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Revisiting Rossellini's Two Trilogies: The Historical Legacies of Fascism and
Neorealism in Postwar Italy and Beyond

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master
of Arts in Comparative Literature

by

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ABSTRACT

Revisiting Rossellini's Two Trilogies: The Historical Legacies of Fascism and Neorealism in Postwar Italy and Beyond

by

Vernon B. Shaw

For many decades, Roberto Rossellini has been widely celebrated in studies of film history as the preeminent filmmaker responsible for inaugurating the influential genre known as Italian Neorealism. However, far fewer viewers and scholars are familiar with the fact that Rossellini began his filmic career as a director of Fascist wartime propaganda films, produced in close collaboration with Mussolini and the regime. This study seeks to interrogate this apparent contradiction by probing the aesthetics and, more importantly, the ethics of these Fascist films before comparing them to Rossellini's later contributions to the Neorealist canon. Ultimately, it finds that Rossellini's early entanglement with Fascist cinema cannot be so easily overlooked, if only because his Neorealist films share much in common with these earlier films. This includes a conception of Italian national self-victimization and self-valorization which during the Fascist period was used to facilitate wars of conquest and annihilation; and, since the postwar era, has been relied upon to expunge Italian Fascism and colonialism from the record of historical memory, both inside and outside of Italy. The consequences to this weaponization of the politics of

memory regarding fascism range from the ideological laundering of Italy's national image in the postwar era to the obscuring of genocide in the present day.

I. Introduction

The date is September 24th, 1945. Only a short five months earlier, Italian anti-fascist partisans had successfully concluded a nearly two-year long war of national liberation— a war which was also simultaneously a class war and a civil war— to free the country from the fetters of Nazi occupation and put an end to the collaborationist Fascist rump state known as the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Italian Social Republic also known as the Republic of Salò) (Pavone 1991/2013).¹² On this day, Roberto Rossellini's most widely celebrated film, *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*), was screened for the first time in the newly liberated Italian capital. For many, the film was seen as both a symbol and exaltation of the country's phoenix-like rebirth from the ashes of the Fascist *ventennio nero* (Black Twenty Years); one which ultimately revealed the upright moral interiority of Italians as *Italiani brava gente* (Italians as good people) who were by and large immune from the barbaric depravity and savage inhumanity which characterized their former German allies (Del Boca 2005; Fogu 2006). As the Italian film historian Giacomo Lichtner recounts: "To those who watched it then, *Roma Città Aperta* was raw with emotion, experience and expectation. In both content and form, it appeared as a revolution to cinemagoers anaesthetised by 20 years of Fascist melodramas yet traumatically stirred by war, hardship and loss" (Lichtner 2013, 45). Although not without some critics on both the political Left (who took issue with the film's tenuous

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

² For clarity, I use the term "Fascism" (with a capital F) in reference to Italian Fascism. I use "fascism" (with a lowercase f) to refer to generic fascist movements, regimes, and ideology more broadly. For example, Italian Fascism is fascist, but not all fascism is Italian Fascism.

understanding of Fascism and its depiction of the uneasy alliance between communists and Catholic liberals) and Right (who took issue with the film's anti-German sentiment and its unflattering depiction of a ruined postwar Italy), these voices were already in the minority at the time of the film's premiere and would only become increasingly unpopular as the film and the genre it birthed— *neorealismo* or "Italian Neorealism"— were elevated by instrumental film critics and historians inside and outside of Italy as examples of anti-fascist cinema *par excellence*. As, Peter Bondanella and Federico Pacchioni note, "the most original European critic of the immediate postwar period, the French writer André Bazin (1918–58), defined neorealism by its aesthetics" and even went so far as to call it "a cinema of 'fact' and 'reconstituted reportage' that contained a message of fundamental human solidarity fostered by the antiFascist Resistance taking place when the greatest Italian neorealists came of age intellectually and artistically (Bondanella and Pacchioni, 63). For Bazin and many others, "The landmark film of neorealism and the work that announced a new direction in European cinema to the world was Rossellini's *Open City*. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of the moment it was created... that it stands as a kind of symbol for the period itself" (ibid., 69). Nonetheless, in spite of the prevailing consensus on Rossellini's film as the foundational film in the Neorealist canon, Neorealism itself has proven to be a highly contested term with definitions "ranging from those who dismiss it as a figment of the critical imagination to those who extol it as the highest expression of the postwar Italian world view" (Marcus 1986, 21). This dissensus is compounded by the fact that Rossellini and the other foundational filmmakers of Neorealism themselves— figures such as Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti— never organized themselves into a

formal group with a shared code of ideology and aesthetics nor did they ever issue anything like a collective manifesto akin to those which defined Third Cinema movement. Instead, the definitions of Neorealism which have perhaps come closest to filling this role can be found in the writings of film critics like Bazin and the Italian screenwriter and prominent postwar intellectual, Cesare Zavattini. In their influential essays, both men foreground certain ethical and aesthetic aspects of Neorealist filmmaking such as on-location shooting, lengthy and unobtrusively edited takes, natural settings and lighting, the use of non-professional actors and vernacular language, a concern for the poor and the working-class, and an implied sense of humanist, anti-Fascist social critique as defining characteristics of the genre (Bazin 2005; Zavattini 1978).

However, the monumental works of scholars like Christopher Wagstaff and Charles Leavitt have shown that even the most well-agreed upon corpus of Neorealist films diverge at many points from the orthodox aesthetic conception of Neorealism once outlined by Bazin and Zavattini (Wagstaff 2007 and Leavitt 2020). Moreover, as the work of Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Gianmarco Mancosu has shown, it can no longer be said that this body of Neorealist films represents some kind of revolutionary aesthetic break from either the realist forms of Fascist cinema or the socialist realist cinema that preceded them (Ben Ghiat 2015; Mancosu 2022; Brunetta 1991, 159ff). For many, this lack of aesthetic distinction and cohesion leaves only a shared morality or ethics of Neorealism as the genre's defining feature. Indeed, Milicent Marcus argues that, in contrast to the older forms of Italian literary realism (*verismo*) developed by Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana— both Sicilian writers influenced by Émile Zola and French Naturalism: “The neorealist, on the other hand,

considers himself part of the world he records—he is in it and a determinant of it, intervening in the present so that the conditional verbs will one day merit the unqualified future tense, and eventually even the present tense itself” (Marcus 1986, 25). She goes on to claim that the key event which converted the “passive resignation” of Verga and his French antecedents “into neorealist activism was, of course, the Resistance” (ibid., 25). Thus, in one fell swoop, she channels Bazin in transforming Zavattini’s cinema of “truth and reality” into the “cinema of resistance,” effectively beatifying the genre and insulating it from critique, particularly from those on the Marxist-aligned Left such as Guido Aristarco, Pio Baldelli, and Mario Cannella, all of whom levied serious criticisms of Neorealism’s ambiguous approach to history and politics at one point or another (For more on critiques of Neorealism from the Left, see Gundle 2014 and Liehm 1984, 92ff). In turn, what was once a fairly disparate genre has now been solidified into an ideological *institution*— what Leavitt describes as a “fixed paradigm”— whose anti-fascist credentials simply go unquestioned by most, lest they be lumped together with the Right-wing critics of the genre who, like the future Italian prime minister, Giulio Andreotti, denounced Neorealism for airing Italy’s “dirty laundry” (Leavitt 2020, 172 and 156ff. For more on the discursive development of the Neorealist “institution,” see Fanara 2000).

In light of such a pervasive and intellectually star-studded hagiography, the average viewer of Rossellini’s films could be forgiven for not knowing that Rossellini and many other self-avowed “anti-fascist” artists and intellectuals of his generation—to say nothing of Italian politicians, priests, and titans of industry— began his career directing Fascist propaganda films in close collaboration with the regime. This is a

fact that, when it is acknowledged at all, is more often than not swept under the rug or paradoxically used to substantiate Rossellini's anti-fascist *bona fides* on account of the films' covert anti-fascism, ostensibly developed right under the nose of Mussolini himself (For some examples of this latter tendency, see: Brunetta 1991, 231-232 and 2009a, viii; Gallagher 1998/2018; Bondanella 1993, 38-40, 43-44 and Bondanella and Pacchioni 2009, 37-38; Haaland 2012, 13-15; Landy 2000, 13; Celli and Cottino-Jones 2007, 37. For more on the "redemption" of erstwhile Italian Fascist intellectuals, see Serri 2005). Indeed, not long before he became the "father" of neorealism and the famous director of the so-called "anti-fascist trilogy"— (*Roma città aperta* (1945), *Paisà (Paisan)* (1946), and *Germania anno zero (Germany Year Zero)* (1948))— known around the world for his highly publicized marriage and working relationship with the film superstar Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini found great success and operated freely within the highest echelons of Fascist society alongside many of the most prominent members of Italian Fascist society. These included his younger brother, Renzo Rossellini, a composer and producer who scored the music for many of his elder brother's films; Vittorio Mussolini, the only legitimate son of *il Duce* himself, who was perhaps the Fascist regime's premiere film critic, a respected producer, and Rossellini's personal friend; and Luigi Freddi who, in his roles as the godfather of the Italian film studio *Cinecittà* and the founder of Italy's national film school *il Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* (Experimental Center of Cinematography), was one of the key drivers of Fascist film policy. Likewise, Rossellini also had close working relationships with Goffredo Alessandrini and Francesco De Robertis, two of his occasional co-directors who were equally close to

the Fascist regime and were also rehabilitated, albeit with much less fanfare, after the war's official end in May 1945.

By that time, however, Rossellini's years of dedicated work for the regime had already resulted in him directing a series of films which can only be described as his own "fascist trilogy"—*La nave bianca* (*The White Ship*) (1941); *Un pilota ritorna* (*A Pilot Returns*) (1942); and *L'uomo dalla croce* (*The Man with a Cross*) (1943)). The juxtaposition between these two sets of films which appear, at least on the surface, to represent opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum and the vast disparity in their critical receptions— one trilogy which has been widely elevated as the paradigmatic example of anti-fascist filmmaking and another nominally Fascist trilogy which has been systematically swept aside for one reason or another— raises a series of uncomfortable but necessary questions, not least about the personal predilections and political convictions of the man who directed them, but also concerning the politics of memory and historiography in postwar Italy and beyond. To start, how is it that the director of a series of fascist propaganda films could go on to, within the span of less than two years, go on to direct and release a film— *Roma città aperta*— which is celebrated by many to have captured by way of its Catholic humanist overtones the very essence of the anti-fascist resistance and is claimed to have inaugurated a *new history* and a *new cinema* for a *new nation*? (Leavitt 2020, 51). What does this dramatic reversal reveal about the nature of Fascism and its historical legacy? And what are we to make of the significant and well-established continuities between Fascist ideology and aesthetics and the ostensibly anti-fascist movement-turned-institution that is Neorealism?

A closer examination of Rossellini and his two trilogies provides some answers to these questions. First, one finds that his earlier fascist trilogy shares more points of overlap with the prevailing Fascist ideology and worldview than has often been claimed, particularly their mutual focus on white Italian racial self-victimization and consequent emphasis on the necessity of reclaiming the Italian nation-state's former strength and glory through imperial expansion and colonialism. At the same time, a fuller uncovering of Rossellini's relationship to Fascism through these films also clarifies the propagandistic role played by Neorealism, both in its time and in the subsequent decades as an institutionalized and commodified intellectual product which has long since become "fixed" and "finished" in the minds of films scholars and critics alike (Leavitt 2020, 173). Like all commodities, the institution of Neorealism has a history which is itself derived from the "material relations operative in the history of capitalism" and, thus, its uplifted status as the exemplary form of anti-fascist cinema is not simply the organic result of "individuals thinking on their own or entering a free marketplace of ideas" (Rockhill 2025, 74, 146). Rather, the hegemony of this commodified interpretation is one that has been systematically manufactured and upheld by the mechanisms of the imperial superstructure of knowledge production— which encompasses capitalist networks popular and academic publishing, funding systems for research projects and conferences, the political economy of tenureship and adjunctification, etc.— and the expansive bourgeois cultural-intellectual apparatus whose ultimate function is to buttress the reproduction of capitalist-imperialist social relations and impede us from struggling against them on the terrains of ideology and social practice (ibid., 29ff; see also, Althusser 1971). The utility of imperial uplift for this particular

historiographical interpretation of Neorealism as a redemptively anti-Fascist phenomenon can be gleaned from following admission by the esteemed Italian film historian, Gian Piero Brunetta, who writes: “*In realtà l’irregolarità del tragitto produttivo e registico di Rossellini nasconde un percorso ideale e ideologico del tutto comune a quello di milioni di italiani*” (In reality, the irregularity of Rossellini’s production and directorial journey conceals an ideal and ideological path entirely common to that of millions of Italians) (Brunetta 1991, 232). Building on this conclusion, I argue that the institution of Neorealism and the fragmented understanding of Fascism it presents serves a more pernicious purpose as the keystone element of a postwar Italian national mythology, one which has served to sanitize Fascism and mask the aborted process of *defascistizzazione* (de-fascistization) in order to help facilitate the return of the country— along with its labor force, markets, and resources— back into the imperial fold after years of destructive inter-imperialist strife. In simple terms, this commodified interpretation of Neorealism has become hegemonic not because it is necessarily the most accurate or correct, but because it is the most politically expedient in facilitating imperialist flows of labor, capital, and ideas. Accordingly, what Rossellini and the genre really represent is an ambivalent form of anti-fascism which we would do well to interrogate much more thoroughly.

II. Fascism and Anti-Fascism: Concepts in Class Struggle

Of course, foregrounding the claim that Rossellini was a fellow traveler of Fascism along with the subsequent conclusion that Neorealism is, in the words of the Colombian author and filmmaker Fernando Vallejo, a “scam” when it comes to its anti-fascist credentials, warrants at least an attempt to define both terms (Hennessy

2024). This is easier said than done, however. As the historian Aristotle Kallis pointed out over two decades ago, notwithstanding the fact that over a century has passed since Mussolini's *Marcia su roma* (March on Rome) in 1922 and more than 80 years have gone by since his death and the official collapse of the Fascist regime in 1945, Italian Fascism— and fascism in general— remains a contentious topic; a “conundrum” that has continuously proven to be, “an extremely slippery terrain for research.” (Kallis 2000, 1). Anti-fascism, by extension, also struggles to define itself on these same grounds.

Broadly speaking, there are two genealogies of thought which have defined analyses of fascism since its nominal inception in the European interwar years. On the one hand, there is the liberal tradition which, despite a certain level of dissensus, has long been hegemonic in Western academic institutions defined by their proximity and subservience to the imperial-bourgeois state. And on the other hand, there is the dialectical and historical materialist tradition— commonly referred to under the umbrella term of “Marxism”— which has its own rich and often discordant history of anti-fascist analysis and activism. Needless to say, these are traditions which run concurrent with one another and have often cross-pollinated to a degree, but they also retain key differences which serve to distinguish them.

Perhaps the most definitive and enduring aspect of the bourgeois concept of fascism is its persistent emphasis on fascist ideology and rhetoric at the expense of de-emphasizing fascist political economy and social practice. Some of the most prominent examples of what we might label as this “culturalist” understanding of fascism can be found in Umberto Eco's 1995 essay entitled “Ur-Fascism,” as well as in the work of scholars like Roger Griffin and Emilio Gentile. For his part, Eco hinges

his unabashedly ahistorical definition of “Eternal Fascism” on fourteen distinct points, which might be condensed as:

- the establishment of a “cult of tradition,”
- the “irrationalist” rejection of “modernism,” and “rotten” parliamentary governments,”
- an enamoration with violence (“life is permanent warfare”) and “action for action’s sake,”
- “contempt for the weak,”
- and a “fear of difference,”
- all of which are meant to appeal to a “frustrated middle class” which has been previously humiliated by economic downturn and/or political defeats.

Eco’s account is self-admittedly diffuse and inchoate, but according to his definition fascism could “coagulate” around any single one of these political-ideological traits (Eco 1995, np). The shortfalls in this interpretation are somewhat obvious as not only did fascism make frequent and mixed use of the past— reappropriating certain elements while discarding others—just as much as it aimed to establish new traditions, but Italian Fascism (the primary subject of Eco’s essay) is well known to have come into power with the legal support of the monarchy and the connivance of liberal sections of the Italian parliament— as well as British intelligence services— before proceeding to dismantle these institutions (Mattei 2022, 205ff; Seldes 1935, 99ff. See also, Dogliani 2008/2024 and Stone 2013). One could go down the list and reject almost all of Eco’s points on similar grounds that they neglect legitimate historical analysis of Fascism in favor of ascribing it a set of overly moralistic and psychological features.

Griffin's definition is not ahistorical in the same sense as Eco's, but it may be called suprahistorical insofar as it identifies fascism as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism" (Griffin 1991/1993, 48). For him, this "palingenetic ultranationalism" premised on the myth of "national rebirth" is what constitutes the "fascist minimum" without which there can be no "true fascism" (ibid., 62, 143). Although attractively succinct and parsimonious, Griffin's account is equally troubled by its provocation for us to myopically identify (i.e. mistake) one element of fascism as its representative whole as well as by its implicit condemnation of nationalism and national liberation. For example, one can locate many non-fascist or even anti-fascist forms of revolutionary nationalism which might also be described as palingenetic.³

Taking a slightly different approach, the Italian scholar Emilio Gentile has defined fascism in terms of "political religion" and the "sacralization of politics," which aims to subsume traditional religion under the political symbols and aesthetics of fascism (Gentile 1993/1996). For him, fascism is best described in negative terms as an "anti-ideological' and pragmatic ideology that proclaims itself antimaterialist, antiindividualist, antiliberal, antidemocratic, anti-Marxist, is populist and anticapitalist in tendency" (quoted in Payne 1995/2003, 5-6). This definition is specious too, however, not only on account of fascism's aforementioned entanglement with capitalism and liberalism throughout the 20th century, but also

³ Frantz Fanon's commingled account of national liberation and the quest for a "new humanism" in the context of the Algerian Revolution immediately come to mind as the archetypal example of an explicitly anti-fascist nationalism (Fanon 1961/2004, 233ff).

because Gentile's emphasis on sacralized mass politics as a replacement for religion problematically ignores the forms that fascism has taken outside Italy and glosses over the oftentimes similarly close working relationship between fascism and the Church in various historical contexts (Kertzer 2014). For these reasons, as the historian of fascism David Roberts argues, "we must beware taking the sacralization of politics as either the essence or the telos of Italian Fascism" (Roberts 2016, 14ff).

Perhaps the most well-rounded liberal analysis of fascism which transcends many of these aforementioned pitfalls can be found in the work of Robert Paxton who began his career as a specialist historian of Vichy France before moving on to theorize more generic forms of fascism in later years. In his 2004 magnum opus, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, he defines fascism in one long— and somewhat unwieldy sentence— as:

a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion (Paxton 2004, 218).

Admittedly, there are many strengths to this definition, particularly Paxton's emphasis on external expansion which is often not taken seriously into consideration by liberal theorists of fascism, but even this account is strained by Paxton's eagerness to dismiss Marxist analyses of class and imperialism as they relate to fascism.

Indeed, he rejects *tout court* the idea that fascism "pursued any rational economic

goal whatever [sic],” instead arguing that fascism and capitalism were no more than “practicable bedfellows (though not inevitable ones, nor always comfortable ones)” (ibid., 208, 210). To justify this claim, he appeals not to fascist economic and political policies themselves, but rather to the collective failure of fascist regimes to successfully implement them in the long run since both the Italian Fascist regime and the Nazi Third Reich were eventually defeated by their opponents. Paxton’s reasoning here is decidedly unsound insofar as one cannot accurately judge the intent of a policy or the character of a regime based on what it failed to do while disregarding the logic that underlies these attempts. The fact that these regimes were unsuccessful in their implementation does not negate the fact that they did have rational economic goals in mind. Ultimately then, despite the seemingly comprehensive taxonomy Paxton provides on the surface, what lies beneath is still a culturalist understanding of fascism circumscribed by categories that the French-Egyptian political economist Samir Amin has described as: the “bourgeois principles of political organization (notions of legality, of the state, human rights, democracy), social values (freedom, equality, individualism), and principles of the organization of economic life (private property, the ‘free market’)” which altogether obscure our understanding of fascist from an etiological perspective (Amin 1996, np).

In contrast to the bourgeois concept of fascism, the leading intellectual exemplars in the anti-imperialist Marxist tradition have been able to generate a dialectical and “multi-scalar” analysis of fascism which “accords a primacy to practices while also situating them in relation to the broader capitalist social totality” (Rockhill 2020, np). This is crucial because, as the organic revolutionary intellectual George Jackson explained from a cell in San Quentin State Prison not long before he

was assassinated by the so-called liberal-democratic US police state: “The final definition of fascism is still open, simply because it is still a developing movement” (Jackson 1972, 135). For this reason alone, any worthwhile definition of fascism must always be contextualized and tested against the vicissitudes of history. Equally as important is Jackson emphasis on the fact—much maligned in liberal circles— that “At its core, fascism is an economic rearrangement,” one which grows directly out of the sharpening of bourgeois class consciousness and the internal contradictions of capitalist value production (ibid., 136). By making this assertion, Jackson finds himself in good company with the well-known (East) German Marxist intellectual Bertolt Brecht who argued with striking prescience and clarity all the way back in 1935 that

Fascism is a historic phase of capitalism; in this sense it is something new and at the same time old. In Fascist countries capitalism continues to exist, but only in the form of Fascism; and *Fascism can be combated as capitalism alone, as the nakedest, most shameless, most oppressive, and most treacherous form of capitalism* (Brecht 1935/2015, 295. Emphasis in original).

By this definition, developed over the past century by Jackson, Brecht, and other Marxists like Georgi Dimitrov, Rajani Palme Dutt, Arthur Rosenberg, Franz Neumann, Daniel Guérin, José Carlos Mariátegui, Claudia Jones, Harry Haywood, Frantz Fanon, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, W.E.B Du Bois, Assata Shakur, Gerald Horne, Martin Kitchen, Jacques Pauwels, and Annie Lacroix-Riz— to name just a few— fascism is little more than the *intensification* of liberal-imperialist bourgeois rule which is already rapacious, exploitative, destructive, and genocidal. Indeed, both

Italian Fascism and German Nazism explicitly modeled their policies of racial repression and imperial expansion on the US's own settler-colonial, white supremacist policies of Jim Crow and manifest destiny (Whitman 2017; Losurdo 2015, 284). Although it might seem shocking to some, the (liberal) American historian James Whitman even notes that at least some in the upper echelons of the Nazi party found certain aspects of US race law, such as the “one-drop rule,” to be “excessively severe” leading them to propose a more “limited” application in Germany and other Nazi-occupied territories (Whitman 2017 134-135).⁴ Thus, as Rockhill notes, “If there is something exceptional about Nazism,” as Aimé Césaire claimed, “it is that concentration camps were being built in Europe instead of in the colonies” (Rockhill 2020, np).

To substantiate this assertion, one need only look to the 1904-1908 genocide of the Nama and Herero peoples in southwest Africa (what is now Namibia) perpetrated not by the Nazis, but their predecessors in the Second Reich— effectively drawing a line of death and enslavement which runs “from Windhoek to Auschwitz” (Adhikari 2022, 116ff; Zimmerer 2024). Likewise, one could trace similar line from the failed Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1896 to the genocide — known as the *Shar* (“evil”) in Arabic— committed there between 1929-1934, wherein Fascist forces systematically murdered close to 100,000 Libyan men, women and children while

⁴ The full quote reads, “From *Mein Kampf* onward, Nazi jurists and policy makers took a sustained interest in American race law. Especially during the early 1930s, the era of the making of the Nuremberg Laws, Nazis engaged in detailed study of American immigration law, American second-class citizenship law, and American anti-miscegenation and mongrelization law. Some of them saw attractions in the system of Jim Crow segregation. In particular, the Prussian Memorandum, the 1933 text that laid out the basic statement of the radical Nazi legal program, specifically invoked Jim Crow—though it proposed a more ‘limited’ version for Nazi Germany. Certain aspects of American race law struck Nazi observers as appealing: in particular, the exceptional American practice of harshly criminalizing interracial marriage lay in the background of the Blood Law. Other aspects, like the one-drop rule, struck them as excessively severe” (Whitman 2017, 134-135).

deporting and interning thousands more in concentration camps (Ahmida 2020; see also, Segrè 1974). In his recounting of this often overlooked history, the Libyan historian Ali Abdullatif Ahmida presents us with another important question which we will return to in due course. Namely, “Why does the dominant image of Italian Fascism as benign persist in the public media, films, and scholarly Italian and Western studies when compared with Nazi Germany’s model of fascism up to the 1980s?” (ibid., 51).

For now, it is worth noting that an excellent synthesis of this anti-imperialist Marxist line of thinking which refuses to sever fascism from its roots in the national and colonial questions of capitalism can be found in the work of the Italian philosopher and communist militant, Domenico Losurdo, whose entire *oeuvre* embodies a “counter-history, a counter-philosophy, and a counter-politics” which cuts against the grain of liberal-bourgeois mythology (Hermeto 2025). Perhaps nowhere is this better exemplified than in his counter-history of liberalism which goes to painstaking lengths to demonstrate that the expansion of so-called “free-market” capitalism and liberal ideology across the globe has gone hand-in-hand with the expansion of racial slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. To trace just one example, Losurdo outlines how conservative liberal intellectuals like John Locke and Edmund Burke– to name just two among many– extended the Aristotelian philosophical tradition of justifying the condition of “natural slavery” for the racialized masses, often referring to them simply as “bipedal instruments” of labor or “work machines” destined to form the human bedrock of a racially stratified “*Herrenvolk*” or “master-race” democracy (Losurdo 2005/2014, 107, 184-185). Losurdo’s critical reinterpretation of this liberal-colonial tradition and its

revitalization under the conditions of fascism echoes and expands the arguments made by the aforementioned group of intellectuals— not to mention other anti-imperialist Marxist leaders and thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and even non-Marxists such as Jawaharlal Nehru— all of whom came to recognize the kindred nature of liberalism and fascism and view them as overlapping and mutually reinforcing aspects of bourgeois rule, particularly in the settler-colonial context which places the colonizer and the colonized in dangerously close proximity. Accordingly, fascism should be seen not as an anomalous deviation from capitalist-imperialism or the “demonic repudiation” of liberal ideology, but as their honed cutting edge— the purest expression of capitalist logic— which exists on a spectrum alongside other forms of bourgeois governance including the aforementioned liberal *Herrenvolk* democracy (Kallis 2000, 21). This understanding of fascism’s deep roots prompts Losurdo to reformulate a “great saying” of Max Horkheimer, one of the leading luminaries of the Frankfurt School. Whereas Horkheimer once quipped that “whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism,” Losurdo makes it clear that “*Chi non vuol parlare del colonialismo deve tacere anche sul fascismo e sul capitalismo*” (“whoever is not willing to talk about colonialism should also keep quiet about capitalism and fascism” (Losurdo 2017/2024, 123). Compared to the eclectic liberal-bourgeois concepts of fascism schematically outlined above, this dialectical and historical materialist understanding of fascism as a tool in the bourgeois political arsenal enables us to better understand its relative ideological flexibility owing to the fact that its primary functions are: 1) to rapidly bolster the rate of profit in the face of economic/political crisis by way of imperialist expansion, culminating in the brutal dispossession— what

Marx referred to as “so-called primitive accumulation” – and the heightened exploitation of labor; and 2) to repress and subdue any and all revolutionary, anti-imperialist forces that might threaten these prospects— whether these take the form of the “Judeo-Bolshevik menace” in Eastern Europe or the Libyan nomads and peasants occupying Italy’s “*quarta sponda*” (fourth shore) makes little difference (Marx 1867/1976, 873ff; See also, Mattei 2022).⁵ Ultimately, the ideological means are constructed to justify these political economic ends. Fascism can thus be considered, in the words of the historian Michael Parenti, as a “false revolution” which represents “nothing more than a final solution to the class struggle” (Parenti 1997, 17). It is a direct product of the capitalist world-system, one “whose precise forms vary depending on the structural phase of capitalist development and the specific sociohistorical conjuncture” (Rockhill 2020).

III. Rossellini: No Fascist Ideologue?

Although much more could be said about the topic, this working definition of fascism is more than sufficient to help gauge the question: just how Fascist is Rossellini’s first trilogy? Prior to any deeper analysis, the answer seems like it should be obvious. How could these particular films, which were produced as state funded and sanctioned propaganda for the Fascist regime, be anything else other than Fascist? Why would the regime finance and distribute films which were latently anti-fascist, as many claim Rossellini’s first trilogy to be? Were the regime and its officials

⁵ It should also come as little surprise then, that “The initial head of the crusade against the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy was Henry Ford, the American automobile magnate. To foil it, he founded a paper with a large print run, the *Dearborn Independent*. The articles published in it were collected in 1920 in a volume entitled *The International Jew*, which immediately became a reference point for international anti-Semitism, to the extent that it ‘probably did more than any other work to make the Protocols [of the Elders of Zion] world-famous’” (Losurdo 2015, 178).

simply inept? Or was Rossellini's artistic genius so great that he managed to evade censorship and embed these films with an anti-fascist message?

In response to these questions, over the past half-century or so many of the most prominent historians of Italian cinema and culture have often opted to stress that Italian Fascism was never as far-reaching and “totalitarian” as Nazism or “Stalinism” were. Therefore, as scholars like Jacqueline Reich eagerly contend, we cannot simply condemn the “cinema of the Fascist period” as “Fascist cinema”— to do so would be “clearly erroneous” (Reich 2002, 7). To justify such claims, Reich draws on the fact that the Fascist regime rarely needed to censor films as a means of bringing them in line with ideological standards and cultural expectations— though she neglects the other means that a regime might use to curate the development of film and other forms of propaganda, such as the allocation of funding to certain films over others, pairing less overtly Fascist films with Fascist documentary shorts and newsreels to bolster their ideological utility for the regime, and the widespread use of dubbing to strategically alter the content of foreign films entering the Italian market. In any case, the lack of censorship allowed Fascism, she argues, to foster a “remarkably open artistic environment within the film community, in which many anti-Fascist intellectuals and Jews continued to participate, even after the 1938 racial laws” (ibid., 17). Reich concludes her glowing review of Italian Fascist film policy by stating:

[Italian] Cinema benefitted from this lack of systematic repression, in which the various government offices and officials influenced rather than controlled its feature film production. As a result, the film industry also experienced a relatively large margin of freedom, as evidenced in part by the relatively few

sedition scandals that took place in the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, in relying on Hollywood for both structural and artistic inspiration, Italian feature film production transposed the textual body of American films, which were decidedly more permissive, even with their own codes and modes of repression, into the context of a more repressive and regulated Italian society (ibid., 23).

In this strategic maneuver, Reich expands her original argument and essentially attempts to dispel the entire concept of Fascist cinema altogether as something which never really existed and likely never could have on account of the regime's permissive and pluralistic attitudes. This raises the question: was Fascism's political-intellectual environment really as "remarkably open" as Reich describes?

For instance, Italian Jews certainly weathered the *Ventennio* and the *leggi razziali* in complex and varied ways depending on their class standing, ideological dispensation towards Fascism, and proximity to key members of the regime and its political elite, but Reich's reference to the Jewish Italian artists and intellectuals who continued working after the promulgation of the 1938 Racial Laws falls short of exculpation. In support of her claims about Fascism's lenient attitude, she cites the presence in the Fascist film industry of

Aldo de Benedetti, one of the most prolific screenwriters of the era [who] continued to collaborate on many screenplays without receiving screen credit. In other instances, ongoing participation depended on a quick name change, as was the case with the Jewish actress Anna Proclemer, the future wife of Vitaliano Brancati, who simply took the stage name of Anna Vivald (ibid., 17).

This statement not only minimizes the impact of Racial Laws and their deleterious effects on Italian Jewry, but it also completely neglects the dehumanizing effects that the laws had on the Italian Romani community as well as the Slavs and African peoples under Italian colonial occupation (Dogliani 2008/2024, 224-254; Sarfatti 2006; Trevisan 2017).

On the topic of the “Jewish Question” which Reich does address, the Luxembourgish-born American-Jewish historian and Holocaust survivor Arno Mayer reminds us in his work that the widespread judeophobia and anti-semitism of this period in European history can only be understood in the context of fascism’s broader anti-communism and rapacious desire for imperial expansion. For Hitler and the Nazis, German Jews and those living in the Eastern European “Pale of Settlement” were considered by Nazi ideologues to be the lived embodiments of “Judeobolshevism” who, alongside the indigenous Slavs of the region, represented the primary obstacle standing in the way of them and their coveted *Lebensraum* (living space). As these “inferior races” began to beat back the Nazi war-machine at key battles such as the Battle of Stalingrad (1942-43), the Third Reich grew increasingly hostile and began to systematically implement a full-on anti-Jewish genocide. Mayer notes that before admitting to that pivotal defeat in the Caucasus, “Once again, he [Hitler] reminded his audience of his original admonition that should the Jews precipitate ‘an international world war for the extermination of the European races’ they would have to pay for it with their own extermination.” Consequently, after surrendering to the Soviets, “bolshevism and Judaism were subjected to equally ferocious excoriation.” In the eyes of the Nazis, the drive toward “total war” and the pursuit of a “final solution” to the class struggle— ideologically re-

framed in terms of a racial and national struggle– had thus become absolutely necessary and coterminous (Mayer 1988, 344ff).

In contrast to Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy was simply not under the same level of pressure to demonize and attempt to exterminate the Jewish population living within reach of the regime– which is by no means to say that they were not complicit in the Holocaust (or the “Judeocide” as Mayer convincingly refers to it), only that they participated under a different set of circumstances (Livingston 2014). The most obvious of these differences lay in the fact that Italy’s imperialist-expansionist impulse was predominantly confined to the African continent where they too committed no shortage of genocidal and other criminal acts of colonial violence. Reich’s reliance on this exceptionalized image of Italian Fascism– which appeals to its differences from Nazism in order to soften its own image while overlooking the capitalist-imperialist logic at the core of both projects– leads into an almost *a priori* desire to rescue “cinema under fascism” from the clutches of “Fascist cinema” under the specious assumption that within every film released under the Fascist regime lies an anti-Fascist film waiting to be uncovered after decades of scorn and narrow-minded rejection.

In their own research, scholars like Losurdo have described this type of selective interpretation as a “hermeneutics of innocence”– reinforced from the top-down by authoritative scholars like Reich, Brunetta, Bondanella, etc.– which has the ability to mystify and obfuscate the presence of Fascist ideology and symbols within many of the films released during the *Ventennio nero* (Losurdo 2019, 997-998). This is especially the case when it comes to Rossellini’s fascist trilogy, which Reich tepidly describes as a series of “realist documentary-like films, indicating a future trend

which would come to characterize post-Fascist Italian production” (Reich 2002, 15).⁶ Like many others, she reduces these early films to little more than mere anticipations of the Neorealist films that he would later direct, the likes of which are taken at face value to be anti-Fascist. As the old adage goes all roads lead to Rome– or, in this case, Neorealism!

Beginning with the first entry in the “fascist trilogy,” *La nave bianca* (1941), one encounters a rather unique and understudied film even when compared to those that came after it. The plot follows a young sailor on an Italian warship in the Mediterranean who, after being injured in a momentous naval battle, is sent to a hospital ship– the eponymous *nave bianca*– for recovery. While aboard, he falls in love with a young school teacher turned wartime nurse, but their relationship is complicated by their shared commitments to the Fascist regime. Beyond narrative and aesthetics, the production of the film also provides evidence for a highly revealing case study which reflects both the young director’s social position relative to the Italian cinematic establishment at the time and points to his own burgeoning ideological commitments.

Born into a thoroughly bourgeois and liberal-leaning Roman family in mid-1906, Rossellini, despite not meeting the standards one might expect of the typical

⁶ Again, it should be stressed that Reich is by no means alone in expressing these particular hagiographic-historiographical tendencies, the roots of which can be traced at least back to the 1950s when the Italian screenwriter and film critic Massimo Mida– who coincidentally earned his debut credit as screenwriter through his contributions to the second film in Rossellini’s fascist trilogy, *Un pilota ritorna* (1942)– published one of the first monographs on the director which, in the words of the esteemed Gian Piero Brunetta, “*ha riconosciuto che, fin dalle prime opere il regista ‘anticipa lo stile di domani. L’evento bellico è percorso dal controcanto di una cronaca dimessa, documenta una partecipazione priva di enfasi: non vi sono sbavature retoriche a gonfiarne il respiro*” (“recognized, from his earliest works, the director [Rossellini] ‘anticipates the style of tomorrow. The event of war is pervaded by the counterpoint of a modest chronicle, he documents a participation devoid of emphasis: there are no rhetorical smudges to inflate its breath”) (Brunetta 1991, 231).

Blackshirt or the hardline Fascist ideologue, emerged organically into the upper-crust of the Italian Fascist social milieu. As the eldest son, he was particularly spoiled and would eventually become infamous for his tyrannical and playboy-like behavior during his teenage and young adult years. His performance in school was less than stellar and he eventually dropped out of *liceo* (high school) without a diploma before receiving a massive inheritance at the age of only 16 following the death of his grandfather. He would then go on to spend the next decade or so partying in the slums of Naples and the backstreets of Rome. Thus, in contrast to many of the convinced Fascist youths of his time, Rossellini's bohemian lifestyle insulated him somewhat from direct indoctrination into Fascist ideology and politics during the mid-1920s when Fascism was on the initial upswing. However, Rossellini's father passed away in 1931 and the young man, now broke and in his mid-20s, lived the next few years drifting somewhat aimlessly through Italian society, eventually rekindling his early love for the movies— during his childhood, his *nouveau riche* father had built two of Rome's earliest and grandest theaters which he often frequented with dozens of his schoolmates— and, more importantly for now, the actresses who starred in them. The combination of these factors— Rossellini's lust for beautiful divas and his long standing connections with his bourgeois counterparts in Fascist Italy's elite upper class— are what propelled him from his first profession as the rich “family son” to his second career in the film industry (Gallagher 1998/2018, 50). As another biographer of Rossellini, Peter Brunette, writes, “It is clear that Rossellini never made a conscious, specific decision to become a director, but instead drifted into it the way rich, idle young men are apt to drift into things” (Brunette 1987, 5). In fact, Rossellini's younger sister Marcella believes he quite literally

followed his first wife, the up and coming actress Assia Norris, into the industry by accompanying her to work at the studio, at which point he would inevitably end up assisting with sound effects, minor script editing, and even some dubbing work. During this earliest period of his career, he experimented behind the camera by making a few documentary style short films, all but one of which— *Fantasia sottomarina* (*Underwater Fantasy*) (1939), on the subject of aquarium fish— have long since been lost (ibid., 21).⁷

Rossellini's real break as a filmmaker would come soon, however, in large part thanks to his blossoming friendship with Vittorio Mussolini who was able to obtain for him a set of fairly prominent positions in the production of the wartime propaganda film, *Luciano Serra pilota* (1938), which would go on to be wildly successful with Italian audiences and win the *Coppa Mussolini* (Mussolini Cup) for Best Italian Film at that year's Venice Film Festival— the same year that Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi epic *Olympia* was awarded the prize for best foreign film (Niven 2018, 92ff). For this project, Rossellini served as both assistant director under Alessandrini— responsible for supervising the shooting of footage on location in North Africa wherein Italy had just recently enacted its brutal colonial genocide— and co-screenwriter whose contributions to the film's script “focused on the air force's crucial contributions to the conflict” while also presenting imperial warfare

⁷ It is worth noting that in order to film this short, Rossellini is known to have “filled dead fish with lead and manipulated them with strings, like puppets. For the battle scenes, he threw live octopuses, morays, lobsters, and fish in the small tank— turning their struggle for their lives into a macabre spectacle for the human public. Approached through the lens of ecocriticism and posthumanism, *Fantasia sottomarina* is in all regards a snuff film. More than a love for the ocean and for nature, more than an appreciation for the precarity of life or an interest in alterity, what moves Rossellini in his debut is the will to experiment: experiment with what he can make a body do for the camera but also— as Giuliana Minghelli argues— to experiment with how film forms can be used to move spectators' bodies (Fabbri 2023, 173; see also, Minghelli 2013).

and the colonial experience as sites of redemption for their disaffected and emasculated Italian male protagonists (Ben-Ghiat 2015, 79). Almost immediately, the critical and commercial success of *Luciano Serra pilota* greatly strengthened Rossellini's position in Fascist political and film circles, particularly with the young Mussolini "who henceforth served as his informal patron" (Ben-Ghiat 2001, 21).⁸

This prior relationship with the Fascist political-cinematic establishment notwithstanding, Rossellini's debut film as lead director, *La nave bianca*, was initially conceived under much different circumstances. According to Brunette, what the regime originally wanted from Rossellini "as the title shows, was a short, reassuring film on the efficient and humane care received by wounded sailors on hospital ships before they were sent home" but Rossellini ended up stretching the otherwise social realist film to "feature length" with the addition of a sentimental love story, a decision which stemmed at least in part from the hope of appealing more widely to a mass Italian audience which was still more accustomed to Hollywood-style spectacles than Fascist pseudo-documentaries (Brunette 1987, 12).

Narratively speaking, the film opens with a series of intertitle cards which boldly attest to the film's authenticity and verisimilitude, indicating from the very beginning that what viewers are about to see is *real*, unlike the vapid melodramas and action movies that audiences had come to expect. The opening sequence of "beautiful" shots showcasing the warship seem, in the eyes of Brunette, both

⁸ The following anecdote from fellow filmmaker Giuseppe De Santis helps to explain what Brunette describes as "Rossellini's unique position vis-à-vis the Fascist authorities: 'We were writing the script of *Desiderio* and one evening... we were going home when we were stopped by a police patrol which demanded to see our papers. I didn't have a Fascist party card— but only because I had forgotten it at home in a drawer... and I could have gotten into trouble. Well, Rossellini, of whom Vittorio Mussolini and the Fascist Federation thought very highly, intervened, and everything was taken care of'" (Brunette 1987, 362).

“spontaneous and carefully chosen at the same time,” serving to highlight Rossellini’s “formidable powers of observation” above all else (ibid., 15). Similarly, Bazin described the film “as antispectacular and uncompromising in regard to the regime” (quoted in Fabbri 2023, 168). Over a decade later, Rossellini himself would go on to stress in an interview with the prestigious film journal co-founded by Bazin– the *Cahiers du Cinéma*– something similar: the presence of the aforementioned romance and the broad “humanistic themes” present in the film. In this interview with French *Nouvelle Vague* directors Francois Truffaut and Eric Rohmer in 1954, he shared that he believed the same moral position evident in *Open City* was already present in *La nave bianca* (Aprà 1987, 113-114).

More critical-minded viewers, however, will no doubt be “struck by the appositeness of one of the Duce’s slogans that happens to be caught by the camera eye: ‘Men and machines: a single heartbeat’” (Brunette 1987, 15). Although easily missed, this briefly glimpsed detail is a key pillar of the Fascist ideology underpinning the film. The “formal excessiveness” of the scenes showcasing the ship and its mechanical internals points to the fact that the filmic devices at work to devise the syncretic unity between man and machine “are not informed by the impulse to capture reality ‘as is’” but are instead driven by the urgent need on the part of the Fascist regime to engage the mind and body of Italian spectators as a way of getting them “caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen.” For Fabbri, accounting for the affective dimension of the cinematic apparatus makes an otherwise “dry” and “objective” film, which many scholars have interpreted as an fostering an anti-war aesthetic and

ethic, watch more like a “racial melodrama” intended to evoke a very different set of feelings and reactions from Italian audiences at the time (Fabbri 2023, 168).

The “brutal” corporeal vision of *La nave bianca* begins to take shape during the naval battle which marks the transition between the first and second parts of the film (Schoonover 2012). In these scenes, danger and the risk of potential injury to the bodies of the Italian sailors functions not only to elicit from contemporary Italian viewers a shared sense of camaraderie and pleasure derived from the “fantasy of a victimized good Italian race under attack from the water” – from the Mediterranean sea itself – but also to reinscribe them with a particular set of Fascist social norms which are subsequently reinforced by the film’s conclusion (ibid., 169). The stage is set for this moment when, during the heat of the conflict, the male protagonist known by the name of Augusto Basso is blinded by a heated rush of toxic gas which leads to his hospitalization on the titular white hospital ship, the *Arno*.

Subsequently, he encounters a number of his fellow maimed and wounded Italian soldiers, some uncharacteristically good-natured Germans, and his old love interest – his “*madrina di guerra*, or pen pal” – a former teacher turned Red Cross nurse by the name of Elena Fondi (Ben-Ghiat 2015, 238). Having left her job to serve Italy and its sons in the war, she recognizes Basso by the name on the medal he wears, but decides not to reveal her own identity out of her sense of womanly duty to the Fascist cause. Eventually, Basso regains his sight and recognizes Elena in return, but like her, he also quickly comes to accept the fact that their shared sense of duty to the nation and national security must take precedence over any romantic feelings that might exist between them. In the melodramatic final scene, the warship that Basso had been attacked on returns from combat to the same port the *Arno* is docked in.

Upon realizing this, Basso sits up in his hospital bed and is joined by Elena as both watch the ship return home. Slowly panning to a medium shot, the camera dramatically frames their “ecstatic faces” as “sexual enjoyment gives way to the ecstasy of patriotism” (ibid., 187). The gendered dimension of this scene in particular— and the film in general— could not be more clear. As the dissident Italian Marxist-feminist Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi argues in her still untranslated 1976 book, *La donna "nera": Consenso femminile e fascismo*, what we see is the quintessential manifestation of Fascist Italian womanhood which presents us with “the equation man = son, and woman = mother = teacher, key to the Fascist ideology of the woman” (quoted in Brunette 1987, 18). Unsurprisingly then, Ruth Ben-Ghiat comes to the conclusion that Elena, as “a carrier of rectitude and charity as well as a love interest” becomes a “prototype” for female characters in later Rossellini films (Ben-Ghiat 2000, 24).

Thus, in spite of Rossellini’s attempts to put up a wall between *La nave bianca* and Fascism after Italy’s defeat in the war, what viewers are left to reckon with in the film is a distinctly Fascist sense of Italian gender politics and national and racial vulnerability vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, both of which are depicted with striking viscerality in order to incite Italians to reject their history of victimization—at the hands of both their white European (British) imperial counterparts and the indigenous Black Africans who had not long ago trounced them in Ethiopia at the 1896 Battle of Adwa— and reclaim ownership of *il mare nostrum* (our sea). Given Mussolini’s outspoken desire to reforge Italy into a new Roman Empire in these years, the film reflects what Claudio Fogu has described in his work as the development of a Fascist-imperialist “Mediterranean imaginary” aimed at restoring

Italy's status as the Mediterranean hegemon (Fogu 2020, 181ff; see also Mack Smith 1976). The film also betrays an uncomfortable fact which film studies has generally been reluctant to acknowledge or interrogate. That is to say, Rossellini's widely celebrated humanism and his "emphatic appreciation of the vulnerability and sanctity of life is not as innocent" as many claim, precisely because he makes clear time and time again that only certain lives and deaths— white, Italian, Fascist ones—are truly worthy of consideration (Fabbri 2023, 189). As intellectuals like Fanon, Césaire, and Stuart Hall have argued, this is a problem which lies at the heart of white, Western, liberal-bourgeois humanism in general. Despite its claims to universality, it has always struggled to acknowledge the humanity of the vast majority of humankind because this would necessarily entail acknowledging the horrors of fascism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism more generally (Fanon 1961/2004; Césaire 1955/2000; Hall 1992/2019; see also Du Bois 1915). Needless to say, this discriminatory humanism alongside Rossellini's penchant for weaponizing melodrama and racialized self-victimization will also appear as recurrent themes across both his "Fascist" and "anti-Fascist" trilogies.

Indeed, Rossellini's second film in the "Fascist" trilogy, *Un pilota ritorna* (1942), projects many of the same themes as its predecessor, only now extending Italy's Fascist-imperialist matrix from the Mediterranean Sea to the not-too-distant lands of Mediterranean Greece. Based on a scenario developed by Vittorio Mussolini, the film echoes Rossellini's previous work with Alessandrini in *Luciano Serra pilota*— particularly in its Italian Futurist-inspired glorification of Italian aviation— as it follows the male protagonist, Gino Rossati, a pilot on his first deployment to the

Greek theater.⁹ But there are also some key differences between these two films. Unlike *Luciano Serra pilota*, released over four years ago on the heels of the relative “success” of the Fascist assault in Ethiopia, the Greek campaign was not one which could be won simply by dropping poison gas on unarmed civilians with no recourse to defend themselves from aerial bombardment. Moreover, by this point in the war, Italy had suffered a string of military defeats in both Libya and East Africa which rendered the triumphant tenor of *Luciano Serra pilota* increasingly untenable. Instead, as was the case in *La nave bianca*, the focus in *Un pilota ritorna* rests squarely on the pain and suffering of the Italian protagonist and his compatriots. Only now, in order to evoke sympathy for the floundering Italian Fascist military project, the embodied violence that we see is also strategically likened to the suffering of the Greeks— suffering which stems not from the Italian invasion in which Rossati had taken part, but from German and British bombing runs taking place all around them.

After his plane is shot down, Rossati becomes a prisoner of war himself and is able to bear witness to the immense torment and turmoil inflicted on the Greeks as they are left to fend for themselves by the retreating British-Greek allied forces. “Fallen from grace, fallen from the sky, Rossati is now part of a homeless multitude yearning for safety and traversing a maimed landscape marred by bombs, blood, and tears” (Fabbri 2023, 194). As the *Wehrmacht* advances, Rossati and the other captives are repeatedly transferred from one location to the next, providing ample

⁹The fixation with aviation in Italy already had deep roots at the time. After all, liberal Italy had been the first country to drop bombs from a plane in 1911 during the Italo-Turkish War and the first imperial power to drop (already illegal) poison gas from the air on an unarmed civilian population during the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (Lindqvist 2001; Sbacchi 1997, 55ff; Del Boca 1996/2007).

time for him to become familiar with the horrors of war. Heading out of Allied territory, he encounters a sick Greek child, but there is nothing that can be done to help because British raids have devastated this part of the country leaving them without adequate food, medicine, or shelter. Later on, a German *Stuka* bomber lays waste to the British army column shepherding the Greeks and Italian POWs through the countryside, showcasing their blatant disregard for the Greek civilians travelling with them, but also for their subdued Italian allies. While the demonization of the British enemy is undoubtedly a carry over from *La nave bianca*, the repositioning of the Germans– whose inhumanity will become a mainstay of Rossellini’s “anti-Fascist” trilogy– as enemies and potential occupiers reflects a stark shift in Italian attitudes towards the war at this point. In another scene, an Italian soldier must have his injured leg amputated and Rossati volunteers to assist the attending doctor– who conveniently happens to be Italian– and his daughter in the operation. Meanwhile, a Greek guard watches on from afar, distant enough to not be involved but not far away enough to prevent himself from nearly coming to tears when he hears the screams of the Italian soldier undergoing an unimaginably painful surgery without the aid of proper tools or anesthesia. Thus, in what is surely meant to be seen as a visceral moment of shared humanity, the Greek resistance fighters are brought to the same level as the Italian Fascist forces, thereby repressing the latter’s role as architects and undertakers of the tragedy and destruction that we’ve seen unfold so far. As Ben-Ghiat argues, this scene is especially important because “The spectacle of bodily intervention staged here works to the advantage of the Italians. Although they are the occupiers, it is the Greek who hears the effects of the mortification of Italian flesh, and his empathetic reaction validates Italian victimhood” (Ben-Ghiat 2015,

256ff). Once again, Rossellini's discriminatory humanism and selective disdain for war is laid bare: the Germans and British are cast as unfeeling monsters capable of the most inhumane acts whereas Italians are depicted as wounded victims simply struggling to survive in a world dominated by the former.

Yet, we are not given the opportunity in Rossellini's filmic schema to "experience the suffering of Greek women forced into prostitution in exchange for food by the Italian soldiers, or the random executions that the [Fascist] Royal Army carried out to terrorize the population, effecting a governance by fear as it had done in Ethiopia" (Fabbri 2023, 195). In this way, although "The disavowal of Italian responsibility in *Un pilota ritorna* may indeed express Rossellini's own ambivalence about what was undoubtedly an unpopular war," as some more generous critics have argued, it cannot be denied that the film "also supported claims about Fascism's 'humanitarian' and 'spiritual' qualities that intellectuals and policymakers had advanced since the start of the regime" (Ben-Ghiat 2000, 27). It is little wonder then that, after premiering in front of Italian Fascist officials and film critics, many of them lauded the film for its ostensibly humanistic depiction of war and its freedom from "all rhetorical concessions" with one sycophantic reviewer even going so far as to praise Rossellini himself for his skills as a pilot, director, and "imperial warrior" who had "so far logged 'two hundred flight hours in the skies of Africa, Italy, and the Mediterranean, often risking his life for the perfect shot" (ibid., 27; Ben-Ghiat 2015, 263).

Given the dismissive attitude he expressed toward *La nave bianca* in the postwar years, it should also come as no surprise that Rossellini again attempted to distance himself from *Un pilota ritorna* later in his life. In a discussion with

Francesco Savio in 1974, Rossellini provided “one of his rare comments on the film” in which he declared that he did not want to think or talk about it before going on to assert— against existing documentary evidence noted by Savio— that all of the dialogue of the film had been changed by the younger Mussolini, effectively disowning the film as the product of someone else’s work. As Brunette recounts, “By the end, however, he seems merely to be referring to his lifelong practice of refusing to write out completed scripts before beginning production” leaving no doubt that this was Rossellini’s production (Brunette 1987, 19-20; Aprà 1987, 40ff).

The final film in Rossellini’s “Fascist” trilogy, *L’uomo dalla croce* (1943), focuses on the army branch of the Italian military and is even more overt in its expression of Fascist ideology, perhaps because it bears the task of propagandizing Italians against a communist enemy which was simultaneously much more distant— the film takes place in Soviet Ukraine on the war’s Eastern front— and much closer to home when one considers the history of socialism in Italy which encompassed movements such as *il biennio rosso* (the Two Red Years) and the simmering anti-Fascist resistance (Spriano 1964; Pavone 1996/2013). Fresh off his profitable collaboration with the son of *il Duce*, one could also trace the film’s ideological extroversion to Rossellini’s collaboration with another key player in the Fascist regime: Asvero Gravelli, pundit, leading member of the “Second Wave” of hardlines Fascists in the 1930s, and editor of the Fascist monthly periodical, *Antieuropa*, which he used as a platform to launch virulent attacks against all subversives and enemies of the regime, including communists, Jews, queers, feminists, and liberals (Franzinelli 2004). All of which “translated into a ferocious crusade against democracy, but especially against Communism and its potential

carriers– who included not only Russians, but also Jews in and outside of Italy (Ben-Ghiat 2000, 28). The lead character in the film is an unnamed military chaplain (*il cappellano*) who was himself inspired by a real life figure: Father Reginaldo Giuliani, a military chaplain turned Fascist martyr who, “as part of the *squadristi cattolici* (Catholic paramilitary squads), followed D’Annunzio in the Fiume expedition of 1919, then marched on Rome with Mussolini in 1922, and finally died in East Africa while giving comfort to the Italian colonial army brutalizing Ethiopia” (Fabbri 2023, 199).

The film opens to a scene of affable and laidback Italian soldiers in an uncharacteristically well equipped and maintained tank unit trading with the local Ukrainian women on a sunny afternoon– a tender moment of humanity that mirrors the kindred relationship between Italian occupiers and Greek civilians devised by Rossellini in *Un pilota ritorna*. The jovial atmosphere is dashed quickly, however, as the very next day, the village is re-captured by Soviet forces and the chaplain and his unit are taken captive by the comically evil communists. Unlike the previous film, instead of encountering an upright Italian doctor and his beautiful daughter, the men are confronted by a “hard-bitten” Italian interrogator “who ends Italian lives rather than saving them” (Ben-Ghiat 2000, 28-29). Intimated to be a dissident Italian Marxist who cowardly fled the Fascist regime years ago, the interrogator makes a mockery of the chaplain’s cross and quickly orders the summary execution of a young Italian soldier who is found in possession of a Fascist party membership card and subsequently refuses to renounce his beliefs. The physical appearance of the Italian Bolshevik turncoat in this scene is particularly significant as his interior moral turpitude is rendered outwardly manifest for viewers by a grotesque and

painful skin condition which leaves him visibly scratching and covered in blood-stained bandages as a result. Similarly, the barbaric and depraved Soviets are depicted as “bearing the stigmata of racial degeneration with their broad faces, high foreheads, sunken eyes, and protuberant noses” (Fabbri 2023, 198).

Taken together, both scenes work to establish a strategy of “*despecificazione*” (de-specification) that will be redeployed in Rossellini’s next film, *Roma città aperta*; only this time, it will be used in order to portray the regime’s erstwhile German allies– now occupiers– and their Italian lackeys “as carriers of sickness and sexual deviance” (Losurdo 1999, 14ff; Ben-Ghiat 2000, 29). Soon after the execution, nearby Italian forces launch a counter-attack leading to the chaplain and his unit become trapped in the crossfire, forced to take refuge in a small farm building alongside “a motley assortment of Italian soldiers, Russian peasants, children and dogs, [and] committed Communist commissars” (Brunette 1987, 26). This marks the beginning of what Fabbri refers to as the film’s “microhistorical” dimension which parallels the “grand narrative of Fascism’s reclamation of the Communist desolate land” by Fascist forces and eventually sees the chaplain teach the godless locals how to pray, baptize a newborn born in the midst of the conflict, and even convert not one, but two staunch communists to Catholicism (Fabbri 2023, 199). In this way, what was in reality a “total war of colonial extermination” waged by Hitler and his Italian Fascist allies is miraculously transformed by cinematic artifice into a religious humanitarian endeavor, effectively justifying the prolonged war effort and the many sacrifices that have been necessary to make it happen (Losurdo 2015, 154ff).

This revisionist view is substantiated by two powerful and highly symbolic scenes. The first follows the chaplain as he ventures out into the battlefield to save a

wounded Italian soldier, selflessly risking his own life to save one of his compatriots from the heathenous clutches of communism which would sooner condemn him to death. The finale strikes a similar chord insofar as it sees the chaplain, who is already dying after having been shot while rescuing one of the communist resistance fighters— a woman by the name of Irina— crawl towards Fyodor, the mortally wounded leader of the local communist resistance, before the two recite the Lord's Prayer together under heavy fire from artillery and machine guns. On account of this deathbed conversion from atheism to Christianity, Fyodor is redeemed and able to pass peacefully into the afterlife before the chaplain too succumbs to his wounds. Here, the micro- and macro-narratives delineated by Fabbri converge once again. During the chaplain's final moments of life, the camera pans out to give us a 360-view from his perspective, allowing him and the viewer to bear witness in unison to the victory of the Italian "liberators" while also "embedding his sacrifice in the larger movement of the fascist redemptive crusade" (Fabbri 2023, 200).

Thus, in contrast to critics like Bondanella who somehow manage to characterize *L'uomo dalla croce* as expressing not an ideological commitment to Fascism, but rather "to the traditional and sometimes quite opposite virtues of duty, self-sacrifice, nationalistic patriotism, and Catholic morality" we should now be equipped to see that the film builds on the longstanding Western tradition of conscripting Christianity into imperialist wars and civilizing missions (Bondanella 1993, 38ff). Under these circumstances, it is far more appropriate to label the film as a prime example of what Stone refers to as Italian Fascism's "propaganda of hate" whose primary purpose had been to mobilize the Italian masses into a war of annihilation against the "absolute enemy" that was communism (Stone 2012).

Should we surprised to learn then that in the same 1972 interview with Truffaut and Rohmer, Rossellini once again attempted to both distance himself from these films and disavow their blatant Fascist themes by claiming that all of them– from *La nave bianca* to *Roma città aperta* and beyond– *pone lo stesso problema: gli uomini con la speranza, gli uomini senza speranza* (pose the same problem: men with hope, men without hope) (Aprà 1987, 114).

IV. Neorealism and the Illusion of Reality

Having exhausted– at least for now– the question of Rossellini’s ideological commitment to Fascism in the aforementioned films, we can now return to the earlier question posed by Ahmida: Why does the dominant image of Italian Fascism as benign persist in the public media, films, and scholarly Italian and Western studies? Unfortunately, there is no short answer to this question which could easily see one reaching back to the Marshall Plan, Operation Gladio, the colonization of the Americas inaugurated by Cristoforo Colombo, the *Reconquista*, the Crusades, Julius Caesar’s genocidal campaign against the Gauls between 50-58 BC, or even the destruction of Carthage some hundred years earlier. Nonetheless, I would like to draw attention to what I feel is one of the most critical elements in this cultural and ideological matrix: the institution of Neorealism and the notion of reality with which it has so often been identified. For the sake of brevity, I will focus only on what is almost universally agreed to be the defining film of the Neorealist movement, the frequently alluded to *Roma città aperta* (1945), but many of the same points could also be raised vis-à-vis the other two films in Rossellini’s “anti-Fascist” trilogy, *Paisà* and *Germania anno zero*. Furthermore, my primary focus will not fall on the technical or aesthetic aspects of the genre– chorality, on-location shooting, the use of

non-professional actors, etc.— as much of the literature is concerned with, if only because previously cited scholars like Marcus, Leavitt, Ben-Ghiat, and Wagstaff have already forcefully dispelled the notion that these “revolutionary” aesthetic qualities were truly revolutionary on account of their incubation in Fascist cinema, Soviet socialist realist cinema, and earlier forms of realist literature.

Instead, my concern lies with the themes and ethics of Neorealism, both of which are still taken for granted as anti-Fascist more often than not. As was gestured to in the introduction, Neorealism has for decades been one of the most widely celebrated and referenced movements in film history, serving as lynchpin in countless studies of film and film history inside and outside of Italy. Among this relatively small number of films, *Roma città aperta* is still to this day considered by many to be the most important (Brunetta 2009, 34ff). Some even go a step further and proclaim it as the most important film in “all of Italian cinema history” (Brunette 1987, 41). Evaluating the veracity of these claims goes far beyond the scope of this paper, but even if they are true, it is not on account of the film’s anti-fascist *bona fides*. This is because, according to the definitions of fascism and anti-fascism presented earlier— definitions which link fascism intrinsically to capitalism and imperialism— one cannot confidently conclude that *Roma città aperta* in particular nor Neorealism in general present a cogently anti-fascist ethics, much less aesthetic. Instead, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Neorealism and the mythology that has been built up around it in academic discourse represent an amnesic avoidance of Fascism that has fostered an inability to reckon with its core elements. In this sense, what Neorealism offers is only a particular “mirror construction” or an *illusion* of reality which has been systematically elevated through the memory politics of the

postwar years in order to invent a cinematic “counter-history” wherein Italians are enabled to remain as *italiani brava gente*, the first and last victims of Fascism (Lawton 1979; Landy 2015.). Rossellini’s “anti-Fascist” trilogy represents a prime example of this ambivalence.

The basis for this interpretation becomes evident almost immediately from the first scene of *Roma città aperta* which opens to the first of two leading male protagonists, a communist engineer by the alias of Giorgio Manfredi, being hounded by occupying German forces. He barely manages to escape his pursuers who are forced to settle on raiding his apartment shortly after. Luckily for him, the older woman living in the building and his mistress, a nightclub dancer named Marina, refuse to give up any information on his whereabouts, instead obfuscating his escape by lying to the gun-toting Germans. Following this series of interactions, the film cuts to a meeting between the previously alluded to carriers of “sexual deviance” Major Bergmann, an effeminate homosexual– later on, we will also be introduced to Ingrid, his equally sadistic lesbian assistant– who, while discussing the occupation with a local Fascist Italian official, identifies Marina as Manfredi’s mistress, setting the stage for her corruption and betrayal of Manfredi later on. Afterwards, we are greeted to a chaotic and joyous scene of the starving Roman masses looting a bakery. Among the crowd is a pregnant woman named Pina who is eventually stopped by a benevolent and similarly hungry police officer who offers to see her home– to which she offers him a few loaves of stolen bread in exchange, which he accepts without hesitation. Unable to return to home since it is now under close surveillance by the Germans, Manfredi seeks refuge in the apartment of a fellow partisan by the name of Francesco whereupon he also encounters Pina, who we learn is Francesco’s fiancé.

Although Francesco is nowhere to be found, Pina offers to assist Manfredi in his mission to contact Don Pietro, a sympathetic Catholic priest known to move money and messages for partisans in and out of the city.

The two proceed to share a cup of coffee as they discuss Pina and Francesco's upcoming wedding which Don Pietro is scheduled to officiate the following day. Although Manfredi questions her about getting married in a church, the two quickly come to the shared conclusion that a Catholic wartime wedding carried out by one of their own is preferable to one dictated by the Fascists who remain stationed in city hall. In order to avoid rousing any suspicion, Pina sends her young son, Marcello, to fetch the priest whom he encounters playing a game of soccer with the other local children. On the walk back to the apartment, Marcello confesses that he and a group of other kids his age have been organizing under the leadership of an older boy named Romoletto— who, despite his youth, has already been orphaned and maimed by the Germans— in order to fight back against the occupation, heavily implying that they were the ones responsible for the inciting the looting of the bakery earlier that day. Soon, we will also witness them sneak out past curfew in order to (successfully) bomb a German occupied building in a heroic act of resistance. Don Pietro arrives to speak with Manfredi shortly after and agrees to carry the money, stashed in between pages of books, to his comrades outside the city. The next day, in the hours leading up to the wedding, Bergmann orders another raid on Francesco and Pina's building on the suspicion that Manfredi is hiding out there. The witty engineer escapes once again, but the groom-to-be Francesco is captured and loaded onto a truck— presumably to be tortured and killed, as we will later see happen to Manfredi. Pina sees this and tries to chase after him, but she and her unborn child are harassed and

shot down in the street by the Nazis in what is arguably one of the most dramatic moments in all of cinema. The immense tragedy of the scene is compounded only minutes later when the partisan forces stationed outside the city attack the convoy and manage to liberate Francesco along with many of his fellow prisoners.

Left with time to mourn, Francesco and Manfredi are compelled to hide out in Marina's apartment, not knowing that the young dancer has already been corrupted by Irina and the illicit drugs which she and Bergmann have been sharing with her in exchange for her services. After an argument with Manfredi regarding her newfound addiction, Marina betrays him to the Nazis and both men are arrested the next morning. In return for her loyalty, Ingrid rewards the decadent Marina with a fur coat of unknown provenance in addition to more painkillers. Always seeking to extract as much information as possible from his victims, Bergmann orders Manfredi to be tortured and forces Don Pietro to watch, all the while attempting to break the alliance between the communist partisan— whose suffering at the hands of his Nazi captors leads him to resemble Christ suffering on the road to Golgotha— and the Catholic priest by labelling the former as a “subversive” atheist and an “enemy” of the church. However, the steadfast Don Pietro affirms their relationship as one which is legitimate in the eyes of the Lord by replying that he is a “Catholic priest” who believes “that a man who fights for justice and liberty walks in the pathways of the Lord— and the pathways of the Lord are infinite” (Brunette 1987, 47).

In the end, Manfredi dies without revealing anything and Don Pietro himself is sentenced to be executed the following morning. At this point, in yet another scene meant to contrast their intrinsic Italian goodness with the inherited evilness of the Germans, the Italian firing squad appears reluctant and unwilling to carry out the

order handed down to them, forcing a German officer to step in and finish the job. The entire time, Romoletto, Marcello, and the parish boys from before have been watching on, whistling a tune of resistance which steadies Don Pietro's resolve in the face of imminent death. After witnessing the gunshot— just as Don Pietro bore witness to Manfredi's death the night before— the boys walk off in another of the most recognizable scenes in Italian film history. As they solemnly depart the execution grounds, their backs turn away from the viewer and the camera pans out to reveal St. Peter's Basilica and all of Rome waiting for them in the distance.

Interestingly enough, for how important their characters have come to be, Manfredi's and Pina's roles in the film were not Rossellini's idea. Initially, he intended the film to be a relatively brief documentary on the life of the partisan priest Don Morosini— the basis for Don Pietro— who had recently been tortured and executed by the Gestapo, but the communist sympathizer and screenwriter, Sergio Amidei, evidently convinced him to include these new characters, both to extend the film's runtime— turning it from a short documentary into a feature-length film— and to ensure the presence of at least one “model hero” who shared his own ideological position (Bondanella 1993, 53). Similar to Don Pietro, Pina's character was also based on the real life account of a pregnant woman who, much like Pina, had been killed while chasing a German convoy that was carrying away her husband (ibid., 53).

The weaving together of these real and fictional threads results in a dramatic narrative and an uncharacteristically complex set of characters who undoubtedly struck many chords with Italian viewers, many of whom felt that they were able to see themselves represented in the film— perhaps for the first time, as was exclaimed

by Carlo Lizzani in his review of the film published in 1945 shortly after the film's opening (Brunette 1987, 52). Pina takes on a central importance in this respect insofar as her "uneducated wisdom, temper and commitment to her family make her emerge as a symbol for the Italian working class as a whole, while her motherly virtues and her human contradictions also make her the paradigmatic good Italian woman" (Lichtner 2013, 49). Moreover, she is the character which, even after her untimely death, continues to bond the remaining characters together, showcasing the resiliency and power of the Italian *anima bella* (good spirit) to reconcile the cacophonous resistance into a unified collective whole. As Lichtner explains, "In this way Pina performs a pivotal narrative role, but she also provides representation for all those Italians who rejected Fascism or suffered through the occupation without enjoying the sense of belonging and predestination that comes from a distinct ideological framework or from a political party" (ibid., 49). Her tragic death can largely be seen as an exoneration for many adult Italians who, regardless of the reality of their previous stance toward the regime, now perceived themselves to have suffered under it just as much as the Greeks, Libyans, or Ethiopians that had once been terrorized in their name. Equally as important in this respect are Marcello, Romoletto, and the other parish boys who collectively accomplish for future generations of Italians what Pina did for the Italian adults that lived through Fascism. In her book on the subject, Giovanna De Luca argues that:

Indelebili nella memoria collettiva sono le immagini di quei bambini che con gli occhi pieni di un angoscioso presente si incamminano mestamente fischiettando verso la città, verso il domani migliore. Il regista, con la storia della sora Pina, Manfredi, Don Pietro, Marcello e Romoletto e la loro

discreta lotta nella Resistenza italiana, trasmette al pubblico destinatario e protagonista del film la volontà comune di riedificazione e di

riappropriazione morale che accomunò molti italiani nel dopoguerra

(Indelible in the collective memory are the images of those children, their eyes filled with an anguished present, sadly walking, whistling, toward the city, toward a better tomorrow. The director, with the story of sister Pina, Manfredi, Don Pietro, Marcello and Romoletto, and their discreet struggle in the Italian Resistance, conveys to the target audience and protagonists of the film, the shared desire for rebuilding and moral reappropriation that united many Italians in the postwar period) (De Luca 2009, 51).

If Fascism were solely a domestic and psychological affair perhaps such an idealized ending would be enough, but the colonial and imperial dimensions of Fascism are entirely absent. And so, along with this inward-looking perspective of a redeemed people from “*Il punto di vista dell'infanzia*” (the point of view of childhood), we are also left with to wrestle with a bitter silence on crucial aspects of Fascist history which have been ideologically repressed in favor of self-exoneration, national unity, and cinematic catharsis. For viewers of these two trilogies, it could not be otherwise because the filmic universe established by Rossellini leaves no time for Italians to reflect on their potential complicity with the regime, much less begin to understand its deeper logic and underlying motivations, effectively setting the tone for the politics of history and memory in Italy for years to come. As Fabbri states, “The legend of neorealism as zero-degree cinema legitimizes the idea of 1945 as Italy’s year zero, and vice versa” (Fabbri 2023, 291).

V. Conclusion: The Legacy of Fascism

To offer a few words on why this all matters beyond the self-image of Italians and their relationships with those they've colonized, let me return to the prescient warning of George Jackson who reminds us— more than 50 years after his untimely death— that as long as capitalism prevails and as long as there is resistance to it, fascism remains a viable “response to a threat to the establishment (Jackson 1972, 151). Today, just as in the days of the Great Depression, one can see examples of inclination toward fascism brewing in nearly every direction (Kitchen 1976, 84ff). In the United States, still the leading hegemon in capitalism's imperialist geopolitical economic world system, one can find that militarized government police forces (including ICE, Customs and Border Protection, and local police departments, etc.) techno-fascist corporations (Palantir, Microsoft, Amazon), and far-Right paramilitary groups (such as the Klu Klux Klan, the Proud Boys, and the Oathkeepers) have been engaged in a protracted, multi-front struggle against “undesirable” immigrants, minorities, and perceived Leftist extremists for decades, but this conflict has intensified in recent years as capitalism becomes increasingly “senile” and obsolete (Amin 2003; see also, Desai 2023 and Patnaik 2023). Across the Atlantic, “Fortress” Europe is conducting a similarly fascistic “migrant genocide” in the hopes of protecting its well-cultivated “garden”— watered by the blood of millions in the colonial periphery and fertilized by the systematic looting of their land and wealth over centuries— from the masses of largely non-white and non-Christian peoples seeking to gain refuge (Suarez 2025; see also, Hom 2019 and Ponce de León 2021). All the while, the imperialist “Triad” referred to by Samir Amin— the military and economic alliance between the US, the NATO-aligned countries of Europe, and Japan— alongside its proxies are in the midst of waging

what Jackson described as an “international fascist counter-revolution” all around the world from Ukraine, to Palestine, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and beyond (Amin 2013; Jackson 1972, 134).

Faced with these dire global conditions, the renewed focus on fascism in our contemporary political and intellectual climate should come as no surprise. For many, this is a struggle between life and death and in order to come out alive—paraphrasing the Chinese philosopher and military strategist Sun Tzu— one must “know thy enemy.” Similarly, the need to understand the rise of fascism today— what some might call “neo-fascism”— forces us to reconsider the “classical fascism” of the interwar period and to reflect on the ways in which countries like Germany, Italy, and Japan reckoned with and rebuilt from their sordid pasts— or how and why they failed to do so. This is no straightforward task, however, nor is it a simple academic exercise. If only because, as Lichtner points out, the legacy of fascism “is everywhere in Europe, not only as commemoration but also as moral example, as genesis narrative for national and political identities, as benchmark for current affairs, as historical and political outpost *to scale or defend*” (Lichtner 2013, 5. My emphasis). Any attempt to understand fascism and its historical significance therefore constitutes an entry into what Marx and Engels described in the *Manifesto* as “The history of all hitherto existing society” whose real animating content is not ideas themselves, but “the history of class struggles” (Marx 1848/2000, 246).

Beyond the Italian case we’re now familiar with, perhaps nowhere is this entanglement of politics and memory more immediately palpable than in today’s “denazified” Germany, the country that was socially, economically, and geopolitically cleaved between the liberal-capitalist “West” and the communist “East” for over four

decades. In this example, as uneven and flawed as the process of denazification was – and indeed, it was extremely flawed, especially in capitalist West Germany where many former Nazi officials were simply re-shuffled into industry and government – there were at least some efforts made to hold German industrialists and the Nazi architects of WW2 responsible for their crimes against humanity. The Nuremberg trials, initially spearheaded by the Soviets who both liberated Auschwitz and developed the requisite legal framework necessary to prosecute Nazi and other fascist war criminals under nascent international law, represent one of these truncated attempts which managed to bring a few high ranking Nazis to justice, but was ultimately cut short by the Western Bloc’s virulent anti-communism in the lead-up to the misappropriately titled Cold War. (Hirsch 2020). As unsuccessful as they were in denazifying Germany, however, the trials were equally as successful at cementing in the West an understanding of the war – and of fascism more generally – which shifted the origins of Nazi Germany’s misdeeds away from the logic of capitalism itself and onto the “special path” (*der Sonderweg*) taken by the German-speaking nations of Europe in their historical development from aristocratic feudalism to industrial capitalism (For more on the “special path,” see Losurdo 2010). According to this thesis, Nazism and WW2 were nigh-unavoidable outcomes stemming from Germany’s abnormal mix of economic modernization and extreme political backwardness. Stemming from what is argued to be this unique historical trajectory, the Holocaust is similarly prefigured *suis generis* as a singular crime unlike any other in history, one that was specifically perpetrated against the Jews as a result of the German peoples’ uniquely violent culture of judeophobia and long history of anti-semitism (Finkelstein 2000/2003). Some decades after the war, these

memories of German guilt over Nazism and the relative “uniqueness” of the Holocaust would rear up again in the tendentious *Historikerstreit* (Historian’s dispute) which saw conservative scholars like Ernst Nolte assert a revised version of the German past in which the “excesses” of Nazism were reduced to an overblown, albeit tragic reaction to the “Red Menace” at the eastern gates of liberal-democratic Europe— a defense which not only echoes the racist, xenophobic comments made by the high-ranking European bureaucrat Josep Borrell, but also mirrors exactly the logic invoked by the Nazis in their defense at Nuremberg (Parenti 1991, 131ff). The reaction from many in West Germany was biting and swift, to say the least. Prominent Left-leaning intellectuals such as the recently deceased Jürgen Habermas— who has since become known by many as the unofficial “state philosopher” of reunified Germany— and Hans-Ulrich Wehler fiercely condemned Nolte for his attempts to normalize memories of the Nazi past by whitewashing the darkest elements of German history.

But even as towering a figure as Habermas could not escape from the ideological confines set by the anti-communist victory at Nuremberg. Following the world-changing events of October 7th, 2023 which saw captive Palestinians in Gaza break free from what many scholars and human rights activists have called “the world’s largest open-air prison”— an event which has often been compared to the famous Warsaw Ghetto Uprisings of 1943— in what has since become the defining moment of his decade-spanning philosophical career, the German philosopher, by then already in his 90s, marshaled his high-unparalleled intellectual authority to argue that: “The democratic self-image of the Federal Republic of Germany... is linked to a political culture for which Jewish life and Israel’s right to exist are central

elements worthy of special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era.” Therefore, “Despite all the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population, however, the standards of judgment slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israeli action” (Habermas et al. 2023). Despite living for nearly three more years and continuing to write and speak for the public, he never recanted this statement. And so, we see that the memory of fascism is not only alive and well, it is actively being weaponized by some of the most authoritative custodians of this memory to condone an ongoing genocide– the phrase “never again” is thus revealed to have stark limits. Such are the consequences of the debate over fascism’s legacy and the politics of memory at hand.

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