

Petrella, Luigi: *Staging the Fascist War. The Ministry of Popular Culture and Italian Propaganda on the Home Front, 1938–1943*. Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd/Oxford 2016. ISBN: 978-1-90616-570-3; 259 S.

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Luigi Petrella's book analyses the Fascist Ministry of Popular Culture's (MPC) „representation of the home front“ during the Allies' air war against Italy in 1940–43. It exposes the gap between the realities of Italians' experiences „under enemy bombing“ and Mussolini's and Fascism's claims to having forged a Fascist „new man“ and having imposed „Italy's primacy in the 'domain of the air'“ (pp. 3–4). By focusing on Fascist propaganda's failures „during the years in which the regime was most significantly tested“ (p. 3), the book aims therefore to bring a corrective to what Petrella considers the prevailing „un-nuanced representation of the determining contribution that propaganda made to [Fascism's] fortunes“ (p. 213).

Petrella revises the arguments that place the beginning of Italians' loss of faith in a victorious outcome of the Axis war in 1942, when Allied bombings across the Italian peninsula grew more intensive<sup>1</sup>, and argues instead „that fear and insecurity spread among civilians from the first air raids on the Italian cities“ in the summer of 1940 (p. 77). Thus, by the time of „Italy's first military defeats“ in the winter of 1940–41, „discontent was widespread“ (p. 107) among Italian public opinion, only to progressively and inexorably expand until Mussolini's arrest and the ensuing collapse of the Fascist regime in July 1943.

How could this happen? Drawing on newspaper articles, newsreels, radio broadcasts, movies and theatrical plays as well as instructions from party officials and confidential reports from police informants, the seven chapters of the book retrace the gradually expanding gulf between the „appearances“ (p. 23) of a feared and technologically advanced Fascist aviation (*Ala Fascista*) and of invincible anti-aircraft defences propagated by a submissive information system during the 1930s,

and the increasingly grim reality of Italians' everyday life under British and later American bombings from 1940 onwards. The book describes the ever-increasing difficulties that the Fascist propaganda machine spearheaded by the MPC under Alessandro Pavolini (October 1939 – February 1943)<sup>2</sup> and briefly under Gaetano Polverelli (February – July 1943) faced in reconciling the need of minimizing the effects of bombings on civilians' everyday life, for example by sweetening Italians' experiences during blackouts or in overcrowded and often unsafe shelters, while simultaneously preparing Italians to adjust to the demands of total war on the home front. These inherent and never resolved tensions within the MPC's message lead Petrella to conclude that the „uneven and often inconsistent directives from propaganda controllers reflected similar attitudes within the regime as a whole“ (p. 215; cf. also pp. 77, 193).

Fascist propaganda's erratic development notwithstanding, two underlying themes clearly emerge from Petrella's narrative. The first theme was the MPC's effort, consistent throughout the three-odd years Fascist Italy was involved in the conflict, to feed public opinion with an image of Italians' unwavering selflessness and resilience in the face of English (and, from 1942 onwards, American) barbarism. Against this backdrop, Petrella reveals that Fascist propaganda grew more reckless over time, for example when it contributed to spreading spurious stories of „explosive devices“ in the form of pens, pencils and the like that American aircrafts allegedly dropped on Italian cities and that children would pick up with terrible consequences (pp. 201–205). The second theme underlying the MPC's message throughout Fascist Italy's war effort consisted of minimizing the destruction that Italian (and German) air raids wreaked upon enemy civilians, both by presenting it as a necessary and legitimate reaction to British and American aggression and by offering an image of Fascist pilots as „heroic“ (p. 82).

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Chianese, Art. „Bombardamenti“, in: Victoria de Grazia / Sergio Luzzatto (eds.), *Dizionario del Fascismo* vol. 1, Turin 2002, pp. 176–179.

<sup>2</sup> Philip V. Cannistraro (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Westport and London 1982, p. 593.

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As mentioned, these messages in time proved to be ineffective and, indeed, the book brings abundant evidence to demonstrate that Italian public opinion was well aware of the regime's lies and exaggerations – although Petrella notes that Italians' ever-growing disillusionment with the Fascist war narrative never turned „into organised and effective opposition or dissent“ (p. 19; cf. also 15, 167). According to Petrella, the MPC failed its task on two levels. First, it failed at the level of „representation“. The MPC fell consistently short of masking the regime's unpreparedness to fight a modern air war, ultimately unmasking „the much-vaunted Italian airpower [as] a groundless myth“ (p. 214; cf. also pp. 4, 107), while leaving a widespread sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction among Italian public opinion (in many cities people feared anti-aircraft shells more than they feared enemy bombs!). Second, and as a consequence of the abovementioned fault, the MPC failed to stir up Italians' „warrior spirit“. More specifically, Petrella pinpoints the „relentless, monotonous uniformity“ of the message and the refusal „to see, or report, the facts“ as the key mistakes in the MPC's propaganda efforts (p. 216).

Overall, Petrella's book offers a convincing, albeit at times unfocused, narrative of the MPC's failure in mobilizing the Italian people behind the Fascist war effort. In so doing, it highlights the interconnectedness of progressively ineffective propaganda efforts, military unpreparedness and increasing disillusionment in the study of the Italian home front in 1940–43. At the same time, notwithstanding the book's focus on the MPC's message, a more in-depth analysis of what Petrella defines the MPC's „vast and complex“ and „hypertrophic bureaucracy“ could be expected (pp. 4–5). For example, despite Mussolini's and Pavolini's „high level of personalization“ (p. 5) in the conduct of propaganda, the role of Celso Luciano, Pavolini's chief of staff, in „co-ordinating“ the press warranted more space than Petrella grants him. In the view of this reviewer, the analysis of the MPC's message would have also benefitted from a robust comparison with Nazi and British wartime propaganda. In the introduction and conclusions, as well as

in few pages in the middle of the book (pp. 133–34, 139), Petrella does introduce some elements of comparison, for example when he underscores the similarities between Joseph Goebbels', the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, and Pavolini's styles in running their respective Ministries. A comparative analysis of the Fascist and the Nazi and/or British propaganda efforts at the level of „representation“ of the air war would have helped the author explain in which ways the MPC staged the Fascist war that the book's title alludes to in addition to the total war that the book carefully describes.

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