Le reazioni interne ed internazionali al crollo del regime fascista in Italia, 25 luglio 1943 by Michele Abbate and Robert Mallett, eds

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succeeds, among other things, in countering the commonplace that Italian Fascism was really a benign dictatorship and might have been remembered that way had it not been for its association with Nazism. Fascism instead was inherently violent and established a low-level terror that affected all Italians throughout the period of Mussolini’s rule.

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As recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East have demonstrated, the collapse of a dictatorship is always a complex event. Regime change involves not only political upheaval but cultural, social, economic, and military transformations as well. It occurs in the halls of power but also plays out in the street; its impact is felt both domestically and internationally; and although hailed as a watershed moment, it is rarely a tidy or well-defined process.

The ousting of Benito Mussolini on July 25, 1943, and the concomitant end of fascism in Italy, is seldom identified as an instance of regime change. Most often, this episode is treated as an artifact of the Second World War, since the Duce’s departure was hastened by a string of catastrophic defeats, the bombardment of Italian cities, and finally the Allied invasion of Sicily. After a long and contentious debate, the Fascist Grand Council passed a motion of nonconfidence against their leader and handed power over to the monarchy; King Vittorio Emanuele III had Mussolini arrested and named Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio as the new prime minister. In short, this was regime change from within and from above, effected by the Fascist leadership and the Italian state. It cannot even be properly called a coup d’état, since the king was exercising his constitutional powers to replace the head of government. Popular opinion played a negligible role—not to mention the antifascist underground—and the news caught most Italians by surprise.

In this new volume, developed out of a 2003 conference to mark the sixtieth anniversary of these events, editors Michele Abbate and Robert Mallett place this account under deeper scrutiny and pose important questions about its broader significance. What factors and which individuals contributed to the demise of fascism? What role did the war play, and conversely, how was the conflict shaped by the events in Italy? How was the fall of Mussolini received by different audiences at home and abroad?

The editors’ introductory essay provides useful context, especially in terms of military history and diplomacy. Abbate and Mallett reject the prevailing notion that the Mediterranean was a marginal theater and stress the strategic importance of Italy both for the Allied war effort and the establishment of a postwar order in Europe. This point is reinforced by Giuliano Manzari’s contribution, which traces the activities of the British and American secret services in Italy, particularly in terms of undermining public morale. Alexander Lassner discusses aerial bombardment, showing that, despite their rhetorical commitment to attacking high-value targets (today’s “surgical strikes”), the Allies came close to ordering area bombing that would have taken a massive toll on the civilian population (as occurred in Germany). Military strategy was in turn shaped by diplomatic concerns. Several chapters discuss Italy’s complicated position as the junior Axis partner trying to find a way out of the war. Roosevelt and Churchill
were inclined to be relatively indulgent, and for their part Italian officials made several attempts to broker a secret peace and sever the tie with Hitler; it was not until the conclusive defeat of the Axis in North Africa that the Allies took a more rigid and punitive stance and demanded unconditional surrender (Minardi). The American position was also shaped by the presence of a large Italian diaspora in the United States. Stefano Luconi shows how the fall of Mussolini freed Italian-Americans from being perceived as fifth columnists for the Axis cause (in part because so many had hailed fascism’s arrival in the 1920s as a restoration of ethnic and national pride). After July 1943, they were able to reconcile their cultural and political loyalties publicly. The collapse of fascism also had a significant impact on other theaters. Giorgio Cingolani looks how the Italian crisis shaped developments in the Balkans by undermining the Croatian Ustasha and creating a vacuum exploited by Tito’s partisans. Going even further afield, Franco Savarino examines Italian attempts to cultivate affinity with fascist movements in Latin America during the war as well as the ultimate failure of these efforts. A few essays discuss internal developments. Mariano Gabriele’s evocative chapter on Sicily shows that the island was woefully unprepared for the Allied invasion, suffered acute food shortages, and was essentially abandoned to its fate by the authorities in Rome. Andrea Di Nicola shows how conservative fellow travelers (monarchists, Catholics, etc.) grew increasingly alienated from Mussolini’s regime during the war years; the royal “coup” of July 25 allowed them to sever this tie and avoid prosecution in the postwar.

The principal strength of this collection lies in its diversity. A wide variety of topics is addressed, and the contributors include university academics, military researchers, journalists, and public historians. At the same time, however, this breadth is achieved at the cost of depth and consistency. While the research presented is extremely robust, most of the conclusions drawn are not revelatory. Curiously, the events of July 25 itself—which this work is meant to commemorate—are largely absent, with attention focused mainly on the international context and the course of the war. A sense of how regime change was experienced domestically and “on the ground” would have brought a much-needed dimension to the discussion (it should be noted that two essays on the Italian military and the postwar press, originally presented at the conference, were not included in the final publication). The volume would also have benefited from more thorough editing. There is no narrative or thematic thread connecting the various chapters, with the result that the book more closely resembles a conference proceedings than a cohesive collection. The concluding section, which transcribes the participants’ closing roundtable discussion, raises many important issues but does not explore them in sufficient detail.

In sum, specialists (needless to say, capable of reading Italian) will find some useful insights here and plenty of raw material for deeper exploration, particularly with regard to military, tactical, and diplomatic issues. We hope that this publication will push others to investigate this crucial episode of Italian history much more fully.

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For good or ill, the palace monastery of the Escorial has always been associated with the figure of its builder, the Most Catholic King Philip II of Spain. And even though he wishes to discredit and distance himself from the majority of past and present