

Giulia Albanese, *Dittature Mediterranee. Sovversioni fasciste e colpi di Stato in Italia, Spagna e Portogallo*, Laterza, 248 pp, 2016, ISBN: 978-88-581-1961-7

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“In the midst of the political and social disorder that was everywhere, and which undermined the cohesion of the Portuguese people and destroyed the national consciousness, or, more specifically, the essence, and the reason for being, of a Nation [...], attempts to re-establish some kind of political system that had already been tried and failed would be useless for the future of Portugal. In the mental and moral anarchy of the century to which we had adhered [...], what really mattered was to reconstruct the lost meaning of human life and instill it into the family and society, into the political organization, into the administration, into the private and public economy, into the moral education of men.”²

In 1936, during his well-known speech in Braga, given on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the dictatorship, Salazar clearly stated that in the light of the political and moral disorder that had characterized the years immediately after World War I, the old political systems needed to be shelved and a new order built. This kind of assertion was not an isolated case in interwar Europe, as many other nations, namely Italy, Poland, Spain, Romania, and Hungary, also sought to introduce a system of authoritarian stabilization during this period.

The main topics of Giulia Albanese’s new book include the search for an alternative solution to the enduring crisis of parliamentary and constitutional liberalism during the 1920s as well as the construction of authoritarian regimes as inspired by a reactionary ideology and openly shaped by Italian fascism, which provided an example and a model to be imitated.

Dittature mediterranee. Sovversioni fasciste e colpi di Stato in Italia, Spagna e Portogallo (Mediterranean Dictatorships. Fascist Rebellions and Coups D’états in Italy, Spain and Portugal) examines the theme of nationalist dictatorships, focusing on those countries – Italy, Portugal and Spain – that Albanese has categorized as “Mediterranean”. An expression, and a title, that might sound less ambiguous if the author would have been

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² Salazar, António Oliveira, *As grandes certezas da Revolução Nacional. Discursos*, Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, II (1935-1937), 1936, 128-129.

chosen to use the term southern Europe instead. As a chronological framework, Albanese chose to focus her attention on the period between the outbreak of World War I and 1926, the year in which a coup d'état ended the Portuguese First Republic. *Dittature Mediterranee* is not strictly a book about regimes, but it deals with the rebellions and violence that characterized the interwar period and promoted the rise of dictatorships in Italy, Spain, and Portugal

Focusing its attention on some crucial turning points in history, specifically World War I and the *Marcia su Roma*, the book traces the political paths that these three countries followed in arriving at the nationalist authoritarian solutions which supplanted the previous liberal governments accused of failure. It also describes how these movements presented themselves both to the political institutions, the monarchy in the case of Italy and Spain and the Republic in the case of Portugal, and to the populations, in particular their middle-class segment, as the saviors of the nation.

The book is divided into four sections presented chronologically: World War I; the immediate postwar period; the conquest of power; and its subsequent stabilization. In the last three chapters, Albanese deliberately chose to follow the same pattern in order to offer her readers a “parallel, comparative and transnational observation” (XX). First, she describes the Italian framework, after which she analyzes the Spanish context, and, finally, she narrates the Portuguese history. At the end of each chapter, there are a few pages offering a conclusion in which the author stresses the aforementioned similarities and differences between the three countries.

The first chapter provides an overview of this model and analyzes the impact that the various phases of World War I had on Italy, Portugal, and Spain: the outbreak; the dilemma in choosing between intervention and neutrality; the significance of 1917; and the end of the war. This stylistic choice helps to make this chapter the most successful one in the whole book. Besides the narrative dynamism, these pages provide a fresh perspective on the significance of World War I in the Iberian Peninsula. The importance of the war in the European context has already been underlined by historians, and Albanese, starting from these reflections, analyzes the repercussions that the conflict had on the formation of the three dictatorships, thereby offering her audience—in particular the Italian one—an innovative point of view. This becomes particularly stimulating when the book scrutinizes the case of Spain. The author is indeed able to view the Spanish case within the more general framework of World War I and to show her readers that although the Iberian nation did not participate directly in the conflict, it was touched by the war and suffered its

consequences. In the three countries, a pivotal role was played by the “evolution of the practices of violence and the militarization of politics” (XXI) that affected them in subsequent years and led to a “brutalization of politics” (4). Interwar violence is a recurrent topic in Giulia Albanese’s study. She started during the late 90s researching the political violence in Venice during the years 1919-1921 and she continued with her Ph.D. dissertation, which focused on the violence perpetrated in the Italian peninsula during the Liberal State Crisis, and specifically scrutinized the phenomenon of the March on Rome.³ Lately, she has been continuing her studies on this topic in her recent publications in which Albanese gradually expanded the reflection on the Italian case on the southern Europe as a whole⁴. In particular, *Dittature Mediterranee* could be seen as an enlargement, on a European scale, of her PhD dissertation, which was transformed into her book *La Marcia su Roma*, published by Laterza in 2006. In both books, Albanese investigates how the use of violence increased after World War I, stressing, in particular, the decisive role played by the aggressive procedures inherited from the war, which spread across the whole continent, and showing how force was used and re-adapted in different national scenarios during the 1920s (106). The “brutalization of politics”—a concept that can be attributed to George L. Mosse⁵, one of its pioneers—increased, due largely to factors such as the radicalization of the middle class, the militarization of politics through the formation of paramilitary forces, and the demonization of the enemy. Directly linked to this last point, it is remarkable that, in all these countries, the internal adversaries—namely the anarchists, the socialists, and the previously liberal lay government, as was the case in Portugal—were depicted as the enemy of the nation and sometimes associated with the anticlerical and “red” danger coming from Moscow. This sense of hostility, which was propagated during the years of the respective governments’ consolidation of power, continued to permeate Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese societies during the 1930s, as demonstrated by the way in which the other political forces were represented during some of the “political exhibitions” organized in these nations. The *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* held in Rome 1932, the *Exposição da obra da ditadura* held in Lisbon in 1934, and the *Exposición de material de guerra tomado al enemigo*

³ Albanese, Giulia, *Alle origini del fascismo. La violenza politica a Venezia, 1919-1922*. Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2001; *La marcia su Roma: politica e violenza nella crisi dello stato liberale*. Ph.D. Thesis, EUI, 2004; *La marcia su Roma*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006.

⁴ See, among others: Comparare i fascismi. Una riflessione storiografica. Special issue of *Storica*, nn. 43-45, 2009; Political violence and institutional crisis: Italy, Spain and Portugal. In Antonio Costa Pinto, (ed.), *The nature of fascism*, Palgrave, 2011, 186-195; Dittature. La creazione di un nuovo regime in Italia, Spagna e Portogallo. In E. Betta, D.L. Caglioti, E. Papadia (eds.). *Le forme del politico. Studi di storia per Raffaele Romanelli*. Roma: Viella, 2012, 97-116.

⁵ Mosse, George L., *Fallen Soldiers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

held in San Sebastián in 1938 were all designed to show how the victory obtained over the internal enemies and the consequent political change had led to an orderly and flourishing society.

The third main theme of the book is closely linked to the March on Rome and examines the “role played by Italy as the trigger of the crisis, but also its function as an example of a new political model that was applicable, with some adaptations, in other countries” (XXI). The Italian case, “an element of great innovation within the European political framework” (310) and a feasible alternative to the dualism of Democracy/Bolshevism, quickly became a lesson and an inspiration for other countries during the interwar period. Following the path already traced by Fascism, the right-wing members of Spanish and Portuguese society—who were to be found among politicians, intellectuals, the military, and a large part of the population (most conspicuously within its middle-class segment)—successfully seized power and presented themselves as a new solution within the political landscape resulting from the war and, at the same time, as the guarantors of institutional continuity (176). *Dittature Mediterranee* can therefore be inserted into the already consolidated historiographical tendency that recognized the pivotal role played by Fascism during the interwar period in a broader European scenario. In the four chapters, the Italian dictatorship is often presented as a model for Spain and Portugal, with the author frequently stressing, in a rather witty fashion, how the Iberian countries maintained their specificity and adapted the Italian example to their political, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The provision of more details about the reactions that the March on Rome provoked in Spain and Portugal, as well as the presentation of the discussions that were held about this topic in the newspapers and in the private correspondence of intellectuals and politicians, could have helped readers to better understand the circulation of ideas between the three countries. Instead, the author decided to deal with this aspect by presenting a fourth and external point of view—that of the Vatican—on both the impact that the events in Italy had on the Iberian Countries and on the Spanish and Portuguese situations.

As previously mentioned, the book ends with the Portuguese coup d'état of 1926 and the author clearly states in the introduction that *Dittature Mediterranee* “seeks to deepen our knowledge of the reasons why, in the 1920s, parliamentary and representative political regimes failed, and were replaced with dictatorships or authoritarian and repressive institutions” (XIX). Another book by Albanese about the subsequent period would surely provide a stimulating new perspective and would be most welcomed by the academic

community. Beginning with the relevant results already achieved in this volume, it would, indeed, be interesting to see if, with the complete stabilization of power in Italy and Portugal and the rise of Francoism in Spain, Italian Fascism still remained the main model to be followed during the 1930s or, as suggested by Simon Kuin in the case of the *Liga de acção corporativa*, some alternative patterns were proposed and introduced⁶.

Finally, *Dittature Mediterranee* is a solid and well-constructed book based on a long-lasting historiographical tradition and with an appealing methodological approach resulting from the parallel structure afforded to the chapters. In addition to this dimension, others important themes of the book, already mentioned earlier, deserve to be highlighted as innovative aspects: the original perspective about the impact of World War I on the Iberian Peninsula and the Vatican's opinions on the events that occurred in the three Southern European countries. The reflections on Spain, a nation that did not directly participate in the war but that reacted to the effects generated by the conflict by dismantling the liberal government, form one of the most innovative parts of the book. The use of the documents found in the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, in particular the nuncios' letters, provide the readers with a sort of *fil rouge* that links the various steps in the formation of the dictatorships and relates them to the Church's reflections on the political situation in Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Vatican documents used by Albanese are particularly interesting as they provide a valuable foreign perspective. In particular they show the ambivalence of the Church divided between understanding the uncertainty of the situation and seizing the opportunity provided by the consolidation of these movements that openly declared themselves to be anti-communist, and to be the restorers of the previous order, which had been endangered by the introduction of lay ideals.

In conclusion *Dittature Mediterranee* is a book in which Giulia Albanese has condensed over a fifteen years of researches on political violence; it is a good analysis of the crisis of the Liberal States in Italy, Spain and Portugal, and, above all, it is a valuable tool both for postgraduate and undergraduate students, and, more generally, for the academic audience. In particular, this work is especially fruitful for readers, who, through these pages, can obtain a complete and comparative overview of the formation of the southern European dictatorships.

⁶ Kuin, Simon, O braço longo de Mussolini. Os 'Comitatos per l'Azione Universale di Roma' em Portugal. *Penélope*, 11(1993), 7-20.