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Fascist Groups in Italian Universities: An Organization at the Service of the Totalitarian State

Considerable research has been devoted to the complex organization of the Fascist Party in Italy, yet there has been little interest shown in the history of the GUF (*Gruppi universitari fascisti*), the fascist groups in the universities.¹ This is particularly surprising if one considers them the keystone of the fascist experiment in totalitarianism. Destined to take over the political and intellectual leadership of the nation, university students represented the élite of the middle class from which fascism derived its social base and were, therefore, of key strategic importance in guaranteeing the vitality and survival of the fascist system.² But, instead, the approach of historians to the subject of university students during the 20 years of fascism has been focused on the more general theme of the fascist education of the young; this has been studied from two different approaches in terms of methodology and interpretation.

The first approach focuses on identifying signs of opposition to the regime from the young, giving rise to what can be called the ‘memorialistic interpretation’. It echoes the views of the protagonists of the time who, in retrospect, generally agree that there was widespread ‘anti-fascism amongst the black-shirts’ or ‘unconscious anti-fascism’.³ The experience of the ‘generalasione del littorio’ was exclusively understood in terms of the notion of a ‘long journey through fascism’,⁴ of the young gradually realizing the reactionary nature of the regime and from the mid-1930s slipping into indifference or even opposition to it.⁵ Historians have associated this interpretation with the political

1 The only research specifically dedicated to the GUF, but restricted to the 1920s, is M.C. Giuntella's essay, ‘I Gruppi universitari fascisti nel primo decennio del regime fascista’, *Movimento di liberazione in Italia*, 1972, no. 107, 3–38, also published in *Autonomia e nazionalizzazione dell'università* (Rome 1992), 125–70. The GUF are mentioned in M.O. Stenc, *L'éducation en Italie pendant le fascisme* (Paris 1980), and T.H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight. Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943* (Chapel Hill, NC and London 1985).

2 From the 1930s onwards, Gentile's reform meant that approximately 70 per cent of the university students belonged to the middle or lower-middle class. M. Barbagli, *Disoccupazione intellettuale e sistema scolastico in Italia* (Bologna 1974), 206.

3 The first of these phrases comes from *Autobiografie di giovani del tempo fascista* (Brescia 1947), 56, the second comes from R. Zangrandi, ‘I giovani e il fascismo’ in *Fascismo e anti-fascismo (1918–1936), Lezioni e testimonianze* (Milan 1962), 209.

4 *Idem*, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo. Contributo alla storia di una generazione* (1947) (Milan 1962).

5 For an example of the topical interest of this interpretation, see N. Tranfaglia, *La prima*

necessity to rehabilitate en masse the young educated during fascism in order to allow their reinsertion into the democratic life of the country and, in the name of reconciliation, to mend the rift between pre- and post-war anti-fascism caused by the long domination of fascism over national life, re-establishing the idea of continuity in the movement. However, in the search for the origins of the 'new anti-fascism', facts true for a militant minority, animated by a conscious anti-fascist goal, have often been inappropriately extended to all university students. More often still, a complex historical chapter, developed over more than 20 years, has been reduced to its final page. Attempts to understand the functioning of fascist totalitarianism have been subordinated to the priority of removing traces of an awkward past, thereby erasing and distorting the true character of an entire generation's experience in both historiography and the collective memory.⁶

The second approach, with less distrust of contemporary sources and of the associated methodological problems, has concentrated more on the actual creation of the new fascist generation. However, in this case also, analysis has been based on 'indirect' sources: studies on fascism amongst the young have centred on the debate surrounding the so-called 'problem of the young' which broke out in the fascist establishment from the second half of the 1920s. Although this constitutes an important aspect of the ideological and cultural history of the regime, it has also meant that the portrayal of the universe of the young was distorted by the values of the men who 'marched on Rome', values which are often overly intellectual or largely conditioned by the wish to protect the status of a generation which remains for ever young.⁷ It must be said that a number of young fascist intellectuals took part in the debate through their publications (*L'Universale*, *Il Cantiere*, *Corrente*, etc.). But for various political reasons these young men were not the primary source used to form the 'second generation', and they were not a true reflection of the intellectual and political climate of the young belonging to the GUF.

Either way, by paying little attention to the organizational and ideological instruments actually used by the regime to regenerate the nation by bringing up a new generation of Italians to believe in the political values and ideology of fascism, historians have underestimated the results of the process of 'fascistising' university students (and thereby lent support to a common and often preconceived 'interpretation of failure' of the fascist experience). According to Renzo de Felice, for example, — whose interpretation, albeit cursory, stands out in its originality — the students were disappointed by the

guerra mondiale e il fascismo (Turin 1995), 621 ff. 'The problem of the young. New and old anti-fascism'.

6 Luisa Mangoni defined the transition generation as 'a generation without a past'. L. Mangoni, 'Civiltà della crisi. Gli intellettuali tra fascismo e antifascismo' in *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana* (Turin 1994), vol. I, 617.

7 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I, *Gli anni del consenso 1929–1936* (Turin 1974), 232 ff.; P. Nello, 'Mussolini e Bottai: due modi diversi di concepire l'educazione fascista dei giovani' in *Storia contemporanea*, 1977, n. 2, 335–6.

regime's retreat behind conservative positions and thus turned to a new form of fascism which aspired to return to the concept of fascism as a movement, and only became 'new anti-fascism' after the 1942–43 crisis. Whatever the causes of its emergence, it was proof that the regime had failed to pass down fascist ideals to the next generation.⁸ This view is supported by Maria Cristina Giuntella: 'Of the fascist organizations, the GUF escaped all efforts at "fascitization" with the greatest ease'.⁹ In the same vein, Tracy H. Koon concludes that 'in the long run, the efforts of the PNF to bring the university youth to its side were not successful'.¹⁰

The claim that the regime failed to 'fascitize' the university youth has been used as the main proof that it was unable to create its own ruling class, thereby undermining its totalitarian ambition of shaping the structure of society and its regeneration process through the party. This interpretation — first postulated by Alberto Aquarone — sees Italian society as immune to the process of acculturation and redefinition of the collective identity undertaken by fascism. According to this theory, the depoliticization of the PNF, requested by Mussolini but carried out by Starace, was a decisive contributing factor in determining the impossibility of 'creating a strong ruling class, home-grown, well prepared and dynamic, able to renew itself indefinitely'.¹¹ De Felice subscribes to the same school of interpretation, believing that the 'political liquidation' of the PNF at the start of the 1930s began a process of internal degeneration of the system which led inexorably to self-destruction. Mussolini's regime was gripped by the unresolved and unresolvable contradiction in terms between authoritarianism and freedom, between the imperative of maintaining the unity of the political and spiritual message and the belief in encouraging independent development of personality which lay at the heart of fascism's policies on education and youth. De Felice denies that fascism could produce a 'second generation' capable of continuing the work started by the founders of the regime because this contradiction meant that the full flowering of the 'spirit of freedom' was unattainable.¹²

8 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II, *Lo Stato totalitario 1936–1940* (Turin 1981), 236 ff.

9 M.C. Giuntella, 'I Gruppi universitari fascisti', op. cit., 3, and idem, 'I fatti del 1931 e la formazione della "seconda generazione"' in P. Scoppola and F. Traniello (eds), *I cattolici tra fascismo e democrazia* (Bologna 1975), 202.

10 T.C. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, op. cit., 184. Whilst this article was in print, a new study on the GUF was published (B. Garzarelli, 'Un aspetto della politica totalitaria del PNF: I Gruppi universitari fascisti' in *Studi storici*, October–December 1997, 1121–61). Although it extends the study of the GUF until the end of the 1930s it does not bring anything new as far as interpretation is concerned and does not change the substance of what we are saying. Indeed, the author asserts that 'in the impassioned activism of the end of the thirties, obstacles and forms of resistance began to build up and gradually challenged the functioning of the gigantic machine for totalitarian education which had grown in the shade of the party'; the fascistization of the young found its limit when it 'attempted to channel the thoughts of the young' (160).

11 A. Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin 1965), 182.

12 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I, op. cit., 228 and 243. The historian of the *Duce* avails himself of the analysis of the sociological historian G. Germani, 'La socializzazione politica dei giovani nei regimi fascisti: Italia e Spagna' in *Quaderni di sociologia*, January–June 1969, 11–58.

Explaining the problem in such terms reduces the historical and political significance of the fascist regime to that of a traditional dictatorship based on an individual's charismatic personality and on the short-lived suppression of collective forces by means of coercion and curtailment of freedom: it ignores fascists' attempts to create a modern, single-party totalitarian regime.¹³ Furthermore, in the examples given above the conclusion is dictated by the assumption that healthy political classes can only be formed within liberal regimes rather than being based on detailed evaluation of the historical result of the attempt to form a new generation of 'revolutionaries'. It therefore seems essential to frame the question of the ruling class and the fascist 'second generation' correctly in order to put forward new hypotheses for the interpretation of the totalitarian nature of the fascist regime, of the role played within it by the party and of the way it fulfilled its task of being an 'agent of the continuous revolution'. The precise reconstruction of the organizational answers the party offered for the formation, selection and employment of the new political élites destined to build the fascist 'new state' must be undertaken in parallel with the analysis of the attitude of the young towards the regime. One must analyse not only the receptivity of the young towards the ideological indoctrination of the party, but also their state of mind, their attitude towards the socio-cultural universe of fascism as a whole, and therefore the real likelihood of their fulfilling the role which the 'fathers' of fascism aspired to for them. This article will concentrate mainly on the first aspect, with just a few references to the second.

Three separate phases can be identified in the story of the GUF: 1) the 'movement' phase (1919–24), characterized by the spontaneous formation of a fascist university movement and by the first attempts at creating a national organization; 2) the phase of its institutionalization as an organization within the PNF, which was begun in 1926 by Augusto Turati and finally achieved after the reorganization of 1928. This was a decisive turning-point, as it was during this phase that the groundwork was laid for the organization of all university youth into the GUF; 3) the totalitarian phase, characterized by the will of the party, dominated by Giurati and Starace, to devise the perfect fascist upbringing for the younger generations. We will see that these three stages are interlinked with the general affairs of the party and the regime, reflecting the different theories suggested to solve the problem of how to educate the young to become the 'new Italians' and thus also the problem of the fascist ruling class.

Right from the earliest years of fascism the educated youth from middle-class backgrounds, meeting in patriotic and ex-servicemen's associations, found in the fascist movement the answer to their aspiration for political renewal in Italy. The 'myth of youth' was one of the fundamental tenets of fascist ideo-

13 E. Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista* (Rome 1995).

logy and was subsequently institutionalized in the regime's rites (the displays of athletic youthfulness regularly imposed upon elderly party leaders are a clinching example). University students, especially the demobilized reserve officers, provided a significant contribution to the development of the fascist movement, being the main recruiting ground for the action squads and by founding the first militant fascist groups in many Italian towns.¹⁴ In 1921 nearly a quarter of the adherents to fascism were under the age of 21.¹⁵

Although the birth of the university fascist movement coincides with the origins of fascism itself, it was only during the last months of 1921 that a specific university organization emerged. The first university groups appeared in Bologna, Florence, Pavia, Naples and Milan when 'Avanguardia studentesca', the group of the older school pupils and university students who supported the fascist programme, was transformed into an organization designed to cater for all Italian youth.¹⁶ The university students' desire to keep a separate identity within fascism was recognized in December by the PNF's National Council convened in Florence which included the creation of the GUF in its discussions on the reorganization of the fascist forces.¹⁷

Immediately after their official foundation, the party gave the GUF the responsibility of preparing the new generation of leaders for fascist Italy. During the Bologna congress of 21 February which saw the foundation of the Fascist National University Federation (FNUF), Massimo Rocca stated that fascism's aim was essentially to 'identify the best elements from every part of Italy and every social class so that the schools can prepare them to govern and lead the Nation'. Dino Grandi described the delicate role of the universities in preparing and selecting the future élite 'to guarantee the vitality and success of the fascist movement'. The GUF's programme was outlined in the telegram the students sent Mussolini at the end of the congress. They pledged to make the universities 'a spiritual school for Italians, able to shape new leaders from every class for the future glory of the Nation'.¹⁸

The statutes of the FNUF, approved by the First National Congress in Milan on 4 June 1922, described the university fascists' mission as to fight against the 'partisan, anti-university, anti-patriotic' action of the students belonging to 'anti-national' organizations.¹⁹ Subordinated to the party line of the PNF and

14 *Il popolo d'Italia*, 9, 14 and 20 April 1919. Cf. A. Cattabiani, 'I giovani nelle origini del fascismo', *Ricerche storiche*, 1967, n. 3, 24–56; E. Santarelli, 'Un fascio universitario del 1919' in idem, *Fascismo e antifascismo* (Rome 1974).

15 J. Petersen, 'Elettorato e base sociale del fascismo negli anni venti', *Studi storici*, July–September 1975, n. 3, 663.

16 *Il popolo d'Italia*, 21 October, 1, 19 and 30 November, 18 December 1921. 'Avanguardia studentesca' was founded in Milan in January 1920, based on the Student Action Committees born during the war to support the home front. See the article, 'Adunata studentesca', *ibid.*, 21 January 1920 and P. Nello, *L'avanguardismo studentesco alle origini del fascismo* (Rome-Bari 1978).

17 'I lavori del Consiglio nazionale fascista', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 23 December 1921.

18 *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 22 February 1922.

19 'Il congresso nazionale della FNUF', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 7 June 1922.

excluded from having independent enrolment, the FNUF were but a mere propagandist arm of the party.²⁰ The general secretary, Ivo Levi, a student from Milan, strove to consolidate the structure of the FNUF in order to increase its autonomy and its political weight within fascism. But this attempt soon came into conflict with the strict lines of the party, which was determined not to allow the slightest reduction of its control over the organization. Levi's request that the secretaries of the GUF should be 'of equal political grade' as those of the local fascist branches prompted an immediate reaction from the PNF's vice-secretary, Giuseppe Bastianini, who emphasized that the relationship between the FNUF and the party should be 'of one sort only, i.e. of total dependence of the FNUF on the leadership of the Fascist Party'.²¹

The opportunity to check the degree of cohesion within the FNUF was provided by the explosion of unrest triggered by Minister Gentile's decision to cancel special exam sessions for ex-servicemen, which affected the main universities from the end of 1922.²² The unrest revealed that fascism had still only attracted a minority of university students and that its national leadership, in the throes of a crisis of authority, was unable to impose its will upon the fringes of the organization. Some GUF disregarded the call for discipline from the central committee of the FNUF and took part in the protest against the measures taken by the fascist minister.²³ The explosion of further unrest in all the main Italian universities against the Gentile reform at the start of the new academic year brought about the final collapse of the university organization.²⁴ The end of the GUF as autonomous national structures was decreed by the leadership of the PNF on 20 August 1924.²⁵ The reasons behind the failure of the FNUF were listed in a memorandum presented by Levi to Mussolini on 29 July 1924:

The Fascist National University Foundation, created out of passion by the university students only existed as an organization of the Party during the first year of its official constitution,

20 Central State Archive, National Fascist Party. Exhibition on the Fascist Revolution (referred to from now on as CSA, NFP, EFR), b. 47 'FNUF', f. 117, s.f. 1. The FNUF was governed by a Central Committee elected by congress, who chose the organization's general secretary and vice-secretary from its ranks.

21 Ibid., letter from Levi to Bastianini dated 18 November 1922 and the latter's response dated 1 December.

22 F. De Negri, 'Agitazioni e movimenti studenteschi nel primo dopoguerra in Italia', *Studi storici*, 1975, n. 3, 761.

23 'La chiusura dell' Università di Roma e un appello della Federazione nazionale degli universitari fascisti', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 9 December 1922; CSA, NFP, EFR, b. 47, f. 117 'FNUF', s.f. 2.

24 CSA, Ministry of the Interior, General Office for Public Safety. General and Classified Affairs (referred to from now on as CSA, MI, PS, GCA), 1923, cat. D. 9 'Agitazioni studenti', b. 67. During the Second Congress of the FNUF at Florence in March 1923, the list of resignations was read out by Levi. Enrico Papisogli was nominated provisional secretary. CSA, NFP, EFR b. 47, s.f. 2 'Congresso di Firenze 1923'; *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 3 March 1923.

25 'La circolare alle Federazioni', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 24 August 1924. It established that 'the university groups are organized within local fascist branches, their only objective being cultural propaganda. . . . In regard to political activism, students are subjected to the discipline of the local branches.'

i.e. 1922–23: a) because it was fought by the Party Leadership; b) because the group was not supported by local fascist branches; c) because the secretary was not empowered to force the local fascist branches and university fascists to follow the instructions dictated by the Party Leadership and ratified in the Statutes of the Federation.²⁶

Actually, the reform of university regulations became the pawn in a game which the FNUF was in no measure to influence. It was the first opportunity for the opposition to gather a wide movement of protest against the government and fascism after the ‘March on Rome’. Furthermore, Mussolini’s intervention to defend the ‘most fascist of reforms’ removed the margins of independence which the FNUF was trying to gain in attempting to represent the interests of the students by acting as an intermediary with the government.²⁷ However, the same political nature of the protest convinced Mussolini of the strategic importance of having control over the universities, not only to extend acceptance of the fascist regime in the intellectual middle class but also with a view to forming future fascist leaders. In a speech to representatives of the FNUF he stated that:

The fascist government needs a ruling class. In these 14 months of government I have seen that we don’t have a fascist ruling class. I cannot suddenly create all the civil servants needed for the administration of the State. They must reach me gradually from the Universities.²⁸

At this crucial time for the consolidation of power, having a means to penetrate the universities became an urgent imperative for fascism. The FNUF was refounded as ‘Alfredo Oriani’, the first Congress taking place in Rome on 14 December 1924. The organization was placed under the control of Serafino Mazzolini, a member of the leadership of the PNF. A student, Piero Saporiti, was appointed secretary-general, with the task of reorganizing the groups. The new statutes reflected the shift from the revolutionary period to a new phase characterized by the conquest of power and represented an attempt to overcome the élitism that had previously characterized fascist student militancy. The explicit call to the GUF to ‘form and educate the next ruling class from the university students’ was accompanied by the instruction to appeal to the student masses through a broad programme of moral and financial assistance.²⁹ However, general disorganization and lack of sufficient funding for the groups prevented them from fulfilling the tasks described in the statutes.³⁰

26 CSA, PNF, the Duce’s Personal Secretariat, Ordinary Correspondence, alphanumeric series b.10, cat. G2, ‘Organizzazioni del Pnf’, f. 32 ‘FnuF’.

27 CSA, NFP, EFR, b. 47, f. 117, s.f. 2 ‘Corrispondenza con il sottosegretario della Pubblica istruzione’.

28 ‘Mussolini parla agli studenti ed illustra lo spirito della riforma Gentile’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 14 December 1923.

29 V. Paggi, ‘Il fascismo universitario dal 1920 ad oggi’, *La Rivolta ideale*, 30 March 1925. Founded in March 1925 and edited by Antonio Beltramelli, *La Rivolta ideale* was the weekly newspaper of the FNUF.

30 The party allocated a budget for the FNUF of approximately 3 per cent of the total budget for the 1925 financial year, i.e. 164,327.40 lire. CSA, NFP, the Duce’s Personal Secretariat,

During this period, fascism's main concern within the universities remained to rid them of the still deeply-entrenched anti-fascist presence, which was considered the main obstacle to the renewal of fascist culture.³¹ This became more urgent after the 'turning-point' of 3 January 1925 and, above all, when, as secretary (February 1925), Roberto Farinacci instigated the radical elimination of any remaining political opposition in the country.³² The 'assault on the universities' was conducted by the 'gufini', as the members of the GUF were called: on the one hand they proceeded to win political dominance over university non-fascist societies through action squads; on the other, they began a virulent campaign to discredit anti-fascist teachers and to 'fascitize' academic culture: 'We must control the schools', the newspaper of the FNUF declared, 'because the continuity of the fascist idea cannot be entrusted to our opponents.'³³

The re-establishment of the FNUF did not solve the problem of unity in the leadership of the university fascist movement.³⁴ The new secretary of the PNF, Augusto Turati, found the GUF 'in a state of truly democratic confusion and chaos'.³⁵ In particular, the new student activism linked to the relaunch of action squads in the universities had intensified the gufini's wish to carry out front line political action.³⁶ Turati's first step was to formalize the GUF's position within the party, taking away from the groups the power to initiate action squads in order to put an end to the 'privileged difference' they had enjoyed until then. *La rivolta ideale*, the loudest of the voices calling for a political role for university students, was suppressed. Then the local activities of the GUF were subordinated to the discipline of the secretaries of the provincial federations. As the GUF only existed in university cities, University Fascist Units (NUF) were created in smaller towns. The 1926 statute of the PNF created a post within the party secretariat in charge of the organization of

Classified Correspondence (referred to from now on as DPS, CC), b. 33, f. 243/R, s.f. 'Bilanci del PNF'. In 1926 the sum allocated to the FNUF was reduced to 148,221.15 lire. CSA, NPF, Executive board (EB), Miscellaneous, Series II, General Affairs, b.463, f. 'Bilancio 1926', s.f. 'Federazione universitaria'.

31 The situation of the University of Naples as described by the Prefect on 6 June 1924 is significant: 'Various political currents opposed to fascism have developed over time amongst university students, the break deepened and the friction accentuated by the recent student disturbances following the general reform of education' (CSA, MI, PS, GCA, 1924, cat. D9, 'Agitazioni studenti', f. 'Napoli'). See G. Quagliariello, *Studenti e politica. Dalla crisi della goliardia prefascista al primo congresso nazionale universitario (1925-1946)* (Manduria 1987), 11 ff.

32 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, II, *L'organizzazione dello Stato fascista 1925-1929* (Turin 1968), 5 ff.

33 Giese, 'Scuola fascista', *La Rivolta ideale*, 39 August 1925.

34 This was revealed in the Second and Third Congresses of the FNUF, held in Rome on 29 April 1925 and 15 February 1926 respectively. Cf. 'Il Congresso dei goliardi fascisti riafferma intera la rinascita dello spirito fascista nelle Università', *La Rivolta ideale*, 6 May 1925; 'Dal Congresso della Federazione Universitaria Fascista', *La Rivolta ideale*, 21 February 1926.

35 'Importanti dichiarazioni dell'on. Turati sull'alta funzione educativa del Fascismo', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 26 April 1927.

36 A. Nasti, 'La funzione politica degli universitari fascisti', *La Rivolta ideale*, 30 June 1925.

the GUF: the general direction of the programme of the groups' activities thus became the exclusive responsibility of the PNF secretary, assisted by a GUF secretary — Roberto Maltini, a fascist since 1919. At the meeting of the Grand Council on 11 November 1927, Turati was able to illustrate the progress made in one year by announcing the existence of 62 groups with a total of 8854 members.³⁷

Notwithstanding Maltini's unstinting commitment, the groups were far from efficient. Internal disputes, rivalry between GUF and university militias, infiltration by undesirable elements, stagnation in the push to create a new form of political organization and financial difficulties were constantly being reported to the secretariat of the GUF from all parts of Italy. Once the wave of enthusiasm for the battle against '*aventinismo*' in the universities had died down, the mere progressive extension of the GUF's control over students was not enough to guarantee the success of fascism's goals. The task was considerably more complex because now, in the words of Vezio Orazi, the head of the GUF secretariat, the aim was to 'form a generation'.³⁸

The need to rethink the practical and ideological basis for student participation in fascism was the main catalyst behind what can be called the 'organizational turning-point' of 1928 because of its value as a landmark date in the history of GUF. The student organization was relaunched with ambitious plans to: a) develop its local management; b) introduce a rigid hierarchy within the internal structure; c) expand the recruitment pool; d) stabilize militancy either through the strengthening of the cultural, entertainment and assistance services offered by the GUF, or by intensifying propagandistic and ideological pressure. The appointment of an 'official representative' in every academic centre in charge of the various forms of activity played a decisive role in achieving widespread control over the student mass and guaranteeing the GUF monopoly over the student community's social life.³⁹

The reorganization of 1928 also marked the beginning of a phase of progressive expansion of the range of activities controlled by the GUF. During the 1930s it became the effective overseer for all cultural activities as well as welfare services, entertainment, social and political education, and was therefore a formidable tool at the regime's disposal to create and maintain consensus amongst intellectual youth. The GUF's strategy was to absorb pre-existing entertainment and welfare associations into its own organization, the same method which had worked successfully for the integration of the student associations, building up the power which had accumulated in the hands of central leadership. In July 1928 the university branch of the Alpine Club (SUCAI) was taken over. The following year the GUF took over control of the youth groups of the Fascist Colonial Institute. Close links with the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) and the Fascist Institute of Culture were established.

37 *Foglio d'ordini*, 6 August, 9 October 1926 and 24 December 1927.

38 CSA, NFP, EB, Administrative Services, series I, b. 586, f. 9.21.5, letter dated 13 March 1928.

39 *Tre anni XIV, XV, XVI* (Turin 1935).

Student accommodation and canteens, libraries, social centres, musical and theatrical groups were set up.⁴⁰ The effort to infiltrate life in the provinces was intensified with the formation of provincial sub-groups and new NUF, leading to the creation of a national network which in 1940 linked 104 university and provincial GUF and 471 NUF.⁴¹

The student celebration on 24 May 1929 of the fourteenth anniversary of the Italian intervention in the Great War heralded the definitive institutionalization of the GUF as an organization of the PNF placed under the direct control of the party secretary.⁴² On 18 March 1930, in a ruling ratifying the concept of generational continuity — the cornerstone of the ‘myth of youth’ — the Grand Council decreed that ‘in order to weld together the strengths of the past with those of the emerging generations’, representatives of the GUF should join the board of directors of the provincial fascist federations.⁴³ The substantial success of Turati’s initiative in the university domain was demonstrated by the increase in membership. The increase from 9215 members in 1927 to 41,680 in 1930 illustrated the distinct shift between both periods, proving how the reorganization of 1928 had triggered a process of spectacular growth which lasted throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁴

During Turati’s time as secretary, the discussion on the ruling class became a hotly debated feature in the fascist press. As Bottai explained, the problem was to ‘make sure fascism became an irreplaceable political reality’ by creating a ‘system of collective substitution of the Italian ruling class’.⁴⁵ Mussolini’s daily newsletter stated that the continuity of the regime depended on the capacity of fascism ‘to prepare the young for the awareness and responsibility of leadership’.⁴⁶ To solve this problem, from the early 1920s faculties of Political Science had either been created or expanded, with the task of forming the next generation of experts in the management of the state’s organizational structure.⁴⁷ However, it soon became clear that the genetic link of the new

40 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 22, 30 July, 6 April and 18 December 1928.

41 *Vita dei GUF a. XVI–XVII* (Rome 1940), 243–9. The chain of hierarchical dependence from town centres to suburbs was the following: National Secretariat of the GUF, University GUF, Provincial Subgroups (or Provincial Groups from 1932), NUF.

42 See the 1929 PNF statutes in M. Missori, *Gerarchie e statuti del PNF* (Rome 1986), 372.

43 *Foglio d’ordini*, 19 March 1930. To crown this evolution in 1934 the GUF became one of the official routes for recruitment into the PNF by means of the ‘fascist conscription’ (*Gioventù fascista*, 10 April 1936). The ‘fascist conscription’ was the mechanism ensuring that the young passed through the regime’s various educational institutions until they reached the PNF.

44 Membership of the GUF 1924–30 was as follows: 1924: 2000; 1925: 4500; 1927: 9215; 1928: 16,965; 1929: 25,440; 1930: 41,680. Sources: *Il Popolo d’Italia*, CSA, NFP, EB, General Services (GS), b.3, ‘Dati statistici’; *Foglio d’ordini* of the PNF.

45 G. Bottai, ‘Le parole e i fatti della rivoluzione’, *Critica fascista*, 15 November 1926.

46 G. Casini, ‘La continuità del Regime’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 October 1926. See also R. Cantalupo, ‘La classe dirigente e il suo Duce’, *Gerarchia*, January 1926.

47 M.C. Giuntella, ‘La facoltà fascista di Scienze politiche di Perugia e la formazione della classe dirigente fascista’ in G. Nenci (ed.), *Politica e società in Italia dal fascismo alla Resistenza*

faculties with the formalism of liberal juridical doctrine and the continuity of the pre-fascist teaching group prevented them from becoming a vehicle for fascism's revolutionary culture.⁴⁸ For this reason the Fascist Faculty of Political Science was founded in 1927 in Perugia with the task of 'promoting knowledge and awareness of fascism' amongst those young people destined for careers in administration, corporate trade-unionism, diplomacy, colonial government or journalism.⁴⁹ The strong concentration of fascist intellectuals invited to teach there and the close link between forming and recruiting the young which it should have guaranteed were hailed as a 'revolutionary' experiment. In actual fact, the Fascist Faculty's capacity to mould new state leaders was rendered useless by bureaucracy's subtle boycott of attempts to infiltrate a new generation of fascist civil servants, discriminating against students from the Fascist Faculty in public competitions.⁵⁰ This resulted in a steady decline in student numbers throughout the 1930s.⁵¹ The failure of what its creators had intended to be the 'seminary of the regime' did not lead the fascists to abandon their project of creating their own ruling class; at most it exposed the limitations of a university system and a government machinery still insufficiently 'fascistized'.

At the start of the 1930s this awareness increased within the party.⁵² The new secretary of the GUF, Carlo Scorza, expressed it perfectly during the leadership meeting of the PNF on 14 July 1931. The setback which he observed in the 'fascistization' of the young should not be blamed on inadequate action by the GUF which were now functioning at full potential and completely able to educate students in 'national passion', but rather on the 'harmful non-fascist, a-fascist and anti-fascist influence of lecturers opposed to the regime'.⁵³ The only solution for a regime faced with the contradiction of proclaiming itself 'for the young' yet not being able to do without the older generation in the universities, was to intensify its efforts to provide a fully fascist education. The party had to break the vicious circle of the past repeating itself in the present, negating one of the main principles of revolution. In the words of the GUF leader, if the universities continued to 'poison' Italian students, the party had to supply the 'antidote':

(Bologna 1978), 293–313; V. Zagarrìo, 'Giovani apparati culturali a Firenze nella crisi del regime fascista', *Studi storici*, 1980, n. 3, 609–35.

48 A. Giaccardi, 'Le mummie della facoltà di Scienze politiche', *La Rivolta ideale*, 11 October 1925.

49 *La Glossa*, 15 October 1928.

50 See the statement of the GUF of Perugia to the Secretary of the GUF on 25 September 1931: CSA, NFP, EB, GS, b. 24, f. 346.

51 Giuntella, *La facoltà fascista di Perugia*, op. cit., 313.

52 On the subject of the 'fascistization' of the universities see A[rnoldo] M[ussolini], 'Il Partito nell'Università', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 24 February 1929; idem, 'Università e Fascismo', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 31 July 1929; B. Giuliano, 'La fascistizzazione della scuola', *Gerarchia*, May 1930. Also R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, op. cit., 107 ff. and 188 ff.

53 CSA, NFL, DPS, CC, b. 33, f. 242/R, s.f. 2 'Riunione del Direttorio del 14 luglio 1931', ins. A.

We must offer a myth to students In the name of the Duce such a strong movement must be created amongst students, through students and by students that Mussolinians continue to thrive for centuries. . . . We must make each and every individual aware that he represents a part of the ideology and thus has a religious responsibility towards it and also, dare I say, towards the Leader himself (in the manner of the Apostles). But above all, we must also make every one of them proud to play a part in this movement.

During this same period, the clash between the Opera Nazionale Balilla led by Renato Ricci (an employee of the Ministry for Education from 1929) and the GUF over control of the students revealed the existence of a conflict between the Duce and the party concerning how to lead the 'pedagogical revolution' which would influence the Italian psyche and mould human beings for the 'new fascist civilization'.⁵⁴ Whereas Mussolini believed that the renewed fascist state should represent both the 'myth' and the agent of the 'revolution', the party adhered to Giurati's belief that it should be the only official agent for the pedagogical revolution which would 'fascistize' the state. The creation of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL) in 1937, giving the PNF exclusive control over education, saw the second hypothesis prevail: once Mussolini's plan that the full fascistization of students and the renewal of the ruling class should be guaranteed by a 'pedagogical state' had been thwarted, he had to make do with the 'pedagogical party'.⁵⁵

To fascists, the the fascistization of youth and the creation of the new ruling class were closely linked. To attain the 'total politicization' of society, they needed not only experts in the political and administrative management of the state but also intermediary cadres able to spread fascist culture and doctrine amongst the masses.

The fundamental postulate of totalitarianism is to bring about a complete fusion between the population and its leaders. This implies high participation in public life from the greatest number of people possible, which would be impossible were political education restricted to one group of people only.⁵⁶

The new élite was to emerge from a new generation of intellectuals, both spokesmen for and tireless propagators of the new values of the community. For this reason, when Starace took over the leadership of the PNF his first goal was to make the GUF a workshop in which a new generation was shaped: artists and technicians, soldiers and trade-unionists, ideologists and journal-

54 N. Zapponi, 'Il partito della gioventù. Le organizzazioni giovanili del fascismo', *Storia contemporanea*, 1982, n. 4-5, 615 ff.

55 The 1932 statutes of the GUF assigned to the groups the responsibility to 'educate university students according to fascist doctrine'. (*Foglio d'ordini*, 16 February 1932). This document formalized the new role of the GUF as recommended by Turati and Giurati. The only important change was that the secretary of the PNF was to become secretary of the GUF, with the assistance of a vice-secretary.

56 U. Bernascone, 'Preparare i giovani a saper ubbidire ma anche a saper comandare', *Gioventù fascista*, 30 January 1933. Founded by Giurati in 1931, *Gioventù fascista* was considered the voice of young activist fascism and of the GUF until 1937 when the GUF of Milan's publication, *Libro e moschetto*, became the official one for all university students.

ists, in short, the 'civil servant intellectuals' who would be employed in the regime's apparatus for ideological production.⁵⁷ The 1930s thus saw the creation of the GUF's Experimental Theatre, the CineGUF and the *Littoriali* of cinema, musical groups, professional societies (lawyers, doctors, engineers etc.), naval and aeronautical branches, colonial, corporate studies, trade-unionist, journalistic, demographic and racial branches. The list also includes the School of Fascist Mysticism, the youth sections of the National Institute of Fascist Culture, the Institute for Studies on Universal Fascism, national *Littoriali* and provincial *Prelittoriali*, competitions which allowed students from all over Italy to test their knowledge of the main political, cultural and artistic trends of the day. University journalism experienced extraordinary growth: in addition to the newsletters published by the GUF in the main cities, every local group had several pages in the local newspapers at its disposal.⁵⁸ Total monopoly over student activities was completed by control over welfare associations and sport clubs, fundamental aspects of teaching. The sheer number of activities planned for students meant that their free time was entirely devoted to collective occupations organized by branches of the GUF: political activism smacked strongly of totalitarianism.⁵⁹ The organization was becoming the only conduit for participation in political life and giving access to public posts, creating a potentially closed society.⁶⁰ By the end of the 1930s the GUF not only supervised all university students but their membership even extended beyond the university world: from 1932 the GUF accepted graduates up to the age of 28, military academy cadets and diplomats between the ages

57 M. Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti e intellettuali funzionari. Appunti sulla cultura fascista* (Turin 1979).

58 I counted about 60 GUF publications, excluding various pages edited by the GUF on the weekly newspapers of the provincial fascist federations. Cf. M. Addis Saba, *Gioventù italiana del littorio. La stampa dei giovani nella guerra fascista* (Milan 1973); A. Folini-M. Quaranta, *Le riviste giovanili del periodo fascista*, op. cit.; B. Wanrooij, 'Il Bò 1935-1944, Italian Students Between Fascism and Antifascism', *Risorgimento*, 1982, n. 1-2, 79-96; P. Nello, 'Il Campano'. *Autobiografia politica del fascismo universitario pisano 1926-1944* (Pisa 1983).

59 GUF (Bologna-Rome 1936); GUF Milano (ed.), *Organizzazione e attività a XVI* (Milan 1938); *Che cosa è il GUF* (Rome 1940); *Vita dei GUF negli anni XVI-XVII* (Rome 1940); *I Gruppi universitari fascisti* (Rome 1940).

60 A police note dated July 1931 read: 'Everybody realises what a serious handicap it is not to enjoy the facilities offered by enrolment [in the GUF], especially at the beginning of the person's career as non-members can in no way aspire to the higher positions in the civil service, posts in government or teaching.' CSA, MI, PS, Political Police Division, cat. K11, *Attività sovversiva studenti*, b. 149, f. 7.

61 Membership of the GUF and of the universities 1930-43 was as follows: 1930: 41,680 — 44,940; 1931: 55,303 — 46,262; 1932: 56,550 — 47,614; 1933: 57,509 — 52,672; 1934: 66,934 — 57,672; 1935: 68,695 — 62,020; 1936: 73,143 — 64,944; 1937: 75,436 — 71,512; 1938: 93,175 — 74,909; 1939: 105,883 — 77,429; 1940: 119,713 — 85,535; 1941: 137,148 — 127,058; 1942: 159,297 — 145,793; 1943: 164,667 — 168,323. (Source: *Atti del PNF, ASCS, NFP, EB, Secretariat of the GUF*, b. 34, f. 'Dati statistici', *Foglio d'ordini*). The Catholic university students (FUCI) managed to elude the fascist monopoly by keeping up an organized presence in the universities throughout the 1930s — although this was limited. See R. Moro, *La formazione della classe dirigente cattolica (1929-1937)* (Bologna 1979).

of 21 and 28.⁶¹ The growing importance of the GUF in the eyes of the fascist leaders is shown by the continuing increase in funding offered by the Party.⁶² In 1941 the funds allocated to the students represented 54 per cent of the total PNF budget, even though the GUF members made up only 3.4 per cent of the PNF's list.⁶³

The fascists acknowledged the need to set up a system for the ongoing replacement of society's élite from the moment they took power, yet it was only at the beginning of the 1930s that people realized that they could not simply rely on natural selection of the best (which assumed that civil society was automatically able to generate the reproduction of knowledge and leadership functions, an idea the fascists rejected), but that encouragement and guidance were required.⁶⁴ For the party, inspired by the 'myth of organization', the problem of the ruling class was essentially practical: 'Slaves to theory . . . rule out the possibility of creating a fascist standard, a fascist way of forming the ruling class, stifling the creative process which lies at the heart of our revolution, which should shape a new civilization'.⁶⁵ The contribution to the revolution which Mussolini expected from the young was derived from profound distrust of the men of his generation and from his visionary fascination for the idea of forming the 'new Italians of fascism'.⁶⁶ On the other hand, under Starace the party gave real thought to the problem of how to accelerate the process of forming a 'second generation' of fascists able to withstand the upheavals which would rock the regime on the Duce's death, consolidating its dominant position over public life and the life of the state.

This new approach fulfilled the need to respond to the students' desire to participate in the construction of the regime. For members of the GUF the 'problem of the young' was linked directly to that of the revolutionary survival of the regime. They believed that the entry of new recruits into leadership positions should not destroy the notion of the fundamental continuity of the generations. They saw it as the fulfilment of the 'continuous revolution' and the Duce's command to 'make way for the young', and as the decisive test to

62 The GUF's annual budget, in lire, was as follows: 1930: 804,776.00; 1932: 1,107,159.70; 1934: 2,642,375.30; 1936: 5,835,124.90; 1937: 7,829,283.51; 1940: 19,887,415.40; 1941: 28,841,308.15; 1942: 35,122,095.85; 1943: 47,068,000.00 (budget). Sources: CSA, NFP, Series II, General Affairs, b. 422, f. 'Dati e prospetti desunti dai bilanci consuntivi', s.f. 'Spese per attività GUF'; b. 464, f. 'Bilancio 1931', s.f. 'Bilancio a. XII GUF'; b. 422, f. 'Prospetti desunti dai bilanci consuntivi', s.f. 'consuntivi a. XIV' and s.f. 'Situazioni economiche e patrimoniali dei GUF'; b. 226, f. 2 'Comitato centrale per le Opere universitarie 1939-1942'.

63 The PNF's total budget for year XIX was 53,286,457.76 lire (CSA, NFP, DPS, CC, b. 33, f. 242/R, ins. 'Bilanci Partito nazionale fascista'). There were 137,148 members of the GUF and 4,017,640 members of the party. *Foglio d'ordini*, 28 October 1941.

64 Agostino Nasti, an intellectual formed in the GUF of Florence, maintained that fascism had the right and duty to form its own ruling class, 'without waiting for it to form itself spontaneously'. A. Nasti, 'Obiezioni a Pellizzi', *Critica fascista*, 1 July 1937.

65 U. Bernasconi, 'Nascita di una classe dirigente', *Gioventù fascista*, 1 December 1934.

66 R. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, II, op. cit., 360.

check the degree of spiritual preparation of the new generations. Only those young people entirely brought up in the new fascist climate could carry forward the construction of the totalitarian state: in the words of the GUF organ in Perugia: 'The future of Italy and of fascism lies with the young.'⁶⁷

In February 1935, courses in political preparation were created to fulfil the party's duty to 'promote the specific preparation of the young who will be the cadres of tomorrow's fascist nation'. The courses offered the natural progression from the practical experience of leadership students could acquire within the GUF hierarchy.⁶⁸ Students between the ages of 23 and 28 who had been members of youth organizations had places reserved for them, but the selection process favoured students who had distinguished themselves in the *Littoriali* and *Prelittoriali*. Aimed at future leaders, the two-year courses took place at all provincial fascist federations; their object was to instil in-depth knowledge of the functioning of the regime's organizational machinery through a combination of theoretical lessons and practical placements at its political or trade-unionist branches. In 1936 their administration was entrusted to the secretariat of the GUF, sealing the organic link between the new institution and the university organization. The system was progressively extended to cover more areas both in teaching and in recruitment: the new regulations of 1940 created local courses for students who did not live in the capital of a province.⁶⁹ In January 1940, the National Centre for Political Preparation, a school for advanced training for political careers within the regime, was opened by Mussolini — the last step in the party's efforts to select the ruling élite from the mass of university students.⁷⁰

Alongside the creation of means to form and select the most promising students, the party adopted a policy of 'valorization', offering them jobs within the PNF and its dependent organizations, in the trade-unions and corporate hierarchy and in the state. Launched by Turati at the end of 1930 with members of the GUF placed in the provincial party headquarters and trade-union offices,⁷¹ it enjoyed rapid expansion from the mid-1930s. In August 1934, the secretariat of the GUF asked all the provincial party secretaries to supply the names of students who should be included in a list of 'fascist university students worthy of consideration for a period of training'. The following November a list was compiled of 'students to valorize'. It contained 472 names of students chosen from the 93 existing GUF, and was regularly updated.⁷² The same method was used to identify the 'cultural forces of the

67 N. Madau Diaz, 'Il problema dei giovani nel decennale', *Il Grifo*, October–November 1932. See M.A. Ledeen, 'Fascism and the Generation Gap', *European Studies Review*, 1971, n. 3, 275–283; B. Wanrooij, 'Giovani e vecchi nel fascismo italiano', *Il Politico*, 1983, n.3, 485–503.

68 From 1933, training courses for the leaders of the GUF were organized, both to strengthen their technical preparation and to vet the leaders' ideological integrity, *Gioventù fascista*, 1 January 1934.

69 *Foglio di disposizioni*, 9 February 1935 and 28 February 1940.

70 *I Gruppi dei fascisti universitari* (Rome 1941), 147.

71 CSA, NFP, EB, GS, b. 46, f. 619, newsletter dated 5 December 1930.

72 CSA, NFP, Administrative Services, Series I, b. 352, f. 6.1.35; b. 353, f. 6.1.38. The names

GUF' at the disposal of the regime.⁷³ In more general terms, the secretariat of the GUF looked after the political promotion and professional careers of the students. Its capacity to control an element, however limited, of the power which the party held over society made the GUF the focus for the university middle class aspiring to promotion.

Leaving aside bureaucratic and administrative functions and concentrating on the party's cadres,⁷⁴ the number of students in positions of responsibility in the regime rose from 1890 in 1932 to 5059 in 1939.⁷⁵ In 1941 they were 10,776 (equivalent to about 8 per cent of the students enrolled in the GUF).⁷⁶ The study of the biographical index of fascist leaders reveals that over the years a total of 57 senior party officials came from the GUF. In order of career progression, 54 were secretaries of the provincial fascist federations, 43 members of the fascist corporative parliament, 10 members of the national executive board, 6 inspectors of the PNF, 2 vice-secretaries and one general secretary of the PNF and one member of the Grand Council.⁷⁷ From 1935 all the national vice-secretaries of the GUF were chosen from amongst the peripheral ranks of the student organization.⁷⁸ Giovanni Calendoli's career illustrates the GUF's role as a reserve pool from which to draw young talent to be employed for the more delicate tasks of the regime: one-time editor of the Rome GUF publication, member of the secretariat of the GUF and theorist of the totalitarian party, he was invited to fill the important position of head of the PNF's press office. Of the seven members of the PNF's Office of Studies and Legislation, created in 1940 by Adelchi Serena as part of the plan to make the party the foundation of the fascist government, three had been moulded at the school of the GUF.⁷⁹

included: Fernando Mezzasoma, the secretary of the Perugia GUF, appointed the following year to the position of national vice-secretary of the GUF and subsequently vice-secretary of the PNF and minister for Popular Culture for the RSI; Guido Pallotta of the Turin GUF, at various stages vice-secretary of the GUF, vice-secretary of the PNF, member of the Executive Board and inspector for the PNF; Niccolò Giani of the Milan GUF, director of the School for Fascist Mysticism and journalist.

73 *Atti del PNF*, year XVIII, t. III, 290, newsletter dated 26 September 1940.

74 Cf. F. De Marchi, 'I laureati nella pubblica amministrazione' in *I laureati in Italia* (Bologna 1968); M. Salvati, *Il regime e gli impiegati* (Rome-Bari 1993).

75 The secretariat of the GUF drew up a list of the young employed in positions of responsibility which included a broad variety of types of employment: secretaries and inspectors of provincial federations, secretaries of the local party branches, positions in trade-unionism, after-work activities etc., CSA, NFP, EB, GS, b. 41, f. 595 and b. 42, f. 596.

76 'Relazione sintetica sull'attività dei GUF nell'anno XIX', 7, quoted in E. Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo*, op. cit., 249.

77 M. Missori, *Gerarchie e statuti del PNF*, op. cit.

78 Fernando Mezzasoma (1935–39); Salvatore Gatto (1939); Guido Pallotta (1940); Aldo Vidussoni (June–August 1940); Aurelio Calandra (August–September 1940); Andrea Ippolito (1940–42); Antonio d'Este (1943); Franz Pagliani (March–July 1943).

79 These were Mario Figà Talamanca and Vittorio Zincone, respectively editor and chief editor of *Roma fascista*, and Teresio Olivelli, who won the title of 'lictor' on race at the 1939 *Littoriali*. On the subject of Adelchi Serena's totalitarian project see E. Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo*, op. cit., 257 ff.

In the face of these figures and examples it is quite clearly no longer possible to talk of the failure of the fascists' plan to perpetuate themselves through an education system capable of not only maintaining consensus amongst the young but also of sustaining the renewal of the ruling class. The system established to form and select future leaders worked — and would have had even greater success had the war not intervened — creating a pool of people available for the replacement of the élite, which was to take place without challenging the ideological content of fascism or the dominance of the middle class over government.⁸⁰ The study of the long process of the creation of the fascist ruling class reveals the leaders' constant awareness of the need to form the ruling élite 'in vitro' once liberal and democratic traditions had been abolished. Fascism's dramatic break from liberalism lay in the ambition of bringing about an entirely new understanding of politics which led to the determination to bring about a radical transformation in the role and duties of political leaders.⁸¹ The absolute faith in the value of 'mythocracy', in the use of myths in political government, entailed overcoming the electoral method and creating a new generation of fascist leaders who, as a GUF pamphlet explained, were to 'uphold and promote public office through their qualities of "faith", "orthodoxy" and "competence"'.⁸² The ambitious project on which the party worked over the years was essentially to design a way to form the ruling class which was compatible with the regime's totalitarian policies; this meant setting up a mechanism to select and prepare the appropriate candidates which would guarantee the political and ideological survival of the regime without preserving freedom of debate within the party. The desired qualities of a leader included neither planning, creativity, nor initiative: from this point of view it is easy to agree that fascism did not create its own distinctive ruling class. However, it is important to understand what the fascists believed a ruling class should be. In his presentation of the plans for a new Centre for Political Preparation, the former vice-secretary of the GUF described it as aiming to be

. . . a school of faith and experience, intent on developing in the young the characteristic qualities of fascist men: tacit and conscious discipline, a habit of obedience without which the privilege of command cannot be deserved, the intransigence of faith, the necessity of sacrifice as an essential tool of any conquest.⁸³

80 Only one of the leaders selected from the GUF was of working-class background: the secretary of the GUF of Trieste, Antonio d'Este, who was also vice-secretary of the GUF, vice-secretary of the National Institute for Fascist Culture, and a member of the executive board of the PNF. See M. Missori, *Gerarchie e statuti del PNF*, op. cit. Agostino Nasti, a lucid analyst of the problem of fascist leadership, foresaw the danger of the regime's becoming limited to the lower middle class. See A. Nasti, 'Obiezione a Pellizzi', op. cit.

81 G.L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York 1974); E. Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome-Bari 1993).

82 *Vita dei GUF a. XVI-XVII*, op. cit., 9.

83 F. Mezzasoma, 'Il Centro di preparazione politica per i giovani', *Gerarchia*, January 1940.

One can talk of a 'cultural break' brought about by fascism in the way of conceiving politics and social life. As it influenced the values, the attitudes and, in short, the collective consciousness of the time, it obliges the historian to clarify his analytical categories in order to reach a fuller understanding of the phenomenon, without this denoting intellectual naivety or ethical relativism.

Far from being a debate on ideology of mere academic interest, the need to rethink the role of the leader was also dictated by the need for functional order. Because in the totalitarian party the decisions were taken at the top, the cadres were not responsible for the political line of the party but only for making sure it was followed faithfully: politicians were organizers guided in their activity only by the principles ratified in the fascist 'table of law'. Furthermore, the party's absolute control over the life of the nation and the absorption of the organization of all social activities into the party state reduced the broad question of the ruling class to the creation of a political élite capable of guiding the machinery of the party so that it could perpetuate its control over society. In short, the new system for selecting the élite was designed to perform the functional integration — identified by Gramsci as a tendency of western political systems — between the figure of the 'specialist' and that of the 'ruler', creating a political class capable of giving rise to an 'integral society' in which the distinction between politics and civil society would disappear.⁸⁴ One must take into account the fact that within a few years educating the leaders of the future according to the 'spirit of freedom' would lead to the failure of the 'anthropological revolution' which the fascists saw as the basis of the construction of the 'new fascist civilization'.

The intellectuals of the GUF were perfectly aware of the new context within which the totalitarian regime had to address and solve the problem of the formation of political leaders. *Roma fascista*, the main voice of young totalitarian fascism, maintained that the party's initiatives to form the ruling class were the 'clear sign of the new challenge outlined by the Regime to the new generations, beyond all old structures and every old order'.⁸⁵ The students considered themselves the authentic trustees of the new 'revolutionary morality' and hoped to take over the leadership of the country in order to carry forward the progress of fascism along the lines set out by the Duce. The 'gufini' were amongst the most ardent supporters of the fascist totalitarian project, putting themselves, for example, in the front line in the anti-middle-class and racial campaign, and in refining the theoretical justification for the party's supremacy in national life. Criticism of the regime's inefficient bureaucracy, which grew exponentially during the war, was based on the call for a 'return to the origins' of fascism to take up afresh with unchanged vigour the march of 'revolution'. In any case, the young educated entirely within the framework of the regime, did not strive towards a 'new' form of fascism, but rather towards what they considered 'true' fascism, the one they had learnt

84 A. Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali* (Rome 1975), 22.

85 *Roma fascista*, 6 January 1938.

about in books.⁸⁶ This interpretation appears supported by a closer look at the memorialistic approach: years later the former 'gufino' Ugo Indrio would write that: 'The young naively thought they could be more fascist than their predecessors, in the sense that integral fascism would have reigned, with an efficient political class, with a socially elevated population and stable, rational institutions.'⁸⁷

I believe that the rallying of university youth precisely at the time when the rest of the country was slowly distancing itself from the regime, illustrated by a surge of new magazines between 1940 and 1942 breathing a sincere 'revolutionary' message and by mass enrolment to take part in the 'war of the Duce',⁸⁸ throws a new light on the quality and effectiveness of the processes employed by the machinery of the PNF to form a new ruling class and preserve ideological continuity. The paradox of the fascist regime, therefore, was not that it failed to prepare its own ruling class which would have created a youth 'branch' or a 'new fascism', but rather that it created a group of party men entirely brought up according to the fascist myths and intended to bring the design of totalitarianization of the nation to its extreme consequences. This required that all the revolutionary ideals solemnly set forth by the fascist rulers over a period of more than 20 years be put into effect, but the fragile Mussolinian regime was not able to ensure this. Faced with the crumbling of the world it had grown up in, with reality bursting in to rip apart the reassuring universe of myths of the regime, a sizeable proportion of the educated youth was unable to conceive of an alternative to fascism and tried to make a desperate and illusory retreat into revolutionary orthodoxy. For this reason, also, the majority of university youth did not reject fascism until it became history.

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86 P. Succi, 'Esame di coscienza', *Rivoluzione*, 20 February 1940; F. Schena, 'Squadre d'azione universitarie', *Libro e moschetto*, 17 March 1941; L. Vacchi, 'Rinnovamento rivoluzionario', *Architrave*, November 1941; D. Venelli, 'Rivoluzione continua', *ibid.*, 1 June 1941; R. Cresti, 'Nostra lealtà', *Il Barco*, September–December 1942.

87 U. Indrio, *Da 'Roma fascista' al 'Corriere della Sera'* (Rome 1987), 26.

88 By February 1941, before all university students were automatically enrolled after the government decree of 16 November 1942, there had been approximately 28,000 voluntary requests for membership, *Roma fascista*, 6 March 1941. See CSA, MI, PS, GCA, cat. A5G 'Seconda guerra mondiale' b. 55, f. 19 'Arruolamento volontario'; L. Deserti, 'I giovani universitari volontari nella guerra 1940–45', *Storia contemporanea*, February 1996, n. 1, 193–7.