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The Möbius strip of memory and history, faith, and fascism – in an Italian Prisoner of War memoir

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Abstract

Giovanni Palermo was an Italian prisoner of war captured at the battle of Bardia[1] on 3 January 1941 in Libya. He was transferred by ship to Durban and from there, taken to Zonderwater prisoner of war (POW) camp near Pretoria. Palermo published his memoir in 1972 detailing his capture and POW experiences.[2] A close reading of his translated memoir presents several historical challenges. He uncritically makes his personal bias plain from the start, yet at the same time sees himself as the custodian of the true narrative of Italian POW history, even where the historical record indicates a contrary truth to his. Religious and political ideologies present themselves like a Möbius strip at various points throughout his memoir, not least with an opening endorsement by a Christian religious figure who frames what is to follow. Palermo's strongly held views on purity, his self-belief that he is the bearer of the real truth, and his desire to make Italy great again have contemporary societal and theological resonances.

Keywords

Historical theology; Giovanni Palermo; prisoner of war; fascism

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1 Contemporary spelling now rendered Bardiyah.

2 I was approached by Dr Karen Horn from the University of the Free State at the start of 2021 to critique the theology of a Second World War Italian Prisoner of War called Giovanni Palermo. She sent me an English translation of his POW memoir, *We! Prisoners, Egypt - South Africa, 1941–1947, P.O.W. 104702* (translated by Tiaré Totaro), to work from. Her research interest subsequently shifted, so our collaboration did not mature, but I am indebted to her for introducing me to this intriguing figure. A limitation that must be acknowledged up front is the translation from Italian to English for which I am deeply indebted to Totaro for. Not knowing Italian, I realise some cultural nuances may and probably have been lost in translation, such is the nature of translation. Yet significant themes still emerge even if linguistic details may have been lost.

Introduction

A Möbius strip is a strange-looking surface, one that looks impossible but can exist in reality. The shape is one continuous side that is formed by joining the ends of a rectangular strip after twisting an end through 180°. It can exist as a mathematical object, an abstract topological space and concretely as a mechanical belt that wears evenly on both sides. It emerges in art, and famously so in the work of the Dutch graphic artist, Maurits Cornelis (M.C.) Escher, who produced prints based on the concept. Beyond these well-known examples, the Möbius strip has been applied as a metaphor to the study of history. Memory and history are like the two distinct surfaces of a Möbius strip that when traced out, reveals only one continuous surface.[3] This metaphor will emerge in the critique of the memoir of Giovanni Palermo, an Italian prisoner of war captured at the battle of Bardia and transferred by ship to Durban and then the Zonderwater prisoner of war (POW) camp near Pretoria. Besides memory and history being like a Möbius strip, a similar yet cautionary critique will be levelled on the link between religious faith and political ideology.

To the glory of eternal Rome

Contemporary historians have come to view memoirs as an important source, and historical tool, in giving voice to the lives of ordinary people.[4] Fass notes that "even those memoirs least devoted to reconstructing social spaces because they describe a long slice of time or emphasize personal encounters … expose large swaths of social life."[5] This insight is apposite to Palermo's memoir. Palermo makes plain his personal bias from the start. He intentionally sets out to pay homage to his soldier comrades with a narrative that emphasizes the glory and honour of his fascist Italian ideals. In so doing he provides a social and ideological commentary. Fass further argues that "the personal can provide a sense of the unique individual variation on commonly depicted historical experiences" but this must

3 D.A. Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination: Contemporary Memory, History and Narrative" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Wits University, 2013), 32.

4 P.S. Fass, "The Memoir Problem," *Reviews in American History* 34 (2006): 107.

5 Fass, "The Memoir Problem," 110.

be held in tension with the reality that a "memoir is not a substitute for systematic historical reconstruction."[6] The task therefore remains to both secular and church historians to disassemble objectively known events and facts, hence the parallel work in this article of positioning Palermo's memoir in its broader military, POW and social contexts.

Beyond the task of factual reconstruction, memoirs act as a reminder that the fundamental unit of historical experience is people's lived experiences.[7] This lived human experience is far from objective and inherently gives expression to numerous biases, fears and hopes, disappointments and dreams, or the recollection thereof – all of which are evident in Palermo's memoir. Importantly, a memoir embellishes and trims facts as the writer rearranges earlier memories, providing carefully chosen details to give voice to an experience or episode that they cannot forget.[8] Dominant words and phrases in Palermo's memoir are illustrative in this regard.

The first observation is that Palermo, in his own eyes, is the custodian of truth and objectivity. Translated into English, he makes use of phrases such as "for the sake of objectivity, it needs to be said …" or "for the sake of objectivity and truth …" or "this honest and objective story," repeatedly using the terms "objective," "objectivity," "objectively," and "truth". He is writing what he terms the "utter truth" and the "real story." These themes are not isolated and are found in Italian literature from the 1930s and 40s. Ben-Ghiat notes that there was "a collective desire to present the intellectual climate of fascism as 'impartial' and 'objective'".[9] However, Palermo is writing his memoir in the 1970s, three decades after his capture at Bardia. He says he felt compelled to write his memoir because other POWs had been remembered but not Italian POWs.[10] But perhaps he was also motivated to write in response to societal trends he observed in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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6 Fass, "The Memoir Problem," 111.

7 Fass, "The Memoir Problem," 111.

8 Fass, "The Memoir Problem," 120.

9 R. Ben-Ghiat, Fascism, "Writing, and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930-1950," *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 3 (1995), 654.

10 G. Palermo, *We! Prisoners, Egypt - South Africa, 1941–1947, P.O.W. 104702* (Lucano Editore, 1972, translated by Tiaré Totaro), 227.

The 1970s was a dramatic decade in Italy history.[11] There had been a long season of strikes, social conflict and wage demands that started in the autumn of 1969 and only peaked in 1975.[12] The international payment system based on the dollar collapsed in 1971; there was a rise in international oil prices, and the Italian economy was profoundly shaken leading to rising unemployment and inflation.[13] A controversial debate on the decriminalization of abortion gained public resonance in the 1970s.[14] According to Frisone, it was an era when "working women showed increasing interest in learning more about their body and in putting into practice autonomous forms of body-care."[15] Another trend emerged. Church attendance declined from the 1960s onwards with a brief period of stability in the 1980s.[16] Perhaps in recounting the past Palermo is confronting the social upheavals of his present reality in the 1970s, seeking a way to rekindle a hope in a great and glorious Italian future. However, there is no internal evidence within his memoir to substantiate these speculations, so the question remains unanswered as to what motivated him to write what he did, *when* he did, to honour an elite group of (fanatical) Italian POW that were held captive in South Africa.

A second observation, and one that has contemporary resonance, is that the idea of greatness dominates his narrative. He is concerned with the greatness of his beloved Italy. This is expressed in various ways when he refers to the "the old and eternal Italy," "the Italy of Honour" and "greatness of Eternal Rome". He speaks of his former comrades as heroes because they fell for the "greatness of Italy". He quotes, at length, a long song composed

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11 P. Bini, "Power and Economics in Italy: From the Social Conflicts of the 1970s to the Euro-Crisis," in M. Mosca (ed.), *Power in Economic Thought* (Palgrave Studies in the History of Economic Thought, 2018), 351.

12 Bini, "Power and Economics in Italy," 352.

13 Bini, "Power and Economics in Italy," 351.

14 A. Frisone, "Gendering the Class Struggle: Trade Union Feminism in Italy in the 1970s," in *Marín Corbera, Martí; Domènech Sampere, Xavier; Martínez i Muntada, Ricard (eds.): III International Conference Strikes and Social Conflicts: Combined historical approaches to conflict* (2016), 833.

15 Frisone, "Gendering the Class Struggle," 832.

16 C. Vezzoni and F. Biolcati-Rinaldi, "Church Attendance and Religious Change in Italy, 1968–2010: A Multilevel Analysis of Pooled Datasets," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 1 (2015), 100.

by Germano Cangi entitled, "The Canto of a True Prisoner Son". A short excerpt translated into English refers:[17]

> Rise again, O Italy, so that your cry
>
> Of pain may reach the hearts
>
> Of all your children strayed
>
> Like a burning arrow
>
> To reawaken in them, finally, patriotic love
>
> Lost in moments of aberration.
>
> May honour be the only flame
>
> That remains alight. May the heroes
>
> Fallen for your greatness
>
> Be the bastion against the foreign!

He laments the loss of the moral greatness in the other Italian POWs. He writes that he, along with some elite POWs,

> lived on an infinite flame of patriotic love and faith, these sublime things were the only aim of our hard existence, to show the English, the [POW] sell outs, the vile and the weak that there are and there always will be Italians that do not give up and never give in to the enemy, whoever he may be, and to maintain the name of our beloved Italy sacrosanct and elevated.[18]

When this group of elite POWs is finally repatriated to Italy, they "salute and kiss the sacred land palpitating and filled with great emotion," determined to invite every good Italian to respond in kind with "a decisive and solid vow of absolute dedication to the Motherland."[19] So, Palermo is a self-confessed custodian of objectivity and the truth. He is also an advocate for making Italy great again.

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17 Palermo, *We! Prisoners,* 138.

18 Palermo, *We! Prisoners,* 202.

19 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 224.

Beyond this, he references purity more than any other concept (except greatness). His is "the pure story of real prisoners."[20] They are pure prisoners who hold to the purest sentiment of God – Homeland – Family.[21] Their love for Italy is fuelled by the purist oxygen.[22] He remembers the purest of blood flowing from his injured commander.[23] Palermo prays that all his fallen comrades may be venerated as pure Italians.[24] The veneration of fallen comrades is not incidental to his narrative. Malone argues that from the earliest days of Italian fascism "the dead emerged as exemplars and their willingness to die was taken as evidence of the justness of a cause."[25] Palermo amplifies this by penning another prayer that links his faith with purity of heart and the glory of Italy:[26]

> Immense and great GOD,
>
> Shine this light, Yours, beaming upon eternal Italy.
>
> Ignite that face that leads afar, vibrant, and candid eternal love.
>
> Our hearts, full of supreme faith, ardent and pure, turn to You.

Not to belabour the point, but he speaks about pure blood, pure people, pure prayer, pure truth, pure beings, pure offerings and even an absolute category of The Pure. He frames those POWs like him – We! Prisoners - as the pure ones, while the other POWs he considers impure scum.[27] Only this elite have a pure faith and pure deeds.

The theme of purity, like objectivity mentioned previously, is not unprecedented. Many novels from the 1930s onwards explored the idea of purity. For example, according to Ben-Ghiat, De Michelis' novel *Adamo* set up "in opposition between the purity of the Italian provinces and the

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20 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 9.

21 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 11–12.

22 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 23.

23 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 23.

24 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 30.

25 H. Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar: Military Cemeteries and Dead Heroes in Mussolini's Italy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 1 (2022): 35.

26 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 107.

27 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 152.

immorality of the city."[28] De Michelis was open about his fascist faith.[29] Likewise, argues Ben-Ghiat, Barbaro in his novel *Luce fredda* "calls the 'cold light' of 'objectivity' into service to produce a damning collective portrait of the Italian bourgeoisie."[30] Barbaro was more enigmatic and ambiguous than De Michelis in his political ideology. Yet he still reflected prevailing societal themes. Ideologically, the concept of purity was important to fascism. Images around purity of blood (Italian superiority) had first developed in relation to Africans' colonised by the Italians and were later extended by Mussolini to the Jewish community.[31] The Secretary of the Fascist Party, Achille Starace, wrote in 1938 about the goal of building a new fascist man.[32] To this end, the Italian state had to be "more vigilant when it came to the Italian race, because of the creation of the empire, the proximity to the Ethiopians, the need to preserve Italian colonial superiority, and finally because of the Jewish problem that the state was now focusing on."[33] Thus the themes of objectivity and purity intersect the story that Palermo tells from beginning to end, although he frames the stated purpose of his memoir differently.

Palermo makes the story arc plain from the very first pages of his memoir. The inscription after the title page and copyright sets the tone for what follows. Palermo writes "To the dear Brothers that always and everywhere kept sacred the name of the beloved Homeland and indomitable, the Faith of Rome."[34] He pens a secondary personal dedication "To the dear brother of the great [country of] South Africa, Pasquale Milenza."[35] This immediately sets up a tension for a South African reader as Palermo links his concept of national greatness to both fascist Italy and his experience of

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28 Ben-Ghiat, "Fascism, Writing, and Memory," 646.

29 Ben-Ghiat, "Fascism, Writing, and Memory," 647.

30 Ben Ghiat, "Fascism, Writing, and Memory," 648.

31 D. Guzzi, "The Myth of the Good Italian, Antisemitism and the Colonial Crimes," *Constelaciones* 4 (2012): 257.

32 E. Ialongo, "Nation-Building through Antisemitism: Fascism and the Jew as the Internal Enemy," *Annali d'Italianistica* 36 (2018): 338.

33 Ialongo, "Nation-Building through Antisemitism," 338.

34 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 4.

35 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 5.

the South Africa in the 1940s and perhaps even his perceptions of a later South Africa with him writing in the 1970s.

An additional religious layer is added with an endorsement of Palermo's memoir by Father Clementino of Montefiore. Clementino writes that he jealously guarded a signed book given to him by Father Friar Ginepro who exhorted Clementino to be a guide of young Italians and a comforter of old combatants.[36] Clementino frames Palermo as the latter, commending Palermo for his "six years of sacrifices [as a POW] suffered for Italy for the triple ideal of God, Homeland and Family."[37] Likening Palermo as the upholder of such an ideal, he expands saying that "the Risorgimento heroes knew how to suffer: witnesses of the continuity of the Nation."[38] Risorgimento means "rising again" in Italian and refers to a nineteenth century unification movement that aroused the national consciousness of Italian people who sought freedom from all forms of foreign domination.[39] Moreover, the Risorgimento connection to Palermo by Clementino is important. Malone comments that "martyrdom was an essential component of the Risorgimento" and furthermore "death was not a necessary condition to qualify as a martyr, since the label extended to those who dedicated their lives to the cause and as a result suffered illness, incarceration, or persecution."[40] Although politically motivated, the idea of a meritorious death was borrowed from Roman Catholicism.[41] Furthermore, Malone notes that "the celebration of the dead as patriotic exemplars was passed down from the Risorgimento to Liberal and then to Fascist Italy."[42] Thereafter Clementino religiously endorses the memoir of Palermo by quoting several texts from scripture: "I will praise you among

36 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 7.

37 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 7.

38 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 7.

39 "Risorgimento," *Encyclopedia Britannica*. [Online]. Available: https://www.britannica.com/event/Risorgimento [Accessed: 18 November 2021].

40 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 37.

41 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 38.

42 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 38.

the Nations, oh GOD"[43], "Rejoice, O ye Nations, with His people,"[44] "O praise the LORD, all ye Nations"[45] and finally, "The shoot of JESSE will sprout, he who will rise to govern the Nations and in whom the Nations shall have hope."[46] Clementino concludes that Palermo's memoirs are a mediation on "the tenacity, the sacrifice, the will of leaders, the real aristocracy of the nation."[47] This sets up a secondary tension for a reader of Palermo's memoir, linking the concept of national greatness to sincerely held Roman Catholic beliefs.

Palermo cements this religious framework with his third dedication to Father Friar Ginepro, calling him a saint and acknowledging Clementino as one of Saint Ginepros' faithful disciples. There is little published information available on Ginepro, but not surprisingly, his Christian zealousness is alluded too. Ginepro went to China as a missionary in 1931 and was martyred by soldiers in 1939.[48] This foregrounds the aspirational example of religious martyrdom and sacrifice, which serves to frame the soldiers' sacrifice later. Palermo includes two prayers by Ginepro as "an example, a warning, a beacon of eternal light for all men."[49] In his foreword thereafter, Palermo set out the aim of his memoir, which was

> to pay homage to the memory of those that gave everything: their life to the beloved homeland. To give pay to the wounded, to the sufferers, to the survivors that, despite the many passing years, still

43 A specific bible verse is not given in the memoir, but the stated verse refers to either Psalm 57:9 or Psalm 108:3. Given what follows in the memoir, perhaps Clementino has Psalm 108 in mind as it concludes in verses 12 and 13, "Give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless. With God we will perform with valor, and He will trample our enemies."

44 A specific bible verse is not given in the memoir, but the stated verse is the first part of Deuteronomy 32:43 "Rejoice, O ye nations, with His people" and it continues "for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance to His adversaries, and will be merciful unto His land and to His people."

45 References Paul's letter to the Romans 15: 10.

46 References Paul's letter to the Romans 15: 11.

47 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 7.

48 "Ginepro Cocchi," *Wikipedia*. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginepro_Cocchi [Accessed: 18 November 2021].

49 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 7.

bear the suffering of more than six years of imprisonment on their bodies …[50]

A Möbius strip of memory and history

The first stage of Palermo's POW memoir details his final battle as a solider – the battle of Bardia in Libya on 3 January 1941 – and his subsequent capture. (In other words, how he became a POW.) The broader historical backdrop to this story is minimalist at best. Gooch notes that the history of the Italian armed forces is unknown territory for most English-speaking readers.[51] Attention has tended to focus on Italian military shortcomings, rooting the causes in the inter-war years.[52] Notwithstanding the desire to thoroughly explore a military angle, a precis will suffice. Italy invaded Egypt on 13 September 1940, hoping to tie down British forces whose total strength in the Middle East was only 100,000, whereas the Italian army in Egypt and Libya numbered around 250,000.[53] The British forces retreated in the face of the Italian invasion and paused for several months while waiting for reinforcements to arrive.[54] The advance of the Italian 10th Army was frustrated by difficult terrain, extreme temperatures, sandstorms and anti-tank mines, slowing their advance to just 20 kilometres per day.[55] On the 9 December 1940 the British Western Force, with 30,000 men, was ordered to attack, encircling a line of Italian held forts by 11 December 1940.[56] The Italian forces around Sidi Barrani had severe weakness in their deployment and they proved vulnerable to the British armoured attack.[57] Such was the British success that instead of halting, as had been planned, they continued to advance on Bardia, inside Libya, and invested in the

50 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 9–10.

51 J. Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922–1940* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

52 Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 2.

53 Keegan, *Encyclopedia of World War II*, 82.

54 Keegan, *Encyclopedia of World War II*, 82.

55 J.L. Collins Jr. (Ed), *The Marshall Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War II, Vol. III* (Orbis Publishing, London, 1972), 346.

56 Keegan, *Encyclopedia of World War II*, 82.

57 Collins, *The Marshall Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War II*, 367.

region on 18 December 1940.[58] The Italian army attempted to defend a 38 kilometre perimeter with the 23rd Corp, the Marmarica Division[59] (near Halfaya Pass) and a Blackshirt Division.[60] The British resumed their offensive on the 3 January 1941 and captured Bardia.[61]

The battle of Bardia led to the surrender of many Italian soldiers. However, Palermo fought to the bitter end and was disdainful of those who surrendered. He makes a point of honouring the courageous few in his memoir, including the medal citations for military valour for Lieutenant Pastorini Bruno, Corporal Cadet De Nadai Augusto, Corporal Cieri Igino, and his own citation. He mentions another recipient, General Annibale Bergonzoli, without providing the citation.[62] Palermo recounts their heroic actions in larger-than-life prose. Pastorini, for example is

> intimately affected by the breakthrough of the metallic monsters, wakes up, or passes, as it were, like a bolt from the exemplary, heroic defensive stage to the grandiose, final dynamic phase of feline assault against the metallic monsters.[63]

He mentions other soldiers who valiantly fought on despite their grave wounds.[64] Their heroic actions are frequently punctuated, in his words, with cries of "Viva L'Italia!" – "Long live Italy!" He does not simply recount their military actions but imbues them with patriotic and religious significance. This same cry – Viva L'Italia – was synonymous with the heroes of the Risorgimento.[65] Palermo also describes the wounds of Corporal Cieri who

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58 Keegan, *Encyclopedia of World War II*, 82.

59 Palermo served as a sergeant with the Italian 116th Infantrymen Regiment, Marmarica Division in East Libya. The Marmarica Division refers to the 62nd Infantry Division, which was an infantry division of the Royal Italian Army. The name Marmarica was derived from the historic region by that same name in Libya. Their distinguishing insignia was a vertically striped yellow and red flash embossed with a star that Palermo writes he proudly wore from the day he was recruited. His division was part of the Italian 10th Army in the events leading up to the battle of Bardia.

60 Collins, *The Marshall Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War II*, p 370.

61 W. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. III - The Grand Alliance* (London, Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1950), 57.

62 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 13–16.

63 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 21.

64 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 25–26.

65 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 55.

is blinded in both eyes by shrapnel and pouring blood yet still stands and adds

> No, this most sublime act of his is not in vain. It is his pure soul, and his unique and uncontrollable Faith; it is the infinite love for the Motherland that knows no limits for its worthy, young children. It is the only love that moves, it moves forward and goes … to eternal beatitude, full of heroism and grandeur.[66]

This is consistent with fascist ideology. A soldier's ultimate sacrifice, his death, was the highest incarnation of fascist collectivism.[67] Given this, Malome argues, that "to die in war was no longer simply a necessity, but the highest possible aspiration."[68] Therefore Palermo is at pains to communicate that he is captured and did not surrender. He recounts his situation as follows:

> Following the tragic, rare, and heroic hand-to-hand combat with the enemy, on foot and surrounded by tanks, after having extinguished all my ammunition, I found myself alone, and I mean alone, in the midst of an infernal chaos.[69]

He is captured by an Australian soldier and marched off with a bayonet at his back. Palermo's war is over, but he continues to battle on for the glory of Italy as a prisoner of war (POW) in South Africa.

The contrast between military history accounts of the battle of Bardia and Palermo's to-death-and-glory rendition in his memoir are marked. The British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, wrote to the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, on 6 January 1941 saying: "Salutations and congratulations upon the victory of Bardia! If I may debase a golden phrase, 'Never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few.'"[70] Palermo did not self-identify with, nor describe any of these shortcomings in his memoir, although he did concede that the enemy had an impressive array of armed forces. His description of the battle clearly goes beyond a

66 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 27.

67 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 39.

68 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 39.

69 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 29.

70 Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. III*, 13.

mere historical rendering and description of the action. What he recounts from memory is highly emotive, narrating a hero's discourse. He is a hero among the heroic few who fought valiantly until, wounded, they could fight no more. He is at pains to show that the special few were not like the other Italian soldiers who surrendered in their masses. While his narration is perhaps quintessentially flamboyantly Italian, it contains sufficient, although limited, historical references (such as dates and places) that it can be located within the broader historical context as described above.

This first stage of his memoir details the four days he was kept in the region of Bardia with no food or water, with the wounded dying first, and then the weakest among them.[71] On the fourth day they began a forced march to the port of Sollum but their progress was slow due to their weakened state. When they finally arrived, Palermo describes soldiers trying to drink water from a nearby marsh in their desperate thirst, only to find that it was salt water.[72] They were loaded onto a shipping vessel going to Alexandria, but again were given no water – eventually the sailors took pity and gave them some.[73] Thus concludes his journey from heroic Italian soldier, to captive, to an official POW in Alexandria.

The second part of his memoir unfolds in Alexandria. He described being imprisoned in a camp in Alexandria where the POWs were poorly fed and became diseased, with diarrhoea, sunburn, temporary sun-blindness, and rampant lice infections being his chief complaints.[74] He and two friends risked their life to steal a bone from a British camp kitchen. Bread was such a rarity that receiving bread takes on religious connotations. He writes that "The English, on the other hand, don't really make much use of bread, so they gave very little to us prisoners: a loaf of bread for fifteen people. It seemed, in our trembling hands, very much like the host."[75] The camp authorities improved their sanitary conditions and disinfected them "after many months".[76] They undertook forced labour, such as carrying rocks

71 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 32.
72 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 36.
73 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 37.
74 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 39–42.
75 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 45.
76 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 43.

from a quarry to build a British outpost.[77] They were only registered as POWs sometime later too. Palermo speculated that the delay opened them up to being abused with no consequences for their captors.[78] But living conditions improved once they were registered and they were moved to a larger camp.[79] However, the new camp was run by armed Polish POWs, who Palermo described as being "crueller than the English."[80] He writes about feeling defenceless as a prisoner and describes several experiences that were humiliating.[81]

Placed in the larger context of POW experiences in the Second World War, Palermo's experience, and that of the Italian POWs, is not unique. Horn has written extensively about the experiences of South African POWs. Many South African POWs had to beg for water and food during their first few days in transit camps.[82] They quickly became infested with lice and suffered from dysentery.[83] The dynamics are remarkably like those described by Palermo as an Italian POW. Horn says of South African POWs captured in North Africa:

> At this early stage of captivity no Red Cross delegates inspected any of the camps, and the conditions in the North African camps were so bad that POWs were mainly concerned with basic survival needs and only later began to concern themselves with the stipulations of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Similarly, faced with an unexpected high number of POWs and inadequate temporary camps, the Italians did not regard the Geneva Convention as a priority at this time.[84]

Returning to Palermo, his journey as a POW took him from Alexandria to Suez and eventually to Durban in South Africa. The POWs were sorted

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77 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 46.

78 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 47.

79 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 49.

80 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 49.

81 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 53-64.

82 K. Horn, "Narratives from North Africa: South African Prisoner-of-War Experience Following the Fall of Tobruk, June 1942," *Historia* 56, no. 2 (2011): 104.

83 Horn, "Narratives from North Africa," 108.

84 Horn, "Narratives from North Africa," 101–102.

in Durban, which he described as an enchanting sight and he was served a hearty vegetable soup (was kindly allowed leftovers) and was also disinfected.[85] They were taken by train from Durban through Pretoria to Zonderwater, where he remarked his "calvary" began again, asserting that their POW experience were "perhaps the greatest and hardest in the world."[86]

What follows is story after story of his trials and tribulations in Zonderwater, then Pietermaritzburg and again Zonderwater before being repatriated to Italy. He accuses the British of flouting the Geneva Convention in their treatment of prisoners. He details camp life with sports committees, building projects, education initiatives (like a library book exchange and literacy classes) and inter-prisoner conflicts. A basic trading store was opened in 1942. He describes art exhibitions and theatrical productions put on by POWs. Palermo advocated non-cooperation with his captors even if POWs stood to gain financially from working outside the camp.[87] He called POWs who co-operated with their captor's impure sell outs and those that did not, the pure ones and good children of Italy.[88] He and his group were seen as dangerous agitators by other POWs and their captors. There was an attempt on his life, but he survived the knife fight duel with ease. He was put in solitary confinement in an attempt to break him down when he refused to do punitive menial tasks.[89] He was particularly scathing of their own Italian chaplains who refused to take a Holy Mass for their fascist POW block in 1944. He describes the moment thus:

> We felt the Lord's Religion more than all the other prisoners, because with it, and through prayer, we strived towards the Redemption of all Italians and of the world. For us, the Easter of Resurrection was our own spirit; pure, simple, and purified. For WE! PRISONERS, Holy Easter represented the Faith of Eternal Rome, impregnated, and transfigured in the Faith of Christ. We waited, but in vain. No chaplain of ours (and there were many at Zonderwater)

85 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 81–82.

86 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 84.

87 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 120–124.

88 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 125.

89 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 144–145.

> had the courage to come and say the Holy Mass for us. I repeat, courage, but I should actually have said: duty, mission, dedication to Fascism, which saved the churches and Religion from destruction and profanation at the end of the first Great War. And then 1929, the date that sanctioned peace, after a break of many decennia: i.e. the Concordat between the State and the Holy Church.[90]

Even after the Second World War had ended, Palermo and the fascist POWs he represented refused to sign a co-operation agreement and be repatriated to Italy when initially given the opportunity. Notwithstanding their continual refusal to co-operate, Palermo speaks of the Christmas lunch in 1946 where the camp commander, Colonel Prinsloo was present, having received the order for them to be unconditionally repatriated, and Prinsloo makes his peace with them. Palermo is moved by Prinsloo's speech, which he notes in some detail. Palermo thereafter departed with a group of POWs from Zonderwater on 1 January 1947 and sailed from Durban on 3 January 1947, with Palermo making the link to the battle of Bardia six years earlier.[91] When Palermo disembarked at Naples he gave a Roman salute, along with the other fascist POWs, and kissed the ground.[92] He was finally home and none of his Christian fascist passion and devoted idealism was dimmed, not even writing about it thirty years later.

Palermo's memoir poses historiographical challenges. He claimed to be writing the truth and representing events objectively. But if Palermo's memories were considered normative of camp conditions for the majority of Italian POWs, then very different conclusions would be drawn as to their treatment. Instead, the historical record provides evidence that Italian POWs (who were not zealous fascists) had a markedly different experience to that of Palermo. Zonderwater was little more than a set of guard towers and a tented camp to begin with but had grown by 1943 into the beginnings of a small town.[93] Fratini describes the transformation of the spaces as follows: "From 1941 to 1943 the POW camp at Zonderwater had transformed itself, notwithstanding the barbed wire and block

90 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 152–153.

91 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 219.

92 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 223.

93 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 9.

divisions, into a true Italian city."[94] Prinsloo, who was the Zonderwater camp commander from 1943, had direct orders from General Jan Smuts to ensure that the treatment of prisoners was beyond reproach.[95] Prinsloo had experienced being a child in a concentration camp during the South African War and knew first-hand how harsh such conditions could be.[96] The Red Cross had a watching brief on the Zonderwater camp at all times.[97] The camp boasted a model hospital without equal in any other POW camp worldwide and each block had its own clinic. [98] Two schools, the Duca d'Aosta and the H. F. Prinsloo schools, were under the direct patronage of Prinsloo and sought to educate the POWs. [99] He saw the improvement of the literacy rates among the Zonderwater POWs as one of the camp's most satisfying achievements.[100] Each block had a soccer field, tennis courts, bowls pitch, and netball courts as well as a library, theatre and a band. [101] The camp grew to hold over 100,000 soldiers.[102] After the armistice of July 1943, Italian POWs who signed the agreement renouncing their allegiance to the fascist regime were allowed to work outside the camp.[103] (Palermo refused to sign or to co-operate.) Prinsloo was invested with the Order of the Star of Italy by the post-war Italian government in recognition of the treatment of POWs at Zonderwater and the Pope awarded Prinsloo

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94 C.C.I. Fratini, "Chaos and Change: The Fall of Mussolini, the Signing of the Armistice by Italy in the Second World War and its Effects on the POWs Interned at Zonderwater," *Italian Studies in Southern Africa/Studi d'Italianistica nell'Africa Australe* 27, no. 2 (2014): 50.

95 A. Milanese, "Italians in South Africa: Challenges in the Representation of an Italian Identity" (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2002), 51.

96 "Zonderwater or Where Do We Put Them," *Zonderwater Camp History.* [Online]. Available: http://www.zonderwater.com/en/prisoners-of-war/zonderwater-camp-history.html [Accessed: 20 November 2021].

97 J.A. Ball, "Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa 1941 – 1947," *Military History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1967). [Online]. Available: http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol011jb.html [Accessed: 20 November 2021].

98 Ball, "Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa."

99 Ball, "Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa."

100 Milanese, "Italians in South Africa," 59.

101 Ball, "Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa."

102 "Zonderwater or Where Do We Put Them," *Zonderwater Camp History. [Online]. Available:* http://www.zonderwater.com/en/prisoners-of-war/zonderwater-camp-history.html [Accessed: 20 November 2021].

103 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 79.

with the Order of Good Merit.[104] Another indication that conditions were not as dire for the less extremist POWs is that remarkably good relations developed between South African authorities, South Africans, and Italian POWs. Many POWs chose to return to South Africa to settle permanently and between five hundred and eight hundred men were allowed to stay in South Africa when the camp closed without returning first to Italy.[105]

Palermo's claim that his POW experience was "perhaps the greatest and hardest in the world" may bear witness to his subjective trauma but is objectively untrue when compared with other POW camps, not least the notorious Japanese POW camps. Then there is also the reality of the Nazi death camps of the Holocaust. His ignorance perhaps is not benign. He makes mention of the Holocaust four times in his memoir, each time referring to his own experiences.[106] He uses the term to describe a bloody assault on an enemy position, in a poem to fallen comrades, commenting on soldiers' sacrifices to Italy and the patriotism of some POWs that went on a hunger strike.[107] In the decade prior to publishing his memoir the trial of Adolf Eichmann had taken place. Eichmann's trial, which started on 11 April 1961 in Jerusalem, was a profound turning point in international public awareness of the Holocaust and the development of historical knowledge.[108] The trial was extensively covered in Italy by the press and television journalism, covering all the stages of the trial, including Eichmann's capture in Argentina in 1960.[109] A myriad of "pop up" books were published for the occasion and according to Galimi, "spread knowledge of the Nazi extermination machine to the general public."[110] It is therefore a fair assumption that Palermo was aware of the association of the term "holocaust" with the Holocaust. His use and appropriation of the

104 Ball, "Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa."

105 Milanese, "Italians in South Africa," 50.

106 In Italian *olocausto* like its English translation holocaust can refer to a great destruction, usually by fire, but similarly is used to describe the Holocaust, which was the murder of six million Jews during the second world war. The term in both Italian and English has become associated almost exclusively with the Holocaust.

107 Palermo, *We! Prisoners*, 25, 28, 30, 194.

108 V. Galimi, "The Image of 'All Good Italians': The Eichmann Trial Seen from Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 24, no. 1 (2019): 116.

109 Galimi, "The Image of 'All Good Italians'," 117.

110 Galimi, "The Image of 'All Good Italians'," 118.

term "holocaust" in his own narrative is intriguing and disturbing. While he makes no overtly antisemitic statements in his memoir, he was a proud fascist, which was also linked to his faith.

Intertwining of faith and fascism

Faith and fascism are inseparably intertwined in Palermo's memoir and were perhaps indicative of his own Italian wartime and post-war context. As previously noted, his dedications at the start of his memoir evoked religious support. The way he wrote about the death and glory of his fellow soldiers was indicative of his fascist beliefs. Moreover, Malone argues that the categorization of the fallen soldier as an exemplar reflected a convergence of politics and religion whereby "the sacred migrated from the religious to the political sphere".[111] Palermo's memoir exhorted the true Christian believers to take their stand. In his view, they were the pure prisoners who held to the purest sentiment of God – Homeland – Family. Fascists and Christians shared similar aspirations, the end of moral decadence, and similar enemies, for example, the rise of communism.[112] The Italian Franciscan friar, Agostino Gemelli, had been a vociferous supporter of fascism on issues such as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the introduction of the Racial Laws in 1938.[113] (Gemelli was the rector of the Catholic University of Milan.[114]) Fascist policies were promoted in the pages of the authoritative Jesuit fortnightly, La Civiltà Cattolica.[115] Pollard argues that "The papacy, and thus the church in Italy, was an essential component of the 'block of consensus' on which the Fascist regime depended during its nearly 21 year existence …"[116] The Vatican endorsed Mussolini's fascist regime, which effectively ruled out any legitimate form of Catholic anti-fascism, but at the same time did not completely identify itself with fascism, remaining

111 Malone, "The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar," 56.

112 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 435–436.

113 J. Pollard, "'Clerical Fascism': Context, Overview and Conclusion," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 2 (2007): 433.

114 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 433.

115 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 433.

116 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 433.

autonomous and holding sometime contradictory principles.[117] Historians are divided over the primary motive behind the endorsement of the fascist regime with arguments ranging from self-promotion of shared ideological goals to self-preservation, an attempt to isolate the Catholic church against potential reprisals.[118] The latter fear was not unfounded. The Pentecostal denomination was banned in 1935, the Salvation Army was dissolved in 1940 and other religious minorities were targeted – properties were seized, and permissions were revoked.[119] Motives can be debated and dissected. However, there are key historical events that had bearing on the relationship of the Roman Catholic church and Italian state.

Since the annexure of the Papal states, including Rome itself, in 1870 relations between the papacy and Italian government had been hostile. 1922 was an important turning point in this relationship with the ascent of Pope Pius XI to the papacy and of Mussolini to the position of prime minister.[120] Mussolini quickly vocalized his intent to resolve the matter of the annexed church land and the pope, in return, expressed the view that only Mussolini could steer the Italian State into calmer water.[121] After years of secret negotiations the Lateran Treaty was signed in 1929 that declared the Vatican City to be a neutral and inviolable territory and Roman Catholicism as the state religion of Italy.[122] In response to the concessions made by Mussolini, the Vatican instructed Catholics to vote in support of Mussolini and the Fascist Party, not least so that Mussolini would approve the legislation necessary for the implementation of the treaty.[123] This co-operation between church and state was based on mutually beneficial political expediency but quickly ran into difficulties.

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117 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 440.

118 B. Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics: The Papal Politics of Pope Pius XI in 1920s and 1930s Italy," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing* 48 (1) (2019), 122.

119 G. Mithans, "The Italian Fascist regime, the Catholic Church and Protestant religious minorities in terre redente (1918–40)," *Approaching Religion* 9:1–2 (2019), 64–65.

120 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 124.

121 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 124.

122 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 125-126.

123 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 127.

Mussolini began directing harsh rhetoric towards the Catholic church not long after signing the treaty and the Italian government asked the church on several occasions to use its missions in Ethiopia to spread fascist propaganda, which the church refused to do in ever strident terms.[124] The pope encouraged the participation of Italians in Catholic Action organizations as a counterbalance to fascism that included an ideological campaign supported by publications and discussion groups.[125] When Mussolini adopted the Aryan Manifesto in July 1938, the pope immediately branded the antisemitic policy as true apostasy and called for Catholic Action groups to combat it.[126] When Pope Pius XI died in February 1939, Passey wryly notes that Mussolini yelled, "Finally, that obstinate old man is dead."[127]

Yet the pope's declaration that the antisemitic policy was apostasy did not mean that the church was free of antisemitism. On the contrary, Valbousquet argues that

> Antisemitism, both latent and overt, was a key feature of some of the most enthusiastic promoters of clerical Fascism of various affiliations, from moderate conservatives to integralist antimodernists.[128]

A significant number of antisemitic publications were penned by authors who had both Catholic and fascist affiliations.[129] The Jewish race was deemed to be a threat to the true identity of Catholic Italy.[130] Ancient Christian antisemitic tropes were added to the newer mix of racial, political, and religious prejudices against Jewish people during the fascist period.[131] Christianity was seen, in some quarters, to be quintessentially

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124 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 128.

125 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 129.

126 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 130.

127 Passey, "How the Pope Played Politics," 130.

128 N. Valbousquet, "Race and Faith: The Catholic Church, clerical Fascism, and the Shaping of Italian Anti-Semitism and Racism," *Modern Italy*, 23:4 (2018), 361.

129 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 361.

130 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 359.

131 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 359.

Latin (and Roman) with no ties with Judaism.[132] This position had theological underpinnings. For example, recognizing that Jesus was a Jew but had no connection with modern Jews (and the alleged corrupt Jewish nature) because of the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary.[133] Some groupings, such as the Jesuit Fathers of La Civiltà Cattolica, promoted a nationalistic variant of racism that enhanced the role of the Catholic church in shaping Italian identity.[134] This focus on a form of Christian nationalism-defined racism was a key point of departure from the biologically defined Nazi racism. Valbousquet asserts that "the Jesuit interpretations of the Racial Laws tended to dissociate Italian racism from its German counterpart by forging the image of a milder, Latin, and Christian form of anti-Semitism."[135] Pope Pius XI expressed concern about this trend when he said at a student gathering on 28 July 1938 that he condemned exaggerated racism and nationalism and lamented that Mussolini was imitating Nazi Germany.[136] However, there were equally vocal opponents of Christian anti-fascism like Giulio de' Rossi dell'Arno who saw fascist racism as a defence of Italian tradition and the Roman Catholic church and argued that fascist racism was based on "the Revealed Truth of the common origin of humankind since Adam."[137] His was not an isolated example and a wide range of Catholic authors continued to explore the ideological overlaps between Catholicism and fascist racism for the duration of the Second World War.[138] Besides Palermo's memoir revealing similar links and themes, there is a Christmas message published in 1943 by a fellow Zonderwater POW, Lieutenant Brunetti. Milanese

132 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 361.

133 For a fuller treatment of this subject see Blüger's illuminating article. While his research is on German Catholic theologians, their teachings and publications were approved in Rome and circulated to the broader Catholic church and so have relevance to the Italian context. See: T. Blüger, "Following the Virgin Mary through Auschwitz: Marian Dogmatic Theology at the Time of the Shoah," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 14, no. 3 (2008): 1–24.

134 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 362–363.

135 N. Valbousquet, "Transatlantic Catholic responses to Fascist antisemitism: the Racial Laws of 1938 in the Jesuit press of America and Civiltà Cattolica," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 24, no. 1 (2019): 16.

136 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 364.

137 de' Rossi dell'Arno (1939), quoted in Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 366.

138 Valbousquet, "Race and Faith," 367.

comments that "Brunetti defines his Italian identity in terms of a strong belief in patriotism and nationalism" and "although the Christ child travels over mountains, seas and cities, the implication is that these are all within Italy."[139] Brunetti invocates Giuseppe Garibaldi, national heroes, and martyrs.[140] This strongly echoes Palermo's own faith as expressed through his memoir.

Conclusion

Palermo's memoir is an interesting and illustrative study. It is a given that autobiographies and memoirs are individual stories.[141] Authors shares about their lives in their own distinct voice. The problem posed to secular and church historians is that these personal stories claim to be a true account of historical events even though, as Popkin notes, "its claim to truth is very different" since these stories "are based at least in part on evidence that is not available to examination by anyone other than their author – namely, personal memory."[142] Somma articulates this important dynamic as it pertains to POWs:

> As memory becomes individual it also becomes more idiosyncratic, in the interior of an individual psyche, the site of memory that is the Italian POW can take on the shape of its container and be inflected accordingly.[143]

Somma therefore remarks that "taken together this made of the history of the POW period a bewildering array of perspectives many of which bear no relation to the attempts to standardise the narrative."[144] Memory and history are therefore like the two distinct surfaces of a Möbius strip that

139 Milanese, *Italians in South Africa*, 55–56.

140 Milanese, *Italians in South Africa*, 57.

141 Autobiographies cover an author's entire life, while memoirs usually only cover a part of an author's life.

142 J.D. Popkins, "Holocaust Memories, Historians' Memoirs: First Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust," *History and Memory*, 15, no. 1 (2003): 50.

143 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 31.

144 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 32.

when traced out, reveals only one continuous surface.[145] The researcher's role in this Möbius strip paradox has to be one of a skilled storyteller, bringing to the fore "the interpretations that are at once close to his or her heart and feeding the appetite for an experience of the past."[146]

Besides memory and history being like a Möbius strip, so too is religious faith and political ideology. In this case study of Palermo's memoir, it was Roman Catholicism and Italian fascism. Palermo published his memoir over three decades after his wartime and POW experiences with the weight of post-war history and the possibility for greater perspective on the events contained therein, yet none of his cultic Christian fascist passion seems dimmed. The uncomfortable reality is that fascism did not disappear with Italy's defeat in the Second World War. Copsey notes: "Fascism did not die in 1945; the reality is that it never left us. It braved the opprobrium of immediate post-war years, recalibrated, and survives to this day."[147] Likewise, far right Catholic groups remained in Italy after the Second World War in different forms, with Pollard commenting that:

> An important factor that needs to be taken into account when contextualising the contemporary Italian situation is the church's willingness to recruit allies of virtually any political description in its battles over such issues as abortion, bio-ethics and same-sex unions …[148]

It is not a stretch of the imagination to think Palermo went to his grave believing in his fascist truth and the purity of his Roman Catholic cause. Yet Palermo's example is not an isolated one nor is this dynamic limited to Roman Catholicism. Christian groups and movements continue to evolve, oftentimes co-opting political power in the interest of ideological advancement. Contemporary examples abound, not least the Christian Trumpism of the past few years endorsed and promoted by mainstream evangelicalism. Forster argues that Trumpism refers to leaders who,

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145 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 32.

146 Somma, "Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination," 32.

147 N. Copsey, Neo-Fascism: A Footnote to the Fascist Epoch?" in C. Iordachi and A. Kallis (eds.), *Beyond the Fascist Century: Essays in Honour of Roger Griffin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 114.

148 Pollard, "Clerical Fascism," 443.

> employ similar political, economic, and religious rhetoric that is nationalist and populist in nature. This includes things such as divisive political views, identity politics (anchored in problematic views on race, gender, and class distinctions), nationalisms of various kinds …[149]

These leaders can be found at the helm of political parties and/or overseeing churches. Essentially what is being espoused are not the aims of early Christianity but an American civil religion.[150] Forster remarks that "the God of Christianity does not prefer Americans over Mexicans or Africans. No nation can claim God for itself."[151] Yet nations and Christian movements have done and continue to do exactly this, and Forster's critique would hold equally true retrospectively of Palermo and the clerics who endorsed his memoir.

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149 D.A. Forster, "A Critical Consideration of the Relationship Between African Christianities and American Evangelicalism: A Cautionary Tale of Theo-Political Exceptionalism?" *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology* (2021), 128.

150 Forster, "A Critical Consideration of the Relationship Between African Christianities and American Evangelicalism," 133.

151 Forster, "A Critical Consideration of the Relationship Between African Christianities and American Evangelicalism," 133.

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