Response to Matteo Millan:

Mapping Squadrist Violence

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Matteo Millan's article is part of an important wave of scholarship that investigates the central role that violence played in Fascist governance throughout the long two decades of Benito Mussolini's rule.[1] Whether at the level of street beatings, worker exploitation (including the use of forced labour) or abuses and mass death in a large network of Fascist concentration camps and confinement spaces (prisons, mental hospitals, penal colonies) that extended to Africa and the Balkans, it is only in the last decade that Italian Fascist violence has been taken seriously. I use this phrase with intent, to highlight the enduring impact of older historiographies that fostered a grave underestimation of Italian Fascist violence and minimised Italians' agency and responsibility for such violence. Generated by nationals wishing to preserve the notion of Italians as *brava gente* (good people),[2] German emigrés such as Hannah Arendt, who concluded that Italy was a 'non-totalitarian or, at the most, semi-totalitarian' state,[3] or a broad Anglo-American tradition of caricaturising Mussolini as a 'sawdust Caesar' and submissive follower of Hitler, such interpretations of Italian Fascism as a 'lesser evil' allowed its actual evil to be assumed but often not empirically documented.[4] It is worth recalling that for over a decade following the First World

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[1] Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Richard Bosworth, 'Everyday Mussolinianism: Friends, Family, Locality, and Violence in Fascist Italy', *Contemporary European History*, 14, 1 (2005), 23–43; Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Italy and Argentina, 1919–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Giulia Albanese, 'Reconsidering the March on Rome', *European History Quarterly*42, 3 (2012), 403–21.

[2] David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1993); Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: La rimozione delle colpe della Seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: Laterza, 2013).

[3] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1973), 257–8. Meir Michaelis, 'Anmerkungen zum italienischen Totalitarismusbegriff: Zur Kritik des Thesen Hannah Arendts und Renzo de Felices', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*62 (1982), 270–302.

[4] See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation', in Helmut Dubieland Gabriel Motzkin, eds, *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices*, eds (New York: Routledge, 2004), 137–53; Richard Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), 69–70 on the tradition of British

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War it was Mussolini's rather than Hitler's regime that stood out as Soviet Russia's 'enemy twin', and that by the late 1920s Mussolini and his followers were using the term totalitarian as a means of advertising the distinctiveness and originality of their approach to governance.[5]

It is this period that is Millan's main focus as he makes his argument that the squadrist movement had an impact that far exceeded its political utility as a vehicle for Mussolini's ascent to power. Born, like Fascism itself, out of the energies of the First World War, squadrism's revolutionary identity lay in its mission of bringing about creative destruction.[6] Domesticating its decentralised violence became a political as well as a public relations priority for a Fascist National Party (PNF) in transition to top-down governance and repression. The legislation of 1925–9 that established the dictatorship's disciplinary and policing apparatus coincided with the purges and internal exiles of many squadrists: both have traditionally been viewed as the victory of the state over the PNF. Millan takes issue with this overly neat schematisation and with the sharp division between Fascism as movement and Fascism as regime (a division most famously posited by Renzo De Felice). Even as Mussolini and his administrators and police declared squadrism to be an 'anachronism', they quietly populated the party bureaucracy with former squadrists – a bureaucracy so vast, by the 1930s that it constituted a state within a state, and was viewed as such by many ordinary Italians. From Bologna and Florence, respectively, 43% and 61% of the squadrists were assimilated into PNF offices, mostly in low-level positions, but every Minister of the Interior until the fall of the regime had a squadrist past, as did every Minister of Popular Culture, and even the head of the movie studio Cinecittà. 'What took place between 1925 and 1929 was not the defeat of the party by the state,

superiority. A. J. P. Taylor was the most prominent exponent of the Mussolini-as-lackey theme, in *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1961) and in the movie he narrated, *Mussolini, Men of our Time* (1998), which proclaims that Italian Fascism was 'all a sham'; Niccolo Zapponi, *Il fascismo nella caricature* (Bari: Laterza, 1981) for cartoons in the international press. For critical reviews of the state of historiography before this latest wave of studies, Paul Corner, 'Italian Fascism: Whatever Happened to Dictatorship?', *Journal of Modern History* 74, 2 (June 2002), 325–51; and Richard Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998); Enzo Collotti, ed., *Fascismo e antifascismo: Rimozioni, revisioni, negazioni* ed. Enzo Collotti (Rome: Laterza, 2000).

[5] On anti-Fascist and Fascist uses of the term "totalitarian" in 1920s Italy, see Jens Petersen, 'Die Entstehung des Totalitarismusbegriffs in Italien', in Manfred Funke, ed., *Totalitarismus* (Dusseldorf: Droste, 1978), 105–28; Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 14–20.

[6] The new attention to Fascist violence is also registered in the appearance of studies devoted to squadrism: Giulia Albanese, *La marcia su Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2006); Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi: Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista 1919–1922* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); Sven Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune: Milizie fascista in Italia e in Germania* (Bologna: Mulino, 2009); and on squadrism as a template for Fascist masculinity, Alfredo Capone, 'Corporealità maschile e modernità', in Sandro Bellassai and Maria Malatesta, eds, *Genere e mascolinità* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 195–224. On the war as incubator of totalitarian violence, Angelo Ventrone, *La seduzione totalitaria: Guerra, modernità, violenza politica (1914–1918)*, (Rome: Donzelli, 2003).

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but a transition whereby the cultural and practical elements of squadrism were fully metabolised by the regime', he concludes (000).[7]

Among the merits of Millan's essay is his employment of under-utilized Ministry of Interior documents on the punishments meted out to former squadrists for the same behaviours that had helped to create the proper climate of male camaraderie and collective fear needed for the seizure of power. Drug use, homosexuality, brothel running – all practices common on the battlefield and its continuation on the streets of Italy in 1919–22 – were now criminalised in what Millan rightly interprets as a strategy of de-politicisation of those who could not be integrated into the regime. He brings out the sentiments of betrayal and bitterness among diehard first-hour Fascists who saw the practice of violence now in the hands of members of a state bureaucracy – informers, prison wards, the various policing forces – that had lost sight of the revolutionary ideal. Of course, such a bureaucracy was necessary to sustain the kind of capillary and everyday violence meant to demoralize and intimidate Italians. And many squadrists joined that security bureaucracy, too, or found a new home in another state organisation: the Militia, established by Mussolini in 1923 as an independent armed force.[8] Throughout the regime, the Militia's rhetoric and structure (squads formed its base units, with Legions uniting fifty or more squads) kept alive the Fascist credo of violence as regenerative. As the author notes, Militiamen were assigned to political confinement areas, where they beat and harassed not only anti-Fascists but rogue squadrists as well.

At times Millan seems to overstate the importance of squadrism. Given the complexity and range of Fascist policies and bureaucracies, it is hard to agree that squadrism was 'a practice that contributed to the shaping the entire construction and organization of the dictatorship' (000). Such an assessment has more validity at the level of ideology, political culture and social practice, as his article provides a pathway for further research in these areas. One would be in the realm of Fascist masculinity. Certainly, the figure of the squadrist heavily influenced ideals of Fascist manhood, entwining it with the performance of aggressive acts. Violence was exalted and displayed 'as an expression of one's own personality as well as a fulfilment of an important social mission' (000). Such an ethos also had traction among Italians too young to have participated in the March on Rome. Up to the mid 1930s, memoirs of former blackshirts appeared that fueled fantasies of squadrism as a space and time of unlimited liberties (random sexual encounters, gang-rapes, the ambiguous

[7] For the relationship of the PNF and the state, see Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarianismo: Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista* (Rome: La Nuova Italia, 1995). Information on squadrists in the cultural and film bureaucracy, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, forthcoming with Indiana University Press. Paul Baxa argues that the squadrist conquest mentality influenced Fascism's urban interventions in the streets and piazzas of Rome: *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). For Italians seeing the party as another state apparatus, Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy*, (London: Bodley Head, 2012).

[8] Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*; Reichardt, *Camicie nere.*

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homosociality of military life, the annihilation of others) hardly imaginable to those growing up in a police state.[9]

Another would be squadrists' roles in the military campaigns that dominated Italy after 1935 and the symbolic importance of their participation. In this regard, as in so many other things, the Ethiopian War was a watershed: Fascism's first mass mobilisation, it allowed squadrists, under the umbrella of the Militia, to regroup on the battlefield, as Millan points out. Ethiopia was billed by the regime in its visual and print propaganda as a revolutionary and epic event and as a place where the squadrist spirit of masculine freedom and transgression could find new expression. The Ethiopian invasion was itself an outlaw enterprise, which caused Italy's expulsion from the League of Nations, and its battlegrounds 'an experimental field of violence' in which aerial bombing and chemical weapons were used as instruments of governance as well as conquest.[10] The Militia's contribution to the Ethiopian War was the subject of no less than eighteen official Istituto Luce documentaries and the blockbuster empire feature *Luciano Serra, pilota* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1938), channelled the squadrist ethos in its story of an Italian emigrant who returns to Ethiopia under an assumed name to fight in the Militia. A hand-to-hand combat scene that culminated in a stabbing with a Militia-issued dagger and publicity that referenced the mythical *aridity* shock troops who were a nucleus of squadrism sent the message to those who wanted to hear it: Ethiopia, together with the Italian Empire, was the new frontier of Fascist violence, and the Militia, the equivalent of the Foreign Legion, a place that welcomed all regardless of their past, as long as they knew how to kill.[11]

Although more research is required in this area, the battlefields of the Second World War would seem to continue the pattern set in the Ethiopian campaign: the Militia as 'an organized context within which [men] could experiment with camaraderie and collective violence'.[12] Nicola Labanca points to similarities between

[9] Quote from Franzinelli, *Squadristi,* 44. Memoirs that link Fascist squadrism with an antidisciplinarian body politics include Marcello Gallian, *Comando di tappa* (Rome: Cabala, 1934); Ottone Rosai, *Dentro la guerra* (Rome: Quaderni di Novissima, 1934), but see also Italo Balbo, *Diario 1922* (Milan: Mondadori, 1932). For squadrism's attraction for youth, Bruno Wanrooj, 'Una generazione di guerra e di rivoluzione: I giovani e il fascism degli origini', *Storia e problemi contemporanei*24 (2001), 109–127; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 107–22.

[10] Aram Mattioli, *Experimentierfeld der Gewalt: Der Abessinienkrieg und seine internationale Bedeutung 1935–1941* (Zurich: Orell Füssli, 2005); Giulia Brogini Künzi, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg 1935/36: Kolonialkrieg oder Totaler Krieg?* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006); Aram Mattioli and Asfa-Wossen Asserate, eds, *Der erste faschistische Vernichtungskrieg: Die Italienische Aggression gegen Athiopien 1935–1941* (Cologne: SH-Verlag, 2006). On the Militia in East Africa, Giorgio Rochat, 'I volontari di Mussolini', in Nicola Labanca, ed., *Fare il soldato: Storie di reclutamento militare in Italia,* (Bologna: Unicopli, 2007), esp. 125–26.

[11] *Il film dell'ardimento italiano* (*The Film of Italian Daring*) trumpeted a publicity poster for *Luciano Serra, pilota*. The dagger used to stab the Ethiopian adversary was identical to the *pugnale di marcia* issued to Militiamen. On this film and the references to squadrism and violence that recur in empire films, Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema,* chapter 3.

[12] Giuletta Stefani, *Colonia per maschi: Italiani in Africa Orientale: Una storia di genere* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2007), 60–1.

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the military tactics utilized in the colonies and in the Balkan territories of Fascist occupation: in Libya and Ethiopia, as in Greece and Yugoslavia, which included not only typical internments, executions and deportations, but a recourse to 'abnormal' practices (as Italian commanders in Yugoslavia euphemistically referred to them) in which the Militia was heavily involved.[13]

My own preliminary research in United Nations War Crimes documents indicates that Militia battalions were responsible for some of the worst abuses, which replicate practices of violence initiated twenty years earlier – the forced ingestion of castor oil, beatings with clubs, and burning and sacking of public and private buildings – and recreate the collective ecstasy and transgression that marked squadrist culture, as when sacking and raping expeditions went on for several days, fuelled by cocaine and drink.[14] Although these behaviours formed part of the arsenal of violence proper to the practice of war in general, as Joanna Bourke and others have so aptly shown, the particular culture of war that pervaded the Militia had its conscious roots in 'the spirit of 1919' and the idea of the Second World War as a last chance to return to Fascism's mythical pure origins. That promise would be briefly fulfilled, for some, during the Republic of Salò (1943–5), a biennium that set the parameters for public memory of the entire Fascist period. By the end of the war, the Italian press and purge bodies used the terms collaborator and resister to refer to the positions Italians took during the Salò Republic, rather than to their actions during the preceding twenty-one years of Mussolini's rule.[15] Such distinctions became accepted in the early scholarship on Italian fascism, facilitating a kind of quarantining of evil as proper to the exceptional and foreign-tinged 'Nazifascism' of Salò. Millan's research on the continuing influence of squadrism during the dictatorship undoes a similar blackboxing of the blackshirts. Not only was the fabric of squadrist practices and ideologies 'absorbed into that of the state', as he concludes (000), but for ordinary Italians the shared experiences of personal and public humiliation and destruction that came out of the squadrist years were a step in a collective habituation to the violence that would continue throughout the two decades of the regime.

[13] Nicola Labanca, 'War Crimes in the Italian Colonies', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*9, 3 (2004), esp. 309; see also James Burgwyn, 'General Roatta's War Against the Partisans in Yugoslavia: 1942', and Lidia Santarelli, 'Muted Violence: Italian War Crimes in Occupied Greece', both in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, 3 (2004): 314–29 and 280–99 respectively.

[14] An example is the episode reported by eye-witnesses that occurred on 23 July 1942 near Ljubljana, where during reprisal killings two female and ten male villagers were executed and their corpses placed on an open military lorry along with the carcass of a pig. A mixed group of Fascist militiamen and Army grenadiers sat on the corpses and sang Fascist songs as they drove the lorry through the streets of Ljubljana. The bodies and the pig were buried in a common grave, and the Italians sang 'dirty songs' as they arranged the male and female corpses in lewd positions. See UNWCC, PAG-3/2.0, reg. no 364/Y/It/11, Appendix 24, microfilm pages 1108–1109. On this Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate Portrait of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[15] Ebner, *Ordinary Violence,* esp. 47; Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano.*

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