

Italy: Berlusconi government seeks to rehabilitate fascism

Marianne Arens
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Within months of returning to power, the right-wing Italian government is becoming increasingly explicit in its political pronouncements. Prominent members of the ruling coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi have recently launched a concerted campaign for the rehabilitation of fascism.

It was Berlusconi who fired the first shot shortly after assuming office as prime minister. On April 25, Italy's national holiday marking the country's liberation from fascism, Berlusconi declared that, while it was appropriate to acknowledge the anti-fascist resistance (*Resistenza*), it was also necessary to understand the motives of the "Ragazzi di Salò."

Berlusconi was referring to those Italian soldiers who defended Benito Mussolini's "Republic of Salò." This so-called "Italian social republic" established by the Italian fascists existed from 1943 to 1945 under the military protection of Germany's Nazi regime in northern Italy.

Similar comments had been made during the spring election campaign by the entrepreneur and senator Giuseppe Ciarrapico, a close friend of Berlusconi. "The Italian social republic never sent anybody to the concentration camps; the Germans were to blame," Ciarrapico declared.

Now, the country's defence secretary Ignazio La Russa has also expressed his admiration for the Italian fascists. Provocatively using the occasion of a ceremony commemorating the Rome resistance fighters of September 1943, La Russa evoked the memory of those fascists who sided with Mussolini after the official surrender of Rome.

Then on September 8, at a ceremony in which President Giorgio Napolitano laid a laurel wreath at the memorial for Rome's partisans at Porta San Paolo, La Russa declared that for his part he felt obliged to also

recall the role played by those soldiers who had served the "Italian social republic."

La Russa said: "I would not be respecting my conscience if I did not pay my respects to the soldiers of the social republic of Salò, who from their point of view also fought for the values of their native country and resisted the advance of the Anglo Americans in Italy. They also earn the respect of all those who regard the history of Italy with objectivity."

A short historical review: On September 8, 1943 the Italian head of state Pietro Badoglio agreed an armistice with the allied forces that had landed in Sicily and southern Italy. The German army reacted by encircling Rome, freeing Mussolini from the fortress where he was being detained, and installed him as head of the newly founded republic of Salò in northern Italy. While Badoglio and the king fled to the south under the control of the allies, 800,000 Italian soldiers were disarmed by the Nazi troops.

It was left to the partisans to defend the Italian capital in a series of heroic campaigns against the Nazi troops. It took a further nine months until Rome was liberated by the advancing allied troops. During this time there was also a major increase in the deportation of Italian Jews to German concentration camps (under the nose of Vatican!)

Ignazio Benito Maria La Russa, whose middle name is the same as that of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, is president of the National Alliance, one of the parties involved in Berlusconi's right-wing alliance "People of Liberty" (Pdl). In May he was appointed defence secretary. Like his father, La Russa was active in Italy's main postwar fascist party, the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano—MSI), the forerunner of the National Alliance.

La Russa is the minister in Berlusconi's government

currently responsible for posting soldiers for duties inside the country while transforming former military barracks into internment camps for “illegal” immigrants to be guarded by army units.

Following Berlusconi’s reelection members of the post-fascist National Alliance have assumed top positions inside the country. La Russa is defence secretary, while the NA president Gianfranco Fini has been appointed the president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. The new mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, also has a fascist past.

Alemanno also recently defended fascism in an interview with the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. Shortly before leaving for Israel and a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial shrine, Alemanno declared that fascism also had its good sides, and that Hitler’s Germany had done the real damage by imposing upon Italy the race laws of 1938.

“Fascism was a more complex phenomenon,” Alemanno declared. “Many [of its supporters] were of good faith. What was absolutely bad were the race laws taken over by fascism, which sealed its political and cultural fate.” These laws were “a concession to Nazism” and were not originally a part of fascism.

As a young man, Gianni Alemanno was a member of the “youth front” of the MSI, the party that represented a direct link to the fascism of Benito Mussolini. He is married to the daughter of Pino Rauti who was a founding member of the MSI and in 1956 set up the right-wing terrorist organization Ordine Nuovo. Alemanno was elected as the first right-wing mayor of Rome since the Second World War just two weeks after the parliamentary elections that brought Berlusconi’s coalition to power.

The statements by La Russa and Alemanno refute the official pretence that the National Alliance under its chairman Gianfranco Fini went through a “cleansing” and subsequently dissociated itself from fascism. In 2003 Fini had declared fascism to be “absolutely bad” during a previous visit to Yad Vashem in a move aimed at making his party more respectable.

The latest attempt to rehabilitate fascism is based on entirely fraudulent premises. Not only did Mussolini brutally persecute his political opponents, abolish free elections and Italy’s trade unions, lead a bloody colonial war and militarise the entire society; racial discrimination was also an integral component of

Italian fascism. Italians of Arian and Jewish descent were prevented from living together, Slavs were regarded as inferior and Mussolini’s regime sought to introduce birth control aimed at preserving “racial purity.” In the course of conducting its war against Abyssinia, the fascist government in Rome also sought to justify its gas attacks on the native population by arguing that the Abyssinians were an “inferior” race.



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