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Fascist Marches in Italy and Germany: *Squadre* and SA before the Seizure of Power

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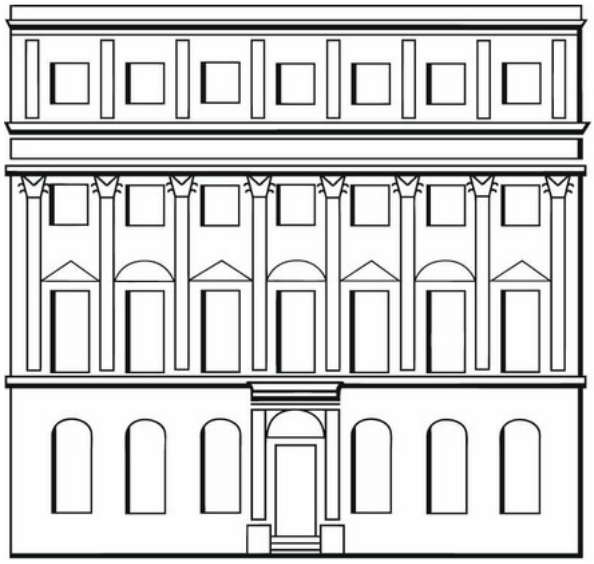

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I

'Propaganda is no substitute for violence, but one of its aspects', wrote Franz Leopold Neumann as long ago as late 1941, in his famous book on National Socialism, *Behemoth*.[1] This undoubtedly also applied to the period of rising National Socialism, when electoral appeals and street violence were closely linked. Although Italian fascism, unlike the Nazi Party in Germany, had few electoral victories to boast of, street violence at election times also played a large part in Italy.[2] Dino Grandi, who had just become secretary of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) in the province of Emilia Romagna in 1921, explained at the party conference held in Rome in the same year that the elections were 'nothing but a *spedizione punitive* (punitive expedition)' directed against the parliamentary system and its customs. Roberto Farinacci, *squadre* leader from Cremona, added that 'the elections were part of the civil war itself, and that in battle, the only thing that matters is to defeat the opponent'.[3]

This essay is a shortened and revised translation of Sven Reichardt, 'Formen faschistischer Gewalt: Faschistische Kampfbünde in Italien und Deutschland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Eine typologische Deutung ihrer Gewaltpropaganda während der Bewegungsphase des Faschismus', *Sociologus*, 51 (2001), 55–88, printed here with the permission of Duncker & Humblot GmbH, Berlin. Translated by Angela Davies, GHIL.

[1] Franz Leopold Neumann, *Behemoth: Struktur und Praxis des Nationalsozialismus 1933–1944*, ed. Gert Schäfer (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 505.

[2] On the statistically demonstrable connection between electoral activity and violence in Germany and Italy, see Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne, 2002), 88–93; Dieter Ohr, *Nationalsozialistische Propaganda und Weimarer Wahlen: Empirische Analysen zur Wirkung von NSDAP-Versammlungen* (Opladen, 1997).

[3] Grandi, quoted from Emilio Gentile, *Storia del partito fascista, 1919–1922: Movimento e*

One of the main features of fascist movements in Italy and Germany was that they regarded propaganda as a message of power interspersed with violence. Propaganda merged into beatings, demonstrations into doctrine. In the words of Mussolini: 'Our doctrine is the deed.'[4]

This essay will explore the context of propaganda as violence. The main focus will be on the organized actions and demonstrations of the fascist fighting corps in Italy and Germany. The Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (SA, storm troopers) and the Italian *squadristi* were quite clearly responsible for most of the propaganda of violence during the rise of the fascist mass movements. The essay will examine the forms that these fascist demonstrations of violence assumed, and the types of fascist propaganda of violence that can be distinguished. The typology of events, symbols, and rituals of the fascist propaganda of violence presented here is limited to three types of publicly organized and systematically pursued demonstrations of physical force. It excludes smaller clashes and spontaneous quarrels in the everyday symbolic struggles on the street.[5] The following typology is based on seven criteria asking the following questions. First, what was the occasion or the trigger for the demonstration of violence? Second, what aesthetic means were employed? Third, what sort of organizational preparation and execution were required? Fourth, how frequent was this type of demonstration? Fifth, how many people were involved in the use of violence? Sixth, at what groups was the

milizia (Rome, 1989), 378; Roberto Farinacci, *Die faschistische Revolution*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1940), ii. 275. For the biographies of Grandi and Farinacci see Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi: Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista 1919–1922* (Milan, 2003), 226–7, 214–15.

[4] Benito Mussolini, *Discorsi politici* (Milan, 1921), 81–2.

[5] In total, seven forms of violent fascist propaganda can be distinguished. This essay does not deal with the following forms of violent encounter: first, those that occurred during Party events held indoors (*Saalschlachten*); second, those that took place in the context of the guerrilla warfare waged around their political opponents' centres of communication and sociability (in Germany, the bars frequented by the SA and the Red Front Fighters, and in Italy, the relevant *caffè*, *osterie*, or *case del popolo*); third, those that were part of deliberate attempts to murder socialist or Communist functionaries; and fourth, those that resulted from spontaneous clashes between small fascist groups and their political opponents (guerrilla warfare for political symbols). On this see Reichardt, 'Formen faschistischer Gewalt', 68–77; id., *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 120–33. Cf. also Peter H. Merkl, 'Formen nationalsozialistischer Gewaltanwendung: Die SA der Jahre 1925–1933', in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld (eds.), *Sozialprotest, Gewalt, Terror: Gewaltanwendung durch politische und gesellschaftliche Randgruppen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1982), 422–40; Adrian Lyttelton, 'Faschismus und Gewalt: Sozialer Konflikt und politische Aktion in Italien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', ibid. 303–24.

violence directed? And seventh, what indirect symbolic impact did this propaganda of violence have? After this typology has been applied to the fascist propaganda of violence, the conclusions drawn will be presented in context.

II

Spedizioni punitive and SA-Landpropaganda

Spedizioni punitive or punitive expeditions undoubtedly formed the basis of the fascist propaganda of violence during its phase of movement. These actions were concentrated on the rural strongholds of the socialist movement, and the ostensible reasons for them were mostly similar. Whenever a fascist was murdered or injured in a small town or village, a few hours later or on the next day, hundreds of armed *squadristi* arrived on lorries for a punitive expedition, and overwhelmed their socialist opponents.

The particular efficacy of the acts of violence perpetrated by the *squadristi* was the result largely of their great mobility and the efficient co-ordination of their operations based on co-operation. The fact that many of the *squadre* were equipped with lorries made it possible for groups from a large area to come together for a punitive expedition, thus enormously expanding the radius of action. Thus the Pisa *Fascio,* for example, organized expeditions against more than a hundred localities throughout Tuscany, many of which were far away from Pisa. In other regions, too, such expeditions often started from the province's urban centre, and they frequently resulted in permanent partnerships between two to three *Fasci.*[6]

The victims of the *squadre* had often been denounced by local landowners and large tenant farmers (*agrari*) who often led the fascist *squadre* to their goal. Often the *agrari* and their local corps paid the fascist *squadre,* and sometimes they were leaders, founders, or commanders of their own local *squadre.* In addition, the *agrari* or the military provided the lorries for these expeditions, and paid for the petrol. This meant that towards the end of

[6] Angelo Tasca, *Glauben, gehorchen, kämpfen: Aufstieg des Faschismus* (Vienna, 1969), 131, 148, 152–4; Anthony L. Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism: The Province of Bologna 1901–1926* (Princeton, 1983), 317; Paul R. Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara, 1915–1925* (Oxford, 1975), 139.

1921, the squadrists were often better equipped than the police. In fact, the *squadre* often co-operated with the normal police. Quite frequently, the police disarmed the socialists immediately before a punitive expedition, with the result that they could offer no resistance to the fascist *squadre*. Hostility towards the Red revolutionaries (*sovversivi*) was fully shared by the ordinary *carabiniere* or *maresciallo* (police chief), who was not infrequently the squadrists' drinking companion.[7]

The intention of the punitive expeditions was to disrupt the institutions of the Italian labour movement so seriously that they could not function. No distinction was made between the revolutionary and reformist wings of the socialist movement. Mostly the autonomous *camere del lavoro*, which were important to unskilled labourers, were burnt down. These institutions fulfilled a broad range of functions, from that of labour and information exchange and the headquarters of strike organizations, to providing a place for sociability. Thus they were important, polyfunctional centres of the labour movement. Similarly, care homes, socialist communal administrations, and co-operatives along with their local party offices and other cultural sub-organizations were destroyed. The editorial offices and print-works producing socialist newspapers were attacked and burnt down. These acts of violence, described as 'punitive expeditions', were carried out in a systematic and deliberate way.[8]

Most similar to the Italian punitive expeditions was the *Landpropaganda* of the SA. Shared features were that the violence was perpetrated by a large group of SA men drawn from the whole region, and that the violence was targeted, planned, and calculated. The objective was to overwhelm the region by constantly repeating SA demonstrations. Not until after 1928 did

[7] Corner, *Fascism*, 124–6; Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites*, 304, 310, 323–6; Simona Colarizi, *Dopoguerra e fascismo in Puglia (1919–1926)* (Bari, 1971), 135–6; Rolando Cavandoli, *Le origini del fascismo a Reggio Emilia* (Rome, 1972), 130–1; Frank M. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany: 1919–1922* (Cambridge, 1989), 171; Claudio G. Segrè, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley, 1990), 49, 87; Lawrence L. Squeri, *Politics in Parma 1900–1925: The Rise of Fascism* (Ann Arbor, 1976), 91–2; Tasca, *Glauben*, 139; Mario Vaini, *Le origini del fascismo a Mantova (1914–1922)* (Rome, 1961), 137; Elio Apih, *Italia, fascismo e antifascismo in Venezia Giulia (1918–1943)* (Bari, 1966), 138–40.

[8] Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 84–8; Jens Petersen, 'Das Problem der Gewalt im italienischen Faschismus 1919–1925', in Mommsen and Hirschfeld (eds.), *Sozialprotest, Gewalt, Terror*, 325–48, at 335–8; Tasca, *Glauben*, 439; Gentile, *Storia*, 608; Franzinelli, *Squadristi*, 75–86.

the Nazi party increasingly adopt this 'rural tactic' in response to electoral successes in the country and catastrophic results in the towns.[9] Initially *Landpropaganda* served as a symbolic demonstration of the Nazis' strength: SA parades were a military spectacle. However, the local people did not see them simply as 'a welcome diversion, to some extent comparable with that offered by a fair, a circus, or a film',[10] because the disciplined march-past of the SA columns, which visited a village or a region several times within a very short period, always escalated into outbreaks of violence. Triggered by the potential for violence latent in a concentrated paramilitary presence in a small, geographically circumscribed space, the symbolic threat was transformed into physical violence as a result of a feeling of omnipotence among the SA. The space was occupied by the brown-shirted battalions for several hours, and the typical course taken by these SA events created a temporal restructuring. Reveille, roll-call, commemoration of the fallen at the war memorial, propaganda march through the small town, a march past the local SA leaders followed by a parade and a public meeting, perhaps accompanying sports events, a concert given by the SA band, an evening meeting indoors, a torchlight procession at night, and, finally, a military tattoo—this was the standard daily programme followed by the SA in their *Landpropaganda*.[11] The other side of this demonstration of discipline and power was represented by the violent excesses perpetrated. A government official in Stettin, for example, writing with reference to the situation in Naugard in December of 1931, commented, entirely typically, that 'a mood of battle' predominated and that the SA was 'abusing peaceful citizens'.[12] An important feature of the urban SA's *Landpropaganda* expeditions to surrounding villages

[9] Peter D. Stachura, 'Der kritische Wendepunkt? Die NSDAP und die Reichstagswahlen vom 20. Mai 1928', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 26 (1978), 78–99; Johnpeter Horst Grill, 'The Nazi Party's Rural Propaganda before 1928', *Central European History*, 15 (1982), 149–85; Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone: Geschichte der SA* (Munich, 1989), 72–7.

[10] Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 74.

[11] Thomas Balistier, 'Freiheit, Gemeinschaft, Macht: Gewaltfaszination der SA', in Ulrich Hermann and Ulrich Nassen (eds.), *Formative Ästhetik im Nationalsozialismus: Intentionen, Medien und Praxisformen totalitärer ästhetischer Herrschaft und Beherrschung* (Weinheim, 1993), 91–8, at 96–7; Thomas Balistier, *Gewalt und Ordnung: Kalkül und Faszination der SA* (Münster, 1989), 140–2.

[12] Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA, Rep. 77, Ministerium des Innern, Tit. 4043, no. 121, fo. 24 (M).

was the combination of an aesthetic occupation by SA banners, a symbolic readiness for violence embodied by the military parades, and violent excesses. The route of these expeditions, mostly involving about a hundred men, would be planned days ahead, and the expeditions were carried out with military and tactical precision, sporting a vanguard, a rearguard, and protection for the flanks.[13]

Thus in the case of Italy as well as Germany, a form of action was practised in which rural regions were targeted and repeatedly visited, at short intervals, by large fighting corps which intimidated their political opponents through terror. The impression this created that the fascists controlled a huge force of street fighters both intimidated their opponents and gave local fascists the courage to make outspoken demands of state organs. When in April 1932 a subdivision of the SA in Upper Silesia put together propaganda storm troops (*Propagandastürme*), each numbering eighty men, which visited a total of 250 smaller localities, the head of the administrative district of Oppeln banned their activities on the grounds that these marching columns were not on the election campaign trail. Rather, he argued, their purpose was 'largely to intimidate the people of the district'. When the members of one of these propaganda storm troops were arrested in the course of a planned occupation by the SA, the local SA standard-bearer told the district administrator who was responsible: 'If the arrested men are not released by tomorrow morning, I will set 5,000 SA men loose in the district, and they will catch you and beat you up.'[14]

Similarly unpunished was the leader of Florentine squadrism, Marquis Dino Perrone Compagni, who expressed himself even more clearly in a letter of April 1921 to a local mayor in Tuscany. The community, he said, could no longer be led by an individual like the mayor, whom he advised to resign within the next two weeks. Otherwise, he would have to bear 'ogni responsibilità di cose e di persone'. Should he turn to the state authorities, the

[13] Cf. Hans Gerd Jaschke and Martin Loiperdinger, 'Gewalt und NSDAP vor 1933: Ästhetische Okkupation und physischer Terror', in Rainer Steinweg (ed.), *Faszination der Gewalt: Politische Strategie und Alltagserfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 123–55, at 133, 137, 141; *Deutsche Zeitung*, 5 Apr. 1930; *Vorwärts*, 5 Apr. 1931; Julek Karl von Engelbrechten, *Eine braune Armee entsteht: Die Geschichte der Berlin-Brandenburger SA* (Munich, 1937), 125–6, 196.

[14] Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA, Rep. 77, Ministerium des Innern, Tit. 4043, no. 311, fos. 208–9 (M).

deadline for the ultimatum would be brought forward by four days. The marquis quite openly signed this threatening letter, which was written under the official letterhead of the Florentine *Fascio*, with his own name.[15] Such demands for socialist mayors to resign were part of everyday life in Italy from 1921. Should a mayor refuse to comply, punitive expeditions were sent out, in the course of which random executions took place, houses were burned down, and socialist officials driven out. In January 1921, even the conservative newspaper *Giornale d'Italia* wrote about conditions in Ferrara: 'Punitive expeditions set out day by day. The fascist lorry is driven to a particular village, straight to the house of a particular League leader . . . If the *capolega* remains firm, violence replaces argument. In most cases, the negotiations alone have the desired effect. If not, revolvers talk.'[16] The arsenal of subversive measures ranged from threatening the authorities and demanding resignations to removing mayors and prefects from office. Particularly in 1922, this led to local rule by fascist *squadre*, especially in Emilia Romagna, with no democratic legitimation. Thus in March 1922 an inspector of public security reported from the province of Mantua to head office in Rome that in fifty-four of the sixty-eight provincial communes socialist administrative employees had resigned in the face of violence perpetrated by fascist *squadre*. In addition, socialist periodicals had ceased publication, and many institutions of the labour movement, from trade union head offices and co-ops to socialist and Communist cultural centres, had been destroyed.[17]

The differences between Italy and Germany are obvious. Whereas in Italy the threat of punitive expeditions, and their execution, by fascist *squadre* were part of everyday life, in Germany the boastful threats of the SA leaders concerning the power of their organization were rarely carried out, even in their north German strongholds, thanks largely to the comparatively functional German police. In the German case, the occupation of public space was a symbolic instrument used mainly for electoral purposes, whereas in Italy hostility and contempt for the

[15] Tasca, *Glauben*, 132; Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo* (Milan, 1961), i. 55, 545–6.

[16] *Giornale d'Italia*, 23 Jan. 1921.

[17] Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Direzione Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza, CA 1922, Fasc. 'Fasci di combattimento. Mantova': report by Paolella to Direzione Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza, 20 Mar. 1922; Corner, *Fascism*, 223; Tasca, *Glauben*, 131–2; Manilo Cancogni, *Storia dello squadrismo* (Milan, 1959), 111–12, 120.

state were bloody reality, and resulted in the systematic destruction of the institutions of the labour movement. Action by fascist *squadre* was more frequent, more terrorist in nature, was paid for by *agrari*, and could count on the co-operation of the police and the military.

The SA's *Landpropaganda* and the fascist *squadre*'s punitive expeditions shared a rural setting, the regional concentration of forces, the claim to dominate public space by virtue of an invasion of violence, and the selection of a specific target, namely, functionaries and organizations of the labour movement.

Occupazioni di città and Stadtbesetzungen

To be distinguished from this is the second type of fascist propaganda of violence: the occupation of whole towns by the mass invasion of fascist troops. The general prerequisite for this was a certain degree of strength and mobilization of the members of the fighting corps. Actions of this nature also required military planning and precise organization, a tactical division into various companies, and close control of the routes of advance and dispersal, which could cover considerable distances.

The city occupations (*occupazioni di città*) instituted by the squadrists in 1922, in particular, were always interspersed by acts of violence, which were a deliberately calculated part of the events staged. A typical example was the occupation of Ferrara in April–May 1922. In a circular of 27 April 1922 from Italo Balbo, the notorious 24-year-old squadrist leader, to the leader of the *Fasci* in the province, we read: 'A rally is to be held in Ferrara which will exceed anything that fascism has yet had to show in Ferrara. It will form the yardstick of our power.' One month later, forces were mobilized, and on 12 May 1922, between 40,000 and 60,000 squadrists stood before the gates of Ferrara, a town which in 1921 numbered just 107,000 inhabitants. 'The town is in our power,' Balbo claimed in his diary. In fact, the squadrists took over the town's schools as their headquarters, traffic in the town was completely paralysed, shops and businesses, including bars, were closed, and armed sentries for each group of a hundred men patrolled the strategically important junctions such as the access roads to the town. The telephone wires which connected the town with the province had earlier been cut. The entry of the fascist

squadre, which took about three hours, began in the early hours; relays maintained contact between the individual battalions. At around 10 a.m., the squadrists assembled for a roll-call taken by Italo Balbo. Thereafter he had a meeting with the town prefect in which he openly threatened to attack the prefecture unless the prefect immediately organized public works for the town's unemployed. While this was taking place, the squadrists marched three abreast through the town for hours, carrying their flags, their songs accompanying the marching columns. Repeated cries of 'Down with the government. Long live Italy' were heard.[18] If we believe the report by Bladier, Prefect of Ferrara, this militant gesture had an immense impact on the people of the town, as all political parties supported the occupation. Bladier complained that, encouraged by the 'large majority' of the population, Ferrara had been turned into the 'heart and brains of the new fascist party' by the huge escalation in anti-socialist violence. Thus the political means of street violence became intertwined with concrete political demands addressed to the state authorities in a manner that was typical of the fascists.[19]

Such occupations took place repeatedly throughout 1922. After Ferrara, for example, Rovigo was occupied in mid-May. Bologna was occupied at the end of May; Cremona and Ravenna in July of the same year. In each case, tens of thousands of squadrists were drawn from the surrounding provinces. They broke through police cordons and, seemingly effortlessly, invaded the towns. The occupations lasted only a few days, during which the socialist organizations and buildings were systematically destroyed. At the same time, the typical squadrists' ridicule was directed at the overstretched urban administrations, which were accused of 'cowardice' and 'weakness'.[20]

In Germany, the monstrous mass rallies organized by the SA also aimed to occupy space symbolically, but during the Weimar Republic they only once managed to bring a whole town into their power. On 17 and 18 October 1931 about 60,000 SA men assembled for the 'central German SA meeting' in Brunswick, a

[18] Italo Balbo, *Der Marsch auf Rom: Tagebuch der Revolution 1922* (Leipzig, 1933), 60, 72–4.

[19] Bladier quoted from Corner, *Fascism*, 217–18.

[20] On this, with further reading, see Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 109–10; Gentile, *Storia*, 593; Pietro Alberghi, *Il fascismo in Emilia Romagna: Dalle origini alla marcia su Roma* (Modena, 1989), 497; Cancogni, *Storia*, 141; Tasca, *Glauben*, 225.

town with a population of 148,000, and transformed it into an army camp. In the process, the Nazis made use of a specific aesthetic which combined mysterious, quasi-religious means with the impression of belligerent power. Thus after a night-time torchlight procession, the SA combined a roll-call the next morning with the liturgical climax of a consecration of the standard by Adolf Hitler. After this ceremony the SA and SS formations marched past Hitler for six hours. During the event, four Nazi propaganda planes—the cutting edge of modern technology—circled above the town. Meanwhile, under cover of the roll-call and march-past, violent excesses were taking place. On both days SA troops rampaged through the working-class districts of the Brunswick old town, singing their battle songs. During real 'punitive expeditions in the working-class districts' (*Berliner Tageblatt*), SA men armed with iron bars and weapons threw paving stones into houses, destroyed shops, and shot at and stormed individual homes. The SA broke through the thin police cordons intended to close off the old town. For two days, the rule of law was practically suspended. As the *Berliner Tageblatt* commented appropriately: 'Despite their best intentions, the police were frequently powerless in the face of the rampaging mob of Hitler-people.'[21] On this 'Bloody Sunday' (*Vorwärts*) in Brunswick two workers died and sixty-two were injured. Thus symbolic occupation was allied with terror directed specifically at the working class. The SA meeting in Brunswick also had special symbolic significance because it took place one week after a meeting of the national associations in Bad Harzburg. Brunswick was intended as a powerful demonstration both of the independence of the Nazis from their partners in Harzburg, and of their strength in the small federal state (*Land*) run by the Nazi Interior Minister, Dietrich Klagges. Unlike the town occupations by fascist *squadre* in Italy, the Brunswick meeting had no immediate and specific power-political purpose, but it was the expression of a strongly symbolic understanding of politics. The images of unity, strength, youth, and revolt projected aesthetic and liturgical concepts as well as violence itself.[22]

[21] *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 493, 19 Oct. 1931.

[22] On the central German SA meeting see Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA., Ministerium des Innern, Tit. 4043, Rep. 77, no. 313, fos. 1–43 (M); Staatsarchiv München, Pol. Dir. no. 6810, Heft 3, fos. 1–27; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 110–11.

Differences between Germany and Italy also emerge in the town occupations achieved by the mass deployments. The Italian fascists to some extent posed a serious threat, whereas the spectacle of the SA in Brunswick did not represent a real threat to the local government. Nor could it be repeated. The threats made by the fascist *squadre* in Italy, by contrast, especially in the Po valley, were immediately transformed into concrete demands addressed to the organs of government. The gesture was more than a mere symbolic demonstration, and its terrorist features emerged clearly. But in both cases the town occupations put the organs of the state out of action. In both cases, the mass deployments served group cohesion, conveying to their members an impressive image of their own strength. The belligerent mood was thus maintained. Balbo noted: 'The fascists need tension and thrills. The desire to fight comes only under pressure.'[23] In both cases occupying the town was of much greater symbolic significance than holding the town. Again, Balbo commented aptly on his 'battle transformed into glorious victory': 'I receive messages of support from all over Italy. Comrades in the most distant provinces are rigid with amazement at this successful test of the power of fascism in Ferrara.'[24] Thus while the symbolic town occupations, just like the punitive expeditions, served to intimidate and harm the opposition, the main thing to emerge from this type of action was the intoxicating feeling of symbolically displaying one's power and size by overwhelming the public space en masse.

Marce collettive and Straßenaufmärsche

Third, the fascist street processions of Italy, the *marce collettive,* were often staged as the triumphal entry of heroes, celebrating the spokespeople and leaders of fascism. They represented a mixture of flower-strewn procession with public acclaim, and a military campaign. The folkloric, carnival-like features of songs and flags were as much in evidence as threatening military symbolism. The procession would generally pass through the town before and after an event such as a speech by a well-known fascist leader, or the cultic initiation of a newly founded *Fascio* in

[23] Quoted from Tasca, *Glauben,* 227.
[24] Balbo, *Marsch,* 69, 78.

the main square, or on symbolically important holidays. The deployments were thoroughly organized pieces of drama and demonstrations of power, in which the uniformed columns, drawn from a wide area, marched past the Duce with arms raised in salute, flags were solemnly consecrated, the martyrs were invoked, and, finally, Mussolini was glorified. Mussolini himself described the point of these processions with great precision in the autumn of 1922: 'Democracy has robbed the life of the people of "style", that is, of a type of behaviour, of colour, power, the picturesque, the unexpected, the mystical; in sum, everything that counts in the minds of the masses. We pull the full range of strings, from violence to religion, from art to politics.'[25]

The flags and banners were a central motif of fascist symbolism. The flags fluttering in the wind, 'wind made visible', as Elias Canetti wrote,[26] represented a symbolic attempt both to restrain the fleeting nature and the dynamism of the marching columns, and to claim them for their own cause. In addition, the flags symbolized membership in a group, and a nationalist cult of sacrifice which was reminiscent of the war. 'It is the new Italy', a fascist newspaper wrote about a procession in Trieste, 'that is marching past here: all the vital powers of the nation are for the first time presenting themselves before the surprised eyes of the people of Trieste'. This 'impressive' march evoked 'scenes of enthusiasm' among the people; flowers were thrown to the squadrists.[27] The symbolically staged will-power of the columns marching for a 'renewed' nation did, in fact, have a strong propaganda effect on the public. 'The fascist marches', wrote *Popolo d'Italia* about the impact of the marches on the squadrists themselves, 'are like a "holy spring", the rise of a will, a song, a spiritual unity'.[28] However, these nationalist demonstrations always also contained a latent violent element. On their fringes, or after the processions, seemingly coincidental, but in reality systematic, violence always took place. Thus at the end of 1921, the police president of Rome reported on a street march in which the fascists entered the capital: 'The fascists knocked down a number of people who did not doff their hats when the procession

[25] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Danilio Susmel, 44 vols. (Florence, 1951–80), here xviii. 438.

[26] Elias Canetti, *Masse und Macht* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 95.

[27] *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 7 and 10 Feb. 1921.

[28] *Popolo d'Italia*, 4 June 1922.

marched past.' 'There was panic in the crowd,' he went on. Various passers-by were 'beaten, slapped, and spat at' because they refused to defer to the fascists by taking off their hats. 'Hideous scenes' were the result.[29]

SA marches through proletarian quarters were one of the urban SA's main means of propaganda and served the purpose of taking over space, that is, one or more quarters of the city. These demonstrations took less time than the town occupations or the *Landpropaganda*; the marching column was in constant movement, and in a certain sense not fixed in any one place. This did not, however, make the march more open or disorderly. The marching SA columns moved as a closed mass. Like the squadrists' marches, it did not grow by picking up people along the way. Its defining feature was its border: 'it creates its space by placing boundaries around itself'.[30] Visually, the SA columns separated themselves from the many-shaped, contourless mass of the public by wearing uniforms and carrying flags, and acoustically by playing music and singing SA songs. Thus the column requisitioned the street in the form of an aesthetically ordered bloc which moved within well-defined tracks.

The SA men were recognizable as invaders in mostly proletarian quarters, and symbolized the conquest of the streets in 'hostile' areas. In Berlin, *Gauleiter* Joseph Goebbels systematically instigated such invasions of proletarian quarters, and used the provocations and fights to which they gave rise in order to gain publicity. He described the impact thus: 'We were talked about. We became a topic of discussion, and the public increasingly asked who we were, and what we wanted.'[31] It was true that in the months after Goebbels's appointment as *Gauleiter* in November 1926, the Berlin Nazi Party became well known 'at a stroke'. The violence perpetrated by larger groups of SA men fully served the party's propaganda purposes. The SA men were set against the (petit) bourgeoisie as a force for order which would overcome Marxism and Communism. The SA marches conveyed the image of a strong, ubiquitous, and dynamic Nazi movement, and the crucial advertisement was the SA men themselves. They

[29] Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministerio dell'Interno, Direzione Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza, CA 1921, busta 90, fasc. 150, no fo. nos.: phonogram Valentis to the Ministry of the Interior, 10 Nov. 1921, at 17.30.

[30] Canetti, *Masse und Macht*, 11.

[31] Joseph Goebbels, *Kampf um Berlin: Der Anfang* (Munich, 1932), 60.

presented themselves 'as a sensual image with a number of attributes: order and discipline, male community and security, activism and a readiness for sacrifice, belief and devotion, the ability and willingness to fight, strength and power'.[32] The more visible it was, the stronger the Nazi movement seemed to be, and the more mobile it was, the more ubiquitous. Since the spring of 1930, the SA had been increasingly motorized, which highlighted the link between speed and ubiquity.

The symbolic presence of violence immediately gave rise to violent actions, for next to the SA columns marched what was known as 'cotton wool' (*Watte*). As an SA man recalls in his memoir, 'specially selected, strong SA men in civilian clothes' were chosen for this task. In fact, most of the people pre-selected for this job were from the SS. We read in a Nazi memoir: 'They are men of steel and iron, and they are somewhat ruthless. They march on the pavement next to their uniformed comrades. The general mass of people . . . know nothing about them. At most, a police report will mention that at an SA march a fight broke out between onlookers who were accompanying the procession.' Several police investigations confirm this Nazi account. A police report from Cologne, for example, as early as April 1928 mentioned a meeting of local Nazi and SA leaders at which it was resolved that 'SA people in civilian clothes, without badges but carrying whatever defensive weapons they wanted' would march next to their uniformed comrades. 'At the least attempt to attack the SA in uniform', the police report continues, 'the non-uniformed SA men were immediately to implement the most ruthless terror measures.'[33]

In Italy as in Germany, street marches were a battle for control of public space. The two fascist fighting corps initially presented themselves as military units in that they marched in close formation. Their uniforms, their symbolic flags, and their songs, whose words and tunes harked back to war songs from the First World War, or to songs from the occupation period in Fiume, also contributed to this image. However, the songs of the fascist *squadre*, like those of the SA, also copied popular workers'

[32] Balistier, *Gewalt und Ordnung*, 65.

[33] Wilfried Bade, *Die SA erobert Berlin: Ein Tatsachenbericht* (6th edn.; Munich, 1941), 87; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA, Rep. 77, Ministerium des Innern, Tit. 4043, no. 309, fos. 153–5 (M).

songs, giving them aggressively mocking and nationalistic words which were intended to provoke the workers present.[34] The fact that the heroic productions of the SA street marches as a symbolic gesture towards a new Germany of the future did not run as smoothly and 'gloriously' as in Italy was largely a result of the tactic, also to be seen as symbolic, of penetrating 'Red' quarters of the city, in which the SA encountered violent reactions from the Communist organizations.

In both cases, the masses in formation served to convey a picture of the strength, discipline, inexorability, and intransigence that fascism was meant to radiate. The fascists undoubtedly orientated themselves by the classical forms of action developed by the labour movement, which, before the First World War, had already recognized the impact of demonstration marches and used them as a political means. The difference between the marches held by the fascists and the socialist labour movement was not so much that the fascist marches and processions were marked by military symbolism—after all, after the First World War the military aspect of demonstrations was increasingly stressed by many political camps. What was specific to the fascists was the systematic deployment of anti-socialist violence, manifested especially in their 'rolling demonstrations', which gave them a communicative appeal aiming for co-operation with the national conservative bourgeoisie. With its national symbolism and almost complete lack of reference to the world of work or social conditions, this fascist amalgam of destruction and order was the most important difference between the fascist and the socialist processions.[35] The street was to be forcibly taken back from the socialist workers' movement and once again made a central symbolic stage for the production of the nation. The restriction and the combination of nationalist populism, forced acclamation, military mobilization, and hate-filled violence used by the fascist movement in its street marches anticipated one of the central mechanisms of the fascist regime's rule, namely, the switch between a populist search for consensus, and sheer, naked force. The two principles could never be balanced.

[34] See Asvero Gravelli, *I canti della rivoluzione* (Rome, 1928); Hermann Roesler (ed.), *SA-Sturmlieder* (Berlin, no date); Paul Hochmuth (ed.), *Sturm- und Kampflieder-Buch* (Berlin, 1933).

[35] Cf. Fritz Carl Roegels, *Der Marsch auf Berlin* (Berlin, 1932), 12–13.

III

In general, the violence perpetrated by fighting corps of both types was—apart from its physical aspect—a type of ostentatious display, which, by means of body language and gestures, clothing and other visual political symbols, gait and sound, expressed their offensive style of action in the political arena of the public streets. In addition to its practical impact, it had symbolic functions, such as the external display of the invincibility of the 'militia of the nation', and the strengthening of the groups' internal ties, identity, and dynamism. The fascist rowdies represented a sort of anti-public against the socialist masses in the political arena of the street, and fought with them for a monopoly of the public streets. Physical aspects played as large a part as the fight for symbols, because the street was regarded as the place where the rites and ceremonies of the holy nation were celebrated. In the view of the fascists, the socialists had desecrated this site with their demonstrations, and therefore had to be combated with all available means.

All forms of what Thomas Lindenberger calls 'street politics' were characterized by the intermingling and mutual strengthening of symbolic threat and physical violence.[36] The fact that this political propaganda expressed itself in an ostentatious gesture of intransigence which was rigorous and militant in equal measure belonged to the style of fascism. Fascist actions combined the forced elements of direct physical violence with the impact of a communicative appeal. The comments on the SA's task published in the *Nationalsozialistische Briefe* (National Socialist letters) of 1926 are typical. At this point, SA propaganda was already being called a 'weapon of attack', and, it went on, 'we like the horn sounding the signal for the attack. The SA's primary vocation lies in the attack.'[37]

In both the Italian and the German case, fascist violence represented a propaganda of power which was designed to make it clear to the people that the power of the fascists was greater than

[36] Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik: Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900 bis 1914* (Bonn, 1995).

[37] Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA, Rep. 77, Ministerium des Innern, Tit. 4043, no. 309, fo. 172c (M).

that of the governments. The political arena of the street brought the battles for power together in spatial, bodily, and visual terms. The fascists demonstrated power relations by displaying their capacity to impose order on the street. Power itself thereby became political propaganda. The cult of force and action, the generation of absolute hatred and enmity, depended on agreement in a world brutalized by the First World War. Fascism repeatedly switched between populist efforts, consensus, and naked power, without ever being able to bring the two principles into a regulated harmony. This binary opposition of the two principles of inclusion and exclusion characterized mainly the fascist movements which, as mass movements, were concerned to gain members and electoral support while also employing violence. Precisely because they set clear external boundaries, they developed a technique of persuasion internally. In addition, the mass terror applied to minor functionaries and non-prominent members of the opposing parties of the left was intended to send the people the message that membership of the organizations of the labour movement alone was dangerous. Because of its effectiveness, the violence of the fascist *squadre* assumed a dual function. It was propaganda for power while also effectively depriving socialist functionaries and institutions of their power. The SA, however, was unable to deprive the far more resistant German socialists and Communists of power through sheer force.

In functional terms, the violence used by both fascist fighting corps served three purposes. First, it paralysed their mainly socialist or Communist opponents by direct force. Secondly, it promoted the internal cohesion of the fighting corps through the 'experience of fighting' itself. Joseph Goebbels expressed this briefly but accurately when he pointed out that 'blood is a cement'.[38] This pithy saying explicitly names the internal bonding mechanism that is created by complicity in murders carried out with others. The common act of violence made everyone share in the responsibility. At the very least, people heard talk in bars frequented by the storm troopers about the nights of blood, and thus became privy to the life of an organization steeped in violence. It was important that the members of the fighting corps observed a division of labour when carrying

[38] Joseph Goebbels, *Das erwachende Berlin* (Berlin, 1934), 126.

out their common acts of violence. Collective action could not tolerate any 'innocents'. To this extent, committing acts of violence together was a highly unifying force. The socialization of violence in the noisy male camaraderie of the bars frequented by the fighters merged with criminal complicity in the fascist fighting corps. A code of honour favouring violence and an acclimatization to violence formed two sides of the same coin.[39] And thirdly, the use of violence served the public demonstration of fascist strength and order which, paradoxically, was achieved via a general unsettling of the population and a massive disruption of public order. In addition to these three main purposes, violent activism, in the early years, made the fascist movement known in public. Instant publicity was easy to achieve by means of spectacular brawls, and this attention in turn enabled the corps to recruit new members and raise new funds.

It is, of course, a general feature of social movements that they use the street as an arena and a medium for forming and declaring political will. Thus fascism, underlining its character as a movement, used the street and public space as the central arena for its propaganda where it declared its will to power and sent the associated signal that it would, if necessary, use force to achieve its goal. The fascists therefore frequently used a piazza at the centre of town, marched in the streets, or demonstrated in a central church square in order to underline their public significance. The physical–symbolic 'argument' presented on the street placed in question the debates of the parliamentary politics conducted by the elite. Body politics and mass politics were introduced as forms of direct political representation, thus implicitly criticizing the compromise-orientated and exclusively verbal politics of parliamentarism.

According to Goebbels, the street was 'the characteristic feature of modern politics', for, he went on, 'anyone who can conquer the street can also conquer the masses'.[40] The power of attraction radiated by the street violence of the fascist fighting corps shows that the traditional mechanisms of transmitting politics to society had lost their effectiveness. Authoritarian machine politics and the old, elite politics led to an increasing alienation of the grass-roots and resulted in a massive radicalization and militarization of street

[39] Cf. Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 406–505.
[40] Goebbels, quoted from Roegels, *Marsch*, 12.

politics, which were growing in importance. The fascist fighting corps used and encouraged this process of disintegration, which had begun at the end of the nineteenth century and was increasingly transferring politics on to the street.[41] The heroic and the violent components of street politics made these fascist fighting corps stand out. Street politics and propaganda merged into each other and formed the foundation of the fascists' activist understanding of politics. Mass participation in street politics in association with specific, symbolically deployed forms of violence could be popularized by the fascists as a legitimate form of politics only in a society brutalized by the First World War. The crisis of traditional politics, socio-economic problems, an inner refusal to accept the peace and the associated acceptance of violence perpetrated by non-state agencies, and a questioning of the state's weakened monopoly of power favoured the repeated appearance of forms of organized political street violence that latched on to the mystical elements of a cult of war and proclaimed this death-dealing vitalism in the name of youth.[42]

The actions of the Communist fighting corps, that is, *Arditi del Popolo* and the *Roter Frontkämpferbund*, were in principle similar. Unlike the fascist propaganda of violence, however, they were mostly integrated into an overall concept with social concerns such as demands for cost-of-living allowances, wage increases, and co-determination. The Communist acts of violence thereby retained a stronger link with the world of work. Whether in marches, hunger strikes, boycotts, the looting of food shops, rent strikes, demonstrations by the unemployed, or factory occupations—the violence which in this case was also used for propaganda purposes was, unlike that deployed by the fascists, tied to the notion of social injustice and the world of work. Violence, therefore, was not just used in the service of political propaganda. It was also linked to social interests which propaganda exaggerated into the demand for a social revolution by an armed uprising.[43]

[41] Cf. Mario Isnenghi, *L'Italia in piazza: I luoghi della vita pubblica del 1848 ai nostri giorni* (Milan, 1994), 207–300; Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik*, 173–384; George L. Mosse, *Die Nationalisierung der Massen: Politische Symbolik und Massenbewegungen in Deutschland von den Napoleonischen Kriegen bis zum Dritten Reich* (Berlin, 1976).

[42] On the social contextualization of fascist power see Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 200–389.

[43] Cf. Dirk Schumann, 'Der aufgeschobene Bürgerkrieg: Sozialer Protest und politische

The dynamic fascist fighting corps differed from the nationalist units in a number of ways: first, they represented a fresh new force; secondly, they acted more decisively, more militantly, and more violently; thirdly, their actions mainly took place in the public forum of the street; and fourthly, their activity was constant.

The fascists publicly used political violence as a symbol of political power. For them, it was permeated with ritual elements, and carried a positive charge. This elevation of violence was expressed in the fact that the fascists did not draw up a model for the society of the future, and had nothing to say about the world that was to emerge from the 'revolution' dictated by the fascist cult of violence. For the fascists, violence was an expression of their lifestyle. Their political violence was an expression of their whole way of life. Thus violence was not only what the fascists did best, it was an integral part of the identity of fascist movements. There was no area of life in which ubiquitous violence did not occur, and this was reflected in the fact that violence shaped the content of individual lifestyles.[44]

This approach, based on forms of political practice, differs from the understanding of fascism as a programmatic ideology. Fascist politics does not reveal itself through the mere intellectual constructs of its pioneering thinkers, or through the unconditional and apparent coherence of its stock of ideas. The fascists made no attempt intellectually to justify their violent acts, unlike the

Gewalt in Deutschland 1923', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 44 (1996), 526–44, at 528–9; Heinrich August Winkler, *Der Weg in die Katastrophe: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1930 bis 1933* (Berlin, 1987), 287, 311, 687; Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt, 1996), 193–9, 312–26, 365–80; Eve Rosenhaft, 'Links gleich rechts? Militante Straßengewalt um 1930', in Thomas Lindenberger and Alf Lüdtke (eds.), *Physische Gewalt: Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 238–75; Corner, *Fascism*, 96; Maurizio Ridolfi, *Il PSI e la nascita del partito di massa, 1892–1922* (Rome, 1992), 181–96; Paolo Farneti, 'Social Conflict, Parliamentary Fragmentation, Institutional Shift, and the Rise of Fascism: Italy', in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (eds.), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Europe* (Baltimore, 1978), 3–33, at 29–31. For a summary of the differences between Communist and fascist power see Sven Reichardt, 'Totalitäre Gewaltpolitik? Zum Verhältnis kommunistischer und nationalsozialistischer Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik', in Wolfgang Hardtwig (ed.), *Ordnungen in der Krise* (Göttingen, forthcoming 2007).

[44] On this approach, which sees fascism as an experiential value born of action, see Sven Reichardt, 'Praxeologie und Faschismus: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft als Elemente eines praxeologischen Faschismusbegriffs', in Karl H. Hörning and Julia Reuter (eds.), *Doing Culture: Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis* (Bielefeld, 2004), 129–53.

Communists with their doctrines of class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The fascist and the Communist movements both aspired to uniformity, but in the case of the fascists this related less to ideology than to participating in acts of violence, being prepared to commit oneself to the movement, and a uniform lifestyle. Among the Communists, by contrast, a unanimously 'correct' ideological attitude or pure doctrine was more important. It could be said that the fascists were concerned that their politics were expressed uniformly, while the Communists were more interested in the uniformity of their contents.[45]

[45] Taking this further: Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 506–34; id., 'Was mit dem Faschismus passiert ist: Ein Literaturbericht zur internationalen Faschismusforschung seit 1990, Teil 1', *Neue Politische Literatur*, 49 (2004), 385–406, at 392–5.