

Standing Up Against Autocracy: Propaganda, Narratives and the Mobilization of Civilians

Matteo Cervellati, Elena Esposito, Giacomo Plevani, Alessandro Saia

Abstract :

Individuals sometimes take extraordinary personal risks to resist and fight oppressive regimes. Material incentives alone fail to fully explain these life-threatening decisions, which appear to be largely driven by a profound sense of injustice and strong emotional motivations. This paper provides evidence of the significant role that immaterial incentives play in motivating rebellion, by examining the formation of subversive identities in Italy following World War I. We reconstruct the history of Italian families, tracing patterns of dissent and rebellion from the early 20th century through World War II. Using these novel data, we examine how a government propaganda campaign—the passage of the train carrying the Unknown Soldier—interacted with personal histories of grievance and loss, fostering the formation of subversive identities and increasing the likelihood of rebellion against the Fascist regime.