

The Fascist Foreign Policy: Some considerations of Mussolini's Fascist Ideology

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Abstract

The current article tries to explain the origins of Mussolini's Fascism and his foreign policy doctrine, by examining the political and ideological contexts of pre-Fascist Italy. This approach offers a wider analysis of the general conditions which enabled the surge of Mussolini's Far-right movement, such as the political instability, the fear of Communism among Italian elites, and above all, a growing imperialist outlook of the Italian public opinion of that period. Thus, Italian society was characterized by a profound process of atomization, a necessary precondition for a totalitarian takeover, according to Hannah Arendt.¹ The article tries to uncover the particularities of Mussolini's Fascist, to point out the ideological differences between this doctrine and other Far-right political orientations, such as Hitler's National Socialism by stressing some of the differences, explaining why Mussolini's Fascist régime was perceived as a moderate one by Western governments for a long period. Mussolini was held in high regard by important American diplomats, like State Secretary Henry Stimson, who labeled Mussolini as a reasonable

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¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London, Penguin, 2017, p. 427.

gentleman in his *Post-war memoirs*². Also, President Roosevelt expressed often his admiration for Mussolini and his policies, like many of the U.S. ambassadors to Rome.³

The cause for the surge of Italian Fascism resides, primarily, in the context of a deep political instability and nationalist fervor, which stemmed from the consequences of the 1919 Peace Treaties, whose clauses were badly perceived by the Italian society, but also in the context of the Bolshevik Revolution, which galvanized the Left-wing Italian labor movement, during a post-war period of economic recession and soaring social inequalities.

The Post-War Italian nationalism, which was so well exploited politically by Mussolini's movement, was also a reaction to the principle of Self-determination, which was a hallmark of Woodrow Wilson's *Fourteen Points*. Although Italy was on the winning side during the Great War, a substantial part of the Italian ruling classes and of the general population - namely the petty-bourgeoisie and the very significant rural population - felt that the benefits of the peace treaties were relatively scarce in comparison with the downsides: the human and economic costs! Besides that, the Italian government decided to get involved in the First World War, hoping that, by these means, Italy would acquire new strategic territories, such as the port of Trieste, the South-Tirolean Region, the Dalmatian Coast, new African colonies and strategic outposts on the Turkish Coastline. All these territorial objectives were based on the agreement of

² Henry L. Stimson, McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1948, p. 173.

³ Gian Giacomo Migone, *The United States and Fascist Italy. The Rise of American Finance in Europe*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 304.

the *Entente* powers and were granted by the Treaty of London of 1915 and the Agreements of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne of April 1917.⁴

It must be added that the Italian Kingdom, so as the German Reich, was an emergent colonialist power at that time, and that circumstance enabled the Italian political elite to hold such expansionist territorial claims. Italy's first colonial expedition on the African Continent, the Abyssinian Expedition, ended by the humiliating defeat of the Italian armies in the Battle of Adwa, of 1896. Its sole colonial accomplishment, thus far, was the conquest of Libya, as a result of the Turkish-Italian War of 1912, during the Liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti.⁵

The amplitude of the Irredentist currents in Italian society was due to the nationalist propaganda, enabled by the Liberal government during the Great War, whose purpose was to galvanize the broad public, which was rather skeptical towards Rome's authority.⁶ The wartime Italian nationalist propaganda was so persuasively disseminated, as it succeeded in breaking even some preexisting party and class lines, and Mussolini's example is more than relevant in this instance: the future fascist leader abandoned his commitment to the Socialist International to join the Italian nationalist movement, led by the famous modernist poet Gabrielle D'Annunzio, and his paramilitary organization, *The Arditi*. Benito Mussolini established his own nationalist organization, the *Fasci d'Azione Rivoluzionaria*, later renamed *Fasci di Combattimento*.⁷

⁴ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 81.

⁵ Robert Mallet, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919-1935, The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 30.

⁶ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 56.

⁷ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 100-112.

The downsides of the Paris Peace Treaties led to the generalization of amputated victory rhetoric (*Vittoria mutilata*), as it was called in the nationalist milieus, and all that popular dissatisfaction contributed to the expansion of the new fascist movement. The Italian state was strongly delegitimized, his authority constantly contested by the actions of the nationalists, such as Gabrielle D'Annunzio, who succeeded in his attempt to retake control over the Adriatic port of Fiume, which then was supposed to be annexed by the new state of Yugoslavia.⁸

The Italian political elites proved the same lack of authority later when they started to use the Fascist movements in suppressing the growing Left-wing parties, the Socialists and the Communists, particularly in the Northern industrial cities. Mussolini's Fascists were often used as strikebreakers.⁹ As Antonio Gramsci wrote in one of his political articles, the Fascist *squadri* served, from the very beginning, as the defenders of the upper classes, especially the landowners class (*latifondisti*), against the surging Left-wing peasant movements.¹⁰

The Left-wing was surging because of the post-war economic crisis that swept through Italy's cities and villages. The Left-Wing parties were the only which stood against any form of intervention during the Great War. After the war, the Socialist Party won the 1919 Parliamentary Elections, ushering in two years marked by a strong political mobilization of the working class, named the *Biennio Rosso*, a period characterized by the actions of the Labor Unions in the

⁸ Stanley G. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti (1914-1926)*, Iași, Adenium, pp. 203-205.

Northern industrial cities, and by a very bold campaign of collectivization, which was started in many villages.¹¹

Being concerned by the growing support of the Left-wing movements, the Giolitti government was willing to accept the violent actions of the Fascist *squadri* against the Unions and the Communists, which were considered by the authorities the Fifth column of Bolshevism.

The National Bloc, as it was named the Giolitti-Mussolini coalition lost the 1921 Parliamentary Elections, and the Socialists won again. However, the Fascists gained about 35 seats in the Italian parliament, thus obtaining ground in the highest political institution of the Italian state.¹²

The Italian government's incapacity to reinforce its authority and to maintain certain social stability led, finally, to the Fascist takeover of 1922, as a result of Mussolini's *March over Rome*.

Despite its strength as a mass movement and the efficacy of its propaganda apparatus, Mussolini's Fascism had a very volatile ideological basis, in contrast to the Left. On economic issues, the Fascists did not propose any radical change to the already existing system, and on social issues, they did not claim a reversal of the class-based system, but a contradiction of that system, by upholding the principles of ethnic unity. According to Zeev Sternhell, the so-called revolution claimed by the Fascists was only meant to oppose the moral and ethical basis of the old society, but to maintain its central incentives, namely private property, and profits.¹³ This ambiguous ideological positioning could be

¹¹ Martin Blinkhorn, *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*, London, New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 22.

¹² Stanley G. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹³ Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology. From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 7.

understood as a means to gain access to power and gain the support of the conservative forces, such as the Clergy, the industrialists, and the nationalist segment of the Italian upper classes.

The Fascists' vision on foreign policy wasn't more revolutionary either, because, in the early years of Mussolini's regime, it only claimed the territories that were supposed to be annexed by Italy after the Treaty of London of 1915. The Fascist claims became more radical later on, in the late 1920s. Before that, in the first years of Mussolini's regime, Italy undertook some military actions in their strategic region in the Mediterranean, such as the occupation of the Greek island of Corfu, in September 1923, during a Greek-Italian border conflict. However, the territorial dispute was settled and this first imperialist adventure of Mussolini was stalled¹⁴. It could be argued that this first failure could be the result of a lack of an adequate industrial capacity, necessary to support a serious war effort. But it could also be the result of inconsistency of the general strategy, meant to draw the coordinates for their future expansion.

In contrast, the Nazis didn't lack industrial capacity or theory. Nazi foreign policy had a more complex theoretical groundwork, claiming, as a leading principle, the concept of the *Lebensraum*, a concept based on the Darwinist theories. Mussolini adopted the same theory to justify the expansion of the Italian interests in the 1930s, but it used that imperialist projection just to define the Mediterranean area. The Fascist dictator was also very reluctant to

¹⁴ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 96-100.

support the internationalization of his doctrine, stating that the Fascist doctrine could not apply to other societies.¹⁵

On racial issues, the Fascist discourse was quite ambiguous initially, during the 20s and the early 30s, because they were not prone to support Eugenic policies, as the National-Socialists or other more extremist Far-right movements of that period did. For that reason, Mussolini was generally perceived by the Western powers as a *moderate* Fascist! However, the Italian Fascists began to radicalize their racial stances during the late 1930s, influenced by the popularization of Nazi ideology in the Far-right circles. The first explicitly Anti-Semitic legislation was implemented in 1938, inspired by the Nurnberg laws of the Third Reich, but before its ratification, the attitude of Fascist authorities and party structures regarding the Jewish community could hardly be considered hostile, and no other forms of discrimination were legally imposed on any other ethnic minority.¹⁶ The Fascist propaganda used racist language starting with the period of the Ethiopian War, to justify the Italian invasion, and the genocide committed by the Italian army, during and after the invasion had also a certain racially-motivated character.

Generally speaking, Mussolini's Fascists lacked, for a long period, any kind of theoretical basis or political literature, favoring a more direct approach, in the name of the so-called principle of *direct action*, which praised dynamism and spontaneity in political actions. Hannah Arendt considered that the specific lack of interest shown by Mussolini in theoretical matters, such as upholding a

¹⁵ Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology. Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922 -1945*, London, New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 27-29.

¹⁶ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy. Life under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945*, New York, Penguin, 2005, p. 27.

coherent political platform, is a common characteristic of those that she labeled *the leaders of the mob*, for whom the only purpose consists in taking the control of the means of violence, not in building a radically new system.¹⁷

According to German philosopher Walter Benjamin, the Fascists tried to alleviate this theoretical vacuity and inconsistency in important fields, such as economics, by what he called the *aestheticization of politics*, a process meant to justify wars.¹⁸ In 1932, Mussolini tried to solve these ideological inconsistencies by publishing an essay titled *The Doctrine of Fascism*, co-authored with Giovanni Gentile, a Far-right Italian philosopher and the chief ideologue of the Fascist Party.

In *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini and Gentile emphasized the Fascist vision on foreign policy, reaffirming its imperialist *ethos*, legitimizing it, and evoking the memory of the Roman Empire by framing Italy's image as an oppressed nation that pursued an equal international status:

"The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command. Here the Roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength. Imperial power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. (...) Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit — i.e., in the tendency of nations to expand — a manifestation of their vitality. In the opposite tendency, which would limit their interests to the home country, it sees a symptom of decadence. Peoples who rise or re-arise are imperialistic; renunciation is characteristic of dying peoples. The Fascist doctrine is that best suited

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *op.cit.*, London, Penguin, 2017, p. 425.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 41.

to the tendencies and feelings of a people which, like Italians, after lying fallow during centuries of foreign servitude, are now reasserting itself in the world.”¹⁹

Just to display this so-called *vitality of Fascism* to the Italian people and to the international stage, Mussolini began a new, more aggressive approach to foreign policy. For his regime, this change of paradigm was necessary at that time, because the Italian society was still shaken by the effects inflicted on the national economy by the Great Depression, which were amplified by the austerity measures imposed by the Fascist government. For that reason, militarization was supposed to work as a contra cyclical measure, meant to stimulate the recovery of industrial production, which fell sharply during the Depression. These are some of the main reasons for Mussolini’s bellicose actions during the 1930s, such as the invasion of Abyssinia or his intervention, alongside Hitler, in the Spanish Civil War.

For the Mussolini regime, those two military campaigns were also meant to secure Italy’s prestige as the leading Far-right power in Europe, a position that was already strongly contested by Nazi Germany. The War in Ethiopia was particularly an asymmetrical one - the Italian army resorted to massive bombardments and chemical weapons, although these means were banned by international laws²⁰.

¹⁹ Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*,
<https://archive.org/details/TheDoctrineOfFascismByBenitoMussolini>

²⁰ John Gooch, *Mussolini’s War. Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935-1943*, London, Penguin, 2020, pp. 59-71.

Later during the 30s, the hopes of some Western leaders that Mussolini could have been used to moderate Hitler turned out to be in vain, because the result was quite the opposite, namely that Hitler influenced Mussolini in pursuing a more radical path. This became clear in diplomatic matters since 1936, as Germany and Italy were closing ties, as they were actively helping the Spanish Far-right during the Civil War, in a push against a so-called expansion of Communism. In October 1936, the two reactionary powers signed a secret anti-Communist treaty in Berlin, under the guise of Galeazzo Ciano, the newly-appointed Italian Foreign Minister and a staunch pro-German. Thus, Rome and Berlin played out the groundwork for their future political-military bloc, the Axis. The next year, Mussolini's first state visit to Berlin was another significant development for the cooperation between the two Far-right powers²¹.

In the short term, by this Fascist *approchement*, Hitler obtained significant diplomatic support, which will prove to be helpful in his quest to reverse the European status-quo, as it was the case of the Munich Agreement of September 1938, where the Fascist dictator endorsed Hitler's position regarding the Sudetenland.²²

It must be emphasized that Mussolini's foreign policy was hindered by some shortcomings of objective reason, the paucity of vital natural resources, much needed for the war effort in the technical conditions of the 20th century, such as oil and ore, the deficient industrialization of Italy, and the lack of a militaristic culture in society, as it was in the case of Italy's allies, Nazi Germany

²¹ Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini și Hitler. Făurirea alianței fasciste*, Bucharest, Orizonturi, 2019, pp. 88-94.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 178.

and Imperial Japan.²³ All these shortcomings became blatant during the Second World War, as the Italian army became the Achilles' heel of the Axis, a great vulnerability for the Germans, and we can list here some important military debacles, such as the failures of the Italian troops in Greece and North Africa, or the easiness of its surrender to the Allies, during the Invasion of 1943.

Fascist ideology could be characterized as a more radical extension of the nationalist current, ushered by the *Risorgimento*. The continuity is more evident in the imperialistic aspirations of Mussolini's foreign policy. As in the case of his liberal predecessors, Mussolini's goal was to bring Italy to the status of an imperialist power, which meant supremacy in the Mediterranean Basin, and further colonial expansion in Africa. In the Nationalist specter, it was generally considered that Italy was obstructed from achieving this status by a conspiracy of the hegemonic nations, and by the provisions of the international treaties. In comparison, Nazi foreign policy had a similar purpose and similar rhetoric.

The so-called moderation of Mussolini's Fascism, a certainty for the Western diplomats of the 1920s and 1930s, was more a result of a different political architecture. Mussolini's moderation was not due to his philosophic leanings but to the constitutional constraints enabled by the existence of a monarchy, which was not the case in Hitler's Germany. Mussolini's authoritarian leaning became blatant during the 1920s, in his attempts to crush the parliamentary opposition, especially the Left-wing organizations. As Hannah Arendt and Zeev Sternhell have pointed out, the transition of Mussolini's régime to totalitarianism took place during the 1930s, influenced by the growing pressure of Hitler's more radical National Socialism.

²³ Aristotle A. Kallis, *op. cit.*, p. 197.