

**Between Rome and Carthage: The Image of Great Britain in
Fascist Italy**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the image of Great Britain in Fascist Italy. It traces the roots of Fascist Anglophobia in the Great War and in the peace treaties, where Britain was seen by many Italians as a 'false friend' who was also the main obstacle between Italy and its foreign policy aspirations. The Fascist movement and Mussolini embraced such views. While at times dormant, the Anglophobic sentiment did not disappear in the years that followed, and was later rekindled during the Ethiopian War. This thesis demonstrates that the peculiarly Fascist contribution to the assessment of Britain was ideological. Since the mid-1920s, the regime's intellectuals saw Fascism as the answer to a crisis in the Western world and as irredeemably opposed to Western civilization of the sort exemplified by Britain. Britain was described as having failed the 'problem of labour', framing Fascism as a salvation ideology, which nations would either embrace or face decay. The Great Depression strengthened such a mind-set and, although by the mid-1930s it was clear that it would not turn into a Fascist country, the perception of Britain as a decaying and feeble nation increased. The consequence was a consistent underrating of British power and resolve to resist Italian ambitions. This tendency was so pervasive among the Fascist elite that anti-British views shaped the reports of military attaches in the late 1930s while others sought ways to explain Britain's decline in racial terms. Furthermore, the analysis of the popular reception of the Fascist discourse shows that the tendency to underrate Britain had permeated large sectors of the Italian people, and that public opinion was more hostile to Britain than previously thought. Indeed, in some quarters hatred towards the British lasted until the end of the Second World War.

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Introduction

After having maintained good relations since the Risorgimento (1815-1871), Italy and Britain fought on the same side during the Great War (1914-1918), only to find themselves in opposite camps in the Second World War (1939-1945). During the maelstrom of that conflict, Britain became the *bête noire* of the Fascist regime. Eventually, among all its external rivals, it was Britain that, more than any other power, precipitated the fall of Italian Fascism and the end of its imperial ambitions.

The events, struggles and intellectual currents that turned two traditional allies into enemies have been under historical scrutiny for several years. There is a large body of work covering the evolution of the relationship between the two powers during the 1920s and the 1930s.¹ However, there is no comprehensive study documenting the image of

¹ H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1940* (London: Praeger, 1997), Enzo Collotti: *Fascismo e politica di potenza : politica estera, 1922-1939*, with Nicola Labanca and Teodoro Sala (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000), Pietro Pastorelli: *La storiografia italiana del dopoguerra sulla politica estera fascista* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1971), Giampiero Carocci: *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista, 1925-1928* (Bari: Laterza, 1969), Rosaria Quartararo, *Rome tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera italiana tra il 1930 e il 1940*, (Rome: Bonacci, 1980), Richard Lamb, *Mussolini and the British* (London: John Murray, 1997), Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), Paola Brundu Olla, *L'equilibrio difficile: Gran Bretagna, Italia e Francia nel Mediterraneo, 1930-1937* (Milan: Giuffrè 1980); Donatella Bolech Cecchi, *L'accordo dei due imperi: l'accordo italo-inglese del 16 aprile 1938* (Pavia: Istituto di Scienze Politiche dell'Università di Pavia, 1977), Donatella Bolch Cecchi, *Non bruciare i ponti con Roma: le relazioni fra l'Italia, la Gran Bretagna e la Francia dall'accordo di Monaco allo scoppio della seconda guerra mondiale* (Pavia: Istituto di Scienze Politiche dell'Università di Pavia, 1986); Richard Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Mario Toscano, *Le origini diplomatiche del Patto d'Acciaio* (Florence: Sansoni, 1956); Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansion in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (London: Routledge, 2000), C.J. Lowe, and Frank Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy, 1870-1940* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London: Viking Books, 1976.)

Britain in Italy during this two-decade long period. There is still no consensus among historians about the motives of Benito Mussolini – the *Duce* - in his tumultuous relationship with Britain. One school, which counted among its members the illustrious historian of Fascism Renzo De Felice, maintains that Mussolini's foreign policy was opportunistic and realistic and that, far from being prejudicially hostile to Britain, the *Duce* long sought an agreement with London, an aspiration repeatedly disappointed by British rigidity during and after the Ethiopian War of 1935-1937. According to this point of view, Fascist Italy enjoyed good relations with Britain (apart from minor, negligible incidents like Corfu) before 1935. Even after this date, Mussolini never lost hope that he could reach a general agreement to limit German influence, aiming to maintain a *peso determinante* (decisive weight) in European politics. Concerning the first phase of the regime, De Felice wrote that a good relationship with London was the key to Mussolini's foreign policy in the first seven years of his rule.² Others maintain that Mussolini had his own, expansionist ideology and envisioned control of the Mediterranean as essential to the project of creating an Italian *spazio vitale* (vital space). In such a scenario, Britain stood in Mussolini's path from the start, and indeed the *Duce* started moving against London as soon as Germany upset the international balance of power after 1933.³ Much valuable work has also been done on Fascist propaganda abroad. While Claudia Baldoli,

² See: Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), p. 349; R. De Felice, *L'Italia tra tedeschi e alleati: la politica estera Fascista e la Seconda guerra mondiale*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1973, pp. 65-74). See also: R. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 206-212.

³ M. Knox, *Foreign Policy, Ideology and War*, in J.A. Davis (ed.) *The Short Oxford History of Italy, Liberal and Fascist Italy. 1900-1945*, ed. by A. Lyttelton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 109-111; Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia Fascista in Europa (1940-1943)* (Turin: Bollati Boringheri, 2003), pp. 72-80. For a general account of the debate, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. 82-105.

Francesca Cavarocchi and Tamara Colacicco have described Fascist cultural efforts to use the *Fasci Italiani all'Estero* and Italian intellectuals in order to reinforce the image of Fascist Italy abroad, politicise the Italian communities there, and even spread Fascist ideology, Nir Arielli and Arturo Marzano have analysed Mussolini's massive anti-British propaganda effort in the Arab world.⁴ This thesis will not address Fascist propaganda abroad, focusing instead solely on Fascist discourse within Italy.

In 1973, Denis Mack Smith's paper 'Anti-British propaganda in Fascist Italy' briefly addressed the theme of Italian domestic wartime propaganda. While touching on many of the themes this thesis addresses, the paper was necessarily constricted by its limited length and by a lack of access to many relevant sources.⁵ Specifically, Mack Smith's paper does not examine the Fascist discourse before the Ethiopian war nor, methodologically, does it reference the orders to the press, or take in consideration the popular response to the Fascist discourse. Furthermore, the piece reflected Mack Smith's understanding of Fascist propaganda as the delusions of a dictator and the lies of his flatterers. While both were certainly part of the picture, this study will show that such a depiction is overly simplistic. As the historian states, 'propaganda doesn't need to be very intelligent to be effective, and need not even be very consistent.'⁶ This thesis will highlight how the tropes of propaganda were more consistent than Mack Smith suggested. Pietro Cavallo's *Italiani in guerra, sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943* devotes one interesting chapter to anti-

⁴ Claudia Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism: Italian Fascism and Britain's Italians in the 1930s* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Francesca Cavarocchi, *Avanguardie dello spirito: il fascismo e la propaganda culturale all'estero* (Rome: Carocci, 2010); Tamara Colacicco, *La propaganda italiana nelle università inglesi, la diplomazia culturale di Mussolini in Gran Bretagna (1921-1940)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2018); Nir Arielli, *Fascist Italy in the Middle East, 1933-40* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Arturo Marzano, *Onde Fasciste, La propaganda araba di Radio Bari* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2015).

⁵ Denis Mack Smith, 'Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy', in *Inghilterra e Italia nel '900. Atti del convegno di Bagni di Lucca* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1972), p.104.

⁶ Mack Smith, 'Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy,' p. 89.

French and anti-British propaganda, but does not address the evolution of the discourse before the war, nor whether the propaganda's tropes were the product of a particular worldview by Fascist elites or simply a way to attack a wartime enemy.⁷ The most relevant effort to represent the image of British imperialism in Fascist Italy is the work of Laura Cerasi. By analysing themes like the reappropriation of the myth of Rome and the concept of modernity, Cerasi tackles the issue of how the Fascist perception of the British Empire shaped the Fascist image of the role Italy had to play in the Mediterranean.⁸

While mottoes like 'Goddamn the English', 'Perfidious Albion,' or 'the people of the five suppers' are well known, there is no systematic study of the broader subject of the image of Great Britain in Fascist Italy.⁹ This thesis aims to approach the issue from an innovative point of view. The novelty of this approach lies in its systematic and multi-layered examination of various key themes of the Fascist depiction of Britain (including unstudied factors such as race, military analysis and economic appraisals) and in an analysis of how these were received by the Italian population through various means, including the Fascist reports on public opinion. Therefore, this thesis will enrich our knowledge of the subject by replacing a fragmentary and superficial knowledge with a focused and comprehensive

⁷ See: Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra, sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1997).

⁸ Laura Cerasi, 'Empires Ancient and Modern: Strength, Modernity and Power in Imperial Ideology from the Liberal period to Fascism,' *Modern Italy*, 19, 4 (2014), p. 431 and Laura Cerasi, 'A Contested Legacy: Conflicting Images of the Roman and British Empire in the Italian Imperialist Discourse through the Liberal and Fascist Era', in *Renovatio, Inventio, Absentia Imperii From the Roman Empire to contemporary imperialism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

⁹ Anti-British sentiment does, at times, resurface to this day. See for example: <https://www.ilpost.it/2010/06/28/la-perfida-albione/>. In 2010, the right-wing journalist Vittorio Feltri, commenting on sport-related matters, described 'Perfidious Albion' in terms which would not appear out of place in wartime Fascist propaganda: 'a country now decayed in every sector – from the industrial one to the financial one - but not resigned to give up the traditional arrogance. An arrogance which is symptomatic of a hypertrophic ego which does not appear to diminish, despite the humiliations the subjects of Her Majesty have collected during the years.' Another Italian with right wing (or post-Fascist) sympathies, the politician Maurizio Gasparri, was even harsher (and considerably less polite) when commenting on another football game outcome: <https://www.salto.bz/it/article/16062014/gasparri-offende-gli-inglesi>.

analysis of the Fascist discourse, of its popular reception and of its effects on military and political matters.

The thesis will propose two main strands of investigation: one focusing on Anglophobia, and the other on an ideologically-informed assessment of Britain. The first will research the origins and development of Anglophobic depictions of Britain before and during the regime, and the degree to which Anglophobic sentiment permeated the Italian population. Furthermore, it will determine the nature and test the effectiveness of anti-British propaganda during periods of acute hostility between the two countries, like the first post-war period and the period beginning with the Ethiopian War and culminating with the Second World War.

The second strand will investigate whether the Fascist regime introduced a new, distinct element to Italian assessments of Britain, this element being in particular the ideological framing of Britain as the birthplace and bastion of the anachronistic, chaotic and supposedly dying liberal ideology. In doing this, the thesis will provide a useful new approach to the study of the Fascist regime and its relationship with Italian society. If, indeed, the depiction of a hopelessly decaying Britain, as developed by the regime and spread first by its intellectuals and then by its propagandists, had managed to permeate the Italian elites and population more than was previously thought, then there is an argument for a greater effectiveness of the Fascist discourse in shaping public opinion than the consensus maintains. This provides elements which stimulate further debate on the nature of Fascist propaganda and, more generally, on the effectiveness of the penetration of Mussolini's totalitarian ideology among the Italian population. At the same time, as discussed in the first strand, if Anglophobia (distinct from the ideological and peculiarly Fascistic assessment of Britain mentioned above) was pervasive and predated

Fascism, at least to a degree, and if it did survive longer than previously thought, then Mussolini's own fixations and ambitions as the unique maker of the Anglophobic direction of the country's foreign policy in the 1930s should also be re-examined. Indeed, the thesis will investigate whether the declaration of war on Britain in 1940 was connected with a deep-rooted sense of hostility among the Italian population and elite which had been simmering for years, or whether it was simply the consequence of British stubbornness and of one dictator's calculations, driven either by pragmatism, foolishness or ideology.¹⁰

This work is based on the assumption that, as Claudia Baldoli explained, 'it is wrong to assume that '[Fascist] foreign policy [was] somehow separate from the cultural and propagandistic features of the regime.'¹¹ Before addressing the importance of analysing propaganda and public, cultural discourse in order to better understand the regime, it is necessary to explain the difference between the two. This work will define as 'propaganda' the kind of Fascist information destined for mass consumption, usually not particularly complex and mostly appearing in newspapers, pamphlets and on the radio. It was generally directly dictated by the regime via orders to the press. The cultural discourse was more sophisticated, being the product of dialogue among the regime's intellectuals, and usually took place in 'highbrow' magazines like *Gerarchia* or *Primato*. Fascist public discourse was, of course, often factually wrong, and always as biased as one might expect it to be, but it was far from mere propaganda. Rather, it was the shaper of Fascist culture, just as much as it was shaped by it. Yet even less complex propaganda worked as an osmotic process. As Philip M. Taylor underlined, even scholars in democracies who write of history without consciously making propaganda are the product

¹⁰ Rosaria Quartararo claimed that the former is the explanation coming closest to the truth. See: Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*.

¹¹ Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism*, p. 4.

of the time in which they live and work.¹² In a totalitarian regime like that of Fascism, ideologically-dictated public discourse reinforced the prejudices and common tropes shared by those who produced it. Concerning Anglophobic propaganda, essentially produced during periods of war or high tension with Britain, it was certainly less sophisticated than the articles written by Fascist intellectuals in magazines like *Gerarchia* or *Primato*. However, it would be a mistake to discount it as meaningless beyond its immediate goal. As the Chapter 3 of this thesis demonstrates, even wartime propaganda had its own ‘life,’ the press proving at times resistant not only to the facts of war but even to the orders of the regime. The study of propaganda is not just useful in understanding why public opinion thought as it did, but also in assessing the mindset of those who produced it - and how who produced it related to the regime.

The development of a certain Fascist image of Britain as arising from an ideologically-driven analysis, which tended to project onto Britain the processes that had led to the collapse of the liberal order in Italy, will be assessed under the lens of broader developments of interwar Europe. As Richard Overy underlined, western countries and Britain in particular were permeated, during the interwar era, by a ‘culture of crisis,’ which led many, intellectuals or otherwise, to deeply doubt the very foundations of their societies. In *The Morbid Age*, Overy describes the feeling of impending doom, or civilisational collapse, which became common in British culture and society during these years. Spenglerian notions of decline, fear of racial degeneration, increasing economic challenges that led many to doubt the soundness of capitalism, the alleged inadequacy of liberal democracy, the looming, apparently unavoidable next global conflagration: all of these contributed to a wave of pessimism in the country.¹³ However, as Overy underlines

¹² Philip M. Talor, *Ammunitions of the Mind, A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 14.

¹³ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age* (London: Penguin, 2010).

in the introduction of his book, the widespread belief in Europe and elsewhere that Britain was the centre of the Western civilisation also meant that European anxieties reflected British ones.¹⁴ The thesis will therefore assess how these cultural trends influenced Fascist public discourse regarding Britain.

A comparison between the image of Britain in Nazi Germany and in Fascist Italy is useful in order to understand the peculiarity of the Italian case. Britain's role as a world power, as a colonial country and an agent of international politics was admired in Nazi Germany until the two countries faced each other in the Second World War.¹⁵ Chapter 1 of this thesis will analyse how the Fascist regime and its intellectuals represented Britain as an imperial power and international player, arguing that, unlike in the case of Nazi Germany, the tropes public discourse used to describe Britain were far less positive and that admiration, since the earlier days of the Fascist movement, was often mixed with open dislike. A key contention of this chapter will be that Anglophobia had been present, if at times dormant, since the Great War. Drawing on newspapers such as *Il Popolo d'Italia*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *Il Messaggero*, and others which enjoyed less diffusion like *Il Corriere d'Italia*, *Impero* and *Il Nuovo Paese*; as well important magazines like *Gerarchia*, pamphlets, memoirs, books and archival material - including official documents and personal correspondence - the chapter will address the genesis of anti-British tropes during the Great War and their evolution during the immediate post-war years, especially during the days of tense negotiation at Versailles in 1919 and of Gabriele D'Annunzio's Fiume Free State (1920-1924). As the following period of less troubled Anglo-Italian relations between the Corfu crisis in 1923 and the Great Depression of 1929 proceeded, a more diverse (if still within the limits allowed in an authoritarian country)

¹⁴ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle, Nazi Perceptions of Britain*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 61-94.

range of opinions concerning Britain as an international player emerged. The chapter will investigate how various criteria, among which were white supremacy, anti-communism and domestic issues, influenced the Fascist perception of the British Empire during this period. Understanding the relationship between the public discourse, as represented by the press, and the actual position of the Fascist regime is often not a simple task. In order to do so, this study addresses the *veline*, that is, the orders the Regime sent to the press through the Ministry of Propaganda (later renamed the Ministry of Popular Culture) in order to steer the direction of the public discourse (collections of which are available at the Central Archive of the State in Rome) to compare Fascist attempts to coordinate the press and direct public opinion in the desired direction. It will suggest that the anti-British discourse in the media was not just the artificial product of government direction, but rather responded to deeply-rooted prejudices and did not always abide by the regime's changing needs. The chapter will also address the legacy of *Romanità* (Roman-ness), the persistent comparison of Britain with Rome's Punic arch-enemy Carthage.

Chapter 2 will focus on social, economic and cultural issues, navigating the Fascist assessment of Britain's social crisis during the interwar years and how this led to the construction of the image of a decrepit and decaying Britain in the Fascist imaginary. The main focus of the chapter will be on the years between 1922 and 1935, a period during which the opinions of Fascist commentators on British political, social and economic systems dramatically evolved with the development of Fascist ideology and regime at home. Giving particular emphasis to the intellectual debate appearing in important Fascist cultural magazines like *Gerarchia* and *Critica Fascista*, the chapter will address how these perceptions and the regime's representation of Britain created an ideologically-based understanding of Britain as a political and economic system, and how the regime decided to act in accordance with this image, for example concerning the support given

by the regime to Oswald Mosley's British Fascist movement. In particular, the chapter will stress the contrast between liberal society, best represented by Britain, and the Fascist one, perceived as revolutionary and the only one which could solve the problem of labour by restraining the egoisms of both workers and capitalists in the name of national prosperity. It will conclude that Fascist intellectuals used their image of Britain as a negative example in order to frame Fascism itself as a universal message of progress. Another conclusion underlined in the chapter is that, far from being a later development, this ideological development was present in Fascist public discourse long before the Ethiopian War and even the Great Depression, drawing its roots in the mid-1920s. In its last section, Chapter 2 will also address the themes of family, feminism, religion, and art, underlining the Fascist representation of British culture and how the ties of the Fascist regime with the Catholic Church influenced the representation of the Anglican Church. Did the image analysed in Chapter 2 influence, in turn, the perception of Britain as a military player? If so, did that mean that the regime failed to properly assess the strength of and the resolve to fight what was increasingly a likely foe? In order to answer these questions, Chapter 3 will challenge the notion that, despite some Anglophobic outbursts, Mussolini had a healthy respect for Britain's global power, instead directing his contempt either towards France or onto some individual British leaders. In order to do so, the chapter will address the reports of the Italian military attachés in Britain from the late 1920s to 1939 (which I have researched in the Foreign Affairs Ministry Historical Archive as well as the Archive of the Historical Office of the Chief of Staff, both in Rome) examining the progressive change in the perception of Britain in the eyes of military experts, who were not ideologues and had instead close contact with British reality. The chapter investigates whether the attachés had absorbed the equivalence that Fascist ideology sought to create between democracy and emasculated weakness, and if so, if

they applied it to Britain. The thoughts of the Italian elites, on the military subject as well as others, has been addressed through an analysis of diplomatic correspondence (in particular the *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* series) as well as memoirs and personal correspondence. The chapter will then analyse the point of view of the military elites, as well as the war plans of the Chief of Staff. By doing so, and comparing it with the outlook of the attachés, it tries to determine whether the process of creating a certain, ideological and unrealistic image of Britain as an emasculated, decaying power was a top-down, bottom-up or an osmotic process. The second half of the chapter will address the subject of Fascist wartime propaganda. Relatively little space will be given to the endless repetition of well-known mottos and common tropes about ‘Perfidious Albion,’ rather analysing the evolution of the propaganda’s deeper themes. Making extensive use of newspaper and magazine articles, as well as orders to the press, the last section of the chapter will investigate the veracity of the traditional historiographical interpretation of wartime anti-British propaganda. In particular, it will contest Renzo De Felice’s claim that propaganda began as relatively moderate in its content, only to shift towards greater truculence as the conflict progressed.¹⁶

Chapter 4 will deal with the largely neglected issue of the racial image of the British people in the later years of the Fascist regime, as it adopted an openly racist ideology and legislation. The chapter will address the development of Fascist racism and the establishment of various ‘factions’ or ‘schools’ within it: in particular the Mediterraneanists, who supported the view of an Italian people belonging to a unified Mediterranean race, and the Nordicists, biological racists who were close to German racist doctrines. The chapter will examine the racist analysis of the British people in magazines like *La Difesa della Razza* within the context of the fierce ideological and

¹⁶ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato, Vol. I* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), p.171.

‘academic’ struggle among various racist Fascist schools, as analysed by Aaron Gillette in his book *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*.¹⁷ If the ‘spiritual’ Mediterraneanist racists tended to use Anglophobic racial rhetoric as a tool to attack the notion of a ‘nordic’ Italy, at times using Britain as a way to attack Germany, the Nazi-inspired, Nordicist biological racists found themselves in an embarrassing position, surprisingly being among the last Anglophiles in Fascist cultural discourse. The chapter will also underline the intersection of the racist debate with other themes like feminism, colonial rule, demography and sexuality.

The subject of the consensus the regime enjoyed among the Italian people and the question to what degree it managed to Fascistise Italian society are widely debated.¹⁸ Both relate to the effectiveness of the Fascist narrative to reach and influence the masses.¹⁹ The fifth and final chapter will, therefore, put Fascist public discourse to the test. It draws on the relatively effective methods the regime used to check the pulse of public opinion in order to understand to what degree the representation of Britain during the two decades of the Fascist era had managed to inform Italian people’s opinions. At the heart of the chapter are the Ethiopian War, the increasingly tense years before the Second World War, Italy’s intervention, military defeats and the escalation of British aerial bombing on Italian cities. It will investigate how the image of the British evolved during all these events. In particular, it will challenge the notion - sometimes sustained by historians of Italian public opinion - that the Italian people were generally immune from hatred of the enemy and that their support for the declaration of war in June 1940 was only due to the hope of winning an easy victory, rather than by any real hostility towards the enemy.²⁰

¹⁷ Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002)

¹⁸ See chapter 5.

¹⁹ George Talbot, *Censorship in Fascist Italy, 1922-43* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.104.

²⁰ See chapter 5.

The chapter will also address the degree to which the Italian people retained hostility for the enemy during the conflict and whether they considered victory feasible after it was clear that the immediate defeat of London was not possible. The chapter suggests a more nuanced view, according to which the Italian people had absorbed many of the anti-British tropes proposed by Fascist public discourse, being consistently hostile towards the British before the defeats suffered in winter 1940-41, and again as the aerial bombing campaign escalated during the last phases of the Fascist war. First, however, it is necessary to explore the origins of anti-British sentiment before and during the Great War.

Chapter 1

The New Carthage: The Representation of British Foreign Policy

The English are divided in two categories, clearly identified by those who study zoology: the first one is represented by that famous Englishman who was marvelled not to find negroes in Calais, for, according to him, the Channel was the border of the civilized world. The second category is the one of types like Hervey, who [...] being in the Venetian Lagoon, tasted the water and concluded 'it is salty, hence it is ours!'²¹

What in the world is this famous English friendship? We want to see the proof!²²

Despite the most-imbecilic British gruffness of Lord Curzon, I am proud to be that famous 'irresponsible adventurer' that nobody dares to punish.²³

²¹ Telesio Interlandi, *I nostri amici inglesi* (Rome: Cremonese, 1935), p.11.

²² Pier Filippo Gomez Homen to Dott. Guido Baroni, 19 June 1935, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, 1926-35, busta 119, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS).

²³ Gabriele D'Annunzio, Ai Biscazzieri di San Remo, Busta 4, Mobilitazione classe 1911 – 1935-1936, Categorie permanenti 1894-1958, Archivio Generale 1870-1958, Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza 1961-1881, Ministero dell'Interno (afterwards Min. Int.,) 1814-1988, ACS.

Introduction

In March 1922, more than half a year before the March on Rome which would start twenty years of Fascist rule in Italy, Margherita Sarfatti published an article about Rudyard Kipling in the Fascist intellectual magazine *Gerarchia*. Sarfatti was born to a Jewish family in Venice in 1880. Her ancestry would prompt her to leave Italy in 1938, as the Fascist regime promulgated anti-Semitic legislation. She was to return to Italy only in 1947, after the Second World War and the end of Fascism. All this was still far in the future in 1922. Sarfatti was a writer, art critic and overall renowned intellectual. She was also the lover of renegade socialist and current leader of the Fascist party, Benito Mussolini. The article analysed the famous British writer as one universal archetype. Rather than being simply a nationalist or imperialist writer, Sarfatti wrote, Kipling was ‘the singer of the will of domination and expansion not just of *britannismo*, [Britishness] but of the west in general.’ At the same time, however, he also represented what was best of *Anglo-Saxoness*, what the Italian people, like other Latins, should better learn to survive in the tired world that emerged from the Great War:

From one side to the other of Anglo-Saxon art [...] act! Work! [These] are the code words which ring like a trumpet call. [...] Mowgli [...] man amongst beasts; Kim, *sahib*, white man amongst Indians; Kipling, man, amongst the soft feminine seductions of regret and sterile torment [...] they are three acts of overcoming and three victories; three gradual steps of *Man* who affirms himself, appealing from the crepuscular regions of subconscious, to the clear and firm rule of reason.²⁴

‘England,’ she continued, ‘is a country of extreme morality - also because it owns colonies.’ Sarfatti then drew a comparison between Britain and Ancient Rome, specifically late Republican Rome, having to reconcile its new imperial dominion over a vast and diverse world with its austere traditions. ‘Such was the crisis of England after

²⁴ Margherita Sarfatti, ‘Il re del creato (Kipling),’ *Gerarchia*, March 1922, pp. 127-133.

the death of the old Queen [Victoria] who turned the Kingdom into (or at least under her it was turned into) an Empire.’ Yet while Britain had retained its respectable and ‘feminine’ values in the motherland, its men went to the rest of the Empire in order to express their conquering vital instincts, so that the homecountry was mostly inhabited by women and children. In the Empire, confronted with countless petty gods and diverse cultures, these men expanded the Christian, respectable education they had received at home ‘on their mothers’ lap.’ In this way, the British man ‘greatly expands the horizon of the divine that [he] finds in himself.’

At the base of this relative irreligiosity and amorality stands a great faith and an absolute unique moral. The unassailable dogma of *self-control* which admits no scepticism, the [...] ideal of the man-gentleman able to dominate himself, and who has conquered his own passions is stronger, as the Bible says, than he who has conquered cities. Once again, like in Rome, it is the warrior ideal of virtue.²⁵

Sarfatti’s mention of Rome was not casual, or negligible, as the importance of the Roman myth in Fascist rhetoric can hardly be overestimated. During the Fascist era, Ancient Rome would continuously be celebrated in order to give historical substance to the imperial destiny of the Italian people. References abounded to the solemn greatness of its monuments and Rome was feted as an ideal of martial spirit, good governance and patriotism which the Fascists sought to emulate.²⁶ Furthermore, the description of the British as virile, conquering, always in control of themselves and of the world, shows striking resemblance with what was soon to be another myth of Fascism: the one of the New Fascist Man. This concept, as Emilio Gentile explained

combined the ideas of Nietzsche, Pareto, Le Bon, Sorel, of the critics of science and of the prophets of the sunset of the West: *the philosophy*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For the importance of Ancient Rome in the Fascist imaginary, see for example: Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra* (Rome and Bari, Laterza 2008); Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922-43: The Making of the Fascist Capital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); and Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity, The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012).

of life triumphant after the process of *destruction of reason* at the hands of reason itself.²⁷

This New Man had to be able to ‘conquer himself spiritually’ and to reach, through the control of his instincts and passions, a new moral and spiritual vigour: that triumph was key to any other, military, political, cultural and social success.²⁸ The importance of the New Man’s masculinity as understood by the Fascists also has echoes in Sarfatti’s words. As Lorenzo Benadusi underlined, during the Fascist era ‘a new idea of masculinity takes shape as a point of comparison to its effeminate counterparts, helping to define, through a negative opposition, the attributes of an ideal type model.’²⁹ Sarfatti’s contrasts the Englishman’s hard, vital and controlled ‘conquering’ virility with the femininity of the wives and children living in the respectable motherland, as well as with that of the ‘conquered’ peoples of the colonies. This, and the comparison with Rome, hinted not too subtly that, if not the British nation as a whole, British men were an example the new Italian people had to follow.

Although this appraisal of the greatness of Britain was unrepresentative of the views voiced by most of the Fascist elite in the years that followed, the comparison with Rome resurfaced during the Second World War. In September 1943, Giuseppe Bottai wrote in his diary about Britain and the possible comparisons between ancient and modern nations. Bottai was a journalist, a prominent Fascist intellectual and politician, and had at times enjoyed Mussolini’s favour. He supported both the alliance with Nazi Germany and the anti-Semitic legislation. After falling from his master’s grace and witnessing the catastrophe of the Fascist war, Bottai became increasingly critical of the *Duce*’s decisions

²⁷ Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo, Storia e Interpretazione* (Bari: Laterza, 2005), p. 82.

²⁸ George D’Agnino, ‘The Myth of the New Man in Italian Fascist Ideology,’ *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, 5 (2016), pp. 130-148.

²⁹ Lorenzo Benadusi, *The Enemy of the New Man, Homosexuality in Fascist Italy* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), p. 7.

- at least in his own diary. He went from words to actions on 25 July 1943, when he voted for Dino Grandi's motion to depose Mussolini. After 8 September 1943 and the German occupation of parts of the country, Bottai had to hide in order to avoid being put on trial for treason. During his days in hiding, he devoted much time to his diary, writing reflections on the fallen regime, the war and many other topics. On 27 September 1943, hiding in a convent from the same Germans with whom he had long championed an alliance, Bottai reflected on Titus Livius' account of the Second Punic War. The reading suggested to him a comparison between the ancient war and the current one. The war had shown, Bottai thought, the fallacy of the notion, introduced by Mussolini, that Britain was the modern Carthage. 'If anything [...] it is more true that England is the modern Rome.'³⁰ Bottai's comparison was drawn from the British behaviour during the war. Like Republican Rome, London had managed to endure initial terrible defeats, refusing to even consider surrendering and flatly rejecting any peace proposal by the German side. Eventually, Britain managed to turn the tide of the conflict.

Sarfatti's and Bottai's biographies have points in common. Neither managed to remain close to Mussolini until the end, but both enjoyed periods of remarkable confidence and influence on the *Duce* and came to know him well enough. Furthermore, both contributed to laying the cultural bases for the Fascist regime: Sarfatti edited *Gerarchia* and Bottai founded and edited *Critica Fascista*, two influential, elite Fascist magazines. The two pieces discussed above were written at the beginning and end of the Fascist era respectively, while both compared Britain positively with one of the pillars of the Fascist imaginary. Yet, as Bottai hints in his diary, the identification of Britain, not with Rome

³⁰ Giuseppe Bottai, *Diary* (Milan: BUR 2006), 27 September 1943. Bottai also drew other comparisons between the ancient and contemporary worlds: if Britain was Rome, Hannibal was certainly not Mussolini 'who never knew how to win [in that war] but rather Hitler, who, while victorious, could never put his victories to use.'

but rather her mortal rival Carthage, was introduced by Mussolini and found fertile ground in the country - so much that an echo of it survives to this day. This chapter will examine the role assigned to Britain within the surprisingly diverse Fascist public discourse, and try to understand how London fluctuated within it between the exalted Rome and the disdained Carthage.

Gerwin Strobl's study of the German perception of British foreign policy and the British Empire during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) and the Third Reich (1933-1945) suggests that widespread admiration for both existed among the German population, particularly among scholars of English language and culture. Britain was seen as a nation which was both culturally and racially close to, and yet more successful than, Germany. Nazi leaders considered British foreign policy, so often ruthless and brutal, as well as the British sense of superiority, subtly but surely racially motivated, good examples to follow. At the time of Adolf Hitler's diplomatic triumphs, Britain's past was used as a shield against accusations of national egoism: for example, Britain's purely nationalistic, bold attitude during the Fashoda Incident with France in 1898 was mentioned by German commentators during the reoccupation of Rhineland in 1936. London was also held up as a model to replicate within the new Nazi central European empire; the installation in 1939 of a German protectorate in the western part of the former Czechoslovakia was modelled on Britain's domination of its Indian subjects.³¹ It was only after the beginning of the Second World War that the atrocities of the British Empire started to be used as propaganda, and with little success.³²

What picture can be drawn of the Italian Fascist perception of Britain as an international player? This chapter aims to further the debate on Fascist relations with Britain through

³¹ See Chapter 4.

³² The subject is thoroughly analysed in Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 61-94.

a detailed examination of the representation of Britain as an international actor during the Fascist era. Before Second World War propaganda depicting Britain in a negative light (see Chapter 3), Fascism coexisted with the British Empire for many years. What the regime told the Italian people during this period, and what Italian culture and media said when relatively free of strict instructions on the subject, can of course help shed light on the direction Fascist Italy's relationship with Britain was taking. However, it can also tell us much about how the regime perceived itself. The perspective would hence not be a study of foreign policy but focus instead on internal Italian discourse.

When assessing Fascist relations with the British Empire, Laura Cerasi argued that

the wish to revenge previous humiliations epitomised by the 'shame of Adua', while it certainly dominated Fascism's public discourse, did not account for all the cultural and political significance of the Ethiopian campaign. Growing Anglophobia and the strident anti-British campaign may provide an additional way of understanding this.³³

This chapter aims to reach a deeper understanding of this subject by asking a series of questions: how did the regime's representation of British foreign policy and imperialism evolve during the Fascist decades? Was such representation always consistent with Rome's fluctuating relations with London? More generally, how did Fascist Italy relate its growing imperialistic urges with the global empire centred in London? To answer these questions, the chapter examines the writings of Mussolini himself, especially in the early years of the Fascist movement, the Italian media before and after their 'Fascistisation' and British Foreign Office reports about the experience of Britons in Italy.

The events leading to the Second World War are well known. As the relationship between Rome and London consistently deteriorated during the second half of the 1930s, the regime adopted diverse tactics in order to deal with the British. Fascist public discourse

³³ Laura Cerasi, 'Empires Ancient and Modern, strength, Modernity and Power in Imperial Ideology from the Liberal Period to Fascism', in *Modern Italy*, 19, 4 (2014), p. 431.

had, by then however, developed a distinct anti-British tone. The amount of newspaper articles criticising British foreign policy are therefore numerous, and since they generally followed the expedient political necessities of Fascist foreign policy, they are of relative interest. Henceforth, the chapter will not follow a chronological examination of the late 1930s press analysis of British foreign policy. While the first half of the chapter follows a chronological approach, from the Great War to the Ethiopian War, the second half adopts a thematic approach in order to understand the more peculiar and meaningful aspects of anti-British discourse, for example the references to the Risorgimento, comparisons between Britain and Carthage and the assessment of British colonial policies.

The origins of Fascist Anglophobia: The Great War

The British Empire, even for its sheer size, had been widely admired – and, of course, envied - by Italian imperialists since the nineteenth century. This fascination was so widespread that, in Laura Cerasi's words, 'in the Liberal period [Britain] had represented an unrivalled superiority – individualism, sternness of character and entrepreneurial daring, all of which had supported the expansion of British rule across the world.'³⁴ Yet a sense of inferiority can bring about resentment. The almost unanimous condemnation in Italy of the British role in the Boer War (1899-1902) showed that respect and admiration did not necessarily descend from an Anglophile attitude.³⁵ At the same time, as Cerasi has demonstrated, by the beginning of the Great War the perception that British power was weakening as a result of domestic as well as foreign factors was spreading. In Cerasi's

³⁴ For an analysis of the popularity of the British Empire during the Liberal era among nationalists of various political flavours, see: *Cerasi, Empires Ancient and Modern*, pp. 426-30. A comparison can be drawn with 19th century Germany, before the stunning growth of German power brought about rivalry and hence hostility towards Britain, London was widely considered to be a 'good foreign' example. See: James Hawes, *Englanders and Huns*, pp. 16-17.

³⁵ Cerasi, *Empires Ancient and Modern*, pp. 428-9.

words, ‘as the first decade of the twentieth century ended [...] it no longer seemed possible to consider the British Empire’s gains without also noting various indications of a weakening in its previously unquestioned primacy.’³⁶

Anti-British feelings had spread in Italy since the very beginning of Italy’s participation in the Great War. The famous British historian G.M. Trevelyan described how, in 1916, an Italian sergeant (otherwise not anti-war) had told him that ‘you English make it [war] last’, that the war was between the British and the Germans and that the British goal was to close the seas to everybody but themselves.³⁷ To this, the sergeant added an argument that would often be repeated by Fascist propaganda years later: that the toll foreign ships had to pay to the British at Gibraltar proved that the British aimed to have exclusive control over the Mediterranean.

Don Giovanni Minzoni, a military chaplain who served on the Italian front during the war and a future martyr of Fascist violence, considered the British the ‘new Romans’ (remarkably, this time the comparison was meant to be negative), fighting the war mostly with Latin blood and whose eventual goal, once Germany had been subjugated, was to dominate the whole continent. The socialists had similar thoughts: Filippo Turati, leader of the Socialist Party and another future victim of Fascism, declared to the Italian parliament that the British had every interest in prolonging the war for it meant, for them, an excellent source of business.³⁸ On the British side Hugh Dalton, future Chancellor of the Exchequer who was serving on the Italian front, wrote in his memoirs that the Italian soldiers often thought that the British tried to prolong the war.³⁹ Even Austrian Alfred

³⁶ Laura Cerasi, *A Contested Legacy*, p. 243.

³⁷ Pietro Melograni, *Storia Politica della Grande guerra, 1915/18* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), pp. 492-3

³⁸ Piero Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande guerra* pp. 491-92.

³⁹ Hugh Dalton, *Con l'artiglieria inglese sul fronte italiano, 1917-1918: un tributo al vittorioso impegno dell'Italia*; prefazione di Mark Thompson ; nota introduttiva e traduzione di Alessandro Roselli, (Florence: Edizioni Clichy, 2018), p. 323.

Totzauer, captured by the Regio Esercito after the Italian victory in 1918, learned how to exploit the bad blood between Italian and British soldiers. If one wanted to ingratiate the Italianes, he wrote, he could curse the British.⁴⁰ Journalist and future anti-Fascist, Mario Borsa, wrote a pamphlet in 1915 in which he denounced the ‘weird and subtle spirit of distrust and antipathy against England that has infiltrated our people.’ Despite traditional British friendship, he wrote, anti-British feeling was growing: ‘everywhere you hear expressions of discontent and resentment, criticism, recrimination and denigration. The intentions and the goals of England are questioned.’ These tropes - British egotism, Britain’s diplomatic and military mistakes and the British tradition of letting others fight and die for them - were often repeated by others. According to Borsa, such ideas had been artificially introduced by the Germans during the period of Italian neutrality.⁴¹

As widespread as it was, anti-British feeling before the Great War was to increase dramatically after the end of the conflict, when it became clear that Italy and Britain saw the post-war order in radically different ways. The fundamental problem was that the various Italian governments, as well as public opinion, felt that the post-war treaties were unfair to Italy. Meanwhile, the British government believed that the root of the problems with Italy lay in the fact that the war had led it to develop unreasonable and disproportionate imperialistic aspirations, despite various criticisms London had for the Italian wartime contribution.⁴²

This, as well as the mistakes made by the Italian negotiators Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and Sidney Sonnino, his foreign minister, led to Italy’s isolation in

⁴⁰ *I vinti di Vittorio Veneto*, ed. Mario Isnenghi, Paolo Pozzato (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018,) P.58.

⁴¹ Mario Borsa, *Italia e Inghilterra* (Milano: Società editoriale italiana, 1916). Other booklets and even conferences addressing the problem appeared during the war. See for example the leaflet *Calunnie contro l’Inghilterra* (Florence: Orsammichele, 1918).

⁴² Luca Micheletta, *Italia e Gran Bretagna nel primo dopoguerra, Vol. I, Le relazioni diplomatiche fra Roma e Londra dal 1919 al 1923* (Rome: Jouvence, 1999), pp. 747-748. See also: Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period*, pp. 2-7.

Paris. Britain's leaders were not particularly stubborn regarding the eastern Italian border, but were hostile to Italian ambitions in Asia Minor and Africa, which they considered their (and France's) sphere of influence. The fact that the Italians had decided not to stick to the Pact of London in order to take Fiume convinced the British that they could selectively decide whether to support Italy's claims agreed upon in 1915, when Italy entered the war.⁴³

After Orlando's fall and the rise of a new government in June 1919, the new Prime Minister Francesco Nitti was more optimistic about Italy's prospects, recognising that Italy had gained many *de facto* advantages from the war, including the destruction of the Austrian arch-enemy and the fulfilment of irredentist claims in the northeast. He saw in Britain – but not in France, which he did not trust because of its nationalism - a partner for the reconstruction of Europe and its economy along fair, liberal lines.⁴⁴ When his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tommaso Tittoni, as part of his attempt to re-establish a good relationship with Britain accepted the evacuation of Italian troops from Fiume, on 12 September 1919 D'Annunzio organised his famous *coup*, which led to the creation of the Free State of Fiume. The immediate threat the *Vate* – as he was often known - wanted to prevent was the occupation of the city by a British police corps, which would have made any similar action impossible. In this sense D'Annunzio's move, so important for the future development of Fascism, started as an anti-British action. By that time, the image of Britain in Italy had reached a nadir, with the government doing little to prevent it. Tittoni's attempt to solve all the contentious points in the peace treaties by swift agreement with Britain proved unsuccessful and, frustrated by British rigidity, the minister revealed to the press that the British government had harshly condemned the

⁴³ Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, pp. 4-7.

⁴⁴ Micheletta, *Italia e Gran Bretagna nel primo dopoguerra*, pp. 19-21; Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, pp. 14-15.

situation in Fiume and admonished him that Italy was risking ‘complete isolation’. The predictable consequence was the unleashing of a new, violent anti-British campaign, this time not limited to nationalist newspapers.⁴⁵

Despite this, Nitti would not give up trying to strengthen his links with Britain. In the final months of his government, he chose British Prime Minister David Lloyd George as an interlocutor, accepting Britain’s proposals in the peace treaties and basing his foreign policy decisions on the assumption that collaboration between Italy and Britain was of absolute importance in order to secure British support for solving the eastern Italian border issue. The cost was the sacrifice of Italian ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean. This upset Italian public opinion, which correctly felt that Britain had chosen Greece as its key ally in the Mediterranean at the expense of Italian aspirations in the region.⁴⁶ Nitti obtained nothing, which contributed to the eventual fall of his government in June 1920, to be replaced by a fifth Giolitti government. Giovanni Giolitti shifted Italian foreign policy towards an improvement of relations with France, leading to the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, which settled the matter of Italy’s eastern border. However, relations with Britain worsened due, among other issues, to increased Italian support for Turkish nationalists and the support given to France on the subject of German reparations.⁴⁷ Mussolini’s government therefore inherited a very tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean.

The unpopularity of Britain among the Italian population worried the British Foreign Office and was widely reported by British newspapers. Letters from British citizens to the Foreign Office described an alarming feeling of hostility towards Britain and Britons in Italy. One mentioned ‘the treatment likely to be experienced at the hands of our grateful allies. On the third night there was a considerable disturbance outside my window,

⁴⁵ Micheletta, *Italia e Gran Bretagna nel primo dopoguerra*, pp. 48, 69.

⁴⁶ Micheletta, *Italia e Gran Bretagna nel primo dopoguerra*, pp.110-47, 173.

⁴⁷ Micheletta, *Italia e Gran Bretagna nel primo dopoguerra*, pp. 741-742.

howling and shouting “Morte a L’Anglais” and after this ceased I heard the sound of a distant crowd howling and booing.’⁴⁸ Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador in Rome, commented that this was only one of many cases.⁴⁹

Another example is seen in the letter written by a British citizen with Italian contacts, who maintained that reports of such hostility were not exaggerated and that his Italian friends had told him

there is great resentment against [Britain] and everybody (of course of the lower classes) says: you see, England has induced us to join in the war, and now that she has got all she wanted from us, has given us the “calcio dell’asino” (the dirty kick out). They think that our bad position at present, economically and politically, is due to the unfaithfulness of England. You can argue for hours, but you cannot dissuade them from this stupid idea.⁵⁰

Indeed, anti-British attitude was not limited to the nationalists, though reasons varied. *Avanti*, the socialist newspaper, attacked the League of Nations as the reason the International Labour Conference in Genoa failed, and claimed that the chief problem had been the policy of English supremacy. Perfidious Albion, the newspaper wrote, defended their right to exploit Indian workers and had hence prevented the adoption of the eight-hour working day principle. The *Avanti* article concluded by threatening a boycott of British and pro-British ships, as well as an international marine strike.⁵¹

The Foreign Office also reported that liberal newspaper *Il Giornale d’Italia* had adopted a violent, anti-British attitude, criticising the Vatican for being a ‘prisoner’ of the British government, unable to defend the Irish Catholics. Meanwhile the *Tempo* wrote that

for Poland, re-arisen to liberty and on the point of losing it through her own imperialistic tendencies and other Imperialisms which the Vatican not dare oppose, a crusade of prayer is ordered. For Ireland,

⁴⁸ Letter from C.H. Russell to Lord Curzon, 15 July 1920, FO 371/4893, TNA.

⁴⁹ Letter from Sir. G. Buchanan to Lord Curzon, Treatment received by British travellers while travelling in Italy, 27 July 1920, FO 371/4893, TNA.

⁵⁰ Letter from Miss A. E. Ashley to Lord Curzon, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 9 July 1920, FO 371/4886, TNA.

⁵¹ Labour unrest in Italy during the month of July 1920, FO 371/4886, TNA.

truer and greater martyr, it is thought neither useful nor necessary to intervene.⁵²

The report added that, 'for some time past, any pretence at impartiality has been put aside and the tone of the paper has been as frankly anti-Vatican and anti-English.' *Il Corriere d'Italia*, a Catholic newspaper, joined the anti-British campaign on the topic of Ireland, though in milder tones. One example was an article titled 'The Terror in Ireland', which condemned the 'destruction' and 'murder' the British soldiers carried out in Ireland, adding that the Irish question cast a shadow on the reputation for civilisation and freedom held by the British.⁵³

Fearing Britain from the beginning, D'Annunzio's state in Fiume quickly assumed a decidedly anti-British attitude, acting as a hub of 'anti-Imperialism'. The fact that most of Fiume's 'Legionaries' were also nationalists who felt that Italy had been deprived of its vital space by the peace treaties was an inconsistency which was not yet obvious, for many Italians still perceived themselves as a 'proletarian' nation, as much victims of imperialism as the Egyptians. The British Department for Foreign Affairs received more than one worrisome report from Fiume. Alceste De Ambris, revolutionary syndicalist and fundamental contributor to the new state's constitution who was to become a fervent anti-Fascist, delivered a speech in which he described Fiume as just one of the many countries which suffered the vexations of international bankers who 'would monopolise nations and souls.' The enemy was soon identified in the Anglo-Saxon powers:

Heroic Belgium, after her martyrdom, finds herself at England's mercy. Ireland, Egypt and the Soudan [sic] support with difficulty the hegemony of the enormous empire. The Latin republics of South America undergo with terror the ever stronger grip of the United

⁵² Letter from Count De Salis, Plenipotentiary at the Vatican, to the Foreign Office, Articles in Italian Press showing Anti-British and Anti-Vatican Attitude, 23 August 1920, FO 371/4890, TNA.

⁵³ Unattributed clipping, 'Il Terrore in Irlanda', *Il Corriere d'Italia*, 12 November 1920, FO 371/4890, TNA.

States.⁵⁴

De Ambris concluded that, since the West refused to recognise Fiume's Council, only a cordial rapprochement with the East could assure the prosperity of the new state. The former Austro-Hungarian states, as well as Russia, could alone assure Fiume's economic prosperity.

Another letter reported a declaration by the Department for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Council of Fiume, addressed to Sir Eric Drummond, 'secretary-general of the pseudo-League of Nations', stating that the League was 'nothing other than an instrument which the British Empire and the other capitalistic states are planning to use to assure their hegemony over the world.' Other reports concerned the relationship between Egyptian nationalists and the Council. The latter stated that

the atrocities committed in a few months by the British troops outbid beyond a shadow of a doubt the most serious misdemeanours perpetrated by the German troops in Belgium and France. Peaceful and inoffensive meetings were dispersed by machine guns, by flames and poison-gases, and by the most atrocious and perfect war inventions which have ever fallen into the hands of the most cruel people on earth. Hundreds of villages were systematically burned after the previous execution of the whole male population. The English soldiers knocked down without pity the women and the children who attempted to escape from the flames. In a few months more than 70.000 people were massacred [...] The Command of Fiume hails with joy the young nation which on the banks of the Nile witnesses the first civilization of mankind, arises and proceeds towards a new destiny.⁵⁵

The Council dispatched letters to other rivals of Britain. In one communication to the Turkish nationalists, De Ambris and the Belgian Leo Kochnitzky described Britain as a 'voracious Empire which, after having subjugated twenty Musulman [sic] races, today aspires to seize Constantinople' and boasted how the legionaries of Commandant

⁵⁴ Acts and Communiqués of the Department for Foreign Affairs, November 28th 1919-May 1 1920, FO 371/4891, TNA.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

D'Annunzio had 'put to flight the English police-bullies who were biding their time to snatch the tortured city, already preparing to make a landing.'⁵⁶ Henry Furst, an American journalist who played a key role in D'Annunzio's recognition of the Irish republic, wrote to the president of the Irish parliament stating that 'the heart of Catholic Ireland has always had the love of her sister, which penetrates to her across the interposed barriers of cold materialism and rigid reason, France and England.'⁵⁷ As a group of university students from Bologna proclaimed, Italian Fiume must be defended against 'the coalition of the arrogance of Anglo-Saxon bankers, of French envy, of Yugoslav barbarism.'⁵⁸

This resentful attitude so common in Italy at the time predictably found a champion in Mussolini. If during the war he had been a consistent Anglophile and had received subsidies from the British embassy, now Mussolini was as harsh as anyone in his tirades against Britain.⁵⁹ Already in January 1919 he had reminded his readers that Malta was not yet *redenta* (redeemed), and in June of the same year the Fascist Central Committee approved a declaration of solidarity with the Maltese Italian nationalists.⁶⁰ On 20 April 1919, the future *Duce* claimed that no country had opposed Italian aspirations as much as Britain, treating the peace conference as business and leaving Italy almost nothing. In order to contrast rising Anglo-American hegemony, Mussolini explained that Italy could soon join the anti-British block, clearly implying that it meant to side with a revanchist Germany, threatening, thanks to its geographical position, the British Empire in the Mediterranean. He threateningly predicted that

I tomorrow carry out the task of blowing up the Asiatic-African

⁵⁶ 'Command of Fiume, Acts and communiqués of the Department for Foreign Affairs', November 28th 1919-May 1th 1920, FO 371/4891, TNA.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Similar messages were sent from other universities. See: Regia Prefettura di Bologna, Telegramma n.339 Gab, 24 February 1920 and *Il Comitato Studentesco Aquilano, a nome dell'intera gioventù studiosa di Aquila degli Abruzzi*, Busta 5, Agitazione pro-Fiume e Dalmazia, Serie A-5, Divisione Affari Generali, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Min. Int., ACS.

⁵⁹ Bosworth, Mussolini, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 90.

⁶⁰ Giorgio Rumi, *Alle origini della politica estera Fascista*, (1918-1923), p. 40.

English Empire, even more so since there is no lack of native unrest [...]. This note does not want to anticipate what can happen; it wants to influence, at the last minute, the four wise men who will today decide on our issues.⁶¹

While Ireland was far, Mussolini hinted, Egypt was close. If Britain chose not to recognise Italian rights, ‘our politics for tomorrow’ will be oriented towards ‘establishing a bit of justice between us proletarians and the fattest and [most] bourgeois nation in the world.’

A few days later, he reiterated the same claims, and threatened that

if the Anglo-Americans [were] to strangle us with the blackmail of wheat and coal, we have other cards [to play]. We are in contact with the English colonial Empire. From Egypt to India, all that world is in insurrectional turmoil. If we are betrayed we will immediately prepare our redress!⁶²

British egoism, the contrast between the rich, satisfied and proletarian nations of the world, but also anxiety over the vulnerability of Italy to Allied blockade and the geopolitical prominence of Italy in the Mediterranean, prove that many of the ideas inherent in future Fascist anti-British rhetoric already existed.

Mussolini was convinced that, after having finally got rid of its Habsburgic and Prussian masters, Italy was now under the heel of the Allies:

It is forbidden – *manu militari* – to have a feeling of solidarity for Ireland; it is severely forbidden to sympathise – in the name of law and justice – [with] the Egyptian insurgents. In Rome there is no Italian Government [...] In Italy, the trembling and cowardly Government, is always at the orders of someone, never at the orders of the nation.⁶³

⁶¹ Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, Vol XIII, pp.70-71, from *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 20 April 1919.

⁶² Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, pp.74-75, from *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 23 April 1919. One week later, Mussolini would write that in Britain, the democratic press was universally hostile to Italy. ‘England, the typically ‘bourgeois’ nation, eats here and there, north and south, it gets fatter [...] we answer: long live Ireland! Egypt to the Egyptians!’ In May, he quipped that Britain would someday ‘explode’, after having devoured so much of the world. However, other proletarian forces existed in the world, beyond Italy. ‘It is not certain the plutocracy will manage to crush them’, he noted. See: Ibid, from *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 28 April 1919 and 126, 15 May 1919. On one occasion, he even envisioned a joint Italian-American attack against Canada. See: Rumi, *Alle origini della politica estera Fascista*, p. 40.

⁶³ Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, pp.154-155, from *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 28 May 1919.

Nitti's overtures towards Britain were ridiculed by the Fascists, whose anti-British rhetoric sharpened during 1919 and 1920 to the point that the Central Committee voted on a declaration of sympathy for the anti-British Egyptian revolt, as D'Annunzio's Fiuman state had done.⁶⁴ It was at this time that Mussolini started shaping an idea of Fascist imperialism, which he described as 'an eternal law of life'; already Mussolini defined his own, Roman, imperialism by contrasting it with the 'other.'⁶⁵

Considering all of this, the British government was understandably worried, but soon after coming to power Mussolini assured London that his anti-British rhetoric would not last. After meeting Mussolini, British ambassador to Rome Ronald William Graham found him moderate and reasonable. In any case, Mussolini's first diplomatic experiences showed that he had not forgotten his past words about Britain. After his unsuccessful participation in the Lausanne Conference (1922-23), he threatened to break the post-war alliance with Britain and France if Italy did not receive a mandate in the Middle East. In addition, he eventually sided with the French against London regarding the question of German war debts. Furthermore, Mussolini expressed his hope that the British Empire would break up under the pressure of a pan-European block so that Italy could take its spoils. It was at this point that he instructed the Italian press to assume an anti-British tone; and so they did, even those newspapers which were not in Fascist hands.⁶⁶ *Il Corriere della Sera* (hereafter, *Il Corriere*) started publishing anti-British articles originally published in France, emphasising London's responsibility for the crisis in the

⁶⁴ This feeling was widespread in Italy, for example a newspaper which was far from anti-British like *Il Corriere* celebrated (in a piece that also proposed giving Libyans a great deal of autonomy) the British decision to give up direct control in Egypt, describing London's reluctance to give the Egyptians their deserved independence as the most 'brutal and humiliating contradiction.' The British Foreign Office also reported that Italians living in Egypt shared similar feelings and were hence subject to the hostility of the British soldiers. See: Unattributed, *L'Egitto e la Libia*, *Il Corriere*, 29 August 1920, p.1, 'From The Liwa el Trablusi of 3 June 1920', FO 371/4886, TNA.

⁶⁵ Rumi, *Alle origini della politica estera Fascista*, pp. 84-85.

⁶⁶ Richard Lamb, *Mussolini and the British* (London: John Murray, 1997), pp. 33-37.

Entente. Luigi Luzzatti, former president of the Council of Ministers, criticised Britain's double standard and egoism concerning financial issues.⁶⁷ Disturbed by the British press' reaction against him, Mussolini changed his course, moderating his words and strenuously denying his fantasies of an anti-British block. The Italian press started doing the same, while still mentioning British responsibility for the crisis.⁶⁸ *Il Corriere* had to reassure the British, writing that while Italy was indeed Francophile, it was not Anglophobic, and that Italy was of course not planning a naval war against Britain. The fact that such an article (and it was not the only one) had to be written, however, shows how tense the situation had become.⁶⁹ While Ambassador Graham wrote to London that Britain was 'not just respected, but liked' in Italy, even he felt some distrust for Mussolini, considering him unreliable.⁷⁰ Post-war Anglo-Italian relations had never been idyllic; in April 1923 a Foreign Office report described them as barely changed after the rise of the *Fascisti*. In June, the British royal family visited Italy and were welcomed by 'an outburst of spontaneous enthusiasm.'⁷¹ The Italian press celebrated the visit, but did not forget the strains of the past and warned readers not to delude themselves about the British attitude towards Italy.⁷² The relations between the two countries were hence still uneasy, but the worst was yet to come.

The Corfu incident

Tension between Greece and Britain on one side and Italy on the other peaked with the Corfu crisis of 1923, which exposed the frailty of the Italian people's new appreciation

⁶⁷ See: Unattributed, 'La responsabilità dell'Inghilterra,' *Il Corriere*, 6 January 1923 p. 5; Unattributed, 'l'eclisse dell'Intesa,' *Il Corriere*, 6 January 1923, p.1; and Luigi Luzzatti, 'La crudezza monetaria inglese verso gli alleati,' *Il Corriere* 5 January 1923, p.1.

⁶⁸ See, for example: Unattributed, *Il 'blocco continentale'*, *Il Corriere*, 16 January 1923, p.1.

⁶⁹ Unattributed, *Italia e Inghilterra*, *Il Corriere*, 27 February 1923, p.1.

⁷⁰ Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il Fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), p. 327.

⁷¹ Lamb, *Mussolini and the British*, p. 39.

⁷² Virginio Gayda, 'La politica britannica,' *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 26 June 1923, p. 1.

for Britain. When in August five members of an Italian mission on the Greek-Albanian border (including a general) were murdered, Mussolini sent an ultimatum to Greece. Greece accepted most of its demands. Unsatisfied, the *Duce* proceeded to bombard and occupy the island of Corfu, killing some refugees in the process. While France's response was soft, Britain was harsher and would have preferred the subject to be debated in the League of Nations. A compromise was eventually found, but Mussolini was only dissuaded from keeping the island under Italian control by the threat of action from the Royal Navy. While internally presented as a triumph of Mussolinian diplomacy, with Greece humiliated and Britain forced to accommodate Italian demands, the Corfu episode damaged Mussolini's image abroad.⁷³ The reaction of the Italian press, which was still not completely under Fascist control, was unanimously anti-British, though in different ways.⁷⁴ Even moderate newspapers such as *La Stampa* - which had thus far managed to preserve a certain independence from Fascist control - was disappointed by the British attitude.⁷⁵ Another moderate newspaper, *Il Corriere*, was surprised:

Italy, after having walked with the allies to the end of the harsh Calvary of the war and of the post-war period, after having given every proof of moderation and sacrifice to keep the general peace, had the right to expect from England and France a show of full and complete solidarity. We faced, instead, open English hostility.⁷⁶

The Fascist newspapers were, predictably, even harsher. Mussolini's daily, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, claimed that Britain preferred Greece over Italy and that traditional Anglo-Italian relations were under threat, while *Il Secolo* wrote that traditional Anglo-Italian friendship

⁷³ Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, pp. 23-24; Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny, A History of Italy since 1796*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 439.

⁷⁴ The crisis had sparked a massive nationalist reaction in the country; the press was also unanimous in its support for the government against the Greeks. See: Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 78.

⁷⁵ Unattributed, 'La respipiscenza di Londra,' *La Stampa*, 27 September 1923, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Unattributed, 'Gli alleati e lo sgombero di Corfu,' *Il Corriere della Sera*, 16 September 1923, p.1.

required, in London, a weak and restrained Italy.⁷⁷ *Il Nuovo Paese*, a newspaper under strict Fascist control which had previously adopted an uncommon pro-British attitude - professing admiration for British imperialism, cheering the moral principles which inspired, together with national interests, British politics, and praising British-Italian friendship - suddenly changed its tone. Discussing a British defeat and the 'people of the five suppers,' using bitter irony, *Il Nuovo Paese* used words which closely resembled those which were to become so common during the Ethiopian crisis.⁷⁸ The League of Nations was widely reviled, and its reputation as a tool of Britain was by then so entrenched that attacks on one reflected on the other; for example, the journalist and future infamous war propagandist, Virginio Gayda, described the League as a 'syndicate of interests of the Anglo-Saxon race.'⁷⁹ The most vehemently imperialistic (as well as anti-Semitic) of the Italian newspapers, *Impero*, used the same kind of verbal violence which would later become the norm during the Ethiopian War, and did so for months after the Corfu incident was over. The Anglo-Italian friendship was dead because Britain wanted to prevent Italy's 'coming of age,' that is, becoming a true Great Power. The British Empire was, like that of the Habsburgs, doomed to disintegration. Mussolini's victory was against Britain, not Greece, and since it was now clear that since London and Paris were unable to rebuild the European system, the Mediterranean belonged to the Mediterraneans.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ The positions of the various newspapers were summed up in *Il Corriere*. See: Unattributed, 'Gli alleati e lo sgombero di Corfù,' *Il Corriere*, 16 September 1923, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁸ See, for example: Unattributed, 'Informazioni,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 26 4 1923, p. 6; Unattributed, 'L'amicizia italo-inglese,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 18 5 1923, p.1; Unattributed, 'Imperialismo e crisi sottomarini,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 12 7 1923, p. 2; Unattributed, *Sconfitta inglese*, *Il Nuovo Paese*, 9 9 1923, p. 1; Unattributed, 'Il popolo dei cinque pasti,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 11 9 1923, p.1; Unattributed, 'Un po' di comprensione,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 12 9 1923, p. 1.

⁷⁹ See: Virginio Gayda, 'La prova del fuoco,' *Il Messaggero*, 4 September 1923, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Luigi Magrone, 'La forza dell'abitudine,' *divagazioni Italo-Inglesi*, and Falsari, 'Colpi di punta, Impero,' 14 September 1923, p. 1; Unattributed, 'La nostra vittoria diplomatica, ben più che sulla piccola Grecia, è stata ottenuta sulla grande Inghilterra,' *Impero*, 28 September 1923, p. 1; Mario Carli, 'L'Impero cammuffato,' *Impero*, 5 October 1923, p. 1; 'Francia e Inghilterra si dimostrano

Corfu was a traumatic event for Mussolini: the British reaction, coupled with the strengthening of the British position in Malta, showed that London was ready to resist any Fascist attempt to pursue an aggressive policy in the Mediterranean.⁸¹ On the other hand, historians have claimed that, far from being an aberration, Corfu had shown the real nature of Fascist diplomacy.⁸² More to the point, the crisis proved that anti-British feeling, so common during and after the war, had not disappeared and that this was still prevalent among the Fascists and their nationalist flankers. Following the end of the crisis, the most violent aspects of anti-British feeling receded, but only slowly, while articles attacking Britain lingered for years. For example, as late as September 1925 writer and journalist Alberto Spaini attacked the League, arguing that ‘the British had in the League of Nations the same role the Prussians had in Germany.’⁸³ In the same year Camillo Pellizzi, who had started to become one of the harshest Fascist critics of Britain, felt the need to contest the opinion Italians held of the British Empire, which was that ‘Wicked Albion grabbed, devoured, exploited... The world has to work to fatten the people of the five suppers... A tyrannical, selfish, hypocritical people.’⁸⁴

After Corfu: Cooperation and tensions

Now aware of the limits to how far he could push London - and temporarily paralysed by the Matteotti crisis (1924-25), which jeopardised his international reputation - Mussolini started a long phase of relative cooperation with Britain, at least in Europe.⁸⁵ The necessity of consolidating his regime, tensions with France and Yugoslavia, the

impotenti a ricostruire un equilibrio europeo,’ *Impero*, 24 October 1923, p. 1; Vittorio Rocca, ‘L’Inghilterra nel Mediterraneo,’ *Impero*, 28 October 1923, p. 2.

⁸¹ Fabio De Ninno, *Fascisti sul mare, La Marina e gli ammiragli di Mussolini* (Bari: Laterza, 2017), p. 64.

⁸² See: Alan Cassels, *Mussolini’s Early Diplomacy* (Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 126.

⁸³ Alberto Spaini, *Appunti sugli Stati Uniti d’Europa*, n.17, 1 September 1925, p. 331.

⁸⁴ Cerasi, *A Contested Legacy*, p. 244.

⁸⁵ Cassels, *Mussolini’s Early Diplomacy*, p. IX.

attempt to obtain Anglo-American cooperation to stabilise the Italian economy, as well as Mussolini's friendship with British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, eased the development of a friendly relationship between the two countries.⁸⁶ However, Mussolini never forgot Corfu and the harsh reality of his vulnerable position when confronted by Britain. The claustrophobic feeling of being strangled by what he saw as his Mediterranean prison was to prove the key motive behind his foreign policy, sometimes hidden but always present. In 1925 he told the Italian diplomat Salvatore Contarini that 'Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Cyprus represent a chain that permits England to encircle, to imprison Italy in the Mediterranean. If another link, Albania, were added, we would have to break it with a war.'⁸⁷

In late 1926 or early 1927, Mussolini stressed to his army general staff that Italy needed access to the oceans to become a Great Power and, in 1929, stated that Italy could not remain a prisoner of the Mediterranean.⁸⁸ However, for the moment, Britain was not the target of his aggressive foreign policy, for already in 1926 Mussolini had turned his hostility towards France. Not unlike Hitler in the following decade, when targeting one adversary the *Duce* tended to forget others; there was hence now room for a new kind of representation of Britain by the Italian media.

During the second half of the 1920s, tensions between Britain and the Soviets - and to a far lesser degree with the United States - led some Fascist commentators to associate Britain with the security of the European continent. This corresponded, more or less, with how Fascism was seen as a bulwark against Bolshevism by many British conservatives.

⁸⁶ The limits to the usefulness of this entente have been underlined by Alan Cassels - during this cooperation, Britain gave very little to Mussolini, mostly empty honours which flattered his ego, while the entente itself depended on the personal relationship with Austen Chamberlain. As soon as Mussolini started wanting more, and after Chamberlain left his office, the 'special relationship' ceased. Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, p. 395.

⁸⁷ Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 119.

⁸⁸ Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 120.

At the same time, there were doubts as to how far Britain could protect Europe in her current state, which many Fascists perceived as severely weakened. In 1927, Manfredi Gravina, nationalist and future supporter of an alliance with the National Socialists, described the British Empire as an essential part of European civilisation, necessary to contain the desegregating influence of Bolshevism and the rise of the ‘coloured’ races. The British Empire, in Gravina’s eyes, was a global extension of the European continent; it had to choose whether to abandon itself to decline or to represent Europe in the world.⁸⁹ Gravina’s article depicts, perhaps more than any other, the attitude of the pre-Depression Fascist press. The British Empire, not British metropolitan society, was seen as a force of stability yet, at the same time, as a declining force. Indeed, during the second half of the 1920s, the decline of the British Empire was seen by some Fascists as a threat to European civilisation and the ‘white’ race as a whole. In April 1930, *La Stampa* warned that if India was lost by London the British Empire was doomed, but also that its collapse would be fatal to European supremacy in the world.⁹⁰

Good relations with London meant that a relatively diverse debate on Britain could emerge among Fascist intellectuals, so that other commentators proved more or less optimistic regarding the conditions and eventual fate of the British Empire than Gravina, while sharing his basic premise. Some commentators were optimistic, and admired the organisation and racial hierarchy of the Empire.⁹¹ In July 1928, Nicola Pascazio contested the notion that the British Empire was dying, devoured by the Dominions’ pressure for

⁸⁹ Manfredi Gravina, ‘I tre Imperi’, *Il Corriere*, 10 March 1927, p. 1. See also: Unattributed, ‘L’Inghilterra e i Soviet, *Il Corriere*,’ March 5 1927, p. 1. Another interesting example can be found in Camillo Pellizzi, ‘Albione e il diavolo rosso,’ *Gerarchia*, June 1927, n.6, pp. 435-38. In the same year, Italo Zingarelli, another die-hard Fascist and future supporter of the Saló regime, expressed very similar views in *La Stampa*, claiming that, in its struggle against Bolshevism, the British Empire could still count on ‘unsuspected energies.’ The fact that he deemed the vitality of the British Empire as something most would not suspect is remarkable, especially in a pro-British commentator. See: Italo Zingarelli, ‘La rivincita di Disraeli,’ *La Stampa*, 31 May 1927, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Unattributed, ‘Sulle vie della rivolta incontro a Gandhi,’ *La Stampa*, 2 April 1930, p. 1.

⁹¹ See, for example: Antonio Palumbo, ‘L’impero britannico,’ *La Stampa*, 15 July 1928, p. 2.

independence; the fact that he felt the need to contest it suggests how pervasive the idea of British decline already was, even before the Great Depression. According to Pascazio, there was evidence that the sunset of the British Empire was neither ‘immediate, nor near.’⁹² He denied Soviet claims that the British Empire was already in a ‘revolutionary phase’: ‘Bolshevism and Islamism, poisons that run through its veins, [...]do not disturb the substance [of the Empire].’ Pascazio believed that the new Italian man, forged by Mussolini, could look at British imperialism as an example: ‘if he must look at lifestyle, if he has to devote his attention to a state-system, if he must ask for enlightenment to an imperialism, this must be the English.’⁹³ It was indeed the British cynical calculation of national interest and outspoken declaration of imperialistic goals that Pascazio admired and hoped the Italians would emulate. This relatively Anglophile attitude emerged during a particular moment in the development of the Fascist regime, already consolidated but not yet in its totalitarian phase, a moment in which traditional conservatism could think of the regime as a source of traditional order. On the domestic front, Mussolini had proceeded to restrain the remains of the *squadristo*, empowering the Prefects in an effort to strengthen the State against the Fascist Party.⁹⁴ Abroad, some commentators felt that Italy was finally enjoying the respect of the world and was now considered a true Great Power; siding with Britain against the double menace of the rise of the ‘coloured’ race and of Bolshevism was a projection of this ‘respectable’ and ‘institutional’ attitude, which would not have survived for long.

However, as A. James Burgwyn explains, Mussolini’s envy of the British Empire and his support for revisionist factions in Eastern Europe meant that the *Duce* was still considered

⁹² Nicola Pascazio, ‘Perirà l’Impero Britannico?’ *Gerarchia*, July 1928, n.7, pp. 542-8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell’Italia moderna*, IX, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), pp. 142-3.

an unreliable partner in London.⁹⁵ Furthermore, while stable in Europe, the relationship with Britain was tense in the Red Sea, to the point that the situation has been described as a cold war.⁹⁶ Not yet able to pursue his goals in Europe, the *Duce* pursued a 'policy of Imperial expansion in the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea.'⁹⁷ The establishment of greater Italian influence in Yemen rested on the support of Imam Yahya, who eventually launched raids on British territory in the Arabian Peninsula. When, unavoidably, the British reaction led to aerial bombings of the Yemeni position, Mussolini made his refusal to support the Imam in a war against Britain clear.⁹⁸ The Italian press covered the topic without expressing overtly anti-British tones. *Il Corriere* celebrated growing Italian influence in the country by underlining how, unlike the British, the Italians did not want to reduce it to a protectorate.⁹⁹ When, in summer 1927, the *Daily Telegraph* announced an imminent treaty between Britain and Yemen, *Il Corriere* resolutely denied this had happened.¹⁰⁰ However, when the British started bombing the country, while maintaining an insistent focus on the civilian suffering caused, the press treated the subject as a purely Anglo-Yemenite matter, irrelevant to Italian national interests.¹⁰¹

The severity of the Great Depression was judged by many Fascists as certain to weaken the British Empire. Already in January 1930, Virginio Gayda described 'the awakening of India' caused by insufficient British lucidity, weariness of British colonial bureaucracy and the decline of British prestige.¹⁰² While Gayda temporarily moderated his previously Anglophobic views compared to the early 1920s, he considered Britain an obviously-

⁹⁵ H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, pp. 36-37.

⁹⁶ Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, p. 22.

⁹⁷ Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, p. 26.

⁹⁸ Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Sirio, 'L'Yemen e i suoi Italicci pionieri,' *La Stampa*, 17 January 1927, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Unattributed, 'Trattato anglo-yemenita?' *Il Corriere*, 30 July 1927, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ See Unattributed, 'Guerra tra Inghilterra e Yemen, arrivo di profughi a Massaua,' *Il Corriere*, July 15 1928, p. 1; unattributed, 'Bombardamenti inglesi sullo Yemen,' *La Stampa*, 15 July 1928.

¹⁰² Virginio Gayda, 'Il risveglio dell'India,' *Gerarchia*, January 1930, n.10, pp. 51-56.

decaying power. Less optimistic than Pascazio, he thought, however, that the crisis of the British Empire was ‘vast, but not desperate’, and maintained that British goals and European cooperation were antithetical. While Pascazio had deemed an Anglo-American alliance unlikely given the contrast between the two powers’ interests, Gayda noted that the British Empire was getting closer to the United States, accepting naval parity with the other Anglo-Saxon power.¹⁰³ *Gerarchia*’s contributor Giacomo Redentini was even more pessimistic than Gayda, writing that the Depression was going to push the declining British Empire and its lazy, comfort-loving people into isolationism.¹⁰⁴ Three years later, in an identical tone, *La Stampa* described the ‘weakening of British prestige in the world, paralyzing uncertainty in the fields of international and internal politics.’¹⁰⁵ The British Empire’s perceived state of weakness fuelled predatory appetites among Fascist commentators; articles concerning Italian interests in and influence over British Dominions or colonies such as South Africa, Malta and Canada started to appear in newspapers and magazines, including the important *Gerarchia*.¹⁰⁶ A harsh anti-British, irredentist campaign focusing on Malta appeared in the press in the first years of the new decade. While the Maltese issue was not a new one, Fascism, as Claudia Baldoli explained, brought it to an extreme point, considering Malta an *Irredenta* land and building an anti-British, anti-Protestant campaign starting from 1928.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Virginio Gayda, ‘Evoluzione dell’idea paneuropea,’ *Gerarchia*, February 1931, n.2, pp. 118-124.

¹⁰⁴ Giacomo Redentini, ‘La crisi inglese,’ *Gerarchia*, September 1931, pp. 715-20.

¹⁰⁵ R.P., ‘La nuova tribuna di Mosley,’ *La Stampa*, 23 January 1934, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example: ‘L’Italia e il Sud Africa,’ *Gerarchia*, September 1930, n.10; Ettore Rossi, ‘Il dialetto Maltese,’ *Gerarchia*, April 1932, pp. 396-404; ‘Sud Africa, importante per l’Italia,’ *Gerarchia*, August 1932, n.8; *Canadiensis*, ‘La conferenza di Ottawa,’ *Gerarchia*, 1932, n.9, pp. 713-721.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example: Unattributed, ‘La civiltà italiana di Malta ed un appello del partito nazionale,’ *Il Corriere*, 9 May 1931, p. 5; ‘Nuove disposizioni vessatorie contro la lingua italiana a Malta,’ *La Stampa*, 4 May 1932, p. 1; Unattributed, ‘Malta fiore di civiltà italiana nel raduno di stirpi dell’impero inglese,’ *Il Corriere*, 4 August 1932, p. 3; Unattributed, ‘La solidarietà del popolo dell’isola col Ministero dimesso,’ *La Stampa*, 22 November 1933, p. 5; Unattributed, ‘Cento anni di lotta a Malta contro la cultura e la lingua italiana,’ *La Stampa*, 30 November 1933, p. 5;

Interestingly, general criticism of British imperialism, and of its hypocrisy in particular, resurfaced - though in a very mild form when compared with what was to come - in these years. In late July 1932 Mussolini dismissed Foreign Minister Dino Grandi because he was considered too Anglophile, 'exiling' him to the embassy in London. In October 1932, *La Stampa* commented that the British had managed to convince the world that their imperialism saved and helped the peoples it conquered, and in March 1933, *Il Regime Fascista* bitterly observed that the Anglo-Saxons could afford to deem war as a crime because they were 'oversated with plundered land.'¹⁰⁸ The perception of British weakness was the cause of this change in attitude. After all, this was the time when Mussolini felt that, as Robert Mallet put it, a bubble reputation - that is, foreign policy oriented towards merely seeking prestige - was no longer enough.¹⁰⁹

The Ethiopian War

With the onset of the Ethiopian crisis, things changed radically and the regime instructed the press much more thoroughly, trying to adapt the tone of newspaper articles to the necessity of changing diplomatic circumstances. In May 1935, the press was ordered to adopt a tone of 'cold hostility' towards Britain.¹¹⁰ The major newspapers had to answer any attack by the British and it was noted that 'very soon it will be up to the whole Italian press to do so.' The Italian press indeed went ahead and hammered the British. Given the opinion that Manlio Morgagni, the head of the Fascist press agency *Stefani*, had of Britain

Unattributed, 'Il popolo maltese e i suoi traditori,' *La Stampa*, 3 December 1933, p. 3. For a thorough essay on the Maltese issue, see Claudia Baldoli, 'The Northern Dominator and the Mare Nostrum, Fascist 'cultural war' in Malta', *Modern Italy*, 13 (2008), pp. 5-20.

¹⁰⁸ Unattributed, 'Occhi aperti e bocca chiusa,' *La Stampa*, 25 October 1932, p. 5; Unattributed, *Il Regime Fascista*, 9 March 1933, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Cassels, *Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty*, *The International History Review*, 5, 2, (May 1983), pp. 255-268.

¹¹⁰ Rapporto del 31 Maggio XIII, Rapporti quotidiani del Capo dell'Ufficio Stampa di S.E. Il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

was that of ‘the great murderer of ideals, ignoble and egoistic and repugnant at every hour and at all times, the great criminal of history’, the basis for the campaign was set.¹¹¹ When Anthony Eden replaced Samuel Hoare as British Foreign Secretary, he was targeted in particular as the embodiment of British ‘perfidy.’¹¹²

At the end of July, after the British had removed the embargo on gun sales to Ethiopia and affirmed its commitment to the ideals of the League of Nations, the press was ordered to start ‘polemics against the British press without attacking the government.’¹¹³ A few days later, the order was to refrain from attacking Britain at all.¹¹⁴ Between 15-18 August, a mediation attempt by Eden and French President of the Council of Ministers Pierre Laval was rejected by Mussolini, but on 19 August the press was instructed to stop attacking Britain and to answer any attacks by the British press, while on 21 August the order was to stop polemicising completely.¹¹⁵ One interesting example of the Fascist understanding of the situation is the report, read by Count Galeazzo Ciano – who was at the time minister for press and propaganda – and Mussolini, which was written by Pier Filippo Gomez Homen, a journalist and Fascist intellectual recently back from a trip to Britain. The report was full of contempt for the British and presented its own explanation of the Anglo-Italian crisis. According to Gomez Homen’s analysis, the reasons for British hostility towards Italian action in East Africa could be traced to the fact that, being an election period, the government needed to gain the support of a pacifist and internationalist public opinion. British public opinion, according to Gomez Homen, was

¹¹¹ Romano Canosa, *La voce del Duce* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002), p. 85.

¹¹² Robert Mallett, ‘Fascist Foreign Policy and Official Italian Views of Anthony Eden in the 1930s’, *The Historical Journal*, 43, 1 (2000), pp. 157-187.

¹¹³ No title, 23 July 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹¹⁴ Comunicazioni del Ministero Stampa e Propaganda, 30 July 1935, year XIII, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹¹⁵ See: Comunicato Del Ministero Stampa e Propaganda, Trasmesso da De Biase – Ricevuto da Boutet, 19 August year XIII, and Comunicato del Ministero Stampa e Propaganda, Dal Dottor Fortunati, 21 August 1935, year XIII, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

inclined to indifference, laziness and provincialism, so very few knew anything about the crisis; they knew only that the Italian press had attacked Britain and that Italy wanted war, while the British only wanted ‘peace, peace, peace.’ It was perfectly possible, Gomez Homen wrote, that if elections had not been close, the Abyssinian question would have remained limited to the Foreign Office and the Parliament. However, some conservatives like Eden had decided to capitalise on the people’s thirst for peace in order to gain votes. ‘The anti-Italian campaign has been orchestrated for electoral means,’ the journalist wrote, adding ‘it is aimed at gaining the votes of:

- a) The anti-Fascists, Labourists or otherwise, that still have not forgiven the fact that Fascist Italy exists.
- b) The Geneva pacifists which are the bulk of the voting mass, and that can be identified with the average Englishman, who is a lazy, egoistic upstart.
- c) The colonialists, [...] who traditionally feel nothing but a haughty contempt for any colonisation methods which are not English.’

Gomez Homen’s advice to the regime was to ignore the British’ anti-Italian press, not to answer it and to work through official channels: ‘We have woken the big electoral bulldog. Let’s see if we can put it back to sleep.’¹¹⁶ On 23 August, Ciano ordered the press to ‘absolutely forget England. English news and newspaper comments can be published; but do not absolutely polemicize. Show cold contempt.’¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Pier Filippo Gomez Homen to Dott. Guido Baroni, 19 June 1935, *Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, 1926-35, busta 119, ACS.

¹¹⁷ Rapporto del 31 maggio XIII, Comunicato dal ministero stampa e propaganda, (dott. Spinetti ore 10 del 23/7/35), Today 23/7/35 there was no report, Comunicazioni del Ministero Stampa e Propaganda, 30 Luglio 1935, anno XIII, ore 18,30, Comunicato del Ministero Stampa e Propaganda, dal dottor Fortunati, 21 Agosto 1935-XIII and Comunicato dal Ministero della Stampa e Propaganda trasmesso da de Biase ì ricevuto da Boutet – ore 19 del 19/8/XIII, Rapporto del 25 agosto 1935, XIII, tenuto da S.E. Ciano, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell’ufficio stampa di

The attacks never really ceased, however, and by September they were as strong as before, so the press was once again ordered to suspend its attacks against British newspapers on 1 October, when a temporary relaxation of the tensions between the two countries took place (for Mussolini was now reassured that Britain would not have chosen war).¹¹⁸ On 3 October 1935, Italy started military operations against Ethiopia and the Italian people had to be kept ignorant of British military measures in the Mediterranean.¹¹⁹

A few days later, the orders to the press were the following:

With regard to Britain, reasons of caution force us not to polemise excessively, after all, next week will definitely make the situation clear, news coming from England can be published but without overrating anything, and without uncovering our game.¹²⁰

On 15 November, a 'reserved' attitude had to be adopted regarding France and Britain, and Vittorio Alfieri - now under-secretary of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda - repeated the message on 18 November, the reason possibly being the prolonged military stasis on the Ethiopian front and uncertain developments in the crisis.¹²¹

British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare's speeches were to be ignored, his replacement to be commented on with only a few words, and when Eden - who was notoriously

S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹¹⁸ G.W. Baer, *La guerra italo-etioptica e la crisi dell'equilibrio europeo*, Laterza, Bari, 1970, pp. 473-76; Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale, La conquista dell'Impero*, pp. 325-328.

¹¹⁹ See: Unattributed, *Come Londra cerca di sfuggire a rischi e responsabilità*, *Il Corriere*, 26 August 1935, p.7; Unattributed, *L'Italia in armi é custode della pace europea*; *Il Corriere*, 3 September 1935, p. 7; Unattributed, *Le gravi responsabilità dell'Inghilterra*, *Il Corriere*, 18 September 1935, p. 2; Comunicazioni del Ministero per la stampa e propaganda del 14 ottobre 1935 - XIII, ore 16, trasmette Ubaldi, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell'ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

¹²⁰ Rapporto, 18 October year XIII, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹²¹ Rapporto alla stampa tenuto da S.E. Alfieri il primo Ottobre XIII, Rapporto del 18 ottobre XIII, Dal ministero stampa e propaganda, ore 23,10, del 15 novembre 1935, XIV, (trasmette de Vlasi, riceve Gallimberti) and Rapporto dell'8 novembre XIV, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell'ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

reluctant to appease Mussolini - replaced him, this was not to be mentioned.¹²² Once revealed, the Hoare-Laval proposal to negotiate an end to the war by forcing the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, to make substantial concessions was to be criticised as ‘a disappointment for public opinion,’ but the press had to restrain from attacking France and Britain.¹²³ During the final months of the war, the orders to the press stopped trying to moderate the attacks, instead encouraging them. The cracks and the harmful effects of the sanctionist front were to be emphasised. For example, the press had to underline how Britain refused to refund the losses other countries had suffered because of the sanctions.¹²⁴ However, the orders to the press did not bother with details of the polemics; the themes were roughly the same as we have already seen in times of past crises with Britain. The most common feeling at the beginning was resentment: why did Britain make common cause with slavers and Africans against its ally of the Stresa front? The answer was found in British egoism, as well as a sense of superiority. Other old themes were the claim that the League of Nations was a scam and a tool of London’s or that, since British ruthlessness was at the base of its empire, it was a great hypocrisy not to accept that Italy had the right to do the same.¹²⁵ Others, however, were new: the British Empire was no more the declining bastion of the ‘white’ race in the world; instead, Britain was betraying

¹²² Comunicazioni del Ministero per la stampa e propaganda del 3 agosto 1935, ore 13, Rapporto del giorno 13 settembre XIII, Comunicazioni del Ministero per la stampa e propaganda del 19 dicembre 1935, anno XIV, ore 10,15, and Comunicazioni del Ministero per la stampa e propaganda del 23 dicembre 1935 – XIV, ore 14,30, trasmette Ubaldi, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell’ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

¹²³ Dal Ministero stampa e propaganda, trasmette De Biase, riceve Galimberti, ore 21.10 del giorno 14/12/XIV, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell’ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

¹²⁴ Rapporto del 5 novembre XIV, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell’ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1934 al dicembre 1935, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

¹²⁵ See, for example: Carlo Antonio Vianello, ‘L’Inghilterra, l’Egitto e Suez (storia del 1882 per gli inglesi del 1935),’ *Gerarchia*, September 1935, pp. 746-751; Leo Pollini, ‘Gli inglesi ed il Mediterraneo,’ *Gerarchia*, November 1935, pp. 920-923.

the 'white' race by siding with 'non-whites' against Italy.¹²⁶ Ironically, it was the Fascists who subverted the other 'pillar' of the united western camp appreciated by people like Gravina, the common hostility against Bolshevism. In December 1936, *Gerarchia* published an article which encouraged the Soviet Union not to repeat the errors of the Tsars, who had refused to follow Napoleon's advice to invade India.¹²⁷

After Ethiopia

The end of the Ethiopian War in May 1936 put Italy in a delicate situation. Mussolini soon involved himself in the Spanish Civil War, leading to further tensions with Britain. Already in May, by virtue of the attempts to normalise relations with Britain, Ciano ordered the press to 'omit any polemic attitude regarding Britain' and in June the press was repeatedly ordered not to talk about Britain at all.¹²⁸ Anti-British hostility resurfaced in the press in the following months and in May 1937, a few days after *Il Corriere* had run columns saying that Britain was 'against European peace,' the press was ordered to avoid any attack and not to refer to attacks coming from other countries.¹²⁹ Two months later, the disorders in Ulster (where the IRA attempted to assassinate King George VI)

¹²⁶ Beniamino de Ritis, 'La Lega corpo astrale dell'Impero britannico,' *Il Corriere*, 12 August 1935, p.2; Unattributed, 'Giallo e nero contro la civiltà bianca,' *Il Corriere*, 22 July 1935, p. 1.

¹²⁷ Arnaldo Cervesato, 'La marcia sull'India da Napoleone ad oggi,' *Gerarchia*, December 1935, pp. 992-1000.

¹²⁸ See: Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, p.7; Rapporto del 26 maggio 1936-XIV, Comunicazioni del Ministro per la stampa e la propaganda del giorno 2 giugno 1936 anno XIV, trasmette Ubaldi riceve Casetti, and Comunicazioni del ministero stampa e propaganda, Rome 9 giugno 1936, trasmette Ubaldi, riceve Montagni, rapporti quotidiani del capo dell'ufficio stampa di S.E. il Capo del Governo, dal gennaio 1936 al dicembre 1936, busta 69, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani. The press, however, did sometimes continue to talk about Britain, and not in friendly tones. See for example: Unattributed, 'Il fallimento definitivo dei calcoli ginevrini,' *Il Corriere*, 7 May 1936, p.2; G.C., 'La risoluta azione diplomatica dell'Italia costringe Francia e Inghilterra ad una revisione della loro politica,' *Il Corriere*, 15 July 1936, p.1. *Gerarchia*, as usual less reliant on the orders to the press, wrote that Britain kept rejecting generous Italian appeasement attempts because it was paralysed by the conflict between its national interest and masonry. See: Leopoldo Eugenio Checchi, *La politica navale*, *Gerarchia*, July 1936, pp. 508-512.

¹²⁹ G.C., 'L'Inghilterra contro la pace europea,' *Il Corriere*, 11 May 1937, p. 7.

were to be ignored and the press had to underline, without any further comment, the moderate attitude of the British press. In August, comments on the Italian-British détente had to be softer on France as well.¹³⁰ When in September the Conference of Nyon excluded Italy, the press was ordered to keep a reserved and cold tone.¹³¹ Such a moderate attitude was confirmed in winter, but only concerning the Spanish issue, while anti-British propaganda was acceptable around Palestine.¹³² This line wavered in November. On the first of that month, Alfieri stated that ‘the moderate attitude of the Italian newspapers regarding [Britain] can be toned down, and in the case of attacks by English newspapers the press can answer and attack’. On 17 November, while not changing these dispositions, the relationship with Britain and France was described by Alfieri as in ‘waiting.’ President of the Council and Leader of the House of Lords Edward Wood of Halifax’ meeting with the Germans was to be reported without jealousy, trusting the good faith of the Germans.¹³³

Now, alongside the traditional anti-League rhetoric, the claim that Britain was supporting Bolshevism appeared.¹³⁴ On 26 January 1938, the order was to reduce the news coming

¹³⁰ Trasmesso dal ministero Stampa e Propaganda, Rome, 16-5-1937, Trasmette Fusca, riceve Montagni, ore 19,20, Dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, (trasmette Bertoni, riceve Piermani), ore 22 del 28/VII/XV), Dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, (trasmette Fortunati, riceve Boutet), ore 11.50, del 4/8/1937, XV), Rapporti quotidiani del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda, dal gennaio 1937 al dicembre 1937, busta 70, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹³¹ Dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, (trasmette Ubaldi, riceve Polverelli), ore 20.10, del 12/9/1937, XV), Rapporti quotidiani del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda, dal gennaio 1937 al dicembre 1937, busta 70, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.

¹³² Rapporto tenuto da S.E. il Ministro della Cultura Popolare ai giornalisti, 23, 10, 1937, Rapporti quotidiani del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda, dal gennaio 1937 al dicembre 1937, busta 70, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹³³ Rapporto ai giornalisti tenuto dal Ministro Alfieri, Rome, 1 Novembre 1937, XVI, and Rapporto tenuto dal Ministro della Cultura Popolare, S.E. Alfieri con lo intervento del Ministro delle Corporazioni S.E. Santini, Rapporti quotidiani del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda, dal gennaio 1937 al dicembre 1937, busta 70, corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

¹³⁴ See: Unattributed, ‘Responsabilità inglesi nell’appoggiare il bolscevismo, 9 October 1937, p.5; Unattributed, Contro i sabotaggi bolscevichi e le indulgenze franco-inglesi, 24 October 1937, p. 1, both in ‘*Il Corriere*,

from France and Britain and to stop publishing comments from foreign newspapers about the opportunity to recognise the Italian empire. In general, little relevance was to be given to the Anglo-Italian talks of February 1938 and the ‘semblance of relaxation of Italian-English relations’ was not to be commented upon.¹³⁵ In June, the newspapers were ordered to stop debating with their British counterparts regarding the bombings in Spain.¹³⁶ When the Anglo-Italian agreement was finally ratified, the newspapers had to refrain from talking about its application.¹³⁷ According to a report written by Alfieri in August 1938, there was ‘no sign of improvement concerning relations with Britain, also because of the effect of the Spanish issues.’¹³⁸ During the Munich crisis of September 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s mediation request to the *Duce* had to be emphasised.¹³⁹

What do these orders tell us? First of all, as we have seen, they did not usually try to explain the details of what the press had to say, often seeming content with hinting the general direction. The remarkable fickleness of the orders might reflect the uncertainty of those who wrote them; the complex relations with London in the second half of the 1930s partially explain this. As Alfieri noticed in winter 1937, relations with Britain were so volatile that the press must not exaggerate in any direction.¹⁴⁰ Another reason might be

¹³⁵ Dal Ministero della cultura popolare, trasmette Fortunati, riceve Piermani ore 20.30 dl 26/1/1938, XVI, trasmette Fuscà, riceve Piermani, 7 febbraio 1938, XVI, ore 21.45 and trasmette Ubaldi, riceve Montagni, ore 15, 9/2/1938, XVI, trasmette Fuscà, riceve Piermani ore 19,30 del 19/2/1938, trasmette Filippini, riceve Piermani, 18 marzo 1938=XVI, ore 21.40, busta 70, *corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.*

¹³⁶ Dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Trasmette de Blasi, riceve Polverelli (ore 12,30, 10/6/1938 XVI), *corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.*

¹³⁷ Dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Trasmette Fuscà, riceve Landini, ore 20.45 del 13 giugno 1938/XVI.

¹³⁸ Rapporto tenuto il 17 agosto XVI alle ore 18 da S.E. il Ministro Alfieri, busta 70, *corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.*

¹³⁹ Dal Ministero della Cul tura Popolare, trasmette Bruno, riceve Polverelli, ore 13,50 del 29/9/1938 – XVI *corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.*

¹⁴⁰ Rapporto del Ministro della cultura popolare S.E. Alfieri ai giornalisti, with no date, Rapporti quotidiani del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda, dal gennaio 1937 al dicembre 1937, busta 70, *corrispondenza rivista, Carte Morgagni, Agenzia Stefani.*

that Ciano, and later Alfieri, were not sure what Mussolini actually wanted. Another point of interest is that the regime's attempts to moderate the violent attacks of the press against Britain, which risked hampering Mussolini's diplomacy, suggests that Anglophobia was not simply the product of a hysterically nationalist regime, but rather a current of Italian Fascist culture, which would again and again re-emerge in times of crisis. Its tropes show a clear consistency from the beginning to the end of the Fascist era.¹⁴¹

Two imperialisms: Rome and Carthage

The Ethiopian War and the sanctions brought Fascist Italy's nationalistic exaltation to its peak. If the perception of Britain as a nation and a European force was changed by this development, so was the perception of the British Empire. The notion that the British Empire was founded on a different ideological and philosophical base than that of Italy was not unheard of. One pioneer of this and other kinds of anti-British discourse was Camillo Pellizzi. Already in 1925, he had published his essay 'Cose d'Inghilterra', in which he stated that:

Naturally, the British Empire is engraved with the seal of the difficulties from which it arose. It bears a somehow commercial and bourgeois character. It doesn't possess a profound spiritual unity. It doesn't carry any substantial mystical and esthetical imprint. Its meaning and ethical value are very vague, and not exceedingly profound. The comparisons with the Roman Empire, so often made by British authors, should show the latter in advantage. The only ethical purpose of the British Empire is to allow freedom of trade and industry of the European kind in almost the entire world. It's a commercial Empire, granting freedom over the seas for all trades, and the opportunity of exploitation of entire continents for the Europeans, better still if Anglo-Saxons.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ The choice of using the word 'dormant' to describe Fascist anglo-phobic sentiment during the periods of 'friendly' relations with Britain is based on this consistency. The fact that the anti-British tropes were coherent, with the minor differences we will analyse now, from the peace treaties to the Second World War, suggests a continuity in both imagery and goals.

¹⁴² Cerasi, *A Contested Legacy*, p. 245.

Two years later, Ettore Pais, an important historian of antiquity who was very close to Mussolini, had already compared Britain to Carthage, describing in his ‘History of Rome during the Punic Wars’ Rome’s African rival as an empire with no martial vigour, whose successes depended on its ability to use diplomacy and wealth. Pais’ reference to Britain was neither hidden nor subtle, for he drew comparison between the Carthaginian and the ‘Modern Briton (*Britanno*)’ and wrote of how Carthaginian methods were reminiscent of the ones of ‘maritime nations of the modern times.’¹⁴³ It was not yet a substantial ideological criticism, but the comparison’s implications were obvious and heavy, especially since Pais’ work was clearly aimed at glorifying Fascism by describing the glories of Rome. A more ideological criticism was formulated one year later by Nicola Pascazio, who in an otherwise pro-British article wrote that, while for the Italians empire was an idea, for the British it was a fact, the implication being that whereas Fascism had inherited Rome’s spiritual empire-building, London’s empire was but a product of materialism.¹⁴⁴ The Ethiopian War brought these themes to maturation. In December 1935, Pais wrote an article titled ‘Roman Imperialism and British Imperialism.’ Pais claimed that whereas Rome integrated and absorbed the most diverse conquered peoples, to the point of being eventually ruled by Emperors descended from these communities, the British always considered themselves superior and above their subjects. Unlike Rome and just like Carthage, Britain focused on exploiting its conquests for the benefit of its aristocratic classes. Again unlike Rome, the historic Punic power and Britain did not extend all the advantages of their empires to their colonies and subjects. A more obvious analogy was the maritime strategy that informed Carthage’s foreign policy:

¹⁴³ Pietro Giammellaro, ‘Times-Semit, Inglesi e Fenici nella storiografia e nella propaganda Fascista’, in *Il Palindromo, Storie al rovescio e di frontiera*, anno 1, n.1, March 2011, pp. 49-51. Giammellaro’s work is a useful analysis of the recurring comparison between Britain and the Phoenicians – Carthage in particular- during the Fascist era, mostly focusing on two articles by Pais and some pieces which appeared in *La Difesa della Razza* (see Chapter 4).

¹⁴⁴ Nicola Pascazio, ‘Periràl’Impero Britannico?’ *Gerarchia*, July 1928, n.7, pp. 542-8.

The diffidence and cleverness with which the Punic metropolis used to forbid other states the chance to navigate towards its ports and colonies is reminiscent of how the British people acquired strategic points, for example Gibraltar, became de facto master of the Suez Canal, and aspires today to rule the whole African continent.¹⁴⁵

Pais would return to this theme in 1938 in the racist magazine *La Difesa della Razza*, more or less repeating the same themes of his past essays, even if by browsing the text the reader has the feeling that Pais had warmly accepted the notion that the differences between Rome and Carthage had racial rather than cultural explanations.¹⁴⁶ The scholar of antiquity was not alone. In 1937, the difference between Roman and British imperialisms was ascribed by Camillo Pellizzi to the rejection of the 'Caesarean' principle by the latter. This rejection had an ancient origin: starting with an analysis of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Pellizzi concluded that British culture was deeply conformist and considered faithfulness to one's caste and monarchy the foundation of their national life; it therefore could not forgive Caesar's rebellion against the Republic and his restructuring of the Roman social order. This rejection meant that 'the same British Empire, even if founded on a Caesarean premise, denies it in its political mythology and hides it with its propaganda.'¹⁴⁷

Still in 1937 Riccardo Astuto, a former governor of Eritrea, wrote an article for *Gerarchia* in which he analysed a pamphlet by the British Fascist James Strackey Barnes, entitled *Roma o Cartagine?* Barnes compared Fascist imperialism, which he described as 'architectural', that is, devoted to building 'something that is beautiful and permanent', with the British one, 'animated by Carthaginian spirit.' Astuto agreed and explained the difference between the two: whereas the British introduced laws and good rule in the colonies, the Roman, or Fascist, imperialism aimed at integrating, with constructive spirit,

¹⁴⁵ Ettore Pais, 'Imperialismo Romano e imperialismo britannico,' *Il Corriere*, 2 December 1935.

¹⁴⁶ Giammellaro, 'Times-Semit', pp. 51-54.

¹⁴⁷ Camillo Pellizzi, 'Il cesarismo e gli inglesi,' *Il Corriere*, 20 April 1937, p. 3.

the colonies in imperial unity with the metropolis. Economically, the British only plundered their colonies, using them as a market for British goods, while Fascism valorised them. British imperialism, concluded Astuto, 'is not constructive. It lacks social and economic building.' Astuto's conclusion was clear: Africa was a land still open to colonisation and valorisation and Britain was not up to the job. It was Italy's turn, for it 'did not want to limit itself to rule the land, but it wants to build an Empire on it.' A key element was Fascism itself; liberalism fuelled resentment and rebellion, while Fascist rule in Eritrea and Somalia had already managed to create imperial patriotism.¹⁴⁸ Another article in *Gerarchia* tried to find a philosophical explanation for the faults of British imperialism. According to Elio Vocca, the strength of Britain rested, like that of Rome (and Fascism), on an era of great dynamism. However, whereas Rome's empire was based on 'a breath of eternity' and on universality, the British had no notion of the 'why' and 'where' of their civilisation. Vocca ascribed this trait to Hobbesian philosophy based on fear and materialism. Losing one's wealth was Hobbes' greatest fear and that justified the 'people of five suppers' assumption that the only goal of life was pleasure – an 'unbearable idea for us Latins.' Such a 'purely egoistic and materialistic' worldview justified an imperialism that was but exploitation and destruction. Without great principles to sustain it, all conquests of British imperialism were sterile and evanescent.¹⁴⁹ In 1938, articles continued to appear in *Gerarchia* which attacked the British Empire's very nature. Curzio Villa flatly denied any similarity between Roman and British imperialism, a comparison that had often been made even by Fascist authors. The Roman citizen was completely different from the Victorian businessman, while British

¹⁴⁸ Riccardo Astuto, *L'Impero Fascista*, *Gerarchia*, 1938, pp.163-69. For another Astuto's article on the same theme, see *L'originalità dell'impero coloniale italiano*, *Civiltà Fascista*, August-September 1937, XV.

¹⁴⁹ Elio Vocca, 'Da Hobbes a Mussolini,' *Gerarchia*, March 1938, pp. 201-203.

imperialism was based on the particular treatment reserved for different subject peoples, hence lacking the great Roman concept of universal justice. Such a claim shows how Villa clearly had no notion of how the Romans administered the conquered peoples.¹⁵⁰ It is interesting to note how Villa's criticism was completely reversed by the racist Lidio Cipriani in 1942, who claimed that the problem with British imperialism was that the British forced their laws upon the whole world without caring for the differences between their subjects, unable as they were to distinguish between peoples and situations.¹⁵¹

This wave of articles appearing in 1935-8 was something new; it was not just the ritual criticism of British greediness which had been the norm in periods of crisis with London. It was instead the first time that systemic criticism of British imperialism, described as something inherently different and *inferior* to its Fascist counterpart, appeared in Fascist publications.

What caused such a development? Laura Cerasi wrote that 'as Grandi observed in his diary in January 1929, the British as a whole were "cold, uncultured and very great, like the Romans"', arguing that such a statement underlines how the Fascist regime perceived Britain with a mixture of envy and admiration.¹⁵² Such admiration was mixed with the hope that, as British power had peaked, it would eventually decline and Fascist Italy could take its place.¹⁵³

As the Great Depression hit Britain hard, and the weight of both the Dominions and colonial empire grew, many Fascists thought that their chance might be coming soon. Cerasi concluded that, 'by claiming the legacy of "*Romanità*" in the Mediterranean, Fascism revealed its intention to compete with the British Empire.'¹⁵⁴ This re-

¹⁵⁰ Curzio Villa, 'Scoperta degli inglesi,' *Gerarchia*, January 1938, pp. 66-70.

¹⁵¹ Lidio Cipriani, 'Irlanda e Inghilterra,' *Gerarchia*, February 1942, pp. 65-67.

¹⁵² Cerasi, *Empires Ancient and Modern*, p. 421.

¹⁵³ Cerasi, *A Contested Legacy*, p. 239.

¹⁵⁴ Cerasi, *Empires Ancient and Modern*, p. 433.

appropriation of Roman heritage, Cerasi wrote, was particularly important both because the British had ascribed it to themselves for a long time and because the imperial dimension was fundamental to the Fascist conception of the State. Analysing Virginio Gayda's 1941 article, in which the journalist compared Britain with Carthage, Cerasi wrote that while many Fascists during the 1930s had begrudgingly recognised the 'unparalleled virtues' of the British people and their empire, by the Second World War the enmity between the two peoples had brought about a decisive turn in Fascist discourse against these values, so that 'industrial and commercial modernity' were now a negative feature.¹⁵⁵

However, as we have seen, the British Empire was not described, neither during the early phase of Fascism nor during the 1930s, univocally in such rosey terms. In this sense, a systemic criticism of the British Empire was necessary for the reappropriation of Roman heritage and Carthage served as the perfect *other*, the *Anti-Rome* with which to link Britain. Nor was this process a cold blooded attempt by the regime to justify its imperialism, being rather the product of the intellectual discourse analysed in this chapter. The fact that such a development emerged during a period where the *veline* still asked the press to be cautious shows the complexity of the relationship between the orders to the press and the actual evolution of the discourse in the worlds of politics and culture. The regime's appeals for restraint were mere attempts to moderate the exaggerated peaks of hostility by the everyday press, but they did not change the transformation of public discourse, which was becoming decidedly anti-British. The theme of the inferiority, or immorality, of British imperialism was of course to be continuously used during the Second World War in order to play down the idea that the conflict was a mere struggle between two different imperialisms. Pietro Cavallo described how books, pamphlets and

¹⁵⁵ Cerasi, *Contested Legacy*, pp. 251-4.

even theatre performances emphasised this alleged fundamental difference.¹⁵⁶ It would be beyond the scope of this work to enumerate all of these examples. What is interesting to underline is how, once again, the themes of war propaganda were not merely an expression of the need to slander the enemy; they were, instead, the logical evolution of a well-established, pre-existing discourse which dated back many years before the war.

The traditional friendship

Another new, important theme which provides an example of the depth of hostility mounting in Italy against Britain was the systematic attack on the old notion of a ‘traditional friendship’ between the English and Italian peoples. During the 1920s, the Fascist press had not attempted to undermine the idea that Britain had been a faithful friend of Italy since the *Risorgimento*, but had not done much to celebrate it either, with articles appearing in *Gerarchia* describing in a quite neutral and pragmatic tone the conflict between the pro and anti-Italian stances in Britain during the Italian unification.¹⁵⁷ This changed during the second half of the 1930s. In 1936, the historian Carlo Morandi wrote that Britain had only pretended to be friendly in order to keep Italy a second rate power.¹⁵⁸ In November 1937, the ardently Fascist journalist Arnaldo Cervesato analysed in *Gerarchia* the history of Anglo-Italian relations during the *Risorgimento*, concluding that

English politics [...] in the regards of Italy, has been characterized by a typical intransigence, to which the description of ‘traditional’ belongs much more than to a supposed ‘friendship’, which existed, until today, only in the fantasy and the feelings of certain noble idealists and poets of the two countries.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra*, pp. 154-5.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example: Francesco Geraci, ‘La politica inglese e l’unitaitaliana,’ *Gerarchia*, April 1924, pp. 238-42.

¹⁵⁸ Margherita Angelini, ‘Clio among the Camicie Nere: Italian Historians and Their Allegiances to Fascism (1930s– 1940s),’ in *The Society of Fascists, Acclamation, Acquiescence and Agency in Mussolini’s Italy*, ed. by Giulia Albanese and Roberta Perghier, p. 218.

¹⁵⁹ Arnaldo Cervesato, ‘Italia e Inghilterra nel Risorgimento,’ *Gerarchia*, 11 November 1937, pp.

The Fascist press emphasised the cold, implacable egoism of London. Conspiracy theories about Britain being the cause of the world's woes started to flourish at this time. The important Fascist journalist Alfredo Signoretti wrote that 'Albion's' attitude throughout the Ethiopian crisis had been a ploy to destroy the friendship between France and Italy. Had not *divide at impera* always been London's rule when it came to Europe?¹⁶⁰ However, optimism was common, for Britain had been defeated. Ugo D'Andrea, a Fascist intellectual close to Bottai, wrote that the defeat of Britain - whose Empire was in crisis and whose fleet no longer ruled the seas - was an example of the more general agony of democracy.¹⁶¹ A few months later Curzio Villa in his analysis of the British national character wrote that the traditional friendship with Britain could not return, for the British people did not consider other peoples as their peers and did not understand reciprocity.¹⁶² Anti-British opinions among Italian patriots were carefully searched for and widely publicised. In 1940, Nevio Matteini reported Vincenzo Cuoco's harsh words against the British, who he described as 'enemies of all the peoples of the Earth.' Their egoism meant that any nation allied to London was doomed to be weakened by the deal, which would benefit only Britain. Far from being a friend of the Italian cause, Cuoco wrote, Britain was afraid of the growing threat Italy posed to its Mediterranean position. Mattei predictably commented that Cuoco's prophecy was finally becoming reality.¹⁶³ In 1941, the journalist Alberto Consiglio considered a revisionist attitude regarding the 'traditional friendship' insufficient - it was important to underline how hypocritical Britain had been

153-162.

¹⁶⁰ Alfredo Signoretti, 'Il dubbio di Baldwin e la legge di Albione,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 11 March 1936, p. 1.

¹⁶¹ Ugo D'Andrea, 'Guerra e pace,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, 14 August 1936, p. 1.

¹⁶² Curzio Villa, 'Scoperta degli inglesi,' *Gerarchia*, January 1938, pp. 66-70.

¹⁶³ Nevio Mattei, 'Vincenzo Cuoco e gli Inglesi,' *Gerarchia*, July 1940, pp. 364-366. Cuoco's hostility had its roots in Nelson's pressures for the execution of the Neapolitan revolutionaries held as prisoners of war by the Neapolitan Royals in 1799.

in the crucial years between 1799 and 1848. In a quick review of these years, he analysed the burning of the Neapolitan fleet by the British in 1799 ('the Neapolitan sea would never be reborn: this was, for British perfidy, an accomplishment'); Lord Bentinck's attempt to establish a British-esque parliament between 1806-12 in Sicily; the attempts to detach Sicily from Naples in 1815 ('consequence: Italy could never become a great power, not even in the Mediterranean'); and the support given to the Sicilian autonomists in 1848, just to let the Neapolitans crush them ('London had, of course, given its warm moral solidarity'). Had London changed its attitude after 1848? Consiglio concluded that the British had hoped that, given the Piedmontese' focus on the continent, the Italian naval tradition would be, if not choked, at least confined to the central Mediterranean. It was, according to Consiglio, the last mistake London would make regarding Mediterranean politics.¹⁶⁴ In 1942, the journalist Carlo Fetta-rappa Sandri reached the conclusion which many other Fascist authors 'discovered' during the war years: Britain was the eternal enemy of Italy, in 1935-36, in 1911-1912 (the Italian-Turkish war for Libya) and in the second Italian independence war in 1859. This was demonstration of the 'traditional unfriendship' (*tradizionale inimicizia*) of the 'new Carthage against Rome.'¹⁶⁵

The victims of British imperialism

The British Empire was easy game for Fascist criticism. In 1935, Telesio Interlandi caustically wrote that there was indeed a large difference in terms of civilisation between the British and the Italian peoples. The Italians 'could never introduce civilisation in that [African] continent with the methods used by happily remembered General Roberts in

¹⁶⁴ Alberto Consiglio, 'L'Inghilterra ed il Risorgimento,' tre pagine della politica inglese nel mediterraneo, *Gerarchia*, 1941, n.2, pp. 81-4.

¹⁶⁵ Carlo Fetta-rappa Sandri, 'Il sentimento ostile,' *Gerarchia*, June 1941, pp. 302-209. One book of the same year expanded the span of British interference in Italy to being three centuries long. See: Luigi Pareti, *Tre secoli di ingerenze inglesi* (Latium, 1941).

Transvaal.' Attacking an editorial by a British newspaper about the supposedly poor Italian military record from the Battle of Adwa in 1896 to the Great War, Interlandi listed a number of shameful episodes in British colonial history, among which was the destruction of the beautiful Summer Palace in China in 1860 and the use of both hypocrisy and strength against the Boers. A few days later, the *Star* newspaper accused Interlandi's analysis of throwing 'mud on the map of Europe.' Interlandi replied that it was mud indeed, but 'made in England.' His further comment elucidates the deeper nature of Fascist indignation concerning British attitudes:

To investigate the history of the English Empire is certainly a nauseating task. It is not the violence that is disgusting, it is the cruelty dressed as *humanitarianism*, masked with hypocrisy. A strong people can be violent, but must not be hypocritical.¹⁶⁶

Interlandi later added that

of the so-called strong manners used by our English friends on the four corners of the globe to build their Empire we are not scandalized [...] we are scandalised by certain London newspapers' own scandal over Italian measures in Africa.¹⁶⁷

The path was open and clear, for all the Fascist polemicists had to do was to rejuvenate the old anti-colonialist tropes of D'Annunzio and early Fascism. The medieval historian Pier Fausto Palumbo, who in the future would join the resistance, celebrated the ancient ties between the Italian and Irish peoples, emphasising their common struggle against Britain and foreseeing that 'the end of the war, with the weakening that [it] will fatally cause to England, will make possible what could not be considered possible before September 1939, an Ireland that belongs truly, and forever, to the Irish.'¹⁶⁸ In 1942, Cipriani denounced once again British crimes against Ireland, emphasising the racial differences

¹⁶⁶ Interlandi, *I nostri amici inglesi*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁷ Interlandi, *I nostri amici inglesi*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁶⁸ Pier Fausto Palumbo, 'L'Italia e l'Irlanda,' *Gerarchia*, 1941, n.1, pp. 37-40.

between the two peoples.¹⁶⁹ In 1942-1943, *La Difesa della Razza*, known for its rabid anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric, published a whole series of issues focused on Britain's cruel attitude towards its colonial subjects, as well as its national arrogance. The British past of piracy and slavery was a recurring theme.¹⁷⁰ One article described the terrible conditions of the black slaves taken from Africa by British cargoes.¹⁷¹

Indeed, what is remarkable regarding the tropes of anti-British propaganda after the beginning of the Second World War is that there was very little that was new in the criticism of Britain's treatment of its subjects. More generally, the aforementioned structural inferiority of British imperialism, the insistence on the supposed Jewish and Bolshevik control over the Foreign Office, as well as the extreme theories of *La Difesa della Razza*'s racialists, were new elements. Yet many of the attacks focusing on British cruelty, hypocrisy and racism could have been written by authors belonging to the early Fascist period or by Fiume's Legionaries. When British imperialism in Africa was described as the most brutal form of exploitation, and the Empire as a whole as the 'most monstrous form of plutocracy', it was the same mixture of anti-colonialist and anti-bourgeois themes so popular in the years between the end of the Great War and the Corfu crisis. Fascism itself, however, had changed.¹⁷² Its attempts to represent the Second World War as a war of the proletarian nations against the plutocracies had been overshadowed by the increasingly evident reality of the genocidal, racial war started by Germany, and the banner of Fascist anti-colonialism had eventually collapsed under the contradictions

¹⁶⁹ Lidio Cipriani, 'Irlanda e Inghilterra,' *Gerarchia*, February 1942, pp. 65-7. Many other articles concerning the woes of Ireland were published at the time. See: Armando Tosti, 'antirazzismo inglese,' *La Difesa*, 20 November 1940.

¹⁷⁰ Unattributed, 'L'Inghilterra e la tratta dei negri,' *La Difesa*, 5 February 1943, pp. 14-21.

¹⁷¹ See: Alfredo Orbetello, 'Gli Inglesi o dell'intima elezione,' *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 February 1943, pp. 5-8.

¹⁷² Nicola Pascazio, 'L'Africa sotto il giogo coloniale britannico,' *Gerarchia*, March 1941, pp.123-134; Unattributed, 'L'impero inglese è la più mostruosa forma di plutocrazia,' *Il Corriere*, 6 January 1942, p. 4.

that had characterised it since the beginning.¹⁷³ For if the peculiar conditions of the Fiume experiment had meant that internationalism and anti-colonialism could coexist with Italian nationalism, wartime Fascist Italy was effectively a ruthless colonial power, whose violent repression of its subjects was second to none of its colonial contemporaries.

Conclusions

If the Nazi perception of Britain as a world power was, as Gerwin Strobl argued, somewhat linear - at least before the war - the Fascist case is far more complicated.¹⁷⁴ If the early Nazi movement was generally pro-British, early Fascism was quite the opposite. Unlike Hitler, who had always been an outspoken supporter of British imperialism and had always considered Britain a natural ally of a new, nationalistic Germany, at the end of the Great War Mussolini had quickly shifted from his wartime Anglo-philial to a fierce criticism of London on nationalist grounds. Part of the reason was certainly that, unlike in Germany, there was no 'widespread admiration for Britain' after the war. Indeed, even during the conflict, Anglophobia was not unknown in Italy. Furthermore Mussolini, again unlike Hitler, did not feel any racial kinship with the British. If anything, he thought that the British thought very little of the 'Italian race.' Another reason was that many Italian nationalists and Fascists considered Britain an obstacle to any future Italian expansion and were incensed by the role London had played in the peace treaties, whereas Hitler looked forward to an alliance with Britain against France and the Soviet Union. Mussolini's bitterness over Britain's attitude in the peace treaties led him to muse about the destruction of the British Empire by Italian hands, while the huge influence the Fiuman Republic's internationalist rhetoric had on early Fascism gave a clear anti-British

¹⁷³ Marzano, *La propaganda araba di Radio Bari*, p. 425.

¹⁷⁴ Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 223-226.

attitude to the Fascist movement before the March on Rome in 1922.

Ennio di Nolfo wrote that, before the March on Rome, Mussolini had no foreign policy ideas of any sort.¹⁷⁵ However, in terms of relations with Britain, between the end of the Great War and his seizure of power Mussolini was indeed gifted with a precise set of ideas regarding the situation and what had to be done about it. Britain was an enemy and an obstacle to Italy's path towards destiny, and as a consequence Italy had to threaten the British Empire by finding support abroad – ideas whose consistency with the eventual developments of Fascist foreign policy in the 1930s is striking.

Nor did this attitude disappear after Mussolini seized power. An analysis of the reactions of a not-yet-completely-Fascist-ised press to the Corfu incident shows how pervasive Anglophobia remained among many Italians in 1923. At the same time, however, the extension, influence and tradition of government of the British Empire impressed a movement like Fascism, which considered strength the main force which ruled the world. In 1922, Margherita Sarfatti had written lyrically about the British Empire, comparing it to Rome, while other opinions had the chance to be heard during the second half of the 1920s, mostly because of the improvement in the relationship between the two countries.¹⁷⁶ A relatively free range of opinions emerged, with the most consistent elements being the importance of the British Empire but also its decline. The perception of decline dramatically increased with the greater autonomy of Dominions like Canada and Australia around the beginning of the new decade, as well as the economic crisis which hit Britain hard. The press then started displaying a more aggressive attitude, remarking, if subtly, that Italy could take advantage of this new world in which Britain was no longer leading the way. The Ethiopian War unleashed a new wave of violent anti-

¹⁷⁵ Ennio di Nolfo, *Mussolini e la politica estera italiana, 1919-1933*, (Padua: CEDAM, 1960), p. 1.

¹⁷⁶ See: Introduction.

British rhetoric, which was more a return to old themes than a creation of new ones. At this point, another remarkable difference with Nazi Germany emerges. If during the late 1930s many German National Socialists still considered British imperialism something to be emulated, after the Ethiopian War many Fascist intellectuals started to draw a clear line between Fascist 'Roman' imperialism and British 'Carthaginian' plutocracy.

The orders to the press hint that such a development was at least partially autonomous, for the orders themselves did not bother with details of the criticism and were more often than not used to *restrain* the attacks, trying to tune them with the necessities of the propaganda effort. An analysis of the orders during the Ethiopian campaign and after also suggest that this relatively restrained attitude from the regime might have been caused by confusion about the role Britain was playing, as well as uncertainty about the intentions of the *Duce*. On the other hand, it can be argued that if the regime tried again and again to restrain the press from attacking Britain, anti-British feeling was more widespread than is generally recognised. The newer 'systemic' criticism of the British Empire (which led to a reinterpretation of Britain as a power traditionally hostile to Italy) developed along with the more 'traditional' themes (anti-imperialism, proletarian nations against plutocracies.) It was, in Alan Cassel's words, 'in a perverted way [...] the same syndicalist revolutionary war preached by Mussolini in 1914-15.'¹⁷⁷ Such arguments had, however, lost much of their effectiveness since Fascist Italy had long relinquished, though not for lack of wanting, any credible role as a non-imperialist power.¹⁷⁸

The chapter offers a critique of Cerasi's work. This chapter has shown how admiration for the British Empire, nearly unanimous during the liberal period, was instead during the Fascist era shakier than previously thought. Grandi's positive remarks about the British

¹⁷⁷ Cassels, *Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy?* p. 261.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example: Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, p. 191.

Empire (he would soon change his mind, as we will see in chapter 4), represented only one of the many schools of thought about the 'health' of the British Empire and the character of the British people. Rather than universally recognising the strength of the Empire, the image of decline registered by much of the Fascist discourse is reminiscent of the liberal one before the Great War.

The later discourse proceeded to turn the British Empire into something inferior to both Roman and Fascist imperialism. This chapter confirms Cerasi's conclusions concerning the use of the Roman myth in order to justify Italian supremacy in the Mediterranean. At the same time, however, it expands on it. Mussolini's Anglophobia, and that of Fascism more broadly, as well as the notion that Britain had to be challenged in the Mediterranean, did not just appear during the Ethiopian War and only resurface during the Second World War. As this chapter demonstrates, it was instead something deeply rooted in the mythology and mindset of the Fascist movement first and later the regime. Furthermore, the systemic criticism of the British Empire was necessary to the reclaiming of Roman-ness.

The chapter confirms that, as Cerasi argues, the liberal admiration for the values and national characters inspiring the British Empire had waned by 1941. It also shows, however, that the process of 'otherisation' of the British had not just been revived by the Second World War.¹⁷⁹ It was instead the product of a discourse developed by Fascist intellectuals since before the Ethiopian War. Far from always being considered a model to emulate or compete with, British imperialism was increasingly framed as different and inferior, rather than as an admired rival. This reinforces the notion argued in this chapter that anti-British discourse was not simply a card produced by the regime at times of political crisis, but had a 'life of its own.'

¹⁷⁹ Cerasi, *Contested Legacy*, p. 250.

The chapter also suggests a more nuanced use of the category of modernity within Fascist discourse. As a general rule, modernity and industry were not at the core of Fascist critique of the British Empire; modernity was not incompatible with *Romanità*. Indeed, *Romanità*, as the historiography has underlined, was to be a living inspiration for the creation of the new Italians, a tool to forge a new Fascist modernity. In the words of Jan Nelis, antiquity was for the Fascists ‘no faraway, dusty past, but a lively source of inspiration and energy, revealing the regime’s modernist, revolutionary ambition to build a Third Rome.’¹⁸⁰ Rather than representing ‘modern imperial power,’ it was instead Britain’s alleged lack of the spiritualism, monumentality, eternity and universality which had been the trademark of Rome and were now central to Fascist modernity, that the Fascists criticised.

This was an almost metaphysical interpretation of what made, according to the Fascist point of view, Roman and Fascist imperialism unique. In this sense, the Fascists did not need to reappropriate empire from the British, for London had always lacked the spiritual framework needed to be able to take the torch of empire and civilisation from Rome. The Fascist analysis of British imperialism cannot be correctly understood without taking into consideration the fact that Fascism considered itself the herald of a new civilisation, a *radical alternative* to the one represented by Britain, but not at all less modern. It was no rejection of modernity, nor the framing of Britain as modern (even if, as Cerasi argued, a commercial modernity) and hence un-Fascist, but indeed the opposite.¹⁸¹ It was rather that Britain had missed the bus of modernity (as understood by Fascist discourse) and was hence on the way to its decline. Furthermore, this idea was not a product of the Second World War, nor of the ‘1930s Fascists’. The main discovery of this chapter is that the

¹⁸⁰ Jan Nelis, ‘Italian Fascist Representations of the Roman Past,’ *Fascism, Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 3, 1, (2014), pp. 1-19.

¹⁸¹ Cerasi, *Contested Legacy*, pp. 251-4.

Fascist view of British imperialism cannot be understood without understanding the Fascist view of modernity *per se*, a view which developed and triumphed within Fascist public discourse during the 1920s, long before the Ethiopian War. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

The Fall of a World: British Politics, Economics and Culture in Fascist Discourse

*We think with pride to our Mussolinian discipline, which out of a People without an Empire, without materials and without resources [coming from] old accumulated wealth, made an ordered and tempered Nation, where there are not Laburisti, but everyone is a worker.*¹⁸²

Introduction

While Renzo De Felice argued that Mussolini was convinced the corporative experiment was a long-term one, he also mentioned that the *Duce* was sincerely convinced his new system was the way forward in order to avoid the contradictions of liberalism and communism.¹⁸³ Corporatism was, in theory, a system in which the market and private enterprises were subject to political control and the Fascist regime regulated labour conflicts, serving the greater interests of the nation.¹⁸⁴ An analysis of Fascist public discourse concerning Britain suggests that, even when the fulfilment of the corporate system was still far in the future, the notion that fascism had solved the ‘problem of labour’ was widespread and had implications for the Fascist approach to international relations. Recent historiography has demonstrated the centrality of the idea of labour in

¹⁸² Unattributed, ‘Vecchia Inghilterra,’ *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 September 1931, p. 1

¹⁸³ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce, Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*, (Turin: Einaudi 1974), p. 177.

¹⁸⁴ For a thorough analysis of the influence Fascist corporatism in interwar Europe, see: Matteo Pasetti, ‘Corporatist Connections, The Transnational Rise of the Fascist Model in Interwar Europe’, in *Fascism without Borders Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, ed. by Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

Fascist rhetoric.¹⁸⁵ By 1925, Mussolini felt confident enough to tell the Italian people that ‘Italy did not exhaust itself in creating its first and second civilisation, but is already creating a third.’¹⁸⁶ This third was, of course, the Fascist civilisation. Five years later, in the prestigious magazine he edited, meaningfully named *Antieuropa*, the stern Fascist intellectual Asvero Gravelli predicted the eventual triumph of universal Fascism over both liberalism and socialism, which still dominated much of the European continent.¹⁸⁷ In 1932, Fascist philosopher Ugo Spirito had written that Fascism sought to export the corporate idea throughout the world.¹⁸⁸ A change of tone in discussing the corporate system, from national to universal, was evident. Baldoli shows how the British Ambassador in Rome, Eric Drummond, noticed in November 1933 that Mussolini had come to believe that Fascism was no longer only a national revolution but a global one. In fact, he thought that ‘in ten years, Europe would be Fascist or Fascistized.’ Baldoli’s work analysed how the contacts between Italian and British Fascists were seen as part of such an initiative.¹⁸⁹ This chapter’s innovative contribution is that it investigates the cultural reasons behind Mussolini’s attitude towards Britain in the context of his attempt to create a Fascist Europe. While Baldoli underlined that the attempt to establish a new Fascist, European order seemed to develop particularly during the years preceding the Second World War – even though it had been evident from the beginning of the 1930s - this chapter will argue the notion that Britain had fallen behind Fascist Italy in terms of political, social and economic development was well ingrained in Fascist public discourse from the mid-1920s, starting with the British general strike of 1926 which represented a major watershed. The Great Depression, without changing this view, radicalised it, so that

¹⁸⁵ Laura Cerasi, ‘From Corporatism to the "Foundation of Labour": Notes on Political Cultures across Fascist and Republican Italy,’ *Tempo*, 25, 1 (2019), pp. 239-255.

¹⁸⁶ Griffin, *Fascism*, p. 57.

¹⁸⁷ Asvero Gravelli, *Antieuropa*, (May 1930), p. 1018.

¹⁸⁸ Griffin, *Fascism*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁹ Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism*, pp. 3-4.

by the time of the Ethiopian War, it was considered conventional wisdom in Fascist discourse.¹⁹⁰

If British influence over foreign policy was often resented in liberal Italy, the British political model was widely admired. During the decades before the Great War, the debate among Italian politicians focused on whether such a model was applicable in the Italian context, rather than whether things in Britain worked better than in Italy.¹⁹¹ This liberal appreciation for Britain lingered throughout the first years of Fascism, with those liberal commentators still active in the country using Britain as an example of freedom of thought and speech. *La Stampa* - the Turin-based newspaper which was one of the last bastions of the conservative but liberal strand of Italian politics - continued to publish articles in which Britain was lauded as the country of triumphant liberalism, social cooperation and a taste for legality for most of the early 1920s. These articles, in which references to Britain were often used to openly attack growing Fascist authoritarianism, lasted until 1925, when the newspaper was finally 'conquered' by the regime.¹⁹² Britain therefore

¹⁹⁰ Like the consensus Fascism enjoyed among the Italian population, the existence of a coherent Fascist ideology has been the focus on a long debate. While original analysis of Fascism, from Marxist or liberal source, essentially defined it as lacking a real ideology, a revisionist school emerged in the late decades of the twentieth century shifting the consensus: see Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista, 1918-1925* (Bari: Laterza, 1975,) pp. 343-69; George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution : Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: H. Fertig, 1999,) Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991;) Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994;) Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1941-1945*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995,) p. 494; This approach has been in turn criticised by historians who believe that a culturalist approach has its weaknesses in turn: see see: Richard J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an analysis of the debate see, among others: David D. Roberts, Myth, 'Style, Substance and the Totalitarian Dynamic in Fascist Italy,' *Contemporary European History*, 16, 1 (2007) pp. 1-36.

¹⁹¹ Fulvio Cammarano, 'Il modello politico Britannico nella cultura del moderatismo italiano di fine secolo', *La Scienza moderata, Fedele Lampertico e l'Italia liberale* ed. by Renato Camurri (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1992), pp. 309-338.

¹⁹² See, for example: Marcello Prati, 'Il senso politico di Londra', *La Libertà*, 23 May 1919, p.1; Francesco Ciccotti, *Insegnamenti inglesi*, 21 March 1919 p.1; M. Massimo Fovel, *La verità di Bentham*, 16 August 1923, p.3; Aldo Sorani, *La vita pubblica*, 6 July 1925, p. 1, all in *La Stampa*. One quote which explains the point of view held by these old fashioned liberals is the following, coming from an understandably-unsigned piece entitled 'Stato e Democrazia,' published in *La Stampa* on 30 May 1924, p. 1: 'The example of England teaches us how there is only one way to

represented, in a way, *the* cultural epitome of liberalism. How did Fascist culture relate to the British ‘liberal’ example? How did the perception of Britain change during the first fifteen years of the Fascist regime, in relation to domestic affairs, economic doctrines and culture? What had happened so that a country, which was far poorer and rather less developed than Britain, could so optimistically be depicted as solidly on the path of tomorrow, looking with a certain disdain at the British, who still had to ‘learn’ the lessons of history? This chapter will investigate these questions by addressing the discourse espoused by Fascist intellectuals since the mid-1920s in newspapers and the major Fascist magazines.

Discourse before the Great Depression

At first, Fascist discourse did not openly attack the British system as an answer to liberal criticism; rather, the British parliamentary system and free press were seen as something for which the Italians were simply not ready. At that time, Camillo Pellizzi was an Italian intellectual pursuing an academic career in Britain (he was on his way to become the Chair of Italian Studies at University College London). He was also a fervent Fascist; he was among the founders of the Italian *Fascio* of London and contributed to *Il Popolo d'Italia*, *Critica Fascista*, *Gerarchia* and, as Tamara Colacicco underlined, would become the protagonist of Fascist cultural propaganda in Britain.¹⁹³ In 1924, Pellizzi wrote an article entitled ‘About English Liberty and Italian License.’ The article addressed the incandescent political climate in Italy at the time, as well as the Fascist intimidation of the free press, which was to culminate in the eradication of press freedom

be conservatives for real: that of being –but seriously- democratic; and only one sure antidote against revolutions: the respect of liberty and the physiological functioning of the people’s will.’ Even the ‘Jacobin’ Francesco Crispi thought that Britain was the best example of domestic policies. Federico Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896*, vol. II (Bari: Laterza, 1971), p.600.

¹⁹³ Colacicco, *La propaganda Fascista nelle università inglesi*, pp. 102-5.

within two years. Pellizzi criticised those who, in order to justify their own grievances about the state of press freedom in Italy, appealed to the example of Britain, ‘that country so different and far that almost nobody knows.’ ‘What freedom?’ he rhetorically asked the ‘zealots of liberty.’ As they answered ‘liberty in the law’, he proceeded to explain that ‘English freedom has no law.’ In answering as such, Pellizzi meant that the freedom of speech and press Britain enjoyed was not the product of laws. Instead, the laws were the product of a long historical process, ‘an accumulation of many interests and feelings and national instincts of solidarity’, which made these laws, and indeed freedom, possible. In the case of Italy, however,

the deep and naïve instinct of every Italian is universalistic and, only in a second instance, national, the instinct of the English is first of all insular and national, and only after a second moment of reflection and of experience, it can sometimes become universal.¹⁹⁴

Consequently, the ‘first and deepest’ instinct of every Englishman was not to harm the moral and material interests of their country – Pellizzi mentioned the well-known motto ‘right or wrong, my country [in English in the original].’ This, he argued, was the first border and limitation of the proverbial British liberty, given by ‘Nature and God’ (at the time, Pellizzi was experiencing a religious crisis which would lead him towards Catholicism). Other limitations also existed: the well-defined hierarchy of the classes (whereas in Italy the borders between the classes were, according to Pellizzi, melting), and the various religious sects, all jealous of the other’s autonomy. Pellizzi then concluded that Britain was not only liberal, it was ‘first and foremost conservative’ and always ready to fight for the honour of its traditional institutions: the Crown, the Cabinet, the Empire and its various religious sects. All of these were open for discussion in society

¹⁹⁴ Camillo Pellizzi, ‘Della libertainglese e della licenza italiana’, *Gerarchia*, July 1924, pp. 401-4.

but were always to be respected. It was this repulsion against the excesses, this ‘discipline of the crew’ which allowed the British government to be moderate. Furthermore, the most important limit to English liberty was ‘the infinite, jealous respect for the autonomy of individuals, for their rights, sentiments, interests,’ amply demonstrated by the harsh sanctions against libel. Pellizzi’s conclusion was that English Liberty didn’t exist in Italy not because of the government, but because of the opposition and the lack of general education. If the opposition had wanted to appeal to the English example, it should have demonstrated the uselessness of Mussolini’s attacks on the press by behaving responsibly. Lacking that, Pellizzi claimed that the Fascists would help all Italians who liked Britain more than Italy to fulfil their desire and obtain British citizenship.¹⁹⁵

This feeling soon started to change. After 1925, having finally vanquished domestic opposition, Fascism was attempting to create a coherent ideology. As Renzo De Felice explained, one principle had begun to emerge as the central tenet of the future Fascist doctrine: the replacement of class struggle with something new.¹⁹⁶ For years, many Fascist intellectuals had been developing a contempt for alleged foreign influence on Italian culture.¹⁹⁷ What did the Fascists see happening in Britain at that point? While the 1920s were generally a period of growth for European economies, 1924 saw a relative worsening of economic conditions. This negative economic conjuncture lingered longer

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Fascista, Vol. II, L’organizzazione dello Stato Fascista, 1925-1929* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968), p. 264.

¹⁹⁷ For example, in 1923 Curzio Malaparte regretted the missed opportunity of killing those intellectuals who ‘derided us and our passion, in the name of a declared modern culture, which is nothing but a rough assimilation of the heretic and barbaric culture of the north and the west.’ See: Curzio Malaparte, *Ragguaglio sullo stato degli intellettuali rispetto al fascismo*, preface to ‘La battaglia delle due vittorie’ di Ardengo Soffici (Florence: Verdecchi, 1923), pp. XXII-XXIII. Giovanni Gentile reached a similar conclusion from very different premises: as Asor Rosa explained, ‘Italian culture was presented [by Gentile] like a monad, closed in itself and self-sufficient [...] the cosmopolitanism of Italian intellectual as a phenomenon of crisis of the national sentiment, see: Alberto Asor Rosa, ‘Dalla grande guerra al ’68,’ in *Storia d’Italia, dall’Unità oggi* (Milano: 2005, Il Sole 24 Ore) p. 1416.

in Great Britain than elsewhere.¹⁹⁸ Coming just when Italy was beginning to create its corporatist institutions, the general strike of 1926 deeply impressed Fascist commentators, among them Pellizzi. While his article published in *Gerarchia* in May 1926 still maintained that most British workers had no intention of pursuing revolutionary aims, and that ‘social order’ was probably going to prevail in Britain, he made it clear that he considered the country a sick one. Britain was, in his words, ‘an immense clinic of philosophical, economic and social illnesses in a time of epidemics.’ The fundamental problem, he wrote, was that despite the best efforts of the government, Britain was suffering from chaos caused by two apparently opposite forces: ‘Liberalism and its historical nemesis: the Trade Union.’ Compared to two years before, Pellizzi had completely changed his point of view regarding liberalism:

The individual is free and individual property is sacred, and something that is even above the state, for after all the state itself is not composed [of] anything but many single individuals, each with his own sacred real and personal rights.¹⁹⁹

Hence, workers felt no responsibility not to starve the nation by striking, for ‘the right not to work is sacred.’ At the same time,

private property as conceived by the Liberal doctrine has no obligation to consider the interests of the nation and the human reasons of the worker. The Trade Union exists in order to ask always more and offer always less. From the struggle between these two egoisms, from the anarchic game of these two opposed, unrestrained interests, nothing can emerge but chaos.²⁰⁰

Liberalism had infected society (both British political parties had absorbed the ‘anachronistic and false’ ideas of the now-dying Liberal party) and the government, despite its best efforts, could do very little to solve the crisis. Pellizzi felt that ‘here [...]

¹⁹⁸ Paolo Sylos Labini, *La politica economica del Fascismo, la crisi del '29*, p. 48 at <http://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/monetaecredito/article/viewFile/11875/11688> originally published in *L'Astrolabio*, Anno III, (1965), 7, pp. 32-4.

¹⁹⁹ Camillo Pellizzi, ‘Britannia docet (commenti allo sciopero generale britannico)’, *Gerarchia*, May 1926, pp. 290-6.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

is where Fascism has a reason and right to say its own word. In this fight, the Fascist mentality does not sympathize [with] anyone, for all are mistaken in it.' Whereas the trade unions were pushing for an anti-economic solution and the capitalists were sustaining a 'purely economic' solution, Fascism had solved the 'problem of labour.' The real danger was that this chaos produced a palatable opportunity for the rise of Bolshevism through Soviet interference. While Britain itself was not likely to experience a revolution, its example was dangerous and 'the continent was another matter.' Careful surveillance was needed, and 'Fascist Italy, we are certain, does not sleep on [its] laurels.'²⁰¹ The implications of this second piece by Pellizzi were remarkable and all the more astonishing in light of his previous article.

Others shared his feeling that something was rotten in Britain. In March 1926, Virginio Gayda wrote a piece ominously entitled 'the twilight of democracies', in which he divided the world into three blocks. The first, the heir of the past century, was ruled by an inefficient, anachronistic liberalism and unable to face the problems of the new century. The other two groups were the product of a 'protest' against liberalism: Fascism and Communism. Yet whereas Communism - a product of 'barbarous instinct and war weariness' - had only accelerated the destruction of the Russian nation, the 'Roman' values proposed by Fascism were reforming Europe. While it was true that Mussolini had described Fascism as a peculiarly Italian ideology, Gayda wrote, it was a fact that liberal, parliamentary democracy was in crisis everywhere in Europe and Fascism had shown the way to those countries which wanted to reform themselves in a constructive way, looking for safety 'in renounce to the excesses of freedom and individuality.' In Spain, Greece, Poland and even France, the crisis of capitalism and the teachings of the Great War had shown that 'the crisis of democracy, the rise and propagation of Fascism, are not an

²⁰¹ Ibid.

ephemeral episode, but a new European historical phase which corresponds to its new cycle of economic and social transformation and elaboration.’²⁰² In this picture, Britain was no exception. True, its immense wealth and international influence, as well as the typical ‘calm and slowness of the Anglo-Saxon race,’ made the triumph of Fascism or Communism in the country unlikely. However, Britain was far from an example of a healthy liberal democracy. Despite usually being considered the beacon of liberalism and the parliamentary system, Britain was indeed ‘the most conservative and anti-democratic state in Europe,’ so that ‘it could be said, not being too far from the truth, that it is a feudal state with an exterior democratic appearance.’²⁰³ Furthermore, Fascism and Communism both inspired movements which worked to transform Britain outside of parliament, a development that was, by British standards, new and astounding. These movements were the trade unions - which detached themselves from the Labour Party and through their strikes experimented with direct action - and the bourgeois class, which organised groups of voluntary workers in case of a strike. The parliamentary tradition that had grown and prospered thanks to previous British economic hegemony over the world, Gayda wrote, was not yet about to be overthrown, but Britain too was changing.²⁰⁴ Gayda’s article was, even more than Pellizzi’s, an obvious endorsement of a new Fascist century, a decade before the Ethiopian War. Britain was depicted as an old, slow, anachronistic pachyderm which represented a backward past. Such was the new philosophy of Fascist intellectuals: Fascism was the philosophy of the future, and liberalism was in decline. In May 1926, *Il Corriere della Sera* wrote that

the Italians who look at the development of this crisis [...] see in the English situation facts and characters that the Italy of the [post]-war period has sadly experienced [...] The progress made by our country

²⁰² Virginio Gayda, ‘Il crepuscolo delle democrazie,’ *Gerarchia*, March 1926, pp. 181-3.

²⁰³ Ibid. Gayda based this judgment on British governments ‘controlling the elections, keeping more authority and independence than the parties, being above the Parliament, not subject to it.’

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

during the last years, compared to European nations, strong and powerful, on the path of disciplined harmony and the willing cooperation of the working forces for the national economic progress, must be acknowledged, once again, and in the clearest way.²⁰⁵

In Italy, unlike Britain, May Day had only seen absolute calm and lack of conflict, as well as the spontaneous rejection by the people of the ‘vain ideologies of social subversion.’ This clearly showed that, in Italy, the ‘order of the souls’ reigned.²⁰⁶ In August, Giovanni Selvi wrote that Italy did not ‘show any symptom of that demo-liberal progressive paralysis that gives Britain the political or economic coal crisis and the inability to produce a vital Government to France.’²⁰⁷ In May 1927, Gayda expanded his point of view, concluding that Britain was indeed starting to follow the path laid out by Fascism. Describing the new British regulation of the trade unions, he claimed that while ‘still far from Italian law’, it was the fruit of the ‘same political and spiritual environment.’ He continued: ‘If the problems of the two countries are different in origin and magnitude, they are equivalent and they can be solved in a similar way. Limiting freedom. Because only in that way today can the nation be given freedom to live.’²⁰⁸ One year later, Gayda was even more persuaded of the weakness of British society and its resultant economic and political decline:

The inferiority of British industry in the competition for world trade has hence also fundamental national causes: insufficiency of technical organization, excessive individualism that rejected the great productive concentrations of the syndicates [...], immaturity of the leaders of industry, despite their glorious tradition.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Unattributed, ‘Raffronti fra l’Inghilterra e l’Italia,’ *Il Corriere*, 3 May 1926, p. 1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Giovanni Selvi, ‘I paradossi della Lira,’ *Gerarchia*, August 1926, p. 499.

²⁰⁸ Virginio Gayda, ‘verso una ‘Carta del lavoro’ in Inghilterra,’ *Gerarchia*, May 1927, pp. 381-7.

²⁰⁹ Virginio Gayda, ‘La crisi dell’industria inglese,’ *Gerarchia*, June 1928, pp. 471-5.

According to Gayda, British decline was a consequence of the natural law according to which those who stop moving, or prove unable to adapt to the changing world, are destined to ‘decadence, in front of foreign rivalries, and then death.’²¹⁰

Discourse after the Great Depression

When the economic crisis hit, Britain was among the countries most severely affected. Although apparently less damaged, Italy was also hit by the economic downturn. Industrial unemployment in Italy was actually worse between 1929 and 1935 than in Britain and, in general, Italy suffered as much as other European countries.²¹¹ Considering the very different levels of industrialisation of the Italian and British economies, however, the effects appeared less catastrophic.²¹² In this context, the reaction of the Fascist *intelligentsia* was hardly surprising - the contempt for how things were run in Britain persisted, but for some it became harder to believe they would find the moral strength to follow Italy’s example. Furthermore, the birth of Britain’s second Labour government in 1929 provided more ideological ammunition. Fearful of the panic the British crisis could cause in the Italian financial market, the press was therefore ordered not to ‘dramatise’ the ‘fall of the pound and other grave symptoms of the English crisis.’ It was also necessary that ‘the financial crisis [was] presented as a consequence of the political crisis, convincing the reader that the crisis can be overcome if other men will be called in the government in England.’²¹³ If the press had to restrain itself, the intellectual

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell’Italia moderna, XI, 1922-1939, Il Fascismo e le sue guerre*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), p. 266.

²¹² As Paolo Sylos Labini underlined, the statistics about unemployment in Italy during the crisis mostly ignored agricultural unemployment. Taking that, and the other forms of unemployment hidden by the regime, into account, unemployment was as bad in Italy as elsewhere. See: Sylos Labini, *La politica economica del fascismo*, pp. 48-53.

²¹³ Ferretti ai Prefetti, Ufficio Stampa del Capo del Governo, busta 2, Archivio Generale (1926-1944); Gabinetto, Ministero della Cultura Popolare (1926-1945), ACS.

discourse was much more genuine and reveals what Fascists did indeed think at the time. In the midst of the crisis, the journalist Gennaro E. Pistolese blamed the current woeful state of the British economy on ‘the system of subsidies, which has created the so-called unemployed professionalism and has granted an easier life to [those who] could before only live through their work.’ Yet the British crisis was deeper and had even more worrisome causes. One example was the decline of British immigration to the Empire and the Dominions: the problem was not just that the British workforce was too expensive because of concessions to the workers, nor that the demographic crisis was reducing it. The British people, Pistolese wrote, had lost their ‘imperial consciousness’ and ‘pioneer spirit’ and preferred to live their comfortable lives in subsidised idleness rather than move to colonies where they would have to work the land. The decline of British agriculture, indeed, was another sign of the decline of British virtues.²¹⁴ This last subject was particularly important for the Fascist regime, with its continuous glorification of rural life and criticism of urbanism.²¹⁵

Another event that helped to convince Fascist commentators of the fact that British society was facing irreversible decline was London’s departure from the gold standard in September 1931. Giacomo Redentini wrote in *Gerarchia* that this catastrophic event was symptomatic of an illness which ‘corroded the British colossus... was ‘maybe mortal’,

²¹⁴ Gennaro A. Pistolese, ‘La crisi migratoria dell’Inghilterra,’ *Gerarchia*, March 1931, pp. 237-42.

²¹⁵ On this subject, see Margherita Bonomo, *Autoritratto rurale del fascismo italiano: cinema, radio e mondo contadino* (Ragusa: EdiArgo, 2007); Georges Canguilhem, *Il fascismo e i contadini* ed (Bologna: Il mulino, 2006); Luciano Segre, *La battaglia del grano: depressione economica e politica cerealicola fascista* (Milan: Unicopli, 2012) Margherita Bonomo, *Autoritratto rurale del fascismo italiano : cinema, radio e mondo contadino* (Ragusa: EdiArgo, 2007) Michele Guerra, *Gli ultimi fuochi: cinema italiano e mondo contadino dal fascismo agli anni Settanta* (Roma : Bulzoni, 2010) Pippo Oriani, *Urbanesimo e ruralismo* (Florence: Salimbeni, 1980) Alberto Mario Banti, *Proprietari, contadini e le origini del Fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982); Giovanni Murru, *L'Agricoltore. Il ruralismo fascista nelle pagine del periodico dell'unione agricoltori di Sassari* (Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura, n.1, July 2005); Mauro Stampacchia, *Tecnocrazia e ruralismo : alle origini della bonifica fascista : 1918-1928* (Pisa: ETS, 1983).

and for which there was no cure yet in sight. Egoism, Redentini wrote, ‘seems to have destroyed the love for risk and adventure in the British race.’ He argued that the British people were now hostage to ‘the egoism of millions of people who did nothing [*nullafacenti*], who cared nothing for the nation’s appeals to responsibility and treated with disdain the splendid opportunities for work given by the Empire. Redentini’s prose was convoluted, but his message was clear. The ‘illness’ was likely to cause the fall of the Empire itself. While the Empire was still formidable thanks to its reserves of capital, it appeared to be ‘declining because of the lack of these fresh resources, of that moral ‘capital’ to throw against the overflowing ills, and without that the material resources are nothing but a lifeless reserve of food.’²¹⁶

Labour movements, liberalism and ‘tired conservatism’ had failed to find any solution and ‘Britain [did] not show the necessary spontaneous energies necessary to cure the illness.’ The fact that the crisis of mercantilism caused such an acute crisis for British political, social and imperial life, Redentini claimed, suggested that it was only mercantilism that gave Britain its *raison d’etre*. The comparison with Italy was harsh for Britain:

Where we see the key of an historical organization is made up by mercantilism, most hard the devastating attack hits, whereas where the vital creating energy starts from the political-social and religious heart of a nation, the resistance [...] is most firm.²¹⁷

Writer, explorer and journalist Arnaldo Cipolla - known at the time as the ‘Italian Kipling’ - agreed that the British people had lost their passion for adventure, that in Britain huge masses of unemployed were idle while the fields lay abandoned and that the corporate

²¹⁶ Giacomo Redentini, ‘La crisi inglese’, *Gerarchia*, September 1931, pp. 715-20.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

system represented the system of the future.²¹⁸ Margherita Sarfatti's son, Amedeo, was less pessimistic. In an article meaningfully entitled 'The Fall of a World,' he wrote that the British people had historically 'always found, in the direst moments, the steel-hard determination necessary to overcome the crisis.'²¹⁹ What Britain now had to do was 'ban demagogy of all colours' and drastically reduce standards of living. The example had been given by Fascism, so that Sarfatti wrote that Italians could 'with right and legitimate pride look back to consider the example of solid and foreseeing loyalty given with so many sacrifices by Fascist Italy.'²²⁰ The opinion among Fascist intellectuals was unanimous. *Critica Fascista*, Giuseppe Bottai's magazine which was known for its radical, at times anti-capitalist positions, published an article in September by journalist Rodolfo Foà with the same message worded in an even-less-diplomatic manner. According to Foà, 'the British crisis is one of those which justif[ies] the State doctrine of Fascism.' The British people knew that something was wrong, but they were still reluctant to turn to Fascism for the solution. No cultured Englishman, Foà thought, would deny in his own heart that

democracy is about to fail even in the classical land which gave birth to it. But to ask [...] for something clear to replace the current rusty political machinery would be too much, for in this country, [for] centuries, [society] is used to hear[ing] of democracy, political parties, of the Parliament.²²¹

Echoing Pellizzi, Foà remarked that Britain was still the most aristocratic country in the world. British democracy was hence a delusion, but the British temperament meant that the words and forms of this delusion still mattered. Therefore, Fascism was still a scary word for most Britons. However, times were changing. These times were

²¹⁸ Arnaldo Cipolla, 'L'esercito dei disoccupati inglesi ed I vasti campi di lavoro che restano deserti', *La Stampa*, 8 June 1930, p. 7.

²¹⁹ Amedeo Sarfatti, 'Il crollo di un mondo', *Gerarchia*, October 1931, pp. 318-25.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ Rodolfo Foà, 'l'origine della crisi britannica', *Critica Fascista*, n.9, 1931, pp. 345-7.

not [a] fleeting anomaly, but lasting precursors of an era which will not have anything to do with the one which is now about to wane in a turmoil of things and spirits. It is natural, then, that the English machine, maybe more than any other because of its venerable antiquity, cannot work as before anymore so that the engineers tire themselves in attaching spare parts, and God knows if they will be enough to fix it.²²²

And so if Fascism was still a ‘shocking’ (in English in the original) word, the whole of British society had now been ‘impregnated [for] some months with concepts which are of the most purely Fascist brand.’ Foà maintained that ‘people now openly say what they had not the courage but to whisper *sotto voce* some months ago, that is, that the democratic regime, party, parliamentary system, they are all nice things, but they have had their time.’ He then proceeded to analyse the reasons for the current critical state of the British economy, blaming most of it on the vociferous trade unions. The ‘leftist’ Fascist *Critica Fascista*’s diagnosis of the causes, the symptoms and the cure of the British disease did not differ from the other commentators.²²³ In addressing the British crisis, Mussolini’s newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia* used softer tones, without changing the content. On 18 September 1931, it published an article titled ‘Young Italy’, which praised the solidity of the Italian social and economic systems. ‘We’ the article claimed, that have not great riches or colonies, nor materials nor gold, look with a passion to this wealth [that are our] children, given to the Fatherland by the Italian women, not yet hit still by the decaying and sterile industrial civilization.²²⁴

The purpose of the article was made clear when, a day later, *Il Popolo* published ‘Old England,’ in which the root of the British troubles was summarised: ‘the diminishing of the ancient imperial prosperity, [the] indiscipline of the classes and the general difficulty to adapt to the inferior standards [of living] imposed by the crisis.’ Britain could only be saved by discipline and sacrifice. Yet even if Britain could emerge from its current crisis, it would still need a ‘compact national party and a strong Government.’ Even beyond the

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Unattributed, ‘Giovane Italia’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 18 September 1931, p. 1.

Channel, the war had sterilised the old parties: and the hardened Italians, used to every hardship, were ‘following with sympathy’ the efforts of the British statesmen to emulate what Mussolini had done.²²⁵ The comparison between the British problem and the Fascist solution was clear and, disguised under a sympathetic tone, the condescending attitude was palpable.

Camillo Pellizzi returned to the subject of the British crisis in October 1931, and once again his article provides a useful summation of the broader perspective on the subject. The British currency crisis, he argued, had been caused by the decline of nineteenth century society, which rested on two, now quickly eroded, pillars: high standards of living and parliamentary democracy. Both were backed by capitalism, an economic and political force which made it impossible to heal the wounds of the crisis because of its rejection of authoritarianism (or, in Pellizzi’s words, ‘the gold which fears the iron’). Once again, the article concluded with a rhetorical question: would the British people know how to look at Fascist Italy and hence return to their former glory?²²⁶ Other prominent Fascists tried to answer this question: in 1932, Oswald Mosley claimed that Britain was moving towards the introduction of a corporatist system and, in 1934, Hungarian-born Fascist Odon Por wrote that many in Britain felt the country needed a strong government in order to put an end to the citizens’ abuse of their rights.²²⁷ Indeed, Fascist public discourse paid much attention to Mosley’s British Fascists in the early 1930s.

As Claudia Baldoli explains, ‘in 1933 Fascist universalism considered it a duty to support British Fascists.’²²⁸ As early as June 1931, the journalist Marcello Prati had described Mosley’s movement as ‘the most alive thing’ existing in British politics at the time, and

²²⁵ Unattributed, ‘Vecchia Inghilterra’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 September 1931, p. 1.

²²⁶ Camillo Pellizzi, ‘Considerazioni sulla crisi Britannica,’ *Gerarchia*, October 1931, pp. 813-7.

²²⁷ See: Oswald Mosley, ‘il fascismo come fattore di pace universale,’ *Gerarchia*, October 1932, pp. 861-5; Odon Por, ‘Nazionalismo economico e corporativismo in Inghilterra,’ *Gerarchia*, March 1934, pp. 204-31.

²²⁸ Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism*, p. 187.

one month later he described Mosley as ‘the youngest of the rebels, the denier of normality’ who had rebelled against the Labour oligarchy and who might well be destined to rule Britain in the future. ‘Can you see,’ Prati asked the readers, ‘the first hints of what happened to politics here? And what could happen [there in the future]?’ Still, in 1933, *La Stampa* wrote with optimism that Mosley’s attempt to spread his propaganda through the countryside ‘might have [a] decisive effect on the fortunes of his new party’; in the same year, the orders to the press were to give due attention to Mosley interviews.²²⁹ In 1934, when a petition against the dangers of a dictatorship in the country was launched by important Britons, the writer and painter Renato Paresce answered in *La Stampa* by talking of a British democracy which was hopelessly looking for an ‘elixir of long life,’ remarking how in ‘regimes at their sunset’ even those opposing dictatorship had to do so by advocating an increase in the powers of the government.²³⁰ All these articles were perfectly in line with the thoughts of the Fascist leadership. In 1933, Mussolini himself celebrated the demise of the ‘demo-liberal’ civilisation and its replacement with a new, more vital Fascist civilisation.²³¹ An avid reader of newspapers, Mussolini might have been influenced by an article from the conservative *National Review*, reported in *Il Corriere*, stating that Liberalism was a spent force and that a Britain which is in a state of doubt, uncertainty and discouragement was waiting for ‘The Prince.’ Tired of ‘the imaginary liberty that brings poverty and slavery’ and of a plutocracy in which the

²²⁹ Marcello Prati, ‘La campagna di Mosley,’ *La Stampa*, 24 June 1931, p.1; Marcello Prati, *La Trireme*, 1 July 1931, *La Stampa*, 1 July 1931, p. 1; Marcello Prati, *la cosiddetta normalità*, *La Stampa*, 19 July 1931, p. 1; R.P., ‘Mosley estende alle campagne la sua propaganda,’ *La Stampa* 10 August 1933, p.2; Rapporto del giorno I agosto XI, Busta 69, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press 13 August 1932, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

²³⁰ Renato Paresce, ‘Ideologie e regime al tramonto, la democrazia inglese in cerca dell’elisir di lunga vita,’ *La Stampa*, 16 February 1934, p. 5.

²³¹ Benito Mussolini, *fra due civiltà*, *Opera Omnia*, XXVI, pp.44-45, originally in *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 22 August 1933. In this context, the Italian *Fasci* abroad became ‘an important instrument in the attempt to create a Fascist International.’ See: Baldoli *Exporting Fascism*, p.191.

wealthy did not answer to anyone, it would gladly accept a strong hand bringing ‘order, peace and prosperity.’²³² The ‘Prince’ was, of course, a veiled reference to Mussolini. The article added that in Italy ‘the government is strong enough to rule not only the poor but also the rich, not only the workers unions but also the money, not only the worker but also the capital.’ The article concluded with a reference to the growth of the forces of ‘order’ in Germany in the last elections (March 1933.)²³³

Certainly, Hitler’s triumph in Germany had helped consolidate Mussolini’s beliefs but, as we have seen, the Fascists had seen themselves as a new beacon of civilisation since the earliest years of the regime. From the sparse evidence (especially the orders to the press) available, it seems likely the regime wanted the Italian people to be well aware of the crisis in Britain and of liberalism more broadly, ordering all the newspapers to write about ‘the threat of strikes looming on the textile industry in Lancashire’ in 1932, and to report Lloyd George’s praise for Mussolini and comment on the near end of liberalism in 1933. Soon, *Il Corriere* wrote that while Lloyd George thought that only then-Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and Mussolini had grasped where the world was going, the Welsh politician had no fondness for the Soviets. Rather, he saw ‘in the Mussolinian conception and implementation of the corporate [system] the state’s greatest social reform of the modern era.’ His words were, the newspaper commented, an echo of the powerful

²³² One interesting example of how the Fascist authorities failed to understand ‘liberty’ as the British meant it can be found in Dino Grandi’s analysis of British cinema censorship. Grandi, at the time ambassador in Britain, was irked by how film censorship was so common in Britain, ‘without anyone being scandalized by that in the name of so-called freedom, and who protests, does so asking for even more restrictive and severe criteria.’ Grandi’s annoyance was clearly caused by the criticism the Fascist regime received for its censorship. By addressing how movies were censored for violent or other ‘unpleasant’ content, however, Grandi failed to see the point that it was the political censorship of different opinions which formed the bulk of most criticism of anti-Fascist censorship. See: Dino Grandi al Ministro per gli Affari Esteri, *Censura cinematografica in Gran Bretagna*, 16 December 1933, *Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, 1926-35, busta 119, ACS.

²³³ Unattributed, *Il Corriere*, *L’avvento del Fascismo nel mondo auspicato nella culla del liberalismo*, 18 January 1933, p. 1.

movement which was spreading throughout Britain which pressed for the implementation of the corporate system.²³⁴

By 1934, however, the interest in Mosley's actions and more generally the hope that Britain would follow Mussolini's path was declining. Nicola Pascazio's report on British fascism in 1934 underlined how Austrian dictator Engelbert Dolfuss' bloody repression of the socialists in Vienna had caused a wave of indignation among the British public to paralyse Mosley's movement.²³⁵ On 22 January 1934, *La Stampa* celebrated the enthusiasm raised by Mosley's Fascists in Birmingham, but a day later it had to add with a certain frustration that 'despite the violent moral crisis that shakes it, [Britain] is the only country where the omnipotence of majority is still worshipped today.'²³⁶ The fact that this comment appeared in an article which discussed the 'march of British Fascism,' as well as the crisis of the Conservative Party, is remarkable.²³⁷ As Pier Filippo Gomez Homen wrote to Ciano, '[the British Union of Fascists BUF] had a certain success when the crisis was rampant in England, and with it so was the criticism [of] the parliamentary system, but it loses ground as the economic conditions improve.'²³⁸ Before 1935 Dino Grandi had been optimistic about the growth of British Fascism, telling Mussolini that if Mosley's progress was slow, it was because of the slow pace of social change in British

²³⁴ Rapporto del 13 agosto 1932, pervenuto dal comm. Cavaciocchi, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press 13 August 1932, Rapporto del giorno 22 gennaio 1933, Busta 69, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS. Unattributed, 'Ammissioni di Lloyd George,' *Il Corriere*, 17 January 1933, p. 7.

²³⁵ Relazione sulla missione in Inghilterra di Nicola Pascazio, febbraio-marzo 1934, Ministero della Cultura Popolare 1926-35, busta 119, ACS.

²³⁶ This kind of attack against the 'omnipotence of the majority,' perhaps because the regime wanted to stress the unity of purposes of Italian people and Fascism, was not common in the Fascist discourse concerning Britain. Whenever this specific feature of the British system was criticised, it was done so by citing British critics, as to make it appear as distant from Fascism as possible. See, for example: *Il Corriere*, Unattributed, 'Shaw, Il suffragio universale ed I vizi della democrazia,' 26 March 1930, p. 1.

²³⁷ See: R.P., 'Mosley solleva entusiasmo a Birmingham,' *La Stampa*, 22 January 1934 and R.P. *La nuova tribuna di Mosley*, *La Stampa*, 23 January 1934, p. 1.

²³⁸ Appunto per S.E. il Ministro, Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda, 6 August 1935, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, 1926-35, busta 119, ACS.

society, which he compared to a tortoise.²³⁹ By March 1935 he had changed his mind and complained to Mussolini about the funding Mosley was receiving, stating quite clearly that it was a waste of money.²⁴⁰ From 1935, the Italian funding of Mosley had started decreasing, diminishing by half in 1936 and becoming negligible by 1937.²⁴¹ However, Mosley, his party and his political influence did not disappear from the radar of Fascist discourse. With the deterioration of Anglo-Italian relations during the second half of the 1930s, a pro-Fascist voice in Britain was duly appreciated.²⁴²

However, by this stage Mussolini had lost faith in his British apprentice's chances of transforming Britain into a Fascist country. There were other reasons for Mussolini's gradual alienation from Mosley, among which was Grandi's belief that the British Conservative Italophiles would prove more useful for Italian foreign policy goals than the BUF and the fact that Mosley himself had started looking to Berlin more than to Rome.²⁴³ Even these factors, however, encouraged Mussolini's conviction that the new Fascist civilisation had to be Roman, Italian and Mediterranean, rather than spontaneously developed by other countries. This development was not limited to Britain and the British Fascists. As Jens Steffek and Francesca Antonini underlined,

the biennium 1935-6 represented a crucial watershed in the history of Italian Fascist ideology [...] Corporativism turned from being seen as the basis of a new and potentially universal economic system to being simply a 'crutch' of Italy's policy of autarky, while the universalistic references closely related to this doctrine now became mere propaganda tools.²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism*, pp. 37-41.

²⁴⁰ Michele Abbate, *L'Italia Fascista fra Europa e Stati Uniti*, (Civita Castellana: Centro falisco di studi storici., 2002), p. 61.

²⁴¹ Gary Love, 'What's the Big Idea? Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42, 3, p. 454.

²⁴² See, for example: Unattributed, 'Lo sviluppo del partito di Mosley,' *Il Corriere*, 14 October 1936, p.5. Mosley was also considered important as a resolute opposer of any conflict between Britain and Italy. See, for example: Unattributed, 'Dimostrazioni a Londra contro i giudei fautori della guerra,' *Il Corriere*, 18 September 1938, p. 6.

²⁴³ Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism*, pp. 191-2.

²⁴⁴ Jens Steffek, Francesca Antonini, 'Toward Eurafrica! Fascism, Corporativism, and Italy's Colonial Expansion', in *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. by Ian Hall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 20.

The sincerity of the regime's support for corporatist ideas abroad has been debated. However, the firm belief that the Fascist model was superior, and that Britain was doomed to hopeless stagnation by its failure to adopt it, is the consistent message found when analysing Fascist public discourse both before and after the 'crucial biennium' of 1935-36.²⁴⁵

Cultural discourse: Religion, Masonry, Feminism

One new, important and little known strand of criticism towards Britain blossomed vigorously in Fascist discourse in 1935 and remained thereafter - a religious approach. Religion had been important in the thought of many Fascist intellectuals since the early years of Fascism, and with it an anti-Protestant zeal. Curzio Malaparte frequently discussed the need for a Catholic crusade against the modern thought which was a product of the Reformation. Such a mission was justified by the 'separation between us [Italians] and modern, Anti-Catholic Europe, created by four centuries of Counter-Reformation.'²⁴⁶ The importance of the religious theme in Fascism's criticism of its enemies was analysed by Marla Stone, who explored the anti-socialist and anti-Soviet discourses over the course of the Fascist movement and regime. Stone concluded that the regime had often resorted to appealing to the Italians' ancestral attachment to Catholicism, which was considered the core of many Italians' system of values.²⁴⁷ As for Anti-Anglican tropes, these existed in the Fascist press before 1935. In 1933, for example, *Il Corriere della Sera* published an article entitled 'the Anglican movement in Oxford fails to achieve its goals,' which

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Curzio Malaparte, *L'Europa vivente, teoria storica del sindacalismo nazionale* (Florence: 1923), pp. 116-19.

²⁴⁷ Marla Stone, 'Race, Faith and Family, Depicting the Enemy in Fascist Italy', in *Fears Past*, ed. by Michael Laffan and Max Weiss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 114-32.

described how many British believers were returning to the Catholic Church after the attempts to reunite the two churches, known as the ‘Movement of Oxford’, had failed. The causes of this massive wave of conversions was a rebellion against ‘liberalism in theology and against state control of the ecclesiastic hierarchy.’²⁴⁸ These pre-existing sentiments can be explained with the hopes held by the regime that the Holy See would become an ally of Italy in the Middle East, where Britain controlled the holy sites of Christianity.²⁴⁹ Fascist identification of the Italian people with Catholicism, and the growing confidence Fascism had in its universal message and of Italy’s role as the beacon of the tomorrow’s civilisation, help to explain the favourable light in which many Fascists increasingly saw a catholicisation of Europe.²⁵⁰ At the same time, the notion that the Anglican Church was infected with ‘modernism’ and ‘liberalism’ was consistent with Fascist discourse on the decadence of British society, as analysed above. However, a truly hostile campaign against the Anglicans only began with the Ethiopian War and the support given by the Anglican hierarchy to the Ethiopians. From 1936 onwards, countless articles criticising Anglicans for a wide range of reasons (including hypocrisy, greediness, subservience to politics and wealth, as well as their bigotry and liberalism) started to appear in Italian newspapers and magazines. Some of the more thoughtful criticism is, however, due to its coherence with broader Fascist discourse on Britain.²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Unattributed, ‘Il movimento anglicano di Oxford fallisce ai suoi scopi’, *Il Corriere*, 6 July 1933, p. 5.

²⁴⁹ See: Patrizia Dogliani, *Il Fascismo degli Italiani* (Novara, De Agostini 2014), pp. 47-50.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ One subject which was particularly targeted by the Fascist press (with an inevitable amount of irony) was the Anglican Church’s criticism of King Edward’s marriage with a divorced American woman. See for example: Luigi Barzini Jr, ‘Un oscuro pastore anglicano celebrerà il rito a Candé sfidando i fulmini dell’arcivescovo di Canterbury’, 3 June 1937, p. 5; Unattributed, ‘la parola è d’argento,’ 17 December 1936, p. 2; Unattributed, ‘Si chiede ai prelati un po’ di caritàCristiana,’ 24 December 1936, p. 5; Unattributed, ‘Aspre accuse di Wells al primate anglicano’, 21 December 1936, p. 5, all in *Il Corriere*.

The first volleys were thrown by the fiercely Fascist priest Don Brizio Casciola who, thanks to his friendship with Margherita Sarfatti, regularly cooperated with *Gerarchia* through a column on religious subjects. Casciola had a history of reprimands by the ecclesiastical hierarchies regarding his attempts to proselytise among some Italian evangelical communities (the Church's stance was to avoid any contact with Evangelicals). His ecumenical philosophy was often expressed by foreseeing a return of the various Christian sects to the Catholic Church. In this context, his hatred for the 'treacherous' Anglican Church was amplified by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York's condemnation of the Ethiopian War. In a piece published in February 1936, the priest criticised the typical simplistic naivety of Anglo-Saxons when they criticised Mussolini for disturbing world peace. Did they ignore, Cacciola wondered, the fact that the Bible orders men to grow and multiply? According to this principle, the Italians wanted to 'turn deserts into gardens' and that was why they were fighting in Ethiopia.²⁵² He then expanded his point into a general criticism of the origins and nature of the Church of England. If the ancient Apostles had no mundane interests to defend, the Anglican prelates were mere tools of the interests of the British ruling classes. The 'original sin' of the Anglican Church was in its 'rejection of an international religious authority,' so that it now 'depended on the state, which in turn depended on the conservative class.' Furthermore, they had allied themselves with masonry, thereby 'betraying the Christian religion.' The rot had started, in Casciola's view, with the Reformation. Caused by the 'excessive exteriority' of the Catholic Church, it had nevertheless led to an extreme focus

²⁵² Cacciola had been a rigid pacifist during the Great War, supporting the Christian notion that war should be stopped and a fair peace reached. By the mid-1930s, it seems that his beliefs regarding the sinful nature of war had somewhat softened.

on the ‘interiorità,’ which in turn meant that the Anglican Church had sunk into ‘solipsism, anarchy and inhumanity.’²⁵³

The discourse presented the conflict against this treacherous church as a true religious war. Hence, during the Ethiopian War, the press reported on ‘protestant and Anglican elements’ actively trying to sabotage the efforts of the Catholic missionaries in Ethiopia, and in the following years the press gleefully reported of the expulsion from the country of Anglican missionaries, which it claimed were spies and saboteurs.²⁵⁴ *Il Giornale d’Italia* attacked the Anglican missions in general, writing that they were ‘creating spiritual disorder’ and undermining Italian authority: ‘That is the case with the British missionaries, and their brothers, who followed their impure path.’²⁵⁵

Like many other facets of the Fascist criticism of Britain, the religious one found at least some important supporters in Britain itself. Mussolini’s settlement of the long dispute between the Italian state and the Vatican deeply impressed many British Catholics.²⁵⁶ As a consequence, many important British Catholics supported Mussolini’s actions in Ethiopia and had strong Fascist sympathies.²⁵⁷ Their works were often quoted by the Fascists, especially during the Second World War. In 1937, British polemist and historian Hillaire Belloc wrote a booklet about ‘The Character of Contemporary England’ which included strong criticism of the Anglican Church. The piece was promptly published in Italy that same year and was later quoted in *La Difesa della Razza* in 1943. According to

²⁵³ Brizio Cacciola ‘Fermi’, ‘Il pensiero religioso’, *Gerarchia*, February 1936, pp. 131-6.

²⁵⁴ Salvatore Aponte, ‘Nelle retrovie nemiche, disordine e malcontento secondo notizie giunte da Gibuti’, *Il Corriere*, 30 January 1936, p. 1.

²⁵⁵ Unattributed, ‘L’espulsione dall’Etiopia di missionari protestanti,’ *Il Corriere*, 10 April 1937, p. 2.

²⁵⁶ Colacicco, *La propaganda Fascista nelle università inglesi*, p. 233.

²⁵⁷ G. K. Chesterton, for example, was a fervent admirer of Mussolini and asked to meet him in 1929. See: No title, busta 315, Serie numerica 1922-1943, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, 1922-1945, ACS.

Belloc, the British hatred of Rome had strong religious connotations and was mixed with the traditional sense of racial superiority held by all Englishmen:

Today [...] the fundamental feeling of hostility against Rome and all the European Catholic culture is as strong as before. The Catholic Church is still an extraneous institution for [the Church of England] and their followers [...] It is an hateful institution because it is foreign.²⁵⁸

Belloc's thesis was often repeated by the Fascist press. In 1942, writing about the ongoing British debate over whether to separate the Anglican Church and the State, an article in *La Stampa* depicted the discussion as an anti-Catholic move driven by the secular tradition of hostility and envy the Anglicans held for Catholicism. 'Churchill's England is substantially as anti-Roman and anti-Papal as the England of Henry the VIII,' the article wrote.²⁵⁹

Alfredo Obertello - Professor of Italian Literature at the University of Cardiff before the Second World War - described the British idea of religion (regardless of denominations, which he defined as 'squabbling factions') as a merry form of atheism, 'for it had lost the permanent absolute value, the divine law, a comfortable human connivance.'²⁶⁰ Since British culture conceived life as a ruthless struggle for success and wealth, in Britain religion was acceptable only as long as its positive rules were not a burden or a hindrance to the pursuit of material achievements. In the second half of the 1930s, the Anglican Church became one of the favourite targets of attacks by the newspapers, which focused on its supposed arrogance, hypocrisy and growing ties with Bolshevism.²⁶¹ The British

²⁵⁸ Hillaire Belloc, *Essay on Nature of Contemporary England* (Italian translation Florence: 1937) pp. 50-59; 60-61, also cited in *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 March 1943, p. 11.

²⁵⁹ Unattributed, 'Grippes e l'arcivescovo di Canterbury polemizzano sulla Chiesa anglicana,' *La Stampa*, 16 November 1942, p. 4.

²⁶⁰ Alfredo Obertello, 'Gli inglesi, o dell'intima elezione', *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 March 1943, pp. 5-8.

²⁶¹ See, for example: Unattributed, 'Il subdolo rapporto della missione anglicana in Spagna', *Il Corriere*, February 18 1937, p.7; Unattributed, 'Il loquace diacono di Canterbury', *Il Corriere*, 14 April 1937, p.2; Unattributed, 'Smentite ad un prelado anglicano favorevole ai rossi spagnoli', *Il Corriere*, 23 May 1938, p.6. The press reached the point of claiming that the Soviet Union

sense of superiority was explained by Curzio Villa using religious reasons.²⁶² The accusation of solidarity with Bolshevism peaked with the Second World War and the Anglo-Soviet alliance in 1941. The Italian press could then write that ‘the Anglican Church, for an abhorrent solidarity with the enemies of the Axis, has become the paladin of Bolshevism, getting to this paradoxical sacrilege of asking God to bless and protect the ones who deny him.’²⁶³ The Anglicans also horrified Fascist commentators for other reasons. Their support for birth control was both deeply anti-Catholic and inconceivable for a regime that considered demographic decline as the symbol of the death of a people. As one Fascist commentator put it, the Anglicans, who favoured the reduction in births and supported Bolshevism, had one goal: to fight Fascism.²⁶⁴

With the introduction of state anti-Semitism in Italy from 1938 onwards, this line of thought gradually led to the association of Anglicanism with Judaism. The accusations made against one religion were similar to ones made against the other. The association between the two groups led to anti-Axis demonstrations in Britain ‘with the participation of high rank prelates, indiscriminately flanked by rabbis or other directors of the Jewish communities or by representatives of the Third International.’²⁶⁵ Celine’s words about Protestantism being a Jewish creation were reported in *Il Corriere*.²⁶⁶ During the Second World War, the fiercest anti-Semites started to explain this cooperation as based upon an innate connection between the British and Jewish concepts of religion. According to Gino Sottocchia, British puritanism (which he seemed to associate with Anglicanism) was

enjoyed ‘the protection if not the spiritual leading of the Anglican leaders.’ See: Pietro P. Carbonelli, ‘Ondeggiamenti pericolosi’, *Il Corriere*, November 9 1937, p. 1.

²⁶² Curzio Villa, ‘Scoperta degli Inglesi’, *Gerarchia*, January 1938, pp. 46-50.

²⁶³ Unattributed, ‘Infame sacrilegio’, *Il Corriere*, 30 September 1941, p. 3.

²⁶⁴ See: Unattributed, ‘Il fronte ideale’, *Il Corriere*, 24 December 1935, p.1; Nicola Pascazio, ‘La propaganda contro la razza in Gran Bretagna’, *Gerarchia*, January 1941, pp. 23-8. For a more thorough analysis of the subject, see Chapter 4.

²⁶⁵ P.C., ‘Rabbini e prelati anglicani affiancati nella campagna contro gli stati totalitari,’ *Il Corriere*, 8 December 1938, p. 1.

²⁶⁶ Piovene, ‘Quattrocento pagine tutte d’un fiato,’ *Il Corriere*, 8 June 1938, p. 3.

quintessentially British and Judaic at the same time. Its ‘pretences of self-election and world dominance’ were similar to that of the Jews, and granted the Briton a sort of divine right over the world, a ‘new Jehovah transplanted from Jerusalem to London.’²⁶⁷

In the same way, according to Sottocchia, the general puritan cruelty, hatred and close-mindedness was reminiscent of the harshness of the Old Testament. Whereas National Socialists often praised Oliver Cromwell, even comparing him to Hitler, the article described Puritan England under Cromwell as a country where ‘a dark sadness surrounded all things,’ with a flood of Jews invited by Cromwell and to whom the ‘dictator’ granted many privileges.²⁶⁸ Cromwell’s England looked to the Jewish Old Testament for hints that the British themselves were the Chosen People; such a belief had survived until the twentieth century within the notion that ‘the current English rulers, who monopolized the essence and will of God,’ were waging war against the Axis as a crusade under the banner of the English God. After all it was not surprising, Sottocchia argued, that many Britons claimed that the English and the Jewish peoples were one. ‘Anglo-Hebraism,’ the article concluded, forged by Puritan praxis, was now part of the British nature and could not be erased.²⁶⁹ The Jewish influence in Britain was explained by another author as the result of a decline in Catholicism in the country. The Catholic Kings had banned the Jews, and the Puritan Cromwell had allowed them to come back. The ‘Anglo-Judaic’ affinity dated back to that fateful day, and had developed to the point that

the English are the only European people who do not just reject, but even invent the story of its lineage from the Chosen People, even believing to have demonstrated that the English are one of the ten tribes lost after the destruction of Jerusalem.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Gino Sottocchia, ‘Lo spirito ebraico nel puritanesimo,’ *Gerarchia*, October 1940, pp. 35-8.

²⁶⁸ Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 71-3.

²⁶⁹ Gino Sottocchia, ‘Lo spirito ebraico nel puritanesimo,’ *Gerarchia*, October 1940, pp. 35-8.

²⁷⁰ G. Dell’Isola, ‘Somiglianze tra il giu daismo e la religione degli inglesi,’ *La Difesa*, November 1941, pp. 28-30.

The Jews, for their part, also had great sympathy for the British. While economic interest contributed to this *entente* (London had supposedly become the centre of Jewish trade), the true reason was ‘the similarity between Christianity as the English conceive it and the Hebraic religion.’ Both were ‘capitalistic religions’ which saw God’s grace in wealth alone, which justified Jewish and British harshness against the poor. Both were based on the idea of being the Chosen People, ‘which provided both the English and the Jews with a divine justification for any violence or trick acted upon other peoples.’²⁷¹ Many other articles in *La Difesa* and elsewhere stressed the link between the two religions.²⁷²

The Anti-Anglican discourse was partly shaped by foreign policy, a desire to uphold ‘Italian-ness’ and hence Catholicism, and eventually anti-Semitism. Fascism represented the Anglican Church as a form of religious anarchy, ‘modern’ in an unacceptable way, and at the same time grimly Puritan, both materialistic and hopelessly anachronistic, and definitely incompatible with Roman, Catholic and Fascist ecumenical aspirations.

Critique of British Feminism

Fascist scholar Guido Manacorda described masonry as a ‘pseudo-religion’ with clear ties to Judaism and Anglicanism.²⁷³ The Scottish Rite Masonry was of ‘very obvious English brand,’ with occasional ‘dangerous incursions in[to] the blackest Satanism. But

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² See: Telesio Interlandi, *I due popoli eletti*, *La Difesa*, February 1942, pp. 6-8, F. Cat, ‘Alle origini dell’alleanza anglo-giudaica,’ *La Difesa*, 5 September 1942, pp. 17-20. One of Concetto Pettinato’s 1941 articles in *La Stampa* contained a typical, if rarer, comparison of Anglicanism with another church. According to Pettinato, the Anglican Church, being a state-religion in a country which was not a theocracy, had sterilised its own theology. In this, Pettinato thought, it was similar to the Russian Orthodox Church, which had so much responsibility for the collapse of the Tsarist system: ‘After centuries [Anglicanism] is still, like the religion of old Russia, [the] supine servant of the State, involved with political and social compromise, dangerously incline[d] to compromise and more preoccupied with the earth than with the heaven.’ See: Concetto Pettinato, ‘Che cosa sono questi inglesi? Il paradiso perduto,’ *La Stampa*, 21 June 1941, p. 3.

²⁷³ Guido Manacorda, ‘Anima e volto delle moderne democrazie,’ *Il Corriere*, 4 November 1938, p. 5.

these things happen, usually, to puritans.’²⁷⁴ All these sects, according to Manacorda, had developed the same demo-Anglo-Saxon cultural features and thrived in the old, rusty and withered societies of the West. Like its French and American ‘sisters,’ it rested on a mediocre philosophy: the rejection of metaphysics, individualism, empiricism and hedonism, which in turn meant ‘license, whims, pleasure.’ Masonry also meant the destruction of the family and the spread of feminism.²⁷⁵ As Patrizia Dogliani underlined, Fascist policies concerning women presented a glaring contradiction. The regime successfully strove to fascistise a vast number of women in the north and the centre of Italy through its non-traditional models of femininity (like sports, culture and other forms of participation in public life). However, it also expected them to remain within the closed doors of their home and family after marriage, virtually disappearing from public life with the exception of the ritual appearances required by forced mobilisations during Fascist demonstrations. Women were therefore necessarily going to submit to their husband.²⁷⁶ Western feminism was seen by many in the Fascist elite as caused by the decadence of masculine supremacy and strength in Britain. It was also considered a sign that women rejected their rightful place in society. Rather than violently attacking feminism, however,

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Dogliani, *Il Fascismo degli Italiani*, p.126. Interestingly, some Italian feminists who turned to Fascism justified their conversion by claiming that Fascism was compatible with a ‘Latin feminism’ which, unlike different from the ‘sterile doctrines’ of other countries, emphasized the importance of maternity over freedom. See Perry Wilson, *Italiane, Biografia del Novecento* (Bari: Laterza, 2019,) p.154. On the broader subject of Fascism and women, see: Isabella Gianelloni, *Cara contessa: le donne e il fascismo* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2014); Stefania Bartoloni, *Il fascismo e le donne nella Rassegna femminile italiana, 1925-1930* (Rome: Biblink, 2012) Nunzia Messina, *Le donne del fascismo : massaie rurali e dive del cinema nel Ventennio* (Rome: Ellemme, 1987), Luciana Buseghin, Cristina Papa, Paola Falteri, *L’organizzazione del consenso nel regime fascista : modelli culturali e forme istituzionali nel controllo sociale sulla donna* (Perugia : Istituto di etnologia e antropologia culturale della Università degli studi, 1983); Mirella Leone, *Il fascismo e l’universo femminile : consenso e dissenso delle donne italiane* (Verona : QuiEdit, 2017) Martin Durham, *Women and fascism* (London: Routledge, 1998) Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna "nera" : "consenso" femminile e fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli economica, 1977); Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare : ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 1975.)

Fascist commentators resorted to ridicule. In 1938, one article in *Il Corriere* laughed at the prospect of a ‘female army’ being organised for the defence of Britain; the author finding the notion of aspiring *generalesse* particularly amusing.²⁷⁷ Another article from the same newspaper, drafted in 1939, described the terrible conditions of ‘the so called Strong Sex’ in Britain, where female workers mistreated their male colleagues to the point that the latter had been forced to organise a league to protect men.²⁷⁸ In September 1941, journalist and writer Paolo Monelli - who was to remain an important intellectual after the war - claimed that British women were not simply equal to men in all aspects of society, including sexual morals, but actually enjoyed a privileged position over men. It was from this ‘confusion of roles’ that much of Britain’s weakness stemmed. Another journalist wrote in *Il Mattino* that British women’s psyche was ‘abnormal’, as their dubious, familiar morality showed.²⁷⁹ In 1943, a correspondent identifying himself only as ‘Minosse’ wrote in *Il Corriere* that the most harmful effect resulting from the participation of women in the industrial sector because of the war was that it undermined the moral basis of society. Unlike in the well-organised totalitarian countries, where ‘women are tasked with duties fitting their familiar and social function,’ in Britain women, who were very spoiled even before the war, now felt completely independent and equal to men. The catastrophic effect, the author thought, was that the demographic decline could be attributed to ‘the firm principle of the English women not to give up their independence.’²⁸⁰ In general, it was clear that Fascist discourse was viscerally offended by the perceived role of a ‘liberated’ woman existing in British society. Still, on 21 April 1945, a few days before the end of the Fascist regime, *La Stampa* reported that 7000

²⁷⁷ Unattributed, ‘Un’armata femminile per la difesa dell’Inghilterra,’ *Il Corriere*, 13 June 1938, p. 6.

²⁷⁸ Unattributed, ‘Riscossa in Inghilterra del cosiddetto sesso forte,’ *Il Corriere*, 7 April 1939, p.5.

²⁷⁹ Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra*, p. 162.

²⁸⁰ Minosse, ‘La bottega laburista e le acrobazie dei comunisti inglesi,’ *Il Corriere*, 19 April 1943, p. 1. For a broader discussion of demographic decline, see Chapter 4.

English girls between 13 and 17 years old had been arrested for crimes against public morals. This was proof that, while the British acted as defenders and teachers of moral order, they were clearly inferior in both to the Italian people, whose girls did not give such problems. The article also connected ‘English liberty,’ and its moral degeneration, with the misery of British lower classes.²⁸¹

In Nazi Germany, once relations with Britain had definitely soured, the regime depicted it as an ‘old’ country. As we have seen, the same happened in Fascist Italy. In Germany, however, German technological supremacy and alleged British technological backwardness were fundamental parts of the discourse.²⁸² Consistent with the futurist aesthetics of Fascism, images of a thundering, lethal Fascist war machine vastly ahead of a desperately clumsy and slow British behemoth can be found in Fascist military discourse.²⁸³ Defeats at the hands of the British during the Second World War surprised many, for the notion of a technologically-advanced Britain fighting a tragically-

²⁸¹ Unattributed, ‘Ragazze inglesi,’ *La Stampa*, 21 April 1945, p. 1.

²⁸² Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, p. 224.

²⁸³ On the futurist aesthetics of Fascism, see Monica Cioli, *Il fascismo e la “sua” arte, dottrina e istituzioni tra futurismo e novecento*, (Florence: Olschki ed. 2011,) pp. 30-56; 314-327; Ernest Lalongo, ‘Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: The Futurist as Fascist, 1929-1937.’ *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, 4 (September 2013,) pp. 393-418; Christopher Adams, “A Leap of Faith: Futurism, Fascism and the ‘Manifesto of Futurist Sacred Art’” in Massimo Duranti, Renato Miracco, Roberta Cremoncini, and Christopher Adams ed. *Piety and Pragmatism: Spiritualism in Futurist Art*, (Rome: Gangemi 2007,) pp.41–46; Emilio Gentile, ‘Il futurismo e la politica. Dal nazionalismo modernista al fascismo (1909–1920),’ In *Futurismo, cultura, e politica*, Renzo de Felice eds. (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli 1988.)

The leading Italian futurist, T. M. Marinetti, wrote a anti-British manifesto during the summer 1935’s diplomatic crisis with Britain. As Ernest Lalongo wrote ‘Marinetti’s manifesto was meant to demonize the British and called on Italians to achieve their independence from the various customs adopted from England, which he characterized as symptoms of a culture indeneration. These were to be replaced with the culture of the new and Fascist Italy on the path of imperial expansion. He denigrated English ‘snobismo’, as ‘the gasping surrogate of every authentic human exertion and worth, that praises the most closed-minded impermeability to ideas and the most lachrymose pity for the little Chinese [recently invaded by Japan], Tripolitani [Libyans], Abyssinians, etc.’. Furthermore, he denigrated “‘the well-shaven beard”, a surrogate for personality’, ‘the small “pipe”, a surrogate for thought’, ‘the “Puritanism” of clothing starched with the rigid pleats of alcoholism, degeneracy, and the lack of genius’, ‘the indifference to women’, and, he concluded, ‘let’s not even talk about their sexual abnormalities’. See Lalongo, ‘Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Futurist as Fascist,’ p. 408.

unprepared Italy was far from widespread when Mussolini decided to join the Second World War (see Chapter 3). At the same time, the emphasis on the youthful nature of the Italian people and the Fascist revolution meant that the comparison with the elderly, sterile Britain was unavoidable. This ‘old vs. new’ trope was how the rivalry between Britain and Italy was often explained. However, the overall technological disparity between Britain and Italy meant that while the decrepit nature of British society was one of the most popular tropes, it did not automatically translate, like in Germany, in the idea of a *materially* backward Britain. Mussolini was, after all, keen to underline that it was spirit, and not matter, that moved history.

Cultural discourse: British Character and Art

British culture was at times used as an example of what was wrong with British society. One enlightening example was Mario Praz’s commentary on the 1935 musical version of the satire *1066 and All That*. Praz was one of the few Italian *anglisti* (he would create the first school for English studies in Italy) and was one of the country’s leading experts in English literature. He was also a fervent Fascist who would later collaborate with Bottai’s magazine *Primato*.²⁸⁴ His understanding of Britain did not shield him from interpreting the culture of the country with a truly ‘Fascist’ attitude. Praz commented that ‘in England the most depressing spectacle is not the unemployment of the youth but the golden, bored and valetudinarian comfort of too many old men.’ Theatre itself looked like an old, second-rate cinema, squalid and suffocating: such was the context in which *1066 and All That* was represented. The nonsensical nature of the play was, Praz admitted, part of a venerable British tradition. Yet what surprised Praz was that the targets of the play were

²⁸⁴ After the war, Praz would collaborate with the right-wing newspapers *Il Tempo* and with Indro Montanelli’s *Il Giornale*.

not ‘the Gods of Homer or the politicians of the time or the happenings of the year.’ It was instead ‘the venerable characters of the national history which danced in a grotesque ballet, and the most appreciated songs are nothing but that humorous version of the popular songs of the War.’ Praz’s surprise was understandable. The Fascist regime’s grip on culture, with all the importance it gave to presenting Italian history as a logical development towards Fascism, as well as with its sacralisation of the Great War, made pieces like *1066 and All That* unlikely to appear in Italy.²⁸⁵ *1066* ignored, Praz wrote, whether it could be said that the British people were so comfortable and crystallised in their status quo that they could detach themselves from their own history and smile about it, like someone who had reached the top of a tower and looks at ‘the silky ladder which helped him to reach it.’ He knew, however, that for other peoples ‘past history is still lived and suffered as a present destiny, not detached parody. These peoples did not sit on armchairs, the streets of their cities are not afflicted by the golden, bored and valetudinarian comfort of too many old men.’²⁸⁶

More sophisticated was the anti-British satire of Fascist writer Curzio Malaparte. Malaparte had a controversial relationship with the regime; an ardent intellectual supporter of Mussolini during the 1920s, he was stripped of his party membership in 1933, was arrested and forced to the *confino* for years. He was a journalist during the Second World War, after the end of the conflict moving towards Communist and Catholic positions, before eventually becoming a Maoist. More consistent was his hostility towards the western powers. Between 1933 and 1934, Malaparte published many articles in *Il Corriere della Sera* (a collection of these would eventually be published in 1960 as

²⁸⁵ On the Fascist sacralisation of the Great War, see: John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009,) pp. 44-49; Emilio Gentile, George L. Mosse, *Le Guerre Mondiali, dalla tragedia al mito dei caduti* (Bari: Laterza, 1990) pp. 59-65; Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio* (Bari: Laterza, 2019,) pp.27-29.

²⁸⁶ Mario Praz, ‘1066 and All That’, *La Stampa*, 12 September 1935, p. 3.

L'Inglese in Paradiso), Malaparte ironically described the English character as *other* from the rest of the European peoples.²⁸⁷ The English, Malaparte wrote, were angels:

I love the English, their shyness, their haughty diffidence, their smiling contempt, the candor of their foreheads covered with light freckles [...] Alas, I love the English, and my feeling for this cold and quiet people, with its red lips, their white and soft hands, is not that different from that which makes one bow in front of the images of Angels, Martyrs and Saints. In front of the English, as if in front of a holy icon, I feel human.²⁸⁸

As 'all is allowed to the English, all is forgiven to them before in advance. No good deed manages to darken their conscience. No sin damages them.'²⁸⁹ This ironic label was the result of the English people's unshakable sense of superiority and trust in its own manifest destiny. While it has been claimed that Malaparte's essays were sympathetic to the British under the veil of irony, the picture of the English people emerging from Malaparte's words is hardly positive.²⁹⁰ He attacked many of what he perceived to be the flaws of English character, from their love for and identification with animals ('for an Englishman there are but two really and supremely civil peoples: the English and the animals'), their peculiar understanding of Greek classicism, to their attitude towards any other people ('the Children of Albion, lucky them, do not love anyone but themselves. They do not care about the others, or despise them, or sneer at them or, what is worse, take them under their uninterested and unsatiated protection'). All were, in turn, the object of Malaparte's irony.²⁹¹ Malaparte's sympathy for Britain had certainly disappeared for good by the time

²⁸⁷ Curzio Malaparte, *L'inglese in paradiso* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1960).

²⁸⁸ Malaparte, 'Gli Angeli ad Oxford,' *Il Corriere*, 28 March 1933, *Il Corriere*, p. 3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Giordano Bruno Guerri, *L'Arcitaliano*, Vita di Curzio Malaparte (Milano: Bompiani, 2008), p. 163.

²⁹¹ Malaparte, 'Eschilo in Cambridge,' 21 March 1933; 'I Cervi e il latino,' 14 July 1933; 'Un popolo che emigra,' 18 June 1933, all in *Il Corriere*.

he wrote some vicious anti-Greek and anti-British articles during the Second World War.²⁹²

Denis Mack Smith asserted that British literature was used as proof of the decadence, unmanliness, materialism and godlessness of England.²⁹³ However, in fact, British culture was not always criticised. Just as the prestige of Italian intellectuals and professors had been consistently used to promote the image of Fascism and of Italy, the Fascists tried to use the appeal Italy always had for British intellectuals, or these intellectuals' criticism of Britain, in order to achieve the same goals.²⁹⁴ One famous example is George Bernard Shaw. The Irish-born playwright and polemicist was known for his criticism of British society and politics, and was hence 'enlisted' as a tool of anti-British Nazi discourse, to the point that Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels claimed that, without him, his domestic propaganda would have been considerably weaker.²⁹⁵ Perhaps British culture was not well known enough in Italy for Shaw or other writers to be considered essential to Fascist discourse.²⁹⁶ Shaw - a personal admirer of Mussolini - was, however, referred to when it was deemed useful to use a British source to attack Britain. In 1930, Shaw's words castigating the vices of universal suffrage and democracy were printed in *Il Corriere*. His attacks against British foreign policy and the League of Nations were reported, and when in 1938 Shaw reprimanded those who dared to call Mussolini and Hitler dictators, explaining that Fascism was instead 'a new form of government,' he was praised in the newspapers as a great antiparliamentary author.²⁹⁷ Furthermore, he was

²⁹² Malaparte, 'L'ipocrita maschera della neutralità' greca 29 October 1940, p. 3; 'La sveglia a Metaxas,' e agli inglesi at Atene, 30 October 1940, p.3; 'La cricca anglofila del governo Metaxas,' 30 October 1940, p. 1, all in *Il Corriere*.

²⁹³ Denis Mack Smith, 'Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy,' p. 90.

²⁹⁴ Colacicco, *La propaganda Fascista nelle università inglesi*, p. 226.

²⁹⁵ Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 186-7.

²⁹⁶ On translation of foreign literature in Fascist Italy see Francesca Billiani, *Traduzioni e identità nazionale nell'Italia degli anni Venti e Trenta* (FDL, 2004,) pp. 17-23.

²⁹⁷ From *Il Corriere*, Unattributed, 'Shaw, Il suffragio universale ed I vizi della democrazia,' 26 March 1930, p. 1; Unattributed, 'Sarcasmi di Bernard Shaw sull'italofobia Britannica,' 12 April

considered of enough importance, together with Shakespeare, to be one of only two playwrights from 'sanctionist' countries that was not banned from Italian theatres during the Ethiopian War. Likewise, his plays were not removed from theatres even during the years of the Second World War.²⁹⁸ Shaw was not alone in being willingly represented as part of a 'good Britain'. In 1937, commenting on an homage given to Mussolini by a group of British writers, *Il Corriere* commented that this demonstrated that not all British people were against Fascism and Italy:

[This episode] confirms how the feeling of the English people regarding Italy is represented not only by the Labour deputies and by the respective if not respectable *deputatessa*, nor by the archbishops of the various denominations, nor by the intelligence service, nor by the papers financed by the producers of cotton and weapons. Another England exists, numerically smaller and which counts little in electoral games, but which must account for something in the struggle of ideas.²⁹⁹

The fact that this sample of the British people was small did not matter, for Fascism denied the 'democratic mindset' according to which it was the numbers which mattered. The article went on to praise Mussolini's proclamation of the importance of poetry in the modern, mechanic world, but what is interesting here is that, far from condemning British culture, in this case it was praised as the only healthy aspect of the British people.³⁰⁰ However, the British university system was described as a nest of anti-Fascists, young dandies blinded by Jewish lies about Fascism and seduced by Bolshevism. The Fascist journalist Pietro Carbonelli wrote an article about the 'extremists with an Oxfordian accent.' Carbonelli's piece is particularly interesting, for it manages to combine Fascist

1936, p. 2; Unattributed, 'Pericolose illusioni inglesi criticate da Lord Stonehaven,' May 1936, p.7., Unattributed, Shaw ridicolizza Ginevra in un nuovo drama satirico, 9 May 1938, p. 4; Unattributed, 'E' pazzo Bernard Shaw o sono pazzi gli inglesi?' 31 August 1939, p. 2; Unattributed, 'Un articolo di Bernard Shaw contro la politica inglese,' 26 October 1939, p. 2; P.C., 'Un grandioso bilancio e un'inflessibile volontà,' 11 July 1938, p.1.

²⁹⁸ Unattributed, 'Come l'Italia risponde alle sanzioni nel settore dello spettacolo,' *Il Corriere*, 29 November 1935, p. 3.

²⁹⁹ Unattributed, 'Necessità della poesia,' *Il Corriere*, 27 February 1937, p. 1.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

hostility for the supposedly degenerate, weak and snobbish elite with the growing belief that British culture was by then in communist hands. In Carbonelli's words,

it is a fact understood even by the English that among the highbrows [in English in the text] of the upcoming generations and especially among the youth of the universities, not few are the ones who [...] think they are marching towards the future getting a card of the University Labour Federation and mumbling the anti-Fascist litanies of model-professors.³⁰¹

One simply had to go to any British university to 'meet everywhere these Bolsheviks with a feminine skin' celebrating the Soviet revolution or collecting funds to help the Reds in the Spanish Civil War. Fifty years ago, Carbonelli reflected, the Oxford-accented British youth spoke a very different language, inspiring themselves with the works of Kipling and Cecil Rhodes.³⁰² The resolution voted for by some students, which said that they would not fight for King and Country, would have been inconceivable then. Yet at the time, Carbonelli wrote:

Today, instead, Professor Laski, internationalist Jew with one foot in Moscow and one in New York, is considered "the most genuine exponent of the new British intellectuality". The toxins of extremism spread from the University halls to the village schools, polluting the spirit of the nation and seeding hatred and resentment against other countries.

Jewish influence was not the only reason for the supposed sorry state of British youth; once again, a British intellectual with Fascist sympathies was mentioned in order to give strength to the argument. Carbonelli quoted the British author, playwright, journalist and composer Beverley Nichols, stating that Britain was a 'nation without a hero.' Nichols himself had met Oswald Mosley in 1937 and was convinced that he was the hero Britain needed.³⁰³ Nichols' assessment, Carbonelli thought, was a

³⁰¹ Pietro Carbonelli, 'Estremisti con l'accento di Oxford,' *Il Corriere*, 9 November 1938, p. 3.

³⁰² The description of British colleges and university students as nests of degenerate radicals who forgot the good old ways of their predecessors has not disappeared to this day and appears to be consistent among the far right.

³⁰³ Beverley Nichols, *News of England, or a Country without a Hero* (New York: Doubleday, 1938), p. 283.

terrible diagnosis, that alas needs no counter-analysis to be accepted. In the greyness of a decaying democracy the British youth, without a Hero, was caught by discouragement, and was overrun by Muscovite nihilism, dazzled by Judaic *messianismo* [...] so that the students of Oxford and Bloomsbury read Challenge or New Commonwealth, drying their aristocratic lips with adorned napkins around tea tables, profess their antifascism nibbling pastries, and repeat by memory words by Marx and Engels, [drinking] at ten a.m. a diabolic cocktail based on gin and advokaat.³⁰⁴

Carbonelli's analysis makes it clear that, despite the few 'good' educated Englishmen who supported Fascism, British education and culture were, if anything, corrupting forces for the spirit of the nation.

Unsurprisingly, the criticism of British culture peaked with the Second World War. The assumption was that, under the apocalyptic firestorms which were engulfing Britain, the British people, unwilling to renounce their entertainments - theatre in particular - were losing their restraints, enjoying despicable pleasures while the world around them was collapsing. The government, instead of trying to limit these excesses, supported them in order to show the world that British theatre was far from dead, even under the bombings. Scantily dressed women, alcohol and partying therefore helped Londoners to forget the war they were losing.³⁰⁵ Oxford was but a shadow of its former self, 'flooding with refugees'; where once the 'language of Shakespeare was spoken [now] the accents of Eastern European Ghettoes are heard.'³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Pietro Carbonelli, *Estremisti con l'accento di Oxford*, *Il Corriere*, 9 November 1938, p. 3.

³⁰⁵ M.b., 'Morbose rappresentazioni della vita notturna a Londra,' *Il Corriere*, 8 November 1940, p.3. Dandyism was also criticised, considered as a declining but 'typical' form of British degeneracy. See: Unattributed, 'La folle vita e la triste fine dell'ultimo "dandy"', *Il Corriere*, 4 January 1940, p. 2. The British obsession with alcohol was also described as endemic by many articles. See, for example: Unattributed, 'A Londra sono pazzi per i liquori,' *Il Corriere*, 9 June 1942, p. 4.

³⁰⁶ G.G., *Decadenza di Oxford*, *Il Corriere*, 18 June 1942, p. 3.

Conclusions

This chapter analysed Fascist public discourse in order to underline how the image of a Britain which could be fascistised came to be formed in Mussolini's, and many other Fascists', minds. The discourse identifying Britain as a country frozen in its economic and social conservatism consistently appeared from 1926 onward. Therefore, long before the Great Depression, Fascist intellectuals saw the British political, economic and social system as a relic of the past, unable to keep pace with the new, increasingly Fascist world. The reason Fascists devoted so much energy to criticising a still-friendly country is that they were responding to and appropriating a narrative that existed in Britain itself. As Richard Overy explained,

the conditions of the British economic crisis in the 1920s, brought briefly to a head with the General Strike of 1926 and the short downturn in the business cycle that year, made the argument for [economic] decadence plausible, and it is significant that the idea of decline was widely embedded in public discussion of the economy well before the onset of the economic crash of 1929-1932 lent overwhelming historical weight to the argument.³⁰⁷

This chapter builds on Overy's conclusions on the British mind-set in order to shed light on the Italian Fascist one. Fascist commentators certainly observed the British crisis with what we could describe as confirmation bias, but Fascist discourse was not merely propaganda destined for internal consumption. The 'constant theme of civilization in crisis' spreading in British society and culture during the interwar years was mirrored in Fascist discourse, while certainly distorted by the interests of the regime and the cultural biases of Fascist commentators.³⁰⁸ As underlined by Emilio Gentile, Fascism was conceived as a *positive* ideology in the sense that it was more than an anti-liberal or anti-communist doctrine, as well as one which proposed a transformation of society according

³⁰⁷ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, p. 66.

³⁰⁸ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, p. 384.

to its own principles. Such a project, Gentile argues, proved popular outside Italy.³⁰⁹ As

Matteo Pasetti wrote:

Indeed, of the watchwords of Italian Fascism, corporatism was one that from the outset attracted considerable attention abroad. In the early years of Mussolini's government, some Fascist proclamations, including those addressing the end of class struggle, the integration of organized interests in the state and the need for a new political representation as an alternative to liberal democracy, crossed national borders.³¹⁰

This does not mean that efforts to sell corporatism as the way forward succeeded. In fact, as we have seen in the British case in particular, Mosley's Fascists remained a minor force in the political landscape. Yet just as many abroad considered Fascism the recipe to heal the ills of modernity, and therefore sometimes looked to Italy with a different attitude than in the past, in the same way the Fascists compared what was going on in Italy and in Britain and began to nurture a series of convictions and prejudices which proved of enduring importance. Observing what was happening in Britain, Fascist commentators were drawn to make comparisons with how they had (in their view) saved Italy from the economic and social troubles of the post-war era. They saw the Fascist model as the cure for these ills. From a grudging admiration which, in the early 1920s, pictured British society as mature enough for freedom compared with an Italian people needful of a strong educator, Britain rapidly became, in the eyes of many Fascists, the country of old men and plutocrats, of the 'full belly rights' and of endless strikes. By 1930, such a view was held by the most important Fascist commentators. Even more, this idea of Britain helped the Fascists to frame Fascism itself as a universal movement, the only 'right' way to face modernity and eventually as a message of salvation for the whole world. In this sense, the framing of Britain as an anachronistic, undisciplined society was more necessary to

³⁰⁹ Gentile, *Fascismo, Storia e Interpretazione*, pp. 79-80.

³¹⁰ Matteo Pasetti, 'The Fascist Labour Charter and its International Spread,' in *Corporatism and Fascism, the Fascist Wave in Europe*, ed. by Antonio Costa Pinto (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 62.

the domestic needs of the Fascist commentators than to their foreign policy programs - it was 'the other' needed in many a religion, political or otherwise.

The Great Depression did not radically modify this narrative. During this first phase, a relatively non-conflictual attitude prevailed - the idea that Britain was eventually bound to become Fascist. Rather than the Great Depression, what changed things was the eventual realisation that Britain was not likely to convert to Mussolini's new civilisation, or at least not by itself. The Great Depression's contribution was not to persuade Mussolini of British weakness (even if it undoubtedly reinforced his belief that it was so), but it rather made the *Duce's* hegemonic goals appear more realistic, first with and later without need of a Fascist revolution elsewhere (see the previous chapter). Eventually, knowing that he could not conquer the world with the force of ideas, Mussolini decided to adopt a more confrontational attitude towards Britain, starting a political shift which eventually led to his downfall. A more conflictual attitude ensued: the *Duce* challenged British opposition in Ethiopia and started a march towards controlling the Mediterranean, which culminated in his intervention in the Second World War. In terms of public discourse, after the beginning of the Ethiopian War the focus of Fascist criticism shifted to British foreign policy, as the previous chapter has shown. However, the discourse never completely stopped criticising British society or its political system.³¹¹ The bitter state of relations with Britain meant that hinting British society was following the path traced by Fascism was problematic at the very least. The academic and politician Pietro Chimenti seemingly solved the problem by writing in *Gerarchia* that, while the British Parliament and Church did not miss any chance to attack Fascism, Britain was nevertheless ruled, *de facto*, by ministerial decrees, hence demonstrating a decline in British democracy. The

³¹¹ See, for example, an article on the cultural review *Omnibus* in 1937, focused on the overbearing role of the decrepit aristocracy in Britain. John Antinori Mortimer, 'Conserva di Conservatori, crisi dell'imperialismo inglese,' *Omnibus*, 10 April 1937, Anno 1 n.2, XV.

Fascist system, of course, worked better than such a hybrid system because it was based on cooperation.³¹²

Renzo De Felice wrote that, in the 1930s, and especially after the Ethiopian War, Mussolini believed he was the answer to the degenerative sickness which (as Oswald Spengler had confirmed for him) was afflicting the West, finding a third way between Communism and Capitalism. As MacGregor Knox noted, this was not a new theme, as Mussolini had believed in the need to bring down the current *status quo* and create a new civilisation since his socialist years.³¹³ The point argued by this chapter is that Mussolini's beliefs had not been dormant between his conversion to nationalism and the 'awakening' of the aggressive, 'universal' Fascism of the 1930s. Instead, they had informed much of Italian public discourse since the Fascists had managed to monopolise it. Furthermore, far from being caused only by Mussolini's personal idiosyncrasies, such a mindset had been brought about by a combination of the peculiar ideological ethos of the Fascist movement and regime with the witnessing of the crisis that Britain was going through during the 1920s.

In the second half of the 1930s, criticism of British domestic life expanded beyond economic and social matters to encompass religion and culture. As Patrizia Dogliani explained, Mussolini did not simply hope to cooperate with the Vatican to expand Italian influence in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Danubian-Balkan area; he also hoped that the Vatican itself would side with Rome against the Protestant power which controlled the Holy Sites.³¹⁴ Gradually, Catholic attitudes mixed with the new anti-Semitic urges of the regime and produced a violent anti-Anglican discourse which had

³¹² Pietro Chimenti, 'La camera ei comuni e il fascismo,' *Gerarchia*, June 1937, pp. 383-6.

³¹³ Knox, 'The Fascist Regime, its Foreign Policy and its Wars: An Anti-Anti Fascist Orthodoxy? Contemporary European History,' 4, 3, (1995), p. 351.

³¹⁴ Patrizia Dogliani, *Il Fascismo degli Italiani* (Novara, De Agostini, 2014), p. 47.

not been present before. Concerning culture, it is hard to find traces of a Fascist analogue of the Nazi discourse about the 'land without music.' There was instead a mixed attitude, suspended between criticism for a supposedly decadent and certainly 'unfascist' world of culture and praise for those British intellectuals who embraced Mussolini and Fascism.

Chapter 3

The Anti-Heroic War: Appraisals of Britain's military strength

[Britain] is convinced that the life of the British citizen is too precious to be risked in the petty fights among continental countries.³¹⁵

Introduction

For Mussolini, as well as the general Fascist worldview, war was considered the greatest test of nations and ideologies.³¹⁶ Indeed, it was the pursuit of war and imperial expansion that led Fascist Italy down the path of hostility with Britain. However, war itself proved the doom of the Fascist experiment, mainly at the hands of the British Empire. The Italian Fascist representation of Great Britain from a military point of view is therefore both interesting for understanding the dynamics of Fascist ideology and its centrality to the development of Fascist foreign policy. However, not enough attention has been devoted to the perception of British military strength and capabilities in Fascist Italy. While the Intelligence Services (*Servizio Informazioni Militari*, or *SIM*, *Servizio Informazioni Marina*, or *SIS*, and *Servizio Informazioni Aeronautica*, or *SIA*) had built a remarkable system of information-gathering concerning foreign powers, providing a sufficiently accurate picture of war plans, it was far more difficult to provide a realistic evaluation of military strength and how this influenced foreign policy.³¹⁷ The basic problem, however, was the regime's inability to understand the military effectiveness of possible allies and

³¹⁵ Ruggeri Laderchi, 'Flessibilità di riarmo britannico', 15 March 1938, busta 937, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³¹⁶ Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, V.93, p. 26.

³¹⁷ Brian R. Sullivan, 'The Impatient Cat,' in *Calculations, Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II*, ed. by Williamson Murray, Allan R. Millett (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 105-119.

enemies of Italy. MacGregor Knox argued that just some of the reasons for the failure of Italian intelligence to assess the strength of its enemies were the overall lack of interest in and resources devoted to collecting the necessary information; the lack of long-term strategic analysis; the inefficiency caused by having three competing authorities involved in collection and assessment, as well as deeply-rooted inadequacies of both Italian military culture and the Fascist regime.³¹⁸ Yet how did the Fascist regime, with its emphasis on ideological indoctrination, influence the perception of Britain - the quintessentially bourgeois and democratic nation - as a military rival and later as an enemy? How did the regime's perception translate in the public discourse directed towards public opinion before and after the Second World War?

Classical historiography does not say much about this topic. The important historian of Fascism Denis Mack Smith wrote that

propaganda was not only the method by which Fascist leaders deceived the population in general, but also the way in which they deceived each other and the *Duce* himself. Correspondents quickly discovered that the Ministry of Culture liked them to ridicule the British army: they therefore described it as a useless force, not made up of Englishmen but of mercenaries, an army which would mutiny rather than parade in the rain and which would break of action at five o'clock for tea. Never could such an army contemplate war against the Axis powers, for such a war would mean the end of the British Empire.³¹⁹

In Mack Smith's opinion, then, the *Duce* had been tricked into a feeling of false sense of security by sycophantic officers. In the historian's view, British helplessness was not, then, a reflection of a widespread belief among the military, but only a fantasy created in order to please Mussolini himself. The other classic interpretation is that of Renzo De Felice. De Felice argued that Mussolini, while not alien to some 'elementary

³¹⁸ Knox, 'Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies' in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessments Before the Two World Wars*, ed. by E. May, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 371-72.

³¹⁹ Denis Mack Smith, *Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy*, in *'Inghilterra e Italia nel '900. Atti del convegno di Bagni di Lucca* (La Nuova Italia, 1973), p. 104.

Anglophobia' and convinced of the declining condition of the wealthy and aging British Empire, held a healthy respect for Britain that he did not have for France, a nation 'of shopkeepers' that he considered corrupt.³²⁰ De Felice's judgement was influenced by his own interpretation of Mussolini's foreign policy as consistently realistic and certainly not Anglophobic, to the point of claiming that Mussolini's main feeling towards Britain was disappointment at its incomprehension of his own situation and real goals. De Felice also overlooked the *Duce's* clear, long standing underestimation of Britain as a military threat, which was quite different from his attitude towards France.³²¹ Beyond these vague claims of Mussolinian respect for the British Empire, De Felice did not address any Fascist underrating of British military might or warlike attitude.

Pietro Cavallo's book *Italiani in guerra, sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943* tangentially deals with the topic, describing some of the tropes of Fascist anti-British propaganda, without however attempting to theorise whether these ideas had any meaning beyond mere propaganda.³²² Generally, there is no accurate study of the evolution of anti-British propaganda in Fascist Italy.

This chapter aims to provide a perspective which is both more detailed and more focused on the ideological consistency of Fascist discourse, contesting both De Felice's and Mack Smith's arguments and adding to the new interpretations of Fascism as a totalitarian project whose goal was to create a 'Fascist New Man'.³²³ It will demonstrate that Mack Smith's claim that the ridiculing of British military might was the delusion of a single

³²⁰ Despite this position, De Felice had to admit that 'after the Ethiopian business, he did not believe in the power of the English fleet anymore, the French army remained for him one of the strongest, if not the strongest of the world's armies.' See: De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce*, p. 770.

³²¹ Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato, Vol. I* (Turin, Einaudi, 1990) pp.171-3. For a broader perspective on the criticism of De Felice's interpretation of Italian foreign policy, see: Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³²² See: Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra, sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

³²³ See, for example: Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, p. 80.

individual (although nourished by lying officers) tells only part of the truth. Rather, Mussolini's delusions were shared by a meaningful section of high-ranking officers as well as military technicians. The chapter will also contest De Felice's notion of Mussolini's respect for the British Empire, proving that the *Duce* considered Britain a decaying and unwarlike realm. It will therefore focus on the reports of Italian military attachés in Britain from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, examining the progressive change in the perception of Britain in the eyes of military technicians, who were not ideologues and had instead close contact with British reality, yet still clearly absorbed the Fascist *weltanschauung* concerning a decadent, bourgeois Britain. The chapter will hence also fill a historiographical gap, since there is no comprehensive research on Italian military attachés in Britain during the Fascist era. The aim of the first section of the chapter is to demonstrate that it was not just the *Duce* (as in Mack Smith's analysis) that sincerely underrated Britain, but also the military elite and, in a top-down process, mid-ranking officers like the military attachés.

Unlike that of Mack Smith, De Felice's analysis of Italian war propaganda recognises that there were two kinds of Fascist discourse regarding Britain: one which he described as permeated by 'an extreme verbal violence,' and one 'more cultured', which developed from an old tradition of Anglophobia. De Felice identified three 'eras' of Italian anti-British propaganda: one spanning between June and December 1940, the second until mid-1942, with the third lasting until the end of the regime in September 1943. In De Felice's analysis, the first period focused on justifying the Italian war, blaming Britain for starting the conflict. During the second phase, propaganda attempted to justify Italian defeats, while at the same time underlining the lack of cohesion of the British Empire and the tensions that threatened to break it at any moment. The third period, which De Felice described as 'far less sophisticated', saw Fascist discourse try to stir hatred against the

enemy, underlining the terrible destiny awaiting Italy in case of defeat. The historian commented that

this temporal articulation coincided every time with an increased verbal violence on all levels, and a decline in ever-lower levels that was [...] natural, spontaneous, corresponding to the elementary, consolidated and spread, Anglophobia that the Ethiopian war and the sanctions had remarkably developed, to the point that it had affected journalistic and cultural environments of a good level and that, partly, corresponded to the directives that the ministry of Popular Culture gave to the press.³²⁴

The second section of the chapter challenges De Felice's periodisation and interpretation of wartime Fascist public discourse (which cannot be merely dismissed as 'propaganda'), suggesting that the same cultural environment which had distorted the attachés' point of view had also caused the Fascist press to internalise stereotypes and ideological prejudices concerning Britain and liberal democracy. Luigi Petrella's recent book *Staging the Fascist War* offers an interesting background for this section. Petrella's work, mostly focused on air raids and the Italian domestic front, only tangentially deals with anti-British propaganda beyond the answer to the air raids. However, in the introduction he states that

the preaching of hatred against the enemy and framing the British raids as barbarous were not confined, as Renzo de Felice amongst others has argued, to the last part of the Fascist war, but were stereotypes in the regime's propaganda as early as the nine months of non-belligerence.³²⁵

An analysis of the sources seems to suggest that the period of non-belligerence saw an evolution in the attitude of the press, with the orders to the press asking for and obtaining moderation at first, while the anti-British tone became clearer towards the end. However, this chapter concludes that De Felice's periodisation was indeed wrong. Concerning the

³²⁴ De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato, Vol.1*, p. 171.

³²⁵ Luigi Petrella, *Staging the Fascist War* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), p. 14. The first chapter, however, does not dwell on the point, not mentioning Britain during the non-belligerence period, rather focusing rather on a detailed analysis of the complex role of Fascist propaganda in the 1938-1939 period, as well as of the anti-raid preparations in the country.

general picture of Britain rather than only the air raids, extreme verbal violence as well as venomous contempt reached their apex during the first months of the war. When the defeats started, Fascist discourse had to moderate itself in order to maintain a certain amount of credibility, while orders to the press actively discouraged excessive optimism or any talk of a collapse of the enemy's home front. Their attempt was, however, not completely successful, for the regime's discourse about Britain as a rich and democratic, and hence degenerate and unwarlike, country had been internalised too well and would resurface again and again until the loss of Africa in 1943. The totalitarian project described by Emilio Gentile failed in creating a Fascist warrior race, but spread the myth of democratic decadence through Italian society, a process which contributed to the fatal underrating of Fascist Italy's most dangerous enemy.

The military attachés

Before the Great War, British martial aptitude was widely admired. The Italian military attaché in London before and during the Great War, Lieutenant Colonel Edoardo Greppi, showed an 'evident Anglophilia' and appreciation for Britain, with 'its gigantic Empire, the sobriety of its costumes and the good demeanour of the people, the admired military virtues and the patriotic dedication of its ruling class.' Furthermore, he was fundamentally in line with the political and military directions chosen by the British authorities.³²⁶ During the Great War and after, Mussolini had shown respect and admiration for the British Army and the British people's military qualities. In December 1917, he had praised the power and efficiency of the British Army, and shortly afterwards resolutely

³²⁶ *Gli addetti militari Italiani alla vigilia della Grande Guerra, 1914-1915*, edited by Andrea Ungari e Francesco Anghelone (Rome: Rodrigo: Stato maggiore dell'esercito : Istituto di studi politici S. Pio V), p. 48.

denied that Britain fought what the Germans called ‘the war of the usurer’, that is, having the Italians and the French die for it.³²⁷ He also mentioned the ‘impressive’ cohesion of the British people behind the war effort.³²⁸ Commenting on the beginning of the German offensive in March 1918, he stated that his confidence in a British victory was motivated also by the human factor, contrasting by implication what happened in Britain with what happened in Italy, where, according to him, socialists, unpatriotic pro-Germans and deserters boycotted the national war effort. According to Mussolini, ‘the English soldier does not desert. He does not surrender. England has no deserters. The English soldier knows why he fights. He has the sense, the individual consciousness of his responsibility.’³²⁹ A few days later, he added that ‘the admirable English divisions [...] fight for us as well. [On] them depends our destiny.’³³⁰ In December 1918, after the end of the war, he commented on the British elections stating that ‘the English nation is rallied around the Government and the men who fought the war and snatched the victory.’³³¹ Such a perception radically changed in the following years, in particular after the end of the 1920s.

³²⁷ Benito Mussolini, ‘Viva Wilson!’, *Opera Omnia*, Volume X, pp. 126-8. From: *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 12 December 1917.

³²⁸ Benito Mussolini, ‘Una solenne risposta’, *Opera Omnia*, Volume X, p. 204. From: *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 8 January 1918.

³²⁹ Benito Mussolini, ‘L’attacco dei “Boches” sul fronte inglese’, *Opera Omnia*, Volume X, pp. 398-9. From: *Il Popolo d’Italia*, March 23 1918.

³³⁰ Benito Mussolini, ‘Old England’, *Opera Omnia*, Volume X, pp. 402-404. From: *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 26 March 1918.

³³¹ Benito Mussolini, ‘Le elezioni inglesi. La disastrosa disfatta dei... disfattisti’, *Opera Omnia*, Volume XII, pp. 96-99. From *Il Popolo d’Italia*, December 31 1918. This opinion was not limited to Mussolini: still in 1928, *Il Corriere* praised the new, professional British Army, claiming that it was far better than its 1913 counterpart. According to the article, the ‘new’ British soldier was, after the Great War, more educated, had better hygiene, was less of a drinker. Most of all his discipline was, as proven by the relative softness of the army when dealing with punishments, excellent. The reason was the rigid discipline that was at the base of this new, voluntary force. All of this represented, according to the author, a new step in military history. See: Unattributed, ‘L’esercito inglese oggi, e quello d’anteguerra’, *Il Corriere*, 12 January 1928, p. 1.

One useful example of how the perception of British military strength evolved is provided by the reports of the Italian military attachés in London. From an analysis of these documents emerges a growing belief in British military weakness and contempt for the British people's military virtues and will to fight.

The Italian perception of Britain as a military power evolved dramatically during the years between the First and the Second World Wars. The reports from the attachés during the early 1920s mostly focused on technical issues; during the second half of the 1920s, however, an interest in British military innovations can be found in the reports. In 1927, the attaché Lieutenant Colonel Amerigo Coppi had already shown an enthusiastic interest in the mechanisation of the British Army. Coppi believed that mechanisation was the right direction for the British Army and, to a lesser degree, for continental armies as well.³³² His successor was to devote even more attention to the subject, without, however, neglecting a broader assessment of Britain's domestic and international situation which was troubled by the economic crisis.

Lieutenant Colonel Adolfo Infante described a nation that had been critically hit by the economic crisis, was politically unstable and increasingly weakened in its international position by US competition and the desire for independence of the Dominions and Colonies.³³³ The root of the economic troubles was, in Infante's view, the lack of competitiveness in the British economy, weakened by high salaries and the weight of generous unemployment benefits, which were necessary to preserve social peace.³³⁴ For

³³² See: Notiziario N.57, 12 Dicembre 1927, busta 644, Ambasciata Londra 1861–1950, ASMAE.

³³³ Infante was born in Mantova in 1891. He was artillery captain during the Great War, later serving as military attaché in London, Chief of Staff of the XX Army Corp in Libya, military attaché in Washington, first aide-de-camp to the King, and eventually led the *Ariete* Division in 1942. Dispatched to Greece to command the *Pinerolo* Division, he cooperated with the Greek partisans against the Germans. The Allies sent him back to Italy, where he became Assistant Chief of the General Staff. After the war, he was again posted to London as military attaché.

³³⁴ Adolfo Infante, Notiziario N.1, January 1929, Notiziario N.3, March 1929, busta 694, Notiziario N.20, October 1930, busta 719, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, Archivio Storico Ministero Affari Esteri (afterwards, ASMAE).

the first time, Britain's place as the greatest world power seemed uncertain and it is not difficult to discern that, in Infante's view, the reason was that Britain lacked a form of corporatist discipline like the one which existed in Italy. In October 1930, Infante recorded a general sense of depression and pessimism, a remarkable contrast with the usual British optimism.³³⁵ Nevertheless, he was convinced that Britain could still regain its strength, even if it was clear that it would require time and that it could not maintain its position *vis-a-vis* the United States: 'The strength of the great qualities of British character will certainly allow the country to overcome the current economic crisis (which is global).'³³⁶ If this political assessment adheres closely to ideas common in Italy at the time, Infante looked at military matters in a very different way. Despite the lack of funding, the army had managed to improve its organisation and,

since the beginning of 1929, [had been] going through a crisis of deep transformation, mostly due to the mechanization of many units and to the many experiments to define the new organic constitution of the infantry Brigade and of the Division. The problem of mechanization of the army is today the fundamental problem which is most studied, experimented and debated.³³⁷

Mechanisation had progressed a great deal, particularly with the first manoeuvres, the creation of the Tank Corps and the introduction of a new model of tank. These improvements were combined with a vast and innovative operative experimentation, so that 'it could be said that [Britain] is ahead of all nations not just in terms of materiel but also for its employment.'³³⁸ Infante was a careful observer of mechanisation; he made two very detailed reports on the so-called *Purple Primer* and recorded the troubled constitution of the Armored Brigade and its employment in the manoeuvres of 1929, the introduction of Charles Broad's Tank Brigade in 1931 and its brilliant success in that

³³⁵ Adolfo Infante, Notiziario N.20, busta 719, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³³⁶ Adolfo Infante, Notiziario N.14, busta 719, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³³⁷ Adolfo Infante, Notiziario N.2, busta 694, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

year's manoeuvres.³³⁹ Observing the manoeuvres, he wrote of the mechanised units' possibilities for achieving surprise and of their extreme mobility, the efficient cooperation between light and medium tanks and between tanks and infantry, the progress in radio communication, and of how tanks had changed war, bringing it back to the 'classic art of Napoleonic manoeuvres.' He did not hide his admiration when writing of 'a great deal of really great issues and new problems which, while they might appear still far in the future, are in Britain already studied, analyzed and practically faced.'³⁴⁰

Infante's replacement from 1933, Lieutenant Colonel Umberto Mondadori, even if acknowledging the progress of army mechanisation in Britain, was already clearly giving in to an ideological worldview. Possibly influenced by British economic difficulties, he claimed that Britain had 'growing enthusiasm for the Fascist 'totalitarian' conquest [...] of Italian society.'³⁴¹

Mondadori described the British Army in increasingly grim terms, contrasting its old fashioned operational doctrine with the most modern Italian 'mobile' warfare. He wrote that, in terms of mobility, Italy was ahead of Britain. In Ethiopia, in fact, Italy was not going to employ those 'old infantry formations' still used by Britain, instead using its 'Mobile Divisions' which represented its most modern and perfect instrument of war. The fact that he was referring to the new, slim 'hay and oil' Italian *Celeri* Divisions hints how far he was already detached from reality.³⁴² In his summary report for 1935, he wrote that 'what is remarkable in these manoeuvres is the feeling that the army is in a state of

³³⁹Adolfo Infante, Notiziario N.22, busta 719, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE. The Purple Primer was a training manual for armoured warfare by Colonel C.N.F. Broad.

³⁴⁰ AUSSME, 14/66/5, datato 1931, to the SIM. See Luigi E. Longo, *Attività degli addetti militari italiani all'estero fra le due guerre mondiali* (Rome, USSME, 1999), pp. 380-4.

³⁴¹ Mondadori, Relazione annuale riassuntiva circa i principali avvenimenti di carattere militare 1935, 1 January 1936, busta 937, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³⁴² Ibid; Mondadori, Notiziario Militare, February 1935, Busta 812, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

disarmament; the organics are extremely reduced, armament and equipment are seriously lacking' and at the beginning of 1936, he highlighted the anxiety of public opinion on this topic.³⁴³

It is hardly surprising, then, that during the Ethiopian War Mondadori claimed that British forces in Egypt were still in a peacetime condition, and that an Italian advance towards the Suez Canal would be an important threat to British imperial communications.³⁴⁴

He also concluded that Britain was unable to provide anything other than air support to its allies in case of war.³⁴⁵ His opinion was shared by the naval attaché in London, Ferrante Capponi. Reporting on the French-British meetings following the German reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, he underlined French scepticism caused by the 'little British military preparation [...] Regarding the army, it is abundantly clear for the French that the British forces could cross the Channel, if necessary, only with huge delay.'³⁴⁶ The issue of the role the British Army would play in a continental war was widely discussed by Lieutenant Colonel Cesare Ruggeri Laderchi, attaché in London from 1937 to 1939. The lack of will by the British to expose themselves to any risk is a recurring theme in his reports, perfectly matching the new Fascist image of the declining, cowardly and satisfied Western democracies. In March 1938, Laderchi wrote a report on British rearmament in which he claimed it had a merely defensive purpose, in accordance

³⁴³ Mondadori, *Relazione annuale riassuntiva circa i principali avvenimenti di carattere militare 1935*, 1 January 1936, busta 937.

³⁴⁴ John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, p. 309. The report is in Carte Capponi, N.509, Indizi e voci concernenti l'attuale situazione italo-inglese, 23 settembre 1935, p. 2, "Londra, Embassy File". According to the author, the report might have influenced Baistrocchi's optimistic judgment as to the possibilities of a clash with Britain. See also: Williamson Murray, Allan R. Millett, p. 106.

³⁴⁵ Umberto Mondadori, *Notiziario mesi gennaio-febbraio 1936*, Busta 937, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

³⁴⁶ Letter from Capitano di fregata, naval attaché, Capponi, to captain of the Genio navale, Gino Iori, *Conversazioni degli Stati Maggiori Inglese, Francese e Belga, in seguito alla rimilitarizzazione della zona renana, Avvenimenti in Germania*, Gabinetto 1934-1950, 1936, ACS.

with the people's opinion that British lives were too precious to be risked in petty fights among continental countries. Laderchi was convinced that rearmament was in no way a prelude to a more 'active', if not quite 'offensive', British foreign policy:

Great Britain does not want to be dragged into a new European war. Who fought it emerged from it with a feeling of disgust, has taught his children in the belief that war in Europe "is not for the British", and is convinced that the life of the British citizen is too precious to be risked in the petty fights among continental countries.³⁴⁷

The issue of materiel was a different matter. British rearmament was meant to assure Britain's European allies it had the necessary means to defend its interests in Europe.³⁴⁸ Eventually, Laderchi convinced himself of the possibility of a British intervention in Europe but, in September 1938, he characteristically wrote that the mechanisation of the British Army had encouraged the British aversion for the arduous, routine part of the conflict, which was to be left to the allies, reserving for themselves only the most decisive and glorious actions.³⁴⁹ His contempt for the British character was as strong as the high esteem in which he held its Fascist counterparts: he repeatedly attacked British newspapers which, according to him, underrated Italy's military might. In January 1938, reporting on some *Daily Telegraph* articles in which the Italian strategic situation was described as 'weak' and it was claimed that Britain would be in a stronger position, the attaché dismissed them as 'War Office propaganda'. Such propaganda was, the officer believed, aimed at convincing British public opinion that, in the case of conflict against

³⁴⁷ Laderchi, Flessibilità di riarmo britannico, 15 March 1938, busta 937, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE. British manpower problems were gleefully reported by the Fascist press. See, for example, without signature: 'L'insuccesso degli arruolamenti inglesi', February 24 1939, *Il Corriere*. The article talked of the 'impressive indifference' with which the British public had reacted to the voluntary recruitment campaign. See also: Unattributed, 'l'Inghilterra manca di soldati', *Il Corriere*, February 4 1938, p. 5.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Laderchi, Primo contingente inglese in caso di conflitto, busta 937, 27 September 1938, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

Italy, Britain would not be ‘in that bad condition’, as well as at introducing the audience to the much-debated and feared idea of a conflict with its Mediterranean adversary. In another article, it was stated that Italy had no history of military successes, that Italian soldiers in Spain had not behaved brilliantly and had suffered a defeat at Guadalajara, and that the Abyssinian campaign, while an organisational and mechanic triumph, had been a military walk in the park which did not particularly add much to Italy’s military reputation. Laderchi, who seems to have been offended, called the author insolent and ignorant of Italian military glories. He was equally annoyed by the reaction of the British press to the Italian annexation of Albania in April 1939. The occupation had not been depicted as a success by the Italian armed forces, and British newspapers had not analysed the reasons behind such a quick and masterful action. The silence that had followed the first attempts to discredit the Italian action was the best recognition from the British (who had lost their traditional sense of *fair play*) that they had recognised Italy’s success.³⁵⁰

The military attachés and the elite

Commenting on the aggressive direction assumed by Fascist foreign policy between 1936 and 1939 (in February 1938, Mussolini informed the Germans that he intended to attack the British *by himself*), Denis Mack Smith wrote that such a policy was based on what he claimed to be crushing proof of the superiority of the Italian armed forces over the British.

³⁵⁰ See: Laderchi, Vedute militari britanniche sulla situazione nel Mediterraneo, busta 937, 14 January 1938, Impressioni inglesi sulle operazioni in Albania, busta 1076, 14 aprile 1939, and Invio della ‘United Service Review’, busta 937, 15 March 1938, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE. Clearly, Laderchi did not know that the action in Albania had actually been ‘ill coordinated, clumsy and laborious.’ See: John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, p. 467.

Mussolini's 'General Staff encouraged him by reporting that their military preparations [...] had outstripped those of Britain.'³⁵¹ The General Staff, continued Mack Smith, could hardly have been honest in claiming that, and Mussolini himself could not ignore the truth. There are, however, sufficient indications that the General Staff was indeed convinced of the superiority of the *Regio Esercito* over the British Army.³⁵² The undeniable Mussolinian knowledge regarding the weakness of Italy might have been far more concerned with acknowledging the strength of the French Army, which the military attachés considered the strongest in Europe and which was a model for the Italian Army.³⁵³ It is unlikely that the deep underestimation of the capability, as well as of the will, of the British Empire to fight had no effect on the aggressive policies Mussolini pursued in the last years before the conflict.

One example is Laderchi's report to the Chief of General Staff and Undersecretary of War, Alberto Pariani, in June 1938. The occasion was the unusual meeting of the Italian

³⁵¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy*, p. 104.

³⁵² In 1935, as MacGregor Knox explained, the army was convinced it could beat the British forces in North Africa. The reports of Laderchi, and Pariani's response to his report, suggest that such a belief did not become more pessimistic in the late the 1930s. Indeed, Pariani considered Egypt 'easy prey' (an idea shared by Balbo, who claimed that 'the operation is less difficult than it seems'). It was only in early 1939 that Mussolini, influenced by Badoglio, became sceptical about the possibility of invading Egypt while defending Libya from the French in the west. It is important to mention that the reasons which forced Mussolini to this change of mind were not connected to a re-evaluation of British strength, being instead due to logistical issues and fear of the French army. See: MacGregor Knox, *Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies*, p. 355; Fortunato Minniti, *Fino alla Guerra, Strategie e conflitto nella politica di Potenza di Mussolini, 1923-1940*, (Naples: Quaderni di Clio, 2000), p. 156; Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, pp. 143-4.

³⁵³ F. Botti-V. Ilari, *Il pensiero militare italiano*, pp. 163-5. See also: B. Liddel Hart, *L'arte della guerra nel secolo XX. Memorie*. Mondadori, 1971, p. 72: 'Tactics and training imitated the French model in its slowness, with plans and operation orders that were too long and detailed. This lack of elasticity still less answered to the Italians' nature [...] The drawbacks of adopting stereotyped tactics were all the more serious as the Italians' firepower was very inferior to French's in view of so rigidly prearranged methods of attack.' See also: M. Montanari, *L'Esercito italiano alla vigilia della 2° guerra mondiale*, USSME, Rome, 1982, p. 432. In Montanari's positions there was an ambitious politico-cultural plan aimed at both politicising the army [...] and freeing Italian tactics of what he considered 'the ill-fated French influence.' See: F. Botti-V. Ilari, *Il pensiero militare italiano*, p. 178. On the Italian military's opinion of the French Army, see also: MacGregor Knox, *Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies*, p. 355.

military attachés stationed in major countries, called by Pariani to update him on the European military balance in that time of increased risk of war. According to Laderchi, Great Britain wanted peace at any cost and wished only to defend what it already had; the support the British could provide to France was limited to the Air Force; the British Army was going to be mechanised, but would not be ready before 1940. The following exchange between Laderchi and Pariani regarding the British situation in the event of conflict is important because it underlines how Pariani accepted Laderchi's point of view on the subject without question:

- Pariani: I would want to know what is the effort Britain is capable of, in case of conflict.
- Laderchi: It could provide 170,000 men, which is to say the whole army currently existing, for the defence would be dealt with by the territorial army.
- Pariani: Few [men]. That's why Britain wants peace at any cost.³⁵⁴

These words, and Pariani's contemptuous attitude towards democracies, can help to explain why, at the time of the Czechoslovakian crisis in September 1938, Mussolini boldly declared that he could fight both France and Great Britain in the Mediterranean, threatening Tunisia and Egypt.³⁵⁵ Pariani had already claimed in 1937 that, once his new, agile army was ready, Italy could crush Egypt and Sudan 'whenever and however we want', and a detailed report dated June 1938 – which was drafted by the 'Operation office II' - described Britain as forced to avoid any 'bellicose attitude' by the scarcity of its forces and by its own strategic doctrine.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Resoconto stenografico delle esposizioni fatta dagli addetti militari nei giorni 27 28 e 29 giugno 1938, L10/8/14, Archivio Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore Esercito, (afterwards AUSSME). This exchange demonstrates how much the *Regio Esercito* conceived war as a matter of numbers.

³⁵⁵ Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 14.

³⁵⁶ Minniti, *Fino alla Guerra*, pp. 148-168.

At this point it is interesting to note that, despite Pariani being convinced that the decisive front of the future war would be the Cyrenaican-Egyptian border, in this and in most of the reports by the attachés very little attention was given to the colonies. Such an attitude was consistent with Badoglio's and others' belief that the colonies were an inconvenient waste of resources in the case of conflict, and that the war would have to be fought in Europe. Pariani himself, convinced that he would be able to overrun Egypt easily with his *guerra di rapido corso* (in that, as we have seen, probably influenced by the reports of the attachés), seemed satisfied with reports that mostly dealt with possible British intervention in Europe.³⁵⁷

Even if by October Laderchi was convinced of the importance of British rearmament, his overall judgment of the British Army remained negative. In a SIM (Military Information Service) report of December 1938 - presumably written by Laderchi - it was claimed that the political crisis in Central Europe had surprised the British Army in a critical phase of transition from an obsolete and inefficient instrument into a new, experimental army which still displayed many problems, including the lack of men, the critical condition of materials in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and the incomplete progress of motorisation.³⁵⁸

Laderchi was not the only attaché convinced that Britain had no will to fight. At the beginning of 1939, the naval attaché Rear Admiral Brivonesi wrote in a personal letter that but for some warmongers and businesspersons, Britain hoped to avoid conflict because it had nothing to gain, a notion the French were aware of. Brivonesi saw the lack

³⁵⁷ For Badoglio's and Pariani's strategic perspectives on the colonies, see: Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato, Vol.1*, pp.73-5. It is worth noting that even Badoglio claimed that Italian action from Ethiopia against Sudan would not 'present much difficulty,' since the British had in Sudan 'more difficulties than us.' See: Fortunato Minniti, *Fino alla Guerra*, p. 144.

³⁵⁸ Unattributed, Riorganizzazione dell'esercito territoriale inglese, busta 937, 11 October 1938, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

of men willing to fight as the root of Britain's problems. Nobody wanted to wear a uniform anymore, almost as if soldiers were ashamed to wear one, the common opinion being that only the good-for-nothing served the nation on the battlefield: such was the base of the less-than-virile reaction of the British people to the Munich crisis of 1938.³⁵⁹ In another SIM report dated March 1939, it was stressed that 'Great Britain's rearmament, while huge, shows a serious structural problem: it is basically based on the machine factor instead of the human one. The spiritual and material lacunae deriving from that are obvious.'³⁶⁰ While the claim that a rearming program's flaw was that it was based on materials rather than on men can seem absurd, it perfectly fitted the picture the military attaché had of Britain: a country abundant in capital but lacking in morale. Indeed, the anachronistic idea of the pre-eminence of 'spirit' over 'matter' was another pillar of the Fascist worldview, continuously stressed by Fascist propaganda.³⁶¹ Furthermore, it proves that, rather than involving only the military attachés, the Fascistisation of the SIM had made it as biased a source of information as Laderchi. After the start of the war, Laderchi himself proved once again how his ideas and his overestimation of the Italian Army influenced his analysis, claiming for example that the German campaign in Poland was more or less a repetition of Mussolini's strategy in Ethiopia.³⁶² His contempt for the British character emerged once again in April 1940. Describing the ongoing campaign in Norway, he mentioned that the British people were particularly gullible to propaganda, for their mindset was such that at the slightest good news from the front they could finally

³⁵⁹ To the S.I.M, Notizie sulle FF.AA. Inglesi, dal 18 dicembre 1937 al 5 gennaio 1940, February 10 1939, I4/3/5, AUSSME.

³⁶⁰ To the S.I.M, Bilanci delle forze armate per il 1939-1940, March 1939 I4/3/5, AUSSME.

³⁶¹ F. Botti-V. Ilari, *Il pensiero militare italiano dal primo al secondo dopoguerra 1919-1949* USSME, Rome, 1985, pp. 246-7. See also: V. Ilari, *Marte in Orbace*, chapter one: 1914-1934, *Guerra e politica militare secondo Mussolini* (Nuove ricerche, Ancona, 1988).

³⁶² Laderchi, *Relazione*, 22 September 1939, busta 1076, Ambasciata Londra 1861-1950, ASMAE.

say: 'the war is going well: so let's go [have] a good time.'³⁶³ Such reports were consistent with an analysis of the British military potential written by the SIM in 1940. According to this analysis, the strength of the British Empire lay in its huge manpower ('8.5 millions of fighters,' echoing Mussolini's famous '8 millions of bayonets' speech). The author, however, claimed that to draw too pessimistic conclusions was wrong: after all, the outcome of a conflict was not decided only by the number of bayonets that could be deployed on the first line with time. It was far more important that those bayonets could reach the principal front. Such an operation was far from safe, since the seas were threatened by enemy forces and British forces abroad had to defend the Colonies and Dominions. More important, the Empire would need considerable time - a year or two - to mobilise its forces, and in such a time span many things could happen, in Europe and in the world, that could neutralise imperial mobilisation. The British Empire, the report concluded, was surely powerful, well protected and not to be underrated. Its armour, however, showed 'cracks that would allow a sharp and well-aimed dagger (*ferro*) to reach its vital organs.' Like all giants, the Empire was heavy and slow in its movements. If confronted by an agile and mobile enemy, it risked much. In conclusion, the British Empire was an enemy not to despise, but which could be beaten.³⁶⁴ Recent research has showed how the *Regia Marina* also underrated the Royal Navy. During the interwar years, and in particular after the Washington Naval Conference in 1922, Italian navalist thinkers started revising their previous assessment of the British Empire as the obvious and necessary ally of Italy on the seas. As Fabio De Ninno explained, if still in the first years after the Great War the officers who had grown up in a world where the Royal Navy ruled the seas and London appeared strong, in the successive period many of them became

³⁶³ Ruggeri Laderchi a Soddu, 23 April 1940, 141, Vol. 4, Serie IX, DDI.

³⁶⁴ L'impero britannico ed il suo potenziale bellico, April 30 1940, Inghilterra: notizie militari sull'esercito (1930/1936), H3/47/2, AUSSME.

convinced that the British Empire was a declining force. Already in 1930, the important navalist thinker De Giamberardino expressed his scepticism of pursuing a policy of close friendship with London, pointing to both the divergent interests of the two powers and the state of decline of the British Empire.³⁶⁵ Even when it came to maritime issues, then, Britain was considered increasingly weak. By the time of the declaration of war in 1940, the belief that the obsolete aeroplanes and submarines Italy possessed would be enough to face the British Empire was widespread.³⁶⁶

Italo Balbo, Governor of Libya, shared the Italian Armed Forces' point of view. In September 1939 he had claimed that, despite the unfavourable position of the Italian forces defending Tripoli against the French, he had no intention of giving up his offensive in Egypt, 'especially to acquire lands far richer than Libya.'³⁶⁷ He did not bother mentioning the British forces defending the country. The reports written by the attachés probably influenced Dino Grandi, Ambassador in London from 1932 to 1939 (whose military information mainly came from the attachés), in his remarks to Mussolini about a decadent and unwarlike Britain, which was 'slow, fat, heavy, sleepy, with weak sight and even weaker nerves' and whose soldiers were no match for the Italians.³⁶⁸ Ciano's claim that the British feared a new conflict 'more than any other [people] in the world' hinted that he had also accepted such a point of view.³⁶⁹ In September, the Foreign Minister added that 'in the English streets [the people] kneel and pray for peace. In Italy they wait with strong and aware calm', while in January 1939 he wrote in his diary that 'the British

³⁶⁵ Fabio De Ninno, *Fascisti sul Mare* (Bari: Laterza, 2017), pp. 94-5.

³⁶⁶ De Ninno, *Fascisti sul Mare*, p. 234.

³⁶⁷ Fortunato Minniti, *Fino alla Guerra*, p. 201.

³⁶⁸ Denis Mack Smith, *Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy*, p.100. Grandi was likely influenced by the attachés, both because ambassadors mostly relied on military attachés for their knowledge of military matters and because Grandi's opinion clearly corresponds with that of his military subordinates in London.

³⁶⁹ Ciano, *Diario*, 29 August 1938.

do not want to fight. They try to withdraw as slowly as they can, but they do not want to fight.³⁷⁰ While Ciano was eventually converted to the anti-German camp, and was far more convinced than Mussolini about the British potential to resist after the fall of France, during the 1930s he was as convinced as anyone that the British were not a people of warrior material.

How accurate was this perception? The British Army was indeed in a dire condition during the 1930s. As a consequence, the role of the British Army as a European fighting force in the upcoming conflict was widely debated, with the consequence of angering and worrying the French. The necessity of rearmament and the process of mechanising the army were also taking their toll; the British Army was restricted by budget issues and by its limited size during the late 1930s.³⁷¹ In this sense, the attachés' perception was correct, as they witnessed a real moment of weakness of the British Armed Forces. However, this weakness was relative. The attachés' lack of appreciation for the still-immense difference in military strength, as well as technological advancement, of the British and Italian armies produced an exceedingly optimistic assessment which proved disastrous. At the same moment in which Mondadori described how great a menace the Italian forces in Libya were to the British in Egypt, as Steven Morewood underlined, the British commanders who were actually in charge of defending the British position in Africa and the Mediterranean did not doubt they could prevail over Italy with ease, with or without allies.³⁷² After the end of the Ethiopian War, the defence of Egypt was, however, neglected, and remained so until the Italian entry into the Second World War. Even after the war with Germany had begun, preparations against an Italian invasion of Egypt were

³⁷⁰ Ciano, *Diario*, 12 January 1939.

³⁷¹ Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the The Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 250-80.

³⁷² Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935-1940: Conflict and crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Frank Cass, 2015), p. 60.

constrained by the idea that extending the war to the Mediterranean could be avoided.³⁷³ The triumphal idea that the Italian Army was more modern and more motivated than the British, and that it could hence easily take over British forces in North Africa, however, was unrealistic, and was not accepted by the British themselves, even in their weakened state. In summer 1939, for example, General Sir Archibald Wavell was convinced that the danger presented by a possible Italian invasion of Egypt was remote.³⁷⁴ The notion that Italy could be beaten without too much effort was widespread among those British military and naval officers who had observed the Italian Armed Forces.³⁷⁵ The reasons for the temporary weakness of the forces garrisoning Egypt, as well as the reluctance to establish a massive continental army, were respectively connected to the low priority British planners gave to Italy in comparison to Germany and Japan and to budget restrictions and strategic disputes. Like the Fascist commentators who assessed British economic and social troubles of the 1920s and the 1930s, the attachés' interpreted these facts in an ideological way, drawing their own conclusions. Nor did the attachés' perception change after the British had begun a rearmament project which easily dwarfed anything Italy could even consider; instead, the admiration Infante had shown for British technical professionalism and will to experiment with mechanisation had been replaced by a completely unrealistic assumption of Italian superiority with Mondadori, as well as an utterly ideological dismissal of the rearmament as too focused on material factors. A comparison of reports by Infante, Mondadori and Laderchi underlines how reality was progressively bent by ideological lenses. However, the fundamental blunder by the attachés as described in this chapter is that, contrary to what many Fascists believed,

³⁷³ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, p. 132.

³⁷⁴ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, p. 133.

³⁷⁵ Paul Kennedy, British "Net Assessment" and the Coming of the Second World War, in *Calculations*, p.40. See also Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2004,) p. 101 and De Ninno, *Fascisti sul Mare*, p. 196.

appeasement did not mean a lack of will to fight. As Morewood put it, ‘appeasement represented a means to uphold the British Empire, not relinquish it.’³⁷⁶ British weakness was real to a certain degree, but it did not mean that Rome was well-equipped to face London.

Undying stereotypes: Public discourse before the loss of Africa

During the early years of Fascism, there was no innate contempt for the military qualities of the British people in Italy. Like most Italians, Mussolini respected Britain’s contribution to the Great War. The image of the Englishman who was too rich, relaxed and peace-loving to be a good soldier (but not necessarily a coward) was nurtured by the spread of pacifism in Britain during the interwar period, so different as it was from the increasing militarisation of society enacted by the Fascist regime. This was compounded by the perceived – and partly real - decline of the efficiency of the British Army after the Great Depression and by the weakness of British foreign policy in the face of Italian, German and Japanese aggressiveness. The latter in particular was likely to impress men like Mussolini and Ciano, probably influencing their policies in the 1930s. Indeed, Mussolini’s certainty that the British were reluctant to fight, and that in general they were a people not made for war, rarely flinched. Mussolini’s lover Claretta Petacci’s diary offers many examples of this attitude on the part of the *Duce*, who repeatedly told her that the English were neither soldiers nor warriors.³⁷⁷ While not considering them cowards, the British nonetheless ‘did not think of war because they did not need it.’³⁷⁸ He concluded, then, that they would not fight for Danzig in 1939.³⁷⁹ After the Polish defeat,

³⁷⁶ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, p. 208.

³⁷⁷ Claretta Petacci, *Verso il disastro* 12 March 1939, 22 November 1939.

³⁷⁸ Petacci, *Verso il disastro*, 12 March 1939.

³⁷⁹ Petacci: *Verso il disastro*, 21 August 1939. Mussolini wrote that ‘of course, without Russian support, England will hardly start any adventure.’ On the same occasion he claimed that, like the

he believed that they would not keep fighting, because they were old and lacked a warrior mindset.³⁸⁰ It is not surprising, then, that the *Duce* was convinced that ‘[his] intervention in the war will bring about [the British] defeat’, or that the day after he told Ciano that ‘Britain will be beaten. Inexorably beaten. This is a reality that you [Ciano] [had] better put into your head.’³⁸¹ Nor is it surprising that he believed Britain, which was no longer feared by anybody, incapable of scaring the Arabs, derided by the Indians, was ‘in the grip of destiny.’³⁸² As late as the beginning of 1940, Mussolini thought he could attack Yugoslavia and Greece without any reaction from France and Britain, and deluded himself that the compensation offers for Italian neutrality meant that the westerners were unwilling to fight.³⁸³ Even during the war, while talking about the British conquest of *Africa Orientale Italiana*, Mussolini described the British as a mercantile people, eager to avoid ‘sacrifices and losses.’³⁸⁴

The Italian press did what it could to emphasise the narrative described above. Notions that the *Regia Marina* and *Regia Aeronautica* were so strong that Britain was now the minor force in the Mediterranean, as well as stereotypes about the undisciplined, unmotivated British soldier, became commonplace.³⁸⁵ Already in 1934, *La Stampa* had written that any foreign observer of ‘British things’ could not help but notice that British

French, ‘the British are fools [*cretini*], [an] old people, like the French.’ See: Ciano, *Diario*, January 11 1940.

³⁸⁰ Petacci, *Verso il disastro*, 2 March 1940.

³⁸¹ Ciano, *Diario*, 6 and 7 March 1940.

³⁸² Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 323.

³⁸³ Sullivan, *The Impatient Cat*, pp. 105-119.

³⁸⁴ Petacci, *Verso il disastro*, 16 July 1941.

³⁸⁵ Ciano, *Diario*, 22 October 1937. See also: Luigi Barzini, *La guerra all’Inghilterra*, July 21 1939, p.19. It has been written that ‘the airplane [...] was presented as the ideal image of the modernity and military efficiency of the regime, [and was] continuously used by Fascist propaganda as a symbol of a rising Italian military power’s strategic superiority, which could surpass the military potential of Great Britain, considered obsolete.’ See: Camillo Zadra, Nicola Labanca, *Costruire un nemico*, Unicopli, 2012), p.178; Unattributed, ‘Le reclute inglesi brontolano’, *Il Corriere*, July 31 1939, p. 6; Unattributed, ‘Malcontento e indisciplina fra le reclute inglesi’, *Il Corriere*, August 4 1939, p. 5.

military might was going through an unprecedented period of weakening.³⁸⁶ In 1936, the writer and journalist Guido Piovene had written in *Il Corriere* that, in Britain, everyone was a pacifist, especially the common people who ‘aim to remain at home with their radios, [fishing] lines and golf clubs.’³⁸⁷ In March 1937, an article in *Gerarchia* reported how Britain was experiencing ‘its worst military crisis in 150 years’, the causes of which were not only material but also social and moral, including the decline of the old ‘mercenary’ model and the scarce amount of volunteers. The consequence was an unavoidable decline in British influence worldwide, for the time being.³⁸⁸ Mussolini agreed, as he stated in 1937, that the British Army was unlikely to become a ‘serious’ one as long as it was led by Leslie Hore-Belisha, Secretary of State for War.³⁸⁹ In March 1939, another *Gerarchia* contributor described how the sword (representing violence, the only virtue of the British Empire) had been replaced by gold. Not a single man in the current Empire was ready to sacrifice himself for it. The real power, he thought, was the Bank of England.³⁹⁰ The writer Giovanni Prezolini was also convinced of this, telling his friend Pietro Calamandrei that the British and the French were too afraid to fight. His belief was justified by the notion (received with scepticism by Calamandrei) that Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union were ready to fight a proletarian war against capitalism, whereas the western allies were the capitalists to be fought against.³⁹¹ Immediately after the start of the war, during the period of strained Italian relations with Germany, the press was ordered ‘to make it clear that we take no part.’ For a short while, the attitude towards

³⁸⁶ R.P. ‘La nuova tribuna di Mosley,’ *La Stampa*, 23 January 1934, p. 1.

³⁸⁷ Guido Piovene, ‘I ginnetti e i pacifisti,’ *Il Corriere*, 10 January 1936, p. 3.

³⁸⁸ Di Saronno, ‘La situazione militare inglese,’ *Gerarchia*, March 1937, pp. 176-183.

³⁸⁹ Ciano, *Diario*, 24 April 1937. Hore-Belisha was routinely mocked by the Fascists, but the historiography presents a more merciful portrait. For example, Brian Bond describes him as an ‘outstandingly successful War Minister.’ Brian Bond, ‘Leslie-Hore Belisha at the War Office’, in *Politicians and Defences, Studies in the Formulation of British Defence Policy 1845-1970*, ed. by Ian Beckett and John Gooch (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1981), p. 130.

³⁹⁰ Guido Guida, ‘L’oro e la spada’, *Gerarchia*, March 1939.

³⁹¹ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 335-6.

Britain was almost balanced.³⁹² This new ‘moderate’ phase ended even before Italy joined the war. Part of the reason was that the Fascist government was irked by what De Felice described as ‘the petty English vexations on the Italian naval traffic’, but the main reason appears to be the Fascists’ notion that, from April, the balance was moving in favour of the Germans.³⁹³

The early months after Italy joined the war were, as we have seen, a time of triumphal tones in Italian propaganda, the press indulging in optimistic comments about the hopeless position of the British Empire.³⁹⁴ British military incompetence was now extended by Fascist authors to past conflicts as well. In July, Marco Ramperti mocked the British contribution to the Great War, and Luigi Barzini wrote that, while numerically superior, the British forces in the Low Countries and France had been unable to make any meaningful advance between 1914 and 1918.³⁹⁵ British military setbacks in Norway and the Low Countries, as well as their idleness while Germany crushed Poland, seemed to confirm the prejudices that had been developing in the previous decade about the fundamentally weak and cowardly nature of the British people. The French defeat was explained in *Gerarchia* as a consequence of this British attitude. General Orlando Freri stated that ‘the English contribution to the Allied cause had been truly insufficient.’ Only

³⁹² Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press, 29 September 1943, Busta 70, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

³⁹³ De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, Vol.1 p. 172.

³⁹⁴ For some examples, see: Unattributed, ‘L’Inghilterra cacciata dall’Europa’, *Il Corriere*, 27 July 1940, p.1; Unattributed, ‘In America, nessuno più crede alla possibilità che la Gran Bretagna si salvi dalla sconfitta’, *La Stampa*, 03 July 1940; Giorgio Sanna, ‘La tenaglia mortale già si stringe intorno ad Albione’, *La Stampa*, 26 July 1940, p.1. Still in September, Orlando Freri announced in *Gerarchia* that the invasion of the British islands would happen in a short time. See: Orlando Freri, ‘La guerra italo-germanica contro l’Inghilterra’, *Gerarchia*, September 1941.

³⁹⁵ Marco Ramperti, ‘Gli Inglesi nell’altra guerra’, *La Stampa*, 9 July 1940, p. 3. Much later, in more difficult times, Ramperti was to expand the theme of British indignity in the previous conflict by claiming that British discipline was a post-war myth, used to erase a reality of strikes and alcoholism. See: Marco Ramperti, ‘Gli Inglesi nell’altra Guerra, - disciplina e flemma: una leggenda – Birra e whisky e scioperi’ *La Stampa*, 11 November 1941, p. 3; Luigi Barzini, ‘Il crollo del prestigio britannico’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, June 27 1940.

caring about their own interests, the British refused to send France a meaningful number of soldiers, but in Kenya and Egypt, where they felt stung in their honour and interests, they showed greater aggressiveness, characteristically attributed, however, to colonial and Dominion troops.³⁹⁶ What is perhaps most revealing about the Fascist attitude during this period is Giovanni Selvi's 'Anti-Heroic war,' or the 'English war', which appeared in *Gerarchia* in June 1940 during the German offensive in France. He started by stating that this definition did not apply to the soldiers:

I do not talk of the war of those who fight. We give full honour to the soldiers and captains who knew and know how to fight and die. We say that the English war is anti-heroic, because so it is in its own traditional political system of waging war.³⁹⁷

According to Selvi, the following were elements characterising the 'anti-Heroic war': coalition war; the war of the 'Cavalry Saint George', that is the war of bribery and mercenaries; blockade, or siege and starving war; the war of 'spider and woodworm', as he called intelligence and propaganda war. Such tropes would appear in one form or another in most Fascist discourse, some until the very last days of the war.

Coalition war, Selvi wrote, was a long-established British tradition. Using the bogeyman of continental hegemonies, Britain had 'exhausted and dominated the European continent, [become] ruler of the seas and stripped the enemies against which it had organized the coalitions, France and Spain, rich of colonies, not sparing friends like the Netherlands.'

For centuries, English influence was behind

the wars in Europe [...] with the only goal of increasing the Imperial power and to crush any new force threateningly rising at the historical horizon [...] Anybody who would dare to threaten such [British] rule would be declared an enemy of England and of God. Napoleon invading Egypt, Wilhelm thinking of the Baghdad-Bahn [railway], Mussolini

³⁹⁶ Orlando Freri, 'La guerra', *Gerarchia*, July 1940.

³⁹⁷ Giovanni Selvi, 'La guerra anti-eroica, ovvero la guerra inglese', *Gerarchia*, June 1940, pp. 287-295.

asking for work for his people and conquering Ethiopia, Hitler, wanting vital space [...] they are the diabolical enemies of England.³⁹⁸

Echoing Mussolini's mention of the guarantees system in his declaration of war speech, Selvi claimed that the real victims of the British coalitions were those peoples who unwisely consented to take part in them, receiving a British guarantee being the greatest misfortune.³⁹⁹ In the current war, the coalition system had failed. Others put forward similar arguments. Pietro Caporilli wrote that British propaganda had been useful for the British, for it had convinced

other [peoples] to kill each other for centuries, in order to preserve John Bull's five feasts. It is only with [their] perfidy and disloyalty that the noble lords of the United Kingdom have perturbed the political life of nations.⁴⁰⁰

Roberto Pavese was a psychologist and professor at the University of Milan. Close to the traditionalist philosopher Julius Evola, he was critical of the harmful influence of gold.⁴⁰¹ In July 1940, when Hitler's victory appeared near, he wrote an article about Britain announcing, with a triumphant and contemptuous tone, the failure of coalition war, as well as British defeat. However, Pavese declared that Britain's usual ploy to fight and win with other peoples' blood had been undermined by the *Duce*, who had weakened freemasonry worldwide and humiliated the League of Nations, inspiring the neutrals to resist the plutocracies' pressure to join them in their aggression. Germany, then, had time to act quickly against every new member of the enemy coalition. German victories, wrote Pavese, had matured from a Mussolinian seed.⁴⁰² The perfidious nature of English

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ The *Duce* had stated that 'the stupid policy of guarantees had [...] shown itself particularly lethal for those who accepted them.' Mussolini's speech, 10 June 1940, at <<http://www.historicalresources.org/2008/09/19/mussolini-speech-of-the-10-june-1940-declaration-of-war-on-france-and-england/>>[accessed 01 05 2017]

⁴⁰⁰ Pietro Caporilli, *Come Cartagine*, p. 7.

⁴⁰¹ Roberto Pavese, 'Oro, metallo ignobile', *Gerarchia*, April 1939, p. 261. For a closer examination of Evolian racism and Britain, see chapter on race.

⁴⁰² Roberto Pavese, 'Ieri e oggi', *Gerarchia*, July 1940, pp. 361-3.

protection was underlined by magnanimous comments on the defeated enemy, France, whose heroism and ‘huge blood effort’, Orlando Freri wrote, ‘had been betrayed by London. France, like Poland, Norway, Holland and Belgium, had sacrificed itself for England.’⁴⁰³ At the same time, the British practice of hosting governments in exile running from German-occupied Europe was widely ridiculed by the press, which mocked the British ‘alliance with the dead.’⁴⁰⁴ The theme of the perfidious coalition war remained popular long after this initial phase.⁴⁰⁵

In what has been described as ‘the optimistic summer of 1940’, the Italian press did little to hide its belief that Britain was almost finished.⁴⁰⁶ The slow and modest Italian conquests in Somaliland, Kassala and Sidi el Barrani were inflated beyond any measure.⁴⁰⁷ At the same time, newspapers talked of panic overwhelming Britain under the shadow of German invasion.⁴⁰⁸ It was soon claimed that the Italian fleet controlled

⁴⁰³ Orlando Freri, ‘La guerra’, *Gerarchia*, July 1940, pp. 370-384. Regarding Belgium in particular, see also: Concetto Pettinato, ‘Cresce l’elenco delle vittime dell’egoismo britannico’ *La Stampa*, 29 May 1940, p.6.

⁴⁰⁴ See: Unattributed, ‘Le alleanze coi morti furoreggiano in Inghilterra’, *La Stampa*, 26 July 1940, p. 1.

⁴⁰⁵ There are many examples of this in the various phases of the war. In January 1941, when Italy was stuck in Greece and Yugoslavia was progressively assuming a pro-Axis stance (that would not last long), the diplomat Giuseppe Solari Bozzi wrote that London’s usual attempts to build a coalition in the Balkans had failed. See: Giuseppe Solari-Bozzi, ‘L’Asse e il nuovo ordine balcanico’, *Gerarchia*, January 1941, pp. 14-19. In September 1942, *Il Corriere* remarked that the British, ‘as long as they will find peoples and armies to tie to their chariot’, will only be indirectly hurt by their defeats. See: M.C., ‘Dunkirk-Tobruk’, *Il Corriere*, 24 September 1942, p. 1. In August 1942, the Fascist authorities ordered the press to report the Soviet Ambassador in London’s hopes that the other members of the coalition would share with Russia the weight of the conflict. Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press August 8 1942, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS. See also: Unattributed, ‘Gli Inglesi non hanno rinunciato a fare la guerra fino all’ultimo francese’, *Il Tevere*, January 5/6 1940; Orlando Freri, ‘La guerra italo germanica contro l’Inghilterra’, *Gerarchia*, November 1941; Unattributed, ‘Il programma di Albione, combattere fino all’ultimo soldato russo’, *Il Corriere*, 3 October 1941, p. 1; Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press August 8 1942, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴⁰⁶ Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, p.163.

⁴⁰⁷ For example, one article talked of the ‘crumbling of [British] African colonies.’ See: Unattributed, ‘Le vittorie italiane’, *Il Corriere*, 3 September 1940.

⁴⁰⁸ Giuseppe Piazza, ‘Smarrimento a Londra in vista della catastrofe’, *La Stampa*, 29 June 1940, p. 1; Unattributed, *Quando sbarcheranno in Inghilterra?*, p. 3. Unattributed, ‘L’incubo dell’invasione grava sull’Inghilterra,’ 8 July 1940, p. 4. Unattributed, ‘Atmosfera di panico a

the Mediterranean, while the British fleet and air force were mocked as unwilling to test their strength against their Italian counterparts; the *Regia Aeronautica*'s incredible claims made in July of having destroyed half the British fleet in the Mediterranean are a hint of this delusional state.⁴⁰⁹ Felice Bellotti had explained the British defeats using the old argument of the supremacy of spirit – namely faith, love and sacrifice - over matter: ‘the greatest Empire of the world’, made weak by opulence, had entered its agony, enduring defeat after defeat. It was the end of the ‘most colossal bluff ever seen.’⁴¹⁰ Journalist Antonio Lovato derided the comfort enjoyed by the British armoured division in North Africa, stating that the well-fed British soldiers, with ‘a motor each three men,’ they expected an easy walk towards Tobruk. They had, however, been disappointed by the strong Italian defence, and it was clear that it would be soon the Italian turn to advance.⁴¹¹

In July, Roberto Pavese had written contemptuously about the last days of Britain:

The epilogue of the British comedy is too banal, given its prologue and its development, to be called drama. It is nothing but a great example of international mob [*gangsterismo* was Pavese's word of choice] severely repressed and punished. [...] Today England is reduced to its island, to defend itself, to prove whether it can, at least, end well. It is the posthumous revenge of the Corse [Napoleon], expressing the feeling of the old Italic soul, decided to end once [and]

Londra,’ 10 July 1940, p. 3; Unattributed, ‘La legge marziale progettata dal governo di Londra,’ 17 July 1940, p. 3, all in *La Stampa*; Unattributed, ‘L’Inghilterra di fronte all’invasione,’ 04 July 1940, p.3; Unattributed, ‘L’incubo dell’invasione da la febbre alla Gran Bretagna,’ 7 August 1940, p.1; Unattributed; Smargiassate inglesi che non dissipano il panico crescente, 8 July 1940, p. 4; Unattributed, ‘L’incubo dell’invasione,’ 20 August 1940, p. 4; Unattributed, Il rinnovato incubo dell’invasione, 13 September 1940, p. 4, all in *Il Corriere*.

⁴⁰⁹ Denis Mack Smith, *Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy*, p. 105-6.

⁴¹⁰ Felice Bellotti, ‘Un anno di guerra e di vittorie’, *La Stampa*, 1 September 1940, p. 1.

⁴¹¹ Antonio Lovato, Gli inglesi sognavano di arrivare un bel giorno a Tobruk, *La Stampa*, 13 July 1940, p. 3.

for all the joke forced upon it by the barbarian [...] Mussolini will avenge Napoleon,⁴¹² like Hitler the Kaiser.⁴¹³

One decade of discourse about British (and western) softness and feebleness seemed on the verge of being confirmed by facts. This was, after all, the time in which Mussolini relished the idea of Italy acquiring long-sought military glory in Egypt and of becoming a leading force in the conflict against the decadent west.⁴¹⁴ Reading Ciano's account of Mussolini's words at this time, Britain does not appear to be a threat, rather simply a playground for Mussolini's armed forces to show Fascism's new might.

The grim winter between 1940 and 1941 made clear that Britain was far from being defeated and that the war was far from over. Even before the beginning of the Italian military disasters, the prolonged British resistance was forcing the Fascist press to adopt a more flexible approach, accepting that Britain was not defeated yet. On 21 October 1940, Aldo Valori addressed the admiration of many Italians for British resistance, attributing it to the stubbornness of an ignorant people, the fear of the ruling class and the profits of big business for peace and defeat, but most of all to the abiding strength of Britain:

Britain is not won; [...] its resources of all kinds, accumulated during centuries of pillaging, are of course not exhausted [...] but let us not attribute to our foe moral virtues that are completely imaginary; let us not credit him with a superiority of character that he has not.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Napoleon's ghost was often used in the context of the war against Britain, clearly hinting that Mussolini was to finish what the Emperor had begun. One author concluded his article on Napoleon's plans to invade Britain by writing that: 'According to the Fate [in Napoleon's time], "the times were not ripe". Today they are: the great Shadow [of Napoleon] is about to be placated.' See: Arnaldo Cervasato, 'La conquista dell'Inghilterra nel piano di Napoleone', *Gerarchia*, February 1941, pp. 68-77. See also: Titta Madia, 'Madame Mére, perfidia inglese nei secoli', *Gerarchia*, May 1941, where the author describes the English persecution of the peaceful Napoleon.

⁴¹³ Roberto Pavese, 'Ieri e oggi', *Gerarchia*, July 1940, pp. 361-3.

⁴¹⁴ See: Ciano, *Diario*, 30 September 1940; Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist ideology, Territory and expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 179.

⁴¹⁵ Aldo Valori, *Parole di Fede*, p.129. One month later, he repeated that British resources were still conspicuous, adding however that it was not the merit of modern Englishmen, but of their ancestors, those 'magnificent and picturesque delinquents.' By any means, the British were not that good at using the huge number of colonies, resources and outposts of their Empire. Indeed,

Then defeat struck. The *Regia Marina* suffered a serious blow when British planes attacked it at Taranto, and the small but mobile mechanised force commanded by General O'Connor managed to rout Graziani's huge Tenth Army, quickly conquering Cyrenaica, while the *Africa Orientale Italiana* was soon overrun despite stubborn resistance in Eritrea. During the winter of 1940-1941, Great Britain had broken Italy's independent war effort.⁴¹⁶

The difficult task of reconciling Italian defeats with the quite-unflattering depiction previously given of the British forced a change in the discourse: victory was still considered certain, but the war was now described as a long business. Britain was still strong,⁴¹⁷ not a dead man walking and, as *La Stampa* commented, all the forces of the nation were to be focused on removing this last obstacle on the path to European peace.⁴¹⁸

At the same time, the magnitude of British success was downplayed. In February, Orlando Freri wrote in *Gerarchia* that England, unable to attack a Germany protected by the sea, had 'concentrated all the forces available in its immense Empire against Italy. The Mediterranean and Africa had assumed a central role in the economy of the war.'⁴¹⁹ However, the British advance was far from quick or decisive. Wavell's offensive had been slow despite his remarkable forces, which had accumulated up to 400,000 men since before the war in many mechanised and armoured units and yet were contained by the stubborn resistance of 'Italian units [lacking] means of attack and defence.' Britain had

he asked his listeners: 'think about what we would have done had we had such a powerful Navy.' See: Valori, *Parole di Fede*, p. 141.

⁴¹⁶ MacGregor Knox, *Fascist Italy assesses its enemies*, p. 347.

⁴¹⁷ Now Aldo Valori grudgingly admitted that 'the English are strong, can still fight.' Later he would repeat that the British were a 'strong people', who had won their past wars thanks to their intelligence. See: Aldo Valori, *Parole di fede*, pp. 262; 326.

⁴¹⁸ Unattributed, 'Lo scopo supremo – la sconfitta totale della Gran Bretagna', *La Stampa*, 19 November 1940, p. 1.

⁴¹⁹ Some authors also commented that Britain had chosen to attack Italy instead of Germany because they wanted to punish Italian insolence for considering itself on par with the superior British race. See: Aldo Valori, *Parole di fede*, p. 242.

used all its strength against what it considered the ‘minor mass’ of the Axis, which explained Italian difficulties.⁴²⁰

In the context of this perceived British attempt to focus all available resources against Italy, it is important to mention how Fascist discourse considered the war in Greece as merely a theatre of the wider conflict against Britain. Therefore, Freri could write in April that the forces of Italy had faced the British Empire not just in Cyrenaica and in East Africa, but in Greece as well.⁴²¹ The King of Greece was a ‘monarch with no character, maintained by Britain and a slave to English imperialism.’⁴²² Particularly revealing is that while the term ‘mercenaries’ was often used to describe British allies or even the forces of the Dominions, it recurs frequently when talking of Greek soldiers opposing Italy.⁴²³ During the following, fluctuating phase of the war in North Africa and the Mediterranean, war propaganda adopted a somewhat more moderate approach. The British defeat in Greece was to be described as a ‘new Dunkirk and a new Gallipoli.’⁴²⁴ While the first Italian-German recapture of Cyrenaica was celebrated as far more impressive than the

⁴²⁰ Orlando Freri, ‘La guerra Italo-germanica contro l’Inghilterra’, *Gerarchia*, March 1941. The Italian command miscalculated the enemy forces’ numbers almost as much as Freri did, estimating 350,000 British men in Cyrenaica, as well as 1,100 tanks and around 900 planes. 340,000 was in fact the number of British personnel, both fighting and in the services employed by the Middle Eastern Command, from Cyrenaica to Palestine and from Kenya to Aden. See: Mario Montanari, *Le operazioni in Africa Settentrionale, Vol. I, Sidi El-Barrani* (Rome: USSME, 2000), pp. 379-80.

⁴²¹ As one propaganda author wrote, Italians could be proud of having ‘endured the desperate clash, the fang, the last convulsion of [one] who is dying a violent death.’ See: Pietro Caporilli, *Come Cartagine*, p.7. On a similar note, a *Supermarina* report drafted in February 1941 claimed that the defeat had been caused by ‘the concentration of all the means and offensive power of the British Empire against the Italian colonial empire, still young and not completely prepared.’ The fact that this was stated in a military source suggests that what Caporilli and Freri wrote was far from simply being propaganda. See: Mario Montanari, *Le operazioni in Africa Settentrionale*, pp. 668-9.

⁴²² Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press April 24 1941, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴²³ See, for example: Unattributed, ‘Miracoli di organizzazione nell’imperversare della tormenta’, *Il Corriere*, January 21 1941.

⁴²⁴ Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press April 25 1941, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

previous British offensive, the recent defeats had instilled caution.⁴²⁵ Already in September 1940, some informants were suggesting the need to avoid excessively underrating British military strength, lest possible military failures have a more harmful effect on a public opinion which was too sure of itself.⁴²⁶ Observers condemned the lack of accuracy in the press' reports, underlining that, by the end of September, it was leading ever more Italians to distrust it.⁴²⁷ The defeats proved these warnings correct, and by 1941 the rule was then to avoid any excessive optimism and predictions of the developments of the war.⁴²⁸ Violent attacks on Churchill, however, were extremely common.⁴²⁹ The temptation of interpreting victory as a sign of weakness, or the unworthiness of the enemy, seemed too strong to be avoided by the press, which was eventually ordered on 22 April 1941 to 'stop underrating the enemy and diffusing a sense of euphoria.'⁴³⁰ One interesting example is a spring 1941 analysis written by *Ministero della Cultura Popolare* functionaries of a book written by Curzio Villa, the anti-British author re-emerging after a long absence. The report considered the book a serious one, 'with [a] rich selection of informative facts.' However, the underrating of British weaknesses was too much:

The balance of the author wavers a little when insisting on the, certainly meaningful but not decisive, episode of the mutiny of the Invergordon [in 1931] to prove the great decadence of the British fleet [...] The following facts do not sustain such a theory. Also excessive is the pessimistic

⁴²⁵ The press was ordered to remark that '[the offensive] took Wavell two months. On the way back, the Axis troops regained ground in 14 days despite the difficult atmospheric conditions.' See: *La Stampa del Regime*, p. 350.

⁴²⁶ Conferenze e propaganda in relazione all'attuale stato di Guerra, 14 September 1940, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁴²⁷ No title, Milan, 23 September 1940, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁴²⁸ One example is the following order to the press: 'Following the recent air-naval victories do not speak of war virtually won, and in general never indulge in premature and anticipatory optimisms.' Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press May 25 1941, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴²⁹ See, for example: Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press June 10 1941, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴³⁰ *La Stampa del Regime*, p. 394.

evaluation of the centrifugal forces of the Dominions and of the Indian revolt as very quick disintegrating germs [*sic*] of the Empire. The experience of the current war in which the Dominions support Great Britain, and India lies more or less quietly under the British heel, have partially debunked this postulate; postulate to be considered historically right if considered in a slow and normal process of time.⁴³¹

A period of violent but indecisive battles in the desert followed, until the Italians and the Germans were forced to retreat once again from Cyrenaica. Again, the British occupation of the region was quite short. Between January and July 1942, as the Axis forces in North Africa managed to overwhelm British divisions in Cyrenaica and eventually push deep into Egypt, contemptuous tones regarding the military qualities of British troops and the weak attitude of the British people resurfaced, stronger than ever since summer 1940.⁴³² The Fascist authorities had realised by then that these exaggerations were counter-productive. The morbid, contented descriptions of the suffering of British civilians under German bombings almost disappeared in the early months of 1942, and already in January Pavolini had recommended that the press not excessively emphasise the difficulties facing the British home front.⁴³³ In June 1942, while the Axis forces were marching through Egypt, the orders to the press set the official tone as one of ‘great sobriety’, adding that ‘we expect victory exclusively through [our] arms, and not from a collapse of the enemy domestic front.’⁴³⁴ In July, the orders to the press stated that

in North Africa, the enemy fought and fights with bravery and stubbornness. To downplay such a truth with vulgar and irresponsible banalities (enemy routs, etc.) would undervalue the heroism and tenacity of our [soldiers]. Also [it is necessary to] refrain from an excessive

⁴³¹ Curzio Villa, *Nemica Inghilterra*, Editore Oberdan Zucchi, (Brindisi: Milano 1941), Busta 278, Sovvenzioni 1931-1944, Archivio generale, Gabinetto, Ministero della Cultura Popolare (1926-1945), ACS.

⁴³² The press was also once again excessively optimistic; in April, an article in *Corriere della Sera* talked of ‘end of British plutocracy’ and of a Britain which was already defeated. See: Marziano, ‘Il tramonto della plutocrazia britannica’, *Il Corriere*, April 28 1942, p. 1. Another article in July stated that the collapse of Britain was by then unavoidable. See: C.B., ‘Di sconfitta in sconfitta, l’Inghilterra va verso il collasso finale’, *Il Corriere*, 1 July 1942, p. 4.

⁴³³ Petrella, *Staging the Fascist War*, p. 171.

⁴³⁴ Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press 26 June 1942, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

underrating of the English generals,⁴³⁵ with ironic biographies, etc. The reason of [our] victories must be exclusively credited to [our] military heroism, strategic geniality, in the power of the Italian and German troops' armament. The current order is also valid for the humoristic press and extends to the maritime field (English ships which do not know but how to sink, etc.).⁴³⁶

However, the press continued to publish articles which questioned the enemy's will to fight. Particularly interesting is an article published in September 1942 in *Il Corriere*, which provides an anthropological explanation of British warfare. If the British had 'cowardly' fled the battlefield on many occasions, it was because they waged war like their corsair ancestors who, in the infinite space of the seas, were used to attacking when superior in forces and withdrawing when the enemy was stronger. In British warfare there was no room for tactical genius in order to obviate with manoeuvre to material inferiority. This kind of warfare reduced the battle to a question of brute strength, so distant from the spiritual values that were at the base of Italian successes. Another reason for such a British 'strategic aberration' was that they had no problem retreating again and again because they never fought in their homeland. However, the German, Italian and Japanese forces, attacking Britain everywhere, had ruined the old British game of 'space and time.'⁴³⁷ Armando Tosti in *La Difesa della Razza* (see Chapter 5) provided one peculiar, and extreme, racial explanation of the British attitude towards war.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ Indeed, the officers were not spared by the Fascist press. One article claimed that the arrogance, ignorance and intellectual mediocrity of the British ruling classes was the reason for the 'pitiful' performance of the British Army, as well as of the 'humiliating political decadence of England.' See: Unattributed, 'Un tipico rappresentante della mediocrità intellettuale inglese', *Il Corriere*, 15 August 1942, p.4. Another article mentioned how British officers were despised by the American press. See: Unattributed, 'L'incapacità degli ufficiali britannici additata al pubblico disprezzo dalla stampa americana', *Il Tevere*, 6/7 July 1942.

⁴³⁶ Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press 1 July 1942, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴³⁷ M.C., 'Dunquerque-Tobruk', *Il Corriere*, 24 September 1942, p. 1.

⁴³⁸ Other authors found explanations that were even more bizarre: the doctor Guido Calderoli explained the supposedly bad quality of English fighters with the widespread practice of tonsillectomy in the British Army. See: Denis Mack Smith, *Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy*, p. 97.

Hatred of the barbarians: Occupation and bombings

With the collapse of Graziani's Tenth Army at Beda Fomm, the British completed their first occupation of Cyrenaica, which was described by the Fascists as exceptionally harsh. In July 1941, the powerful *Gerarca* Alessandro Pavolini wrote that the '97 days of infamy' of the first British occupation of the region had given all Italians good reason to hate the authors of such barbarity.⁴³⁹ Another article denounced 'the ignoble and inhuman behaviour of the occupation troops', contrasting it with Roman civilisation,⁴⁴⁰ a theme which was reprised by a successive comparison of the British and Australians with the Vandal invaders of Roman Africa.⁴⁴¹ One letter published in *Gerarchia* described the 'martyrdom' inflicted on the Italian civilians by the Australians, who instead ostentatiously respected the Jewish, Arab, Greek and Indian populations:

This is the British civilization and nobleness, this is [...] the truth that every citizen of Benghazi lived through during the temporary rule of the alcoholic Englishmen; their army was in such a state to disgust the most savage race in the world.⁴⁴²

The British were also supposedly cruel with prisoners of war. Aldo Valori said that 'there are many things that make us greatly doubt that the English have an adequate concept of the principles of humanity and decency that must rule war [...] for example the lack of

⁴³⁹ Alessandro Pavolini, 'Gli Inglesi in Cirenaica, 97 giorni di infamie', *La Stampa*, 27 July 1941, p.1. Angelo Del Boca wrote that Pavolini's comments were not exaggerated, being confirmed by many other sources, both the soldiers and the Italian colonists, who had carelessly not been evacuated. Even worse than the first was the second occupation of Cyrenaica, but in that case it was not the British, but the Arabs that were most feared by the Italians in the region. See: Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia, Vol. 2, dal Fascismo a Gheddafi*, (Mondadori, 1997), pp. 314-5.

⁴⁴⁰ Unattributed, 'Bengasi: nera pagina della storia dell'Inghilterra – l'ignobile e inumano comportamento delle truppe d'occupazione', *La Stampa*, April 14 1941, p.2. See also: G.Z. Ornato, 'I misfatti commessi sul Gebel in due mesi di occupazione', *La Stampa*, 26 April 1941, p.2; Unattributed, 'I pirateschi soprusi della soldataglia inglese', *Il Tevere*, 17/18 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁴¹ Unattributed, 'Il calvario di Bengasi sotto il breve dominio inglese', *Il Corriere*, April 13 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁴² Lettera di Verardo Andrea, 'La civiltà inglese come è apparsa ai Bengasini', *Gerarchia*, April 1941.

care they have for the prisoners' correspondence.'⁴⁴³ As the war went on, accusations of brutality against prisoners became more common and depicted a far harsher situation. Italian prisoners were now living in inhumane conditions, enduring harassment by British troops and (with the implication that such a thing was far worse), coloured gaolers. Movies like *Un pilota ritorna* (A pilot returns) pictured a harsher reality, with prisoners being brutally mistreated by British troops.⁴⁴⁴

The violent German bombing campaign against Britain was celebrated by the Fascist press. The word 'panic' was used to describe the condition of Londoners, and Englishmen in general, under the bombs.⁴⁴⁵ In September 1940 *La Stampa* laughed at 'English contortionism under the avenging bombs', noticing how British agitation under the bombs contrasted with the stereotype of the calm Englishman.⁴⁴⁶ The same month, one article mocked the Londoner 'cavemen' who lived underground to find refuge from the bombings.⁴⁴⁷ In October, Luigi Barzini commented on the 'rain of fire from the sky' annihilating London with apocalyptic tones, recalling the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was, in Barzini's words, historical revenge for all the miseries inflicted by Britain on the world; 'if [British] resistance persists' he concluded, 'nothing will remain of England but the skeleton.'⁴⁴⁸ Mussolini was proud to announce to the Italians that he had asked

⁴⁴³ Aldo Valori, *Parole di Fede*, p. 238.

⁴⁴⁴ See for example: Unattributed, 'Testimonianze di generali e di soldati sugli inumani trattamenti degli inglesi', *La Stampa*, June 15 1943, p. 4; And the movie *Un pilota ritorna* (A pilot returns), mentioned in Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra*, p. 150.

⁴⁴⁵ See, for example: Unattributed, 'Giornate di panico in Inghilterra', *La Stampa*, 12 July 1940, p.3; Unattributed, 'Il panico si diffonde in Inghilterra, la legge marziale progettata dal governo di Londra', *La Stampa*, 17 July 1940, p. 3.

⁴⁴⁶ Unattributed, 'Contorsionismi inglesi sotto le bombe giustiziere', *La Stampa*, 8 September 1940, p. 2.

⁴⁴⁷ See: Cesco Tomaselli, 'Nei sotterranei londinesi, I cavernicoli alla ricerca del più sicuro rifugio', *Il Corriere*, 14 September 1940.

⁴⁴⁸ Luigi Barzini, 'Che cos'è la resistenza inglese', *Roosevelt e la guerra all'Inghilterra*, (Verona, Mondadori, 1942) p. 207. Other suggestive headlines were: Cesco Tommaselli, 'A terrible punishment destroys London from the sky'; Pic. 'The infernal nights of the British capital', *Il Corriere*, 11 September 1940, p. 1.

for and obtained Hitler's approval to participate in the air battle against Britain (something which would later be exploited by British propaganda).⁴⁴⁹ Yet Britain kept fighting, and soon Italy was also subject to a bombing campaign. The ferocious allied bombings on Italian (and German) cities was one of the main themes of both propaganda and more sophisticated Fascist discourse regarding wartime Britain. Yet how could one reconcile the need to denounce the brutality of the British campaign while praising the German one, which brought to Britain the destruction described by countless articles, for the whole length of the war?⁴⁵⁰

Civilian correspondence often underlined anti-British themes as well. One letter sent from Italian immigrants in Argentina dated October 1941 stated that 'it is necessary that these Anglo-Saxons are exterminated for good, for with them we would live in a state of eternal slavery, given the nefarious egoism which is in them innate.'⁴⁵¹

Luigi Petrella underlined that the line held by Fascist propaganda in the first year of the conflict was to 'deny that the war was a destructive break with the deeply rooted rhythms and habits of Italy, while at the same time it was describing in the crudest terms the terrible consequences of German air raids over English cities.'⁴⁵² In this context, the point usually held was that the enemy was willingly targeting people because their goals were not military but terroristic in nature, and that Britain had started the murderous practice of

⁴⁴⁹ Marco Fincardi, *Anglo-American air attacks and the rebirth of the public opinion in Fascist Italy*, in *Bombing, states and peoples in Western Europe, 1940-1945*, ed. by C. Baldoli, Andrew Knapp and Richard Overy, (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 245.

⁴⁵⁰ Even this became more difficult once it was clear that the bombing campaign had not defeated Britain. In February 1941, the press was ordered 'not to exaggerate in the titles and in the description of the effects of the German air attacks on the English cities.' Tranfaglia, *La Stampa del Regime*, p. 345.

⁴⁵¹ R. Prefettura di Firenze al Capo della polizia, Stato d'animo della popolazione, desunto dal riservato controllo epistolare, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁴⁵² Petrella, *Staging the Fascist War*, p. 15.

bombing civilians.⁴⁵³ As soon as 13 June 1940, the British bombed Turin, leading radio propagandist Aldo Valori to denounce their ‘murderous amateurism.’⁴⁵⁴ As written in the order to the press on 21 November 1942, ‘the enemy increasingly shows that it does not pursue a military goal, but only a criminal one [*camorristico*]. In any case, the Italians are not and will not allow themselves to be terrorized.’⁴⁵⁵ The employment of bombs disguised as toys or pencils was unsurprisingly the source of plenty of moral indignation. In July 1941 *La Stampa* stated that, by using this kind of arms, the British had proven itself once again not to belong to the world of civilised peoples.⁴⁵⁶ The themes of brutality and reluctance to risk their men’s lives appear side-by-side in an article written in June 1943 in *Gerarchia*, which suggested that ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ had still not attempted a landing in Europe, preferring instead to bomb women and children because of the awareness of the heavy price in blood that such a move would require. The Anglo-Saxons were

in a hurry to eliminate Italy from the conflict, and they would like to do it without a fight. Never were our enemies so worried to spare the blood of our fighters, shedding the one of our children, of our women, of our elders, of our nurses, and destroying our churches, our millenary monuments.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵³ For example, *Il Corriere* claimed that Churchill subverted the truth when stating that the Germans had attacked civilians first. The article commented that ‘the bombings of London and of other British towns began after at least three months of British aggression against the German populations, specifically as a reprisal for these aggressions.’ Unattributed, ‘Un nuovo sfogo di odio Churchilliano’, *Il Corriere*, July 15 1941, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁴ Aldo Valori, *Parole di fede*, p. 15.

⁴⁵⁵ Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press 21 November 1942, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴⁵⁶ Unattributed, ‘Come combattono gli Inglesi’, *La Stampa*, 18 July 1941, p. 4.

⁴⁵⁷ The Allies were indeed attempting to undermine the morale of the Italian people through their psychological warfare techniques. Especially from mid-1942, the intensive dropping of leaflets on Italian cities before and after the bombings had the effect of both blaming Mussolini and the Germans for the bombings and underlining the desperate situation of Italy in the conflict. See: Claudia Baldoli, *I bombardamenti sull’Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale, strategia anglo-americana e propaganda rivolta alla popolazione civile*, DEP, n.13-14, pp. 40-3; Marco Fincardi, *Anglo-American air attacks and the rebirth of the public opinion in Fascist Italy*, pp. 244-7.

Their goal was, then, to break the spirit of the Italian people, the tools used including the usual ‘threats and wheedling, the explosive pencil together with the flattering leaflet, the brutal bombing with the sentimental appeal, the humiliating command with the praise of our soldiers.’ Brogi wondered how much more worried they would have been if, being aware of the real spiritual endurance of the Italian people, they would realise that ‘there are not few people waiting for the Anglo-Americans,⁴⁵⁸ in Sicily, Sardinia, Calabria or Grosseto, to avenge their killed or maimed children, [their] women bombed on peaceful roads, old men buried under the ruins.’⁴⁵⁹ The same month, Concetto Pettinato underlined how, throughout their history, the British had proven themselves to have ‘a heart of stone.’⁴⁶⁰ However, this kind of discourse, which showed the Italians as victims of British cruelty, was not always appreciated by the Fascist censorship. The orders to the press were to avoid any sentimentality concerning the loss of human lives and the visits of personalities to the population (the term used was *pietismo*), to adopt a ‘virile polemic tone’ and focus on the barbarity and cowardice of the enemy.⁴⁶¹ The Fascist authorities felt that too little space had been given to describing Anglo-Saxon cruelty by the press. In May 1943, the orders to the press lamented that ‘the polemic against the Anglo-American pilots, murderers of children and women, is not “cutting” enough. [It is necessary to] develop the concept of barbarism, *gangsterismo*, cowardice. Avoid any

⁴⁵⁸ The orders to the press mentioned that the enemy had to be identified as ‘Anglo-Americans’ rather than ‘Allies.’ See: Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press May 22 1943, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴⁵⁹ Dino Brogi, ‘Sintomi’, *Gerarchia*, June 1943, pp. 207-8.

⁴⁶⁰ Concetto Pettinato, ‘Cuore di pietra’, *La Stampa*, June 4 1943, p. 3.

⁴⁶¹ See, for example: Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press May 2 1943, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS; Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press July 20 1943, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS. The term ‘barbarous’ was one of the most commonly used. See, for example: Alessandro Luzo’s criticism of British bombings, in Denis Mack Smith, ‘*Anti-British propaganda in Fascist Italy*’, p.109. See also: Petrella, *Staging the Fascist War*, p. 171.

sentimental tone. Do not mention, for now, reprisals.⁴⁶² The appeal did not have a long-lasting effect and, later the same month, the orders to the press mentioned how ‘after some days, the polemic against the enemy has, again, lost its “cutting”’: the English and the Americans keep fighting the war as brigands. The reaction of the Italian press is weak.’⁴⁶³ The order added that one newspaper had claimed ‘Italians are angels’ - such rhetoric was to be avoided, since it was reminiscent of the ‘old despicable commonplaces of the “good Italian”’.⁴⁶⁴ The Fascist regime had sought to turn the Italian people into a hard race of conquerors: the only acceptable response to the bombings was hatred, not images of passive martyrs. The order to the press on 17 May 1943 gives a picture of what this meant:

Today we witness cowardly, atrocious and inhuman acts [...] that have no precedent and recall the far times of the barbarian invasions. The reaction of the Italian press against those atrocities must be dealt with a strong sentiment, and most of all must be strongly felt by the writers, without pietisms. GENERAL DIRECTIVE: hatred against the barbarians.⁴⁶⁵

By 1944, the discourse focused on the subject of the brutality and arrogance of the invaders, the ‘new barbarians’, worse than the old, because unlike them they showed no respect for the artistic treasures of Italy.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶² Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press May 3 1943, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴⁶³ It was ironic that the regime asked for *more* emphasis on the destruction brought over the country, when its propaganda had refused to admit the severity of the bombings even after the first, unopposed raids on the Italian cities. See: Fincardi, *Anglo-American air attacks and the rebirth of the public opinion in Fascist Italy*, p. 243.

⁴⁶⁴ Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Order to the press May 22 1943, Busta 71, Varie, Carte Morgagni corrispondenza rivista, Agenzia Stefani, ACS.

⁴⁶⁵ Tranfaglia, *La Stampa del Regime*, p. 388.

⁴⁶⁶ Countless articles mentioned the devastation brought by the enemy on occupied Italian soil. See for example: Unattributed, ‘I barbari vengono dal mare’, *Il Corriere*, October 18 1944, p. 1.; Cesco Tomaselli, ‘Il ferro e l’oro’, *Il Corriere*, may 5 1944, p.1; Massimo Lej, ‘Perche gli anglosassoni distruggono l’arte italiana’, *Il Corriere*, February 23 1944, p. 2. This last article typically stated that ‘calling them barbarians we honour them [...] they are not [capable] of the delusions of the barbarians, they are simply corrupt. And organizers of corruption.’ See also, unattributed, ‘I criminali piani inglesi trovano sempre nuove conferme,’ *La Stampa*, 1 July 1943, p.1; unattributed, ‘Mentre il mondo civile insorge, si accumulano le prove del misfatto angloamericano’, *La Stampa*, 19 February 1944, p. 1; Unattributed, ‘Oltre 800 edifici storici e culturali distrutti in Italia dai “liberatori”’, *La Stampa*, 31 May 1944, p. 1.

The stereotype about the Briton who cannot or will not fight had largely disappeared. Concetto Pettinato, a journalist well known for his hatred of the Western democracies, wrote in January 1943 that

if the British islands had been inhabited by 50 millions of Italians instead of 50 millions of Englishmen, after Dunkirk Churchill would have been forced to wear a fake beard and run from his home from the window [and] King George would have escaped by night [...] But the British islands are inhabited by Englishmen, instead, and forty-three months since Dunkirk the war still lasts, King George is still on his throne, Churchill smokes his cigars and Eden did not stop talking about fancy ties.⁴⁶⁷

Pettinato's new point of view somehow mirrored Mussolini's in 1917, when he had implied that, unlike the Italians, the British were capable of remaining solid behind their national cause. Once again, the Fascist discourse had gone full circle.

Conclusions

Emilio Gentile argued that

it was after the success of the Ethiopian conquest that the conscious and planned acceleration of the process of 'totalitarization' of society and the state happened' with the result that 'at the eve of the war, the Fascist State was far more totalitarian than it was at the end of the 20's', including '[...] the methods and goals of the foreign policy as well.'⁴⁶⁸

The reports of the attachés hint that the process had begun before the Ethiopian conflict, as shown by Adolfo Infante's merciless description of the state of disarray of British society and global influence. If he, however, balanced his view with a reference to British strength of will with a professional appreciation for British technical prowess in the field of armoured warfare, his successor, Mondadori, showed how ideological prejudice increasingly distorted this judgment. Later on, according to the process described by Gentile, the prejudice became blinding. Great Britain was, in these reports, a country

⁴⁶⁷ Concetto Pettinato, 'Perché la guerra non può essere perduta', *La Stampa*, January 25 1943, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁸ Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, p. 156.

experiencing moral disintegration (perfectly fitting Fascist propaganda of the time), and whose military was increasingly weak. The waning of British military supremacy, above all in armoured warfare during the 1930s, while partially true, was greatly exaggerated, especially if compared with the Italian Army. Eventually it coalesced into a constant and blinding moral judgment of a people not ready to risk its life to protect its interests.

However, the reports of the military attachés seem to prove that, far from being simple propaganda or the product of sycophantic journalists who wanted to please their editors, the notion of the decadent and unwarlike Englishman had permeated even those who had direct contact with the future enemy and had knowledge of military matters. It also seems unlikely that Mussolini was ‘deceived’; the *Duce’s* considerations of British weakness and idleness predate most of the newspaper articles quoted in this piece and matured in the same cultural environment as the reports of the military attachés. It was Mussolini’s Fascist doctrine itself, with its system of beliefs and worldview, that encouraged the misunderstanding regarding Britain and war.

While the aim of the first section of this chapter was to use the military attachés as an example of how a totalitarian regime could create myths in a top-down process, the next step is to investigate whether this triggered a process which, in turn, influenced the elite. It is indeed unlikely that the process was one-way. The military attachés represented a class of officers who had absorbed these notions and started to act accordingly, in this case producing feedback with a skewed perspective in a bottom-up process. People like Grandi and especially Pariani were clearly aware of what the attachés said and shared their opinion; there is also evidence that Mussolini, who had little respect for diplomatic reporting regarding military matters, had more use for some of his military attachés.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ Knox, *Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies*, p. 352-53. The military attachés reported through the Foreign Ministry to their respective intelligence services.

The systematic underestimation of Britain's capabilities and will to fight was hence upheld by an osmotic process among the officers, the elites and Mussolini.⁴⁷⁰

The second section of the chapter has demonstrated how De Felice's periodisation and interpretation of wartime Fascist public discourse is not supported by an analysis of the sources. First of all, as we have seen, the verbal violence, contempt and mocking tones, talk of the 'end of the British Empire', as well as the accusations of cowardice and lack of martial virility (generally ignored by De Felice), peaked during the 'first period' of summer 1940. During this phase, more than once the discourse focused less on an attempt to justify the Italian war and more on a gleeful, Darwinian explanation of why the carcass of the British Empire was about to be devoured by the young peoples. Regarding verbal violence, it was as strong at the beginning of the war as it was as the end approached. The morbid descriptions of the horrors of the German bombing of London, or the aforementioned Appellius' call for the partial genocide of the English people to cleanse the European genetic pool, are hardly examples of moderation and date back to mid-1940. Both classical war propaganda and the more refined discourse appearing in newspapers and magazines presented an image welcomed by the Fascist ideologues: one of a nation whose people had been emasculated by democracy and wealth.⁴⁷¹ The defeats of the first winter of the Italian war forced the press, and the authorities which tried to control it, to adopt a more balanced approach, but the old attitudes kept resurfacing until the final defeat in Africa in 1943.

⁴⁷⁰ It is important to underline that military journals spoke surprisingly little about Britain, and when they did they limited themselves to take notice of technical developments in the British Army. If senior Italian officers disagreed with the reports, or with Pariani's ideas concerning the British, they did not write that in official publications.

⁴⁷¹ Mussolini's opinion on the effect of wealth over peoples can be summed up by his claim that 'a people must be poor to be proud.' See: Ciano, *Diario*, 17 March 1938.

Chapter 4

The racial inferiority of Anglo-Saxons: Italian Racists' Image of Britain Under the Shadow of Defeat.

*A few tens of thousands of well-fed, carnivorous Englishmen manage to rule over two hundred millions of Indians.*⁴⁷²

*Nobody ignores that the principal characters of the English race are the habit to promise and not to keep their word; the opinion that everything is for sale; hence their ease with any kind of betrayal and the inclination to count on others to pull their chestnuts out of the fire.*⁴⁷³

Introduction

Considerable attention has been devoted by academics to the nature of Fascist Italy's racism and the racial laws it produced.⁴⁷⁴ However, the representation of Britain in racial terms has received far less attention.⁴⁷⁵ No previous study has taken into consideration

⁴⁷² Giuseppe Lucidi, 'L'autarchia alimentare difesa della patria,' *La Difesa*, 20 November 1938, p. 18.

⁴⁷³ Armando Tosti, 'Atavismi psichici della razza inglese', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 February 1941, pp. 13-5.

⁴⁷⁴ The debate is ongoing. See for instance: Giorgio Fabre, *Mussolini il razzista, Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita*, (Milano: Garzanti, 2005); Meir Michaelis, 'Gli Ebrei nell'Italia Fascista', *Rassegna mensile di Israel* (1967); Luigi Preti, *Impero Fascista, Africani ed Ebrei*, (Milano: Mursia, 1968); Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli Ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997); Antonio Spinosa, *Il razzista riluttante* (Rome: Bonacci, 1994); Renzo de Felice and Luigi Goglia, *Nota sul razzismo coloniale Fascista* (Estr. da: *Storia contemporanea*, a. XIX, n. 6, dicembre 1988); George Mosse, *Verso una teoria generale del fascismo*, (Rome: Laterza, 1996); Gentile, *Fascismo, storia ed interpretazione*.

⁴⁷⁵ Most of the sources dealing with racial perceptions of Britain were contained in the magazine *La Difesa della Razza*. It is therefore natural that most references to it can be found in the main studies regarding that magazine, in particular the works of Giorgio Lorè (with a focus on anti-Semitism) and Valentina Pisanty's anthology. Lorè's work includes three pages dealing with the issue of the 'La Difesa della Razza against the United Kingdom.' However, the author devotes only a few lines to mention of 'the racial inferiority of the Anglo-Saxons', focusing on the theme

the fact that Italian racism was divided among factions with different worldviews, goals, allies and enemies, and how that influenced the choice of the themes used by this racist discourse. Whereas previous works treated *La Difesa*'s attitude towards Great Britain as monolithic, this chapter aims to provide a more detailed and nuanced reconstruction of the racial criticism of Britain in the period during which it flourished - 1938-1943. The double interpretative goal adopted is to identify both the origins of the propaganda's themes and the reasons behind the diverse stances adopted by different racist personalities. The chapter will first briefly introduce the origins and evolution of racism in Italy and the Fascist regime. It will then focus on the analysis of British racism as perceived by Italian racists, torn between considering it a good example because of the firm racial consciousness it created and the impressive achievements of British imperialism, and criticising it because of its excessive harshness. The focus will then shift to the origins and peculiarity of the various racist factions which emerged during the late 1930s and the war years. The racial image of the British emerging from the analysis is fragmented and at times inconsistent, changing again and again until the end of the regime. The chapter will analyse how the various factions each developed one or more understandings of the 'racial nature' of the British, both according to their scientific (or, more accurately, pseudoscientific) postulates and, often, to the political opportunity within the context of the struggle with the rival factions. The chapter will also address the

of Jewish influence in Britain. Pisanty's book includes extracted parts of two articles, only one of which - Armando Tosti's 'Psychical atavisms of the English race' - is part of the racial campaign against the British. Denis Mack Smith's *Anti-British propaganda in Fascist Italy* quickly deals with the issue, quoting brief sections of Aldo Modica's article 'Inferiorità razziale degli Anglo-Sassoni' and Arnaldo Tosti's 'The Anglo-Saxon race against Europe.' See: Michele Lorè, *Antisemitismo e Razzismo ne 'La Difesa della Razza' (1938-1943)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008); Valentina Pisanty, *Difesa della Razza, Antologia, 1938-1943* (Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 2016); Mack Smith, 'Anti-British propaganda', pp. 114-6. *La Difesa della Razza*, active between August 1938 and July 1943, was the 'official' magazine of Italian racism. It was directed by the journalist and pioneer of Italian anti-Semitism, Telesio Interlandi.

more general Fascist assessment of the alleged ills of interwar Fascist society, like eugenic movements, alcoholism, ‘sexual deviancy’ and lack of care for physical vigour.

Italian and Fascist racism

While forms of both spiritual and biological racism had existed in Italy since the nineteenth century and a number of Italian scholars adhered to Nordic Aryanism, the fact that people like de Gobineau and Chamberlain, the fathers of biological racism, held the Italians in contempt alienated most Italian intellectuals.⁴⁷⁶ Even when, with the development of anthropology, eugenics and archaeology, the European debate about race was dominated by a more ‘scientific’ approach, the strong anti-scientific prejudices held by the idealistic cultural élites of Italy meant that cultural, or spiritual racism (as well as Lamarckian, or environmental, genetics) was always more popular in the country. Internationally, Italy was weak compared to other European nations, and the great difference in the development of northern and southern Italy inspired many racist Italian thinkers to speculate on racial explanations for these differences.⁴⁷⁷ Eventually, in the early twentieth century, two schools emerged: one that identified the Italians with the Aryans and one which claimed they were Mediterraneans. The first assumed that the Italians were part of the dominant ethnic identity of northern Europe, implying that current Italian weakness was the consequence of the country (and of course the southerners in particular) being ‘racially contaminated’ by inferior races. The second insisted that, far from being Aryans, the Italians were part of the (recently-‘discovered’) Mediterranean race. The hugely influential anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi was the most

⁴⁷⁶ Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, pp. 15-18.

⁴⁷⁷ Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, pp. 21-22. Cesare Lombroso, founder of an influential school of criminology and himself Jewish, explained the huge amount of crime in Southern Italy with the lack of Aryan blood in those regions. See: Duggan, *The Force of Destiny*, p. 268.

important of the Mediterraneanists: he claimed that the Mediterraneans, being an independent group themselves, were the greatest of the races and denied that the Aryans (who, until recently, had been unable to develop civilisation) had a meaningful influence on European history.⁴⁷⁸ Anti-Germanic and anti-Nordic feelings peaked during the Great War, as reflected in Mussolini's writings at the time.⁴⁷⁹ However, his new Fascist comrades also influenced the future *Duce's* early racial ideas. While Mussolini praised the Latin race in one of his speeches, he also deplored the current state of Italy, and soon absorbed much of the Nationalists' stance on regenerating Italy. Convinced of the necessity of improving the Italian people by transforming their character along Fascist lines, he made it clear, even before his rise to power, that eugenics must play a role. However, it was not until 1927 that he started to introduce measures aimed at increasing the 'health' of the nation, by encouraging physical activity, as well as fecundity, with the creation or improvement of pre-natal and maternal support structures, increasing criminal sentences for those involved in abortion and taxing bachelors.⁴⁸⁰ The Catholic Church supported these policies, and for ten years Mussolini appeared convinced that such policies were proving successful.⁴⁸¹ Convinced that the strength of a nation lay in its demographic power, he never approved of sterilisation.⁴⁸² Mussolini had an interest in demography and was deeply worried by the higher and increasing birth rate of non-white races.⁴⁸³ Increasingly racist towards people of colour, after the proclamation of the

⁴⁷⁸ Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, pp. 23-32.

⁴⁷⁹ Fabre, *Mussolini il razzista*, pp. 217-8.

⁴⁸⁰ On Fascist policies on motherhood, see Massimiliano Monnanni, *Per la protezione della stirpe: Il Fascismo e l'Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia* (Rome: Sallustiana, 2005.)

⁴⁸¹ Francesco Cassata, *Building the New Man, Eugenics, Racial Science and Genetics in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), p. 6.

⁴⁸² Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, p. 40.

⁴⁸³ On Fascist obsession with demography, see Francesco Cassata, *Il fascismo razionale: Corrado Gini fra scienza e politica* (Rome: Carocci, 2006) and Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: the Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.)

Empire in 1936 Mussolini began outlining an apartheid system in East Africa and was incensed by accounts of frequent miscegenation there.⁴⁸⁴

The development of an Italian Fascist racial doctrine was the consequence of the *Duce's* frustration with the apparent failure of his attempts to build a 'Fascist New Man' through both political indoctrination and eugenics programs. Feeling that a new war was looming and that the Italian people still seemed to reflect a more traditional 'bourgeois' character than the Fascist one, Mussolini introduced racial legislation in order to strengthen Italian identity and transform the Italian people. Thus, racism was part of the Reform of Customs (*Riforma dei costumi*) Mussolini announced in 1938.

German-style racism was quite unpopular in Italy in the mid-1930s and would remain so for most of the population. In 1934, during a period of temporary crisis with the new Nazi regime in Germany, Mussolini openly ridiculed Nordicism and German claims of racial superiority. In 1936, Sergi once again championed the Mediterraneanist cause with a book entitled *The Britons: Mediterraneans in the North of Europe*, in which he claimed that the glories of the British Empire came from the Mediterranean origins of part of its people.⁴⁸⁵ In his book, Sergi stated that the Mediterranean presence in the British Isles preceded by far the various other peoples, like the 'Celts, Scandinavians, Wikings [in English in the text] and Normans, Danes, Angles, Saxons, pirates and thieves, who brought enormous damages to the population and the territory and caused fierce and bloody civil wars as well as a century-long, deep anarchy.' While they probably were not the first inhabitants, the Mediterranean Britons (linked with the Iberians) still had a major ethnic presence in the islands. The successive invading peoples were indeed little more

⁴⁸⁴ Luigi Goglia, 'Note sul razzismo coloniale Fascista', *Storia contemporanea*, n.6, December 1988. Anxieties at the possible decline of the white race appear in Mussolini's writings as early as 1908-9. See: Fabre, *Mussolini il razzista*, pp. 162-5.

⁴⁸⁵ Fabre, *Mussolini il razzista*, p. 32.

than ‘a few hundreds of men that suddenly landed on the British coasts assaulting and submitting the [native] inhabitants like the fierce pirates they were’, who were unavoidably assimilated by the indigenous population.⁴⁸⁶ His conclusion was that ‘it is possible to trace, in the British population, an archaic base common with many other populations of Europe, Greece, Italy, France, Spain with [*sic*] Portugal, as well as with other populations of Central Europe.’⁴⁸⁷

However, and surprisingly, when Mussolini decided to create his own brand of racism he did not make use of Italian Mediterraneanism, but did so by synthesising the concept of *Romanità* with the Nordic Aryan myth. Unsatisfied with the progress of his attempt to transform Italians, and convinced that the myths of *Romanità* and Mediterraneanism had proven insufficient for his goals, he thought that Nordic Aryanism could provide Italians with a militaristic racial model. He also probably believed that, by making Italians Aryans, he could neutralise the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon Nordicism he had always strongly resented. Mussolini’s contempt for southern Italians and his long-time anti-Africanism probably made such a choice easier, and in 1938 the *Duce* privately stated that he himself was Nordic.⁴⁸⁸ After one first cautious (and unsuccessful) attempt to test the waters in late 1936, and the beginning of the anti-Semitic press campaign in 1937, Mussolini tasked the young anthropologist Guido Landra with writing the ‘Manifesto of the Racial Scientists’ in 1938.⁴⁸⁹ The Manifesto sported a scientific approach to the problem of race. While *Romanità* could be kept with reservations, Landra’s Nordicist

⁴⁸⁶ Giuseppe Sergi, *I Britanni: I Mediterranei nel settentrione d’Europa* (Milano: Bocca, 1941), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁷ Sergi, *I Britanni*, pp. 91-6. Sergi’s views were not unique: even in Germany, before the rise of the Nazi Party, the idea that the British might have been at least partly Mediterranean in their origins, and that, given the glorious history of the Mediterranean people, that was not a bad thing, was not unheard of. Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 53-4.

⁴⁸⁸ Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 55-8.

⁴⁸⁹ Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italia e la persecuzione degli Ebrei*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), pp. 111-6.

racism replaced concepts like *Latinità* (Latin-ness) and Mediterranean identity with Nordic-Aryan myths.⁴⁹⁰ Supported by the anti-Semitic faction of the Catholic Church, the racial campaign singled out Jews, useful targets because the stereotypes surrounding them were close to what Mussolini wanted to fight in the Italian bourgeois class. The racial laws did not, however, signal the final victory of the Nordacist faction. Mussolini himself seems to have regretted his support for this brand of biological racism and the Mediterraneanists fought back, reclaiming much of their lost influence under the banners of spiritual racism and Catholicism. The struggle did not cease until the end of Fascism and around 1941 a new faction, the one led by spiritual Nordacist Julius Evola, emerged.⁴⁹¹ With consensus proving impossible, only German occupation of the country made the pro-German faction, led by the long-time anti-Semite Giovanni Preziosi, the force behind the harshly anti-Semitic Fascist policies of the Republic of Saló in 1943-1945. Ironically, Mussolini himself shifted again from Nordicism and Aryanism to Mediterraneanism in his final days.⁴⁹²

Understanding the English and their racial policies

The first ‘anthropological’ analysis of the British people in the Fascist press can be found in the article ‘The discovery of the English’ by Curzio Villa in *Gerarchia* in January 1938. Villa stated that ‘to understand the English character means to understand England, it means to anticipate the developments of English politics and, somehow, foresee its future consequences.’ The elements which had contributed to the formation of the ‘unmistakable physical and spiritual’ traits of the English had been ethnic, geographic and ideological

⁴⁹⁰ It is, however, important to note that even in this first phase, Italian racism was never a mere imitation of German racism and always had its own peculiar character. See: Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italia e la persecuzione degli Ebrei*, pp. 44-5; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, p. 153.

⁴⁹¹ Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, pp. 59; 98-99; 154-56.

⁴⁹² Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, pp. 176-180.

(i.e. the Puritan idea). The English ‘race’ was the expression of an ‘obscure mix of races coming from the Baltic which settled [in] the great islands’ and formed its character after the invasion of the Normans. Villa summed up the supposed English national character in a few essential traits: the preponderance of pragmatism and utilitarian realism, which subordinated theories, ideals and feelings to interest and reason, as well as a perceived necessity for cooperation and a tendency toward social organisation. The latter resulted in a strong sense of collective discipline. Other features were the ritual concept of life (as shown by the rigid system of ceremonies, traditional costumes and vocabulary in British public life), the idea of respectability and team spirit. The last, remarkable, trait was the deep belief in the superiority of the English people over every other. The reasons for such a *hubris* (which Villa considered one of the ‘funniest features of the English character’) were both historical (long isolation) and religious (dating back to Cromwell and his conviction of the divine mission of the English people). The key to the English ability to combine their spiritual side with their constant pursuit of self-interest was hypocrisy. Unable to understand abstractions and great intelligent ideas, the English were gifted with a formidable instinct but lacked intelligence, while their civilisation was all appearance, characterised by empiricism, greediness and personal interest. The English national character, according to Villa, ‘was completely subject to instinct and nature.’⁴⁹³ Interestingly enough, while successive Fascist criticism of Britain corresponded with some points of Villa’s analysis, the supposed English tendency towards social cooperation and discipline was consistently denied by many racist scholars, to the point of describing the British as unable to even conceive the concept of community. Furthermore, later authors claimed that the British way of life, far from being ‘subject to instinct and nature’, was indeed anti-natural and anti-biological.

⁴⁹³ Curzio Villa, ‘Scoperta degli Inglesi’, *Gerarchia*, 1 January 1938, pp. 46-50.

A few months later, Mussolini launched his 'Reform of Customs' (one of the most derided consequences of which was the ban on the handshake, which was considered soft and 'Anglo-Saxon').⁴⁹⁴ His racial campaign followed, culminating in the 1938 Racial Laws. Mussolini's obsession with the problem of miscegenation was soon mirrored in *La Difesa della Razza*.⁴⁹⁵ Already in the third issue, it was noted that the French colonial model, encouraging massive movements of metropolitan colonists to the colonies, had as a consequence the spreading of miscegenation.⁴⁹⁶ The British, in contrast, only allowed a limited number of white women to move to the various countries of the Empire.⁴⁹⁷

The first article focusing explicitly on Britain appeared in *La Difesa* in November 1939, under the title 'British Racism.' According to the author (identified only as A.L.), the British Empire and people were extremely racist. Furthermore, British racism was described as unique:

British racism is aprioristic and integral. Racism was born in various countries as a reaction against the penetration of foreign ethnic elements. In Great Britain, instead, it was placed as the base of its whole policy regarding foreigners, and that is because of the Englishman's notion of his own absolute ethnic superiority compared to all other men living on the Earth, be they white or coloured.⁴⁹⁸

Such a worldview had its origins in both the English national character and historical reasons. Used to feeling safe and having developed an attractive way of life, characterised by the absence of frugality and based on comfort and relaxation, the Englishman

⁴⁹⁴ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 303.

⁴⁹⁵ The bi-monthly magazine published its first issue on 5 August 1938 and soon obtained an almost complete monopoly on the racist press. See: Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italia Fascista e la persecuzione degli Ebrei*, p.200. Other racist publications were the juridically themed *Il Diritto razzista* (May-June 1939) and *Razza e Civiltà* (March 1940), far closer to the Mediterraneanist faction and proud of its 'scientific' and intellectual approach. There is no trace of anti-British racial propaganda in these later publications.

⁴⁹⁶ The French situation in particular deeply disturbed Mussolini, who considered it an example of the dangers of a lack of racial consciousness. See: Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 288.

⁴⁹⁷ Lidio Cipriani, 'Razzismo e possessi coloniali', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 September 1938, p. 32.

⁴⁹⁸ A.L., 'Razzismo Britannico', *La Difesa della Razza*, November 20 1939, pp. 32-4.

considered the concurrence of other, hardworking peoples disloyal, and despite the current social and economic crisis kept living in a state of ‘optimistic torpidity.’ His basic notions of British superiority made him unable and unwilling to see what was wrong in his own home. The Briton, however, was also a harsh ruler. Abroad, where he poses as a ‘silent and severe master, greedy merchant or merciless creditor, he was devoid of sympathy for any foreigner.’ Never loved, he was nonetheless respected, sometimes even admired, but often hated. The article described how brutal British racism was concerning its colonial subjects.⁴⁹⁹

La Difesa, however, was a racist magazine, which responded to Mussolini’s perceived necessity to construct a racial identity for the Italian people. The very characteristics of the British described in the article were quite close to what Mussolini had declared his desire to turn the Italian into when he told Ciano the Italians had to learn ‘to be less “nice”, to become hard, implacable, hated. That is, masters.’⁵⁰⁰ The author seemed to show respect for the British racial attitude towards their inferior subjects:

The Briton rules, we have to admit, with a handful of white men over vast lands, that is because of his energy and his bravery: he is extremely severe when he asks for obedience, implacable when suppressing: the Briton does not oppress the native, instead leaving him the full freedom to follow his own customs, but [...] he does not give him anything back.⁵⁰¹

Furthermore, the British (meaningfully here called ‘Anglo-Saxons’) used to get rid of the races they deemed unassimilable.⁵⁰² This inconsistency regarding British colonialism was inherent in Fascist rhetoric and was usually solved by claiming that it was British

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ciano, *Diario*, 10 July 1938.

⁵⁰¹ A.L., ‘Razzismo Britannico’, pp. 32-4.

⁵⁰² The use of the term “Anglo-Saxon”, while uncommon before the United States became an enemy in the war, was not unknown in the Fascist imaginary, especially when denouncing American or British politics. See Chapter 1.

hypocrisy, not British violence, that was despicable. The following passage regarding the British perception of Jews is an example of that kind of reasoning:

Great Britain is not racist, or so it claims, but does not allow Jews in the main public services or among its high officers. An Anglo-Saxon asked whether an Israelite is an Englishman, will simply and calmly answer that he is not English, but an Israelite. With the same aplomb he will however declare himself an anti-racist!⁵⁰³

In this early phase, some Nordicists seemed to consider the British more as an example to follow than an enemy to despise. In the same issue, in an article supporting alimentary autarchy and claiming that it was the law of nature that the carnivore is the master and the herbivore the servant, Giuseppe Lucidi (a quite unknown signer of the 'Manifesto' who became a prolific contributor to *La Difesa*) remarked how 'a few tens of thousands of well-fed, carnivorous Englishmen manage to rule over two hundreds millions of Indians.'⁵⁰⁴ The ruthless British attitude was an example of what was needed for a superior race to rule over large, inferior, masses of coloured people. The Nordicists were, in this case, close to the Nazi perception of British colonialism. Hitler and many others in Germany were convinced that brutality in the colonies and in war was a key feature of the British national character. Even Allied victory in the Great War, according to many Germans, had been mostly due to the British lack of moral scruples in starving the German nation through the blockade.⁵⁰⁵

Guido Landra fought furiously against his Mediterraneanist rivals (and in this case against their Lamarckian beliefs) when he wrote an article entitled 'The environment does not change the race's nature' some months later. Rejecting the idea that it was the geographical position that made the fortune of great civilisations, he claimed:

⁵⁰³ A.L., 'Razzismo Britannico', *La Difesa*, 20 November 1938, p. 34.

⁵⁰⁴ Giuseppe Lucidi, 'L'autarchia alimentare difesa della patria,' *La Difesa*, 20 November 1938, p. 18.

⁵⁰⁵ Strobl, *The Germanic Isle, Nazi Perceptions of Britain*, p. 43.

Historians often tell us that England became a great power just because it is insular, or that the geographical position of Rome was the cause of the Roman Empire. But in the world there are far better placed islands than England, and places far more suited for the foundation of a city than Rome.⁵⁰⁶

He concluded that, given the right racial attributes, it is men who defeat the environment and not vice versa. Once again, Britain was considered a positive example, in this case even compared with Rome.

Other contributors to *La Difesa* were far less enthusiastic about Britain and its imperial methods. One was the journalist, director and cinema critic Antonio Petrucci. In an article, he described the Italian relationship with its imperial subjects as the right balance between the excessively friendly approach and the far more brutal British one.

The pride in their own superiority, exasperated by an education that is based on the famous motto according to which the Negroes begin just below the Channel, makes of the English who moved to the colonies an example of the second [excessive brutality] case.⁵⁰⁷

Petrucci criticised British brutality once again a few months later, claiming that while British colonialism had been somewhat admirable, the British ideology of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority had been the cause of the extermination of the natives, especially in the Dominions.⁵⁰⁸ Later, he talked of the ‘failure of the British colonization in Africa’, caused by wild mercantilist imperialism. According to Petrucci, the British were proving unequal to the responsibilities the superior white race had concerning its supposedly inferior subjects.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Guido Landra, ‘L’ambiente non snatura la razza’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 December 1939, p. 16.

⁵⁰⁷ Antonio Petrucci, ‘Difendere il prestigio’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 January 1939, pp. 40-41. The supposed British notion of ‘blacks beginning at Dover’ was harshly resented by the Fascist press. See: ‘I negri cominciano a Dover’, *Il Tevere*, March 24/25 1941.

⁵⁰⁸ Antonio Petrucci, ‘Tramonto dell’imperialismo democratico’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 13 May 1939, pp. 45-8.

⁵⁰⁹ Antonio Petrucci, ‘Il fallimento della colonizzazione inglese in Africa’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 August 1939, pp. 19-21.

Lidio Cipriani, one of the original scientists who signed the Manifesto and a die-hard Nordacist, surprisingly shared Petrucci's point of view. Cipriani was an anthropologist whose area of expertise was the African races. While thoroughly convinced of the inferiority of the African peoples,⁵¹⁰ he also believed that British colonialism was predatory and exceedingly violent. In December 1940 he wrote in *La Difesa* about the different races' methods of conquest and ruling. He stated that while the Italians were fair and humane rulers (as proven by 'the chubby faces of the kids born after our annexation'), the British Empire had been by far the most brutal of the colonial powers, whose 'inhumane methods, applied as they were on a huge scale, decimated or destroyed the harmless indigenous populations all over ample territories.' The Italian people, instead, thanks to their 'ancient civilization that Italy enjoyed because of its racial features', were incapable of mistreating the weak and of being 'insincere'.⁵¹¹

Explaining British defeat: The Nordacist reaction to Britain's difficulties in the early phase of the war

The events of the first year of the war were to greatly influence the racial discourse concerning Britain. In March 1940, in the middle of the uncertain period before the German attack in France that made Mussolini decide to join the war, Silvio Landra, Guido's brother, wrote an article entitled 'Two peoples struggling', in which he analysed the two main belligerent nations: Germany and Britain. Landra claimed that the struggle between these two powers was not a racial one, for the Germans and English were, if not brothers, at least cousins. He argued that Britain was 'inhabited by a people that was created out of the mixture of the Saxons, the Angles, with elements of Celtic and also

⁵¹⁰ Duggan, *The Force of Destiny*, p. 511.

⁵¹¹ Lidio Cipriani, 'Razze e metodi di conquista', *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 December 1940, pp. 35-7.

Mediterranean origin [...] as well as of the invasions of the [Scandinavian] Normans and Danes.’ Celtic populations still lived in some regions of the country, and the differences in both looks and character between the Germanic and Celtic elements, where the mixing had not occurred, were easy to spot. Describing the English, Landra wrote that ‘not denying his own good qualities as a worker, mariner and manufacturer, it must be noted that all his activities are dominated by egoism and cold calculation.’ The author described the Germans in a better light, without however trying to predict which side would prevail.⁵¹² The article was relatively balanced, and reflected both the difficulty in racially attacking the English without involving the Germans and the uncertainty regarding Italy’s place in the conflict. In the following issues of *La Difesa*, not much attention was given to Britain. Things changed after the Allied defeat in the Low Countries and France. In the 20 June issue, after Italy joined the war, Guido Landra tried to explain through a Nordacist lens the German triumph and the Allied disaster. Defeated France had no right to call itself a Latin nation: its demise was indeed the consequence of its ancient Celtic (which had unavoidably evolved into bourgeois and revolutionary) elements, destroying the Germanic Frankish core of the nation.⁵¹³ The struggle against Britain had its own clear racial character as well. The island, originally Celtic, had been repeatedly invaded by different peoples, all of which were of Nordic stock. These racially superior elements were the same and, as in other continents, had contributed to the creation of new nations. In ‘Old England’, instead ‘they had assumed a completely oligarchic and mercantile form.’ It was therefore necessary that ‘a new great Nordic invasion would happen in England, and that other peoples would reorganize in a more civil way the rule of the seas

⁵¹² Silvio Landra, ‘Due popoli in lotta’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 March 1939, pp. 21-5.

⁵¹³ Landra’s harsh stance regarding the French had been made clear already in 1938, when he had written that no such a thing as a ‘Latin brotherhood’ with France could exist, for the Gallic racial element in France was still dominant. See: Guido Landra, ‘Italiani e Francesi. Due razze, due civiltà.’ *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 October 1938, p. 21.

and the continents.⁵¹⁴ The problem was the decline of the Nordic element that had built the British ruling class. It is remarkable that the first analysis which sought to explain the crisis of Britain through a racial lense came from the same author, Landra, who would later vehemently resist the racial demonisation of the English. In the same issue, Ubaldo Nieddu wrote extensively about the connections between theatre, poetry and race, describing Shakespeare as an author who had been able to fascinate the public of every age and country thanks to his connection to his race. Writing about ‘the most Latin of the Latins’, he had given Caesar that ‘sense of reality’ that was typical of the English race but also of the Ancient Romans. At this point Nieddu, probably realising that such a positive comment about the nation Italy had just declared war on was not acceptable, added that, in light of recent political events, such a ‘sense of reality’ was no longer a British racial attribute.⁵¹⁵

National sickness, sexuality, degeneration and anti-racial ideologies

The theme of the weakness, decline and degeneration of the British race had consistently appeared on the pages of *La Difesa* since before the war. Antonio Petrucci, anti-British as ever, criticised refinement and high standards of life as the cause of decline of the strong races. He was clearly talking of Great Britain in particular, since he wrote that ‘the British soldiers who brought all the supremacy of the Union Jack over the world, certainly did not have the supplementary portions that Hore-Belisha’s soldiers can enjoy today.’⁵¹⁶

The harsh anti-Semite Armando Tosti was one of the sharpest anti-British contributors to *La Difesa*. In an article entitled ‘British anti-racism’, he linked the ideas of the eighteenth-

⁵¹⁴ Guido Landra, ‘Il mondo delle razze eroiche’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 June 1940, pp. 18-20.

⁵¹⁵ Ubaldo Nieddu, ‘Motivi razziali del teatro di poesia’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 June 1940, pp. 10-17.

⁵¹⁶ Antonio Petrucci, ‘Il sentimento eroico della vita’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 October 1939, p. 18.

nineteenth century demographer Thomas Robert Malthus with the ones of his coeval economist David Ricardo, who he called ‘English ambassador[s] of a Divinity hostile to humans.’ Both authors, according to Tosti, expressed a worldview that inhibited procreation. The consequence of what he called ‘these magnificent ideas’ was that ‘it is not possible, in Britain, to address the problems regarding the continuity and health of the race.’ Tosti quoted Trevelyan (who was himself an ardent admirer of Mussolini), stating that if Great Britain had been a great nation in 1851, the opposite was true today.⁵¹⁷ The more recent generations had experienced moral, spiritual and intellectual degeneration, also caused by the crowded environments in which they lived, by alcohol and lack of fresh air. Further proof of such degeneration were the ‘alarming cases of homosexuality, not limited to the famous ones of Lord Douglas and Oscar Wilde.’ Tosti added that, according to nineteenth century authors, British soldiers were ready to sell their bodies for money and that the British people saw no difference between homosexual and heterosexual relationships. According to Tosti, ‘if we want to have the right understanding of [...] the sexual idealism of England, one can look for it in the writings in which Edward Carpentier [*sic*] (again an Englishman!) explained and almost glorified sodomy!’⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁷ Richard J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 69.

⁵¹⁸ Interestingly, before the Rome-Berlin Axis the Germans had supported the British attempts to repress homosexuality, noticing at the same time that while the ‘*Nordic-Germanic*’ nations tried to eradicate what they considered a weakness of the nation, the Mediterranean nations tolerated it. Later, this perception changed completely, and earlier British defeats in the war were associated by German propaganda with a supposed effeminacy of the British soldiers – under the assumption of the homosexuals’ lack of military virtues. At the same time, in the remarkably hard - and unsuccessful – attempt to improve the image of their ally in German public opinion, the Nazi authorities started to compare the lack of vigour of the British people with the virility of the Italian soldiers. It was a sad irony that homosexuality, which had been negatively associated with Germany before and during the Great War and during the first years of the Nazi regime, then with the decadent West during the Fascist era, was again equated with Nazi and Fascist brutality after 1945. See: Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 88-90, 121; Payne, *A History of Fascism*, p. 232; Lorenzo Benadusi, *The Enemy of the New Man*, pp. 38-9, 289.

Women and children were the principal victims of British anti-racism. Violence against women was endemic and children were subject to corporal punishment (which Tosti did not consider useful for the health of the race). The British often employed still painfully young children in the mines and in other menial labour, in terrible health conditions. British children were ‘usually in bad condition, pale, sickly, and in general they look like a generation whose physical strength is increasingly disappearing.’ The British people were ‘ugly’ and more vulnerable to illnesses than other populations. Tosti believed that anti-racism was a way to mistreat a people’s own race. He concluded that ‘the step from anti-racism to mistreating other races was short.’ The oppressed Irish (whose race was clearly different from the British) and the subjects of the British colonies were examples of such brutality. Hence, the British people, who had so many flaws in their own race and mistreated other races, could not hope to be relevant in Europe, and could not, in the name of a non-existent civilisation, rule the world.⁵¹⁹

British sexuality had been previously discussed by the journalist Marco Ramperti in *La Stampa*, in which he argued that the undying anti-Italian hatred of the British had a sexual origin and came from the deep envy the English harboured for Italian vigour.⁵²⁰ The British were homosexuals, according to the historian Alessandro Luzio, and were assisted in this by the ‘conveniently placed thickets of Hyde Park.’⁵²¹ Much later, in July 1943, the important journalist and signatory of the Manifesto, Concetto Pettinato (who, almost sixty years later, was to be remembered by Indro Montanelli as an ‘example of coherence and honesty’), wrote in the same newspaper that ‘Puritanism, Methodism and moralism turned the English into a moral pachyderm reducing [...] his faculty to answer to external

⁵¹⁹ Armando Tosti, ‘British anti-racism’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 November 1940.

⁵²⁰ Marco Ramperti, ‘Ci odiano come ci odiarono’, *La Stampa*, 27 June 1940, p. 3.

⁵²¹ Mack Smith, ‘Anti-British propaganda in Fascist Italy’, p. 109.

excitations.’⁵²² Vice and cruelty were typical of the ‘British Eros’ and ‘English love was always polluted by prejudice, regret, resentment or fear.’ As for British feminism, far from meaning good relations between men and women, it ‘meant a reciprocal rejection of the sexes’ and was the cause of abuses and homosexuality.⁵²³ Another author talked instead of the British abuse of pornography, which brought much money to the pockets of Jewish pornography mongers.⁵²⁴

The two themes of the British ‘anti-biological’ mindset and the terrible influence those values had worldwide because of their export by Britain were later expanded by other authors. Regarding birth control, there could hardly have been an easier target for Fascist criticism. Ironically, the fears and goals of the British birth control, or Malthusian, movement were quite similar to those of the Italian Fascists who wanted to forge a new Italian race. Worried about a perceived decline in the racial quality of the population, and convinced that without a vigorous race, the Empire and the very survival of civilisation were in danger, the British Malthusians supported many measures, including the possibility of forced sterilisation, to improve the British race.⁵²⁵ While a long standing racist newspaper like *Il Tevere* reported about British anxieties already in 1937, claiming (and in doing so echoing Mussolini’s own preoccupations) that Italy was not safe either, these methods were not compatible with the ethos and goals of the Fascist regime. Italian authorities had always been suspicious about it, for more reasons than just the well-known

⁵²² Almost sixty years later, Pettinato was to be remembered by Indro Montanelli as an ‘example of coherence and honesty.’ Indro Montanelli, ‘La Stanza di Montanelli’, *Il Corriere della Sera*, September 5 1996.

⁵²³ Concetto Pettinato ‘Eros Inglese’, *La Stampa*, 12 July 1943, p. 3.

⁵²⁴ Francesco Scardaoni, ‘Barbarie Britannica e nuova coscienza europea’, *La Difesa*, 5 April 1943, p. 4.

⁵²⁵ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age, Britain and the crisis of civilization, 1919-1939*, (London: Penguin Books, 2010), pp. 96, 118-20.

opposition of the Catholic Church.⁵²⁶ Corrado Gini, who strongly influenced Mussolini's beliefs regarding the health of the Italian people, distrusted the 'economic' mindset of neo-Malthusians and believed that birth control, once implemented, could escape the control of the authorities, potentially leading to the collapse of the nation.⁵²⁷ Already echoing Gini's thinking, in January 1941 Nicola Pascazio wrote in *Gerarchia* that Malthusian propaganda (supported by the Anglican Church) had reduced the British birthrate to such a point that the 'vital power' of Britain was obviously declining. The consequences of birth control were to 'increasingly spread like an enormous abyss, at the roots of the biological and social building of the Empire.'⁵²⁸ In June, Aldo Modica wrote that Great Britain, unable to take care of its own race, had seen the spreading of medical literature that encouraged the 'anti-biological and anti-scientific practice of birth control.' According to Modica, the racial decline of peoples which were 'too much civilized' was caused by the 'intellectual limitation of the births', which caused a 'progressive diminution of genitalism', meaning that men's virility decreased and led to the eventual biological blurring of the differences between sexes. The unavoidable victory of the Axis was going to destroy such unnatural ideas and the new world was to be ordered according to a new, 'healthy, naturalistic ethics, in which peoples [would] find peace and harmony

⁵²⁶ See: Unattributed, *Il Tevere*, 17/18 February 1937, p. 2; Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy, Life Under the Dictatorship*, (London, Penguin Books, 2006), p. 269; Overy, *The Morbid Age*, p. 126.

⁵²⁷ Francesco Cassata, *Building the New Man*, p. 86. The Fascist press reported many cases showing the impact of this 'anti racial' ideology, so thoroughly opposed to pro-fecundity Italian policies. For example, *Il Corriere della Sera* mentioned how many companies forbade their low rank employees to get married before they reached a high enough salary. See: Without signature, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 'Il divieto di sposarsi ai piccoli impiegati inglesi', August 18 1938, p. 2. Another example is Concetto Pettinato, 'Febbre di divorzi in Inghilterra', *La Stampa*, July 5 1942, p. 3.

⁵²⁸ Nicola Pascazio 'La propaganda contro la razza in Gran Bretagna', *Gerarchia*, January 1941, pp. 23-6. Pascazio's analysis was similar to that provided by a number of articles published in Britain in the mid-1930s which, by analysing demographic trends, envisioned a depopulated Britain in the near future, generating a new panic about the state of the race. See: Overy, *The Morbid Age*, pp. 130-1.

between Matter and Spirit, adoring the Mother and the Heroes, in one single Symbol of equity and justice.⁵²⁹ In 1941 the *Corriere della Sera* wrote that the reasons for British demographic decadence, which proved the end of any English role in Europe and the world, was not just the despicable Malthusian ideology but the idea that too many children were a strain for the wealth of the family.⁵³⁰ In July 1942, *Il Tevere* commented on the bleak demographic future of Britain, noting that while the number of dogs grew the number of children diminished. Facing the disappearance of their people, many Britons now advocated for the introduction of German style demographic control.⁵³¹ The idea that British demographic decline was connected to the decline of Britain as a Great Power was not new. In September 1936, Mussolini had told Bottai that he had been sure of Britain's unwillingness to act in defence of Ethiopia. His certainty, Mussolini said, came from a study of British demographic statistics, which clearly suggested that Britain was a nation increasingly consisting of old men and women, while the number of youths diminished. He commented that

such a phenomenon leads to the prevalence of the weak, the feeble, the peaceful, the conservative, over the energetic, the willing, aggressive, the innovator. Such an England would have no will to fight. And she did not fight.⁵³²

In January 1941, the Manifesto signatory Giovanni Savelli argued that the British anti-racial ideology had a harmful influence on a world scale, producing a sort of 'racial atomism' where, through artificial immigrations and the imposition of 'absurd borders'

⁵²⁹ Aldo Modica, 'La maternità come difesa della razza', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 June 1941, pp. 12-15.

⁵³⁰ Unattributed, 'Dati demografici sul decadimento inglese', *Il Corriere della Sera*, March 27 1941. Still in 1943, the disappearance of the British people was considered unavoidable. See: Carbonelli Pietro P., 'Inghilterra senza inglesi', *Il Corriere della Sera*, May 10 1943. See also: Italo Zingarelli, 'Spopolamento dell'Inghilterra', *La Stampa*, July 18 1943.

⁵³¹ Unattributed, 'Prospettive demografiche inglesi: aumentano I cani, diminuiscono I bambini', *Il Tevere*, July 16/17 1942, p. 1.

⁵³² Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario*, 1 September 1936.

(one example was British Somaliland), British rule caused the fragmentation of racially homogeneous peoples.⁵³³

From an ‘anthropological’ to a truly ‘racial’ discourse

Between late 1940 and 1941, the fierce criticism of British racial policies and of their inability or unwillingness to preserve the health of their race often slipped into considerations that questioned the English race as a whole, and sought to prove how decline was inherent not just in British choices or history but in its racial features. While the authors often echoed Landra’s earlier argument, their condemnation of the British race was now much harsher and did not seek to separate the ruling class from the people. Furthermore, the Germanic invaders of the Isles were not exempt from criticism.

In October 1940, Bruno Damiani accused the British of having an ‘anti-European and anti-civil’ mindset. While he did not claim that the nature of the English character had only racial explanations, (the article was, after all, entitled ‘The English children of their history’), he took care to specify that distinguishing between the British people and the ruling class was useless, for ‘Britannia is a multicellular animal, but the spirit and the brain are only one.’ Damiani’s discourse included clearly racial elements. According to him, ‘the Celts of England and the Britons proved reluctant – both because of their intellectual incapacity and hostility towards social institutions - to [assimilate] the Roman heritage.’ Damiani wrote in *Gerarchia* rather than *La Difesa*, and was not reluctant to express somewhat anti-Germanic tones when he stated that ‘those populations (the Angles and the Saxons) proved impervious to a sincere acceptance of the Christian spirit.’

⁵³³ Giovanni Savelli, ‘Genti e costumi della Somalia ex inglese’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 January 1941), pp. 6-8.

He added that ‘the Germanic invasions of the Vikings later established a new unbalance’ because of the lack of a Roman civilisation and Christian religion.⁵³⁴

Armando Tosti stated that British degeneracy, coming as it did from the ruling classes, had infected every country touched by the ‘tentacles of England.’ The topic of the degeneration of the English race was an old one, Tosti wrote in January 1941. ‘I cannot help but think that degeneration is almost [...] congenital to Britain’, he wrote, then proceeded to present a summary of British history which included cannibalism, thievery (quoting Hume, Tosti stated that before 1688 all Scotsmen were thieves), alcoholism, illiteracy (including among the ruling classes), torture, child abuse and murder. For Tosti, the ruling classes were still a clear example of British degeneracy. They

had replaced the patience of continuous work and the energy of methodical work with a gambling frenzy and a passion for quick luck; the industry and trading with the Stock Exchange Market and Banks; frugality with orgies: they set up a colossal banquet of pleasure, pride, vanity, they intoxicated themselves with all these poisons of the spirit, which weaken the most energetic of the human qualities, break the balance of intellectual and moral faculties.⁵³⁵

According to Tosti, before Fascism such degenerate Anglo-Saxons were a common sight in Italy, visiting the country, loving it when it was poor and picturesquely barbarous. British plutocracy itself had meaningfully contributed to the weakening of the English race, which was now unable to compete with younger and healthier races. ‘In other words,’ he concluded, ‘the Anglo-Saxon race, which has lost any vitality, had, in recent times, increased its degeneration and exhaustion.’ It was time for the Axis powers to bring it down once and for all.

⁵³⁴ Bruno Damiani, ‘Gli Inglesi figli della loro storia’, *Gerarchia*, October 1940, pp. 528-32.

⁵³⁵ Armando Tosti, ‘Degenerazione della razza anglosassone’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 January 1941, pp. 28-30. The perception of British senescence was shared by the German National Socialists, who were, in other ways, far more pro-British. By the late thirties even Hitler considered Britain a spent force. See: Strobl, *The Germanic Isle*, pp. 98-101.

One month later, Tosti wrote about the ‘Psychic atavisms of the English race.’ The article began as follows:

Nobody ignores that the principal characters of the English race are the habit to promise and not to keep their word; the opinion that everything is for sale; hence their ease with any kind of betrayal and the inclination to count on others to pull their chestnuts out of the fire.⁵³⁶

Other features of the British race were systematic hypocrisy and brutality. After a quite long summary of the examples of merciless violence in British history, Tosti concluded that the British race believed

it was the supreme flower of humanity, when it is instead only rich of the most brutal qualities of instinct, it’s the race that does not contradict its psychic atavisms when, in 1940, it strafes field hospitals, kills women and children, uses the civilian population of the Italian and German cities as a military target.⁵³⁷

In June 1941, Tosti expanded his point of view in another article, in which he elaborated a curious explanation of the British national character. According to him, the British race had historically been unwilling to accept the sacrifices necessary to fight wars. This had racial explanations: ‘indeed, in order to follow the political events and keep an eye on the major powers, the English are forced [in]to an intense cerebral activity which explains, maybe even more than the weather, the spleen [in English in the text] they suffer of.’ Such a tension, passed through the generations, had produced commercial and industrial speculation, which in turn had led to the establishment of an exploitative, lazy and conservative British capitalism. Capitalism and industrialism made them insensible to the ideal and moral values that permeated war. Despite its great successes, British capitalism had failed to vanquish its enemies, (the other races, whose psychological attitude was so radically different from the English ones) and

⁵³⁶ Armando Tosti, ‘Atavismi psichici della razza inglese’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 February 1941, pp. 13-15.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

could not do anything more, or better, to defend itself, to keep its wealth intact, than impoverishing, weakening and softening its own race, taking away from it even any single ideal reason of existing.⁵³⁸

Furthermore, British capitalism had mongrelised the English race when it had allowed America to invade it:

Oh, yes! This Great Britain, this island so rich of coal and tin, lost in the mists and hit by the waves, inhabited by Celts, Scandinavians and later by Germans, civilized by the French-Normans, once ruler of an Empire consisting of hundreds of millions of people, is today completely Americanised.⁵³⁹

Americanisation, here meaning the penetration of American modernity, consumerism and race-mixing, had deprived Britain of its national consciousness. The British people had never learned that

pain must be faced with calm and bravery; that war must be accepted as a law of our current human life; that the utopian social state described by modern utilitarian intellectuals, in which material pleasures would be the goal of life, is repugnant and hateful; that the great fundamental values are bravery and spirit of sacrifice; that the destiny of Empires is tied to the development of the religious and altruistic sentiments in the human spirit.⁵⁴⁰

That was the reason Britain could not win the war against the younger peoples. The British race was a decrepit one, whose ephemeral victories had been achieved thanks to others and one that hoped to be saved by merchants from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Moral and physical degeneration had allegedly extended to the Dominions as well, and here the racist commentators of *La Difesa* felt the need to condemn Britain for allowing the degeneration and miscegenation of its white subjects. In May 1941, one article depicted Australia as a country whose population consisted of the descendants of old

⁵³⁸ Armando Tosti, 'La decadenza fisica della razza inglese', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 June 1941, pp. 27-9.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

British rejects, convicts, drunkards and lunatics. Australia had been a lucky country, however. After the extermination of the native population (a typical British policy), Australians could exploit the huge resources of an immense 'virgin land'. Now immensely rich, the Australian people were strongly hostile to immigration, privileged, egoistic and uncaring of the suffering of other peoples.⁵⁴¹ One year later, it was South Africa's turn to be targeted by *La Difesa*. In an article entitled 'The racial decadence of English South Africa,' the author claimed that, despite the healthy practices of racial separation, the coloured population - mulattoes included - in South Africa had surpassed the whites. Beside immigration, the cause was the plague of the 'poor whites' who represented the 'most hideous stain of the British Empire.' Such poor communities, whose birth dated back to the nineteenth century, had been systematically neglected by the British and South African governments and were so miserable that they lived in conditions sometimes even worse than those of the blacks. The worst thing was that

because of the fact that these 'poor whites' are at the mercy of the white populations, they have no other choice but to approach black women, with whom they live in intermittent concubinage.⁵⁴²

Such a crime against the race was made worse by the fact that the 'poor whites' were not disappearing. Instead, their number was increased every day by the unemployed citizens of the big cities, the rejects, the immigrants who still believed in the mirage of gold. Not every South African accepted such a situation, however. The South African National Party, consisting of all but Boers, opposed it, and was also willing to free the country of the hateful British exploitation.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴¹ S.L., 'Le origini della popolazione dell'Australia,' *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 May 1941, pp. 26-9.

⁵⁴² L. Angelini, 'Decadenza razziale del Sud Africa inglese,' *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 August 1942.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

The Nordicist dilemma: The led-astray Anglo-Saxon

The war against Britain and the United States, which many now identified with the war against the Anglo-Saxons, offered the rivals of the Nordicist faction a useful opportunity. Giovanni Marro, the most important of the Italian Nativists, managed to deal a blow to both the Mediterraneanists and the Nordicists when he harshly attacked Sergi's book *I Britanni*. Marro criticised Sergi's modernism, as well as his concept of a Mediterranean race. Furthermore, he could easily use Sergi's statements about the weaknesses of Liberal Italy and 'The Decadence of the Latin Nations' to accuse him of anti-Italian feeling.⁵⁴⁴ 'Infected' with the mark of Judaism by his friend Lombroso, Marro stated, Sergi had smeared the accomplishments of both Rome and the Italian race. However, Sergi's most hideous crime had been

the supreme insult of judging the 'English imperialism as perfectly similar to the Roman' and even to consider 'the English as the modern Romans, for convergence of origins, kin, of public life characters and of many other psychological, individual and social manifestations.'⁵⁴⁵

When the United States joined the war, the Fascist press increasingly started to use the term Anglo-Saxon. While admitting that the United States and Great Britain had different goals (the British were becoming vassals of the Americans), both nations were part of a single enemy race. Lidio Cipriani, as we have seen, had no problem writing harshly of British imperialism, but had to deal with the contradiction of being a key Nordicist writing for a magazine that was increasingly targeting the Germanic Anglo-Saxons *as a race*. Perhaps trying to find a solution, he wrote an article entitled 'Are the North-Americans Anglo-Saxons?' His answer was negative. The growing presence of coloured peoples (the

⁵⁴⁴ Maria Sophia Quine, 'Racial "Sterility" and "Hyperfecundity" in Fascist Italy: Biological Politics of Sex and Reproduction,' *Fascism, Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 1, 2 (2012), p. 101.

⁵⁴⁵ Giovanni Marro, 'Razzismo vero e razzismo spurio', *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 June 1942, pp. 5-6.

blacks in particular: Cipriani stated that his long experience in Africa proved to him that blacks could not be civilised) represented a huge danger for the nation. The Americans were already a mixed people, and it was difficult to find an actual Anglo-Saxon in such racial chaos, despite the British having ‘some merit’ in the (brutal) colonisation of North America. Cipriani thought that the first English colonists were ethnically mixed as well, and so were their ancestors who lived in post-Roman Britain and even earlier:

We should not neglect to address the mix [which] happened between the Anglo-Saxons and the aboriginals of Britain: who were in turn far from uniform. Tacitus had indeed noticed short, swarthy men with curly hair who lived beside tall men with blond, wavy hair, very fair skin and blue eyes.⁵⁴⁶

Writing about Ireland, Cipriani mentioned the racial differences between the Irish and the English races, writing that while ‘the English were generally tall, blond [...] long faced and headed, not vivacious and tending to insincerity’, the Irish were close to the Mediterranean peoples, both in somatic traits and in character. Indeed, they were ‘usually shorter, dolicocephalic, dark eyed and haired, with a loyal and vivacious soul.’ Despite these words, which could easily have been written by a Mediterraneanist, Cipriani took care to avoid any mention of the Nordic, or Germanic, nature of the English, only talking of the pre-Roman natives of Britain, whom the Caesar described as barbarous and cannibalistic. Unlike them, the Irish were a people of Iberian origin, who had developed forms of civilisation since Neolithic times.⁵⁴⁷

Guido Landra’s reaction to the growing ‘anti-Anglo-Saxon’ tone of *La Difesa* was quite different from Cipriani’s. In summer 1942, in an article regarding the importance of the study of chromosomes in order to understand race, Landra wrote that the English had a

⁵⁴⁶ Lidio Cipriani, ‘Are the North-Americans Anglo-Saxons?’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 March 1942, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁴⁷ Lidio Cipriani, ‘Italia e Irlanda’, *Gerarchia*, 1942, pp. 65-7.

chromosomic Nordic element which was even purer than that of North Germans.⁵⁴⁸ As Aaron Gillette explains, in 1942 'Landra saw the increasingly desperate struggles of the Axis in World War II as part of a racial Armageddon.'⁵⁴⁹ In July, he wrote that old, decrepit Europe had given up its hegemony over the world, as well as rejected its white heritage, by masochistically attempting to repress the vital energies of Italy and Germany. The conflicts against the 'mongrelized intellectual class' of France, the Anglo-Saxons and the Soviets could be defined as truly racial wars. However, while the war against the Bolsheviks was racial because they represented 'central-Asian barbarism' and were heirs of the 'Empire of the Tartars who had reached the Adriatic in a not too remote past', the war against the Anglo-Saxons had a racial character just because 'when we fight England and the United States, we fight international Judaism that has turned those nations into its stronghold.'⁵⁵⁰

While believing that the Anglo-Saxons had become puppets of the Jews, Landra did not think that the problem lay in their race. Nor had he completely given up his earlier appreciation for British imperialism: in September 1942, while writing on the issue of Italian racism in the colonies that Italy was to acquire from the British Empire, Landra still stated that 'we have to admit that they [the English] have a strong racial consciousness with regard to the natives.' He added that 'the Italian [people] will have to replace in certain zones, a people who knew very well the importance of the racial factors.'⁵⁵¹

In Landra's view, if 'the western countries, and the Anglo-Saxon countries in particular [were] in great decline, according to the racial point of view', part of the reason was their

⁵⁴⁸ Guido Landra, 'Razzismo e cromosomi', *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 April 1942, pp. 4-7.

⁵⁴⁹ Gillette, *Racial theories in Fascist Italy*, p. 176.

⁵⁵⁰ Guido Landra, 'Quattro anni di razzismo', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 July 1942, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁵¹ Guido Landra, 'Razzismo ed espansione imperiale', *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 September 1941, pp. 4-6.

urbanism. Given the rise of many eastern peoples, still faithful to the land, the industrial development necessary to the Axis nations to contrast the Anglo-Saxons must not harm agriculture, which was essential for the defence of the race. Unlike the Italians, Anglo-Saxons, so proud of their strength, were now nothing but the ‘asocial expression of the great cities they come from.’⁵⁵²

The final representation of Landra’s apocalyptic worldview, and in particular of his opinion on Anglo-Saxons, can be found in a December 1942 article entitled ‘Conflict of Races.’ Here, Landra describes the races belonging to each of the two struggling alliances. Once again, the French were depicted as rotten and senescent and the Slavs were the Mongols of old. Regarding the Anglo-Saxons, Landra still could not condemn them, at least in racial terms, with the same harshness. While admitting that the British people were clearly in a state of senescence and decadence, he wrote that the roots of the Anglo-Saxon race were ‘with no doubt a strong Nordic base’, which explained the past greatness of Britain and, partially, the reason for its successes. The problem was that, with time and because of the expansion of the British Empire, the racial character of the English people had deeply changed.

Landra’s anxiety regarding the progress of the war is illustrated by his statement about

the Bolsheviks [that are] pressing with the forces of the renewed Tartary [...] the Anglo-Saxons [that are] unleashing against us the scum of all the continents. It is almost as if the Devil wants to destroy for good the ideas of good and beautiful from this earth.⁵⁵³

The predominant Jewish influence on their politics and society, the fact that they were conspiring with non-Europeans to bring Europe down and their racial decadence meant that the Anglo-Saxons could not be considered ‘European peoples and of European

⁵⁵² Guido Landra, ‘Antropologia delle grandi città’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 January 1943, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁵³ Guido Landra, ‘Conflitto di razze’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 6, 4 (December 1942) pp. 9-11.

civilization.’ At the same time, however, Landra compared the Americans with the British, claiming that the former had very little in common with the latter who, ‘for a long time, constituted a positive force for Europe.’ It is not clear whether he eventually came to believe that the English were not a European people anymore; it is possible that, at the time of the fall of Fascism, he still had not found a solution for his dilemma.

The Mediterraneanist stance: The insane Englishman

Other promoters of racial beliefs did not have such problems. The Mediterraneanists could simply develop the most violent theories justifying the racial otherisation of the enemy. One example is particularly interesting in that it underlines both the extreme lengths to which this faction had gone to express their anti-British bias and the indifference to reality, and even simple intelligibility, of *La Difesa*’s intellectuals. In April 1942, Giovanni Savelli wrote an article entitled ‘Anglo-Saxon racial solitude’, a long, remarkably abstruse piece in which he addressed biology, psychology, anthropology, geography and history to articulate his own interpretation of the British racial character. Savelli’s article was one of many similar pieces in which Fascist contributors to *La Difesa* or *Gerarchia* in particular investigated the supposedly peculiar psychology of the Anglo-Saxon race. These contributors tried to find a racial explanation for the traits of British (and American) societies, which were especially hideous to the Fascist mindset and its emphasis on individualism. The pioneer of this genre had been the influential philosopher Francesco Orestano, who, in April 1941, in his *Gerarchia* article ‘The Insane Englishman’ had argued that a particular mental structure fundamentally separated the English (the term *Anglo-Saxon* was not fashionable yet) race from the Germanic or Latin ones. Once again, the English were accused of being irredeemably bound to the empirical world and of being incapable of elaborating ‘general concepts.’ This nature explained

why the British, inherent believers in materialism and nominalism, were skilful in their manipulation of the physical world, where the inert nature was easy to manipulate, but traditionalist in the field of society, where human nature could not be as easily bent. The impossibility of British society expressing a superior moral order had the consequence of unleashing individual originality, tolerance and religious anarchy in the internal sphere, and shaping a faithless, chaotic foreign policy abroad. Lacking any sense of justice, Great Britain was unable to respect international treaties and was hence an enemy of the 'European Order.'⁵⁵⁴

Savelli's article went even further. According to him, from the Early Middle Ages to the fifteenth century, English history had experienced violent struggles underlining the original racial tendencies that would be constant in later centuries. British history since the Tudors had revealed 'constant directions and impulses.' The formula that would be the core of the Anglo-Saxon world was discovered during the Tudor era and the strengthening of the Monarchic institution.⁵⁵⁵ This formula was 'the node and the heart of a racial tradition that in it is concluded and recognized.' The Tudors had established their authority by aligning around them all the countless groups - municipal, associative, familiar interests - each of which had fought to keep its prerogatives during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They had not fused them into a 'constitutive and hierarchical structure' and had instead created a formula based on an elastic principle that, while proposing the myth of converging interests, was instead a 'bitter mechanic of interferences' that did not undermine the vitality of the groups. It was nothing more than the translation on a political level of 'a tendency towards moral and social atomism that, typical of all the English peoples, forms their common racial ground, that is, the trait that

⁵⁵⁴ Francesco Orestano, 'L'Inglese folle', *Gerarchia*, April 1941, pp. 179-187.

⁵⁵⁵ Modica believed the American constitution was also an expression of a Tudor formula. See: Aldo Modica, 'Caratteri fisico-psichici degli Anglo-Sassoni in America,' pp. 12-20.

distinguishes them from the other peoples.’ Such a tendency, which started at the individual level, defined a peculiar ethnic orientation that was inextricable from the Anglo-Saxon psyche. If the Anglo-Saxon moral atomism influenced the British concept of politics, it was in turn influenced by the geographical position of Britain. Isolated in this ‘moral microcosm’ and unable to perceive the fullness of reality, the English turned to rational or instinctual models. Isolationist conformism hence characterised every field of Anglo-Saxon society:

Anglo-Saxon extremism [is linked] to the reactions and the bitter abandonments of a humanity isolated beyond a geographical fracture which became, irresistibly and deliberately, a historical and moral one. On such a base, the destiny of the race is already defined.⁵⁵⁶

Any contact with the external world (in which political action gained its impulse from economic reasons) was to cause England massive instability. The detachment of the Anglo-Saxon from his islands was the archetypal ‘adventure.’ He

convulsively falls from his geographical-moral microcosm towards lands and peoples that massively flash towards his horizon for the time that his eyes keep staring it, just to immediately fall down again in the unknown.⁵⁵⁷

The creative insufficiency of the Anglo-Saxon race (which had clear similarities with the Jewish people), had as a consequence the necessity to adhere to the roughest aspects of material reality. Adventure influenced the Anglo-Saxon individual in a ‘virtual drowning in nature and corporeality, with all the relative utilitarianisms.’ Adventurers and Companies, these economic versions of the old ‘clans’, formed the Empire. The fundamental characters of the race were codified in theoretical systems like Walpole’s empiricism or William Pitt’s political cynicism, Adam Smith’s economic liberalism, or

⁵⁵⁶ Giovanni Savelli, ‘Solitudine razziale anglo-sassone’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 April 1942, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the parliamentary action of Peel and Gladstone, peaking in the establishment of free market, ‘the complete expression of the atomistic dynamic of the race.’ However, at this point, Anglo-Saxon vitalism began to be eroded and now ‘British doom is close to its maturation, in the conclusion of this racial circularity.’ The Commonwealth system, once again a Tudor formula, represented the centrifugal forces that were reawakening once again. The consequence was that Britain was

giving up the cores of its Imperial economic potential; the loss of the most essential Ocean bases; the abandonment of the most important South American and of the special systems of control on the movements of the traffic between Great Britain and the Commonwealth.⁵⁵⁸

These were only some among the most obvious signs of the destruction of the British Empire. Such a rapid re-definition of the positions of power could seem incredible, but it was nothing but ‘the convulse contraction of an ethnic aggregation with no roots in history inside its own atomistic microcosm.’ The Anglo-Saxon people defined itself, Savelli wrote, ‘in this paralysis which is biological more than moral, in this wooden involution caused by an ethnical experience fastened between the shapelessness [*sic*] of insufficiency and the abnormality of solitude.’

The Punic Race: The Mediterraneanist-Evolian definition of the racial inferiority of the Anglo-Saxons

The Mediterraneanists’ offensive peaked with a long article written by Aldo Modica (who had, in June 1941, wrote in *La Difesa* the previously heretical concept of the lack of interdependence between the Italian Mediterranean and Germanic civilisations), which discussed a topic developed through five issues of the magazine in a series of articles

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

entitled 'The racial inferiority of Anglo-Saxons.'⁵⁵⁹ While in the article Modica carefully avoided openly condemning Italy's Germanic allies as an inferior or inherently flawed race, he still maintained that the flaws of the Anglo-Saxons came from traits that were typical of the Nordic Germanic race. Another remarkable feature of the article is how Modica combined his Lamarckian and anti-Germanic attitude, typical of the Mediterraneanist worldview, with continuous nods to the Evolian, Spiritual-Nordicist mythology. Modica's insistence on Aryanism, heroism, tradition and warrior chastes is a clear sign that the author was doing his best to please the then ascending Evolian faction, while at the same time attempting to attack his old biological Nordicist rivals.

Anglo-Saxons' human individualism, due to inferior biology, had made them unable to evolve from a 'brute association' of individualisms, a 'biological flaw' present in the Teutonic racial stock but exalted in the Anglo-Saxon ethnicities. The anti-Germanic tone of Modica's claim is striking, even if he added that the 'current Germanics' had managed to 'eliminate and put under a rigid discipline' those traits thanks to 'superior and diverse biological gifts' like physiology and spiritualism. The hypertrophic personality of every Anglo-Saxon individual made him unable to express a true sociality, understood as a mutual limitation of the individualisms for a 'natural goal.'

Having to compensate for their biological inferiority, the Anglo-Saxons - like some predators in nature - paraded an excessive display of power, which impressed some un-individualistic peoples. Under this light, 'their formal superiority was a consequence of their substantial inferiority.' Moreover, thanks to their economic worldview and material means, they succeeded in spreading their barbarous 'conventional values' among races once ruled by the typically Aryan heroic nobility and those biologically superior to

⁵⁵⁹ Modica had, in June 1941, wrote in *La Difesa* the previously heretical concept of the lack of interdependence between the Italian Mediterranean and Germanic civilisations. See: Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, p. 141.

them.⁵⁶⁰ To demonstrate the inferiority of the Anglo-Saxons to the Nordic-Aryan race, as well as to the Mediterranean-Aryan race, due to their ‘economic, antiheroic and anti-vital character’ and their inability to organise themselves on any meaningful level, Modica again used examples from the animal world:

The animal that can care about himself, while it might be emotionally developed and intelligent is, biologically speaking, inferior to the one who knows how to organize himself in a social complex limiting the single individualities through a redistribution of the work.⁵⁶¹

According to him, the most developed human races shared these superior traits. Different from races like the Neanderthals, ‘proto-Aryan’ humanity had developed heroic-agricultural and heroic-hunter civilisations that prized ‘biological values’, heroism and sociality. While the descendants of the Neanderthals - Punic-Phoenicians, Jews, Anglo-Saxons - were lacking a racial consciousness and were just able to elaborate ‘non biological’ values to create civilisations dominated by hedonism and wealth, the proto-Aryans were instead builders of great civilisations united by a common blood and mysticism. Theirs were, among others, the Indian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian (before the negroid-Jewish contamination), Greek, Roman and some Germanic civilisations. They had

‘Nordic-Dalic’ traits. These two kinds of humanity fought each other through the centuries: these two ‘biotypes’, corresponding to the two great racial ‘lines’, have hence been fighting because of vital necessity since prehistory, and they still do.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶⁰ Aldo Modica, ‘Inferiorità razziale degli Anglosassoni’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 December 1942, pp. 4-7.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Aldo Modica, ‘Inferiorità razziale degli Anglosassoni’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 January 1943, pp. 9-11. The ‘Dalic’, or ‘phalic’, race, theorised by German nordicist Paudler in 1924, was, in the German Nordicist vision, a race that while not properly Nordic still had most of its ‘superior’ traits. See: Richard McMahan, *The Races of Europe, Anthropological Race Classification of Europeans: 1839-1939*, Doctoral thesis, file:///C:/Users/hyjni/Downloads/2007_06_%20McMahon.pdf (Florence, 2007), p. 269.

As for the ancestors of the racial elements existing in Britain (proto-Aryan Hybernians, Gaelics and Britons), they were so diverse that it had been impossible for them to create a 'national union based on Blood and Tradition,' their linkage being based only on individuals' common interests. Individualism made the Gaelics and Britons inferior to the Nordic race and unable to resist the (exceptionally brutal) invasion of the however inferior Anglo-Saxons.⁵⁶³ Here, Modica feebly attempted to differentiate the Anglo-Saxons from the Germans, writing that

the German Saxons [who lived on the Elba], who constituted together with the Franks and the Swabians the German group, distinguished from the Anglo-Saxon-Frisian also according to [an] ethnical point of view, lived in the land that we today call Holstein.⁵⁶⁴

The Angles were the group which had a major role in the conquest and colonisation of what they later called 'Engla-Lond.' Once in Britain, these peoples had experienced an involution influenced by several factors which Modica identified, nebulously enough, as 'the mutation of the surrounding biospheric environment', the 'physical and psycho-cultural mongrelisation' and 'the change of culture in its ethno-racial meaning from the culture relative to the original environment.' This new 'bio-anthropological line' entailed physical differences and mutations, including the passing from their original dolichocephalic nature to a growing brachycephalia and mesaticefalia, which were once again proof of the racial inferiority of the Anglo-Saxon racial group. In addition, since

all racial modifications depend from a fundamental anthropological character: reactivity [...] if the English people became what it seems to be, it means that its peculiar reactivity to the internal and external

⁵⁶³Aldo Modica, 'Inferiorità razziale degli Anglosassoni', *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 January 1943, pp. 16-18.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

stimulations shaped it this way, and it cannot change without renouncing its own being.⁵⁶⁵

The Anglo-Saxons had in themselves a concentration of ‘the negative characters common to the Nordic groups’ and ‘represented a deteriorated branch of the greater Indo-Germanic stock.’ Now, ‘the British ethnicity constitutes a free union [of contrasting ethnicities] where the dominant psychic characters are the negative ones typical of the Nordic or Nordic Dalic race.’ These traits were caused by the Nordic ‘hyperpituitarism and hypertiroidism’, which can produce positive effects (like reflexivity and self-consciousness), but also be the cause of ‘characters that, when exaggerated, constitute notes of human negation’, like individualism and insufficient emotivism. The latter, opposed to the excessive reactions of ‘certain meridional peoples’, was a consequence of the hyperpituitarism typical of the English branch of the Nordic race and was extreme in the Americans. Other consequences of this hyperpituitarism were sexual torpidity (according to Modica, ‘it is known that the sexual excitability of this ethnicity is exclusively based on cerebral and inferior spastic-emotive data’), moral coldness, egoism, phlegm united to an adventurous spirit, as well as a tendency towards aggression. Typical of this ethnicity was a good and analytical memory (traits which they shared with the Jewish race), but very little ability for abstraction and synthesis. Another trait was the lack of virility and tendency for sexual perversion. Here Modica mentioned one older theme of anti-British propaganda: the accusation of homosexuality and effeminacy. According to him, individuals affected with hypertuitarism experienced puberty later than any other ethnicity, had ‘long-limbed and delicate bodies’, and were

fertile ground for sexual and moral perversions. Sexual uncertainty and the puerile form that can be noticed in the (Anglo-Saxon’s) face as well

⁵⁶⁵ Aldo Modica, ‘Inferiorità razziale degli Anglosassoni’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 5 February 1943, pp. 9-11.

as in his somatic traits can also be traced in the psychic sphere, that is stuck in its puerile or pre-pubertal phase, while the sexual sphere presents homosexual or ambivalent tendencies.⁵⁶⁶

All these features, Modica added, were present, if somewhat lessened, in the Anglo-Saxon race. Once again, Modica wavered between an absolution of the Germanic branch of the Nordic race and its condemnation. Indeed, he wrote that what separated the psyche of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon branches was that the former hyperputarism caused ‘psychic explosions and improvise cruelty.’ However, the conclusion of the article stated that the biological inferiority of the Anglo-Saxons was typical of the racial branch to which they belonged. Whether Modica intended to include the Germanics in this sentence is open to speculation.

While Modica’s article was long and often confused, it is a remarkable example of how far Italian racists’ anti-British criticism had gone. In his Evolian division of humanity into two, ever struggling groups, Modica had located the Anglo-Saxons in a place of irredeemable anthropological difference. No peace could exist with a people whose values were inherently opposed to the ones of the Mediterranean-Aryan-Italian civilisation. The obvious implication of Modica’s article was that Britain was indeed the New Carthage, to be annihilated like its Punic predecessor. Indeed, the article concluded that it was necessary ‘to defend [ourselves] with prudence from the Anglo-Saxons and fight them so to demolish the strength of their substantial, and naturally not remediable, weakness.’⁵⁶⁷

However, Modica had at least refrained from directly attacking the Germans. While he considered the Anglo-Saxons biologically inferior and inherently dangerous, his article

⁵⁶⁶ Aldo Modica, ‘Inferiorità razziale degli Anglosassoni’, *La Difesa della Razza*, 20 March 1943, pp. 12-14.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

was not yet the most violent condemnation of the role and nature of the Anglo-Saxons to appear in *La Difesa* before the end of both the magazine and the regime. In January 1943, during the increasingly desperate battle for Tunisia, Armando Tosti wrote an article entitled 'The Anglo-Saxon race against Europe.' There, he attacked the Anglo-Saxons and, more broadly, the dolichocephalic-blond races which had developed in the polar regions, where the long periods of darkness alternated with long periods of light. In such conditions, every family lived far and isolated from others, in houses only enlightened by the hearths, so that 'a development in each individual of a tendency to solitude, misanthropy, retreat into himself, even a lack of cohesion with its own familiar group' appeared natural. During the period of darkness the whole group was isolated, 'surrounded by the unknown and by mystery, [while] during the period of light the husbands, the fathers, the eldest sons abandon the family and leave for fishing in new, far lands.' The natural consequence was the emergence of 'an exaggerated individualism, the feeling of being weak in front of nature' and, what was worse, the moral weakness 'of the race that, enclosed in its fierce egoism, proves to be still today unable to absolve any duty of European solidarity.' In Tosti's view, particularly remarkable in light of his prolific anti-Semitism, it was Britain, even more than the Jews, who had been the cause of all Europe's miseries:

England, this carboniferous island, immersed in the mist and beaten by the waves, monotone in its landscapes and poor in its vegetation, inhabited originally by the Celts, by the Scandinavians and eventually by the Germanics, civilized by the French-Normans, England is, since centuries, because of its greediness for wealth, the cause and origin of every European perturbation and calamity.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁸ Armando Tosti, *La razza anglosassone contro l'Europa*, *La Difesa della Razza*, (January 5 1943) pp. 4-6.

Even more than Modica, Tosti's article combined a strongly Mediterraneanist and Lamarckian point of view with a clear anti-German attitude.⁵⁶⁹ It is easy to imagine how infuriated Landra would have been by reading opinions that were so diametrically opposed to his own in the magazine which was once the main voice of the biological Nordicist faction.

Conclusions

Racism was only institutionalised in Fascist Italy in the second half of the 1930s. The late and difficult attempts to develop a comprehensive Fascist racial theory eventually failed, under the weight of the differences between the rival racist factions and the misfortunes of war. In such a context, a precise and definitive hierarchy of races was never really developed and, even more than in the Nazi case, racial criticism of other peoples depended on many, usually expedient, factors. The consequence of this, and of the fact that by the time anti-British propaganda started to appear in racist Fascist media, Italy was moving closer to a country which was supposedly racially close to Britain, was that a purely racial criticism of the British people only appeared quite late, well into the war. It was far easier to identify in the British nation (or in general in the concept of the 'decadent West') the flaws of the internal enemy which Mussolini considered the real bane of Fascism and Italy: the bourgeois class. In Mussolini's perception, the bourgeoisie was either a-Fascist or actively anti-Fascist and represented the kind of Italian that had to be replaced by the 'Fascist New Man'. The *Duce's* obsession with the health of the nation

⁵⁶⁹ The fact that these words were published in a key regime magazine in 1943, when Italy and Fascism were utterly dependent on German military support, is surprising. However, as Aaron Gillette wrote, the 'dislike of Nordic and Germanic racial theories was so intense among many powerful Fascist scientists and government bureaucrats that Mediterraneanists, nativists, and other anti-Germanic theorists continued to exert substantial influence on government policies and propaganda.' Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, p. 145.

made the identification between the West and bourgeois class easier. The British (and the French until their defeat in summer 1940) then became the example of what Fascist Italy should both fight and fear. Capitalising on actual British anxiety about the perception of a 'sickness in the racial body', which had sparked a long lasting debate between the two wars, Fascist propaganda could draw the picture of a Britain that was home to a lack of fecundity, feminism, degeneracy, materialism, Malthusian ideologies, alcoholism and lack of physical vigour. It was indeed the decrepit, tired Empire stubbornly refusing to make room for the younger peoples which Mussolini described in his 10 June 1940 speech.⁵⁷⁰ This kind of anti-British discourse had, then, the advantage of targeting both the external and internal enemies of Fascism. However, while such articles used what was then considered anthropological analysis of the British national character to criticise Britain, they still did not adopt a truly '*racial*' approach, being closer to the usual habit of the Italian Fascists to judge according to national stereotypes.⁵⁷¹ Gradually, as the war continued and Italy's fortunes dimmed, a more overtly racial discourse gained traction, without, however, ever completely replacing the other, 'anthropological' approach. Predictably, given the extreme fluidity and fragmentation of the world of racist Italian thinkers, their response was diverse and conflictual. The Nordacist faction, which had previously been appreciative of the British attitude to racial superiority in the colonies, split between those, like Cipriani, who simply ignored or denied the Germanic racial character of the Anglo-Saxons, and those who, like Landra, never accepted the notion of the Anglo-Saxon race as inferior or *racially* incompatible with European civilisation. The Mediterraneanist (and, later Evolian) faction took advantage of the situation to gain ideological ammunition for their anti-Nordic crusade. In this case, it seems that Britain

⁵⁷⁰ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, pp. 93-135.

⁵⁷¹ MacGregor Knox, *Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies*, p. 356.

had become a useful target for those among the anti-Nordicist racists who wanted to attack Germany and the Nordic myths, without risking criticising its ‘Nordic cousin.’ This kind of racial analysis of the British, which would rather use the term *Anglo-Saxons*, often tried to explain the materialistic, individualistic and archaic nature of British society by identifying its biological reasons. The most common tropes of these analyses were the Anglo-Saxons’ limited intellect, pathologically-twisted perception of reality and their inherent inability to limit their own individualisms to form a true society, to the point of justifying a classification of the Anglo-Saxon race as inferior. Mussolini himself seems to have assimilated some of these notions, for he stated a few months before his fall that the British people’s strength was its own stupidity. This, he claimed, was ‘not a figure of speech, but a real state of the English intellect, slow and dull.’ As for the United States, he stated, like Landra, that they were not a people but ‘a population.’⁵⁷²

It should be kept in mind that magazines such as *La Difesa*, like the other vanguards of Italian racism, while widely distributed, failed to influence the majority of the Italian population.⁵⁷³ After the first months, the magazine’s sales rapidly declined. *La Difesa*, like the rest of the racist press, then became dependent on state subsidies.⁵⁷⁴

Furthermore, it does not appear likely that the anglophobia which could be displayed by the Italian people (as underlined in other chapters) was key in the racial debate about the English race. Extreme racial criticism of the British and American peoples was undoubtedly only ever undertaken by a minority. An analysis of the racist anti-British propaganda does, however, tell us about the regime, both in better understanding the dynamics of the racist debate it led, and the depths of delusion reached by certain segment of Fascist propaganda under the shadow of defeat.

⁵⁷² Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario*, 3 January 1943.

⁵⁷³ Renzo de Felice, *Storia degli Ebrei italiani sotto il Fascismo*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 272.

⁵⁷⁴ Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italia Fascista e la persecuzione degli Ebrei*, p. 202.

Chapter 5

Shallowness Triumphant: The Italian Public's Reception of the Fascist Discourse on Britain

Concerning Britain, I heard everywhere the harshest words, words of hatred from the people who do not forget, and I heard many donnette [poor women] with little education show [anti-British] hatred - fierce hatred.⁵⁷⁵

Mussolini's attempt to transform Italians was not a spectacular success. The catastrophic defeat in the war and the quick fall of the regime in 1943 demonstrated that the experiment to create a 'Fascist New Man' had failed. However, the failure to create a nation of warrior supermen does not mean that the regime did not have a long-lasting impact on Italian society, shaping the character of the Italian people in other ways. The questions of how much consensus the regime enjoyed among Italians and to what extent the Italian people had been 'Fascistised' have been the subject of lively debate among historians. While Renzo De Felice's position on the subject changed more than once, his most dominant thesis claimed that the years between 1929 and the Ethiopian War, culminating in the proclamation of the empire, were the period of greatest consensus for the regime.⁵⁷⁶ In those years, De Felice maintains, most Italians accepted the regime and Mussolini's

⁵⁷⁵ Livorno, 10 June 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁵⁷⁶ For an analysis of the historiography of consensus on the Ethiopian War and Fascism in general, see: Labanca, Nicola 'Chi ha studiato il consenso alla guerra d'Etiopia?', in Romein H. Rainero, Paolo Alberini (eds), *Le forze armate e la nazione italiana (1915-1943): atti del convegno di studi tenuto a Roma nei giorni 22-24 ottobre 2003* (Rome: Commissione italiana di storia militare, 2004).

leadership.⁵⁷⁷ Such an interpretation has been criticised by other historians including Colarizi, Bosworth and Corner, who argued not just that Fascist indoctrination was superficial but also that the support the regime enjoyed from the Italian people was already waning by the late 1930s.⁵⁷⁸ Connected to this debate is the extent to which the discourse described by this thesis, developed as it was by the elite of Fascist culture and politics, had been absorbed by Italian society at large.

The reception of anti-British themes by the Italian people has not been thoroughly analysed. Renzo De Felice analysed the subject in his *Mussolini l'Alleato*, writing that

[anti-British propaganda] was, among the ones undertaken by Fascism, the one which achieved the greater results. As it is impossible to dwell in a thorough explanation of the fact, which would require the consideration of a whole series of factors, among which the preexistence, as it has been said, of an Anglophobic cultural tradition, both secular and catholic, revived by the Ethiopian War and by the sanctions and by the petty English vexations on the Italian naval traffic in the months before the intervention, the scarce direct knowledge, on a popular level of the English and of England, country of limited Italian working immigration, the large use by [the] British side of colonial and Dominions troops, often considered of colour, or, anyway, 'barbarians,' the often counter-productive effects which, especially in the first phase of the War had the English radio transmissions for Italy [...] we will notice how the few studies on the letters and diaries of fighting and deceased men, the most truthful memorial literature, the censorship of the correspondence show how only regarding the English the war was truly felt by large sectors, especially among the youth, and there were instances of contempt and hatred not found in the regard of other enemies.⁵⁷⁹

Further research on public opinion did not produce extensive results on the subject of Britain and studies remain 'limited.' Corner argued that the regime achieved a certain degree of success in creating anti-British (and anti-French) feeling, convincing the Italian

⁵⁷⁷ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936* (Turin: Einaudi 1974), p. 55.

⁵⁷⁸ The debate is analysed by George Talbot as well as Corner himself: see Paul Corner, 'Italian Fascism: Whatever Happened to Dictatorship?' *The Journal of Modern History*, 74, 2 (2002), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) pp. 325-351; George Talbot, *Censorship in Fascist Italy, 1922-43* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 104.

⁵⁷⁹ Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato, Vol.1* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), p. 171.

people that these nations were depriving Italy of its rightful place in the Mediterranean.⁵⁸⁰

Colarizi's work devotes greater, if passing, attention to the subject, concluding that while at the time of the Ethiopian War Fascist propaganda had managed to raise hatred against the Western powers, the regime failed to create consistent Francophobic and Anglophobic sentiment before and after the Second World War. Not much space is devoted to Britain in particular, especially in the years before 1940.⁵⁸¹

This chapter aims to test the effectiveness of the Fascist discourse concerning Britain, examining the impact of its themes and evolution against the available sources on public opinion under Fascism. Rather than focusing on diaries or letters, this chapter will instead focus on the regime's reports on the feelings and attitudes of the Italian people. That is because any selection of diaries and letters, within the scope allowed by a doctoral thesis, would be no match, in range and accuracy, to the efforts of a totalitarian regime to test the popular reception of its discourse.

Assessing public opinion in a dictatorship poses a number of methodological challenges. As Colarizi noted, the absence of modern polling data concerning the Fascist era meant that the 'power-society' relationship of the time must be studied through the rougher, but no less interesting, methods created and perfected by the regime itself to understand the public mood. The most important of these was the *Divisione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza* (General Division of Public Security) and the Political Police, both of which were organs of the Ministry of Interior.⁵⁸² Concerning the credibility of Fascist documentation, Colarizi maintains that 'the homogeneity of the source from which these sources were obtained' allows a reading of them as a polling system. This chapter is based

⁵⁸⁰ Paul Corner, *Italia Fascista*, p. 269.

⁵⁸¹ See: Simona Colarizi, *L'opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime (1929-43)*, (Rome: Laterza, 2000).

⁵⁸² Colarizi, *L'Opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime*, p. 14.

on the assumption that these documents, together with the correspondence of civilians and soldiers, can indeed be read as a representative, if not always accurate, picture of reality at the time. It is necessary to clarify some methodological premises concerning the following analysis.

The first is the availability of sources. As mentioned above, Fascist officials were especially concerned with matters of public order, yet devoted less attention to the image of the enemy on the home front. In the context of this chapter, the number of Fascist sources dealing specifically with Britain is limited and, before the Ethiopian War, practically non-existent. Finding evidence of the attitude of the Italian people towards the British becomes easier as the war drew closer, but still, the amount of evidence, especially during the tense phase between the Ethiopian War and the Spanish Civil War, is surprisingly sparse. However, the available material allows a general, if contradictory, picture of how the Italian people perceived the British adversary before and during the Second World War to be drawn.

The second difficulty concerns the analysis of personal correspondence. One example is Christopher Duggan's *Fascist Voices*, which features a collection of letters written by common Italians to the *Duce*.⁵⁸³ It must be remembered that the letters reaching Mussolini could have been filtered by his secretariat, and that people writing personally to Mussolini would presumably tend not to criticise the dictator nor prove sympathetic towards Britain. In this sense, the extent to which they are representative should not be exaggerated. At the same time, Mussolini's secretariat did receive (anonymous) letters criticising his choices, especially concerning foreign policy and his alignment with Germany, proving that the usefulness of the secretariat as a source should not be underestimated either. The

⁵⁸³ Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: Vintage, 2013).

influence of self-censorship should also be kept in mind when analysing letters sent by soldiers, such as the sources provided by Avagliano and Palmieri's works.⁵⁸⁴

Lastly, the role of the local Fascist authorities on the one hand and of the police and informers on the other also brings about difficulties. The former had an interest in depicting local public opinion in a way that would conform to the expectations of the regime and was symptomatic of effective Fascist institutions. They were also interested in reporting disturbances or lack of support for the institutions, lest being accused of having been idle should the situation prove troublesome later.⁵⁸⁵ At the same time, as Colarizi explained, the role of the informant has often been discredited by the prefects and *questori* themselves, as informants were anonymous to them and often criticised the role of the local Fascist authorities. The reports from Sardinia included in this chapter, for example, are always peculiarly pessimistic and critical.

The Ethiopian War

Britain's conduct during the Ethiopian crisis roused a massive anti-British response in Italian public opinion. As Christopher Duggan observed, the letters Mussolini received from many Italians often showed genuine anti-British feeling:

In the view of many, the opposition shown by Britain in particular to the invasion of Ethiopia was the product of fear – fear that Italy with its new spiritual energy and unified sense of mission was resurrecting the glorious military traditions of ancient Rome and would soon be able to threaten the imperial dominance of the increasingly materialistic, corrupt and effete world powers.⁵⁸⁶

These feelings were remarkably consistent with Fascist public discourse. Some of the tropes common during the Great War re-emerged as well: one man from Milan

⁵⁸⁴ Mario Avagliano, Marco Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!, Gli Italiani al fronte, 1940-1943*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

⁵⁸⁵ Colarizi, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁸⁶ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, pp. 253-4.

complained in his diary of the ingratitude of the ‘English barbarians,’ who behaved as if Italy had not lost 700,000 men during the conflict ‘to save the British Empire.’⁵⁸⁷ One report from Milan underlined how the British attitude during the conflict had increased support for the Ethiopian War and that ‘the Milanese people are [...] irked by the actions of the English government and ready to accept any event, even against England itself, while Fascist groups organized demonstrations against Britain.’⁵⁸⁸ The intensity of anti-British feeling expressed by parts of the Italian public was such that, in summer 1935, it was necessary to triple the amount of *Carabinieri* guarding the British embassy in Rome.⁵⁸⁹ A Fascist observer from Rome commented that many intellectuals were disgusted by British actions towards Italy: ‘[these intellectuals] show what a nauseating effect England’s attitude has caused. An old ex-journalist in his Eighties told me that he would, despite his age, go and whistle in front the English embassy!’⁵⁹⁰

Other reports hint that France was still considered with a certain benevolence, which is unsurprising considering the more cautious French attitude during the Ethiopian crisis; yet concerning Britain, reports from all over the peninsula show a growing hostility.⁵⁹¹

At the same time, isolated individuals here and there criticised the Ethiopian enterprise,

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ No title, Milan, 8 July 1935, and Appunto per l’on. Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, 14 July 1935, Busta-fascicolo 6, Mobilitazione classe 1911 – 1935-1936, Categorie permanenti 1894-1958, Archivio Generale 1870-1958, Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza 1961-1881, M.I. 1814-1988, ACS.

⁵⁸⁹ Circolare della Reuter, 8 June 1935, Busta-fascicolo 4, Mobilitazione classe 1911 – 1935-1936, Categorie permanenti 1894-1958, Archivio Generale 1870-1958, Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza 1961-1881, M.I. 1814-1988, ACS.

⁵⁹⁰ No title, Rome, 6 October 1935, Busta-fascicolo 109, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁵⁹¹ No title, Florence, 4 October 1935, and Grande adunata, Savona 2 October 1935, No title, Milan, 4 October 1935, Busta-fascicolo 109, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁵⁹¹ Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, pp. 385-7.

as both Duggan and Bosworth document.⁵⁹² Of these, some opposed the war for fear of confronting Britain.⁵⁹³ However, as mentioned before, even historians opposed to the notion of a lasting Fascist consensus, like Corner, accept that Italian public opinion had been influenced by anti-British propaganda during that period. Simona Colarizi argued that the first reaction of the Italian public to the tensions with the allies was one of fear. While the regime had fully managed to create a feeling of hostility towards the British nation, which was ‘starving’ Italy, the mere nature of the propaganda - which continuously underlined how subordinate Italy was to the western allies - gave the public the idea that the danger of opposing them was great. As soon as it became clear that the British would not follow their threats with actions, however, the public’s enthusiasm skyrocketed.⁵⁹⁴

These feelings clearly appear in a letter sent by the American journalist Joseph Ravotto to his chief editor in 1937:

Recently in Capri and Amalfi, where Fascist propaganda has not penetrated as deeply as in the big centres, I found that the hatred and intensity of the feeling [*sic*] which dominated during the Ethiopian conflict [...] were stronger than ever. Eden is still the devil for every Italian, him being an ardent or mild Fascist.⁵⁹⁵

Ravotto gave many examples of this Anglophobic sentiment. One example was a Capri peasant, who had fought for three years in the trenches during the Great War and who would have gladly volunteered to fight the British in the case of war: ‘the English are a bunch of hypocrites [he told Ravotto,] if they emerged as victors from the last war, they owe it in great part to us.’ However, the British were ungrateful, the peasant thought, and when Italy had attempted to take some of the little Britain had not taken for itself, they

⁵⁹² See, for example: Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 145.

⁵⁹³ Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, pp. 385-7.

⁵⁹⁴ Colarizi, *L’opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime*, pp. 184-194.

⁵⁹⁵ Joseph D. Ravotto to Mr. Tom Gerber, 26 May 1937, busta 2, Serie affari generali, 1926-1944, Gabinetto, Ministero Cultura Popolare, ACS.

had tried to rouse the whole world against it. ‘We will have one time to fight against the English’, he concluded, ‘for they are [...] jealous of our development and fear that Mussolini could become too powerful. The sooner it happens, the better.’⁵⁹⁶ Another example was a taxi driver from Amalfi, who said he would also volunteer to fight against the English despite being 58 years old. He would even sacrifice the lives of his two sons, 14 and 18 years old, ‘if that would contribute to humble this race that for too long has dominated the world.’ He was sure, he added, that for the British the end was approaching. One Italian friend of Ravotto’s was open about his contempt for Britain’s military qualities. He believed that the *Regia Marina*, despite being smaller, could beat the Royal Navy: ‘Our submarines, our cruisers, our *mas*: small and quick boats with only two missiles and two men, could overthrow the powerful from their throne. The English thought twice about [fighting Italy] for we have little to lose and we will not even lose this little.’⁵⁹⁷ The notion that the British were not a martial race had permeated others, as well. Another Italian friend had written to Ravotto that

the English are not soldiers. The other allied troops had always to help them with great difficulties with the recruitment [*sic*]. They are forced to offer all kinds of treats to induce men to enlist. Despite this weakness of theirs, they always managed to get by, for they have fought their battles more with money than with men.⁵⁹⁸

Non-belligerence and war

Colarizi underlined the scarce enthusiasm for war alongside Germany before the German victories in France. Already in 1938, the idea of a war against France was often unpopular and in some places, such as Trieste, the people would have preferred a war against Germany. In May 1940 Fascist informers among the citizens of Piedmont and Genoa put

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

their hopes in a victory of the ‘democratic states’ against the Germans.⁵⁹⁹ Referring to the police records of people investigated for ‘subversive’ comments, Bosworth talked of the ‘esteem of the English enemy’, referring to the period before the conflict and non-belligerence.⁶⁰⁰ For the purposes of this study, however, it is interesting to note that while sympathy for France was (and continued to be after this point) often reported, sympathy for Britain is conspicuous in its almost complete absence. On the other hand, sympathy for the democratic states was often connected, and directly linked, to the opposition against Germany, a country that, as Colarizi abundantly documents, was truly and deeply loathed by most Italians.⁶⁰¹ In the uncertain period before the war and during the first months of non-belligerence, there is no evidence of widespread expressions of hostility against Britain, but there was no excess of support either. One report from Ancona, dating to 1937, revealed that rather than against the French, the hostility of the people was directed against Britain ‘because of the spirit of these populations, which would not suffer any prepotence.’⁶⁰²

A June 1939 OVRA (the Organization for the Vigilance and Repression of Antifascism) report denounced the attitude of students in Milan, claiming that ‘among the students, that is the educated people, there are too many who don’t think as they should.’ However, this attitude was exemplified by the sympathy these students showed for France, not Britain.⁶⁰³ Another report about the Milanese public in September 1939 scornfully noted that the people there tended not to consider Britain as the instigator of the war, blaming

⁵⁹⁹ Colarizi, *Opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime*, pp. 271, 302.

⁶⁰⁰ Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, pp. 452-3.

⁶⁰¹ ‘...fear and hatred against Germany are the dominant notes in the public opinion’, Colarizi, *Opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime*, pp. 299-301.

⁶⁰² Ancona, situazione politica ed economica della provincia, 10 April 1937, Busta/fascisolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1936-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1936-1945, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981,) Min. Int.1914-1936, ACS.

⁶⁰³ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 36.

Hitler instead: the report specified that such views were held not only by the ‘popolino’ (small folk) but in ‘intellectual and Fascist circles’ as well.⁶⁰⁴

However, there were reports which suggest that reality was more nuanced than the idea of an Italian people overwhelmingly benevolent towards westerners. One report, drafted in June 1939, stated that public feeling was against ‘fighting for Germany, even if nobody sympathizes with France. About England, people say that it is the usual egoist Albion.’

⁶⁰⁵ Another report drafted by the *Questore* of Arezzo in April 1940 mentioned how, having not been particularly engaged at first, public opinion in the province had oriented itself to thinking that Italy should not suffer the economic strangulation of the Anglo-French.⁶⁰⁶ One from Vicenza in August claimed, echoing Mussolini’s own thoughts, that it was generally believed that Britain would not dare to fight without Soviet support.⁶⁰⁷

One report from Rome concluded that the general feeling was for ‘war of defence, freedom and justice,’ and that for Britain the conflict was ‘the war of desperation’ because the growing power of the Axis certainly threatened its existence. It was the British Empire, in the hands of the Jews, which had forced the war on Italy, thankfully ‘in the hands of God and Mussolini.’ Henceforth, it was better to fight the war sooner rather than later, for the perfidious Albion would be better armed in the future. ‘The war of poverty and spirit’, concluded the report, ‘will defeat the war of wealth and arrogance.’⁶⁰⁸ A report

⁶⁰⁴ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 42.

⁶⁰⁵ No title, Bologna, 29 August 1939, Busta-fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶⁰⁶ Situazione politico-economica della Provincia di Arezzo, 22 April 1940, Busta-fascicolo 48, Categorie annuali 1875-1945, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale (1870-1968), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶⁰⁷ No title, Vicenza 24 August 1939, Busta-fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶⁰⁸ Voci, impressioni, opinioni generali, Roma, 29 August 1939 Busta-fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

drafted on 28 August stated that the people of Rome felt the British decision to withdraw its trade fleet from the Mediterranean meant the British felt Italy was the dominant power in the region. Another report drafted on 31 August reported anti-British outbursts in the streets by the people listening to the news in public shops. A further report from the following day claimed that ‘the people’ opposed the British attempt to lure Italy into meaningless negotiations: ‘no, Mussolini will not let the English frustrate the Italian people anymore.’ The report added that anti-British feeling was growing and that it was not unusual to see common people speaking harsh words against the British.⁶⁰⁹ Hostility towards Britain appears, in these reports, sometimes connected to the idea that the British were afraid to fight, a notion echoing the perception of Britain in the military circles analysed in Chapter 3:

[It is still believed] that the London Jews who warmly desire the catastrophe have a formidable foe, the Englishmen’s fear; and that hence England will cave in despite the King’s and Chamberlain’s manifest impotence in containing the Jewish influence.⁶¹⁰

However, after the declaration of non-belligerence and the first developments of the conflict, hostility for Britain did not disappear. The regime itself investigated public opinion in order to understand how it felt about the British. One OVRA observer answered his superiors stating that the people in Carrara-Appuania Province (today Massa-Carrara) felt that the British deserved to be fought against because of their behaviour during the Ethiopian crisis and that, if war was to come, doing it immediately

⁶⁰⁹ No title, Roma, 28 August 1939, No title, Roma, 31 August 1939 and Voci, impressioni, opinioni generali, 1 September 1939, Busta-fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶¹⁰ No title, Roma, 1 September 1939, Busta-fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

would be a good idea, for in the future it might prove impossible.⁶¹¹ Other Italians instead showed frustration for the British stubbornness in refusing Hitler's peace proposals. On 25 October 1939, a report from Milan stated that the German peace offers had been warmly received by people in the city and that the British refusal had convinced many that London did indeed want war.⁶¹² In December 1939, a report from Ascoli Piceno described popular feeling about Britain as 'more or less unanimous': that is, that it was the 'fomenter of discord among the peoples.'⁶¹³

There was a class divide, as well. The 'bourgeoisie' (a label under which Mussolini lumped all the middle and upper-middle classes which, he felt, did not share his goal of anthropological transformation of the Italian people) more often than others feared the war, or even hoped that Italy could reconcile with the Western democracies.⁶¹⁴ An OVRA report stated that in Milanese commercial and industrial circles, many were still convinced of the economic and financial power of France and Britain. No mention was made, however, of their military might.⁶¹⁵ Instead, the report underlined how these 'cowards' believed that Italy would prevail in an armed conflict, because of the 'higher war potential and training of the various arms,' and rather feared the long term consequences of the blockade enforced by the Western powers. In this sense, the feeling

⁶¹¹ No title, 14 September 1939, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶¹² No title, Milan, 25 October 1939, Busta-fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶¹³ *Provincia di Ascoli Piceno, condizioni politiche ed economiche*, 29 December 1939, busta/fascicolo 48, Categorie annuali, 1879-1945, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981) 1861-1931, Min. Int. 1814-1986.

⁶¹⁴ Colarizi, *L'opinione degli Italiani sotto il regime*, p. 302.

⁶¹⁵ It must also be remembered, however, that while the industrial circles were divided when the conflict began in 1939, even then many powerful names of Italian industry supported the Italian intervention and were convinced of the possibility of an easy victory. Even those who did not at the time, changed their minds after the German successes in Denmark and Norway. See: Valerio Castronovo, *Giovanni Agnelli: la Fiat dal 1899 al 1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), p. 543.

of even the most sceptical mirrored the Fascist discourse and, in the case of Britain, the optimism expressed in the reports of the attachés. The world of commerce and industry had not changed this attitude by the time Italy joined the war. On 8 May 1940, another OVRA report stated that Italy should avoid war because Britain could starve the country.⁶¹⁶

The tone of the reports is not particularly surprising since, as we have seen, the period of non-belligerence was one in which the press adopted the most neutral approach towards Britain. Moreover, the anti-German attitude of the Italian people at the time is well known. However, already in April 1940, OVRA reported that, while Francophilia was widespread enough, ‘I heard ironic comments [about] the English declarations on [their] dominion of the seas, mocking the British strength and pitying France, described as [the] victim of England.’⁶¹⁷ The change of tone in the Fascist press and the German victories in Northern Europe had an effect on the mood of the people: the image of Britain as a weak nation was reaffirmed and pro-French sentiment was expressed through anti-British lenses. The longing for neutrality was still strong, but antipathy for Britain was a fact that the secret police unanimously noticed. One report from Forlì already in March stated that the people hated Britain more every day, and another drafted one month later shows that the trend had continued.⁶¹⁸ One report drafted in April said that, while most Italians wanted peace, a meaningful number of people were upset by the ‘continuous prevarications’ of Britain. Another report, also dating from April 1940, stated that while conscious of how the British power, for ‘its perfidy’, was more dangerous than that of Germany, the people still bought the anti-Fascist arguments for neutrality. A report dated

⁶¹⁶ Piero Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista 1938/1940* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), pp. 31, 67.

⁶¹⁷ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 56.

⁶¹⁸ No title, Forlì, 12 April 1940, Busta-fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

14 May stated that the ‘prevarications’ against Italian trading ships had caused great indignation among the people in Milan, and that more generally ‘no Italian justifies today the British behaviour.’ However, they hoped that Mussolini could force the British to respect Italy without joining the war.⁶¹⁹

By then, however, German successes in France were shifting public opinion towards war. Reports hint that, by the time of the declaration of war, the Italians were overwhelmingly Anglophobic and Francophobic. As Colarizi mentioned, the sudden interventionist and anti-Allied feeling amazed even Fascist observers themselves.⁶²⁰ As one report from Pisa explained, ‘today the entire people is Franco-phobic and Anglo-phobic.’⁶²¹ On 16 May an OVRA agent reported that the Milanese supported a swift settling of accounts with France and Britain before the still-unpopular Germans could win the war by themselves.⁶²² Two days later, a report mainly focusing on the fear the Milanese had of future German hegemony on the continent stated that ‘many, more than to France, [are hostile to] Britain and blame the British statesmen [who] have played with the French future, joining the war with the [British] nation unprepared and, what is worse, practically disarmed.’⁶²³ On 20 May, a report claimed that the people hoped Italy would rise against France and Britain, which could not offer much resistance to Italian forces.⁶²⁴ As Colarizi noticed, the common perception was that the enemy was devoid of energy, with low morale and insufficient materiel.⁶²⁵ In Duggan’s words, ‘according to many informers, many people believed that the *Duce* had always wanted peace and blamed the outbreak of war in Europe on the arrogance and inflexibility of the British and the French.’⁶²⁶ Even

⁶¹⁹ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 56, 58-9, 70.

⁶²⁰ Colarizi, *L’Opinione degli Italiani sotto al regime*, pp. 337-8.

⁶²¹ Colarizi, p. 338.

⁶²² Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 76-7.

⁶²³ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 80.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁵ Colarizi, *L’Opinione degli Italiani sotto al regime*, p. 338.

⁶²⁶ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 333.

when the popular response to the declaration of war was described as cold, as in the case of a report from Aosta, it was also true that it was because ‘the intellectual class, known for its Francophile attitudes, nurtured hope that war would not be declared against the neighbouring Republic.’⁶²⁷

After the French defeat we can see how the efforts of Fascist commentators to paint France and other allies of Britain as victims of London’s ruthlessness were successful. If, as we have seen, antipathy for France had not matched that for Britain in 1939, in May 1940 a Political Police report stated that, here and there, compassion for France still emerged because France was considered the last bulwark of ‘socialist democracy,’ whereas nobody considered the British system truly democratic. It was easy to conclude, the report continued, that the Anglophile feelings of segments of public opinion had their root not in ideological or political reasons, like the Francophile ones, being instead the product of fear that British naval power might evoke. Once the myth of Britain’s power had been broken, the ‘traditional friendship’ between Britain and Italy began to disappear as well.⁶²⁸ Britain was blamed for having sacrificed France, was accused of cowardice, and bloody revenge against it by the German Luftwaffe was ‘demanded.’⁶²⁹ Another May report from Milan stated that, if some compassion for the French could be found among public opinion, there was no exception in the general satisfaction for the doom of Britain; many were reading the anti-British poem written by the poet Monti during the Napoleonic Wars.⁶³⁰ One report from Aosta underlined that ‘as a consequence of the sympathy

⁶²⁷ Situazione politica, R. Questura d’Aosta, 31 July 1940, Busta/fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1936-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1936-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1914-1936, ACS.

⁶²⁸ Relazione informativa 7, Roma 29 May 1940, busta/fascicolo 232, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione Polizia Politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶²⁹ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 103.

⁶³⁰ Conflitto anglo-franco-tedesco e spirito pubblico, 28 May 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

towards France [after its defeat], a very much felt aversion against England has increased.’⁶³¹

In a particularly enlightening report from Milan dated 26 June, an OVRA agent pointed out that

now the staring eyes of the Italian people [are] directed to Britain as its N.1. [*sic*] enemy towards which Germany and Italy will turn all their forces to crush it with no mercy. And the public opinion follows with general sympathy this decision of Italy and Germany for, if feelings of clemency for France existed, such a thing cannot be said for the hated England, and [the people] want to see it on its knees, especially after its betrayal of many little nations, lastly France.⁶³²

One report from July mentioned how a civilian observer had denounced the ‘whiny’ attitude so many Genoese showed for France, demanding a merciful treatment of their French ‘cousins’ at the peace treaties. Yet regarding Britain, ‘the attitude is hostile, almost more because of its responsibility [for] the French defeat rather than for the wrongs it did to Italy.’⁶³³ Even old republicans (hardly the most ardent admirers of the regime) hated the British; a report from Forlí stated that ‘ [the British] were saying bad things about the French after having betrayed them. You hear funny things from people with this old mindset,’ commented the report.⁶³⁴

Already in May some Italians felt that the British had proven themselves to be an unwarlike people, one report from Milan stating that the people felt the British were

⁶³¹ Situazione politica, R. Questura d’Aosta, 31 July 1940, Busta/fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1936-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1936-1945, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1914-1936, ACS.

⁶³² Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 105-6.

⁶³³ 11 July 1940, No title, Genoa, 6 October 1935, Busta-fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶³⁴ No title, Forlí, 24 June 1940, Busta-fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

always the first to run when confronted by the Germans.⁶³⁵ A few days later, after the Italian declaration of war, a report from Forlì stated that while the people in town admired the French and Belgian resistance, everyone agreed that the British had shamed themselves by running from the Germans towards the coast, not helping their allies one bit.⁶³⁶ It was reported on 21 June that the people from Leghorn, the working class in particular, were even more optimistic, believing that the war would be over by the end of July.⁶³⁷ By this stage, the feeling among the public emerging from the reports perfectly mirrored the Fascist discourse; an OVRA report from Milan stated that the common belief was that peace was near. The reason was that ‘the English are used to a comfortable life and to eat well, as well as work little or do nothing’ and they would soon give up before Germany could destroy and invade Britain and before Italy could disrupt its communication lines and invade its Mediterranean possessions.⁶³⁸ Workers from Leghorn, a report drafted on 17 June stated, mocked the Royal Navy as a bunch of ‘carcasses,’ wondering what such wretches could do against ‘our modern and powerful fleet, suggesting that the hammering statement that the *Regia Marina* was by then the first force in the Mediterranean had not been in vain.’⁶³⁹ A report from Avellino on the state of local public opinion between April and July 1940 depicted a very optimistic situation:

Already with the beginning of the hostilities [the population] had started to have the feeling that the war was not going to be that difficult for Italians, and that both [because of the great German victories] and

⁶³⁵ Conflitto anglo-franco-tedesco e spirito pubblico, 28 May 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶³⁶ No title, Forlì, 23 May 1940, Busta-fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶³⁷ No title, 21 June 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶³⁸ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 106.

⁶³⁹ No title, 17 June 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

because of the deeply rooted conviction that the Axis powers had prepared themselves [for the war] with better care; successively, after the [French surrender] and especially following the victories obtained by our [forces] in the colonies and the great battle in the Ionian [Sea], the myth of the invincibility of the English Fleet having faded, nobody doubts the final outcome anymore, and nobody fears the always threatened economic blockade.⁶⁴⁰

One report from Asti drafted on 31 July mentioned the growing resentment against Britain caused by its stubborn refusal to address the Fuhrer's 'humanitarian speech' and by the alleged mistreatment of Italian nationals in Britain.⁶⁴¹

Many Italian soldiers embraced the Fascist view of the war as a crusade against the unjust accumulation of the world's wealth in the hands of a minority of exploiters. Many censorship reports on the soldiers' correspondence underlined that anti-British feeling was particularly high among the troops, with one stating that the hatred for the British was so great that many soldiers asked to be moved to Cyrenaica to fight them.⁶⁴² An analysis of the sources during the 'summer of optimism' shows that many also shared the stereotypes about the British moral fibre, weakened by wealth and luxuries.⁶⁴³ The attack against the French fleet at Mers el-Kébir in Algeria (described in Italy simply as the attack at Orano) was one of the arguments Fascist propaganda insisted on most vehemently. The Italian people, as we have seen, were particularly sensitive to the allegedly ruthless British

⁶⁴⁰ Relazione sulla situazione politico-economica della Provincia, con particolare riferimento rispetto allo stato d'animo rispetto all'attuale situazione interna ed internazionale (1 April - 31 July 1940), R. Questura di Avellino, busta/fascicolo 48, Categorie annuali, 1879-1945, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981) 1861-1931, Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁴¹ Relazione della situazione economica e politica della provincia, R. Questura di Asti, busta/fascicolo 48, Categorie annuali, 1879-1945, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981) 1861-1931, Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁴² Mario Avagliano, Marco Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, pp. 38, 44. Avagliano and Palmieri's work must be read with the same cautious attitude adopted when reading *Fascist Voices* - the soldiers' letters were filtered by censorship and the soldiers knew that when they wrote them.

⁶⁴³ Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, p. 36.

treatment of their former French allies. A few days after Mers el-Kébir, one report from Leghorn underlined local public opinion's hostility against the British:

[The news of] English piracy against the French fleet [...] has roused the bitterest indignation; the harshest words against the English government were not spared, and against the whole nation too, described as a nation of pirates. Concerning the English prime minister, I will not repeat the words addressed at him [...] Many predict that the German occupation of Britain is close [...] and the rage of some is such that they dream [of] the hour when the English nation and people will be vanquished.⁶⁴⁴

The censorship reported not only anti-British hatred but also confidence in an easy victory. Soldiers mocked the endless British strategic withdrawals, cheered the inevitable Fascist victory and boasted of the superiority of the Italian forces.⁶⁴⁵ Often, the civilian population shared the soldiers' hope. The people from Messina, a report dated 11 July 1940 stated, hated the British more every day and waited a quick occupation of Malta to be 'a bit more free in the Mediterranean.'⁶⁴⁶ Still in late September 1940, the Prefect of Milan underlined that there was no doubt concerning the eventual victorious conclusion of the war. However, public opinion was disappointed because of the prospect of a long conflict.⁶⁴⁷

Indeed as we have seen, already in late summer 1940 the Fascist discourse changed its tone in order to justify the lack of action against Britain. The popular feeling was one of disappointment at the fact that the downfall of Britain, which had been considered

⁶⁴⁴ No title, 5 July 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶⁴⁵ Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, pp. 62-5.

⁶⁴⁶ No title, Messina, 11 July 1940, fascicolo 234, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1964, ACS.

⁶⁴⁷ Prefettura di Milano al Min. Int., direzione generale P.S., Situazione politica ed economica, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

imminent for the whole summer, had not yet materialised.⁶⁴⁸ At the same time, British resistance against the hated Germans was admired, to the point that Aldo Valori himself had to urge the Italian people not to exaggerate the qualities of the enemy (see Chapter 3). The disgust for the regime's propaganda was widespread: as a report claimed in December 1940, the consistent underrating of the enemy, the belief that the British could not take the initiative and were always just about to collapse, had been followed by bad news on all fronts. As a consequence, the report continued, the morale of the nation, 'poisoned by stupid and criminal propaganda [...] has no more reactive power.'⁶⁴⁹ As a consequence, the British-based *Radio Londra* was listened to by many Italians, to the point that, in February 1941, around one thousand university students in Naples organised a march 'to protest British propaganda.'⁶⁵⁰

Simona Colarizi argued that British resilience had, in that period, destroyed hope of a quick victory - or even victory at all.⁶⁵¹ As a later OVRA report explained, 'the incredible English resistance caused a light disorientation and, here and there, the doubt that the game was much harder to win than expected started to appear.'⁶⁵² The British refusal to surrender was greeted with irritation, for it implied that the war would continue. In a report of this period, a gradual admission of the fact that Britain was still strong and capable of fighting can be seen, an admission that perfectly mirrors the discourse in the press and, of course, reality.⁶⁵³ A report dated 7 August 1940 clearly shows the mood of the people in Milan at the time. All enthusiasm for the unavoidable and quick fall of Britain, an OVRA agent wrote, was gradually weakening. 'Too much had the might of

⁶⁴⁸ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p.107. The report contained another attack on the Milanese financial circles, who opposed even the idea of a British defeat for its consequence on the global financial markets.

⁶⁴⁹ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 131-2.

⁶⁵⁰ *Promemoria per il Duce*, 8 February 1941, Busta 164, Carteggio riservato, SPD, ACS.

⁶⁵¹ Colarizi, *L'Opinione degli Italiani sotto al regime*, pp. 341.

⁶⁵² Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 124.

⁶⁵³ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 106-9.

England and of its fleet been underrated and the people believed that its annihilation was a matter of days [away]’ and even in ‘responsible’ circles everyone was certain that the war would be over by the middle of July.⁶⁵⁴

However, a new wave of enthusiasm rose with the offensives in Africa in August and September 1940. As Colarizi points out, Mussolini was deluded by the successes in Africa, inspiring his belief that he could fight a parallel war alongside Germany.⁶⁵⁵ Deluded as he was, so too were the Italian people, and not just about the possibility of having a more autonomous role from Germany. In reference to this period, a report written in December pointed out that, during the summer ‘the British withdrawal from British Somaliland resurrected the morale, and the beginning of our offensive in Egypt, with its brilliant initial results, raised the tone of the public spirit.’ The people had believed again that the war was about to end and they relished the notion that Italy, and not Germany, would conclude the war.⁶⁵⁶ The people of Milan were reportedly ‘galvanized’ by the Italian occupation of British Somaliland, believed to be one of the greatest victories of colonial history. It was also common belief that a great Italian offensive in Egypt was imminent. Nobody ‘expected so much decision in fighting the war against England’, the agent noted. The Italian air force, people now believed, had proven itself superior to that of the British, despite the latter’s lack of modern means. The British attempt to depict the retreat from Somaliland as a victory, like Dunkirk, had been widely ridiculed by the common man. The press’ hammering on the morbid details of the bombings on London contributed to the general enthusiasm, too. In September, a ‘wave of optimism concerning the quick and victorious end of the war’ pervaded Milan, mainly motivated by the German raids on London. The British people, having realised that they

⁶⁵⁴ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 111.

⁶⁵⁵ Colarizi, *L’Opinione degli Italiani sotto al regime*, p. 342.

⁶⁵⁶ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 124.

had been led astray by their government, would either force the government to surrender or riot. At the same time, boasting of the British radio was derided.⁶⁵⁷ Even the Milanese who had previously overrated British power were increasingly certain that Britain was about to fall, and the deal with which the British had exchanged some of their colonial outposts with American warships was seen as a sign of the state of prostration London was in.⁶⁵⁸ Despite some regret expressed over the suffering of British civilians, the bombings on London were ‘welcomed with joy.’⁶⁵⁹

In the autumn, the mood was again very low, and would remain so during the rest of the conflict; unsurprisingly, the public mood adapted to the Italian forces’ fortunes in the war. The press’ routine claims of the demise of the Royal Air Force (RAF) were received with boredom.⁶⁶⁰ The British offensive in North Africa further worsened the public mood, already depressed by the Greek fiasco. In general, for the first time, the masses realised ‘our inferiority in front of the enemy.’⁶⁶¹ However, this sudden awareness illustrates how successful the discourse underrating the British military qualities had been in the past. An OVRA report expressed surprise at the number of people who had been taken completely aback by the mere fact that the British would take the initiative in Africa.⁶⁶² ‘It was not true, then’ one observer reported the Milanese as saying, ‘that England has men who are worth nothing, who cannot nor know how to fight.’⁶⁶³ One bitter report from Milan sums

⁶⁵⁷ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 114-5.

⁶⁵⁸ No title, Milan, 6 September 1940, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁵⁹ Colarizi, *L’Opinione degli Italiani sotto al regime*, p. 340.

⁶⁶⁰ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, pp. 120-1.

⁶⁶¹ Dr. Pasquale Andriani, OVRA report, All’Eccellenza il Capo della polizia, Avezzano, 4° zona, 25 December 1940, Busta 1, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁶² Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 130.

⁶⁶³ No title, Milan 19 December 1940, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

up with remarkable realism and surprisingly harsh clarity what the public discourse about Britain had been:

England has been consistently depicted as an old paralised man barely standing on [his] infirm legs, a slap on his shoulder enough to break him down. Before the declaration of war you could hear thousands of people saying: Malta? Gibraltar? Suez? Three days and they are ours.” Such beliefs had to be known to our leaders, and they should have, consequently, cautioned the public opinion, informing it that England was a powerful empire, vital and rich of means, even if relatively unarmed. Instead, our propaganda blew on the fire and optimism, or rather shallowness, triumphed.⁶⁶⁴

Another report stated that

public opinion is humiliated because of the fall of Bardia. I say humiliated, not crestfallen or depressed [...] it goes back to the origin of the war when the newspapers, serious, humorous and conferenzieri [literally: conference newspapers] trouble themselves to depict the English as drunkards, bad soldiers, unable to endure hardships and to fight.⁶⁶⁵

At this point, public opinion was becoming less optimistic. One report from Rome described the extent of this low morale, how few believed that British pressure on Cyrenaica could be stopped, and how many felt that the boasted dominance of the *Regia Marina* in the Mediterranean was a joke. Generally, and compatibly with public discourse, the perception in the capital was that the war was going to be long and harsh.⁶⁶⁶ However, the propaganda failure was not absolute. As we have seen, the regime tried to minimise the effect of defeat by underrating the British success, claiming that it had only been possible because of Britain’s neglect of other sectors and focus against Italy. An

⁶⁶⁴ No title, Milan, 10 January 1941, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁶⁵ No title, Milan, 15 January 1941, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁶⁶ ‘Notizie varie dalla capitale, Promemoria per il Duce’, 19 January 1941, Busta 164, CCRR (relazioni giornaliere e mensili sull’ordine pubblico nelle varie province e relazioni sullo spirito delle truppe), Carteggio riservato, SPD, ACS.

OVRA report from Turin dated 21 December 1940 hinted that, at least in some regions, the Italian people had accepted the official explanation of the defeats:

The difficulties met in Greece, Egypt, the Mediterranean and other theatres are essentially attributed to the fact that Great Britain has focused against Italy all its available forces, coming from all sides of the world, supported by an extremely advanced armament.⁶⁶⁷

Another report, this time from the south of Italy, dated to 24 December, went further:

The initial enemy success, that in a first moment had caused some criticism [...] against our Command, is now considered, after Marshal Graziani's report to the *Duce*, the inevitable effect of the crushing superiority of the enemy's technical means, which overcame our troops' heroic resistance.⁶⁶⁸

This new realisation of British technological superiority (the publication of Graziani's report to Mussolini was *the* key moment triggering this), was never to disappear during the conflict. However, it was compatible with the regime's ethos of spirit versus matter and helped public opinion to cope with defeat; furthermore, anger against the British for their stubbornness in prolonging the war, with the sole goal of preserving their privileges, contributed to the resistance of public morale to avoiding collapse.⁶⁶⁹ Likewise among the soldiers, the catastrophic defeat in Cyrenaica changed the perception of their now seemingly victorious enemy. During Operation Compass in winter 1940-41, the officers complained about the inadequacy of their materials. At the same time, the humiliation at having to ask for German help was weakened by the belief, present in both Fascist discourse and among civilian public opinion, that Italy had for months been bearing the

⁶⁶⁷ P. Vercelli, L'ispettore di P.S. di zona (1° Zona), Relazione circa situazione politica, 21 December 1940, Busta 1, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁶⁸ L'Ispettore Generale di P.S., Dott. Giuseppe Console al Capo della Polizia, 3° zona, Puglia e provincia di Matera, Condizioni dello spirito pubblico in relazione agli eventi in corso, 24 dicembre 1940, Busta 1, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁶⁹ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 349.

whole weight of the war.⁶⁷⁰ Still in February 1941, one report from Milan stated that ‘trust in Graziani is absolutely not shaken, and expects that he will stop the English’s mercenary hordes.’⁶⁷¹ The report was clearly exceedingly optimistic but hints at one underlining truth: the state of public opinion was not yet completely pessimistic.

Then, the German intervention in the Balkans and in North Africa gave respite to the Italian armed forces – and likewise to Italian public opinion. As one report from Milan underlined, ‘the quick advance of the Italian-German troops in Cyrenaica had an enormous impression. In one week, the morale of the people rose to the highest levels, turning into real enthusiasm.’⁶⁷² One of the effects of the Axis victories in spring 1941, which culminated in the expulsion of British forces from continental Europe and the reoccupation of Cyrenaica, was to once again change the image of the British in Italy.

‘The majority of the people’, the report from Milan stated

are more convinced than ever that the valour of our soldiers, now protected by means at least equivalent to the English ones and craving revenge, will not stop anytime soon. It is thought that after having freed Cyrenaica the Axis forces will, after a short stop, launch themselves [in] the conquest of Egypt. Hence, the news that numerous English generals have been captured caused amazement, for it shows at what phenomenal speed the occupation happened. It is also remarked that Italian generals are rarely captured, that they always defend themselves and often fall at the head of their troops.⁶⁷³

The victories ‘boosted morale and led to a new certainty regarding the desperate conditions facing Britain.’ The same miners, who had fantasised about leaving their work

⁶⁷⁰ Impressioni e commenti di carattere generale, Relazione sullo spirito delle truppe, promemoria per il Duce, 1 February 1941, Busta 164, Bollettini e informazioni 1940-1943, CCCR, Carteggio riservato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, ACS, and Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, p. 229.

⁶⁷¹ No title, Milan, 1 February 1941, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁷² No title, Milan, 12 April 1941, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*

place to go and fight the British, ‘show[ed] real enthusiasm, [and dreamt] that in a few days we [Italians] would arrive to hit England in Egypt.’⁶⁷⁴ A report dating from April 1941 stated that the public thought ‘England will shortly be eliminated from South-Eastern Europe, that the [British] resistance in Egypt will be worn out, and that new developments might shortly appear, such that the conflict might be over before long.’⁶⁷⁵

Another report stated that

the Germanic intervention in the Mediterranean [...] helped dissolving worries over the outcome of the struggle which had [been] born in the hearts of the craven, especially after the recent behaviour of the United States [in support of] the faltering British Empire.⁶⁷⁶

Such an optimistic attitude was confirmed by another report from Vercelli, which underlined how

a great part of public opinion, in consideration of the events which are engulfing the British Empire, has given up the notion that the invasion of the British island [*sic*] is the prerequisite for the victory of the Axis. It instead believes that only in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic is it possible to establish the premises of the island’s capitulation, for the German air offensive, however formidable and lethal, has proven to be, for now, insufficient [...] In some circles [it is believed] that the new strategic situation determined by the occupation of Crete might cause the exodus of the English fleet from the Mediterranean.⁶⁷⁷

One report on the general mood of the public opinion in the peninsula (directed to Mussolini) stated that

in many circles, the impression that the conditions of England are at least serious and that its capability of resistance exclusively depends on the

⁶⁷⁴ 6° Zona OVRA, Cagliari, 7 April 1941, busta-fascicolo 2, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁷⁵ ‘Promemoria per il Duce’, 22 April 1941, Busta 165, CCRR Relazioni ordine pubblico e spirito delle truppe Aprile 1941, Bollettini e informazioni 1940-43, Carteggio Riservato, SPD (1922-1945), ACS.

⁶⁷⁶ Il Questore Lippolis, Relazione sulla situazione politico-economica della Provincia di Ancona (Gennaio-Febbraio-Marzo 1941), 2 March 1941, Regia Questura di Ancona, Busta/fascicolo 220, Fascicoli per materia 1936-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1936-1945, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1914-1936, ACS.

⁶⁷⁷ Ispettore di P.S. della zona P. Vercelli, Relazione circa la situazione politica, 1° Zona OVRA, Turin, 8 June 1941, busta-fascicolo 3, Segreteria Capo della polizia, 1940-1943, Relazioni settimanali sullo spirito pubblico, 1° Zona OVRA, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, M.I., ACS.

help it can receive from the United States is spreading. As a consequence, the comments of the public increasingly focus on [the United States].⁶⁷⁸

The same document reported that certain circles were critical of the excessively triumphal tones with which the Italian press had treated recent victories. What does that tell us of the state of public opinion? Of course, Britain's prospects after the defeats in the Balkans and in Africa were indeed dire and having needed German help was perceived as a humiliation.⁶⁷⁹ However, there existed a trend within public opinion of being excessively dismissive of Britain's prospects of enduring, to the point that it was even portrayed as a *minor player* in the Mediterranean, completely eclipsed by the United States, already in spring 1941. Another report stated that if the people of Milan believed the war would continue for a long time, it was not because 'of the English resistance, that even if furious would not be able to continue for long, but rather [because of] the American intervention.'⁶⁸⁰ This seems to confirm that the excessive optimism and dismissiveness of Britain that we can find in the same Fascist press, though condemned by some, had conditioned at least some Italians.

The following months were characterised by a general stasis despite violent battles in the desert. Excessive optimism diminished, but reports on public opinion suggest that few doubted a final victory. In June 1941, a few days before a British offensive in North Africa and the German invasion of the Soviet Union, a report directed to the Chief of Police from Abruzzo described the public mood as positive: many believed that though England, supported by the United States, could still resist for a long time, final victory was

⁶⁷⁸ 'Condizioni dell'ordine e della sicurezza pubblica, Mese di maggio 1941', Promemoria per il Duce, CRR Relazioni ordine pubblico e spirito delle truppe Aprile 1941, busta 166, Bollettini e informazioni 1940-43, Carteggio Riservato, SPD (1922-1945), ACS.

⁶⁷⁹ Colarizi, *L'Opinione degli italiani sotto al regime*, pp. 350-1.

⁶⁸⁰ No title, Milan, 14 May 1941, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

certain.⁶⁸¹ Another report on the state of public opinion in the country, drafted in November 1941 and sent to Mussolini, stated the same: public opinion assumed that British resources, thanks to the United States' support, were still remarkable. However, it was also believed that eventual victory was certain, especially after the 'British failure in the first phase of the battle in Marmarica.'⁶⁸²

The German defeat at the gates of Moscow in December 1941, as well as the second British conquest of Cyrenaica, caused a new wave of pessimism, described to Mussolini in a report written in December 1941.⁶⁸³ The Japanese intervention, so much celebrated by the press, did not particularly help the public mood, since it was a common opinion that the British would focus their resources in the western theatre, even if that meant losing their Asian possessions. Likewise, 'it is noticed that England manages *-more solito-* to make the Australians, Chinese and Dutch fight for her, with the obvious advantage of maintaining, more or less unchanged, their military efficiency in Europe and Africa.'⁶⁸⁴ The notion that the British way was to have others fight in their stead, often repeated in Fascist publications, appears in other reports as well. One of these, dating from winter 1941, reported that 'England, always generous with promises, is far from effectively intervening in Russia's favour, instead, taking advantage of the mortal struggle that [Russia] fights, it finds the necessary time to increase their war production

⁶⁸¹ Oggetto: spirito pubblico. Relazione settimanale, Avezzano, 4° zona, 11 June 1941, Busta 3, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁸² *Promemoria per il Duce mese di Novembre 1941*, 14 December 1941[sic], Busta 169, Bollettini ed informazioni 1940-1943, SPD, ACS.

⁶⁸³ Condizioni dell'ordine e della sicurezza pubblica, Mese di dicembre 1941, Busta 169, Bollettini ed informazioni 1940-1943, SPD, ACS.

⁶⁸⁴ Spirito pubblico nella Provincia di Bologna – relazione settimanale, 24 December 1941, Busta 1, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS. As one Fascist observer reported, 'it is [the] opinion of the majority that what happens in the Far East regards Japan.' Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra*, p. 227.

and complete its rearmament.⁶⁸⁵ Since victory had not come after the triumphs of spring, and the British were instead often on the offensive, the Italian people had seemingly accepted the fact that their enemy was unlikely to be defeated anytime soon. One report dating from 17 December mentioned that ‘the abundance of men and materials deployed by the enemy in the North African theatre brings to mind, with anguish, the hard tests that for perhaps a long time our troops will have to face.’⁶⁸⁶ And yet, both in Africa and Russia, the spring of 1942 brought new successes for the Axis forces: the Wehrmacht started a new offensive penetrating deeply in southern Russia, and the German and Italian forces in North Africa did not stop the British march west, but managed to drive the British out of Cyrenaica and eventually threaten Egypt itself. Colarizi argues that there was ‘no enthusiasm’ for the victories against the British in 1942, the common perception being that it was, by then, too late.⁶⁸⁷

An analysis of the sources suggests a more nuanced picture: while some reports did indeed suggest that ‘it was too late,’ and that public enthusiasm for the victories was generally more cautious than before, the successes caused another rise in the public mood, with a renewed hope in the final victory. One August 1942 report from Naples, written at the time of the lowest British fortunes in the war, mentioned the hope that ‘these hits, dealt everywhere against British power, manage to weaken it and, in the end, to exhaust it,’ while at the same time Indian agitation against their colonial masters was given a certain amount of attention.⁶⁸⁸ Another report, this time from Trieste, underlined how

⁶⁸⁵ Spirito pubblico nella Provincia di Bologna, 28 October 1941, Busta 5, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁸⁶ Spirito pubblico nella Provincia di Bologna – relazione settimanale, 17 December 1941, Busta 1, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁸⁷ Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto al regime*, p. 383.

⁶⁸⁸ Spirito pubblico, relazione settimanale, Napoli, 12 August 1942, Busta 7, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

public opinion was mesmerised by the Axis victories and that ‘while they are not enough to push the enemy down the way of defeat yet, it is however believed that they deeply hit the Anglo-Saxon resources and give the absolute trust in the fateful, just victory.’⁶⁸⁹ Another report from Trieste mentioned how widespread hope was that the fragile situation of Britain in North Africa and Malta could be exploited by the Axis forces to completely expel the British from the Mediterranean, while the aerial-naval victories in the Mediterranean and the consequent ‘British humiliations’ were welcomed with ‘lively satisfaction.’⁶⁹⁰ Commenting on the failed British raid on Dieppe, France, one report mentioned that the people of Bologna, while relieved by the German success, believed that Great Britain and the United States, with their great abundance of means, would surely attempt again to land on the continent.⁶⁹¹ By September 1942, in the Cagliari province the public knew anything *Radio Londra* had said, while its broadcasts ‘were discussed and often commented [upon] favourably.’⁶⁹² A similar feeling was common among the soldiers in Africa: after the victories in spring-summer 1942, the morale rose again and the censorship reported a widespread belief in final victory. Some soldiers still talked of the inevitability of Fascist victory due to the spiritual weakness of the British; one stated that one British tank would be worth ten times more if led by Italians, but the scornful comments of the summer of 1940 were, overall, gone.⁶⁹³ However, a bitter tone

⁶⁸⁹ Spirito pubblico, relazione settimanale, Trieste, 12 August 1942, and Relazioni settimanali sulle condizioni dello spirito pubblico, 20 August 1942, busta 7, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁹⁰ Condizioni dello spirito pubblico della provincia di Bologna, 19 August 1942, busta 7, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁹¹ Condizione dello spirito pubblico nella provincia di Roma, 20 August 1942, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁹² Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, Cagliari, 28 September 1942, busta 7, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁶⁹³ Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, pp. 74-6.

of contempt against the enemy is evident in the reports of the censorship, as well as in many individual letters all through the North African campaign. The triumphant tones of the press were echoed by many letters celebrating the expected victory against the hated British enemy.⁶⁹⁴ The collapse of the propaganda effort in the following period of stalemate and then defeat was caused by the increasingly unsustainable gap between propaganda and reality. One report drafted at the end of July 1942 stated that the population of Bolzano ‘deplored that our press persists in minimizing and ridiculing the attitude to war of America and England.’⁶⁹⁵ With the defeat at Egypt’s El Alamein, belief in the final victory was over once and for all, and after the loss of Africa in 1943 only a ‘small core of irreducible military men’ still believed victory was possible.⁶⁹⁶

The question of anti-British hatred

As we have seen, there was precious little sympathy for the British before Mussolini decided to join the war and, in the last months of Italy’s non-belligerence, the public mood became distinctly opposed to Britain. Did this antipathy turn into hatred during the conflict? While somehow naïve, regime-organised campaigns like the distribution of ‘Goddamn the English’ badges met with a very lukewarm reception among the people, as mentioned above, many Italians felt frustrated by Britain’s stubbornness which prolonged a war they were tired of fighting.⁶⁹⁷ The defeats inflicted by the British and the first bombings did little to improve the image of the British among the Italian people and, by winter 1940, people were generally more convinced that Britain had caused the war

⁶⁹⁴ Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, pp. 79-88.

⁶⁹⁵ Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra*, p. 250.

⁶⁹⁶ Avagliano, Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, p. 262.

⁶⁹⁷ Riservata Assicurata, Bologna 5 November 1941, busta-fascicolo 7, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

than they had been in 1939.⁶⁹⁸ Certainly, this hatred was by no means universal and it had class connotations. Indeed, when investigating the degree to which Italians hated the British, it is also important to remember the aforementioned class divide. Colarizi commented that, during the war, the middle class was Anglophile and pro-American.⁶⁹⁹ Mussolini himself believed that the bourgeoisie considered Britain ‘the ideal of any State and also of any educated individual.’⁷⁰⁰ One report from Milan stated that ‘in the popular classes, perhaps more than in the wealthy ones, the feeling of the sanctity of this war grows, due to give to Europe a better tomorrow with the tearing down of the British and democratic plutocracy.’⁷⁰¹ On a similar note, one report from Cagliari written in June 1941 remarked how the ‘bourgeois classes’ did not really feel anti-British hatred.⁷⁰² Another Sardinian report underlined how, in industrial and commercial circles, ‘nobody hates the English.’ The report hinted that the same people were even starting to doubt the *Duce* and were fertile ground for anti-Fascist propaganda, especially coming from Sardinian autonomists like the exile Emilio Lussu. Interestingly enough, the author of the report linked anti-Fascist tendencies like listening to *Radio Londra* with the, in his opinion, unnecessarily high number of educated people on the island.⁷⁰³ However, another report seemed to confirm that anti-British feeling was more widespread among the Sardinian lower classes:

⁶⁹⁸ ‘Everyone’ thought Britain had caused the war, a report by OVRA stated. See: Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra*, p. 139.

⁶⁹⁹ Colarizi, *L’opinione degli italiani sotto al regime*, p. 365.

⁷⁰⁰ Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia segreta Fascista*, p. 134.

⁷⁰¹ No title, Milan, 9 November 1940, busta/fascicolo 236, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷⁰² Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, 6° Zona OVRA, Cagliari, 9 June 1941, busta-fascicolo 3, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷⁰³ Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, 6° Zona OVRA, Cagliari, 3 February 1941, busta-fascicolo 3, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

[The workers] are calm and disciplined. They give an example of patriotism and show understanding of the political moment [...] Our men overheard (during the transmission of war bulletins) that some minors attacked with rough words the British Empire, and declared to be ready to give up their job to join the army.⁷⁰⁴

A June 1941 report from Turin reached the same conclusions: unlike the ‘working masses,’ it was the ‘intellectual bourgeois masses’ that were more sceptical: they kept pouring cold water on the optimism of the workers, reminding them that the British still had fight left in them, and that it would take years to completely defeat them. These ‘anti-Fascists’ also believed that even an Axis victory would be a German victory, and that German imperialism was as dangerous as the Anglo-Saxon variety.⁷⁰⁵

Anglophobia appears, however, overwhelming in the letters coming from soldiers fighting on the Greek front, confirming that the Fascist discourse had been, in this regard, successful in influencing public opinion among the ranks. In the minds of these soldiers, the enemy was the British rather than the Greeks.⁷⁰⁶ This does not mean that the feelings were univocal. The soldiers’ correspondence shows a minority of pro-British feelings, usually linked with an anti-Fascist message. In March 1941 a report from the *Questore* of Genoa stated that, despite the recent bombing, the population generally lacked the feeling of hatred for the British that was to be logically expected. The citizens of Genoa, the report continued, believed that the British could have completely destroyed the city, had they wanted to do so, and had instead only attacked military targets. At the same time, the general feeling was that the regime’s boasts of control of the Mediterranean were

⁷⁰⁴ Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, 6° Zona OVRA, Cagliari, 31 March 1941, busta-fascicolo 3, Relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷⁰⁵ Rapporto settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, Zona OVRA 1, Turin, 1 June 1941, busta-fascicolo 3, Segreteria Capo della polizia, 1940-1943, Relazioni settimanali sullo spirito pubblico, 1° Zona OVRA, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, M.I., ACS.

⁷⁰⁶ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 360.

hollow.⁷⁰⁷ Genoa was a city of known anti-Fascist attitudes, as well as the first to begin the anti-Fascist and anti-German insurrection at the end of the war. It is also possible to find personal correspondence mocking the official propaganda's claims that Britain was behind all of Italy's evils, while one Fascist commentator mentioned in a Navy report that in Sicily 'some felt that Sicilians could not be anti-English.'⁷⁰⁸ These feelings of sympathy for the British were to increase in the following phase of stalemate and then defeat in Africa and by the unbearable hatred the Italian people felt for the Germans. As an informer from Florence mentioned in a 30 August 1942 report, there was a growing sympathy for the Americans, British and even the Russians, which increased together with the hostility for the Germans.⁷⁰⁹ On the same note, one report from Sardinia stated in 1942 that the growing hostility against the regime and hatred for the Germans meant that 'large sectors of the population would not be opposed to a British invasion of the island.'⁷¹⁰

By the time of the loss of Tunisia in spring 1943, it was clear to almost everyone that the war was lost. If the traditional anti-British message was losing its effectiveness - and there is some evidence of a growth of pro-Allied sentiment during the last phases of the African campaign - another important development was due to ensure that anti-British hatred would return with a vengeance during the last months of the Fascist war: the escalation of bombing. If belief in victory was rare by that point, the regime's orders to the press about 'hatred against the barbarians' were strongly echoed by many Italians.⁷¹¹ One

⁷⁰⁷ Sentimento pubblico, Genoa, 17 March 1941, 29 December 1939, busta/fascicolo 232, Fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione Polizia Politica (1926-1945), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (1981-1961), Min. Int. 1814-1986.

⁷⁰⁸ Avagliano and Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, pp. 87-8.

⁷⁰⁹ Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra*, p. 249.

⁷¹⁰ L'ispettore generale di P.S., Fabi, Situazione politica, 17 November 1942, busta 8, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷¹¹ Avagliano and Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, p. 265.

November 1942 report from Milan noticed ‘the population’s deep, ever-growing hatred [of] such barbarous ways to wage war which [...] have been inaugurated by the English.’⁷¹² Another report from Apulia and the province of Matera dated to the same month stated that ‘the horror caused by the numerous victims among the civilian population is made more hateful by the cynical pleasure shown by the English press as well political personalities for the results obtained with such inhumane acts against open cities.’⁷¹³ The hatred people from Sardinia and Sicily felt for the enemy, another report underlined, was exacerbated by the choice to bomb objectives of no military value.⁷¹⁴ One report from Trapani stated that the hatred against the enemy was fierce and increasing because of the ‘bestial bombings’ of civilians.⁷¹⁵ The English were also ‘making a deep impression’ among the common people because of their reported ‘treatment of war prisoners [...] their repeated actions against hospital ships, hospital planes and hospitals.’⁷¹⁶ The ‘particular impression’ made by the news of how the British mistreated the Italian prisoners was also reported in December.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹² No title, Milan, 20 November 1942, busta/fascicolo 238, fascicoli per materia 1926-1944, Divisione polizia politica (1926-1945), Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza (1861-1981), Min. Int. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷¹³ Condizioni dello spirito pubblico in relazione agli avvenimenti in corso. Puglia e provincia di Matera. 28 October 1942, Busta 8, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷¹⁴ Relazione situazione politica ed economica alla data del 30 giugno, 24 June 1943, Busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷¹⁵ Situazione politico-economica della provincia di Trapani dal 1 maggio al 30 giugno 1943, 27 June 1943, Regia Questura di Trapani, Busta 12 Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷¹⁶ Puglia e provincia di Matera, Condizioni dello spirito pubblico in relazione agli eventi in corso, 14 October 1942, busta 8, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷¹⁷ Condizioni dello spirito pubblico, 11 December 1942, Busta 9, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

One report from Pola mentions that the people showed distress for the loss of Libya, but kept calm and disciplined, ‘curs[ing] the barbarism of the Anglo-Saxons.’⁷¹⁸ The Allies’ insistence on the Axis powers surrendering without conditions also had a negative impression on the Italian people.⁷¹⁹ A revival of patriotic feeling as a consequence of the bombings arose ‘in the souls in front of the persisting work of destruction unleashed by the enemy on the Italian cities.’⁷²⁰ Many reports underlined the same general feeling: ‘the vicious enemy incursions against some centres of northern Italy have caused lively indignation and deep hatred against England and America.’⁷²¹ As usual, the reports from Sardinia were more pessimistic: one report from Cagliari mentioned that ‘hatred for England has not increased in the bourgeois classes’ and that ‘the hatred against the English doesn’t conquer the souls of the majority.’⁷²² However, a report from Foggia underlined that ‘the criminal actions of the Anglo-American airmen and of the inhumane treatment inflicted [on] our prisoners intensifies the hatred against the enemy [among] all classes.’⁷²³ Similarly, a report from Frosinone stated that ‘the brutal incursions on

⁷¹⁸ No date, relazione situazione politica, Pola, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷¹⁹ *Relazione sulla situazione politica ed economica della provincia di Bologna*, 24 June 1943, Busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷²⁰ *Relazione sulla situazione politico-economica della provincia di Trento- bimester Maggio-giugno 1943*, 25 June 1943, busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷²¹ *Spirito pubblico-relazione settimanale*, Questura di Bari, 28 October 1942, busta 8, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷²² *Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico*, Cagliari, 1 December 1942, and *Situazione politica*, 19 December 1942, Busta 9, relazioni questori ed ispettori delle zone OVRA, 1940-1943, Segreteria Capo della Polizia (1923-1945) Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza 1861-1981, M.I. 1814-1986, ACS.

⁷²³ *Relazione sulla situazione politico-economica della provincia di Foggia*, alla data del 25 giugno 1943-con particolare riferimento alla ripercussione degli eventi bellici sullo spirito pubblico, 25 June 1943, busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, M.I., ACS.

inhabited centres, on women and children has intensified the hatred against the vile aggressors.⁷²⁴

One Fascist observer who commented on the public feeling in Catanzaro could therefore conclude that

our propaganda on the barbarism of the enemy bombings and on the inhuman treatment of our war prisoners proved effective. What is told by the families and friends of those who come back from the front and captivity intensifies the feeling of hatred for the enemy⁷²⁵

Pietro Cavallo underlined that, by the end of the Italian war effort, the attitude of the Italian people towards the British was changing: anti-British hostility was overshadowed by the desire to see the war end. At the same time, however, the number of attacks against Britain in Italians' correspondence increased. Most Italians were tired of the war, but hated the British as much as ever, if not more.⁷²⁶ This conclusion is shared by Avagliano and Palmieri, who wrote that

Anglo-phobia is not a feeling restricted [to] the early phase of the war, carried by the enthusiasms and ambitions of a quick victory against the English, considered weak and militarily inferior, but it left traces even after the defeats and many months spent at the front.⁷²⁷

Via an in-depth analysis of sources not analysed by Avagliano and Palmieri, this chapter confirms these conclusions.

⁷²⁴ Relazione sulla situazione politico-economica della provincia di Frosinone relativa al bimestre maggio-giugno 1943, 24 June 1943, busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷²⁵ Relazione sulla situazione politica ed economica della provincia di Catanzaro, bimestre Maggio-giugno 1943, 25 June 1943, busta 12, Relazioni questori ed ispettori zone OVRA 1940-43, SCP 1940-43, M.I., Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, ACS.

⁷²⁶ Cavallo, *Italiani in Guerra*, p. 166.

⁷²⁷ Avagliano and Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo!*, p. 84.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Italian perception of British foreign policy in the first chapter shows that, by 1935, Anglophobia was hardly something new for Italian public opinion. At the same time, historians have sustained that Fascism failed in generating sufficient anti-British sentiment to mobilise the country, both before and after the conflict, against what Mussolini perceived as the greatest enemy of Italian goals. This chapter's findings do not contradict this picture, but allow us to conclude that reality was more nuanced. Just as the Italian people were not transformed into a race of masters and conquerors as envisioned by Mussolini, it was also not uniformly pervaded by hatred of the enemy and Britain in particular. However, an analysis of the sources leads to the conclusion that anti-British Fascist discourse was at least partially successful in framing the image of Britain in Italian public opinion. If Anglophobia at the time of the Ethiopian War was surprisingly intense, the Italian people's reluctance to enter a new conflict in 1939 was hardly caused by sympathy for Britain; there is instead evidence that, despite the furious anti-French campaigns Mussolini desired, France was by far the least disliked of the two western powers. Colarizi maintains that the Italian people's anti-Allied outburst in May-June 1940 was due to mere opportunism - the Italians hurriedly despicted themselves as warriors, and implored the *Duce*, to join the Germans in a war which they did not believe they would have to fight. The virulent Anglophobic attitude adopted by many Italians at the time of the German victories in France was certainly partially caused by reasons of opportunity and fear of Germany, as Colarizi observed, but they were also well prepared by the previous Fascist discourse. This discourse could not create an overwhelmingly anti-British mood before or after the German invasion of Poland, but, as analysed above, anti-British feelings had been widespread, if not majoritarian, during the period of non-belligerence. Indeed, propaganda had paved the way for the steady increase of anti-British

sentiments which developed during spring 1940. Despite the scarce enthusiasm with which many Italians reacted to the beginning of the war, the reports show a picture of an Italian people mostly aligned with the Fascist discourse described in previous chapters. Britain was seen as a decaying and unwarlike nation, weakened by its own luxuries and unlikely to resist the Fascist assault. At the same time, many of the old tropes about the rapacious, egoistic Albion which had emerged again and again during the Great War, at the time of Versailles, the Corfu incident and the Ethiopian crisis, once again found traction.

The fact that, in the following months, the Germans had not broken Britain's resistance and the Italian forces had not swept the British out of the Mediterranean was made more frustrating for the Italian people by the unrestrained optimism of the regime's propaganda. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the regime realised this and changed its discourse. While the public mood was certainly disappointed by the lack of progress (even if momentarily galvanised by Italian advances in Libya and East Africa) and then shocked by the defeats in winter, Fascist discourse proved capable enough of adapting to ensure its narrative was generally accepted by Italians. The war was no long a short and easy walk, but victory was not impossible in the long run; the British were indeed strong, but their successes depended on their superiority in numbers and arms and on the employment of other, vassal peoples. The German victories in spring 1941 gave a meaningful boost to morale, and by that point many Italians were again convinced that the British Empire was about to crumble. The uncertain progress of military operations in the second phase led to a new depression of the public spirit, but the fear was of a long war, not of defeat. Public reaction to the victories in spring-summer 1942 show a late and momentary, but quite clear proof, that hopes of defeating the British were still alive in the third year of Italian war, and that the Fascist discourse forged, or reflected, the opinions of many. With the eventual defeat

in Africa, propaganda about a future victory became untenable and the regime shifted to other themes, such as the attempt to boost hatred against the enemy's brutal bombings. The reports show that the regime's propaganda definitely reflected popular opinion and that it did contribute to shaping it.

As far as 'hatred' of the enemy is concerned, the widespread hostility witnessed during the Great War and between the peace treaties, as well as during the Corfu incident, was masterfully resurrected by the regime at the time of the Ethiopian War. This never disappeared during the following years. Fear of the war and the obvious reality of German aggression led many Italians to blame the loathed Germans, rather than the British, for the catastrophe of 1939. However, the sympathy often felt for France and the other victims of the Reich was completely absent with regard to Britain. After the fall of France, it seems that the main feelings concerning Britain were annoyance at British stubbornness and reluctance to accept their defeat (which many linked to egoism and pride - both on the backs and blood of London's allies), and the desire to finish the war as soon as possible with a decisive victory. The following British resistance against the loathed Germans was admired by many Italians, and the British victories against the Italian armed forces caused a surge in scepticism regarding Fascist propaganda. Hence, many started to doubt the image of the enemy as depicted by such propaganda.

Fascist anti-British discourse, it can be concluded, managed to retrieve the existing grains of Anglophobia and introduced them into an ideological framework made up of traditional grievances and prejudices and a new philosophy of history. Considering the oscillations of Fascist foreign policy in its relationship with Britain, it is not surprising that the effect of the message was not 'totalitarian.' Nor does this chapter aim to demonstrate that the Italian people were united in wishing a war of aggression against Britain or that, after the war started, they were united behind the regime because of its

anti-British hatred. In fact, between winter 1940-41 and late 1942, the Fascist authorities were often unsatisfied with the lack of popular animosity towards the British. However, grains of anti-British hostility remained consistent throughout the length of the conflict, peaking during the last phase of the Fascist war when Allied air raids ravaged almost every Italian city. This is not disproven by the quick collapse of Italian resistance when the country was invaded.

The better opinion of Britain's American ally; the fear of a victorious enemy; the knowledge of the futility of the struggle and the desire to see the war finally over; the hostility against the Germans (at all times greater than the one against the British); the grievous material conditions in which the Italian people lived by that point; and the disillusion and hatred for the regime that had led the country to this position: all these factors meant that the Italian people did not want to keep fighting an enemy many of them did indeed hate.

Conclusion

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
are full of passionate intensity.*⁷²⁸

*I always thought, looking at them, of the wild beasts in the zoos.*⁷²⁹

In a way, Italy's entrance into the Great War alongside Britain lay at the heart of the subsequent hostility between the two countries. As this thesis has underlined, the strain on public morale caused by the immense bloodshed of 1915-1918 led some Italians to believe that the war had been caused by and fought for interests foreign to those of Italy. This belief was fuelled by German propaganda before and during the Great War. The treatment Italy received during the peace treaty negotiations allowed this resentment to fester and grow exponentially: by the time of D'Annunzio's coup in Fiume, Britain was unpopular in the country and abuse of British citizens in Italy was not unheard of. As seen in Chapter 1, the short-lived Fiume Republic, which worried the Italian government but excited many Italians, was distinctly anti-British and supported the struggle of the colonised peoples against 'Anglo-Saxon' imperialism. During the Great War Mussolini, as an ardent supporter of the Allied cause, had fervently denied accusations against London and repeatedly praised the British war effort. However, his enthusiasm for Britain did not stem from an appraisal of British liberalism. Apart from the generous support he received from the British in exchange for his activity, Mussolini's stance was connected with his belief that Italian patriotism was less pronounced than that of the British. It was hence a useful example to point to Italian *disfattisti* (people who allegedly hoped Italy would lose the war). As anti-British feeling increased, and after Britain had made it clear it would not support Rome's post-war ambitions, Mussolini shifted his own position

⁷²⁸ W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919.

⁷²⁹ Lucio Filippi, 'Questi inglesi', *Meridiano d'Italia*, 19 February 1950.

towards Anglophobia. The new-born Fascist movement soon adopted all of Fiume's anti-British tropes, to the point of threatening hostile actions against the British Empire in the Mediterranean. After the March on Rome and the Fascist takeover of the Italian state, Mussolini reassured the British by making it clear that his inflamed rhetoric was nothing more than propaganda. However, the rabid anti-British reactions from both the Fascist and non-Fascist press at the time of the Corfu incident in 1923 underlined how Anglophobia had certainly not disappeared from Italy's public domain. Whatever the reasons for the following era of good relations between Fascist Italy and Britain, the general lack of friction between the two countries' foreign policies led to the development of a relatively diverse discourse regarding the British Empire within the country. Open hostility virtually disappeared, to be replaced by a more sophisticated attempt to understand the state of the Empire. Bitter Anglophobic critics like Virginio Gayda believed that the British Empire's decline would open new spaces for Fascist Italy's expansion. Other commentators, who generally valued a more traditional approach to foreign and internal policy or were particularly invested with European and white supremacy, feared that British decline augured a terrible blow for the prestige of the white race and the resistance against Soviet communism, which at the time was led by London. While this dichotomy underlined deep differences within Fascist public discourse, most agreed that the British Empire had indeed become weaker. The reason for this perception was to be found both in the difficulties the British were experiencing in their colonial empire and in a much deeper, widespread analysis of British society by Fascist commentators.

In the years immediately after the end of the Great War, few Italians would have described British society as decadent. Britain had been and still was the liberal country *par excellence* and enjoyed widespread admiration among Italian liberals as an example of

stability and patriotism. Even the Fascists, who had spared no criticism for British foreign policy, were reluctant to attack the former ally's domestic system. However, the image of strength Britain enjoyed after its victory in the war began to falter in the following years. The 1926 general strike in particular convinced many Fascists that all the threats the Fascist regime had vanquished after its seizure of power were still rampant in Britain, and that this was true because the British political system was backward and inefficient. Freedom of the press was at first almost apologetically explained by Fascist commentators as something that Italy, unlike Britain, could not afford because of the lack of political maturity of its citizens. Its repression however, soon became a perfect example of why the Fascist regime was the path forward: the will and ability to enforce discipline over an undisciplined people in order to educate them. During the 1920s, Fascist public discourse increasingly reflected the opinion that British liberalism was not just an outdated system, but also one fated to be replaced, sooner or later, by a British version of Fascism. This process increased, as Chapter 2 highlights, together with the strengthening of the Fascist regime and while Mussolini's totalitarian aspirations took form. Mussolini's initial support of the British Fascists was also connected with this belief, as was the massive propaganda effort the Fascist regime pursued in Britain itself. As the conviction, or hope masquerading as such, of a future Fascist Britain faded together with Oswald Mosley's political standing, Mussolini realised that Fascism was unlikely, through peaceful means, to become Europe's dominant doctrine. Hitler's challenge to the European order presented the *Duce* with an apparently more convenient opportunity to exploit the ensuing chaos to pursue Italy's foreign policy goals. As the direct confrontation with Britain over Ethiopia developed, the country was presented as hopelessly misguided in its foreign policy and framed as an enemy to Italian's rightful aspirations.

Weakened as an international player, with an outdated domestic system and unable to discipline its people, the Britain of Fascist commentators was not the military power it had been. The ever-growing perception of a weak, almost disarmed Britain can be detected not only in the Italian press of the 1930s, but also in the words of the military and political elites, as well as of military experts like the military attachés in London. The worsening of relations between the two countries, beginning with the Ethiopian War, contributed to the idea that Fascist Italy's primacy was not only moral and political but also had military implications. As (misplaced) trust in Italian military might increase with victory in the wars in Ethiopia and Spain, the actual issues experienced at the time by the British Army were overrated, to the point that 'totalitarian' conclusions on the British people's will to fight were drawn. The problem also lay in Fascist philosophy; the huge material disparity between the British Empire and Fascist Italy did not count that much if, as the Fascists believed, it was spirit rather than matter which was the motor of history. As the Ethiopian crisis developed, anti-British propaganda hammered the Italian people and had some success in awakening an Anglophobic sentiment the tropes of which, as we have seen, had their roots in the events of previous decades. The subsequent period saw successive moments of tension and attempts at rapprochement. Whether Mussolini was sincere in the latter or not, public discourse had, by 1938 - when the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement was signed - gone down the path of framing Britain as the opposite of everything Fascist Italy represented. The British lifestyle was associated with the bourgeoisie, the object of so many of Mussolini's campaigns to Fascistise society. The attacks became even more thorough. A radical criticism of British imperialism appeared in some of the most prestigious Fascist publications during the second half of the 1930s. In variance to what Margherita Sarfatti had once written in *Gerarchia* in the early 1920s, the British colonial character had nothing to do with that of the ancient

Romans. Whereas Roman imperialism was based on law and eternal institutions, Fascist commentators claimed, the British Empire was simply an instrument of exploitation and plunder. It was during those years that the association between Britain and Carthage became commonplace. As the criticism expanded from the British social and political system into a civilisation-wide one, Anglican religion was added to the list of British flaws. In a move which conveniently elected Fascist Italy as the leader of the Catholic struggle against Protestantism in Africa and the Levant, Anglicanism was now associated with an alleged lack of moral rigour and a philistine British mindset.

These years of anti-British public discourse did have a meaningful effect on Italian public opinion. While most Italians were quite happy with keeping out of the Second World War when it began in September 1939, this was due more to an almost universal loathing of the Germans and to the memory of the terrible toll of the Great War than to any sympathy for the British. Indeed, Fascist reports on public opinion show that, if many Italians had some sympathy for the French, that was far less true for the British. The widespread enthusiasm for war and loathing for the Allies in summer 1940, which accompanied the declaration of war, was hence not just an extemporaneous outburst caused simply by greed for plunder and fear of the Germans. Its origins can be traced to the very genesis of the Fascist regime and even before that, in the trenches of the Great War. Many Italians still felt resentment for the perceived treatment Italy had received from Britain and accepted many of the tropes presenting London as a plutocratic, exploitative power as true. The depiction of Britain as a nation unwilling to fight had also worked. If so many Italians felt that it was safe to enter the war alongside Germany, it was not only because of the perceived strength of their ally, but because German victories had validated a propaganda narrative which dated back to the Ethiopian War.

This hostility never completely disappeared. As the regime's prestige vanished in a humiliatingly-ineffective war effort, subordinate to that of Germany, many of the stereotypes about Britain became increasingly difficult to sustain. Despite this, the Italian press kept dwelling on accusations of incompetence or simple reluctance to fight almost until the very end of the Italian war. This happened despite the regime considering this kind of propaganda counter-productive and trying to limit it through orders to the press. As discussed in Chapter 3, Italian public opinion did not completely lose hope in a positive outcome to the conflict until the final defeat in Africa. The outstanding victories won by the Axis forces in Cyrenaica and Egypt were successfully exploited by the regime's propaganda, while many Italians believed them to be important and possibly heralding the much-desired final victory. However, the stereotype of Britain's reluctance to fight, kept alive by the press, was by then hardly taken seriously. What rekindled the fire of hatred against Britain was the later phase of the aerial bombing escalation. The reports on public opinion highlight that, if hatred for the regime was widespread, the same could be said of the resentment towards the Allied bombings.

The other main tropes of wartime propaganda were consistent with pre-war discourse and were much easier to maintain after the defeats started. Britain was the rapacious colonial power which, through control of the sea, deprived the younger peoples of their rightful place in the sun. Britain was also at the same time held by the power of, and allied to, the Jews. One trope did indeed become easier to employ later on in the conflict, drawing on the German-style racialist imagery of the 'mongrelised' British armed forces. As soon as Italy lost its colonial empire, the image of colonial troops was exploited not just in the sense that the British preferred to have others die in their stead, but rather to depict the imminent invasion of Italy as the coming of racially impure hordes, enemies of everything that Italian and European civilisation stood for. It was the definitive othering of Britain.

Other, more complex if certainly not more rational, racist tropes appeared in the self-referential *La Difesa della Razza* magazine. While the Second World War raged, the racist theorists of Fascist Italy as well as Mussolini struggled to create a definitive racial identity for the Italian people. The process soon took the form of a violent clash of different theories, prejudices and interests ranging from religion to biology and pseudo-history. The most extreme of these schools, and the closest to the National Socialists, was the Nordicist biological, racist school of thought. Their main ideological enemy was the Mediterraneanist school, which rejected purely biological racism and was often less than enthusiastic about Italy's German ally. In a surprising twist, the Nordicist need to oppose the Mediterraneanist school, as well as their own racial beliefs, led some of their main theorists to become the last defenders of the British race within Italian Fascist discourse. It is beyond doubt, as the Second World War proved, that the Italian discourse concerning Britain was misleading and self-deceptive. If Fascist Italy saw what it wanted to see when it looked at Britain, it was because 'the West', which was most of all represented by Britain, was going through a period of such confusion and lack of self confidence that such an interpretation was made possible.

The two strands of investigation outlined in the introduction reached complementary conclusions. Anglo-phobia, certainly among Italian intellectuals but also among meaningful sectors of the public opinion, existed and predated Fascism. At the same time, Fascism added one fundamentally new, ideological lens through which Britain was not just seen an antagonist, but as an unavoidable and decadent one. These two factors contributed to lead the country towards war and defeat.

If not the myth of British weakness, Fascist Anglophobia survived both war and defeat. Italian Neo-Fascist culture, which struggled to find a new self-definition in the immediate post-war years, was torn apart by its position between West and East in the new Cold War

era.⁷³⁰ While the Neo-Fascist press was generally critical of the United States, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* eventually placed itself firmly in the Western camp for anti-communist reasons.⁷³¹ If the relationship with the United States was hence problematic, but not completely negative in the long run, there were no such doubts concerning Britain. As Federico Robbe wrote, ‘the USA [was] not as unanimously opposed [by the Italian Neo-Fascists] with the same virulence [as Britain].’⁷³² Such was the hatred the Neo-Fascist press focused against Britain that Robbe correctly uses the term ‘obsession’ to describe it. Yet Anglophobia was not the prerogative of the Fascists in 1945, any more than it had been in 1919. It is telling that even the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce kept a decisively Anglophobic attitude after the fall of the regime. Croce, unlike other anti-Fascists, had made it clear in July 1940 that, as an Italian, he wanted Italy to defeat the British even if he did not care for Fascism.⁷³³ He did not change his mind during the conflict: indeed, his hostility for Britain increased after the Italian defeat. Bitter because of the punitive attitude British diplomacy pursued with regard to Italy after the war, Croce wrote in 1947 that

I think I have made it clear enough what a political error hides within the “egoism” of the English policy. Utility, even before ethics, rejects that egoism which, before offending moral conscience, offends and leads astray, for its excessive greediness, the good utilitarian calculation.⁷³⁴

⁷³⁰ Luca Tedesco, *L’America a Destra, L’antifascismo nella stampa neoFascista dal Patto Atlantico alla Seconda Guerra del Golfo* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2014), pp. 10-11.

⁷³¹ Tedesco, *L’America a Destra*, p.22. Some ‘leftist’ Fascists proved to be die-hard opposers of the West. Concetto Pettinato, who appeared so often in the previous pages, refused to accept the ‘Atlantic’ choice of the party and left the *Movimento Sociale* in 1952. In 1950 he had made his thoughts about the English clear in a vicious pamphlet entitled ‘Questi inglesi’ (These English), in which he went through British history, describing it with the darkest colours possible.

⁷³² Federico Robbe, *Il neofascismo delle origini e l’ossessione antibritannica* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2015), p. 103.

⁷³³ Eugenio Di Rienzo, *A political Biography of Benedetto Croce, during the years, 1943-1944*, in *Gli affanni di Villa Tritone, 1943-1944. Benedetto Croce, gli “amici azionisti” e la «Perfida Albione»*, Giuseppe Galasso storico e maestro, a cura di E. Di Rienzo (Rome: Biblioteca della Nuova Rivista Storica, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2019), pp. 109-148.

⁷³⁴ Di Rienzo, *A Political Biography of Benedetto Croce*, p. 147.

If Anglophobia thrived in Neo-Fascist circles, more research needs to be done concerning the more general long-term effects of the Anglophobic Fascist discourse on the rest of post-war Italian culture. Such an investigation should include the communists, the socialists and the Christian Democracy, which were explicitly anti-Fascist.

It is possible to trace some historical similarity between the obsession for decline and civilisational collapse during the interwar period and today. The admiration some strongmen of today enjoy among vast sectors of western audiences reminds us that Mussolini's conclusions about the fate of the West and the destiny of Fascist Italy were closely intertwined with Western moral malaise. The history of Fascist's image of Great Britain can help us to understand how ideological prejudice skews one nation's assessment of its rivals today.

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