

## Book Review: Ruzzi, Marco. *Generazione Littorali. Rugby e fascismo in Italia dal 1928 al 1945*. Cuneo: Primalpe, 2022

By Gianluca Cinelli

Sport and politics are connected insofar as the latter provides the structural conditions to perform the former: laws, infrastructures, funding, and representation. There is one sombre aspect of this fortunate combination, namely when the political system is a dictatorship. This is the case investigated by Marco Ruzzi in his last book, *Generazione Littorali*, in which he unfolds the story of how rugby was introduced to the Italian public and how it developed during the years of fascism and war.

Ruzzi's book is remarkable in many aspects. The first is the richness of the information that the author provides about a sport that in Italy has occupied a niche, overshadowed by football and other specialities such as athletics or swimming, bicycle races, and Formula 1. Ruzzi reaches back to the first appearance of rugby in Italy in the 1920s, providing a very precise and detailed account of how the main clubs grew, how the championships unfolded, and how gradually the Fascist regime appropriated this sport for ideological reasons. The second reason for praise consists in the iconographic material that Ruzzi has collected and published, which provides another interesting kind of documentation about a less-known historic-social phenomenon. And the last but not least point concerns the research that the author has carried out for years to reconstruct the stories of 40 Italian rugby players involved in the Second World War.

Ruzzi highlights the peculiar nature of Italian rugby under Mussolini's regime. While the sport in its original conception was practised as an activity that enhances individual discipline and the spirit of sacrifice for the sake of the team, in fascist Italy rugby was first of all supported by the regime as a sport that developed the "warrior" qualities of the ideal fascist: aggression, strength, and will to fighting (366). Another peculiarity of Italian rugby under fascism was, as Ruzzi points out, the "grotesque terminological cleansing" (p. 287) that replaced the English vocabulary with a made-up Italian one: "rugby" became *palla ovale* or *rugbi*; yards and miles were converted into the units of the metrical system; and finally, the most ridiculous invention of all, the origin itself of the sport that was dated back to the Roman *harpastum*, which made Italian rugby become *arpasto* (and the players *arpasti*) (421). Despite the nationalistic drive, Italian rugby of the 1930s also hosted several international key figures and kept

alive its contact with its British origins. However, the war marked an interruption of this relationship: foreigners from countries with Italy waged war with left the clubs and the country, bombings over the major cities of Turin, Milan, Genoa, and Naples caused disruptions, and no less havoc was caused by the enlistment of many sportsmen, several of whom died in the war. However, after New Zealander, British, Canadian, and South African troops landed and advanced along Italy in 1943, Italian rugby partially resumed its international inclination. On December 1944, while the allied advance was stuck on the Appennini north of Florence, some matches were played between southern Italian teams (above all Naples and Rome) and the *South African Police*, the *8<sup>th</sup> Command Pay Office*, and the *London XV*, representative of the *56<sup>th</sup> London Infantry Division*.

War, therefore, represents a strange watershed for Italian rugby, as Ruzzi explains. On the one hand, it affects the practice of this sport in a material way, as well as the lives of people all across the nation. On the other hand, though, the war brought back rugby to its genuine roots, by reinstating its British origins and spirit that had been erased by fascism for ideological reasons. Thus Ruzzi spends a few significant words about the connection between sport and war, remembering that the usefulness of the former for the latter is demonstrated because sport helps the soldiers to keep their morale high and the stress at a low level, and contrasts the psycho-physical exhaustion (366).

The encounter of sport with war is a topic that historians should explore more thoroughly after that sport has been officially accepted as a “proper” topic of cultural and historical studies. Rugby in Italy is not the most popular sport although it can count on numerous supporters and good and internationally renowned clubs. This book is certainly suitable for the broader public and most of all for readers who have an interest in rugby, its culture, and history.