From enthusiasts of the “totalitarian state” to enthusiasts of “quieto vivere”: police personnel in Fascist Italy

This paper considers the attitudes and behaviour of police officials and officers of the Italian Interior Ministry police during the fascist period, in relation to two underlying and closely-related questions: How successfully were the Interior Ministry police transformed into the instrument of an authoritarian dictatorship? To what extent did the institution undergo a process of ideological ‘fascistization’?

The Italian police historian is confronted with conflicting images of how the forces of law and order operated during the fascist period. Police journals, handbooks and training manuals, and, naturally, fascist propaganda, present Mussolini’s police as an all-powerful, well trained, and technologically advanced institution, which, from an ideological point of view, was fully integrated into the fascist regime. Indeed, an analysis of the practice of policing suggests that we should not under-stress Mussolini’s creation of a highly oppressive system characterized by intensive surveillance activities that penetrated all walks of Italian society. It also implies that a considerable number of members of the police, particularly among the higher ranks, supported the fascist regime, some to the point of openly declaring ideological allegiance to it.

By contrast, a large amount of archive documentation of the fascist period indicates that the police experienced notable practical difficulties which, if we are to believe the reports, affected their ability to maintain order and prevent political dissidence. This, alongside frequent references in inspection reports to a negative work attitude and to episodes of corruption, appears to contradict any image of an efficient police force and partly brings into question the supposed ideological allegiance of the police to the fascist regime. The documentation confirms the presence in the police of a ‘backward’ culture founded on ‘clientelistic’ relationships inherited from the Liberal State (which the more radical fascists attributed to a failure to adequately ‘fascistize’ the institution). Other factors, including recruitment and training methods, disciplinary regimes, pay structures,
and policing resources (facilities, equipment and manpower), played a role in determining levels of efficiency, transparency, and loyalty to the fascist regime.

My paper starts by analysing the attitudes of Interior Ministry police personnel towards fascist government and ideology in the context of the Fascist Party’s intentions to ‘fascistize’ the police. This leads on to an examination of episodes of malpractice and corruption revealed in numerous investigations of police headquarters and of individual police officers and officials carried out during the late twenties and the thirties. This section also considers the particular cultural environments in which the police operated, as well as the effectiveness of systems of hierarchical control within the Interior Ministry police. The final part of the paper relates the behavioural trends revealed in the investigations to the broader question of the ability of the fascist regime to maintain control over society; this analysis is conducted in relation to such issues as availability of policing resources, the relationship between the police and organs of the Fascist Party at the local level, and the regime’s desire to maintain a balance between coercion and the achievement of consensus. Throughout the paper, focus is given to the question of levels of continuity/discontinuity between the Italian Liberal and fascist regimes in relation to policing practices and the attitudes of the police officers and officials concerned.

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