

⁴⁶Sergio Panunzio, "La fine di un regno," *Critica Fascista*, 15 Sept. 1931. On Panunzio see, for example, Alexander James Gregor, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (Princeton and Oxford, 2005), 140–65.

⁴⁷Panunzio, "La fine di un regno."

⁴⁸Riccardo Fiorini, "A proposito dell'antitesi Roma o Mosca," *Critica Fascista*, 15 Oct. 1931.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

While denying that the Soviet Union was the true communist state as predicted by Marx and Engels, others, such as the journalist Amerigo Ruggiero from the journal *La Stirpe*, were impressed by the colossal effort of the “totalitarian industrialization of Russia” and its radical pace, which was described as an undertaking virtually without precedent in history, with the possible exception of the United States during the nineteenth century.⁵² This epic endeavor found expression, for example, in the building of new towns such as Magnitogorsk. What was most impressive to Ruggiero about the latter was not so much its vastness or the speed with which it was constructed but the audacity that had rendered possible the installation of this “modern and complex giant of metallurgy” in one of the most underdeveloped zones of the national territory. It was a perfect expression of the belief that everything was possible in the land of the Soviets.⁵³ In fact, the rapid drive toward industrialization favored by Stalin and his expert advisers was depicted as much more than a simple effort to “catch up” with the most industrialized nations of the world.⁵⁴ Rather, it was a veritable moral and cultural revolution of political and everyday practices, a totalitarian enterprise aimed at “encompassing the masses within collective life.” This was evidenced by the regime’s effort to establish collective housing projects and communal kitchens, whose final goal was the “spiritual education” needed for the new way of life perceived to be taking place in the USSR.⁵⁵

An anonymous informer from the Italian embassy in Moscow also noted how the *piatiletka* went far beyond the economic sphere, aiming at the political and cultural education of the masses. The goal of this education was to overcome capitalist and petit bourgeois prejudices, and thus imbue the population with “communist ethics,” shaping “the conscience and mentalities of men.”⁵⁶ Striking a similar chord, Mirko Ardemagni defined the struggle for the USSR’s industrialization as a question of “life or death.” According to Ardemagni, at stake was the very fortune of the revolution, which aspired to the formation of a new ruling class that was totally immune to and different from the bourgeois world. Ardemagni interpreted the radical collectivization drive in agriculture precisely in these terms of creating a new world for the Soviet person. Others, such as the literary expert Eugenio Anagnine, noted the wholesale character of Stalin’s experiments in fields such as literature and the arts. Anagnine believed that Stalinism was determined to realize a “vast program of collectivization of literature,” where writers would not indulge in the decadent and dated bourgeois concept of art for art’s sake, but instead would

⁵²Amerigo Ruggiero, “Tecnici americani in Russia,” *La Stirpe*, Sept. 1932.

⁵³Ibid. For Magnitogorsk see the excellent study by Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995).

⁵⁴For Stalin’s economic advisers see, for example, Kyung Deok Roh, *Stalin’s Economic Advisors: The Varga Institute and the Making of Soviet Foreign Policy* (London and New York, 2018).

⁵⁵Amneris Fassio, “Teoria e pratica del bolscevismo,” *La Stirpe*, Dec. 1933. Ettore Lo Gatto, one of the most knowledgeable Italians of the period with regard to Soviet affairs, could not help but notice on one of his journeys to the Soviet Union that, despite the enormous sacrifices and privations imposed upon the population by Stalin’s crash industrialization, there was a “moral tension, an exasperation of every human capacity and possibility ... a heroic aspect that leaves one pausing for thought.” See his *URSS 1931: Vita quotidiana, piano quinquennale* (Rome, 1932), 37–8.

⁵⁶Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Affari Politici, 1931–1945, b. 1, “Russia,” f. “Piano quinquennale russo,” report from Moscow, 3 June 1932.

contribute with their creative energies to the transvaluation of the moral and political values needed to create the revolution's perfect secular order.⁵⁷ For his part, the frequent contributor to Bottai's *Critica Fascista*, Mario Da Silva, also accentuated the revolutionary and totalitarian departure signaled by Stalin's drive to radically transform the economy and the bodies and minds of his citizens. Da Silva spoke of the creation of a new "revolutionary spirit" after the experience of the somewhat lethargic New Economic Policy. Instead of a cold, materialistic determinism, which had enabled the initial Stalinist departure toward total revolution, one now perceived a spiritual emphasis on will and human agency. On display were the tenacity and the spirit of sacrifice of millions of Soviets who were collectively engaged in the construction of a new and qualitatively superior experience of "revolutionary" time that would replace the suffocating and alienating politics of time of the old order.⁵⁸

Luigi Barzini, a famous journalist of the era and another of the many Italian travelers to the USSR during these years, took pains to understand the revolutionary dynamic then taking place in the Soviet Union. He was somewhat overwhelmed by the face and rhythm of Stalin's USSR, noting how the Soviet Union revealed itself as "ferocious and humane, paradoxical and rational, barbaric and progressive, absurd and logical."⁵⁹ However, he was certain that under Stalin's rule, the Soviet Revolution had entered into an "impetuous and convulsed period of modern reconstruction," which assumed an "imposing grandiosity" even as it acquired a shrill militaristic tone and inevitably entailed "unspeakable sacrifices of the people."⁶⁰ Trying to capture the historical and ideological allure of revolution, Barzini underscored the alleged nature of contemporary Russians as a people who, in their revolts, revealed a "messianic substratum, an attitude of universal reclamation, a mixture of vengeance, ferocity, dream, and utopia."⁶¹ Once the destructive side of the revolution had accomplished its goals of removing such remnants of the past as the Christian faith and the influence of the traditional family structure, the Soviet leaders understood that the success of its radical politics lay in the "transformation of the psychology of the masses." With regard to the latter, the Italian journalist acknowledged some successes in the Russian experiment of "great politics," such as the gigantic effort to educate the population that had increased the literacy rate and formed cadres of technical experts and specialist workers, with the final goal of "modeling the mentality and emotions of the people according to a communist identity."⁶²

Of particular importance for the Italian observer were the Bolshevik efforts at the political socialization of youth in the "religion of communism." This process entailed severing the link to past traditions and the breaking of parents' influence over the young. He soberly commented that "parents were a temporary necessity,

⁵⁷Eugenio Anagnine, "Letteratura sovietica," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11 Sept. 1932.

⁵⁸Mario Da Silva, "Il piano quinquennale," *Critica Fascista*, 1 July 1931.

⁵⁹Luigi Barzini, *L'Impero del lavoro forzato* (Milan, 1935), ix. This book contained observations of a journey he made to the USSR during 1934.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, ix–x.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 171–2.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 173.

whereas the true family is society.”⁶³ Barzini noted how the Soviet politics of youth had been successful in creating a new generational cohort of combative fanatics and dogmatics. Striking a similar chord, the well-known Fascist writer Enrico Emanuelli was impressed during a visit to Moscow in 1934 by the lived experience of socialism, as represented by the urban communes he observed in the capital. Emanuelli was struck by the tremendous revolutionary zeal of the young men and women who inhabited these communes as they experimented with socialism and attempted to supersede the patriarchal family structure and create a new world of Soviet persons based on a novel and collective sense of human relationships. The gap between the older generation and the world seemed definitive. When confronted with the past, everything that belonged to it seemed “extremely ridiculous” to these young revolutionaries.⁶⁴

Other observers echoed the remarks of Barzini and Emanuelli regarding the politics of youth pursued by the Stalinist regime. What most impressed them, as one collaborator of *Educazione Fascista* eloquently put it, was the Soviet youths’ nearly Nietzschean aim of “total rebuilding,” of instituting, that is, “a new creation after the absolute revision of all inherited ideas and values.” He added, with a mixture of admiration and fear, that what was most striking was the “fervor, the fever, and faith with which this youth hurries toward a total refashioning” of assumptions and beliefs. In this sense, this Soviet youth was “truly new.”⁶⁵ According to Ugo D’Andrea, a USSR expert in Fascist Italy and author of the influential book *Le alternative di Stalin*, the moral climate engendered by the Stalinist experiment was much more than the relaxation of social norms. Rather, the proletarian revolution from above admitted no weaknesses, nor did it admit private vices that could contaminate the purity or slow the radical tempo of the march into the new world. What was most impressive for this Fascist writer was the severity of habits in the private and public realms that rendered the face of the revolution nearly “Robespierrian” in its drive for absolute adherence and faith from its citizens.⁶⁶

The ‘superiority’ of the Fascist revolution

Writing in November 1936, after the Spanish Civil War had begun and Fascist Italy had aligned with Nazi Germany, the Fascist youth leader, Gastone Silvano Spinetti, wrote in *Gerarchia*, “Fascism is revolution, whereas Bolshevism represents reaction, even degeneration. Fascism is creativity, Bolshevism is destruction. Even more: Fascism is civilization, Bolshevism is barbarism.”⁶⁷ This statement, with its radical oppositions between Fascism and Bolshevism, captured the changed political climate engendered by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the ever-

⁶³Ibid., 192–3. For the Soviet politics of youth see, for example, Seth Bernstein, *Raised under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism* (Ithaca and London, 2017); Matthias Neumann, *The Communist Youth League and the Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1917–1932* (London and New York, 2011); and Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington, 2000).

⁶⁴Enrico Emanuelli, *Racconti Sovietici* (Milan, 1935), 99. Emanuelli was the author of the novel *Radiografia di una notte*. For the urban commune movement see the excellent study by Andy Willimott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism, 1917–1932* (Oxford, 2017).

⁶⁵Argo, “Idee d’oltre confine,” *Educazione Fascista*, Feb. 1933.

⁶⁶Ugo D’Andrea, *Le alternative di Stalin* (Milan and Rome, 1932), 150.

⁶⁷Gastone Silvano Spinetti, “Fascismo e Bolscevismo,” *Gerarchia*, Nov. 1936.

closer relationship with Hitler's regime. However, it also revealed deeper tensions within the Fascist matrix of representations and receptions of Bolshevism during this period. Above all, it expressed an arrogant superiority "complex" that had increasingly become apparent among Fascist intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and travel writers in the 1930s.

In 1931, the renowned historian Delio Cantimori tried to specify the contours and superiority of the Fascist revolution vis-à-vis earlier revolutionary experiments. He lambasted some "romantic spirits" who considered the French or Russian revolutions as cases par excellence because of the violent changes they had wrought, the display of "exuberant forces and impulses" and the "Jacobin destruction of the past," all in the name of vague and abstract ideals.⁶⁸ At the heart of this erroneous conception of revolution as a total and destructively violent event was an "abstract and aestheticizing" appreciation of the concept of revolution. Cantimori even denied that the French Revolution had been a true case of revolutionary politics because it had brought about the triumph of "fanaticism, intolerance, and oppression" instead of the tolerant nurturing of the energies of the individual and the critical spirit that had previously dominated in the "France of Voltaire."⁶⁹ Nor was the Soviet variant a "great revolution." It had merely resurrected "old Panslavic ideas, and with the GPU, the secret police, it has exceeded the repressive Tsarist police, while ridiculing the progressive intelligentsia."⁷⁰ Indeed, for the young Fascist intellectual, both the French and Soviet cases had been too limited in scope and lacked the history-making capacity of true revolutions. He identified the latter with the corporate experiment being carried out in Mussolini's Italy, which rendered the Fascist revolution "modern, a revolution of the people." In his view, an authentic revolution was essentially "European and universal."⁷¹ Moreover, as was the case with many Fascist intellectuals and ideologues, Cantimori expressed a conception of revolution as a highly charged ethical concept synonymous with the spiritual civilizing mission purportedly being carried out by Fascism.

For Giuseppe Bottai, one of the leading corporate theoreticians and minister of corporations in the mid-1930s, the corporate experiment in great politics was at the heart of the Fascist revolution. It informed its ideals and historical landscape and justified the Italian political and juridical architecture. Above all, the latter was seen by the Fascist hierarchy as the hallmark of Fascism's alternative modernity.⁷²

⁶⁸Delio Cantimori, "Fascismo, rivoluzione e non reazione europea," *Vita Nova*, July 1931.

⁶⁹Ibid. For Fascist understandings of the French case see, for example, Giovanni Belardelli, *Il ventennio degli intellettuali: Cultura, politica, ideologia nell'Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari, 2005), 237–59; and George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York, 1999), 69–95.

⁷⁰Cantimori, "Fascismo, rivoluzione e non reazione europea."

⁷¹Ibid. Having long considered the corporatist thrust present in Fascist ideology to be mere propaganda, scholars have only recently come to acknowledge its importance, as well as its transnational dimension and appeal. See, for example, Antonio Costa Pinto, ed., *Corporatism and Fascism: The Corporatist Wave in Europe* (Abingdon and New York, 2017); Matteo Pasetti, *L'Europa corporativa: Una storia transnazionale tra le due guerre mondiali* (Bologna, 2016); Didier Musiedlak, ed., *Les expériences corporatives dans l'aire latine* (Bern, 2010); Alessio Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista* (Rome and Bari, 2010); and Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista: Il mito del corporativismo* (Rome, 2006).

⁷²The study of Fascism as an alternative modernity has been intensely debated in recent years. See, for example, Fernando Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity* (Basingstoke, 2015); Gentile, *Modernità totalitaria*; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini*

For Bottai and, indeed, for many other Fascists and non-Fascists, corporatism promised to unify all the activities of the nation and put an end to the fractures of the liberal economy. This vision of a newly discovered and superior moral unity for the economy was continually trumpeted.

Furthermore, the projected new social and political order supposedly spiritualized the workplace and the economy in general, subordinating mere economics to ethics. In this fashion, corporatism allegedly permitted the blossoming of the potentialities of the individual and created a heightened sense of the nation through participation in a collective enterprise. It considered labor to be an intrinsic moral force and a constituent element of the human personality and development of the self. It furthered this ambition by recognizing that men and women were inherently social beings whose full capabilities could be fulfilled in the collectivity. The collective interest, from the perspective of the Fascists, was not the mere summation or aggregate of single and particular interests, in the same fashion that society was not the mere sum of the individuals composing it. This was precisely the error that liberalism had committed. Society and collectivity were *qualitatively* different entities. Moreover, collectivity, far from crushing individual interests and potentials, nurtured them and allowed their true realization. The end result was supposedly a harmonic construction, which fortified the interests and rights of the individual in the corporate whole. Corporatism appreciated that labor was not a simple factor of production but rather a tool of self-fulfillment and personal growth and a social and moral duty. Consequently, many people thought that the corporatist experiment was leading the nation into exciting and uncharted territory.

Corporatism was also praised for offering a more peaceful social order, for allegedly abolishing class warfare, strikes and disruptive demonstrations, while at the same time respecting the “natural” hierarchies in social and political life. Indeed, for many, the new corporate order seemed to promise the possibility of deeper and more meaningful participation in the life of the nation, whether in the social, economic, or political spheres. It offered a path for the nationalization of the masses, which transformed them into active and conscious citizens. Similarly, it provided a way of involving people more directly in public affairs, offering a modern, post-liberal form of handling political and economic conflict. It was also a method of creating more durable and rewarding relationships between the government and the governed.

In this sense, Giuseppe Bottai considered the corporatist *stato nuovo* to be the culmination and great synthesis of the ongoing political experiment inaugurated by the French Revolution. Indeed, Bottai considered Mussolini’s attempt at state building as the pinnacle and dialectical resolution of the aporias that had been left unresolved by the French Revolution, most noticeably the alleged divorce between the principles of authority and liberty, which Fascism, in Bottai’s mind, had finally reconciled. Far from considering Fascism an iconoclastic movement against the ideals and principles of the French example, Bottai rescued what he considered to be part of the driving force behind the French enterprise. Differing in this sense from Delio Cantimori, he saw in the seventeen articles of the Rights

and Hitler (Basingstoke and New York, 2007); and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, 2001).

of Man a core “substance of undeniable value, in line with the spirit of modern man,” even if they were somewhat “naively and pompously articulated.”⁷³ Moreover, he denied the reductionist interpretation of the French Revolution as the ideological reflex of the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie, emphasizing, instead, the general importance of the modern notions of autonomy, emancipation, and the critical spirit, without which “our conscience cannot conceive.”⁷⁴ In particular, he commented on the radical importance for modern politics of the “eminently critical character of the thought of the French Revolution, which wants to reevaluate everything and does not recognize any other authority than the individual’s own independent thought.”⁷⁵ Thus Bottai placed Fascism firmly at the center of key developments in European history, seeing it as the resolution of a process begun in 1789. The Fascist conception of the individual as one “who acquires awareness of his creative potential, of his absolute liberty ... and who wants to critically examine everything and to build his own personal history” also owed something to French Revolutionary ideals.⁷⁶

However, Bottai’s views on the limits of the Russian Revolution as a mere form of state capitalism reverberated widely in the Fascist press during the years under study. For many Fascists, what was missing in the Soviet experiment was a deeper understanding of history making in the modern era and a more profound knowledge of the human condition. While *piatiletka* had been studied, theorized, and calculated in minute detail to maximize its success and appeal, the Soviet authorities had forgotten the “human factor.” By erroneously attempting to capture the dynamism of modern life a priori through an abstruse formula and the putatively inevitable laws of history, Stalinism had proven unable to grasp human creativity, adaptability, and exuberance, and the uncertainties of contemporary existence.⁷⁷ Instead of recognizing the wide variety of human traits, the USSR under Stalin attempted to mechanistically standardize and determine the contours of human vitality. Leveling from below the myriad richness of human personality, Stalinism ended by fracturing the creative will and capacity of human beings.⁷⁸ Denied their essential dignity, emotions, and ideals, men and women were “considered solely in terms of their social utility, in the part they play in the process of socialist

⁷³This was a lecture entitled “Corporativism e principi dell’ottantanove” that he delivered at the University of Pisa on 10 November 1930, now in Giuseppe Bottai, *Scritti* (Rome, 1965), 169–77, at 172.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., 173.

⁷⁶Ibid., 176.

⁷⁷An Italian Fascist who had spent two years in the USSR could confidently write in 1934 that while the Soviet state under Stalin’s rule practically left no room for the unfettering of the individual’s creative energies, Mussolini’s corporatist *stato nuovo*, by contrast, “with prudence, historical sense, tact, and balance ... has known how to reconcile in Italy the very new social demands with respect for private property and individual freedom.” See Peregrinus, *Grandezza e servitù bolsceviche: Sguardo d’insieme all’esperimento sovietico* (Rome, 1934), 9.

⁷⁸Benigno Crespi, “Organizzazione orizzontale,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 Oct. 1932. Carlo Scarfoglio, during a journey to the USSR in the summer of 1932, similarly observed the abstruse character of Stalinist principles and how “scientific socialism” had increasingly lost touch with men’s and women’s concrete lives and demands. Instead, with “a priori mental forms ... which have nothing to do with life as it is lived, remote institutions and principles” are substituted for men. See his *Nella Russia di Stalin: Russian Tour* (Florence, 1941), 49–50.

reconstruction.”⁷⁹ Communism tended to level the plurality of life’s values with the aim of constituting a “universal collectivity, where every initiative and all enthusiasm and intelligence must necessarily disappear.”⁸⁰ As such, Communism represented for some Fascists the decadence of nineteenth-century ideological systems, which proved unable, especially after the crucible of the Great War, to capture the modern “elasticity of our way of life.” The Communist idea was summarily decried as inflexible and lacking in the “dynamic qualities needed for the new times.”⁸¹ Moreover, what reigned in the USSR was a dictatorial and mechanical mass that effaced the individual and his or her sense of ethical and historical responsibility, giving rise to the so-called “New Man” of the USSR. However, unlike what was claimed to be happening in Fascist Italy, the Soviet creation neglected the spiritual “inner man” in favor of an externally organized human being who lost every trait of personhood in the midst of the tyrannical mass that devoured him through its “mechanical and external union.”⁸² Others wrote of how the newly organized collective life in the USSR created passive and dehumanized subjects who renounced the call to embrace a courageous and responsive life. This was the reign of the anonymous mass, which was depicted as an atonal world, automatic, colorless, without the personal joy of life. In its place, Fascism offered the true unfettering of human potential. Within the Fascist ideal, “everything is virile, everything is forcefully individualized” within the ambit of the ethical state. Although the New Man espoused by the Fascists was also a new human being who was collectively arranged, he or she did not disappear in the midst of the social whole. In contrast, Fascist propaganda and ideology constantly extolled the ways in which the party was opening the path to a qualitatively superior way of life in which a new synthesis between respect for individual personality and the authority of the state was organically and intimately connected.⁸³

Conclusion

Many Fascist writers, journalists and politicians made serious, and at times even genuine and sympathetic, attempts to understand the Russian Revolution on its own terms. However, in the process of representing and interpreting the phenomenon of Stalinism between 1928 and 1936, many grew increasingly convinced of the superiority of their own revolution. This process was fueled by at least two overlapping contextual factors. First, these were the years that coincided with the height of so-called “Universal Fascism” in which Rome saw itself as exercising a superior

⁷⁹Eugenio Anagnine, “Letteratura sovietica: Uomo e la macchina,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 15 Jan. 1932.

⁸⁰Domenico Carella, “Coscienza collettiva e coscienza individuale,” *Critica Fascista*, 1 Dec. 1932.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²René Fulop-Miller, *Il volto del bolscevismo* (Milan, 1932), 46. This book by the noted Austrian writer and journalist had a tremendous influence in Fascist circles. It was prefaced by the above-mentioned Curzio Malaparte. For the fundamental importance of the notion of the New Man within Italian Fascism and more broadly within radical right movements and regimes see Jorge Dagnino, Matthew Feldman, and Paul Stocker, eds., *The “New Man” in Radical Right Ideology and Practice, 1919–45* (London and New York, 2018); Patrick Bernhard and Lutz Klinkhammer, eds., *L’uomo nuovo del fascismo: La costruzione di un progetto totalitario* (Rome, 2017); and Jorge Dagnino, “The Myth of the New Man in Italian Fascist Ideology,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 5/1 (2016), 130–48.

⁸³Gustav Glaesser, “Roma e Mosca: sintesi di antitesi,” *Antieruopa*, Dec. 1931.

civilizational mission throughout Europe and the world in what was perceived to be a global crisis of civilization.⁸⁴ To many observers at the time, Rome represented the triumph of spirit over matter, and Fascism was seen as the superior path to follow after the alleged bankruptcy of the liberal parliamentary order. Second, these were the years when Fascist Italy exercised a broad fascination among many fascist and radical right movements and regimes across the Continent, as recent studies of transnational Fascism have demonstrated.⁸⁵ This could only fuel the self-confidence of Italian Fascists vis-à-vis their Bolshevik counterparts. In a sense, they exhibited a sort of “faith” in the crisis, whereby, in a process of radical dissolution of old certainties and institutions, the Fascists would arise to conduct the destinies of the world. Indeed, this led some to conclude that Fascism would eventually absorb the Soviet experiment, as the notion of “nation,” they believed, was charged with a higher revolutionary potential than that of “class.” For Antonio De Simone, a young Fascist ideologue, there was no turning back. Once the Bolsheviks had finalized their experiment of abolishing the tsarist past, they would still have to confront one of the most important issues of the present: the nationalization of the masses and the coordination of professional and vocational categories into a unified national and efficient structure. In De Simone’s mind, this could only mean the adoption by Stalin of Fascist corporatism as the sole vehicle toward resolving the contradictions of modern civilization.⁸⁶

For the travel writer Renzo Bertoni, the USSR was also inclining toward Fascism. Although antithetical in many respects, this situation could only be transitory for the Italian observer. Above all, with regard to the difficulties imposed by the collapse of the liberal democratic order and the contest for the totalitarian post-liberal terrain, Stalinism proved to be unable to rise to the enormous challenge. Instead of delivering to the world a novel civilization, the Bolsheviks had settled for forced collectivization, hunger, and systematic terror. If the USSR were to be saved from this predicament, it could only abandon Marxist principles and embrace Fascist-style corporatism. As Bertoni solemnly concluded his book, “After fifteen centuries of struggle, Fascist Rome returns to the role of master and guide to the world.”⁸⁷ Striking a similar chord, Giuseppe Scudreri emphasized Fascism’s universal revolutionary potential. Commenting in December 1936, he was convinced that, through the consolidation of the new corporate state and the penetration of its universal principles into the “souls and minds” of the people, the Italian experiment had

⁸⁴For universal fascism see, for example, Marco Cuzzi, *Antieuropa: Il fascismo universale di Mussolini* (Milan, 2006); Cuzzi, *L'internazionale delle camicie nere: I CAUR, 1933–1939* (Milan, 2005); and Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–1936* (New York, 1972).

⁸⁵Among this growing field see, for example, Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance* (New Haven and London, 2018); Arnd Bauerkamper and Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York and Oxford, 2017); Benjamin J. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2016); Matteo Albanese and Pablo Del Hierro, *Transnational Fascism in the Twentieth Century: Spain, Italy and the Global Neo-fascist Network* (London and New York, 2016); and Salvatore Garau, *Fascism and Ideology: Italy, Britain, and Norway* (New York and London, 2015).

⁸⁶Antonio De Simone, “Problemi esteri,” *Civiltà Fascista*, Feb. 1934.

⁸⁷Renzo Bertoni, *Il trionfo del fascismo nell'URSS* (Rome, 1934), 211.

triumphed over Moscow for the creation of the *novus ordu*s. By that date, Stalinism was allegedly in ruins, a shadow of its initial potential, a “collectivism without a soul.”⁸⁸

In 1931, navy captain A. Costarini confidently proclaimed and certainly exaggerated when he observed that “the vast majority of the Russian people are opposed to communism. Everyone I have had the chance to speak to has shown a great admiration toward Italy and for our Duce and nearly all proclaim that they need a man such as Mussolini.”⁸⁹ Similarly, the engineer Gaetano Ciocca, who had been in charge of a ball-bearing plant in Russia, noted with pride after his return to Italy how in Russia many high-ranking politicians and ordinary people had expressed an unreserved admiration for Fascist Italy and Mussolini, who was “the bearer of spiritualism against the pervasive materialism of our times.”⁹⁰

In sum, when receiving and representing Stalinism and the USSR during the 1930s, what comes to the fore is the uniqueness that many Fascists and fellow travelers assigned to Italy’s revolutionary credentials. Not only did the Fascists convince themselves of the peculiarity and superiority of their revolutionary cause; for many, it represented the *only* revolutionary course in the enactment of great politics and the conquest of the post-liberal world for the new totalitarian community.

In this regard, these analyses can help shed new light on the notion of “totalitarianism.” The latter, perhaps more than a closed and static system of government driven by an ambition toward total control of power, should be considered a drive and aspiration to forge a new collective and dynamic political system after the perceived destruction of liberal democracy and its values of individualism and materialism. Moreover, totalitarianism, despite its horrors and nightmares, is possibly better conceived as the most daring attempt to reach alternative modernity and morality over the course of the troubled twentieth century. Fascist encounters with Stalinism reveal, in many cases, a genuine sense of admiration for the ethical potential of Soviet Communism. Furthermore, Stalin’s experiment in the total mobilization of the USSR’s vast population seemed, for a while at least, a veritable path toward an alternative modernity. This was a modernity in which leaders strove to lead the masses toward what was deemed by some Fascists to be a more grandiose and epic sense of existence than the one offered by the then seemingly exhausted liberal path. Rather than focusing on individuals’ narrow self-interest, Soviet totalitarianism appeared to some observers as a plausible avenue to collective history-making grandiosity.

Of course, when confronted with Fascist-style totalitarianism, Italians could not help but express the “superiority” of their radical departure in totalitarian and extreme politics. Fascism allegedly revealed a deeper understanding of the dynamics and novelties opened up by the modern political experiment. The Soviets, despite all their efforts, could not leave behind their coarse materialism and determinism,

⁸⁸Giesse, “Fascismo e bolscevismo,” *Universalità Fascista*, Dec. 1936.

⁸⁹Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Affari Politici 1931–1945, b. 1 “Russia,” f. “Condizioni della vita in Russia,” report from Naples, 20 Nov. 1931.

⁹⁰Gaetano Ciocca, *Giudizio sul bolscevismo* (Milan, 1933), 199. On his time in Russia see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Building Fascism, Communism, Liberal Democracy: Gaetano Ciocca, Architect, Inventor, Farmer, Writer, Engineer* (Stanford, 2004), 21–35.

which had purportedly impeded them from seeing the primacy of politics over the economy. In contrast, Fascists' stress on the spiritual and ethical seemed to have reached a more profound understanding of the possibilities opened up by the French Revolution, particularly with regard to men's and women's place in history and their capacity to act creatively in a human-made world. Additionally, the French Revolution opened the path to a more daring state intervention and mobilization of the population. This, in turn, led many totalitarians to the possibility of a more responsible and deeper relationship between the leaders and the led. The Duce seemed to many at the time to spearhead an authentic moral revolution, especially through corporatism, with regard to men's and women's ethical fulfillment and their respective roles as history makers. In the end, it was Rome, not Moscow, that appeared to signal the birth of a new world.

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