

In November of 2003, Gianfranco Fini, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and the leader of Italy's fascist party, made an historic pilgrimage to Israel. This article explores the legacy of Italian fascism and discusses the implications of Fini's recent visit.

Italian Fascism and the Jews: Brown? or Shades of Gray?

The Holocaust has become an argument. If sixty years of reflection on the event have taught us anything, it's that, if you can compare your sparring partner to a Nazi, the debate is over, and you usually win. Observed by *Economist* magazine as the 'Führer manoeuvre', the Holocaust Argument has been used to 'silence' everyone from Communist dictators to student activists, Hollywood actors and Talmudic scholars, multi-national corporations, video-games, baseball players and cartoon characters, and every U.S. President since Truman. It's a national pastime of sorts in Germany, and especially among the left in Europe at large — where everyone from Italian MPs to environmental activists invoke this muse, often taking particularly perverse pleasure in pointing the 'Nazi' finger at Israel or the Jewish people. The argument is wrong to use and, just as often, used wrongly. And the recent furor over the visit of Italy's Deputy Prime Minister is no exception.

As was to be expected, the recent visit of Gianfranco Fini, the head of Italy's National Alliance party (the legal heir to the Italian fascist party), met a chorus of condemnation and critique. Leading figures from across the political spectrum called his visit "a disgrace to Israel" and reiterated their opposition to "fascists, neo-fascists and anti-Semitism of all kinds." Most outrageously, MK Yossi Sarid christened Mussolini (and by extension, we must suppose, "fascist creeps" like Fini) "one of the biggest villains of the 20th Century — second only, perhaps, to Hitler." Many a commentator played the Holocaust trump-card and virtually no one, it seemed, sat out with a dummy hand.

Fini is no antisemite. On this, the record is clear: He has good relations with Italy's Jewish community; he has visited Auschwitz (and now, Yad Vashem); he threw his support to Holocaust memorial legislation in Italy; and he even calls for Israel's inclusion in the EU. (As a member of the EU's constitutional committee, this is a policy on which he will apparently have some say.) Indeed, of all the allegations against him, the 'worst' is that he once called Mussolini the "greatest statesman of the 20th Century" (speaking of outlandish top-ten lists) — a statement he retracts and one not entirely unlike those made by great statesmen such as Roosevelt, Lloyd George, George Bernard Shaw, and even Churchill.¹ Be that as it may, since so much of the sensation surrounding Fini's visit concerns his party's fascist legacy, it makes some sense to revisit that legacy, and thereby to unmask one of History's 'greatest' villains.

¹ In fact, Churchill admitted that he couldn't help be "charmed" by Mussolini, the "greatest living legislator" who "rendered a service to the entire world" [See Ray Moseley's *Mussolini's Shadow: The Double Life of Count Galeazzo Ciano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000)]. Although it may well be that Churchill made such statements long before the war, an astute student of languages might observe that, for Churchill, 'great' really does mean 'great', whereas, for Fini, it could just mean 'big' or 'major'. Nevertheless, plenty of good people managed to find Churchill's company tolerable when the going got rough.

As most historians of the period will agree, there was a vast diversity in the forms of fascism practiced at the time of the Second World War. While most were characterized by intense nationalism, rabid anti-Communism, and militarist cults-of-personality, antisemitism was hardly common to all. In the view of Mussolini and many of his henchmen, the Jewish Question of German fascism was, at best, a waste of time — if not wholly unworthy of civilized people like the Italians. In Bari in 1934, Mussolini's disdain for Nazi plebianism was hardly concealed:

“Thirty centuries of history allow us to look with supreme pity on certain doctrines which are preached beyond the Alps by the descendants of those who were illiterate when Rome had Caesar, Virgil and Augustus.”

“The Jews,” on the other hand, Mussolini remarked a few years earlier, “have lived in Rome since the days of Kings [and] shall remain undisturbed.”²

This is not to say, of course, that Mussolini always meant what he said. No politician is a stranger to exaggeration, and Mussolini was far from an exception. But it is hard to deny that, even in his regime's most deplorable associations, Mussolini's brand of fascism demonstrated a remarkable lack of enthusiasm. In occupied Yugoslavia, Greece and France, thousands upon thousands of Jews sought refuge from Nazi persecution by escaping *into* Italian zones of operation and, later, into Italy itself. That Mussolini took active steps to protect these Jews seems unlikely. But that he knew what was going on — and chose to ignore it — seems almost certain.

Even within Italy itself, Mussolini's anti-Jewish legislation lacked the ‘sharp edge’ that characterized similar legislation around the continent. In 1938, for example, he gave the green light to a decree restricting Jewish involvement in certain professions. However, the decree was ‘weighted-down’ by so many loop-holes and exceptions (for war veterans, churchgoers, “essential” workers and even members of the Fascist party!) that enforcement became virtually impossible. Even with the war under way, according to noted Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg, a “large segment” of the Jewish population in Italy remained “almost wholly unaffected” by the legislation.³

The attitude with which the fascist regime enforced these policies reflected Mussolini's attitude in passing them. Responding to his sister's concerns about the anti-Jewish legislation, Mussolini called the laws “a showy but cheap token payment” to his Axis partners.⁴ Much to the chagrin of their Nazi partners, the fascists in Italy never really achieved a ‘proper understanding’ of the Jewish Question.

No doubt, some of Mussolini's hesitation was motivated by practical concerns. He feared the adverse economic effects that rash moves against an industrial class might have. He also feared the opposition of ordinary Italian citizens, into whose ranks so many Jews had thoroughly assimilated. But however we chose to perceive it, Mussolini's simple impatience for Nazi antisemitism, and the outright disdain of many in his upper echelon, is well documented. As we have seen, even when Mussolini reluctantly imposed anti-Jewish

² Excerpts taken from: *Hitler's Ten-Year War on the Jews* (New York: World Jewish Congress, 1943): p. 283.

³ *The Destruction of the European Jews*. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985): pp. 664-6.

⁴ See Meir Michaelis, “The Attitude of the Fascist Regime to the Jews in Italy,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, IV, 1960: pp. 38-9.

legislation, he lacked the determination, the zeal, and — I dare say! — the criminality to implement them with full resolve.

Mussolini's reluctance was not without its consequences. Over 80% of Italy's Jewish population survived the war. It is unnecessary to stress, I hope, that the murder of over 7,000 individual human beings constitutes yet another tragic chapter in the history of the Holocaust. But in comparison to the survival of Jews around occupied Europe (Norway: 54%; the Netherlands: 33%; Hungary: 22%; Romania: 57%), the result is noteworthy. We must also remember that Mussolini was only able to show such 'negligence' to the Nazis because of his country's rather generous contributions to Axis military might. Nonetheless, even with these important moral caveats in mind, it remains true that, with the possible exception of Denmark (exceptional in a number of respects), no country subject to German occupation during the war was able to foil Nazi efforts to so great a degree.

Mussolini was a far cry from fanatics like Hitler who, even when the war was all but lost, devoted precious military resources to killing Jews. He was a far cry, even, from Stalin, who practiced mass-murder on a scale heretofore unknown. Calling Mussolini "one of the biggest villains of the 20th Century" is to make him far greater than he actually was. With my apologies to Mr. Sarid, most of us have moral barometers that are sensitive enough to perceive the crucial difference.

The Holocaust was a product of antisemitism and not of fascism. Claims that the two are necessarily connected are uninformed, usually sensationalist, and cannot be justified historically. Such arguments also imply that fascism and solidarity with Jews cannot go hand-in-hand and, moreover, that Jewish fascism is inconceivable. These implications are also untenable and not justified by the historical record. Critics of fascism should *not* base their attacks on fascism's supposed antisemitism but on human rights, democratic values and the interests of the international community. Critics of antisemitism should recognize that this vile political commodity is something for which neither side of the political spectrum has a monopoly.

An historically accurate understanding of Italy's fascist legacy also clarifies the political implications of Fini's recent visit to Israel. Fini, who came to Israel with a message of support for the Jewish state, is not an antisemite in disguise. Thus, his meeting with Sharon was not a path-breaking meeting between an antisemite and a Jew, but a congress of right-wing leaders, both with a penchant for brazen nationalism and neither with a convincing respect for democracy and human rights. Fini's diplomatic visit was based on the principle of support for Israel and the Jewish people. Thus, rather than giving a green light to antisemitism, the new Alliance will remind people, Jew and non-Jew alike, that certain forms of fascism are, indeed, kosher.

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