

## The Contemporary Reader and Rediscovery of WWII: The Past in the Present in Selected Historical Novels by Contemporary Writers

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### Abstract

World War II stands as an enduring subject of fascination, drawing intrigue from its profound impact on global history, mass destruction, and the utilization of cutting-edge warfare technologies. This has driven many contemporary novelists to set their storylines within that epoch and bring about the various repercussions of that war on both man and land. This research paper delves into the multifaceted aspects of WWII, with a particular focus on the fascist ideology that permeated the era. The study investigates the potent role of propaganda in manipulating and brainwashing both citizens and soldiers of that time, examining how it shaped perspectives and fueled fanaticism to serve as a moral cover to the atrocities committed. The paper explores the enduring legacy of WWII, not merely as a historical event but as a lens through which contemporary societal issues are scrutinized to illuminate resonances with present-day conflicts. These narratives unveil parallels in narrowmindedness, hypocrisy, and fanaticism, drawing attention to the enduring relevance of the lessons learned during that tumultuous period. By analyzing the two selected contemporary historical novels set in WWII, this research seeks to unravel the complexities of human behavior, societal structures, and political ideologies, drawing connections between historical events and contemporary conflicts. The study contributes to our understanding of the enduring impact of WWII on the collective psyche and its ability to serve as a poignant mirror reflecting the darker aspects of humanity. In doing so, it underscores the importance of studying WWII history to comprehend contemporary challenges and to navigate a path toward a more enlightened and compassionate future if people learn from their previous mistakes.

### المخلص

تظل الحرب العالمية الثانية موضوعاً دائماً للإثارة، يستمد إعجابها من تأثيرها العميق على التاريخ العالمي، والدمار الجماعي، واستخدام تكنولوجيا الحرب المتقدمة. وقد دفعت هذه الإثارة العديد من الكتّاب المعاصرين إلى وضع قصصهم ضمن تلك الحقبة الزمنية وإظهار تداولات الحرب على الإنسان والأرض. يتناول هذا البحث الجوانب المتعددة للحرب العالمية الثانية، مع التركيز الخاص على الفاشية التي اجتاحت تلك الحقبة. يحقق البحث في الدور الفعّال للدعاية في التلاعب وغسل أدمغة

المواطنين والجنود في تلك الحقبة، محللاً كيف شكلت آراءهم وأقودت التعصب لتكون غطاءً أخلاقياً للفظائع التي ارتكبت. يستكشف البحث الإرث المستمر للحرب العالمية الثانية، ليس فقط كحدث تاريخي ولكن كعدسة يتم من خلالها فحص القضايا الاجتماعية المعاصرة بغية إلقاء الضوء على التشابه مع النزاعات الحالية. تكشف هذه السردية عن توازيات في التضيق الذهني، والنفاق، والتعصب، ملفتة الانتباه إلى الأهمية المستمرة للدروس المستفادة خلال تلك الفترة العاصفة. من خلال تحليل الروايتين التاريخيتين المعاصرتين المختارتين اللتين تدور أحداثهما في فترة الحرب العالمية الثانية، يسعى هذا البحث إلى فك رموز تعقيدات السلوك البشري، وهياكل المجتمع، والأيدولوجيات السياسية، وربط الأحداث التاريخية بالنزاعات المعاصرة. يساهم البحث في فهمنا للتأثير المستمر للحرب العالمية الثانية على النفس الجماعية وجعلها مرآة حية تعكس الجوانب الإنسانية الأكثر ظلمة. وبذلك، يسلط الضوء على أهمية دراسة تاريخ الحرب العالمية الثانية لفهم التحديات المعاصرة والتوجيه نحو مستقبل أكثر تنويراً وتعاطفاً إذا تعلم الناس من أخطاء الماضي.

### Introduction

The aim of the historian is to know the elements of the present by understanding what came into the present from the past, for the present is simply the developing past... The goal of the historian is the living present. –Frederick Jackson Turner (Loewen, 1995, p.232)

Studying the past has always been an essential human process to understanding the present, as implicated in the above quotation. It is through this understanding that the present becomes meaningful and worthy of living. Understanding the implications of WWII events in our present circumstances becomes significant to today's generation, who may discover that many current political and economic situations are now rooted in that destructive war.

Though the past is enigmatic and rendered mysterious by multiple epistemological assumptions, Frye (1998) believes it must remain essential to understanding our world. This could be achieved by lively historical inquiry from various perspectives, so the narrative features of novelistic discourse provide vital insights and perspectives into the past (p. 153), which the contemporary historical novel provides its readers with. Writers of historical fiction, specifically in contemporary times, arguably point to the complexity and fluidity of people's relationship to the past and how that past impacts the present. New historicist scholars like Greenblatt use the past as an impetus for political struggle in the present and assert that the discipline of literary studies is not removed from the sphere of politics (Brannigan, 1998, p.6). In this regard, and many situations, the past is stretched to the present to fit current political needs using different means of representation, including the historical novel.

Having the wisdom of about a century later, the knowledge that we have today when we look back at WWII is an essential point in which to embark for the analysis of those long-gone events, and this paper chooses two contemporary historical novels: *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Beneath A Scarlet Sky* by Louis De Bernieres, and Mark Sullivan respectively. The reconstruction and re-narration of WWII in the selected novels allow the readers of today to view and understand

WWII events from other perspectives, specifically in the digital age, which gives a very different depiction of WWII to this generation; this propels historical fiction writers and historians to try to fix that distorted vision as the two selected writers arguably do. Lowenthal (2015) makes a very significant point stating how the past in the internet age has become more intimate yet more remote, easily found but rapidly forgotten as its range today is stupendous, embracing not just the human but the terrestrial and even the cosmic saga (p. I-II). The revolutionary development of communication technology and the internet have given access to many historical events in general and WWII in particular via media in the form of T.V. documentaries, series, newspaper archives, and internet websites that offer an immense amount of WWII data for today's generation. In this regard, WWII history is easily found but rapidly lost in the vast ocean of information. It is only sensible to think of how, nowadays, we are offered distorted visions of WWII as created by historians moved by political ideologies, politicians using persuasive techniques, or even by videogame versions that depict stereotypical images of good vs. evil participants of WWII.

Play Station games depicting WWII, for instance, are so popular amongst this generation, and one very famous game called "Call of Duty WWII" is an excellent example of a digitalized version of the war played via the perspective of an American soldier. Although it allows the gamer to have a second-hand experience of fighting in WWII and to encounter dangerous real-life situations virtually recreated, still it (and many other WWII-related games) does not offer the humane aspects of war experience but instead seems like a detached kind of war presenting "good" American soldiers fighting the "evil" Nazis or Axis participants. Such games teach this generation distorted images and Euro-centric discourses of WWII; therefore, contemporary historical novels set in WWII offer a different perspective of that war, focusing on the human experience and trauma and the impacts of WWII on both the individual and national level. The selected writers' going back to WWII events is arguably not meant as a nostalgic return but more of a critical revisiting intended to bring with it a plethora of reasons for which the novels were written. One is to resonate with the savage brutality of contemporary wars triggered by certain war ideologies and "myths" created by those in power and circulated via different means or propaganda then and now.

Thus, this paper will try to answer the following question:

· How does the selected writers' retrieving of WWII events in their novels serve as a means to resonate the savage brutality of contemporary wars triggered by certain war ideologies and "myths" by those in power?

### **Literature Review**

In 1994, de Bernieres's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* was released, and the 400-page novel became a best-seller that sold, according to Rebecca Caldwell (2004), 2.5 million copies in the Commonwealth alone, propelled by a marketer's impossible dream—word of mouth sales. It also won the overall Commonwealth

Writer's Prize in 1995 (p.18). After the novel's tremendous success, it was converted into a film in 2001 starring Nicholas Cage as Captain Corelli and Penelope Cruz as Palagia. "The film rights were sold for roughly £200,000 (almost \$486,000 Canadian)" (Caldwell, 2004, p.18), consequently rendering the book a must-read novel that combines tragedy, humor, love, friendship, fear, and hope. Corelli's *Mandolin* received much appraisal from prestigious literary magazines, newspapers, and critics. The *Boston Globe* writes that Captain Corelli's *Mandolin* is "a captivating read... a daring work. De Bernieres writes with a sense of the fantastic... to embrace Corelli is to be enveloped" (as cited in De Bernieres, *Captain Corelli*, i). The novel is captivating and does not allow the reader to be bored due to the variety of stories so cleverly intertwined to create the book. The reader can venture into the novel's world through the clever narrative style that the writer adopts, a style that echoes postmodernity. Moreover, the *San Francisco Chronicle* also writes that the book is "dazzling... a fabulous book in the tradition of Tolstoy and Dickens... so joyous and heartbreaking, so rich and musical and wise, that reading it is like discovering a new the enchanting power of fiction" (as cited in De Bernieres, *Captain Corelli*, p i). The novel triggers the question of how history and fiction are connected and what each genre offers to the other so that they create a successful historical fiction book to be much appraised by readers and literary scholars at the same level. Furthermore, Cressida Connolly (1994) from *The Spectator* states that De Bernieres "writes one hell of a story, and he tells it straight, with only interludes of high comedy to interrupt the flow... He is clever and funny, with an acute and vivid sense of history, and can tear the reader" (p. 37). In truth, the book can make the reader cry at one time, laugh at another, and even be vexed and infuriated at other instances. One powerful aspect of the novel's remarkable success is the mixture of emotions one undergoes while reading the book. The current reader cannot but find him or herself identifying with one or more characters in the book because their lives, tragedies, and comedies resemble our contemporary world in many aspects. In another interesting study, Tatiana Golban (2014) attempts to expose the postmodern representation of myth and monomyth of the hero and the quest in *Corelli's Mandolin* (p.11). Golban (2014) bases her study on the use of myth in the novel, a fact that de Bernieres himself does not hide. "Much of the book is based on *The Odessey* – it is stuffed with references to Homer," explains the author in one interview (as cited in Reynolds, 2012, p. 10). The extensive use of myth in the novel is another point that is worth investigating further, specifically in the point of how all references to myth help us gain a better understanding of our contemporary life. Van Watson William (2005) perceives the novel from a completely different perspective via the field of gender studies. He argues that *Corelli's Mandolin* follows the dominant paradigm of war narratives that configure the invading force (Italy) primarily as male and the invaded country (Greece) as female. William (2005) further argues that the ultimate conclusion of this paradigm, equating pillage with rape, reflects

the interchangeability of the acquisition of territory and sex in the human instinct. As such, the penetration of foreign territory, according to William (2005), elides with the penetration of the female at the level of the other, who, in the novel, also readily elides with the concept of the mother (p. 313). His argument further extends, and William (2005) asserts that the novel presents the Italian invasion of Greece as an escape from patriarchy and a return to the mother (p. 313). William's argument is interesting in that it analyzes gender concepts as represented in the aspects of war in the novel, which brings to mind the nature of our modern wars and the role of women in wars. Last but not least, Richard Sheppard (2002), in an innovative article, argues that the novel is a debate about history. It involves a discussion of the problems of historiography, a critique of various heroic concepts of history, and a debate between a catastrophic vision of history and a more optimistic vision of it (p. 51). At its very beginning, the novel presents one problem of historicism when Dr. Iannis, Plagia's father, attempts to write the history of Cephallonia but never succeeds because his subjective point of view keeps interfering with his objective writing. According to Sheppard (2002), Dr. Iannis discovers the impossibility of objectivity in the process of writing history; as a result, he finally concludes that he might be able to write a "tirade" or "lament" because "History Itself Was Impossible" (p.51). This reading of the novel instigates the new postmodern methods of historiography, one that encourages multiple subjective stories of histories to be told as opposed to Dr. Iannis's linear, objective history of grand occurrences. Postmodern historiography, thus, implicates that the writing of history should include almost as many lost voices of the past. To sum up, Correlli's *Mandolin* is an eccentric and multi-layered novel that presents characters larger than life and whom the reader finds easy to identify with. De Bernieres's ingenuity lies in the fact that his novel simply addresses the reader's sensation and challenges his intellect at just the same level, a fact that makes it a "captivating read...a daring work," as worded by the *Boston Globe* (as cited in Correlli's *Mandolin*, 2001).

The second novel selected for this paper is Mark Sullivan's *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*. Issued in May 2017, the novel was a # 1 best-seller on Amazon Charts, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* and has received numerous positive reviews from most of its readers. Only reviews and interviews are available as literature for this novel, so this research will hopefully be one of the first studies conducted on the book. Amazon has recently announced that the novel will soon be a motion picture from Pascal Pictures, starring Tom Holland (*Spider-Man: Homecoming* star) in the role of Pino Lella, the protagonist. 18 One of the best elements in the novel is the fact that it is based on the true story of Pino Lella, a forgotten Italian war hero of WWII. Young as he was, Pino was able to engage in more than one life-threatening situation against the Nazis. On its website, a review of the novel by the *Poisoned Pen Bookstore* (2017) states, "*Beneath a Scarlet Sky* is the triumphant, epic tale of one young man's incredible courage and resilience during one of history's darkest hours." The website further writes that the novel follows

17-year-old, real-life hero Lella as he guides hunted Jews out of northern Italy over the rugged winter Alps into Switzerland. The saga continues when Pino is then recruited to become a spy for the Italian Resistance. Working undercover as a driver for the mysterious and powerful Nazi general, Pino gains deep access inside the German High Command but also witnesses the atrocities of war firsthand. According to Poisoned Pen, the book's main events are how Pino becomes a live eyewitness to WWII events in Northern Italy and his exposure to the happenings at that particular time, as never told before. The historical information is a novelty to the contemporary reader, a fact that made Mark Sullivan – on first hearing Pino's story –unable to "shake the image of the Italian teenager leading refugees to safety across perilous mountain ridges," and "determined to tell the tale of this anonymous, unsung hero" (Poisoned Pen.com, 2017). "He spent weeks in Italy with Pino, listening to the 79-year-old recount in painstaking detail the most fraught and eventful years of his life" (Poisoned Pen.com, 2017). Sullivan's curiosity was not satisfied, so "for the next nine years, [he] interviewed historians and Holocaust experts and dug through war archives in Germany, Italy, and the U.S., and Great Britain" ([http://www.Poisoned Pen.com](http://www.PoisonedPen.com), 2017). The Poisoned Pen website ends its review of the book stating that *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* is more than just a novel based on actual events –it is a piece of history, and Pino's memories have given this book its realism, its heart and its shattering sense of loss and tragedy. It is truly a tale unlike any other –a story of courage and intrigue, love and redemption –and one that can finally be shared ([http://www.Poisoned Pen.com](http://www.PoisonedPen.com)). Pino's memory which becomes a powerful tool to retain the lost, suppressed, and forgotten events of WWII in Northern Italy is yet another interesting aspect to be examined. *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* came as a culmination of all the writer's research and dedication for this forgotten story to be told as Pino Lella's WWII lost story is finally told. Along the same lines, in an online interview with the author Mark Sullivan, M.K. Todd (2017) asks Sullivan if he has any particularly memorable anecdotes from the research he had conducted for his book. Sullivan answers: "I was lucky that *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* was based on a true, untold story of World War II Italy. I was also blessed that Pino Lella, the hero, was still alive". (<http://awriterofhistory.com/2017/05/09/interview-with-mark-sullivan-author-of-beneatha-scarlet-sky/>). Publishers Weekly also positively reviews the book and writes that in the novel, Sullivan lays on history with a trowel in this overstuffed tale of derring-do set in Italy during WWII. In 1943, seventeen-year-old Pino Lella was sent to the mountains to escape the bombardment of Milan. When he returns home on his 18th birthday, his parents urge him to join the German army to avoid the draft and thus be spared a one-way ticket to the Russian front. As months pass, Pino witnesses every significant element of wartime life...facing a few obstacles he cannot overcome. The heroic Pino easily outfoxes the Nazis (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/> 978-1-5039-4337-7).

Based on the above literature, this research paper will try to examine WWII in a different light; it will try to look closer into the aspects of Fascist Ideology and myths that circulated at that time and how they resonate with the same ideologies and myths of many contemporary wars worldwide albeit being defeated historically at the end WWII. The paper will draw a parallel between the propaganda used during WWII and those used in contemporary wars in an attempt to show how its impacts still manifest themselves in the present time.

### **Methodology**

Revisiting WWII via fiction in the present time is used in New Historicist views as a critique of the many political struggles occurring nowadays that have their roots in WWII events. This war shaped our contemporary world and left repercussions on society, economy, and politics today. By contemporary standards, WWII was the end of all destructive wars, and so writing about it would probably ensure that it would never happen again.

According to Brannigan (1998), New Historicism comprehends past stories as society's way of constructing a narrative that unconsciously fits its own interests (p. 5). New Historicists are also busy interpreting the significance of the past for the present, paying particular attention to the forms of power that operated in the past and how they are replicated in the present (Brannigan, 1998, p.6). Considering this notion, it is contended that the selected writers in their novels are exploring what it means to write about a period that has become more like a ghost war, long forlorn, where the contemporary reader did not experience nor remember. The authors' fascination with the fragmented and forgotten narratives and with storytelling allows for the transmission of many "truths" and collective memories related to WWII in our contemporary times. In this respect, the role of the contemporary historical fiction writer living in the postmodern world brings forth fragmented forms of history instead of a linear and unified one. With all the grand narratives of WWII history fragmented nowadays, new individual histories are retrieved in the forms of historical fiction novels, such as those selected for examination in this paper. This will eventually drive today's readers to think about the human morals and values tested in such times. Through the experience of fictional and real participants from both WWII camps, "good" and "evil" values are to be re-examined and questioned. The aim is to bring back to the contemporary reader the valuable lessons to be learned from WWII as a long-gone war of that long-gone past that still impacts our present.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Using a New Historicist lens, this section of the paper examines the way Mussolini propagates the Fascist ideology and Roman myth and tends to brainwash his followers as any dictatorship does nowadays in both selected novels. The paper will examine how this Fascist ideology and myth is deconstructed by the characters in Louis De Bernieres' *Corelli's Mandolin* and Mark

Sullivan's *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* and how it reverberates the same fascist ideologies and myths used by those in power in many contemporary wars waged now.

### **WWII as a Reflection of the Brutality and Savagery of Wars Now**

As stated earlier, although WWII has marked about 100 years since its ending, it is considered to have had a direct impact on the map of the world, as shown in political, economic, or social ramifications worldwide. With its ending, new powers were shaped while discourses from the loser camp were either marginalized or silenced by the ever-growing power of the U.S. and its Allies; hence, countries all around the globe found themselves in a new place depending on their position during WWII. In the Middle East, for example, the Allies gifted Palestine to the Jews as compensation for the horrors of the Holocaust committed by the Nazis, and the direct impact of such decision then and now is the displacement of thousands of Palestinians around the world and the constant and continuous bombardment of Palestinian areas and their inhabitants. What strikes us as ironic is the fact that “Israel” believes that Palestine is its rightful possession after the Holocaust, yet what its government was and is still exercising against the innocent Palestinian civilians reflects the savagery and cruelty of the Holocaust, only this time the Jews are the perpetrators, not the victims. New Historicist views about 'power' have opened the door for the contemporary reader to inquire about the reasons that made “Israel” ask Germany for compensation for the Holocaust. At the same time, ironically, nothing is said about the Palestinian plight of 1948, two years after WWII had ended. From a New Historicist perspective, the former has a more powerful discourse that marginalizes and silences the latter albeit what had been done to the Jews at the hand of the Nazis in WWII was deemed evil and unforgivable; nevertheless, the same act was and is still committed by the Jews against the Palestinians but is considered just and righteous beyond interrogation. This allows us to question how notions of good vs. evil tend to shift with the shift of those in power. Writing about WWII, thus, is but an expression and a reflection of the exact nature of contemporary wars—in terms of brutality, narrowmindedness, hypocrisy, and racism, little has changed since then.

In a book review of *All the Light We Cannot See*, another contemporary historical novel set in WWII, the aforementioned is illustrated:

The legacy of World War II is still with us. France today faces the growth in influence of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) headed by Marine Le Pen, while in Germany, certain reactionary historians are attempting to rehabilitate Hitler's reputation. Humanity faces a gathering storm—the threat of another world war. (Jeresova, 2016, para. 24)

Based on the above quotation, it becomes inevitable for people today to ponder upon the sudden rise of the far-right politics in Europe that seem to echo the same Fascist ideology of WWII that was supposedly defeated in 1945. In an interesting article, Del Hiero (2020) states that it seems indisputable that important developments are taking place at the right of the right political



spectrum as the extreme right currently rules in many countries both in Europe and outside of it and enjoys a growing electoral success (para.2). Del Hiero (2020) further states that these developments have triggered a heated academic and public debate about how to interpret them in the light of the Fascist experiences of the interwar years. His article offers an examination of these developments in a historical approach that would trace back why the current far-right can be regarded as interwar Fascism's heir and how the latter's ideology has evolved in an attempt to identify the features that are still present today in far-right parties across Europe. He explains how it is necessary to understand that the translation of ideology from one period to another or from one group to another is an organic process of appropriation and re-appropriation. In this sense, Fascism should be considered as a living ideology that spatial and temporal borders cannot constrain. It has existed through almost a century of history and traveled across many countries; in order to survive, Fascism has had to change and adapt itself to the international context, and the main political actors at that time, and many of the Fascists who survived the end of WWII managed to pass on their ideology to successive new generations, thus keeping it alive (Del Hiero, 2020).

This paper adopts Del Hiero's argument of how Fascist ideology has traveled since WWII without being restrained by space or time and manifested itself in the present in far-right politics. The reasons for this rise, as explained by Sandrin (2021), are manifold: the economic impacts of globalization and neoliberal policies, advanced by national governments and the European Union (EU), have generated a mass of discontented 'left-behind,' which becomes an easy target to right-wing populists. This economic indisposition is compounded by a rise in immigration, which creates anxieties about the potential loss of jobs and pressures on the welfare state, about threats to national security—as migrants are perceived as likely terrorists and criminals; and about the loss of national identity. The state's inability to manage the economy and control national borders due to the loss of sovereignty in EU integration and as a result of neoliberal globalization has worsened the situation. Finally, traditional political parties are perceived as unable or unwilling to change the state of affairs, leading to frustration and paving the way for populist parties (p.228). All the reasons stated above explain the circumstances in which far-right politics is on the rise now. However, this paper is mainly interested in the return of nationalism and national identity at the expense of democracy that reverberates Fascist ideology practices and myths. The selected authors, thus, seek to explore this constant hammering of national identity in citizens and the call for the rise of a nation that is proud, secure, and economically prosperous in an attempt to brainwash the population against those who are different.

The selected novels, in other words, bring about how ideologies traced back to WWII are circulated amongst some extremist groups to ensure that the sense of nationalism still prevails and thrives. Those created ideologies along with the myths that support and legitimize them play on the emotions of the people

involved and act as a coverage to all the atrocities committed during wars circulated by different means of media then and now. Myth, according to Doerr, is like a titanic force that drives history; he even blames myth for the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) nowadays stating, "Myths are still used to foment nationalism in all sorts of places, and the Internet is being used to transmit myths in much the same way radio was used in the 1930s and 1940s." ISIS extremists, "upload acts of horrifying violence to YouTube to wage psychological terror," (as cited in Jeresova, 2016, para.13).

Along the same lines, the selected novels also explore the different means used by leaders of WWII to enforce their war myths on their people in order to elate nationalism. The novels, however, also expose how those same war myths are destroyed and deconstructed by some characters who finally form a different understanding of the concepts of "good" vs. "evil". The characters discover that those concepts they were bombarded with were nothing but fabricated myths by their leaders, and this realization becomes the valuable lesson to be taught to the contemporary reader about the brutal nature of wars and the power of propaganda to blind and brainwash followers.

Bringing all this to the present, as New Historicism does, one notices how these same nations that made up the two camps of WWII are still competing in what seems as a never-ending race to absolute power mainly headed by the U.S. and amplified with Trump's open call for nationalism that resounded Fascist ideology.

In *Corelli's Mandolin*, De Bernieres experiments with Fascist ideology that relies on circulated myths to elate a sense of nationalism among the fighting soldiers of WWII. The Greco-Italian War is brought back to the contemporary reader via a Fascist soldier, and De Bernieres describes how Il Duce and Fascist propaganda painted a great and invincible army that reminisced the great Roman period as an attempt to construct a glamorous Fascist identity. An excellent article that explains the need for Mussolini to rely on the myth of Rome to construct a Fascist identity is entitled "The Fascist Myth of Romanity" by Andrea Giardini. Giardini (2008) explains that the myth of Rome was used by Mussolini with a multiplicity of positive references. Roman symbols and rites such as the salute with the outstretched hand and rhythmical march not only qualified as a Fascist specialty, but also a specificity of the nation. The Fascist use of romanity in Mussolini's time resorted to mass communication media in a global dimension. One very important Fascist concept, explicates Giardini (2008), is the Latin word "disciplina", i.e. discipline. This virtue was represented in the Fascist march ritual designed to promote a sense of togetherness, solidarity and power. The connection between the march and discipline, as a result, remained a constant aspect of Mussolini's political view, as he had once proclaimed in 1921:

We, too, have thus abolished and tend to abolish the herd, the procession. We abolished all of this and replaced those old-fashioned forms of manifestation by our march, which imposes, on each one, an individual

control, which imposes on everyone order and discipline. Because we wish to establish a solid national discipline, since we believe that, without such discipline, Italy cannot become the Mediterranean and global nation that resides in our dreams. (Giardina, 2008, p.56)

In this way, states Giardina (2008), the Roman and Fascist discipline were inseparable from the mystical exaltation of a nation (p.56). The aforementioned explanation concerning Mussolini's implementation of the Roman myth mirrors today's leaders and politicians' reliance on certain myths (whether in war or peace) to brainwash people and to construct a certain collective national image in order to keep their ideology alive. De Bernieres, however, deconstructs the glamorous vision of the Fascist army construed in the contemporary reader's mind as strong and well-trained by juxtaposing Mussolini's myth with the reality of what was happening in the ill-prepared invasion of Greece. Mussolini's engrossment in the Roman myth and his detachment from the realities of the happenings around him are cleverly recreated by De Bernieres in the novel when he places Il Duce in a monologue, and the reader amusingly follows his eccentric trail of thoughts, "I am the embodiment of Italy, possibly more than the king himself," says Mussolini, "This is Italy, smart and martial, where everything runs like clockwork. Italy as inflexible as steel. One of the Great Powers, now that I made it so," he boasts (De Bernieres, 1994, p.8). In the monologue, Il Duce states how he wanted to try a new slogan, 'Fascisto Perfetto' (p.9) meaning perfect Fascist:

I want people to understand that Fascism is not merely a social and political revolution, it's cultural as well. Every Fascist should have a book in their knapsack, do you understand? We are not going to be philistines.

I want Fascist book-clubs even in the smallest towns. (p.9).

Mussolini, like most dictators, made sure that Fascist propaganda was being circulated well among the Italians so that the Roman myth and the Fascist identity would earn credence. However, this same identity would be deconstructed in the novel when de Bernieres intentionally chooses a homosexual Italian soldier to be the representative of one of the elite squads in the Fascist army called the Julia Division that engaged in the invasion of Greece. Ironically, the Italian side of the WWII story in Greece is narrated by two Italian soldiers who are the exact opposite image of Il Duce's portrayal of a perfect Fascist soldier. The first is a homosexual soldier who is fighting in the Elite Julia Division while the other is the protagonist himself, Captain Corelli, a musician and soldier who happens to carry his mandolin wherever he goes and spends time with his regiment playing music. The disastrous invasion of the Italians, hence, is discussed throughout the novel, and in these chapters the point of view shifts to the first person, and the narrator is the homosexual Italian soldier named Carlo Guercio who narrates the dire consequences the Italian soldiers faced due to that rash decision taken from commanders headed by Il Duce. Guercio's story becomes the means in which Il Duce's Perfect Fascist image is deconstructed; Guercio confessed that he had enlisted in the army fleeing from his pretense life and trying to hide the shame of

not meeting the expectations of being a "man" in the eyes of society due to his homosexuality. The effective use of the first person point of view in the chapters entitled *L'Omossessuale* involves the reader in intimate and shocking details about the war experience of this homosexual Italian soldier who hides his true feelings from the world because of his fear of rejection in a society controlled by the myth of greatness and perfection. In fact, De Bernieres (1994) introduces Guercio to the reader and his homosexuality is ironically juxtaposed against the Duce's boasts of having the strongest and best Italian troops of all time, "there are no soldiers in the world as resolute and valiant as ours" (p.13) boasts Il Duce a couple of pages before. Guercio's homosexuality is then presented to mock the words and false pride of the tyrant Mussolini and the "myth" of the invincible Fascist army.

De Bernieres' intentional choice of Guercio and his homosexuality in New Historicist terms shows that even in the army, there are soldiers who, although different, are as brave and true to Italy as others, which gives voice to those neglected minorities in a Fascist community that is paranoid with perfection. Homosexuality might have been a stigma at that time, but Guercio's tale proves his honor, nobility and possession of human values more than his Italian dictator Mussolini —a dictator living in his own fabricated world and who toyed with the fate of thousands of young Italian soldiers resounding politicians of today who do the exact same thing. The "march" discipline that Mussolini proudly imposed on Italian soldiers is comically portrayed in the novel as a waste of time and energy through Guercio's narration. Inexperienced, like many of the Italian soldiers, Guercio stated that the circumstances in the army were fine at the beginning of the war until he realized that everything was in chaos. No sooner had he settled down in one unit, he was transferred to another. His division had no transportation and the whole regiment was "made to march from the Yugoslav border to the Greek one and back again, seemingly at a whim of the High Command" (De Bernieres, 1994, p. 31). Mussolini and his commanders, it seemed, had done nothing to prepare their soldiers to the war they were about to be thrown in except to march from one border to another. Guercio also stated that what made matters even worse was the fact that those soldiers were given no winter provisions or supplies and were left without vehicles to transport them to their destinations (p.32), a fact that Mussolini refused to acknowledge as he stated in his monologue, "[The Chiefs-of-Staff] keep moaning about the lack of transport, so I've given orders that the infantry should be trained to march fifty miles a day" (p.14). Later through the chapter, Guercio described how young, handsome and strong he and his fellow soldiers were, and how invincible and immortal they felt at that time. They could actually march fifty miles in one day while singing their battle songs and would even "dig a trench all night in solid rock in the pouring rain and then march away at dawn without ever having slept in it" (p.32). As a result, all their energies were drained in fruitless missions, in

chaotic marches to and from borders and in digging up trenches instead of engaging in real battle.

De Bernieres points out that although the Italians were defeated by the Greeks, Il Duce used propaganda to circulate their false victory in an attempt to cling to the myth of the perfect army and keep the ideology circulating. Guercio, however, admitted that the war against the Greeks that they, as Italian soldiers, were thrown into by the impulse of the Duce was a complete fiasco and that the Greeks managed to swipe out a large number of Italian soldiers and could have taken out more lives were it not for the interference of the Germans to aid them and save their necks. Despite the Italian's great loss, "the Duce has made it clear that the Greek campaign was a resounding victory for Italy" stated Guercio sarcastically. "But he [the Duce] was not there. He does not know what happened" (p.33). With this, Guercio seemed to vocalize the reality of the battlefield as extremely different from the vision most tyrant leaders like Mussolini perceived. He imagined a different reality, one that transfixed the Roman myth of glory which is the exact opposite of that existing in the reality of the battlefield. Ironically, Mussolini believed the lies he had invented and even lived the resounding and imaginable victory. In New Historicist terms, it is with this calculated and forged victory that fake grand narratives are devised, written and circulated by those in power to create their own ideologies and war "myths". The United States' myth of the greatest armed force that fights evil around the world and which consequently waged war on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and many other countries under the banner of fighting terrorism is but a good example of the power of propaganda to circulate a dominant ideology and its concurrent myths in order to legitimize its foul doings.

As a soldier who had witnessed all the horrors, Guercio becomes the lost voice of the participating Italian soldiers that would expose those false claims and become the tool to deconstruct Mussolini's ideology and the myth of the perfect Fascist army to the contemporary reader as he stated:

But I was there, and I know what was happening in my part of the war. For me that war was an experience that shaped the whole course of my thought, it was the deepest personal shock that I have ever had, the worst and most intimate tragedy of my life. It destroyed my patriotism, it changed my ideals, it made me question the whole notion of duty, and it horrified me and made me sad. (p.33)

Guercio's realization of the realities of war as depicted in the above extract exposed Mussolini's false ideology and destroyed his sense of nationalism to the extent that it shook him to the core and made him question his own ideals. The stories about national glory and patriotism turned out to be deceitful lies that were meant to brainwash them into fighting till death. To Guercio, thus, 'his part of the war' was not worth dying for.

De Bernieres extensive research of the Greco-Italian war allowed him to discover the horrid situation the Italian soldiers faced as Guercio continued

unfolding the horrors of the war they were engaged in. "How wonderful it was to be at war," exclaimed Guercio sarcastically, "until the weather turned against us" (De Bernieres, 1994, p.100). The Italian soldier went on recounting the very dire conditions they were left to face as ten thousand men slogged through mud soaked to the bones. They were assured that the Duce had decided on a winter campaign in order to avert the risk of malaria, but ironically, they were not assured of winter clothing. They were also supplied with the wrong ammunition and their lines of communication and supply became inoperable before a shot had even been fired (pp.100-101). As a result, the Italian troops found themselves trapped in Greece while the Greek guerilla fighters hunted them down and killed them in large numbers. The situation became even worse as Guercio stated in a dreary and hopeless tone:

We had become anonymous. We grew immense beards, we were buried in storms of sleet, our bloodshot eyes sank deep in our heads, our uniforms disappeared beneath an encrustation of icy clag, our hands were torn as though by cats, and our fingers curled up into laden clubs. Francisco looked the same as me, and I looked like everyone else; our life was neolithic. Within the space of a few days we had become skeletons, rooting for food like pigs. (p.103)

In the above extract, Guercio's tells the story of his side of the war –one that is devoid of glory, patriotism and honor as he and other soldiers were stripped of all their human dignity and turned into cavemen rooting for food like animals. Mussolini's myth of the best Fascist army is juxtaposed with the reality of what was happening, revealing the level of degradation the Italian army had reached because of deceitful lies circulated by their superiors.

De Bernieres' description of the degeneration the Italian troops fell into might seem like an exaggeration to the contemporary reader; however, many historians verify it. According to Roy Morris Jr. (2017), Mussolini was informed that the army in Albania was virtually naked: "Reserve rations, nil. Equipment, minimal. Woolen clothing, zero. Infantry ammunition, insignificant. Arms and artillery, all supplies exhausted. Engineering equipment practically nil. Medical equipment, inadequate", but Mussolini did not believe it and rubbed it off as complaints (para.34). Morris Jr. (2017) further states that when the first Italian prisoners were led to Athens, Greek citizens did not know whether to laugh or cry, "I feel sorry for them," an old woman said. "They are not warriors. They should carry mandolins instead of rifles" (para.34). As illustrated, the conditions of the fighting Italian soldiers were pathetic, yet Il Duce was angry and embarrassed by the stalemate in Albania that he even placed the blame on the soldiers themselves, "The human material I have to work with is useless, worthless" (Morris Jr., 2017, para.36). Just like most irresponsible leaders, Mussolini blamed others, here the soldiers, for the loss of the war, yet again, De Bernieres exposes Mussolini's hypocrisy via Guercio who helplessly observes in the ever biting freeze of winter in a seemingly endless war, "I looked around and

felt the palpable horror," he admitted bitterly, "of the irrecoverable absence of the men that I had come to love [as brothers] and whose indomitable courage nobody should ever doubt or carelessly impugn" (104). Guercio asserted that no one should ever doubt the bravery and valor of his comrades who fought courageously despite the ominous conditions they were placed in. "War is a wonderful thing," he said mockingly, but only "in movies and books" (104).

De Bernieres sends a message to the generation of today through Guercio to understand that virtues like glory and honor are part of the myth of war that leaders construct for the soldiers to fight blindly. This is manifested when amidst all the torture that the Italian soldiers had to endure, came the desperate and hypocrite message from the Cavallero to fight in the name of Italy and told them that he would come to fight with them too if there was need. "Fuck the name of Italy" cursed Guercio, "Fuck the generals who never come and die with you" (115) and "fuck your defeats which you snatch from the jaws of victory. Fuck this frivolous war we did not want and do not understand" (pp.115-116). The vile language used by Guercio was but a reflection of the level of degradation of the Italian soldiers' psychological well-being. The hypocrisy of the generals and the vicious death of young Italian soldiers for no prolific and comprehensible reasons infuriated Guercio and made him snap:

Long live Greece if it means an end to this, this white death and this snow incarnadine, this ungrateful lethal cold, these trails of entrails, these shattered bones, these bellies void of food and torn by mortars and ripped by bayonets, these fingers paralysed, these model 91 rifles jammed, these young men broken, these innocent minds made mad. (116)

The conditions described above in minute details are scandalous and devastating. De Bernieres does not cringe from recreating the images of death and decay of the human bodies as ugly as they are. The white death crept upon those victimized Italian soldiers with their worn and tattered clothes and viciously snatched their lives. The snow covered mountains become trails of shattered human bones, entrails and stomachs that were empty from starvation, and Guercio's first person narrative voice moves the reader with the intensity of emotions; his story successfully deconstructs Mussolini's perfect Fascist image of a soldier and brings it home to readers of today. It is here that the novel plays a significant role in providing a humane perspective to these aforementioned vile descriptions of shattered human bodies as opposed to WWII videogames that give a detached and cold version of blood, death and violence to the contemporary generation. What the Italian and Greek soldiers in the novel came to discover about the war they were engaged in is summed up by Golban (2014):

If at first war signifies fighting heroically for glory, later it comes to represent a source of immense suffering. The war depicts soldiers on both sides as seeing it to be wretched, dreadful and bitter. The war is not frightful to them in terms of fighting, since the forces of both sides fight bravely for their cause. The war is dreadful to them because they discover

that they are simple objects of warfare, instruments of a fighting machine, indispensable in an artistic scenario created by a god/leader that uses them for the satisfaction of his alter ego. (p.44)

Along the same lines, the second selected novel, *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*, deconstructs WWII myths in both the Axis and the Allies camps and shows us how a new notion of morality is created in times of war. As this novel is based on a true war story of the protagonist Pino Lella, Sullivan recreates the incidents Pino witnessed during the war and reveals how moral lines between good and evil are tested and blurred. As examined in the first novel, Mussolini tried hard to revive the Roman Empire's glory and thus created the Roman myth; it was still circulated amongst his Fascist followers. Pino witnessed a disturbing and savage act the Fascists committed against the Italian partisans that reverberates the same brutal act, which according to Mussolini, was usually attributed to the natives of Africa. To him, the Africans were savages and should be civilized by Roman colonizers, yet what Mussolini's followers committed revealed the level of brutality and savagery they tried to hide. In the novel, Pino went to retrieve the body of a young girl, the daughter of his mother's friend, who was mistakenly killed while partisans and Fascists were fighting. As he was carrying the body of the young woman, he looked up the road and to his horror spotted a group of Black Shirts (Fascist soldiers) using axes, saws, and knives to behead the partisan dead below their red scarves. Pino saw fifteen maybe twenty heads stuck on fence posts facing the road; many of their eyes were open and their faces were twisted in death's agony. Horrified beyond his young years, Pino wanted to drop the body he carried and run away from the savagery surrounding him; instead, he set the body down and rested on one knee praying to God for the strength to go on (Sullivan, 2017, p.338).

Pino's horror and shock was a result of his understanding of the evil nature of the action committed by the Fascists as it was morally unjustifiable to anyone civilized and humane to do what they were doing. However, Mussolini's Roman Myth propaganda gave his followers a moral justification as shown in the novel:

"Romans used to do it," Raphael said behind him.

Pino twisted to look up at the Fascist, aghast. "What?"

Raphael said, "Caesar would have the heads of his enemies lining the roads into Rome as fair warning of what happened if you crossed the emperor.

I think it has the same effect now. Il Duce would be proud, I think. You?"

Pino blinked dully at the Black Shirt. "I don't know. I am just a driver" (p. 338).

The Roman myth created by Mussolini was so engraved in his followers that it gave them a moral cover to the atrocities they were committing against their fellow Italian citizens. The circulation of this ideology produced a powerful discourse that even Mussolini himself, the one who created it, would come to believe in its truth. Nevertheless, his belief in the rise of the ancient Roman Empire with its invincible national and colonial power would be shattered later.



Ironically, black Brazilian soldiers in the American army invaded Italy to Mussolini's horror who took pride in in the way Italy was able to conquer Ethiopia, and had to watch horridly his 'Roman Empire' being roamed by 'Negroes'. When Pino and General Leyers came to his villa to speak to Il Duce for the last time on March 2, 1945 when the Nazis were losing and retreating, that final encounter showed a broken and defeated tyrant with a shattered ideology. "We conquered Ethiopia, Leyers. And now the Allied swine have brought Negroes north into the land of Tuscany. Negroes rule the streets of Bologna and Rome, too! It is a thousand times better for me to die now than to live. Don't you think?" stated Il Duce (Sullivan, 2017, p.366).

Mussolini's words show the basis of the White Supremacy ideology that was fed by Fascist and Nazi philosophy, which also echoes the same extremism of far-right politics still witnessed to this very day across the world manifesting itself in various forms of racial discrimination specifically in American politics under the lead of President Trump. As such, having black soldiers conquer white power was not something to be accepted to the likes of Mussolini and Hitler, and it is interesting to reflect on the powerful role of propaganda both Nazis and Fascists used to circulate their extremist ideology during the war. That same ideology, along with the myths created to sustain it, became a new reality to tyrants like Mussolini who came to believe in his own devised lies of their supreme and absolute power. He would not believe the Nazis would ever lose the war due to their invincible army to the extent that he even thought that Hitler still had a secret weapon up his sleeve to use against the Allies and end up victorious. "Does dear Hitler have a secret superweapon up his sleeve? A missile, a rocket, a bomb like we've never seen before? I hear the fuhrer is just waiting to use the superweapon his enemies have drawn close enough to wipe them all out with a series of devastating strikes" translated Pino (Sullivan, 2017, p.367). Mussolini could not fathom the idea that the powerful Nazis were losing; he believed that Hitler would eventually win the war with his hidden superweapon, so the above extract unfolds a dramatic irony in the contemporary reader's knowledge of the existence of no such weapon and that all that was but a figment of Mussolini's imagination and his dispersion in lies and stories he himself had invented.

The Roman myth that Mussolini worked so hard to keep alive would eventually fall with the fall of his allies, yet Il Duce still refused to accept the fact that the Nazis and Fascists were losing. In the novel, Pino also witnessed how Mussolini became angry once he realized certain agreements and negotiations were held under the tables between the Nazi Generals in Italy and Cardinal Schuster to ensure less death and destruction to Italy. "You Nazi bastards," Mussolini roared. "Once more we can say that Germany has knifed Italy in the back! I'll go on the Radio! I'll tell the world of your treachery!" (p.394). Cardinal Schuster addressed the tyrant casually, "You'll do no such thing, Benito" (p.394). Even though defeat was inevitable, Mussolini still perceived himself as the

Emperor of Rome, "Benito?" he cried, "Cardinal Schuster, you will address me as 'Excellency!'" (p.394).

Pino did not see Mussolini alive after that final encounter, and Il Duce's myth would be ultimately destroyed in the infamous incident when his corpse would be met by an angry mob at Milan Square who vented their "personal vengeance on the man who brought the Nazis to their doors" (Sullivan, 2017, p.456). Sullivan skillfully recreates the incident and describes the savagery and madness of the mob as they saw Mussolini and his mistress's bodies and the vile things they committed against them. Pino, who was with an American Major called Knebel stood watching as "The bloodthirsty chorus in Piazzale Loreto sang deliriously and called for more" (Sullivan, 2017, p.458). The American Major watched with disgust and said, "This is how tyrants fall" (p.458). Mussolini's fall would signify the end of an extremist regime that caused a lot of bloodshed and fanaticism, and the Roman ideology and myths of glory were buried with Il Duce. The Italian citizens of the North chose to bury that chapter of the war never to mention it again to the upcoming generations until Pino decides to speak and Sullivan decides to write his novel.

### **Results ad Findings**

The two selected novels focus on how ideology and war propaganda used by Nazis and Fascists during WWII shaped the perception of their followers and even distorted their moral sense of right and wrong. De Bernieres highlights the way Mussolini's ideology and deceitful lies are exposed by his own soldiers during combat, while Sullivan reveals the power of Fascist ideology to brainwash its followers and then expose and deconstruct its glamorous vision via Pino's first-hand experience of WWII in Milan, Italy.

The ideology circulated by leaders of WWII fed their followers' lust for racism, fanaticism and even white supremacy that would ignite their sense of nationalism and ensure their followers' blind obedience. In New Historicist terms, these same practices re-examined by the selected authors are still prevalent in today's far-right politics that base their notions on racist, fanatical and even religious ideologies and discourses specifically in times of war. In fact, the world is still divided into opposing camps with each wanting to claim total economic and political power and authority as a rightful deed, a claim that might lead to an inevitable third World War if it continues with the same gusto.

### **Conclusion**

This realization leads one to wonder how in the 21st century our world leaders choose to ignore the lessons of the past and echo the same brutal and futile wars waged around the world that are "rooted" in WWII; one good example is the most recent and devastating war waged on Gaza by "Israel". The selected novels bring all this to the fore to the contemporary reader to be worthwhile lessons to the generation of today.

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