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**ИТАЛЬЯНСКИЕ ПОЛИТИКИ И ИСТОРИК
РЕНЦО ДЕ ФЕЛИЧЕ (1929–1996):
ПРОБЛЕМЫ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПАМЯТИ,
ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО И ЭЛЕКТОРАЛЬНОГО КЛИМАТА**doi:10.31518/2618-9100-2024-5-7
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**ITALIAN POLITICIANS AND THE HISTORIAN
RENZO DE FELICE (1929–1996): BETWEEN HISTORICAL
MEMORY AND THE POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL CLIMATE**

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Abstract. This article focuses on the career of the Italian historian Renzo De Felice, aiming to understand how the Italian political class reacted to his theories and interpretations regarding the history of fascism. De Felice was the first historian to delve into fascist documents at a time when the anti-fascist historical memory relied primarily on historical-political testimonies. Historians, until his studies had refused to construct a history of fascism based on documents and contextualisation of the regime’s actions, favouring instead a politicised anti-fascist historical memory. For this reason as well, when De Felice’s theories and interpretations emerge, the Italian historian finds himself increasingly criticised and isolated by anti-fascist intellectuals, whom he himself will describe as the “sacristans of culture”. While the value and impact of the criticisms De Felice received from the Italian intellectual class of his time have been extensively discussed in recent historiography, this article shifts the focus to the reactions of politicians, who generally remained cautious about taking a stance on De Felice. Through the analysis of three specific episodes in De Felice’s career where he engaged directly with the political class in public debate, it is observed how politicians considered De Felice for reasons related to the political climate and specific political-electoral purposes. This research thus raises important theoretical questions regarding the role of historians and their freedom in a democratic regime, not only vis-à-vis their peers but also in relation to the political class engaged simultaneously in electoral consensus building.

Keywords: De Felice, historians, power, politicians, Italy.

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Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена карьере итальянского историка Ренцо Де Феличе. Ее цель состоит в исследовании откликов итальянской политической элиты на его теории и интерпретации истории фашизма. Де Феличе был первым историком, который подробно изучал документы эпохи фашизма в то время, когда антифашистская историческая память в основном опиралась на историко-политические свидетельства. До его исследований историки отказывались воссоздавать историю фашизма на основе подтверждающих документов и не стремились к контекстуализации действий режима, предпочитая политизированную антифашистскую историческую память. Поэтому,

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когда теории и интерпретации Де Феличе стали достоянием общественности, итальянский историк стал объектом критики со стороны антифашистских интеллектуалов, которые изолировались от него. Сам Де Феличе называл их «служителями культуры». Влияние критики на Де Феличе со стороны итальянского интеллектуального класса своего времени было широко исследовано в недавней историографии. Данная статья смещает фокус внимания на реакцию политиков, которые в основном оставались осторожными при занятии позиции по отношению к Де Феличе. Через анализ трех конкретных эпизодов в карьере Де Феличе, где он прямо взаимодействовал с политическим классом в общественных дебатах, становится очевидным, как политики относились к Де Феличе, исходя из политического климата, а также конкретных политических и избирательных целей. Таким образом, это исследование поднимает важные теоретические вопросы относительно роли историка и его свобод при демократическом режиме, когда его деятельность пересекается с интересами политического класса, занимающегося формированием избирательного консенсуса.

Ключевые слова: Де Феличе, историк, власть, политики, Италия.

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Preliminary Considerations. When in the 1960s, a young Renzo De Felice¹ began to study the history of fascism he himself denounced the state of Italian historiography on the history of fascism as somewhat lacking. He denounced resistance on the part of what he himself called anti-fascist scholars to face the reality of fascism that because of the political reasons² that “repelled them”³. On the contrary, De Felice’s method, according to him, stems from the need for a history made for historical reasons and not for political reasons⁴. It is now well established in contemporary historiography that De Felice as a historian contributed to ensuring that fascism “was no longer considered an accident, a parenthesis, an anomaly, a foreign body to the events of the nation-state, making it possible in this way to profoundly rethink the crucial problems of the 20th century”⁵. In this way, De Felice would “expounded the importance of analysing the facts without any ideological prejudice and without distorting them to fit theoretical schemes of interpretation”⁶. Particularly in the 1970s, after the publication of his book “Interpretations of Fascism”⁷, De Felice himself dwells on the developments in historiography following his first publications, recognising the contribution of a group of different historians to a history of fascism all bound together by the rejection of an interpretation of the history of fascism tied to “any of the traditional interpretations and characterisations”⁸. Similarly, recent historiography has confirmed how historical memory⁹ of fascism up to De Felice was influenced by “needs of a predominantly political nature” arising

¹ All original quotations in Italian have been translated into English by the author.

Renzo De Felice (1929–1996) was an Italian historian renowned for his extensive research and publications on fascism and Benito Mussolini. Born in Rieti, Italy, De Felice was briefly a historian of Jacobinism before devoting himself completely to the history of fascism and especially to his eight-volume biography of Mussolini to which he devoted over three decades of his career. Despite his initial closeness to the Marxist ideal and his membership of the Communist Party, following the events in Hungary in 1956 he left the Communist Party and if we exclude a brief connection with the Socialist Party, he was one of the few intellectuals at that time not registered with any party. This position, especially in relation to this research, is a relevant fact as we will see later.

² De Felice, more precisely, wrote: “it often seems that the driving force behind them is more political than purely historical” see De Felice R. *Storia degli ebrei italiani durante il fascismo*. Roma. 1962. p. 3.

³ Ibid. “A certain psychological resistance on the part of anti-fascist scholars to confront, partially or entirely, a reality that, already settled morally and in its general cognitive outlines, in a certain sense repels them”.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Aramini, D. Renzo De Felice e la recente storiografia italiana. In *Studi Storici*, vol. 55, 2014, p. 339.

⁶ Ibid. This approach has been judged by Italian historiography as positivist; see Breschi, D. Dal metodo storico al metodo liberale: nel laboratorio di Renzo De Felice. In *Il pensiero storico*, vol. 4, 2018, p. 2.

⁷ De Felice R. *Interpretazioni del Fascismo*. Bari. 1970.

⁸ De Felice R. *Interpretazioni del Fascismo...* P. 210.

from “the assumption of anti-fascism as a founding value of the newly established Republic” and causing the creation of a historical memory implying, “the innocence of the entire people with respect to the choices made by Mussolini”¹⁰. If these reflections are therefore no longer so unpopular today, Renzo De Felice with his method and his interpretations of history has exposed himself, for these same reasons, to a “difficult life”¹¹. His main actions and interpretations for which he was accused of revisionism by left-wing historians¹² were: 1) denying the international dimension of fascism by emphasising clear differences between Italian, German, and other fascism 2) a tendency to re-evaluate moments and aspects of the fascist regime in comparison with post-fascist Italy 3) resizing the role and scope of anti-fascism 4) resizing fascist responsibility in the extermination of the Jews 5) an idea of peaceful Italian colonialism as opposed to that of other colonising powers 6) conducting an analysis of Mussolini’s activities from the point of view of the statesman and the man¹³. Such interpretations of the fascist period led to a collision with the Italian political power that declared itself democratic and anti-fascist¹⁴. These criticisms were undoubtedly part of a highly politicised climate and were part of a historical debate involving intellectuals, predominantly historians. On 28 April 1976, Mack Smith and De Felice even came to prime time on Rai Uno, Italy’s main TV channels, to discuss some of these theories¹⁵. Media exposure increased criticism and isolation of De Felice¹⁶. While the (few) defenders of De Felice claimed De Felice’s right to make history while distancing themselves from some of his theories, others went on to violently challenge him¹⁷. De Felice reacted to these polemics in a very resentful manner towards this class of intellectuals whom he described as the “sacristans of culture”¹⁸. In this way, he developed what is described as a “lividity” towards historians who saw themselves as just politically anti-fascists¹⁹. If for these

⁹ In the sense expressed by Pellistrandi B. *La mémoire historique entre concept historiographique, fonction sociale et enjeu moral* In *Les failles de la mémoire : Théâtre, cinéma, poésie et roman : les mots contre l’oubli*, Rennes, 2016.

¹⁰ D’Alessandro, P. Il fascismo, l’antifascismo e la società italiana: un problema aperto. In *Studi Storici*, vol. 55, 2014, p. 198.

¹¹ Di Rienzo, E. Renzo De Felice: Una vita difficile. Nel ventennale della scomparsa. In *Nuova Rivista Storica*, No. 100 (3).

¹² The list would be very long, by way of example one can take some non-scientific publications by historians in the mid-1970s when the historiographical debate reached its peak, see Valiani, L., No, il fascismo fu proprio nero. In *Il Corriere della Sera*, 5 luglio 1975; Tranfaglia N. La pugnalata dello storico. In *Il Giorno*, 6 luglio 1975; Alatri, P. Il nero c’è ma non lo vede. In *Il Messaggero*, 8 luglio 1975; Santarelli, E., L’interpretazione del fascismo. In *L’Unità*, 5 agosto 1975; Santomassimo, G. Senza dubbio fu reazione. In *Rinascita/Il contemporaneo* vol. 35, 1975, p. 29–30; D’Orsi A. Le tesi sul fascismo di De Felice sono l’espressione di una parabola di destra. In *Il quotidiano dei lavoratori*, 29 luglio 1975; Pavone, C., De Felice: il fascismo incomprensibile In *Il Manifesto*, 20 luglio 1975; Basso, L. Quanti errori ed omissioni nel suo fascismo In *Il Giorno*, 12 luglio 1975.

¹³ This list was compiled by one of his most bitter academic opponents: Gianpasquale Santomassimo: Santomassimo, G., Il ruolo di Renzo De Felice. In *Italia Contemporanea*, 212, 1998.

¹⁴ It should be pointed out here that the Italian Constitution of 1948 had declared its democratic nature through the first article of the Constitution and formally banned, through the twelfth transitory provision, any reconstitution of the fascist party. Added to this was the Scelba law of 20 June 1952, which supplemented the transitional provision by introducing a ban on apologia for fascism. The subject is still extremely topical considering that these legal provisions are still in force and from time to time force judges to pronounce on what can constitute apologia for fascism and what does not, the subject is beyond the scope of our research but suffice it to refer here to a 2019 text by the historian Emilio Gentile, a pupil of De Felice, who had to intervene to delimit the contours of what is fascist and what is not. See Gentile, E. *Chi è fascista*. Bari, 2019.

¹⁵ The main topics discussed in the media were summarised in Baris, T. and Gagliardi, A. Le controversie sul fascismo degli anni Settanta e Ottanta. In *Studi Storici*, vol. 1, 2014, p. 320. These topics were: 1) the revolutionary nature of fascism belonging to the progressive left 2) the emergence of the middle classes and the distinction between fascism movement and fascism regime 3) the issue of consensus in Italian society and the consequent incompatibility between Italian fascism and nazism.

¹⁶ Baris, T., La stampa italiana e il dibattito sul regime fascista (1945–1990). Appunti per una ricerca. In *E-Review. Rivista degli Istituti Storici dell’Emilia-Romagna in Rete*, vol. 6, 2018.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.15.

¹⁸ Degli Esposti, G. I sacrestani della cultura Intervista a Renzo De Felice. In *La Nazione*, 22 febbraio 1976.

¹⁹ This was caused by the bitterness of the endless debate that sometimes led to personal attacks against him and which resulted in numerous attempts to boycott his lectures throughout his career by extra-parliamentary political movements and an attempted attack on his home, without serious consequences, a few months before his death. See, among others, Gentile, E. Renzo De Felice: A tribute. In *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, 1997.

reasons it is now established that historians and intellectuals largely criticised De Felice's theories and interpretations on every possible public occasion, we are interested in trying to understand whether politicians did the same. Indeed, the question is of relevant importance especially if we consider that the Italian political power established after the Second World War had thus equipped itself with an anti-fascist historical memory, to the extent that the intellectual power wrote an anti-fascist history of the Italian fascist period while the material power²⁰ would seem to have let him do so, although without expressing himself particularly in public²¹. Renzo De Felice himself said in a newspaper interview in 1995: "If one wanted to recall my case, I could provide ample documentation of what has been said and written about me. Including the part that was not simply negative, but also trivial and intimidating in which politicians were, however, shrewder than intellectuals"²². This article thus aims to verify whether and to what extent this sentence by De Felice reflects reality and in what way and, above all, whether and in what way the political climate could push politicians to react in a certain way towards the Italian historian. In order to do this, it was necessary to go beyond purely academic texts and therefore I do not agree with the most recent historiography that one should not "mechanically confuse or overlap historiographical and journalistic debate"²³. This is because we consider this distinction to be merely theoretical, since De Felice's critics themselves have in a certain sense cleared the way for historians to expose themselves in newspapers and television, and above all because in newspapers historians tend to express his thoughts outside the cage of the scientific method, being more easily understandable by the politicians. We have thus selected several episodes of De Felice's career as a historian in which he was publicly exposed to comments and reactions directly from Italian politicians in order to understand how his activity was subject to the political climate and the objectives of certain politicians with relevant consequences both to the reactions of intellectuals and to De Felice himself.

I. The Piccardi case. When De Felice's book "History of Italian Jews during Fascism" was published in 1961²⁴, the so-called Piccardi case exploded. Named after Leopoldo Piccardi²⁵, at that time secretary of the Italian Radical Party and Roman city councillor and one of the founders of the Radical Party. Despite his anti-fascist positions that allowed him to appear in the anti-fascist newspapers of post-republican Italy²⁶, he nevertheless had an important past in the governmental administration of Fascist Italy, having held the position of Councillor of State since 1934. In this text, De Felice discovered from the newspapers of the time the participation of several Italian jurists including Piccardi at an Italian-German conference on race in Vienna at which a joint resolution on Race and Law was signed²⁷. The signing of such a document by an exponent of post-war anti-fascism like Piccardi created a certain amount of unrest in the Radical Party by splitting it into two currents and even dragging some members of this party to trial ending up forcing Piccardi to resign from the party²⁸. The impact of this small, almost involuntary case on a young Renzo De Felice was

²⁰ Both conceptions of intellectual power and material power draw on the conceptions elaborated by Gaetano Mosca in particular in Mosca, G. *Storia delle dottrine politiche*. Bari, 1941.

²¹ Except for a minority of historians who also held parliamentary seats and engaged in active politics mainly in the Italian Communist Party or in connected parliamentary groups and electoral lists.

²² Fertilio, D. De Felice e Tranfaglia, la guerra è finita In *Corriere della Sera*, 11 gennaio 1995.

²³ Baris, T. and Gagliardi, A. *op.cit.*, p. 319.

²⁴ De Felice, R. *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*. Torino. 1961.

²⁵ Leopoldo Piccardi (1899–1974), the son of a judge, during the First World War, he served on the Karst front and later attended the Military Academy in Turin. In 1919, he participated in D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume as a legionnaire. In 1932, he joined the National Fascist Party and in 1934, he became a councillor of state and actively participated in the Commission for the reform of civil codes. In 1943 joined the Badoglio government as Minister of Industry and Trade, in 1955 he participated in the founding of the Radical Party, of which he has been one of the national secretaries and In 1960 he was elected city councillor of Rome just a year before the Piccardi case came up.

²⁶ For example In *L'Unità*, 22 febbraio 1960.

²⁷ De Felice, R. *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*. Torino. 1961, p. 411.

²⁸ In fact, Piccardi withdrew his resignation at first, creating considerable friction within the party and leading to a split, The heirs of the Radical Party had put some very interesting documents online in its archives which delve into what happened within the party, we point out in particular the documents accessible at the following links:

a) http://old.radicali.it/search_view.php?id=44353&lang=&cms=

b) http://old.radicali.it/search_view.php?id=44356&lang=&cms=

such that it had immediate consequences on his work as a historian. The consequences were of two types: one of an editorial nature and the other of a personal nature. In the first case, the publisher Einaudi²⁹, led De Felice to a confrontation with Piccardi, who showed him a hitherto unpublished judgement of 27 December 1944 by the Council of State's Purging Commission, which allegedly exonerated Piccardi as the author of this report. A second 1961 edition was hurriedly published that was identical in every respect to the previous one, with the exception of De Felice's addition of the mention of the aforementioned ruling. In the second edition, in fact, the note on Piccardi is amended by adding the following sentence: "A judgement of 27 Dec. 1944 by the Council of State's Purging Commission, however, exonerates L. Piccardi, who, according to this judgement, is found not to have signed the motion of Race and Law"³⁰. In public, Piccardi refrained from commenting. We do know, however, that some exponents of the radical political area went as far as to describe De Felice as a "little scoundrel manoeuvred by some powerful character"³¹, suggesting an instrumentalisation of the historian. From a personal point of view, this friction with one of the longest-serving politicians created quite a few problems in the advancement of his career. In this regard, a rather curious criticism by intellectuals, not purely historians, can be found in the newspaper *La Stampa* of 7 February 1962 signed by two professors, one a professor of Literature at the University of Turin and the other a professor of Glottology at the University of Milan. In the section "letter to the editor", the two professors denounce "the great scandal" made in other newspapers, congratulating the daily newspaper for not having given space to the "absolute groundlessness" of the accusations and that in the conference attended by Piccardi they dealt with "many other strictly technical matters"³².

His publication also affected his academic career. In the same year, he failed the examination for lecturing, a very curious fact for a historian who had already written a monograph of such importance as the one just published. The rejection was justified by modern historiography as an act of political hostility towards De Felice because of the Piccardi case³³. In 1968, he faced a commission to judge his transition from Associate Professor to Full Professor. One of the members of the commission, Nicola Matteucci, reported that the atmosphere was very tense³⁴ and only had to decide by a majority vote on the change of role, again a rather peculiar case considering that at that time De Felice had already written three important monographs, of which two were the first two volumes of the biography on Mussolini³⁵.

II. Giorgio Amendola defending De Felice. In the politically heated climate that would follow the publication of the book "Interview on fascism"³⁶, Giorgio Amendola³⁷, Italian Commu-

c) http://old.radicali.it/search_view.php?id=44359&lang=&cms=

d) http://old.radicali.it/search_view.php?id=44379&lang=&cms=

²⁹ The intervention of the Einaudi family, owners of the publishing house, was probably also decisive. Giulio Einaudi in fact inherited from his father, Luigi Einaudi and second President of the Italian Republic, a long-standing acquaintance with Leopoldo Piccardi as demonstrated at various points of his biography, See Einaudi, L. *Diario, 1945–1947*, Roma, 1993, p. 140.

³⁰ The wording of this note is such as to suggest that De Felice did not have the opportunity to consult the resolution directly, and it seems that he was only able to do so a decade later to the extent that he points out in the 1972 edition that the documents are in Amsterdam, although he is not explicit about the presence or absence of Piccardi's signature. See De Felice R. *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*. Torino, 1972.

³¹ This is reported in Simoncelli, P. *Renzo De Felice: la formazione intellettuale*, Firenze, 2001, p. 241.

³² Terracini, B. and Fubini, M. Una testimonianza In *La Stampa*, 7 febbraio 1962.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 212.

³⁴ Matteucci, N. *Battaglia continua*. In *Il Giornale*, 25 novembre 2005.

³⁵ De Felice, R. *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883–1920*. Torino, 1965; De Felice R. *Mussolini Mussolini il fascista*. Vol. I: *La conquista del potere, 1921–1925*. Torino, 1966. The third volume would be published in 1968 see *Mussolini il fascista*. Vol. II: *L'organizzazione dello stato fascista, 1925–1929*, Torino, 1968.

³⁶ De Felice, R. *Intervista sul fascismo*. Roma, 1975.

³⁷ Giorgio Amendola (1907–1980) was an Italian politician best known for his political and anti-fascist commitment. Amendola began his political activity in the 1920s as a member of the Italian Communist Party and continued to play a leading role within the party for most of his life. He was a determined opponent of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime and suffered several arrests and imprisonments due to his anti-fascist political activities. After World War II, Amendola became a leading figure within the Italian Communist Party, playing key roles within the party and contributing to its political growth and influence. He was elected several times to the Italian Parliament and held important positions, such

nist Party deputy and anti-fascist publicly defended De Felice on two occasions. In the first case in the Italian Communist Party's daily newspaper, *L'Unità*, where in a front-page article on 20 July 1975 he emphasised, agreeing with De Felice, the importance of doing a history of fascism in order to finally write a history of anti-fascism³⁸. In the second case through the publication in 1976 of the book "Interview on anti-fascism"³⁹. On these two occasions, Amendola writes that although he disagrees with De Felice's interpretations did not approve at all "the indignant and morally exasperated reaction that greeted De Felice's interview, when what was needed, rather, was a refutation of his theses" and that this historical research could only be done within the framework of historical research on fascism⁴⁰. Apart from sharing the need for a history of fascism, it seems to us that there are other points in common between Amendola and De Felice, such as when Amendola emphasises the rejection of a universal category of fascism concerning different states⁴¹ but above all Amendola believes, like De Felice, that the history of fascism is opposed by anti-fascists precisely because it highlights the contradictions of the history of anti-fascism, the myth of the anti-fascist resistance that had never been questioned until then and that was instead considerably weakened after De Felice's interpretations⁴². Amendola also recognises partisan resistance as "a fact of minorities"⁴³ and that the anti-fascist republic was inevitably born from the compromise between more or less repentant fascists and anti-fascists more or less convinced of the need to build a state⁴⁴. This defence was appreciated by De Felice⁴⁵ who emphasised in this way how the sharing of certain theories by an anti-fascist communist like Amendola was sufficient to reject the accusations of revisionism levelled at the historian up to that point. However, several journalists had already pointed out at the time that Amendola's intervention was probably aimed at political instrumentalisation to emphasise the anti-fascism of the Communist Party and the lesser impact of the anti-fascism of the other parties so as to reduce the electoral pool of the other anti-fascist parties⁴⁶. This political instrumentalisation of De Felice tends to be confirmed by the fact that the polemics towards him would only subside with the rapprochement between the two main Italian parties of the time, the Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party, with a view to excluding the party of fascist inspiration, the Italian Social Movement⁴⁷. However, it must be emphasised that this attempt was a solo effort, being, Giorgio Amendola, a member of the Italian Communist Party, by definition considered the party of intellectuals especially among historians⁴⁸.

III. De Felice in the 'trap' of Italian Social Movement and Socialist Party. Following the Italian Social Movement Party's electoral decline in 1987, the party's historic secretary and former

as secretary of the Italian Communist Party for a short period in the 1960s. His father, Giovanni Amendola (1882–1926) had been a politician in the Kingdom of Italy and a staunch opponent of fascism.

³⁸ Amendola, G. Per una storia dell'antifascismo. In *L'unità*, 20 luglio 1975.

³⁹ Amendola, G. Intervista sull'antifascismo. Roma, 1976.

⁴⁰ Amendola, G. Per una storia dell'antifascismo. In *L'unità*, 20 luglio 1975: "To accept or reject the theses of De Felice, I do not see how it can be done without going into that historical research on fascism, in that study of its various components and contradictions that to many critics of De Felice still seems a reason for repugnance".

⁴¹ Amendola, G. Intervista sull'antifascismo. Roma, 1976, p. 182.

⁴² This position of De Felice's would be particularly accentuated towards the end of his life and career in the text "Red and black" that was much criticised for this by left-wing intellectuals. See De Felice R. *Rosso e nero*. Milano. 1995.

⁴³ Amendola, G. Intervista sull'antifascismo. Roma, 1976, p. 170.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13: "The fascist who helped the anti-fascist to find accommodation, in turn found in the anti-fascist who helped him accommodation afterwards. This is the republic we founded". On p. 179 he explains the difficulty they faced when the fascist regime had fallen to build a state composed of people completely excluded from fascism as it was not always easy "to understand which testimonies were reliable and which were not or to understand who was protecting whom and for what in return".

⁴⁵ See also for the cultural connections between De Felice and the Italian communist phenomenon: Parlato G. Renzo De Felice, il Sessantotto e la difesa dello Stato di diritto. In *Ventesimo secolo: rivista di studi sulle transizioni*, 22, 2, 2010.

⁴⁶ Doubt of the truth was already instilled in the form of a question by the book's editor in one of the questions to Amendola, See Amendola, G. Intervista sull'antifascismo. Roma. 1976, p. 14.

⁴⁷ See note on Giorgio Almirante.

⁴⁸ On this topic see among others Ajello N. *Intelletuali e PCI*. Roma-Bari, 1979.

member of the Italian Social Republic between 1943 and 1945, Giorgio Almirante⁴⁹, decided to give way to a new secretary, Gianfranco Fini⁵⁰. The particular political context and media exposure that De Felice enjoyed led the Arezzo historian to expose himself to a great deal of criticism following essentially three interviews, one on television⁵¹ and two in newspapers⁵² which will reignite, aided by the political climate, accusations of revisionism against it. These three interviews had as a common denominator a position that was certainly more political than De Felice's albeit anchored in his historical ideas and interpretations. There were at least three key points: 1) the normalisation of the Italian Social Movement as a party now detached from the fascist context, and which followed the meeting that first took place between the leader of the Italian Social Movement and the leader of the Italian Socialist Party⁵³ 2) De Felice's proposal to abolish the Italian constitutional provisions prohibiting the reconstitution of the fascist party⁵⁴, the latter considered by De Felice as inapplicable, symbolic rules that contribute to creating a fictitious link between democracy and anti-fascism⁵⁵ 3) To emphasise the continuity between the Fascist state and the Giolittian state as well as the continuity between the Fascist state and the Republican state in its administrative form while also highlighting the limitations of the Republic and its otherwise undemocratic character. The criticism came from left-wing intellectuals and historians and essentially concerned De Felice's possible instrumentalisation of his historical method, accusing him of legitimising the importance of the Italian Social Movement for mere political reasons⁵⁶. For example, he was accused of emphasising the similarities between Italian states in different periods solely to normalise the rapprochement to the Italian Social Movement and the fascist experience in general, thus lending himself to a "revisionism, consequently, programmatically aimed at demolishing any distinction/contrast between successive regimes and historical phases"⁵⁷. There are in this sense two key moments in which De Felice found himself exposed to the political manoeuvres of Gianfranco Fini and Bettino

⁴⁹ Giorgio Almirante (1914–1988) was an Italian politician who was born in 1914 and died in 1988. He was a prominent figure in 20th century Italian politics, particularly associated with the extreme right. In the post-war period, Almirante became a leading member of the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*), a far-right political party founded in 1946. During his long political career, Almirante embodied the nationalist, conservative, and anti-communist ideology of the Italian Social Movement, becoming a reference point for many followers of the Italian extreme right. He always remained a controversial figure, criticised for his extremist positions and his political past during Benito Mussolini's fascist regime.

⁵⁰ Gianfranco Fini (1952) is an Italian politician. He began his political career in the 1970s as a youth activist in the Italian Social Movement. Subsequently, in 1994, he was one of the founders and leaders of *Alleanza Nazionale*, a centre-right party born from the transformation of the Italian Social Movement.

⁵¹ In particular, the TV programme *Linea Rovente* aired on *Rai Tre* on 6 January 1988.

⁵² The interviews were transcribed in *Corriere della Sera* on 27 December 1987 and 8 January 1988 respectively and are also reported in Focardi F. *La guerra della memoria*. Rome-Bari. 2005, pp. 252–258.

⁵³ The political importance of this event and the topic raised by De Felice can be seen in the collection of articles and notes related to De Felice and to the topic of antifascism and the aforementioned Italian norms, preserved in the historical archive of the Senate of the Republic, by one of the most important politicians of the Italian Communist Party. See Archivio Storico del Senato della Repubblica, Fondazione Gramsci, Paolo Bufalini, 1.3.67.

⁵⁴ The rules are described by De Felice in a 1987 interview as "grotesque". See Ferrara G. *Le norme contro il fascismo? Sono grottesche, aboliamole*. In *Corriere della Sera*, 27 dicembre 1987.

⁵⁵ We quote the full passage translated into English from the 1988 interview: "First of all, as you know and as everyone knows, the anti-fascist norms of the Constitution are not applied by the same ruling class that seems to want to defend them tooth and nail. This means they have a mere symbolic value. But what are they a symbol of? Of a certain conservatism, of a lack of willingness to seek elsewhere, forty years after the Constitution came into force, the legitimisation of a true and modern liberal democracy. It is obsessively repeated: we are democratic because we are anti-fascist. But this is not true. Some voices have risen to reaffirm that one can be anti-fascist and not democratic. And this, secondly, is a discourse that also applies to Italian communists". See Ferrara, G. *De Felice: la Costituzione non è certo il Colosseo...* In *Corriere della sera*, 7 gennaio 1988.

⁵⁶ This passage is taken from an article in the newspaper *Repubblica* calling for history not to be rewritten according to the need to take the votes of Italian Social Movement voters into account. See Forcella E. *Per inseguire i voti del MSI non si deve riscrivere la storia*. In *Repubblica* 30 dicembre 1987.

⁵⁷ This is how a historian opposed to De Felice's theories expressed himself in an article that is also very interesting for understanding the climate among historians in the face of this media exposure. See Legnani M. *Al mercato del revisionismo*. In *Italia Contemporanea*, vol. 170, p. 100.

Craxi⁵⁸. When the new secretary of the Italian Social Movement, Gianfranco Fini, was elected in 1987, De Felice welcomed this news as a confirmation of his theories in particular on the historical delineation of Italian fascism in the Mussolini experience⁵⁹. In this way, he will greet the new secretary as a sign that the Italian Social Movement does not constitute a fascist danger at all, Fini himself having been born in 1952 and thus being outside the direct tradition of Italian fascism. Fini declared in an interview that historians like De Felice “have understood before the others that Italy has changed, that we do not want to remain anchored to the past”⁶⁰. In this sense, Craxi, who, in the meantime, was weaving a web of relations with the Italian Social Movement with a view to external support in a future government⁶¹, within his party saw a conference organised in March 1988 by the official magazine of the Italian Socialist Party *Mondoperaio* on the role of Togliatti and the Italian Communist Party as well as the role of the Soviet Union. De Felice there criticised the Italian Communist Party’s juxtaposition with Stalinism. This conference was criticised as an attempt by Craxi, secretary of the Italian Socialist Party, to bring some voters of the Italian Communist Party closer to the Italian Socialist Party itself⁶².

Conclusions. It thus seems to us that there are two moments in particular when the pathos against De Felice was at its peak: the first is the period following the publication of his “Interview on fascism” in the mid-1970s. The second runs from the end of the 1980s until his death centred around De Felice’s increasing participation not only in the historical debate but above all in the country’s political debate. Despite the academic and media clamour, the political class had remained cautious at least in expressing criticism of De Felice. It seems very likely that precisely because of a political class that was partly anti-fascist by origin and partly anti-fascist because it converted after the constitution of the Republic, the silence of the political class in power was essentially due to fear of opening Pandora’s box, delegating the preservation of acquired historical memory to intellectuals, as in the case we have seen of Piccardi who only exposed himself because he was personally attacked. Piccardi’s case would have taught politicians to remain shrewd while Amendola’s, Fini’s, and Craxi’s defences of De Felice show, in a certain sense, that politicians of a certain prominence were exposed in defence of De Felice but also in an electoral context such that there was an instrumentalisation of De Felice and his intellectual nonconformity. The broader political climate thus ends up having a major impact on the historian’s work, but in the Italian case it was not the political class that was the greatest obstacle to De Felice’s attempt to change historical memory. These considerations are particularly pertinent if one takes into account the theoretically democratic nature of Italian power in this period and the fact that it had no possibility of centralising control over culture. In this sense, while intellectuals were an obstacle to De Felice’s attempt to adopt new theories and interpretations of the history of fascism, the political class merely reacted to De Felice in relation to their own personal or political-electoral interests. De Felice’s case shows how it is the political climate that the historian’s activity in a regime of alternating power has to reckon with both for better and for worse and yet leaves open numerous other theoretical questions concerning the limits of historians’ activities and their ability to maintain the balance between their profile as a historian and of a citizen as well as the limits of intellectual pressure from one’s peers on any historian’s activity.

⁵⁸ Bettino Craxi (1934–2000) was an Italian politician, a leading figure in Italian politics after World War II and held several important positions, including First Secretary of the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*) from 1976 to 1993 and Prime Minister from 1983 to 1987. Craxi is best known for leading the Italian Socialist Party during a period of significant political influence and for playing a key role in the establishment of a political system based on government coalitions between left and centre parties.

⁵⁹ See Ferrara, G. Le norme contro il fascismo? Sono grottesche, aboliamole. In *Corriere della Sera*, 27 dicembre 1987.

⁶⁰ In *Panorama*, 10 gennaio 1988.

⁶¹ On the relationship between the MSI and the Italian Socialist Party at that moment and the general metamorphosis of the MSI under the new secretary, see : Tassani G. The Italian Social Movement from Almirante to Fini. In *Italian politics*, vol. 4, 1990.

⁶² As mentioned at the time, with some worldwide resonance in Painter B. Renzo De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism. In *The American Historical Review*, vol. 95, 1990.

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