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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Giuseppe Bottai e la Germania nazista: I rapporti italo-tedeschi e la politica culturale fascista**, by Nicola D'Elia, Rome, Carocci, 2019, 199 pp., €22 (soft cover), ISBN: 9788843096763

Giuseppe Bottai (1895–1959) played key roles in several areas of concern to the recent historiography on Italian fascism – corporatism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, and the fascist mobilization of Italian intellectual and cultural life – in an apparently contradictory career that has stimulated scholarly and public debate. While some have highlighted the journals he founded and edited, including *Critica fascista* and *Primato*, which engaged many of the country's brightest young intellectuals in uncommonly free-spirited debates, others point to Bottai's ruthless enforcement of the regime's 1938 anti-Jewish laws as Minister of National Education. Was Bottai a force for the liberalization of the regime, forced by circumstance to apply policies of which he disapproved? Or was he a ruthless opportunist who crafted intellectual justifications for the regime's worst policies, while cynically co-opting the country's young minds?

In his recent book, the historian Nicola D'Elia seeks to recast this debate by exploring Bottai's relationship with Nazi Germany. As D'Elia observes, even scholars with opposed interpretations of Bottai's role have generally agreed that Bottai was 'anti-German'. His diary, after all, reveals his disdain for the Nazi leadership and scorn for their biological racism. But this scholarly consensus, D'Elia argues, is misleading. D'Elia's closer look at Bottai's engagement with Hitler's Germany – consisting primarily of detailed discussion of texts about Nazism in the journals under Bottai's control, and reconstruction of Bottai's interactions with Nazi regime officials and German cultural institutions between 1933 and 1943 – reveals a more nuanced picture of Bottai's attitudes toward Hitler's dictatorship. This picture in turn offers a richer context within which to understand Bottai's support for the alliance with Germany and for Italy's own anti-Jewish persecution.

D'Elia presents the argument in seven chronologically arranged chapters. The first four chart the way Bottai's circle engaged with Nazism from 1923 to 1935. The following three chapters follow Bottai's own writings about and contacts with Nazi Germany from 1936, drawing on Bottai's private reflections in his diaries and letters as well as German and Italian archival material.

The story, on the face of it, is one of striking discontinuity. Readers of *Critica fascista* in 1933–34 were offered sophisticated explications of the deep moral and ideological divide between Nazism and Italian fascism. Once Mussolini launched the Rome–Berlin Axis in 1936, however, Bottai's flagship journal celebrated the way that Hitler and Mussolini were 'Constructing the New Europe' – based on the deep moral and ideological affinities between the two nations and ideologies.

The journal's earlier rejections of Nazi racism (dismissed in intellectual terms as a crass form of materialism) were likewise replaced by articles that justified Nazi anti-Semitism to Italian readers, helping ease doubts about the Axis partnership while preparing the way for the persecution of Italy's Jews. Bottai himself, while continuously scornful of his German counterparts in his diary, worked closely and cordially with Goebbels, Himmler, and Reich Education Minister Bernhard Rust to expand and deepen German-Italian cultural and intellectual cooperation.

Yet even while he documents these ironic shifts, D'Elia highlights a point of continuity: Bottai's ongoing desire to make fascism into a social-revolutionary project. According to D'Elia, it was Bottai's interest in so-called 'left fascist' models of corporatism – that is, visions of how the totalitarian state could resolve conflict between capital and labour in a wholistic manner, abandoning liberal democracy so as to transcend capitalism – that motivated his posture toward Nazi Germany across the 1930s and during most of the war. Early in the decade, D'Elia shows, *Critica fascista* debated the virtues and vices of National Socialism as a means of hashing out issues in Italy's own struggle over corporatist reform. Although disappointed in their hopes that the Nazis would learn from fascist corporatism, and stung by Mussolini's rejection of the most ambitious corporatist visions, Bottai and his circle revived the prospect of radical social reform to argue that Nazism and Italian fascism were natural allies. In 1940, Bottai embraced the hope that the conflict Hitler had unleashed could be a *guerra rivoluzionaria*, finally making possible a radical pan-European social-economic transformation, but only if Italy maintained and indeed deepened its partnership with Germany. D'Elia shows us how Bottai pursued this project by arguing at every occasion that Italian fascism and National Socialism were distinct yet 'complementary', and by trying to advance an 'Italian' appreciation for humanism and classical antiquity in Germany.

D'Elia argues finally that Bottai's left-fascist dreams likewise motivated his embrace of anti-Semitism. Rejecting earlier scholarship that has found reasons for Bottai's actions in his personal and political troubles, D'Elia calls attention instead to the entangled relations, in the ideological world of the *sinistra fascista*, between the rejection of the 'plutocracy' of the Western democracies, fascism's campaign against 'bourgeois values' in Italian society, and anti-Jewish racism (121–122). In this light, Bottai's active support for the Axis and the regime's persecution of Italy's Jews were not strange departures from earlier liberal positions; they were new ways of pursuing a consistent set of deeply anti-liberal goals.

The book is rich in detail, well researched, and careful in its weighing of new evidence against arguments from earlier historiography. Its central contribution is the way it interweaves the political-historical question of Bottai's support for the Axis and anti-Semitism with the intellectual-historical issue of his effort to mold fascism into a radical form of national-social populism – a fascism, as Bottai wrote in his diary in 1939, 'understood as a force "of the left," transcending and not negating the ideals of [17]89' (quoted here, 108). Once we have this ideological project in focus, the issue of whether or not Bottai was 'anti-German' can be seen for the simplistic question that it is. This approach also contributes valuably to the growing literature that has been re-evaluating the domestic and international

significance of fascist corporatism. The sections on Bottai's cultural-diplomatic activities are less original and less sophisticated in their analysis, but they succeed in supporting D'Elia's point: that Bottai's close collaboration with Nazi Germany was neither pro- nor anti-German, but rather a calculated strategy in pursuit of his own Italian-nationalist and fascist-corporatist ideological project.

The problem with this claim is that after 1932 there was no real hope that Bottai's 'left fascist' visions could become reality in Italy, much less in a European New Order dominated by Hitler, and a man of Bottai's intelligence surely understood this. What then did his insistence on these visions mean? D'Elia might have done more to explore this tension, perhaps by grappling more explicitly with the power-political goals behind Bottai's ideological claims.

This is above all a work of intellectual history, however, and on this territory it makes a strong contribution. One comes away from this book reminded that for many Italian intellectuals, fascism was the way they participated in a European-wide rethinking of the core relationships of modernity: between capital and labour, nation and state, individual and collective, market forces and state power. This grandiose intellectual project shaped the way Bottai, and many others, understood the political and moral choices of the day – including those raised by Nazism and anti-Semitism – in a way that seems deeply foreign today. D'Elia's fascinating book offers dispassionate insight into this ideological world, improving our understanding of Bottai and his circle while leaving it to us to decide how to judge them.

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