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## Paramilitary Violence and Fascism: Imaginaries and Practices of Squadristo, 1919–1925

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This article examines the violent imaginaries and practices of *squadristo* in the period preceding the establishment of the Italian fascist dictatorship. Based on the examination of newly accessible documentary sources at provincial state archives, the article sheds light upon the ways in which *squadristi* imagined, performed, justified and ascribed meanings to their violent actions and the disintegrative impact of violence on local communities. The article concludes with a reflection on Blackshirt violence in the aftermath of the March on Rome and the persistence of the ideological and cultural fabric of *squadristo* in the years of the dictatorship.

In early 1921 fascist paramilitary squads in Italy embarked on a ferocious campaign of destruction, violence and brutality that sent large areas of the country into states of disarray and confusion. Starting in the Lower Po Valley the offensive convulsively spread around the northern and central regions and then down the peninsula and the islands, radiating into the tablelands of Apulia and the coastal Sicilian provinces of Syracuse and Ragusa. The relentless nature and appalling toll of destructive raids against and beatings and murders of socialists and communists played a decisive role in Benito Mussolini's rise to power and his consolidation of the dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> Although violence has been credited as being central to the formation and development of the fascist movement, historians have been reluctant to examine *squadristi* violence in both its historical depth and its cultural specificity, the meanings that informed its actualisation and interpretation, as well as the ways in which violence dissolved and reconfigured communities' material and experiential contexts. All too frequently studies on the rise of fascism have treated violence as the surface expression of political and socio-economic matters. As a result, the study of violence has often been reduced to an identification of its causes rather than an analysis of violence itself, and thus the experiential and physical realities of violence have been disregarded altogether or not taken into consideration properly.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For contemporary accounts on violence see, in particular, Giacomo Matteotti, *Scritti e Discorsi* (Parma: Guanda, 1974); Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918–1922* (New York: H. Fertig, 1966) (French original edition, 1938); *Fascismo. Inchiesta Socialista sulle gesta dei Fascisti in Italia* (Milano: Società Editrice L'Avanti, 1921); Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul Fascismo*, Vol. 1 (Milano: Feltrinelli 1963); Pietro Nenni, *Sei anni di guerra civile* (Paris: Cecconi, 1929); Emilio Lussu, *Marcia su Roma e dintorni* (Paris: Casa Editrice 'Critica', 1933). From the fascist side, Giorgio Alberto Chiurco, *Storia della rivoluzione fascista*, 5 vols (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1929); *Barbarie Rossa. Riassunto cronologico delle gesta compiute dai socialisti italiani dal 1919 in poi*, edited by the Comitato Centrale dei Fasci Italiani di Combattimento (Rome, 1921).

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the interpretation of *squadristo* as a mere phenomenon of anti-proletarian reaction, see Adrian Lyttelton, 'Fascism and Violence in Postwar Italy: Political Strategy and Social Conflict' and Jens Petersen, 'Violence in Italian Fascism, 1919–1925', both in Wolfgang F. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirshfeld, eds., *Social Protest, Violence and Terror in 19th and 20th Century Europe* (New York: Springer 1982); Paolo Nello, 'La violenza fascista ovvero dello squadristo nazionalrivoluzionario', *Storia Contemporanea*, XIII, 6 (1982), 1009–25.

In recent times a small but growing field of studies has emerged which explores the role of violence within the fascist organisation and decodes the pervasiveness of terror, fear and despair in the everyday life of fascist Italy.<sup>3</sup> Taking a closer look at the normative (or intra-group) and institutional configurations of violence, scholars have discerned the value-system of the *squadristi* and their ritualised forms of destruction and collective physical aggression as well as the persistence of their worldviews, morals and codes of conduct in the regime. While building on this flourishing scholarship, this article takes a new direction, by explicitly focusing on the phenomenological and performative aspects of fascist paramilitary violence – that is to say the analysis of the processes through which violence was produced, consumed, experienced and retrospectively construed by all the actors involved (perpetrators, victims and bystanders).<sup>4</sup> In doing so, the focus lies upon the social dynamics of violent performances and, in particular, the ways in which staged experiences of bodily transgression and memories of pain, torment, loss and foreboding came to be inscribed in the everyday reality of victims, ordinary people and communities. The scale and intensity of suffering inflicted and its deforming effects on social structures and the collective imagination are thus of interest here.

Another important way in which this work differs from previous treatments is the primacy it ascribes to the physicality of violent interactions. The detailed description of the techniques of violence aims to deconstruct the symbolic schemes and the imaginary of *squadrismo*. The task is to shed light on the cultural valence of practices of bodily violation, mutilation and degradation.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, this work aims to illustrate how the unremitting engagement of violence shaped *squadristi*'s cognitive picture of the world and produced a way of life which persisted and perpetuated itself in the regime.<sup>6</sup>

In order to reconstruct the organisation, logistics and multifaceted forms of violence, this article is divided into four thematic parts. The first part explores the syntax and cultural construction of *squadristi* violence, focusing on its specific manifestations and the way it became stylised and mythically constructed in its perpetration. This section also examines the impact of violence on social institutions,

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Emilio Gentile, *Storia del Partito Fascista. Movimento e Milizia* (Roma-Bari, 1989); Id. *E fu subito regime. Il Fascismo e la Marcia su Roma*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012); Sven Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune. Milizie fasciste in Italia e Germania* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009) Orig. ed. *Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA* (Köln-Weimar: Bohlaus Verlag, 2002); Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi. Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista 1919–1922* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004); Matteo Millan, *Squadrismo e squadristi nella dittatura fascista* (Roma: Viella, 2014); Ibid. 'The Origins', in Joshua Arthurs and Michael Ebner, eds., *The Politics of Everyday Life in Fascist Italy: Outside the State?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 19–49; Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23–47; Giulia Albanese, *La Marcia su Roma* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006); Fabio Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile: l'Italia dalla grande guerra al fascismo (1918–1921)* (Torino: UTET, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Since the late 1990s and early 2000s phenomenological violence research has started criticising traditional sociological approaches to violence, contending that they offer a 'sociology of its causes' rather than a 'sociology of violence as such'. From this standpoint, scholars like Trutz Von Throtha, Birgitta Nedelmann and Wolfgang Sofsky have insisted on the 'thick descriptions' of the forms and many dimensions of violent experience in order to correct this analytical deficit. On the phenomenological approach to violence, see Trutz von Trotha, 'Soziologie der Gewalt', in Trutz von Trotha, ed., *Soziologie der Gewalt* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997); Birgitta Nedelmann, 'Gewaltsoziologie am Scheideweg: Die Auseinandersetzung in der gegenwärtigen und Wege der künftigen Gewaltforschung', in *Soziologie der Gewalt*, 59–85; Wolfgang Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996). For an application of phenomenological theories to historical research on violence, see Wolfgang Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> In the reconstruction of violent acts, this study has drawn theoretical insights from several anthropological studies on violence and conflict: Arjun Appadurai, 'Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalisation', *Development and Change*, 29, 4 (1998), 905–25; Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body & Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), Lisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutsu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> On the permanence of *squadrismo* in the regime, see in particular, Matteo Millan, 'The Institutionalisation of Squadrismo: Disciplining Paramilitary Violence in the Italian Fascist Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History*, 22 (2013), 551–73.

communities and socio-cosmological contexts. In certain provinces of the Po Valley – as demonstrated by the more systematic and comprehensive analysis of both existing and previously inaccessible archival sources in the state archives – violence expanded and unfolded itself into the recesses of everyday life.<sup>7</sup> The viciousness and capillary character (almost private) of violence destroyed communities, scattered families and bankrupted people's sense of reality. At the same time, violence, terror and apprehension became the foundation on which fascist power was grounded. The second part of this article reconstructs *squadristi*'s ritualised methods of bodily harm. The analysis will show how the body of the 'enemy within' – transformed into a symbolic repository of alterity (or otherness) and betrayal – was exposed to acts of cruelty which conformed to that idolatry of nationhood that believed in the cathartic power of 'surgical hygiene' as a way to remove any 'foci of infection' from the national body. Building on the theoretical framework provided by Sven Reichardt,<sup>8</sup> the third part of the article undertakes an analysis of those organisational and structural inducements that contributed to the routinisation and ritualisation of violence. Finally, the last part provides a brief overview of *squadristi*'s violence after the March on Rome and the permanence of a *squadrista*'s mentality, values and norms in the complex process of institutionalisation of *squadrismo*.

The purpose of this article is less to refute or repudiate other historiographical positions (to which I owe numerous intellectual debts) but rather to propose a new angle of vision to penetrate the gruesome realities of *squadristi* violence as well as the ways in which it propagated into daily life and produced new subjectivities through harm, suffering and trauma.

### A Phenomenology of Squadristi Violence

The First World War had not yet dawned upon Europe when a myriad of paramilitary formations arose from the spasms of revolution, the fragmentation of imperial sovereignties and the atavistic regression of the *Ius ad Bellum*. Amid the ominous rumbling of the 'great conflagration', the *Fascio di Combattimento* and its squads were destined to show to all other European nationalist armed militias and paramilitaries the powerfully corrosive action of violence on liberal parliamentary democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Although sporadic and isolated, early fascist violence already reflected a discernible operational pattern. Spectacular raids against socialist rallies and parades not only aimed to challenge the territorial power of the opponent but were also designed to induce shock amongst the masses. At the same time, these actions served to glamorise the image of fascists as political soldiers in defence of the national community, to provide sympathetic constituencies to the movement and to create emulations among grassroots patriotic associations and anti-Bolshevik leagues.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This article has benefitted from the intensive consultation of hundreds of police files and court documents at the State Archive of Ferrara. These documents have provided fundamental event data on violence as well as invaluable biographical information of hundreds of *squadristi*. In addition, court documents have been examined at the State Archives of Bologna and Mantova. At the National Archive in Rome, the documents scrutinised include, but are not limited to, correspondences from the Ministry of Interior, Directorate-general of Public Security, Division of General and Confidential Affairs, to the prefects from the provinces of Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Lombardy (1919–25); selected files in the political record office (*Casellario Politico Centrale*) and the documents of the High Commission for the sanctions against fascism (*Alto Commissariato contro il Fascismo*); the administrative documents of the Fascist Party; the files from the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution and the epistolary exchanges and the correspondences in the Segreteria Particolare del Duce (*Carteggio Privato* and *Ordinario*). Also consulted were the Fondo Giacinto Santucci, Comando Generale dell'Arma dei Carabinieri, Ufficio Storico and the Memorie storiche del Comando Territoriale dei CC.RR di Bologna, 1871–1925, Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito.

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to the 'praxeological' approach to fascism research, see Sven Reichardt, 'Fascismo e teoria delle pratiche sociali. Violenza e comunità come elementi di un concetto praxeologico di Fascismo', *Bollettino di Storiografia*, 12, 2007–2008. (supplemento di Storiografia, 12, 2008), 43–65.

<sup>9</sup> On paramilitary violence in the aftermath of the First World War, see Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe After the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Gentile, *Storia del Partito Fascista*, 69–71.

After the tragic events of Palazzo D'Accursio in Bologna and Castello Estense in Ferrara at the end of 1920, fascist violence and acts of terrorism dramatically increased in scale and intensity.<sup>11</sup> By mobilising the resentment that existed among a variety of social groups, from aristocrats to agrarians, businessmen, middle or low income professionals, students and intermediate strata of the rural population,<sup>12</sup> fascists were able to unleash a wave of violence that rapidly engulfed the Po Valley, the Tuscan sub-Apennines and the Apulian plain. Beatings, selective murders, kidnappings, destruction of property and enforced administration of castor oil assumed endemic proportions in Italy's most advanced agricultural provinces, in particular where the socialist organisation had been powerful enough to take control of local governments.<sup>13</sup> In about six months, with the acquiescence or outright connivance of peripheral state authorities and the judiciary, the fascist squads disintegrated the political, economic and social network of the labour movement and reduced their opponents to a state of incapacitating fear and impotence.<sup>14</sup>

In this campaign of destruction that aimed to cleanse the territorial presence of the enemy/‘other’, punitive expeditions constituted the most fundamental form of violent action.<sup>15</sup> These raids were constructed and performed around the models of expiatory violence and disproportionate retaliation. A mythical relationship between punitive violence and cleansing atonement was applied in order to achieve exemplary retribution for the transgressions of the ‘Bolsheviks’. As a symbolic action, the destructive force of punitive expeditions was intended to be sensational. Capitalising on their intense emotional impact, the expeditions commanded visibility, projected an image of power and ruthlessness and spread fear and apprehension among their enemies as well as onto entire communities.<sup>16</sup>

Punitive expeditions involved a mobilisation system based on speed, concentration and surprise. Operations against a targeted locality were carried out according to military techniques that involved destructive and terror-inducing raids against the structures of the labour movement. These raids were planned and coordinated by war veterans and regular active duty military personnel. Moving in lorries, usually at night, fascists amassed forces for a punitive expedition in an area they had established in advance. The fact that almost all squads were equipped with lorries enormously increased their operating range to hundreds of miles and allowed them to rapidly coordinate attacks against individual targets. The strategic concentration of forces at any given point destroyed the ability of the opponent to fight back and minimised the possibility of failure, which might have otherwise set in motion a cycle of organised armed defence, and jeopardised the mobilisation capacity of the squads by eroding the morale of the *squadristi*.<sup>17</sup> Not infrequently, in the hours preceding riskier operations, conniving Carabinieri searched the houses of political suspects and socialist sympathisers for weapons, including daggers, pitchforks and butcher's tools that peasants used for the traditional winter slaughtering of pigs, *de facto* foiling any form of organised resistance.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Nazario Sauro Onofri, *La Strage di Palazzo d'Accursio. Origine e Nascita del Fascismo Bolognese 1919–1920* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980); Delfina Tromboni, ‘Verso il fascismo: l'aggressione del presidente del consiglio e l'eccidio del 20 dicembre’, in Delfina Tromboni, ed., *Terra di provincia: uomini, donne, figure* (2003), 94–106.

<sup>12</sup> Jens Petersen, ‘Elettorato e base sociale del fascismo italiano negli anni venti’, *Studi storici*, 16, 3 (July 1975), 627–69. For a sociological examination of agrarian *squadristo*, Frank Snowden, ‘The Social Origins of Agrarian Fascism in Italy’, *European Journal of Sociology*, XIII (1972).

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the political and socio-economic contexts of paramilitary mobilisation: Ivano Granata, ‘Storia nazionale e storia locale. Alcune considerazioni sulle problematiche del fascismo delle origini (1919–1922)’, *Storia contemporanea*, 11 (1980), 503–40.

<sup>14</sup> For a chronology of political violence between 1919 and 1922, see Franzinelli, *Squadristi*, section 3.

<sup>15</sup> See the dossier of the General Director of Public Security Giacomo Vigliani in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Interno (MI), Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), Affari Generali e Riservati (AGR), ca. 1921, Cat. G1 b. 90 f. 148.

<sup>16</sup> On the punitive expedition as a ‘performance’, Matteo Millan, L'«essenza del fascismo»: la parabola dello squadristo tra terrorismo e normalizzazione (1919–1932), PhD thesis, University of Padua, 2011, 87–8.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see the dossier of the commissioner Paolella in ACS, MI DGPS AGR, ca. 1921, b. 96 f. Ferrara, 2 Nov. 1921.

<sup>18</sup> On the collaboration between fascists and law enforcement agencies, see generally, Marcello Saija, *I prefetti italiani e la crisi dello stato liberale* (Milano: Giuffrè, 2001).

Before the punitive expedition started, the designated town, village, ward or neighbourhood was hermetically sealed. In a matter of minutes squads blocked exit routes and cut inhabitants off from the outside. Once the place was completely isolated, the assault started. In a sudden onslaught of destruction, the *squadristi* ravaged and set on fire peasant leagues, local branch offices of the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*; PSI) and the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista Italiano*; CPI), cultural centres, newspaper offices and printing presses. They targeted labour movement structures, which were not only interwoven into the fabric of the labourers' community's (*comunità lavoratrici*) everyday lives and represented significant landmarks that defined their social environment, but also possessed a fundamental symbolic value, representing the desire of popular communities for democratically organised forms of self-governance and emancipation from the lords (*signori*) and the 'bourgeois State'.<sup>19</sup> Violence was, thus, directed toward the systematic annihilation of those institutions that posed a threat to the fascist vision of organic and hierarchical unity of the nation and the subordination of individuals to the mystique of the national community. In this perspective, the significance of burning socialist headquarters went beyond traditional rituals of purification. The use of fire was intended to irrevocably eradicate the presence of the 'enemy within' and its existing connection to the place. At the same time, the desecration of monuments, cenotaphs and plaques, the burning of flags or their carrying off as trophies and the smearing of emblems was meant to extinguish the history and perpetuation of socialist communities.<sup>20</sup>

The punitive expedition did not stop at buildings reduced to ashes. *Squadristi* wanted to humiliate and ridicule the enemy. Furniture, registers, insignia and banners of the labour movement were hurled into the streets, covered in gasoline and set on fire. *Squadristi* relished in their victory, uttering war cries and hailing the pyre with shouts of triumph and wrath over the afflicted enemy. Rather than prompting misgivings, their actions provoked elation and exhilaration amongst the blackshirted hooligans. In his autobiographical memoirs, Serafino Prati, writer, poet and socialist politician from Reggio Emilia, tersely wrote: 'the newspapers of the labour movement are set on fire in the piazzas. Consumer cooperatives are burned and agricultural leagues are dissolved, while they – the fascists – kill and laugh, laugh and kill'.<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, while the *Tricolore* was hoisted on the socialist offices, some of the *squadristi* embarked on a search for 'political undesirables' – the socialist mayor and town councilmen, the president of the cooperative, the secretary of the Chamber of Labour and the local union officials (*capilega*). 'These [people] were forced to resign and banished forever from the district', Angelo Tasca wrote, 'under pain of death or the destruction of their houses. If they managed to escape, vengeance was taken on their families'.<sup>22</sup> By seeking out local leaders of the socialist movement, fascist violence aimed to undermine the defensive capacities of the enemy by 'cutting [off] its head'. By the end of April 1921 hundreds of representatives in provincial and municipal government, as well as union administrators and organisers, had been forced to resign and were hunted out of their towns by prohibitions of every kind: social ostracisation, aggression, harassment and intimidation. The burning of leagues and people's houses, the destruction and confiscation of properties, the plundering of cultural institutions and the arrest, exile or assassination of political and syndical leaders contributed to the rapid paralysis of socialist activities, resulting in an almost smothering sense of isolation for the working masses.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Marco Fincardi, 'La "spedizione punitiva": conquista e sottomissione del territorio', in Mario Isnenghi and Giulia Albanese, eds., *Gli italiani in guerra: conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*. Vol. IV, tomo 1, *Il Ventennio fascista. Dall'impresa di Fiume alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Torino: Utet, 2008), 310–7.

<sup>20</sup> In Consandolo, province of Ferrara, *squadristi* assaulted the Società Artigiana and 'after having hoisted the *Tricolore* from the balcony, they seized the paintings of Karl Marx, Enrico Ferri and one containing the pictures of socialist deputies, unleashing their venom on them in the town square'. Later, they moved to the working-class suburb of Ferrer, 'which, at the end of the destructive raid, was re-baptized Mussolini'. 'Vandalismi e smargiassate a Codifiume', *Avanti!*, 13 Apr. 1921.

<sup>21</sup> Serafino Prati, *Alba sul Po* (Parma: Tipografie riunite Donati, 1963), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Giulia Albanese, 'Le occupazione delle amministrazioni pubbliche', in *Gli italiani in guerra. Conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni. Il Ventennio fascista*, 318–24.

Localised socialist attempts at resistance, which resulted in the killing or wounding of a fascist, provoked new raids. To take revenge against their foes and avenge their fallen comrades, fascists launched punitive expeditions which were enacted around the model of disproportionate retaliation. They reasoned that more severe retaliations served to induce unconditional compliance, to deter further socialist attacks and to prevent retributive cycles from continuing. The desire to exact a disproportionate vengeance was also staged to produce a ‘positional asymmetry’ between the ‘us’ and ‘them’ by means of an experience of absolute power imbalance. Finally, disproportionate retaliation aimed to avenge the fallen and to restore the impaired honour of cadres by instilling terror.<sup>24</sup>

After the *squadristi* had wiped out the labour movement’s network of social, economic and organisational structures and had dissolved socialist administrations in a district, they moved their offensive to the next village or hamlet. Characteristic of squads’ violence was its propagating ‘ripple effect’, that is the mechanism through which an incursion against one location became the precipitating factor for subsequent punitive expeditions and raids in other areas, leading to self-sustaining and self-amplifying dynamics of violence. This process of escalation, with reference to southern Veneto, was gloomily outlined in the volume ‘*Fascismo – Inchiesta Socialista sulle gesta dei fascisti in Italia*’, edited by the official socialist newspaper *Avanti!* and distributed to the Chamber of Deputy in the summer of 1921:

Town after town, destruction, threat and terror has hit the sixty small municipalities of Polesine. One by one, and in about two or three weeks, they have been invaded by hundreds of hooligans during the day, beating all those who have been indicated as being socialists by local agrarians, ransacking buildings, breaking up the furniture and taking away everything they find. At night, moving in groups, wearing masks and holding muskets, they shoot at random in the streets and throw bombs, break into the houses of whoever is part of a municipal administration, of a league, of a cooperative and so on and, surrounded by the unspeakable screams of women and children, they threaten, *violentano*, extort declarations, impose shameful things or force people to desperately run away in the countryside.<sup>25</sup>

The dismantling of socialist institutions occurred concurrently with and was accelerated by thousands of raids against local union bosses, representatives and militants of the labour movement and even ordinary citizens suspected of socialist sympathies. These raids were known as operations of ‘cleansing’. At night, *squadristi* would arrive at a targeted house. Here, as the correspondent from Ferrara of the conservative *Giornale d’Italia* wrote in early 1921, ‘they announced themselves to the head of the league. They begin with a discussion; then either the head of the league gives way or persuasion is followed by violence.<sup>26</sup> After spraying doors and windows with bullets, *squadristi* forced their way into the house, searched all rooms, wrecked everything that stood in their way, looted objects of value and sometimes maliciously destroyed heirlooms that were most dear to their victims.

All contemporary accounts and memories convey images of families cast into a state of paralysing fear, crying for mercy or desperately trying to prevent the *squadristi* from taking away their loved ones. Individuals were herded into the street, humiliated and then beaten. Sometimes fascists took people away in trucks, and after having tortured them in every imaginable way, abandoned their victims, tying them to trees and stranding them miles away from their homes. Before the Chamber of Deputies, the socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti provided a graphic account on the *modus operandi* of the *squadristi*:

In the dead of night, when decent folk are at home asleep, fascist trucks arrive in the hamlets and towns, in the little centres made up of a few hundred inhabitants. Of course, they are escorted and

<sup>24</sup> For detailed reconstructions of cases of ‘disproportionate retaliation’, see Giorgio Sacchetti, *L’imboscata, Foiano della Chiana 1921, un episodio di guerra sociale* (Cortona: Arti Tipografiche Toscane, 2000), 31–57; Lindo Guernieri, *Quel tragico lunedì di Pasqua del 21* (Portomaggiore: La Loza stampa, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> *Inchiesta Socialista*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Giornale d’Italia*, 23 Jan. 1921.

led by the heads of the local landowners' association. How else could the fascist recognise in the dark in the midst of the rambling countryside the home of union leader or the inconspicuous little union headquarters? They arrive before a house and the order to surround it is issued. There are twenty to a hundred men armed with guns and revolvers. They call the union leader and request that he come down, they tell him 'if you do not come down, we will burn your house, your wife and your children'. He comes down. They seize him, bind him, toss him on the truck and make him undergo the most unmentionable tortures, pretending to kill him or drown him. Finally, they abandon him naked, in the midst of the fields, tied to a tree. If the union leader is a man of courage who refuses to open the door and takes up arms to defend himself, then immediate assassination takes place in the dead of night, a hundred against one. This is the system in the Polesine.<sup>27</sup>

By the spring of 1922 abductions and tortures of socialists, and occasionally Catholic representatives, across the country were reported in the hundreds. In the raids against individuals, the *squadristi* were brought in from other towns or provinces so that they would not be recognised. As a result, they relied on local guides – normally landowners or farmers – to steer them through seemingly impenetrable and dispersive rural areas and for the designation and identification of the victims.<sup>28</sup> In Adria, under the guidance of the local secretary of the *Fascio di Combattimento*, Paduan *squadristi* kidnapped the town clerk. Blindfolded and transported by a vehicle to the lower Padua province, he was let go the following night. At the subsequent trial, it was found that the squad of captors was mostly made up of adolescents fourteen to sixteen years of age, reflecting the predominantly young age of the *squadristi*.<sup>29</sup> After the verdict was given, which exceptionally sentenced two blackshirts to eight months to one and a half years of prison, respectively, the town clerk had to precipitously abandon Adria, while his family was subjected to constant harassment and psychological abuse at the hands of the local fascists.<sup>30</sup>

In certain cases, the 'punishments' of those linked to the socialist organisation or suspected of involvement in anti-fascist activities did not come out of the blue, but were announced through a series of public threats, forewarnings and vague rumours. 'Since Italy must belong to the Italians and cannot therefore allow herself to be administered by people of your kind', the Tuscan Ras Dino Perrone Compagni wrote to a mayor of a village in the spring of 1921, 'I advise you to resign your office before Sunday, April 17. If you refuse, you alone are responsible for the consequences.'<sup>31</sup> An even more explicit message was sent by shooting at the windows of houses of socialists or by throwing rudimentary bombs on their doorsteps and rooftops. The message was a clear order for socialist officials to immediately resign from their positions.<sup>32</sup> Those who refused were exposed to severe forms of retaliation. In Argenta, a town located southeast of Ferrara, a fascist squad seized the local union organiser Natale Gaiba, who had defied the ban to re-enter his hometown. Gaiba was severely beaten and then executed with two gunshots in front of his family.<sup>33</sup> Later, the priest Don Minzoni, who publicly condemned the local Fascio for the murder of Gaiba and the atrocities of *squadrismo*, was beaten to death by two *squadristi* from Casumaro di Cento (Ferrara).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in translation in Frances Keene, *Neither Liberty nor Bread: The Meaning and Tragedy of Fascism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 28. See also, Mauro Canali, *Il delitto Matteotti* (Il Mulino, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Donino Roncara, *Ricordanze della vigilia* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1939), 20–1.

<sup>29</sup> *Il Corriere del Polesine*, 14 Feb. 1921.

<sup>30</sup> Archivio di Stato di Rovigo (ASRO), Prefettura, Serie Generale, b. 1082 'Caso Camilli'.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Tasca, 104.

<sup>32</sup> 'Ancora su e giù per Ferrara', *Avanti!*, 13 Apr. 1921.

<sup>33</sup> Archivio di Stato di Bologna (ASB), *Procura generale presso la Corte d'appello di Bologna, Serie IV*, n. 24, 'Registro generale in materia penale della Procura generale', n. 328, 6 May, 1922. See also Telegram from prefect of Ferrara to Ministry of Interior, 8 May 1921, in ACS, MI DGPS, AGR, Cat G1, ca. 1921, b. 96. On the case of Natale Gaiba, see Luciano Casali and Fiorenzo Landi, *Natale Gaiba: L'Antifascista dimenticato* (Bologna: Patron, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Benigno Zaccagnini and Roberto Ruffilli, eds., *Il messaggio di don Giovanni Minzoni: atti del convegno nazionale di studio: Ravenna, ottobre 1983* (Bologna: Centro Studi C. Donati, 1984).

While *squadristi* attempted to avoid ‘counterproductive homicides’, violence was performed with brutal ruthlessness. Thousands of individuals suffered severe physical injuries such as dismemberments, amputations, loss of bodily functions, internal hemorrhages and injuries that required prolonged hospitalisations. The wave of punitive expeditions left behind immense material damages and uncountable disabled and scarred bodies. At the same time, it undercut the basic sense of individual safety and security. The unpredictability and wildness of the attacks shattered villagers’ notions of personal safety and invulnerability, and inspired feelings of terror, mistrust and apprehension. Violence transformed the perception of space and time.<sup>35</sup> Space became synonymous with vulnerability, insecurity and risk. People were afraid to go to piazzas, local markets and taverns; they were even afraid to visit their neighbours. The ever-present possibility of experiencing violence was progressively integrated and modified common patterns of cognition, perception and action. A police inspector from Polesine in April 1921 wrote:

Fascists have committed themselves to manhunts, and not a day goes by in which they do not chase, confront, beat and abuse those who belong to the socialist organisations. . . . And then there is not an end to their breaking into homes, destroying furniture, documents and objects, lighting fires, shooting into houses at night, patrolling in armed groups; and all this in order to keep in perpetual state of intimidation people who truly, in some places, are so traumatised and frightened, one could even say terrorised, that they completely avoid public places and never leave their homes.<sup>36</sup>

While space contracted, time became uncertain. Everyday life was intensely overshadowed by a sense of uneasiness and trepidation about the immediate future. Fear that something terrible might happen to anyone at any moment disrupted social relations. Whole communities were taken over by forms of paranoia and hyper-vigilance, which generated anxiety and insomnia. In numerous local communities in the province of Ferrara, men moved throughout the countryside at night in order to not be caught while asleep.<sup>37</sup> In the Polesine, the *Inchiesta Socialista* reported ‘the whole tenor of civil life is destroyed, each commune is isolated from the next, each labourer from his neighbour, the agrarian struggle is also lost . . . terror and violence permeate the life of all families. In the countryside, life had become an opprobrium or martyrdom. Refugees are hundreds, forced to abandon their families and to find labour in Milan, Venice or the Piave; other are searching to move away to America.’<sup>38</sup>

In this context, even houses were no longer safe havens. Personal and private spaces that had once been considered invulnerable were now casualties as fascist violence forced itself into the homes, even the bedrooms, of its victims. In Granzette, a small village in the province of Rovigo, a group of fascists surrounded the house of the *capolega* Luigi Masin. ‘It was around 4am, when we heard shots and yells of ‘open up’, Amalia Masin, daughter of Luigi, recounted many years later to the Venetian writer Gianni Sparapan. As soon as the door was opened, four men rushed in and started searching the house. ‘When they entered the room, three of them assaulted my father, who was sitting on the bed putting his pants on, and tormented him with points of daggers and punches, while shouting at him “face of a criminal. We looked for you for a long time”: Luigi’s wife, desperately imploring the assailants to spare the life of her husband, was held outside the bedroom by a fourth man. At the same time, a fifth man screamed to all others ‘go get dressed because we are setting the house on fire’. The *squadristi* forced Luigi to lay face down and to place his hands on the headboard, and

<sup>35</sup> For the analysis of perceptual distortion of space and time under intense violence, I am intellectually indebted to Jacques Semelin, *Purifier et détruire: usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in translation in Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini’s Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1. Original document in ACS, MI, DGPS, AGR, ca. 1921, b. 110 f. Rovigo. Dossier of the prefect of Rovigo, ‘Condizioni P.S in Polesine’, Apr. 1921.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Il brigantaggio nel Ferrarese’, *Avanti!*, 31 Mar. 1921.

<sup>38</sup> *Inchiesta Socialista*, 31–2.

then shot him in the abdomen at close range, a wound that resulted in his death. After the execution, they walked down the stairs and sardonically told the fifth man 'he is not going to eat *polenta* anymore'.<sup>39</sup> All the *squadristi* brought to trial for the murder were acquitted.<sup>40</sup>

This type of violence violated the most basic assumptions about safety, human empathy and caring. Familiar and viable realities were shattered and transformed into meaningless, chaotic and terrifying settings. The perpetrators barrelled into people's spaces – invading the most intimate areas of families' lives – and filled them with their sense of unhindered and lethal potency. Even when the victim was made impotent, lying bleeding on the ground, the perpetrators persisted in punching and kicking him. Most of the time, the victim was left alive but severely scarred, physically and psychologically. According to numerous accounts, *squadristi* appeared to take pleasure in inflicting harm and their laughter must have aggravated the suffering of the victim and the desperation of their families.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the impunity of the *squadristi*, which methodically benefitted from the connivance or weakness of local magistrates, certainly intensified the despair among abused persons, their families and their communities.<sup>42</sup>

During the assault, *squadristi* typically wore masks to hide their identities. The use of masks underscores the fact that fascist violence moved within 'small-scale, face to-face social settings, where people develop dense interpersonal interactions, living and working together in daily mutual dependency, rivalry and love'.<sup>43</sup> Victims sometimes recognised their assailants as people from neighbouring villages, fellow countrymen (*compaesani*), neighbours or former friends. A socialist peasant recalled that 'it was around 3am when fascists came into my house and ransacked everything. I was threatened with a gun. I knew them all. They were people who owned a little piece of land. Small landowners who were frightened that communism would have taken their land'.<sup>44</sup> Far from increasing the threshold of moral inhibitions, the proximity of the victims raised the level of brutality and offered convenient avenues for settling private accounts. From the analysis of archival sources, it remains astonishing to find men, who had lived relatively normal lives, and who were generally respected members of the community, turning in a matter of weeks into ferocious persecutors of persons with whom there was a great deal of familiarity as they lived side by side in the same social spaces, and with whom they enjoyed neighbourly relations.<sup>45</sup> 'The violence that is taking over our districts, fragmenting in a myriad of small, isolated but however horrible episodes', the Ferrarese Catholic weekly *La Domenica dell'Operaio* wrote at the end of March 1921, 'has assumed the character of a heinous fight, a fratricide'.<sup>46</sup>

In conclusion, the expansion of violence into the sphere of everyday life is one of the most salient characteristics of fascist rise and seizure of power. The threat of physical violence was ever present, instilling a corrosive sense of uncertainty, indeterminacy and insecurity that permeated the lives of groups and individuals. The ubiquitous and pervasive danger of violence, the fear of imminent attacks

<sup>39</sup> The reconstruction of the assassination of Luigi Masin is based on the detailed reconstruction of Gianni Sparapan: 'I fatti di Granzette e il processo d'Assise', in *Studi Polesani*, 17–9 (1985), 61–70.

<sup>40</sup> ASRO, serie Gabinetto (1901–1955), 1921 b. 21, report of the prefect, 10 Dec. 1921.

<sup>41</sup> Sadism and seemingly gratuitous acts of cruelty were a central theme in post-war victims' statements to police and in many private accounts. For instance, see Archivio di Stato di Ferrara (AsF), Fondo Questura di Ferrara, Serie Gabinetto Cat. A8, primo versamento aa. 1920–1960, b. 75 f. Gulinati Agide (1949–1950), Judiciary report of the Legione Territoriale dei Carabinieri Reali di Bologna, Stazione di Cento, 30 June, 1945 about events that occurred in spring 1921.

<sup>42</sup> Guido Neppi Modona, *Sciopero, potere politico e magistratura*, 1870–1922 (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Stathis Kaliwas, 'Conflict', in Peter Hedstrom and Peter Bearman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 608.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Renato Sitti and Lucilla Previati, *Ferrara, il regime fascista. Documenti e immagini del fascismo ferrarese* (Milano: La Pietra, 1976), 66.

<sup>45</sup> This reflection is mostly based on the large sample of personal files of former *squadristi* that I examined at the State Archive in Ferrara. In particular, see Fondo Questura di Ferrara, Serie Gabinetto Cat. A8, primo versamento aa. 1920–1960.

<sup>46</sup> *Domenica dell'Operaio*, 27 Mar. 1921.

and ignoring where or whom fascists would have struck next threw many into a state of disoriented passivity. This process caused the dissolution of social consciousness and a contraction of public spaces. At the same time, by penetrating into the deepest aspects of everyday society and by inscribing itself in the lives of communities, violence signalled an irremediable impairment of traditional forms of solidarity and obliquely contributed to shaping those powerful social scripts of hatred and retribution that would materialise in the final stage of the fascist regime and in the wave of post-liberation extrajudicial executions.<sup>47</sup>

### **Violence and the Body**

A comprehensive analysis of the pervasiveness of *squadristi* violence and the forced deconstruction of systems through which people's worlds were defined must also pay closer attention to the suffering body. Turned into a metonym for the nation, the body of the victim was exposed to formalised techniques of physical and mental cruelty which encoded hygienic metaphors of catharsis and redemption as well as projections of the ways in which the *squadristi* imagined the 'enemy within' (i.e. social diseases, the sacrificial beasts, the hunted preys etc.). At the same time, victims' bodies carried the traces of the pain and suffering caused by their ordeal, thus becoming a projection of fascist power through images of bodily affliction.

The most common form of bodily violence and harm was the communal, ritualised beatings of the political opponents with iron rods, metal tipped canes and clubs. Victims were forced to run the gauntlet (*passaggio indiano*), later rebaptised as 'the *Caudine* forks', wherein they were forced to walk between two lines of *squadristi* who beat them with truncheons.<sup>48</sup> In other circumstances, *squadristi* surrounded the victim and subjected him to beatings over an extended period of time. 'They formed a square around the unfortunate', Giacomo Matteotti wrote, 'and then proceed to bludgeon him to death in piazza or outside the headquarter of the Carabinieri, who pretend they do not see and hear'. It was also reported that socialists were kidnapped by fascist paramilitaries, placed inside a dark room and beaten to a pulp. Fascists attributed cleansing, punishing and, at times, redemptive functions to these ritualised ordeals.<sup>49</sup>

Beatings often involved the symbolic striking of the victim's head. By hitting the head – the seat of intentionality, consciousness and cognition as well as the locus of most of the primary sense receptors – perpetrators meant to impair not only the structures of meaning and signification through which individuals understand, evaluate and act upon their social reality, but also their sense of self and identity. In this respect, the striking of the head signified the erasure of one's narrative identity, while serving as an indicative symbol of vengeance. In some cases, the beating of the head might have responded to a more traditional pedagogy of punishment for acts which were deemed offenses against the 'religion of the Fatherland'. Mussolini himself argued about the necessity of 'inculcating our ideas into brains by battering obstinate skulls . . . and we trust that, little by little, by pounding on skulls, the brains will be defogged'.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the clubbing of the head contained a grotesque pedagogical function of conversion and reintegration of 'bastardised Italians' into the national community. This practice also carried other connotations. As the head is metonymically and metaphorically associated to markers of status, honour and respectability, striking it signified both the subject's loss of social standing and the demeaning of his person. Fascists ferociously punished those local union leaders who represented entire working communities and neighbourhoods and coordinated labour mobilisations and strikes at

<sup>47</sup> In his pathbreaking *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella resistenza*, Claudio Pavone argued that the Civil War between fascists and anti-fascists (1943–5) could have been seen as a 'recapitulation and final enactment' under the shadow of the German occupation of a conflict that had in reality started in the aftermath of the Great War. This interpretation was substantiated by the elderly partisans' propensity to assimilate memories of the violence suffered at the hands of fascist paramilitary squads (*squadristi*) in 1921–2 into the experience of the resistance.

<sup>48</sup> *Inchiesta Socialista*, 86–7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 5 Feb. 1921.

local levels. Thus striking their heads carried with it a powerful delegitimising effect on the authority of those 'bosses' and in turn a reduction of trust and confidence in the socialist community itself. Concurrently, the ritualised beatings of socialist leaders constituted a form of symbolic group humiliation as it was directed against a collectively shared part of identity, was socially sanctioned and went unpunished.

In the ritualised practice of striking the head, the weapons employed also reflected specific cultural features. In Ferrara, fascist paramilitaries created the 'breaking head' (*rompicapo*), a steel rod wrapped in leather with kernels of lead or large nails fixed on top, which was able to cause grossly deforming wounds.<sup>51</sup> Most likely, the *rompicapo* was inspired by Austrian maces used in the First World War, which traditionally consisted of a wood lever with large iron tips applied to the top of another wooden lever of about 15 centimetres, inserted on a spring or a steel wire of 25 centimetres with a heavy cone shape steel head. The maces were normally kept tied to the wrist with a string of rope or leather. The use of the *rompicapo* was constructed around the symbolic beheading and transformation of the enemy into a headless corpse. Striking off the head from a corpse violates, dehumanises and reduces the victim into a sub-human object of ridicule.

Beyond the symbolism of attacking the head of the opponent, cudgels were used for the sexual abuses of men and for the mutilation of male sexual organs. In the spring of 1921 two socialist brothers were taken from their house and carried to an isolated place in Ambrogio, province of Ferrara. There they were forced to strip naked and were then beaten in the testicles until their organs were mangled.<sup>52</sup> In March of 1923 Giuseppe Vitali, a landless labourer from Campiano di Ravenna, was abducted from his house, driven away and ferociously beaten by the *squadristi* in front of villagers who were forced to witness the ordeal. At the end, Vitali, who was accused of the murder of a *squadrista*, was castrated and thrown in a water canal. He died of exsanguination after terrible suffering.<sup>53</sup> These acts of cruelty were intentional and intended to demasculinise the victim by stripping him of the prerogatives of masculinity as defined by social status, virility and fertility. Instances of emasculation also reflect the traditional strategic aim of feminising the political enemy and asserting the fascists' dominant masculinity. Other forms of sexual violence comprised anal penetrations with batons, pieces of wood or bottles. During the second 'Matteotti's trial' (1947), journalist Carlo Silvestri revealed the abuses suffered by the moderate socialist leader in Castelguglielmo (Rovigo) on 12 March 1921 at the hands of a group of *squadristi*:

It is not true that there was a candle, but only a little stub inserted in that place. That candle burnt to even scorch his soft tissues. The account was told to me by chance, while I was on a train from Bologna to Ferrara, from students, one of whom said: 'that Matteotti! But I will become socialist! It's an incredible thing, if you had seen the courage of that man!' Naturally I listened. We were crammed in the hallway of the train. One night we went' – they said – to interrupt his speech and order that he moved away from the area. Matteotti said that he would not have paid any mind to that warning and the next evening, in fact, he came without being expected in the midst of the crowd above a parvis (*sagrato*). 'I demand to speak!' It was Giacomo Matteotti who was asking to speak, contradicting the fascists. That evening we were ordered to kidnap him, and drive him around in the truck, when at a certain point there was a simulation of trial and of execution with a round of shots. 'You didn't think we wanted to kill you, did you?' Then they obliged him to pull down his pants and they inserted the burning candle that burnt his soft tissues, all whilst around him an uproar was happening. What self-control this man showed, . . . he

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Teseo Bastia to Luigi Bagnolati, in Luigi Bagnolati, *Origini della Federazione comunista Ferrarese. Memorie e Documenti*. Edited by Istituto di Storia Contemporanea del movimento operaio e contadino di Ferrara (Modena: Levi, 1976), 144.

<sup>52</sup> ASF, Fondo Questura di Ferrara, Serie Gabinetto Cat. A8, primo versamento aa. 1920–1960, b. 23 f. 647. Judiciary report of Sept. 1945 about events that had taken place in the Spring 1921.

<sup>53</sup> Claudio Albonetti, Gabriele Brunelli, Raoul Fiorini, Vanni Tesei, eds., *Le Vittime del fascismo in Romagna 1921–1923. Con un' appendice dal 1924 al 1927* (Forlì: Comune di Forlì, 1973), 44.

never folded. . . . The next evening, he would again be there in the middle of a fascist assembly and would speak with force. He had elicited such admiration in his aggressors that they would have wanted to know his address in order to go and ask forgiveness for what they had done.<sup>54</sup>

These forms of sexual violations served as a demonstration of the power to subjugate the enemy and take possession of him. Its objective was to humiliate, degrade and dishonour. Such acts of sexualised violence, however, were ‘a taboo within a taboo’; they were very rarely reported to police and only hinted at or insinuated through idiomatic and metaphorical compounds in socialist or fascist accounts. Similarly, socialists rarely reported cases of sexual assaults and abuses against socialist women. In the province of L’Aquila, fascists ‘pulled out the pubic hairs of a socialist woman in public’, while another woman was forced to endure multiple sexual acts in front of her husband.<sup>55</sup> Oftentimes fascists expressed their contempt for socialist women by shaving their heads or by throwing spatters of oily tar, carbon black and dirt on their faces. In Alessandria, a socialist militant’s head was shaved and painted green. Such practices conformed to the tradition of goliardic and playful mockery, symbolising repentance through outward signs of humiliation.<sup>56</sup>

A subtle form of violent humiliation involved the pouring of powerful laxatives, such as castor oil, down the throats of socialists and communists. This practice, known as the ‘patriotic baptism’, followed a script and rules, and typically involved victims being taken to the centre of the piazza after they had been paraded – bound and half naked – along the main roads of the town. Here, the victims were forced to drink up to a litre of castor oil, which fascists sardonically stated would have purified the soul and the conscience of the antifascists. ‘The ingestion . . . of a good glass of castor oil, the fascist newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia*’ wrote, ‘serves to purify them of their wrongdoings and old sins of Bolshevism’.<sup>57</sup> If the victim accepted to drink it without waiting and hesitating, the ceremony of redemption was quick and merciful. But if the victim resisted, fascists forcibly inserted a tube into his oesophagus and poured an amount of castor oil that was quantified ‘in proportion to his sin’.<sup>58</sup> In 1924 one *squadrista* recounted to a reporter of *The Survey* that they took the local communist leader into a house, shaved his head completely, painted his skull green, white and red and then administered half a pint of castor oil with flies in it, before parading him through the town.<sup>59</sup> In the village of Lendinara, fascists forced a *capolega* to drink a large dose of castor oil and then walked him through the streets with a rope around his neck, horsewhipping him. Sometimes fascists mixed castor oil with gasoline, petrol or even a tincture of iodine, which caused long-term breathing difficulties, the burning of the oesophagus and rectal bleeding in the victims.<sup>60</sup> This form of violence was intended to destroy the self-respect and morale of the victims.

Other forms of violence were framed within a process of bestialisation of the enemy’s body. For instance, suspension tortures were structured around animalistic metaphors. Suspending victims upside-down from a hook or a rod hanging from the ceiling, while running of a knife through their throat, represented a cruel re-enactment of the traditional slaughtering of pigs. A notable case was the assassination of the socialist typographer and trade unionist Antonio Piccinini in Reggio Emilia in early 1924. A newspaper revealed that he had a chain slipped round his legs, was hoisted by a pulley and hooked on the iron bar. While suspended head down, fascists ripped up his belly and then finished him off with four revolver shots.<sup>61</sup> In other instances of violent bestialisation,

<sup>54</sup> Carlo Silvestri, *Matteotti, Mussolini e il dramma italiano* (Roma: Ruffolo, 1947), 172–3.

<sup>55</sup> Giacomo Matteotti, *Scritti sul Fascismo*, edited by Stefano Caretti (Pisa: Nistri Lischi, 1983), 193.

<sup>56</sup> Paolo Valera, *Mussolini* (Milan: La Folla, 1924), 33.

<sup>57</sup> *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 21 Sept. 1921.

<sup>58</sup> Lussu, *Marcia su Roma e dintorni*, 108–9.

<sup>59</sup> *The Survey*, Volume 51, 1924.

<sup>60</sup> During these years there were also rumors going around that local ‘*squadristi* had forced political opponents to kill themselves by drinking great quantities of castor oil. It was a method which left no marks on the victim’. Maurice Crain, *Rulers of the World* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1940), 124.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Chi ha ucciso Antonio Piccinini?’, *Il Risorgimento*, 22 Apr. 1923. See also, ASF, Fondo Questura di Ferrara, Serie Gabinetto Cat. A8, primo versamento aa. 1920–1960, b. 17 f. Tommaso Beltrami (1934–1938).

victims were led outside the local chamber of labour or people's houses and beaten, like animals, with bats striking the backs of their necks.

The animalisation of the enemy found another paradigmatic expression in manhunting. In October 1922, in the province of Pesaro, socialist Giuseppe Valenti, who had killed two fascists who were attempting to break into his house, was hunted for five days until he was captured. Thrown in the back of a car and driven around the town as trophy, Valenti was then horribly beaten and disfigured. His arms were broken, his nose almost torn off by a gunshot, joints were popped off and lacerating wounds diffusely soaked his clothes in blood. Outside the Fascio's branch office, an agonising Valenti was put on display to the public and finally executed with a knife.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, fascists not only killed, tortured and degraded their enemies but also projected the mythic constructs and violent imaginaries of redemptive nationalism on the physical surface of their victim's bodies. These 'bodily inscriptions' played upon cultural images of castigation, retribution and renewal and powerfully resonated upon the structures of feeling of post-war Italy. At the same time the ritualised spectacles of suffering played a key role in the foundation of fascist power by revealing the elemental vulnerability of bodily existence.

### The Normalisation of Violence

The willingness of political and social actors to resort to violence is the outcome of a variety of processes. First, it has to be fostered by ideologies that stress the identification of a scapegoat and the construction of clear-cut boundaries between friends and enemies. These ideological constructs would then serve to outwardly express the group's legitimacy and to rationalise its most radical actions.

*Squadristi* presented themselves as members of an embattled community of political soldiers fighting a heroic struggle against an absolute enemy. It comes as no surprise that the *squadristi* defined their reality through a military frame of reference and regularly used war analogies and military jargon to describe their operations. By equating punitive expeditions and physical attacks on individuals with conventional military actions, inhibitions and taboos on violence were progressively anesthetised. In particular, young men and adolescents who had not served in war succumbed more readily to this process of moral regression, making them vulnerable to wartime fantasies of destruction.<sup>63</sup> In 1922 socialist leader Giacomo Menotti Serrati decried:

What really disturbs us is that such a reaction, so difficult to imagine, does not come from the state, nor from any of the public authorities, it comes from below, sinking to the level of arbitrators, criminals and thugs. Armed with revolvers, daggers, rifles and hand bombs, the dregs of society have all been enrolled and are now maintained with twenty or thirty lira a day and live by hunting down socialists. And now the youngsters from our schools have actually gone and joined them. Drunk with romanticised ideas of war, their heads full of patriotic hot air, they see in us the 'Germans', the traitors, and they attack us with zeal, just as if they were fighting for their country, just as if they were soldiers fighting for their lives in the trenches. Students of eighteen to twenty years old are now drawn up amongst criminals and they are brawling with the workers as if they were our foreign enemies.<sup>64</sup>

War analogies were complemented by the dehumanisation of the enemy. The dehumanisation and criminalisation of political enemies involved the attribution of extremely negative characteristics to

<sup>62</sup> ACS, MI DGPS, AGR, Cat G1, ca. 1922 b. 146 f. Pesaro, report of the vice-commissioner of public security to the prefect of Pesaro, 'Cattura ed uccisione del comunista Valenti Giuseppe'.

<sup>63</sup> On youth and *squadrismo*, see, among others, Felicita De Negri, 'Agitazioni e movimenti studenteschi nel primo dopoguerra in Italia', *Studi Storici* 16, 3 (July–Sept. 1975); Paolo Nello, *L'avanguardismo giovanile alle origini del fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1978).

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in translation in Angelo Ventrone, 'Fascism and the Legacy of the Great War', in Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Riitte, eds., *The Legacies of Two World Wars* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 105.

them, either by comparing them to animals that infected the social body (i.e. snakes, rats, jackals, insects or parasites) or to supernatural creatures such as devils or hydra-headed monsters. The ‘other’ was divested of individual identity and reduced to an entitativity: ‘the intoxicated crowd’, ‘the red beast’, ‘the bestial horde’. Drawing on theories of crowd psychology, *squadristi* attached to popular masses stereotypical characters like irrationality, instinct, weakened intellectual reasoning, suggestibility, destructiveness, bestial appetites and predisposition towards criminal and immoral behaviours. Union bosses were categorised as vagabonds, hoodlums and profiteers recruited by ‘professional agitators and ringleaders’, ‘red demagogue’ and ‘false prophets’. The squad commander in the Portomaggiore area, Raul Forti, defined socialist leaders as ‘deniers of God, traitors of the Fatherland and destroyers of the family’.<sup>65</sup> In many *squadristi* accounts the representation of the enemy as ‘other’ also included its de-nationalisation, denaturalisation and racialisation. The use of ethnic and racial stereotyping, through the depiction of socialists as ‘Slavs’, ‘pilgrims from Moscow’ or ‘Asian malaise’ or ‘Moroccans’, fit into a traditional friend/enemy scheme. It symbolised the ‘anti-Nation’ and was portrayed as alien, outsider and ‘internal traitor’.<sup>66</sup> Any agreement with him was impossible. The paradox of this process of dehumanisation was that it did not run against an indistinct and distant ‘other’, but rather one with whom there was a great deal of familiarity.

In the construction of the enemy, the ‘subversive woman’ also played an important role. Stripped of any feminine quality, women were described as crone, ‘wild harpies’ ‘possessed by demons’, ‘disheveled (*scarmigliate*) and screaming in beastly voice’ and ‘hauling cauldrons of boiling oil unto the fascists’. Often, they were said to be inciting the mob with ‘hysterical and bestial’ screams to beat the fascists to death. At other times, they were accused of committing macabre forms of cruelty on the mangled body of the victims such as biting off ears, gouging eyeballs or severing genitals for witchcraft rituals.<sup>67</sup> Socialist women were frequently referred to as ‘red virago’ or more vulgarly ‘Muscovite metropolitan prostitutes’. As a result, people’s houses, peasant’s leagues and local branch offices of the socialist party were commonly defined as ‘red brothels’, whorehouses and ‘strumpet shops’. In the autumn of 1919 the newspaper *Il Fascio* ominously wrote that Italian socialism was nothing but ‘chit chat and fornications’ and the red flag ‘a rag of a dark menstrual colour’.<sup>68</sup> This process of dehumanisation, de-individualisation and objectification of the opponent, who had fallen outside the protection of the law and below the threshold of moral vision, secured the permissibility of violence.

The perpetuation of wartime ideological narratives – the construction of clear-cut boundaries between friend and enemy, ‘us’ and ‘them’, insider and outsider, and a rigid separation of ‘internal and external morals’ – cannot explain everything.<sup>69</sup> While they are necessary vectors for the development of individual and collective dispositions to violence, they are not enough to cause its actual production and perpetration. Mythic and ideological constructs must be grafted on specific group dynamics (i.e. group influence, peer pressure to conform, Milgram’s agentic state etc.). Property destruction, killings, beatings, abductions, tortures and degrading treatment always took place within a group context, and it can be argued that the group played a crucial role in transforming the beliefs and attitudes of individual *squadristi* to the point where commissioning acts of violence was normalised and routinised. This psychological mechanism of cognitive restructuring, as Sven Reichardt specified in his pioneering diachronic comparison of *squadismo* and the SA, must be primarily searched in the self-contained and impermeable milieu of the squads and their overarching belief system.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Forti and Ghedini, *L'avvento del Fascismo: Cronache Ferraresi* (Ferrara: Taddei, 1923), 13.

<sup>66</sup> The list of derogatory remarks on the socialist enemy has been compiled by perusing Chiurco, *Storia della rivoluzione fascista*, 5 vols.; *Barbarie Rossa Riassunto cronologico delle gesta compiute dai socialisti italiani* and several diaries, memoirs and biographies of *squadristi* in the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>67</sup> These descriptions can be found in *Barbarie Rossa*.

<sup>68</sup> Quotes in Reichardt, *Camicie nere e Camicie brune*, 381–2.

<sup>69</sup> Trutz Von Trotha, ‘Forms of Martial Power: Total Wars, Wars of Pacification and Raid’, in George Elwert, ed., *Dynamics of Violence. Processes of Escalation and De-Escalation in Violent Group Conflicts* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1999), 37–8.

<sup>70</sup> Reichardt, *Camicie nere e Camicie Brune*, 231–300.

From 1919 onward the squad represented the main structuring unit in the organisational life of fascism. The Central Command of the *Fascio di Combattimento* noted the importance of setting up armed squads with relatively small memberships in order to impose a high level of ideological and behavioural conformity. However, the development of smaller sized groups not only served to instil unquestioned loyalty, discipline and compliance within the *squadristi*, but also ensured the individual's departure from generally accepted societal norms and values as well as their integration into a subculture with its own idiosyncratic set of beliefs, behavioural expectations and practices. In short, such an organisational setting was geared towards socialising militants into an alternative moral system that exalted aggressiveness, combative virility and emotional identification with their comrades.

Establishing affective ties was fundamental in the recruitment strategies of the squads. Recent studies have shown that squads were built and evolved in close-knit personal networks.<sup>71</sup> Those networks were territorially based (village, hamlet or district) and consisted of clusters of relations where ties of kinship, friendship and neighbourhood prevailed. This allowed high levels of commitment through the activation of bonds of mutual obligation and intense control and monitoring of militants. During an investigation into the criminal activities of a squad in Molinella, province of Bologna, a police commissioner emphasised that 'the cohesion of these people is such that it makes your hair stand on end'.<sup>72</sup>

An additional explanation for the intensity of individual commitment is related to the *squadristi*'s youth. The young age of the recruits and, more generally, certain psychological traits of late adolescence and young adulthood (i.e. a search for identity, utopian enthusiasm, exuberance, a taste for adventure and the tremendous importance of peer influence) fostered fraternal bonds and strong senses of communion and loyalty to the squad.<sup>73</sup> Florentine *squadrista* Piazzesi significantly wrote: 'if I should die on the truck during a punitive expedition, close to my comrades, while singing hymns to the youth, I would not have had the worst of deaths'.<sup>74</sup> Fascist leaders worked to reinforce affective ties through rites and oaths, dress code, symbols and standardised forms of behaviour, as well as a more general political culture that exalted the primacy of the group over the individual. In particular, funerals of fallen blackshirts, with their liturgies and iconographies construed on the burial of the unknown soldier, became a veritable exercise of emotional cohesion and 'mass suggestion'.<sup>75</sup>

Rigid pressure was exercised to make *squadristi* conform to the expectations of the squad. Accordingly, whether it was to earn the respect of comrades or the fear of letting them down, *squadristi* seemed to act out of a sense of moral commitment and obligation to their comrades. The correspondent of *Avanti!* in Ferrara highlighted the role of peer pressure in the process of undermining individual inhibitions and inner restraints to physical aggressiveness:

They are all young men between eighteen and thirty years old, elegantly dressed, with faces bearing stilted grim expressions, wearing hats at jaunty angle (*cappello alle ventitre*) and showing a cocky and provocative attitude. They are armed with small wooden bats, partly wrapped in leather and provided with a kernel of lead on the top, which serves to strike the victim with greater security. Local socialist comrades have informed me that there are those among the *squadristi*, who taken individually are not bad guys, but when they are bounded together, ready to launch a raid, they look unrecognisable, appearing as they are unable to restrain themselves from performing the worst acts of cruelty and degradation.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Reichardt, *Ibid.* 243–8.

<sup>72</sup> Telespresso form from the Deputy Commissioner G. Terranova to prefect, 12 Aug. 1921, in ASB, Gabinetto di Prefettura, 1345, f. Molinella – Ordine Pubblico, foglio non numerato.

<sup>73</sup> Peter H. Merkl, 'Conclusion: Collective Purposes and Individual Motifs', in Peter H. Merkl, ed., *Political Violence and Terror: Motifs and Motivations* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), 358–9.

<sup>74</sup> Mario Piazzesi, *Diario di uno squadrista toscano: 1919–1922* (Roma: Bonacci, 1981), 164.

<sup>75</sup> Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralisation of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 19–31; Roberta Suzzi Valli 'Il culto dei martiri fascisti', in Oliver Janz e Lutz Klinkhammer, eds., *La morte per la patria. La celebrazione dei caduti dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica* (Roma, Donzelli, 2008), 101–17.

<sup>76</sup> 'Su e Giù per Ferrara', *Avanti!*, 12 Apr. 1921.

Commitment did not only derive from the small dimension of the squads' personal cliques, or the young age of the *squadristi*'s recruits. *Squadristo* also reinforced commitment through strict control of its recruits. In late 1921 and early 1922, the *Comando Generale delle squadre di combattimento* stressed the importance of instilling the 'habit of an individual and collective discipline' into the militants.<sup>77</sup> Those militants who transgressed orders, failed to use all means to attack 'the secret and avowed internal enemies', were unable to live up to the duty of firmest solidarity with their 'comrades of faith' or lacked the 'sense to meet the enemies of Italy on the basis of a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' were considered traitors – impure and unworthy.<sup>78</sup> Fear of disciplinary punishment, ranging from expulsion to assassination, loss of comradeship and respect from other fellow comrades added incentives to discipline. The *squadristi* were expected to blindly obey and execute any order of their *caposquadra*. The constant physical presence of the *caposquadra*, whose authority rested on his charisma, increased the level of obedience. Having fought in the war, as officers of the Arditi, Alpini and Bersaglieri, these *capisquadra* commanded deference and admiration from the younger *squadristi* as embodiments of the ideal of militarised masculinity. *Squadristi* gave them their undivided loyalty, devotion and uncompromising commitment. As a result, the *capisquadra* yielded great influence over them and stiffened their determination to kill, beat, abuse, injure and plunder.<sup>79</sup>

Beyond situational factors, it is important to remember how violence itself created the essential condition for its perpetuation and legitimisation. 'Men who have killed together, burned houses, terrorised whole country-sides', Angelo Tasca wrote, 'cannot stop or separate. To commit crimes at top speed became a law, for one crime could only be washed out by another. The bond uniting the aggressors was not their own blood, which was seldom spilled, but the blood of their victims. Feeling that nothing could quench the hatred in which they were held, they went to all the lengths, for they knew that once they hesitated, once their enemy was given a breathing space, they were lost'.<sup>80</sup> Communal acts of violence and terror intensified bonds of loyalty, beliefs in a common destiny and increased the psychological distance between the *squadristi* and the outside world. At the same time, the shared experience of destroying, killing, beating and torturing made everyone an accomplice and served to smother any sense of guilt, shame or regret.

In summary, group pressure to conform and the authoritarian/hierarchical structure of the squads contributed to the production and maintenance of violence. Once a militant was absorbed into a community of friend-comrades, his image of external reality was filtered (and distorted) through the group, precipitating a sequential disengagement from conventional morality and a re-conceptualisation of violence as routine, everyday work. This kind of violent habitus was strengthened daily through the direct experience of violence. In this context, violence became a normative orientation and the structuring principle of the fascist experience.

### The Institutionalisation of Violence after the March on Rome

After the March on Rome, *squadristi* violence did not stop. According to Gaetano Salvemini, from 1 November 1922 to 31 March 1923, fascists killed no less than 118 people at a national level.<sup>81</sup> In his impressive exposé, 'A Year of Fascist Domination' (1924), Matteotti wrote that fascist violence and terrorist activities were a 'permanent feature' in people's lives and, in some parts of the country,

<sup>77</sup> 'Direttive per l'organizzazione delle squadre fasciste', in Chirico, *Storia della rivoluzione fascista*, Vol. IV, 485–9.

<sup>78</sup> *Il Popolo d'Italia*, n. 237, 4 Oct. 1922 in ACS Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (MRF) b. 142, f. 142 169 sotof. 3, f. n.n. (Comando Generale, Regolamento di disciplina per la milizia fascista di Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Emilio De Bono, Italo Balbo per il Comando Generale e Michele Bianchi per la Direzione del Partito). The manuscript draft of the disciplinary regulation with 69 articles in ACS, MFR, b. 134, f. 169, sotof. 1 n. 88.

<sup>79</sup> See the paradigmatic case of Augusto Maran, caposquadra of Argenta (Ferrara), ACS, MI DG Divisione Servizi infomatici e speciali (SIS), b. 227.

<sup>80</sup> Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 181.

<sup>81</sup> Salvemini, *The Origins of Fascism in Italy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 390.

the *squadristi* had become a law unto themselves, replacing law enforcement agencies in dispensing ‘justice’. He estimated that between November 1922 and November 1923, fascists were responsible for 150 assassinations and over 2,000 cases of violence against individuals, as well as the wrecking of local and regional branch offices of PSI, CPI and the Italian People’s Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano*; PPI) and the illegal seizure of hundreds of newspapers.<sup>82</sup>

At this stage, *squadristi* violence primarily reflected an internal conflict in the National Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*; PNF) – both at national and local levels – between the ‘revisionism’ of those who advocated a process of de-escalation, de-militarisation and normalisation of the party and the ‘integralism’ of the provincial Ras who were determined to use violence until the complete overthrowing of existing parliamentary institutions and the creation of a new fascist state. In this view, the use of high levels of indiscriminate violence emerged as a rational strategy for fascist radicals to employ in order to challenge Mussolini’s conciliatory tactics and to precipitate a revolutionary crisis. It also served to expand fascist power in those districts and locales that were not entirely subdued to it, and at the same time, to consolidate it in the already controlled provinces, through the combination of terror and economic coercion.<sup>83</sup>

The establishment of violence as a resource of labour management needs some consideration as it defined the way in which violent actions created a conduit for *squadrismo* into a constellation of economic and financial interests. Conflictual relations between labour and capital, which albeit at a more moderate level continued to persist in the first years after the seizure of power, secured a market for violence, and those *squadristi* with a well-established reputation for ruthless violence were bound to exploit this market. *Squadristi* were utilised to repress workers’ efforts to unionise outside the fascist syndicate, breaking strikes and punishing strikers. Many *squadristi* exploited their position as intermediaries between employees and employers to insinuate themselves into strategic roles within the syndical and corporative institutions of the regime. They were allowed to access funds accumulated by workers’ fees and dues, and, particularly in the first years, they were also able to extort entrepreneurs and landowners by threatening strikes. From the alliance between the *squadristi* in the syndical organisation, representatives of the PNF and businessmen, a number of powerful local coalitions were formed.<sup>84</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, the dynamics of fascist violence in the immediate aftermath of the march can be explained, in part, with reference to the revolutionary demands of the most extreme wing of fascism, and in part by the internal characteristics of the party militia and its inherent centrifugal tendencies that jeopardised the cohesion and institutionalisation of armed groups into an authoritarian system.

To submit the leaders of *squadrismo* to a long-standing commitment to organisational discipline and to restrain the use of indiscriminate violence with its delegitimising effects on the government, the newly established Grand Council instituted the Voluntary Militia for National Security (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*; MVSN).<sup>85</sup> The formation of such armed force satisfied Mussolini’s need to impose a centralised control of the party-militia and to reorganise fascist paramilitary squads into ‘a formal, hierarchical military structure, making them an official institution of the

<sup>82</sup> Matteotti, *Scritti sul Fascismo*, 167–253. Quote is on 26.

<sup>83</sup> Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (New York: Scribner’s, 1973) and Idem ‘Fascism in Italy: The Second Wave’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), 75–100.

<sup>84</sup> For the formation of powerful and corrupted local cartels, see Salvatore Lupo, *Il Fascismo. La politica di un regime totalitario* (Roma: Donzelli, 2000); Millan, *Squadrismo and squadristi*, 111–41; Paolo Giovannini and Marco Palla, eds., *Il Fascismo dalle mani sporche: dittatura, corruzione, affarismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2019); Paul Corner, *L’Italia fascista. Politica e opinione popolare sotto la dittatura* (Roma: Carocci, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> A full scientific study of the MVSN does not exist yet. However for a general overview, see Alberto Aquarone, ‘La milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale’, in Alberto Aquarone and Maurizio Vernassa, eds, *Il Regime fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), 84–111. Elisa Valleri, ‘Dal partito armato al regime totalitario: la Milizia’, *Italia contemporanea*, Oct.–Dec. (1980), 31–60.

Italian State'.<sup>86</sup> In numerous places, the formation of the MVSN spurred *squadristi* resistance and gave them a niche for their anti-normalisation discourses and for the perpetuation of violence.<sup>87</sup>

Even though the decree establishing the fascist militia ordained that 'all parties whatsoever shall be forbidden to have formations of a military character', squads were not always dissolved, and some continued to exist outside the MVSN. The most powerful provincial Ras deliberately did not demobilise their private armies in order to counterbalance Mussolini's centripetal/centralising strategies. They, in fact, needed to legitimise their position by further means in order to maximise their political and military power in the provinces. The perpetuation of violence, even if continually disintegrated into banditry and 'gangsterism', was not only associated with the repression of political dissension or with deliberate strategies of destabilisation of the still fragile legitimacy of Mussolini's government, but also linked to the intense struggle for power within the PNF at local and national levels. Despite the efforts to integrate the *squadristi* into regular armed forces and civilian sectors – an attempt to convert the charisma of violence into traditional legitimacy by inserting the squads into a larger normative framework – their undivided loyalty to local Ras and commanders were still all powerful.

The perpetuation of a *squadristi*'s *Weltanschauung* was also a partial expression of the same sense of self-empowerment that allowed them 'to think and act in ways that transcended moral and cultural inhibitions'.<sup>88</sup> The use of violence was also deemed necessary because people did not forget. In this perspective, violence came to function as a 'mnemonic device' designated to revive images of pain, suffering and horror in victims and witnesses and to inject dark fears and forebodings to all others. Thus, the perpetuation of violence, and the actual threat of physical harm and death, served to build a climate of repression and apathetic compliance.

*Squadristi* attributed utmost importance to the preservation and active development of their identity. Accordingly, the experience of violence, even when it was indistinguishable from criminal action, continued to provide a sense of 'ecstatic communal belonging'.<sup>89</sup> While the use of violence in the punitive expeditions of the ante-March served to annihilate the political enemy and to reinforce the structures of solidarity within the group, the use of violence in the years of the dictatorship assumed the character of a ritual of identity restoration; it was a way of evoking the experience of the squad and recovering a direct, socially effective sense of camaraderie in violence. In addition, violent actions served to perpetuate *squadristi* identity by reproducing a boundary between themselves and the rest of society.<sup>90</sup>

For many *squadristi*, violence remained a familiar exercise, a routine that ran 'like a bright thread through the fabric of life'.<sup>91</sup> However, the reason for violence was not always politically motivated. Groups of *squadristi* and MVSN militiamen were also involved in criminal activities – mainly extortion-protection rackets, illegal enterprises and forms of micro-criminality – and enforced their control over the territory through crude intimidation, beatings and murders.<sup>92</sup> Having evolved in the competitive, bickering and violent social world of the squads, wherein violence was a 'cultural expectation', they forged reputations as ruthless and predatory individuals. Their resoluteness for violence and strutting brutality was the key to their local power. These groups were allowed to continue to exist, and sometimes prosper, as long as they paid lip service to the regime and were willing to carry

<sup>86</sup> Lyttelton, *Seizure of Power*, 105.

<sup>87</sup> On *squadristi* disorders in Pistoia, see ACS, Carte Michele Bianchi, fasc. 43, 1 May 1923; in Florence, Lyttelton, *Fascism in Italy*, 77.

<sup>88</sup> Aristotle Kallis, *Genocide and Fascism: The Eliminationist Drive in Fascist Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 100.

<sup>89</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', *The New York Review of Books*, 6 Feb. 1975, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Roberta Suzzi Valli, 'The Myth of Squadrismo in the Fascist Regime', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, 2 (2000), 131–50. On the representation of *squadrismo* during the dictatorship, Ruth Ben Ghiat, *Fascist Modernity. Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X. La mostra della Rivoluzione fascista del 1932* (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2003); Marla Stone, 'Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, 2 (1993), 215–43.

<sup>91</sup> Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 102.

<sup>92</sup> Millan, *Squadrismo e squadristi nella dittatura fascista*, 111–41.

out its 'dirty jobs'. The coexistence between legal and illegal violent practices remained integral to the repressive policy of fascism.

The approval of the Laws for the Defence of the State (1925–6), which established a single-party regime and produced a vast machinery of legal repression, accelerated the 'statisation' of fascist violence. By keeping the instruments for rooting out and repressing dissent in the hands of state functionaries rather than fascist squads, and by undercutting the influence of provincial bosses by strengthening prefectorial powers, the 'special legislation' created the conditions for a firm disciplinisation of *squadristi*. The purging of local and communal violent cliques served to substantially diminish 'fascist illegalism' and reinforced the need for internal bureaucratisation (and therefore centralisation) of the PNF. This formalisation mechanism involved the suppression of any alternative form of power formation within the fascist movement, a shuffling of top staff members and the assimilation of the *squadristi* into the burgeoning administrative, syndical-corporative and colonial structures of the regime. Those *squadristi* who refused this process of bureaucratic streamlining were rapidly morphed into criminals, subversives, perverts and psychopaths addicted to violence. Some of them were sent into political confinement, while others existed in a precautionary oblivion and later reappeared in search of redemption in the puppet regime of Salò.<sup>93</sup>

The containment of *squadrismo* did not obliterate violence but rather signalled its shift from public spaces to the segregated MVSN provincial investigative offices (*Uffici Provinciali Investigativi*; UPI) or PNF headquarter rooms. In some places, the type of services the *squadristi* provided were still required. In Ferrara, for instance, former blackshirts were responsible for the secret detention, interrogation, beating and torturing of dozens of citizens.<sup>94</sup> In 1935 two victims denounced the existence of a commission or 'fascist illegal court' that had ordered the cudgeling and the administering of castor oils against 'subversives'. The secrecy of violence and torture was used as an instrument of political terror – which instilled fear and apprehension without fuelling scandal in the public domain – and generated consent through disbelief in distant observers. This does not mean that these practices of violence remained unnoticed or ignored, but the knowing (or supposing) of the existence of these invisible spaces – operating outside legal or moral boundaries, where individuals were tortured during extenuating questioning sessions – produced a pervasive state of fear, which often led to passive complicity and moral indifference.<sup>95</sup> This complicity grew in parallel with the gradual contraction and dissolution of social spaces.<sup>96</sup> In this way violence did not only terrorise individuals and communities but also induced silence and isolation, thereby rendering the victims invisible. The source of social conformity and orderliness in the years of the dictatorship must be also be considered in the embedding of violence into the deep structures of everyday life and into the crisis of communication that it produced.

## Conclusions

There is no denying that violence was the structuring and permeating allegory of the fascist experience. Understanding its innermost nature requires being able to look at it in its proper historical and moral context, to cognise its structural and morphological uniformities and to measure its effects through the realities of lived experience. In that regard, this article has been primarily conceived to extricate the social and somatic aspects of *squadristi* violence and to interrogate how the relentless exposure to abhorrent brutalities in the everyday life shaped subjectivities both among perpetrators and victims, as well as the lives of whole communities.

<sup>93</sup> James Burgwyn, *Mussolini and the Salò Republic: The Failure of a Puppet Regime* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 83–100.

<sup>94</sup> ASF, Fondo Questura di Ferrara, Serie Gabinetto Cat. A8, primo versamento aa. 1920–1960, b. 51 f. 1643 'Delfanti Alessandro' (1944–1950).

<sup>95</sup> Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*, chs. 6, 7, 8.

<sup>96</sup> See, for instance, the memories of Ferrarese partisan, Spero Ghedini in Giorgio Rochat, *Balbo* (Torino: Utet 1986).

This article has operated from the premise that the analytical tools offered in recent years to diagnose the brutality of *squadristo* are too static or mechanical. Therefore, it has set out to approach violence not as an outcome but as a social process. This allows a more robust articulation of the dynamic experiential field through which death, physical suffering and destruction transcended the moment of their actualisation and became inscribed in the structures of the everyday.

*Squadristo* was unquestionably an outgrowth of the First World War. Throughout Europe, the fall of empires, the rise of new nation states and the polarising duality of revolution and counterrevolution allowed the rapid transmutation of war mythopoeia into the multifaceted phenomenon of paramilitarism. Among the variety of irregular armed formations, which mobilised to fight the 'Red Beast', the symbiosis of violence and politics experimented by Mussolini's party-militia in its seizure of power and construction of a new political order became a prototypical operational model for right-wing organisations in interwar Europe. In a broad perspective, the analysis proposed in this article helps to graphically delineate the disintegration of democratic polities and the reconfiguration of power at local and national levels under the unrelenting pressure of violence on daily life.

The careful attention to the detail of murders, brutalities, tortures and other physical and psychological torments has aimed to decode those *squadristi*'s imaginaries, worldviews, modes of moral reasoning and fantasies about the 'enemy within', which provided for the motivational dispositions and post hoc rationalisations of violence.

Finally, the detailed accounting of events and situations can corroborate the proposition that *squadristi* violence was more intense than hitherto recognised. It has been shown how violence shattered the existence of individuals and groups, exposing them to extreme vulnerability and pure contingency to the point of claustrophobic oppression. To a certain extent, this article can be read as an attempt to bring back to light the visceral intensity and repugnant complexion of *squadristi* violence which temporal distance and posthumous caricaturisation have contributed to sanitize.