

Xander Klas

Prof. Gasper

HIST 490

10 December 2019

Fascism's Final Hour: Italian Agency in the Republic of Salò

Historians of the Republic of Salò have routinely characterized the final iteration of Italian Fascism as a dysfunctional, unpopular German puppet state with little leeway for independent decision-making. According to this view, the Fascist rump state served the interests of the occupying German army. In the prevailing historic narrative this government, called the Italian Social Republic¹ (RSI), and based in the Northern Italian town of Salò, existed only to legitimize and support Nazi occupation as auxiliaries to the German war effort.

Few writers have attempted to study this state in detail. Immediate postwar memory in Italy rejected the Fascist era as a subject of analysis entirely, while more recent work focuses on the early and middle periods of the Fascist regime. In most existing work on Salò, historians characterize the Republic's leaders as entirely reliant on German military support and beholden to the priorities of Nazi military authorities. This interpretation ignores the long participation of most Salò leaders in the Fascist state and party that existed before Mussolini's fall in 1943, as well as the limited autonomy they exercised in the Republic itself.

Correspondence from one of Salò's central figures contradicts the scholarly consensus on this period. In a series of letters to Mussolini written in mid-1944, Alessandro Pavolini explains

¹ *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* in Italian.

his concerns and objectives regarding the political situation in the RSI. Originally a journalist and writer from Florence's avant-garde circles, Pavolini worked as Secretary of the Florentine branch of the National Fascist Party in the late 1920s before joining parliament in the early 1930s.² After serving as President of the Fascist Confederation of Artists and Professionals beginning in 1934, Pavolini became Minister of Popular Culture in 1938, a post he held for seven years until Mussolini's fall from power in 1943.³ During Salò, Pavolini headed the reconstituted and renamed Republican Fascist Party⁴ (RPF), in addition to simultaneously commanding the Black Brigades, one of several paramilitaries organized by the Salò regime.⁵

Pavolini, one of several high-ranking Fascists in Mussolini's party when anti-Fascist partisans captured them, shared the dictator's summary execution and public display in 1945. His continued dedication to Fascism, even at a late stage, makes possible an examination of his perspective on Fascism's collapse and his efforts to rebuild it. While Pavolini's letters illustrate his difficulties administering the RSI with few resources and the restraints placed on the remaining Italian leadership by its reliance on Germany, they also show an ideologically committed Fascist exercising limited autonomy by pursuing actions independent from German objectives, creating new Fascist governing institutions, and dismantling remnants of the earlier government.

² I Nuovi Ministri dell'Italia, May 12 1939, sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 640, busta 102, Affari generali (I versamento) 1926-1944, Archivio generale (1926-1944), Gabinetto (1926-1945), Ministero della Cultura Popolare (1926-1945), Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Partito Repubblicana Fascista* in Italian.

⁵ Phillip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 170.; Newspaper clipping from *Corriere della Sera* titled "Pavolini Ferito in un'Azione contra i Ribelli," 13 August 1944, sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

In the early postwar era, Italian public discourse and scholarship on Fascism sought to ignore or explain it away as an unnatural and unpredictable phenomenon that momentarily afflicted Italy without any relationship to Italy's past. Representatives of Christian Democracy, the most prominent right-wing Catholic political movement in postwar Italy, condemned Fascism as an "intellectual and moral disease," an oppressive dictatorship that lacked any meaningful connection to Italian culture or history.⁶ Likewise, on the left, Marxist historians saw Fascism as the product of Italy's reactionary ruling classes enforcing a tyrannical system of domination.⁷ By arguing that Fascism arose out of an "international capitalist crisis"⁸ provoked by widespread socialist unrest in Europe after World War One, the Marxists placed the Fascist period in the context of continental class struggle while rejecting the existence of specifically Italian conditions that caused Mussolini's rise to power. Both major political factions of Republican Italy treated the Fascist era as a "historical negativity," a brief and inherently "un-Italian" time undeserving of serious analytical attention.⁹

Beginning in the early 1960s, historian Renzo de Felice challenged both interpretations and pushed for a reassessment of Fascism stripped of the interpretive frameworks endorsed by both sides of the political spectrum, claiming instead that Fascism belonged in the greater narrative of Italian history. In a multivolume biography of Mussolini, one of the first studies of Fascism in any form, he argued that Fascism was neither a historical anomaly nor a repressive totalitarian state, but a functioning system that governed with the general consent of the public

⁶ Emilio Gentile, "Fascism in Italian Historiography: In Search of an Individual Historical Identity," *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 2 (April 1986): 180, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260363>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Micheal A. Ledeen, "Renzo de Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 4 (October 1976): 272, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260199>.

⁹ Gentile, 180.

and drew on political traditions of both the left and right.¹⁰ This interpretation provoked widespread controversy in Italy, spearheaded by criticisms from Marxist historians, who claimed that de Felice relied too heavily on Fascist sources and granted personalities like Mussolini too much sympathy.¹¹ In their view, de Felice's attempt to escape the taboo on analyzing Fascism amounted to apologetics for the atrocities committed during the *ventennio* and undercut the Italian Republic's anti-Fascist consensus. As one leftist historian remarked in a newspaper review, "If Renzo de Felice set himself the goal of attempting a political rehabilitation of fascism [*sic*], he has achieved his goal perfectly."¹² Despite these criticisms, de Felice proved influential in promoting the study of Fascism as part of Italy's history.

While de Felice's work expanded the scope of research on the Fascist period, few writers looked at the continuation of Fascism after the fall of Mussolini's government or the armistice with the Allies. Most scholars end their histories of Fascism in 1943. Academic work on such diverse topics as military history and cultural history all exhibit this tendency.¹³ As a result, the dominant narrative of the Salò era continues to treat it as an "un-Italian" anomaly imposed by a foreign power. While de Felice and later historians placed Fascism between 1922 and 1943 into what became an accepted narrative of Italian history, the same has not been true for narratives of Fascism between 1943 and 1945.

Scholars have dismissed the Republic of Salò as an instrument of Nazi occupation in which Italian Fascists were at best willing puppets and at worst vanish from the historic

¹⁰ Borden W. Painter Jr, "Renzo de Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism," *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (April 1990): 393, doi: 10.2307/2163756.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 396.

¹² Ledeen, 274.

¹³ MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-1943* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

narrative. Both general histories on Italy and studies of the Fascist era present this argument. Anthony L. Cardoza, author of a recent history of modern Italy, articulates this viewpoint in his subchapter on the 1943-1945 period, writing “The Duce and the Social Republic were, from the outset, puppets of the Nazi regime, which continued to make all the critical decisions and to dictate policy within the areas of Italy under German control.”¹⁴ He treats the RSI as a subservient entity to Germany. This position propagates the postwar removal of Fascism after 1943 from mainstream Italian historical consciousness. According to this view, Italians became the victims of Nazi oppression like the rest of Europe. More in-depth work on Fascism shares a reductionist approach to Italian participation in the RSI. In a study of Mussolini and Hitler’s relationship stretching from 1922 to 1945, Christian Goeschel suggests that “Germany was intent on turning Italy into a complete vassal...” with Mussolini “serving as a figurehead for a Nazi satellite state” in order to assist Nazi officials “determined ruthlessly to milk the Italian economy and manpower for the German war effort.”¹⁵ Goeschel’s description places Mussolini and the rest of the RSI in the position of subaltern, stripping away their agency in the last stage of the war. While historians agree that Germany’s military and political leadership largely held this attitude towards Italy,¹⁶ they largely fail to incorporate the perspective and motivations of the Italian Fascists that supported the Republic of Salò. This enables a shifting of guilt for late Fascism’s atrocities onto foreign actors, removing the accountability of Italians in carrying out the regime’s acts of violence.

¹⁴ Anthony L. Cardoza, *A History of Modern Italy: Transformation and Continuity, 1796 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 225.

¹⁵ Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 255.; *Ibid*, 266.; *Ibid*, 263.

¹⁶ Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, trans. Peter Levy and David Broder (New York: Verso, 2013), 280.

A recent scholarly focus on the RSI has produced a more nuanced view of Italian Fascism after 1943 that acknowledges the extent of Nazi influence on the reborn Fascist state while also investigating the active role Italians took in running it. In Philip Morgan's analysis of the collapse of the Fascist government, he claims Mussolini "simply went along with the drift of events and decisions which were being determined and made by others... by the Germans."¹⁷ This mirrors the arguments about foreign domination put forward by other authors. However, Morgan also acknowledges the enthusiastic participation of rank and file Fascists, as well as experienced notables, in Salò's armed forces and bureaucracy, including figures like Pavolini and others motivated by a "lugubriously defiant patriotism"¹⁸ that regarded the RSI as Italy's legitimate government. Morgan therefore presents some Italian Fascists, excepting Mussolini, as willingly supporting Salò without Nazi coercion. Likewise, in a study of anti-Semitism in the RSI, Simon Levis Sullam argues that Italians actively furthered the Holocaust, in conjunction with the Germans, but also in independent actions. As he writes "through each decision, understanding, and action Italians became agents of and accomplices to the Holocaust."¹⁹ He places responsibility for the actions of the RSI upon the Italians who committed them, extending greater agency and culpability than in the narrative which defines Salò as a Nazi appendage. I will further this Italo-centric revision of the contemporary understanding of the RSI. In analyzing Pavolini's letters, I show his negotiation of the restrictions placed on Italian Fascist leadership with the objectives of the Salò regime.

¹⁷ Morgan, 168.

¹⁸ Ibid, 170.; Ibid, 178.

¹⁹ Simon Levis Sullam, *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy*, trans. Oona Smyth and Claudia Patane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 4.

This paper utilizes three letters written by Pavolini to Mussolini between June 18th and June 24th, 1944, found while doing summer research at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome. They range from two to six pages in length, though I will primarily analyze the latter two letters. While limited in temporal scope, these testify to Pavolini's private concerns, priorities, and objectives at that point in time. Because of his importance to the PRF and the Salò government, Pavolini's writing provides insight into the measures taken by the highest levels of Fascist leadership to prolong Salò's existence, suppress dissent, and reconstruct aspects of a state apparatus. Since they are neither public documents nor statements intended for propaganda, Pavolini was free to candidly address the regime's structural issues, weaknesses, and failings, as well as the necessary steps, in his view, to correct such problems. The letters cover a range of topics, from administrative reform to the defection of Fascists and civic officials to Pavolini's dealings with German officials. He detailed his relationship with Albert Kesselring, the German Field Marshall who commanded all German troops in Italy, often reporting the harmful impact of Nazi deprivations like the mass confiscation of Italian men for forced labor.²⁰ These complaints, a recurring motif in the letters, communicated Pavolini's concerns over Salò's unequal partnership with the German army. However, the letters also record his attempts to work with and around German initiatives to fulfill his own goals.

The letters suffer from limitations as sources, containing a single Fascist's thoughts over a short period of time. Mussolini's responses were not in the same file, so it is unclear if his thoughts differed from Pavolini's, and in what manner. Despite Pavolini's position as a military and administrative leader, his letters do not necessarily speak for the entire Fascist movement. Other leaders and supporters of Salò likely held different opinions on many topics, including

²⁰ Goeschel, 263.

Italian Fascism's relationship to Germany. The short timeframe of the letters also calls into question their relevance to the rest of the Salò period. Pavolini's thoughts may have changed in reaction to shifting circumstances, especially as the long-term survival of the RSI and the Axis in general became increasingly unlikely. This paper attempts to revise the absence of Italian participation in the Salò regime within much of the extant historical literature, illustrating instead the independent decisions made by Fascist leaders during the period.

Italian Fascists were the junior partners in the Axis alliance, but they remained willing partners rather than servants. This paper's use of terms like "agency," "autonomy," or "independence" does not imply that Italian Fascists exercised absolute freedom from German demands. Mussolini and the Fascists of Salò were not the superior party in the relationship, and the German military undeniably exerted extensive control over the RSI's military and internal affairs.²¹ This paper will show that Pavolini often planned around German actions, instead of the other way around. However, Italian Fascists also convinced the German leaders to change their policies on several occasions. Despite this, the current prevailing narrative portrays Italians as passive victims overshadowed by their more visible German masters. And while the Salò regime relied upon its alliance with the German military and government, their relationship featured more conflict, tension, and negotiation than the prevailing narrative would allow.

The RSI was founded during a period of political and military confusion. By early 1943, Fascism had fallen out of favor with most Italians. The war worsened living conditions across Italy.²² Allied planes flew their first bombing runs over Italian cities in 1940, which increased in frequency and intensity over the next three years.²³ Damage to infrastructure, housing, and

²¹ Pavone, 280.

²² Morgan, 77.

²³ Ibid, 74.

industry exacerbated problems like “evacuation, food shortages, even-higher food prices, reduced rations,”²⁴ which most Italians blamed on Mussolini and the Fascist state.²⁵ Repeated military failures undercut Fascism’s popularity. After defeating Axis armies in North Africa, Allied armies invaded the island of Sicily on July 9th, 1943, the latest and most threatening in a series of embarrassing Italian losses.²⁶ In response to the state’s declining public support and the impending invasion of mainland Italy, the Fascist Grand Council, the body composed of state and party leaders which Mussolini founded in 1922 “to discuss all major matters of Fascist Party and government policy,”²⁷ met on July 25th and dismissed Mussolini as head of government.²⁸ Military police subsequently arrested and imprisoned him.²⁹ King Victor Emmanuel II appointed Pietro Badoglio, a general, to lead the government.³⁰ Despite the change in leadership, Italy did not immediately leave the Axis or make peace with the Allies.

The events surrounding Mussolini’s fall produced a crisis in national identity and cohesion. The new government, supported by the monarchy and a coalition of moderate anti-Fascist parties, abolished Fascist institutions like the Fascist party and Grand Council of Fascism, presenting itself as the continuation of Italy’s pre-Fascist liberal governments.³¹ Dominated by conservatives, many of whom had worked with Fascists over the past 20 years, it claimed the allegiance of the military and civil service while pursuing a publicly ambivalent and unclear policy regarding the war itself.³² While Badoglio opened secret peace negotiations with

²⁴ Ibid, 77.

²⁵ Cardoza, 221.

²⁶ Goeschel, 244.

²⁷ Morgan, 12.

²⁸ Cardoza, 167; Morgan, 11.

²⁹ Morgan, 11.

³⁰ Cardoza, 223.

³¹ Morgan, 160.

³² Ibid, 87-88.

the Allies, German troops flooded into Italy in anticipation of the new government's foreign policy about face.³³ When Badoglio announced an armistice on September 8th, the German army had already surrounded Rome and quickly occupied most of the country.³⁴ The Allies had landed in southern Italy on September 3rd, and the new government's senior personnel, along with the royal family, fled Rome on the 9th.³⁵ According to historian Victoria C. Belco, they provided no "guidance, plans or leadership for the thousands of Italian troops or for the rest of the population."³⁶ Badoglio and other leaders never specified if the army should fight the Germans or surrender to them. In this confusion, many soldiers deserted or turned to banditry.³⁷ The Badoglio government's delayed and ambiguous approach to changing sides did little to repress Fascism as a political movement or discourage extreme Fascists from taking up arms against the monarchy.

The muddled military and political situation allowed Italian Fascists to regroup and reorganize. German authorities disarmed and interned some units caught in northern Italy or Italian occupied territories, while other formations joined the Germans and would later become part of the RSI's armed forces, while other units decided to resist the Nazis, either as part of the Badoglio government's army or through joining local partisan movements.³⁸ As Italy's administration and military crumbled, Nazi special forces broke Mussolini out of prison on September 12th.³⁹ On the 18th Mussolini proclaimed the formation of a new Fascist state, which

³³ Ibid, 87.

³⁴ Ibid, 95.

³⁵ Goeschel, 258.

³⁶ Victoria C. Belco, *War, Massacre, and Recovery in Central Italy 1943-1948* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 43.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Morgan, 107.

³⁹ Goeschel, 264.

would govern the parts of Italy still controlled by the Axis.⁴⁰ In the autumn of 1943, Fascists opposed to the Badoglio regime, including Pavolini, concentrated in the north and formed the core of the RSI's military and bureaucracy.⁴¹ In this environment of civil conflict and ideological confusion, Mussolini's new Republic of Salò competed with the southern government for Italians' allegiance.

Italian Fascists conceptualized the Salò government as a means of rebirth and redemption for Italy, which in their eyes had been morally corrupted by the armistice and the kingdom of the south. One historian, Claudio Pavone, illustrates this belief using the text of a Fascist poster hung up around Milan, which depicted an RSI soldier proclaiming "The tragedy of Italy will perhaps be worth my blood. I am fighting with the impetus of my faith. Let it gush forth without parallel, without reprisals, and without vendetta. Only in this way will it be dearer and more fecund for my *patria*."⁴² This shows how Salò's Fascists conceptualized their violence as a way to spiritually purify and politically unite the Italian nation. Propaganda from the RSI depicted Badoglio's armistice as a betrayal of both Italy's allies and national honor.⁴³ The new Republican Fascists of Salò sought to redeem the nation from this act of treachery and return to Fascism's original *squadristo*, the practice of widespread, decentralized violence against political enemies.⁴⁴ Pavone quotes from a memo circulated by Pavolini soon after the creation of the RSI in September 1943, in which he declared "As of this moment all Fascists are to consider themselves in a state of emergency for the struggle against the activity of the rebels and for the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 266.

⁴¹ Cardoza, 226.

⁴² Pavone, 512.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Pavone, 285.; Cardoza, 159.

defense of their own families.”⁴⁵ This statement both declared Salò’s claim to be the sole legitimate national government and stressed the return to widespread, decentralized violence.

Fascist leaders saw the war against the allies and the Badoglio government as an opportunity to avenge Italy’s betrayal and install a purer, more true Fascism free of compromise with the monarchy. During the radio broadcast in which Mussolini announced the formation of the RSI, he described the new government as the heir to Mazzini’s republicanism, called for the death of traitors, and claimed that Italians could only rectify the nation’s betrayal of its German ally by defeating Badoglio and the monarchy.⁴⁶ Mussolini extolled the “renewed fighting will”⁴⁷ of Republican Fascism in letters to Pavolini, while prominent newspapers ran articles discussing how Pavolini “passed from command of the party to command of the Black Brigades,”⁴⁸ exchanging his administrative position for direct participation in paramilitary violence. The new state also renounced any connection to the monarchy. Fascist officials dictated the removal of all pictures of the King from public buildings and crossed out the word “royal” on official stationery.⁴⁹ This rejection of Fascism’s past alliance with traditional conservatism accentuated the RSI’s violent, revolutionary rhetoric, depicting the war as a struggle to establish a truly Fascist state without the compromises that weakened Mussolini’s first dictatorship.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Pavone, 287.

⁴⁶ Goeschel, 267.

⁴⁷ *Rinnovata volontà di combattimento* - Mussolini to Pavolini, 13 August 1944, sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.; Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁴⁸ *È passato dal comando del Partito al comando della Brigata nera.* - Newspaper clipping from *Corriere della Sera* titled “Pavolini Ferito in un’Azione contra i Ribelli.”

⁴⁹ Belco, 46.

⁵⁰ Morgan, 170.

The German occupation of Italy, which coincided with the existence of the RSI, was characterized by a proliferation of paramilitary and extrajudicial violence. German popular opinion distrusted Italians as twice treacherous, once in the First World War and again in the coup against Mussolini.⁵¹ Racialized Nazi propaganda castigated Italians as a “people of gypsies.”⁵² The German military in Italy shared these prejudices, viewing Italy as an occupied nation and pursuing a strategy of organized attacks on civilians.⁵³ The German armed forces and Italian Fascists killed 12,000-15,000 Italian civilians during the occupation, treating them as a hostile population supporting the partisans and traitors to the nation respectively.⁵⁴ The Nazis deported Italian men to Germany as a source of forced labor, often forcibly abducting them from streets for work in Germany or elsewhere in occupied Europe. The Nazi measures were so punitive they prompted a complaint from Mussolini, who argued that the “excesses were driving those Italians who had previously adhered to the German cause to join the partisans.”⁵⁵ Here and elsewhere, the violent methods adopted by the occupation army provoked conflict with their Italian allies.

Tension and mistrust characterized the relationship between Germans and Italian Fascists in Italy, in which German officials often expressed their lack of faith in the Republic of Salò’s ability to function independently. Almost half a year before Pavolini’s 1944 letters, only two months after the chaotic events which founded the RSI, he met with the German Ambassador to Italy. In correspondence with Mussolini, Pavolini reported that “the ‘crisis of faith’ manifested in the recent past on the German part about some aspects of our government activity are rather

⁵¹ Goeschel, 256.

⁵² Ibid, 261.

⁵³ Paolo Pezzino, *Memory and Massacre: Revisiting Sant’Anna di Stazzema*, trans. Noor Giovanni Mazhar, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 5.

acute.”⁵⁶ German officials openly doubted Italian Fascists’ ability to run a functioning state.

Neither the Germans nor Italians harbored any doubts about the strained nature of their relationship.

Just as German diplomats expressed their misgivings with Italian civilian administration, German military leaders disparaged Italian soldiers. In a letter written on the 19th of June of 1944, Pavolini reported the German army’s dissatisfaction with Fascist military discipline. Rome fell to the Allies on June 4th, and fighting had reached southern Tuscany by the time of Pavolini’s letters.⁵⁷ The commander of German forces in Italy, Albert Kesselring, complained to Pavolini about the performance of Italian troops on the island of Elba, off the Tuscan coast. According to Pavolini, Kesselring felt “shocked and upset by the defection of the Italian battalion stationed on the island of Elba which went over to the enemy.”⁵⁸ While defection and desertion were recurring problems in the RSI’s armed forces and bureaucracy, as Pavolini attested in an earlier letter,⁵⁹ Kesselring’s response suggests a lack of confidence in the Salò regime’s ability to maintain military discipline. This led him to “particularly insist on the idea that our forces of public order... are formed by groups restricted in number, provided they are absolutely

⁵⁶ *La ‘crisi di fiducia’ manifestatasi negli ultimi tempi da parte germanica circa alcuni aspetti della nostra attività governativa si è piuttosto acuita.* - Pavolini to Mussolini, 30 November 1943, sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

⁵⁷ Goeschel, 280.

⁵⁸ *Impressionato ed addolorato per la defezione del battaglione italiano stanziato nell’isola d’Elbe e passato al nemico.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 19 June 1944, sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

⁵⁹ Pavolini to Mussolini, 18 June 1944, sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

faithful.”⁶⁰ In response to the RSI’s failure to preserve the discipline of its armed forces, Kesselring demanded that the Italian leadership examine its ranks for signs of disloyalty.

Mistrust of Italians dictated many of Kesselring’s strategic decisions, which were calculated to subordinate Italian forces to German control. In this area, at least, the Salò government could not exercise total autonomy. The new Fascist paramilitary groups advocated by Kesselring would work “in direct cooperation with the German armed forces in anti-rebel operations and in the cleanup of rear areas.”⁶¹ Such an arrangement implied a great degree of German influence over the RSI’s armed forces, while relegating the Salò military to a subsidiary role supporting German formations. Instead of relying upon the Italians for frontline fighting, Kesselring apparently hoped to employ a smaller number of friendly units to combat partisan activity and police vulnerable areas within the RSI’s jurisdiction. On June 17th 1944, two days prior to Pavolini’s letter, Kesselring issued new guidelines for anti-partisan operations which included “a guarantee of immunity for those commanders who adopted excessive methods,”⁶² granting approval to the escalation of attacks on civilians and suspected partisan sympathizers. Italian historian Paolo Pezzino refers to an “obvious punitive intent towards a population described as untrustworthy and treacherous”⁶³ that motivated German attitudes in the Salò period, and it seems that Kesselring was content to reduce Italy to the status of an occupied country. In combination with the restrictions on Fascist military organization, Kesselring’s willingness to ignore violence against the civilians of an ostensibly allied country reveals a

⁶⁰ *Ha particolarmente insistito sul concetto che le nostre forze di ordine pubblico e di eventuale ultimo sgombero siano formate da nuclei anche ristretti di numero, purchè assolutamente fedeli.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 19 June 1944.

⁶¹ *Di cooperazione diretta con le forze armate germaniche nelle operazioni di antiribellismo e di ripulitura di retrovie.* - Ibid.

⁶² Pezzino, 4.

⁶³ Ibid, 3.

disdain for Italians that worsened his relationship with Fascists like Pavolini. However, though Kesselring tried to reduce the role of Salò's military to supporting German operations, Pavolini evaded many of his restrictions on Italian military activity.

Despite Kesselring's instructions, Pavolini expanded the RSI's paramilitary groups to avoid the German leader's restrictions, displaying independent initiative in managing the RSI's war effort. Despite the German generals' desire to maneuver Italian military resources into serving German strategic aims, Pavolini planned independent operations. After outlining German intentions for the organization of Italian forces, Pavolini told Mussolini of his idea to use Fascist sympathizers as guerillas in the territory controlled by the southern government. He describes the "organization of activist groups [intended] to leave their positions or eventually to spread out throughout the south"⁶⁴ as already underway in Terni, Arezzo, Grosseto, Florence, Livorno, and Pisa, Tuscany's major cities.⁶⁵ Kesselring's strategy for making Italians into rear security forces did not include this transformation of Tuscan Fascists into guerilla cells. According to Pavone, records from the Resistance and the Allied armies reported clashes with clandestine Fascist groups in Tuscany's cities and countryside following their liberation.⁶⁶ While these attacks did not inflict serious damage on Resistance bands or Allied occupation forces, they show that Italian Fascists independently planned and carried out military operations outside of the support actions permitted by Kesselring. Such a strategy evaded the German restrictions on independent Fascist operations and maintained Salò's agency over a portion of the war effort.

⁶⁴ *Organizzazione dei gruppi attivisti da lasciare sul posto o eventualmente da irradiare a sud.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 19 June 1944.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Pavone, 288-289.

Pavolini complained about German actions, showing some ability to criticize his allies. The tension between the German authorities and the Italian leadership emerged later in the June 19th letter over the confiscation of Italian men for forced labor. A unilateral German roundup of railway workers in Florence “caused a general stampede and a widespread panic, with the consequence that absenteeism is feared in many offices for tomorrow and that the city has assumed a semi-deserted and dead aspect.”⁶⁷ These labor confiscations prompted great difficulty on the Italian part, bringing Florence to a halt. Pavolini briefly mentioned other, similar operations carried out on public streets to abduct younger Italian men indiscriminately.⁶⁸ Pavolini alluded to “the obvious inconveniences that this entails,”⁶⁹ expressing frustration with the unilateral roundup, performed without Italian troops. While the Germans were not concerned by their actions’ impact on public opinion, Salò leaders like Pavolini had to shift their priorities into mitigating their ill effects.

Pavolini’s cautious reaction to the atmosphere of fear in Florence reveals his preoccupation with maintaining the RSI’s base of support among the Italian citizenry. The situation in Florence affected Pavolini’s short term plans, as he told Mussolini “Unless you order differently, I believe it appropriate and also necessary to continue to live here... an eventual departure would be interpreted as a sign and would cause confusion.”⁷⁰ Because the Germans pressed workers and men on the street into forced labor, Pavolini choose to remain in Florence to avoid producing a general panic. Despite the actions of foreign forces, Pavolini’s priority was to

⁶⁷ *Ha causato un fuggi fuggi general e panico diffuso, con la conseguenza che si teme per domani la mancata presentazione al lavoro in molti uffici e che la città ha assunto un aspetto semi deserto e mortificato.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 19 June 1944.

⁶⁸ *Allo stesso fine sono stati operati anche rastrellamenti di elementi meno anziani sulle pubbliche vie.* – Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Gli ovvi inconvenienti che ciò comporta.* – Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Salvo Vostro diverso ordine, credo opportuno e anzi necessario continuare a trattenermi qui... una eventuale partenza verrebbe interpretata come sintomo e causerebbe sbandamento.* – Ibid.

restore public order. He noted that “in the case that in the near future the situation at the front is definitely improved, I would leave.”⁷¹ Within this sphere of civic administration, Pavolini retained the authority to decide upon his own actions. While he lacked the ability to block or prevent the Germans from conscripting Italians for labor duty, he nevertheless attempted to mitigate their ill effects and retain Fascist control over the populace. Despite his subservient position relative to the Nazi military leaders, he utilized what autonomy he possessed in order to better react to German initiatives which he saw as contrary to Fascist goals.

Much as he courted public opinion that would lend legitimacy and aid the RSI’s survival, Pavolini attempted to build institutions that would provide longevity to the new Fascist state. In the letter, he described the creation of a new set of logistical regulations. He tells Mussolini that “a permit regime for motor vehicles is obtained that seems to finally guarantee the minimum amount necessary for traffic, reinforcement, and the evacuation.”⁷² Since he implies that the absence of logistical regulations had impeded the RSI’s ability to transport military material and circulate troops, the implementation of such rules improved Salò’s military capabilities, strengthening their capacity to carry out independent operations without relying on the German military. This suggests that Pavolini believed that Republic of Salò would be permanent and autonomous, requiring its own system of internal transportation. Additionally, the reorganization of the Republican motor pool provided a means of moving personnel, supplies, and communications outside of Nazi oversight. This created a parallel logistical system, positioning Italian Fascists as equal allies as opposed to lower ranked ancillaries. Instead of acting primarily

⁷¹*Nel caso che nei prossimi giorni la situazione al fronte si rafforzi definitivamente, potrei partire. – Ibid.*

⁷²*Si è ottenuto un regime di permessi per gli automezzi, che sembra finalmente garantire il minimo indispensabile per la circolazione, il rifornimento, e la evacuazione. – Ibid.*

to facilitate German occupation and exploitation of Northern Italy, Pavolini hoped to reconstruct a lasting, independent Fascist state with its own internally managed institutions.

Changes in German policy followed Pavolini's complaints, showing that Italians possessed some capability to affect German decisions. In a letter dated to June 24th, he optimistically noted "The situation in Florence is completely calm and dominated by us. Our German comrades have desisted from roundups of citizens."⁷³ In contrast to the disruption caused by the German deportations, ending the threat of abduction produced public tranquility. It is unclear if a request from Pavolini, Mussolini, or another Italian official prompted this change, though Mussolini's protests about the negative effect of German occupation policy convinced Kesselring to alter his orders regarding the treatment of Italy's civilian population on at least one other occasion.⁷⁴ Regardless, the benefits of abandoning roundups prompted Pavolini to consider the end of other wartime measures. He wrote "I hope also to be able to abrogate the order that blocked all private telephones, causing maybe a disturbance to enemy clandestine action, but certainly paralyzing our own movements in a noticeable way."⁷⁵ Much like his complaints on the German roundups in the June 19th letter, Pavolini presented the ban on private phones as a hinderance to public order and the Fascist government. While the Germans saw Italians as unreliable and incompetent, Pavolini argued that German interference damaged Salò's administrative abilities.

⁷³ *A Firenze la situazione è complessivamente tranquilla e da noi dominata. I camerati germanici hanno desistito dai rastrellamenti di cittadini.* - Pavolini to Mussolini, 24 June 1944, sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62, RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato.

⁷⁴ Pezzino, 5.

⁷⁵ *Spero anche di poter far abrogare la disposizione che ha bloccato tutti i telefoni di privati, causando forse disturb all'azione clandestina avversaria, ma certamente paralizzando in modo notevole i nostri propri movimenti.* - Pavolini to Mussolini, 24 June 1944.

Pavolini emphasized the role of the Italian armed forces in resisting an Allied advance, stressing their independence from the commands of the German military. While in accordance with Kesselring's orders to keep Italian troops off the frontline, much of the fighting was "a nearly totally German military situation now," Pavolini insisted that "actually the head of the province, the federal officer, the mayor of Livorno, all their collaborators and the armed Fascists dug in on the coast at the Italo-German anti-air batteries, and will be retired only at the last moment."⁷⁶ Even though the German command removed Italian troops from the front on the basis of their suspected disloyalty, Pavolini stressed the continued participation of Fascist troops and officers in the war with the Allies. This both displayed their importance to the Axis defense of Tuscany and their ability to autonomously perform successful military actions, which went against Kesselring's orders.

Pavolini directed violence against perceived traitors as firmly as he praised loyalty, exercising Salò's ability to police itself internally. He detailed violent reprisals against anti-Fascist partisans. In one case, he reported to Mussolini that "Our killing of five enemy elements found with weapons responded to the killing of a Fascist in a neighborhood of the city,"⁷⁷ an act of reprisal that reflected the Fascist belief in redeeming Italy's earlier betrayals through violence. Just as the bravery of Fascist forces demonstrated both their worth to their German allies and their own capacity for functional independent action, Pavolini's retaliation against the Italian Resistance displayed the Salò regime's ability to police its own streets as well as a rejection of outside intervention in its suppression of domestic enemies.

⁷⁶ *Una situazione ormai quasi totalmente militare germanica.* – Ibid.; *Attualmente il Capo della provincia, il Federale, il Podestà di Livorno, tutti i collaboratori e i fascisti armati sono arroccati sulla costa presso le batterie contraeree italo-germaniche, e si ritireranno soltanto all'ultimo momento.* – Ibid.

⁷⁷ *All'uccisione di un fascista in un rione della città ha risposto l'uccisione di 5 elementi avversari trovati con armi.* – Ibid.

As part of the RSI's efforts to ensure loyalty and return to the idealized, decentralized *squadristo* of early Fascism, Pavolini dismantled the civic and legal institutions inherited from the Kingdom of Italy and replaced them with new Fascist organizations. Most of the functionaries, institutions, and organizations of the earlier Fascist period survived both Badoglio's rise to power and the beginning of the occupation.⁷⁸ With little time to create alternative governing institutions, the RSI ruled through the same administrative bodies as the preceding regimes out of necessity. However, Pavolini detailed his efforts to abolish the remnants of the old government and install new Fascist organs in their place. In response to the desertion of a chief of police in Lucca, the Fascists disarmed 400 policemen and distributed their weapons "between the action squads and the GNR,"⁷⁹ or *Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana*, a Fascist paramilitary controlled by the Salò regime.⁸⁰ They placed the armaments at the "disposal of the *Capo della provincia*."⁸¹ In this way, older administrative entities associated with the era of Fascism's co-existence with the monarchy and state surrendered their resources to the newer institutions of the Republican Fascist Party, under the oversight of the *Capo della provincia*, an explicitly Fascist office that replaced royal prefects as province level leaders.⁸² Previous desertions of local police may have also motivated Pavolini's desire to replace them with more reliably loyal Fascists.⁸³ Pavolini planned to abolish the rest of Florence's police as well. In the same letter, he said that "The disarmament of the remaining group of police officers (about 80) is decided upon. I am rounding up ... all the available armament in Tuscany for immediate transfer

⁷⁸ Belco, 46.

⁷⁹ *Tra le squadre d'azione e la G.N.R.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 24 June 1944.

⁸⁰ Morgan, 165.

⁸¹ *A disposizione del Capo della provincia.* - Pavolini to Mussolini, 24 June 1944.

⁸² Belco, 46.

⁸³ *Il fenomeno preliminare è stato quello, come sempre, dello squagliamento dei carabinieri.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 18 June 1944.

to the north and to arm the squads.”⁸⁴ Pavolini worked to rejuvenate Italian Fascism’s revolutionary spirit and liquidate the groups with which the earlier Fascist state had compromised. This turn to paramilitary extremism also evaded Kesselring’s restrictions on the Republican army, simultaneously strengthening the Fascists’ military capabilities and fulfilling their ideological goals.

Outside of the military sphere, the Fascists of Salò also retained control over Italy’s cultural artifacts. According to the letter, Florence contained not only the “works of art of the Florentine galleries,” but also an unspecified number of works “amassed in Florence from Tuscany, from Lazio, and Umbria – a treasure worth billions and billions.”⁸⁵ While Pavolini did not explain how these artworks arrived in Florence, Fascist officials or sympathizers may have moved them to the relative safety of Florence in the chaos that followed the 1943 armistice or later in 1944 as the Allies approached from the south. Regardless of the exact date at which the art moved to Florence, this suggests that the Fascists, including Pavolini, saw the ownership of Italy’s cultural patrimony as the exclusive right of the Fascist state, not Germany or the kingdom of the south. Despite the danger of invasion, Pavolini planned to leave the art with a Cardinal-Archbishop Dalla Costa during the eventual evacuation, in the hope that the Church would protect it from confiscation in a hypothetical postwar settlement.⁸⁶ This would serve Salò’s

⁸⁴ *Si è inoltre deciso il disarmo del residuo nucleo di carabinieri (circa 80). Sto rastrellando... tutto l’armamento disponibile in Toscana, per subito trasferirlo al nord e armare le squadre.* – Pavolini to Mussolini, 24 June 1944.

⁸⁵ *Opere d’arte delle Gallerie fiorentine* – Ibid.; *Amassate a Firenze dalla Toscana, dal Lazio, e dall’Umbria – un tesoro di miliardi e miliardi.* – Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Possa far presente all’altra parte come la decisione italiana di lasciare tutte le opere d’arte a Firenze costituisca un omaggio ai diritti inalienabili e secolari di questa città... Ciò autorizza a pretendere un eguale rispetto e un eguale riconoscimento per parte degli invasori.* – Ibid.; *L’intervento nel questo senso del Cardinale Arcivescovo ed eventualmente del Vaticano contribuisca ad evitare una iniziativa anglo-americana di rivalersi sui tesori artistici fiorentini in conto pagamento danni di guerra.* – Ibid.

objectives by denying the southern government custody of culturally important art objects while simultaneously preventing their seizure by the Germans or Allied Powers.

Pavolini's treatment of Florence's artistic treasures excluded the Germans completely, so that Italian Fascists made all decisions regarding the Florentine art collections. Pavolini chose to leave the art in Florence after consulting only with Italian officials, including the Minister of National Education, a Florentine professor named Anti, Mussolini, and Dalla Costa.⁸⁷ This implicitly suggests that the Germans had no authority over Italian cultural objects. In addition to foregoing any German input, Pavolini's idea for dealing with the Florentine art collections also explicitly protected them from German seizure. As Pavolini told Mussolini, "There the initiative was able to be justified as an attempt to protect them [the artworks] against Anglo-American bombardment, while here it is almost only a matter of protection against German requisitions."⁸⁸ While Pavolini presented the idea as a means of defending Florence's collections of art from enemy attack, he also admitted that the more present danger was seizure by Salò's allies. The Fascists deliberately orchestrated the handover of art to deny the Nazis any chance of acquiring the objects for themselves. Instead of surrendering Italy's cultural wealth to Germany, Pavolini attempted to avoid such deprivations by utilizing his own agency in this area.

Pavolini's letters show the extent to which necessity and negotiation defined the RSI's relationship to its Nazi partners. While the reality of the political situation sometimes compelled Pavolini to comply with the demands of his German allies, he nevertheless tried to act as autonomously as possible. While historians have discredited the postwar narrative that placed Fascism outside the wider trends and processes of Italian history, their treatment of Salò, until

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Là l'iniziativa poteva essere giustificata da un tentativo di proteggersi contro i mitragliamenti anglo-americani, mentre qui si tratta quasi soltanto di protezione contro le requisizioni germaniche.* – Ibid.

very recently, remained tied to the motifs of outside domination and foreign intervention.

Despite the perception of the RSI as a product of German occupation, the example of Fascists like Alessandro Pavolini speaks to the need for a historical reappraisal of Italy's Fascist past, especially in its last incarnation in the Republic of Salò. With contemporary Italian politics witnessing the resurgence of far-right parties which seek to rehabilitate the memory of Fascism, interrogating the Italian support for Fascism at all stages of its historical development is critical for understanding its continuing influence on modern events.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

I Nuovi Ministri dell'Italia. 12 May 1939. sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 640, busta 102. Affari generali (I versamento) 1926-1944, Archivio generale (1926-1944), Gabinetto (1926-1945), Ministero della Cultura Popolare (1926-1945), Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Mussolini to Pavolini, 13 August 1944. sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Newspaper clipping from *Corriere della Sera* titled "*Pavolini Ferito in un'Azione contra i Ribelli.*" 13 August 1944. sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Pavolini to Mussolini. 30 November 1943. sottofascicolo 1, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Pavolini to Mussolini. 18 June 1944. sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Pavolini to Mussolini. 19 June 1944. sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Pavolini to Mussolini. 24 June 1944. sottofascicolo 2, fascicolo 631, busta 62. RSI Carteggio riservato 1943-1945, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Italy.

Secondary Sources

Belco, Victoria C. *War, Massacre, and Recovery in Central Italy 1943-1948*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

Cardoza, Anthony L. *A History of Modern Italy: Transformation and Continuity, 1796 to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Gentile, Emilio. "Fascism in Italian Historiography: In Search of an Individual Historical Identity." *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 2 (April 1986): 178-208.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/260363>.

Goeschel, Christian. *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Knox, MacGregor. *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of*

1940-1943. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Ledeen, Micheal A. "Renzo de Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 4 (October 1976): 269-283.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/260199>.

Morgan, Phillip. *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Painter Jr., Borden W. "Renzo de Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism." *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (April 1990): 391-405. doi: 10.2307/2163756.

Pavone, Claudio. *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*. Translated by Peter Levy and David Broder. New York: Verso, 2013.

Pezzino, Paolo. *Memory and Massacre: Revisiting Sant'Anna di Stazzema*. Translated by Noor Giovanni Mazhar, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Sullam, Simon Levis. *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy*. Translated by Oona Smyth and Claudia Patane. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.