Fascism and Culture in Sicily: The Centennial of Vincenzo Bellini's Death

Olga A. Casaretti

Utah State University
FASCISM AND CULTURE IN SICILY: THE CENTENNIAL OF VINCENZO

BELLINI’S DEATH

by

Olga A. Casaretti

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

Approved:

__________________________  __________________________
Tammy Proctor  Victoria Grieve
Major Professor  Committee Member

__________________________  __________________________
Lynne McNeill  Mark McLellan
Committee Member  Vice President for Research and
                  Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2015
ABSTRACT

Fascism and Culture in Sicily: The Centennial
of Vincenzo Bellini’s Death, 1935

by

Olga A. Casaretti, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Tammy Proctor
Department: History

The rise of totalitarian governments during the interwar reflected a unique momentum for mass society without precedence. The Great War was instrumental to the creation of a new mass culture in which violence and ultra-nationalism became dominant forces. Fascism was an anti-liberal and authoritarian mass movement that attempted to create a new social order that exalted nation, violence, and war as sublime myths. As the first prototype of a fascist regime, Italy provides a model worthy of analysis.

This paper analyzes how fascist propaganda sponsored a culture of violence that secured the existence of fascism against liberalism and that legitimized the regime’s venture into war. Benito Mussolini presented his movement as a revolution that intended to create a “new Italy” as an alternative to democracy; however, the regime constantly used and coopted specific aspects of the national past to legitimize its power. In October 1935, Italy began the Ethiopian campaign as the culmination of the regime’s promises of
a social revolution. In 1935, the celebrations for the centennial of musical composer Vincenzo Bellini’s death illustrated specific dynamics of war propaganda in which the regime used the Italian cultural heritage to fit its imperialistic agenda.

(115 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Fascism and Culture in Sicily: The Centennial of Vincenzo Bellini’s Death, 1935

Olga A. Casaretti

Benito Mussolini constantly portrayed his regime as a protector of nationalism and the ultimate promoter in the re-discovery of Italian culture. The 1930s represent the highest involvement of the regime in cultural activities. Such events had the specific propagandistic goal of ingraining the idea of fascism as a solution to poverty and cultural disunity between north and south. An ongoing theme of propaganda was connecting fascism’s mission to the glory of the Italian past and of its most illustrious protagonists. The Duce and his followers built the idea of a new political establishment that legitimized its rule through a reassertion of the past.

My study displays the regime’s involvement in Sicily as a sponsor of culture and national renovation through the reinterpretation of Italy’s most popular figures. Vincenzo Bellini’s centenary reveals the regime’s plans of achieving national unity between north and south in a culturally and economically divided Italy. With an emphasis on the history of the Risorgimento, I ultimately show the regime’s endeavor in forging cultural unification between north and south through the exaltation of a Sicilian figure. As fascists planned to invade Ethiopia in late 1935, Bellini’s centennial played a critical role in showing the regime’s commitment to modernization and the relevance of Sicily in the creation of a new Italian-Mediterranean empire.
In memory of my grandparents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Archivio di Stato and the Museo Civico Belliniano for providing all documents that were essential to produce this research. I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Tammy Proctor, Victoria Grieve, and Lynne McNeill, for their assistance through the project. A special thank you goes to my major professor, Dr. Tammy Proctor, for reviewing all drafts and for continuous guidance and support through my years in graduate school. I would also like to thank the Head of Collection Development at Merril-Cazier Library, Jennifer Duncan, for assisting me in the process of obtaining Italian newspapers that allowed my research to come to life.

I give special thanks to my husband, Jeremy, my mother, Rita, and my daughters Grace and Sofia, for their moral and practical support as I worked on my research. I also thank my father, Davide, for accompanying me to the archives and for visiting them when I was physically away. Lastly, I thank my grandparents, to whom this project is dedicated, for sharing their life experiences under fascism and for sparking my love for history. I could not have done it without all of you.

Olga A. Casaretti
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN FASCISM</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. ORIGINS OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY AND FASCISTIZATION OF ITALIAN SOCIETY, 1920S TO 1930S</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE CENTENNIAL OF VINCENZO BELLINI’S DEATH, 1935</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>La Befana del Duce</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Held by his mother, a boy <em>Figlio della Lupa</em> Happily Shows a Package Saying ‘Befana del Duce’”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hall of Cimeli</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hall of Scenographies</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hall of Cimeli</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sancta Sanctorum</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>In front of Bellini’s House</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Homage of Flowers of January 25</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the morning of January 25, 1935, citizens of Catania, Sicily, spontaneously gathered in the city center to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of music composer and fellow citizen Vincenzo Bellini’s death. News of the time described the crowds as “throbbing with enthusiasm, visibly demonstrating the love for Catania’s beloved son,” and paying a sincere tribute to the musician’s memory.1 Three weeks later, on January 25, newspapers reported that shops in the main streets of the city had enthusiastically decorated their windows with colorful flowers and portraits of Bellini. More than 15,000 people of all social categories, accompanied by fascist leaders and distinguished musicians, departed for “the Bellinian Pilgrimage.” The procession honored Bellini by visiting his house (hosting the Museo Civico Belliniano), and his grave at St. Agatha’s Cathedral.2 The event served as the first occasion officially marking the beginning of 1935, renamed by Benito Mussolini and his followers as the Anno Belliniano.3

The year 1935 was also important to fascist Italy for accomplishing the regime’s promises of building a new empire that honored the Roman glorious tradition. In order to support its imperialistic plan, the government mobilized an ambitious propaganda aimed at persuading Italians of their cultural greatness and impressing Western powers that Fascist Italy deserved a prestigious role in world affairs. The Bellinian celebrations

---

3 Bellinian Year.
illustrate fascism’s commitment to modernization by emphasizing the uniqueness of the Italian cultural heritage.

The ultimate goal of Fascism was to rejuvenate society through a cultural and spiritual revolution aimed at establishing a new social order based on ultra-nationalism, militarism, modernity, and a cooptation of the national past. Mussolini presented his program as an anti-liberal revolution that intended to create a “new Italy” as an alternative to democracy and to communism. In the process of creating a “new destiny,” the regime targeted youth and ambitiously began a program to “fascistize” society. By managing mass media, education, and extracurricular activities, fascism openly or subtly insinuated its values into society.

In past decades, many historians have devoted attention to whether fascism succeeded or not in molding a new world, particularly in the centers of fascist power. Rather than analyzing the social effects of indoctrination, this paper specifically evaluates the strategies that Mussolini’s regime used to impose its power and to attract the masses. This study focuses on the most important themes of interwar Italian propaganda such as the reinterpretation of the national past, the cult of the leader, and the concept of fascism as a rejuvenating and modernizing social force. This paper ultimately portrays fascism as a meta-political phenomenon that attempted to permeate all aspects of national life. The regime instrumentalized popular folk characters such as the Befana and Pinocchio and coopted historical figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi and Vincenzo Bellini to build popular devotion towards fascism as a new powerful civic religion centered on nationalism. Through these figures, the regime created, altered, and even exaggerated national myths to support the fascist political agenda and strengthen popular loyalties.
Fascists constantly struggled between reasserting tradition and modernizing the country. For instance, the *Befana*, an old woman who distributed gifts during the epiphany, was a well-established Italian figure. When appropriated by the fascists, however, the *Befana* illustrated how the regime intended to assert traditional gender roles through a folk figure. The fascist version of the epiphany celebrations had the *Befana* distribute specific gifts that were based on gender. The celebration, as an instrument of social welfare, also displayed the government’s commitment to modernization by attempting to eliminate social inequalities.

The year 1935 is particularly emblematic in showing the contradiction within the regime between the reassertion of tradition and the necessity for modernizing the country. During that time, the government engaged in a massive celebration that commemorated the centennial of Bellini as one of Italy’s most famous romantic music composers. At the same time, the country prepared to invade Ethiopia and to build an Italian empire. Therefore, the decision to exalt a Sicilian figure who had been involved in the *Risorgimento* assumed a dual function. The regime used Bellini to create a cultural and political connection between Italy’s south and north by emphasizing the history of national unification. Fascism hoped this plan would eventually strengthen a sense of national cohesion based on a common historical heritage.

Furthermore, Bellini functioned as the perfect model serving the fascist idea of “the new man.” The musician illustrated major characteristics of Italianism and modernity. Bellini was cosmopolitan but devoted to his fatherland; he was young but

---

4 The term “Risorgimento” is used in Italian history to describe the process of national unification that began in the 19th century.
politically active. Most importantly, he was practically involved in the Risorgimento and used his music to encourage Italian dreams of national unification.

The decision to celebrate the musician in his hometown of Catania aimed at involving Sicily in major cultural events as a potential center of the new Italian imperial power.\(^5\) Fascism coopted Italian figures and traditional aspects of the national past as channels of propaganda; however, the pressure to modernize the country and to engage in imperialistic ventures pushed the regime to assert Italy’s cosmopolitan place in the world. The reasons behind fascism’s commitment to cultural cohesion are found in the history of Italian unification.

Italy became officially a unified state in 1861; however, political unity did not eliminate cultural, social, and economic disunity. Historian Gaetano Salvemini argued, “Italy consisted of sections, each one of which had for thirteenth centuries lived under different sovereigns and different forms of government.”\(^6\) The economic structure of the country was unequal because agriculture in the south was heavily influenced by drought that alternated with heavy rain. Salvemini noted, “The rain caused landslides that destroyed the farms in the valleys and created marshes which breed malaria mosquitos.”\(^7\)

Until the early 1900s, the hostility of the Papacy, problems of brigandage, illiteracy, and public debt inherited from the wars of independence also challenged the path to cultural unification.\(^8\)

---

7 Salvemini, 2.
8 Salvemini, 3.
Salvemini also underlined how after 1900, the rise of industrialization and the improvement of agriculture in the north gave rise to the formation of a Socialist party. Young Mussolini, as a socialist coming from the northern region of Emilia Romagna, believed that “socialism seemed the mass ideology with the most promising future,” and that class conflict could be the solution for the Italian problems. However, with the outbreak of World War I, the future Duce distanced himself from socialists and joined the conflict against Austria and Germany who were labeled as “barbarian and bestial enemies ready to rape and mutilate Italians.” The Great War had a strong impact on the lives of the soldiers that participated. Richard Bosworth noted, “Almost all leading fascists followed their leader in claiming that their souls had been reforged at the front.” Bosworth also argued that, “For Italy, east of the great powers, poorest of the great economies, most fragile of the great societies and most uneasily nationalized of the great cultures, the conversion from war to peace entailed a sea of troubles.” The Great War, with its social destabilization and political disappointments, paved the way for the development of fascism as a concrete political force.

On March 23, 1919, Mussolini founded the Fascio di Combattimento (Fighting Group) supported by futurists, anarchists, and Arditi. Although the movement did not have ideological coherence, it expressed “a state of mind, a pervasive mood of postwar discontent and undirected revolt.” By the end of 1921, Mussolini and his movement

---

9 Salvemini, 6.
11 Bosworth, 67.
12 Bosworth, 94.
13 Special militia that fought during World War I.
emerged as a major force in the political scene.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the success of the fascist movement in the north, various social and economic problems afflicted Southern Italy.

During 1919-1920, strikes, peasant land occupations, mafia murders, and general social violence particularly afflicted Sicily.\textsuperscript{16} The Sicilian economy was backward in terms of land administration and control. Landowners ruled, oppressing the peasant class while the Mafia was responsible for making the local terrain impenetrable for transportation.\textsuperscript{17} Through the appointment of Cesare Mori as Prefect of Palermo in 1924, the regime aimed at weakening the Sicilian Mafia as a competitor for local power. Mori undertook “what he depicted as a successful campaign to win over the hearts and minds of Sicilians of all classes and so abduct them from Mafia influence.”\textsuperscript{18} Although the fascist campaign against the Mafia succeeded in the short term, by the end of the 1920s, the regime had not yet solved the problem of poverty nor dealt with the unequal social structure of the island.\textsuperscript{19}

While Northern Italy was industrialized and modernized with infrastructures and improvements in education, the South constantly struggled with poverty and illiteracy. Such differences threatened the fascist dream of creating a uniform mass society that shared common values. National cohesion at home was crucial to begin the grandiose but risky imperial plan. As a result of the social, cultural, and economic demarcation within the Italian nation, during the 1930s, fascism aimed at modernizing Sicily by involving the island in relevant national issues. Sicily’s location in the Mediterranean made it

\textsuperscript{15} Cardoza, 43.
\textsuperscript{16} Bosworth, 167.
\textsuperscript{17} Bosworth, 69.
\textsuperscript{18} Bosworth, 241.
\textsuperscript{19} Bosworth, 210.
important as well in a larger vision of an Italian empire that linked North and East Africa to Italy itself.

By the end of 1935, Italy began the Ethiopian campaign as the culmination of the regime’s promises of a social and political revolution. While men proved their loyalty to the regime by leaving for war, the regime asked women to donate their wedding rings to support the cause. Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues, “This symbolic reconciliation between state and society was heralded by propaganda that posited the new empire as a solution to problems that had plagued Italy during the liberal period.”20 Through imperialism, Sicily would enjoy a cultural renaissance of a new Mediterranean empire, “peasants would be allotted land in Ethiopia, alleviating some of the misery that had led to past waves of emigration.”21 Fascism presented the Ethiopian campaign and war as effective instruments of social change.

The centennial of Vincenzo Bellini in 1935, assumed particular importance for gaining domestic support for the Ethiopian campaign and also for proving to the world that Italy was ready to play a central role as a Western superpower. The Bellinian celebrations illustrate the most important themes of fascist propaganda, such as war, violence, nationalism, the cult of the leader, and devotion to the national past and modernization. Prior to and during the Ethiopian expedition, it was crucial for Mussolini and his followers to show both domestically and internationally that Italy had modernized thanks to fascism and that the regime was finally honoring the glorious Roman past by recreating a Mediterranean empire.

---

20 Ben-Ghiat, 5.
21 Ben-Ghiat, 124.
The celebrations took place all over Italy and even abroad. The emphasis on the Sicilian festivities had various functions. Since Catania was Bellini’s hometown, it was logical to organize commemorative events in Sicily. On the other hand, the regime was attempting to demonstrate that Sicily had modernized and that the history of the island was connected to the tradition of the *Risorgimento* in a clear attempt to unify Italy through a common cultural heritage. The constant struggle for modernization in Sicily is also shown by the regime’s long interest in cultural renovation through the purchase and rehabilitation of museums and places of historical interest.

My study is divided in four chapters: the first part illustrates the evolution of the historiography of fascism and explains how this work is unique; the second chapter provides a general overview of the origins of fascist ideology and of its existence as a political force in the interwar period; the third section analyzes the Sicilian case study of Bellini’s centennial as a channel of propaganda aiming at consolidating Italian culture in lieu of the creation of an empire; and the conclusion will show how the Bellinian celebrations and the regime’s interest in culture in Sicily attempted to culturally renovate the island.
CHAPTER II

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN FASCISM

In past decades, scholars have evaluated fascism as an ideology that originated from a rebellion against Positivism and the materialism brought by industrialization; however, they have also identified World War I as the catalyst that translated fascism into a concrete political force.\(^1\) The transformation of fascism from an ideology to a concrete political phenomenon was a product of the moral breakdown post-Great War. The evolution of the historiography of Italian Fascism from the 1950s to the present day contextualizes fascism as a specific ideology and a unique meta-political phenomenon that used the Italian cultural heritage to portray itself as the custodian of nationalism.

Italian Fascism was a phenomenon directly fueled by the interwar crisis. As the first prototype of a fascist regime, Mussolini’s Italy provides a model worthy of deep analysis. Since the execution of the Duce on April 28, 1945, historiography has shown an increasing interest in Italian fascism.\(^2\) After World War II, the echoes of the anti-fascist Resistance instilled scholars with such an intellectual prejudice that they refused to evaluate the years between 1922 and 1945 as anything but negative. Benedetto Croce went as far as denying the existence of a Fascist ideology and reduced Mussolini and his followers to “a regime of donkeys.”\(^3\)

Starting in the 1960s, scholars timidly began to explore the ideological profile of fascism but focused primarily on its intellectual components. George Mosse underlined

---


\(^3\) Gentile, 1.
how historians and political scientists neglected to analyze the fascist movement due to post-war traumas caused by Germany.\textsuperscript{4} Since the 1970s, historians have dedicated their attention to the intellectual, social, and cultural history of fascism. More recently, historians have increasingly contextualized fascism as a specific ideology that used nationalism to capture the spirit of the masses.\textsuperscript{5} Specific studies have expanded methodologically, by evaluating fascist uses of folklore and rhetoric to connect with the people.

Emilio Gentile was among the first historians to point out the importance of considering Mussolini’s regime as a phenomenon with its own historical identity. Gentile’s “Fascism in Italian Historiography: In Search of an Individual Historical Identity” is a remarkable analysis of the historiographical output in the field of Italian fascism from the 1950s to the 1970s. The article argues, “The first task of the historian of fascism is not to consider fascism as merely a history of Italy between the two World Wars.”\textsuperscript{6} Gentile illustrates how until the 1960s, historians had shown little interest in Mussolini’s regime. Militant anti-fascism and radical Marxism were the main channels through which historians interpreted the Fascist dictatorship. Benedetto Croce, for example, “described the liberal interpretation of fascism as ‘an intellectual and moral disease,’ which had infected all classes following a crisis of faith in the principle of

\textsuperscript{5} Tracy H. Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
freedom and reason.”

Marxist historian Paolo Altari used class conflict to explain the regime’s advent, writing that:

The flaws inherent within the fabric of Italian society were the product of the class domination of a backward and reactionary bourgeoisie, which had never been truly liberal and which used fascism to put into effect its ‘persistent design of anti-democratic resistance.’

These two examples, although ideologically different, indicated intellectual hostility of the 1950s toward fascism.

Gentile noted that both anti-Fascists and Marxists portrayed the regime as an incoherent system lacking historical relevance. According to this interpretation, “fascism had neither a vitality of its own, nor an ideology, nor mass support, and was nothing more than a terroristic dictatorship of a demagogue and of a class.” As a result, prior to the 1970s, scholars refused to consider the historical importance of fascist myths relating to the socialization of the masses. The distinctive features of fascism such as the myth of the Duce, the involvement of the masses, the militarization of politics, the elaboration of a “new Italian” and the liturgies of a new political culture were all considered “masks and instruments of tyranny not worthy of consideration as historical facts.”

Such reluctance was an expression of a generalized cultural fear that showing intellectual interest to fascism implied sympathy or clemency towards the regime.

Gentile continued by arguing that during the 1960s historians began to recognize that evaluating fascism exclusively as negative precluded any possibility of deeper analysis. Enzo Santarelli observed “it seems to us that the phase of general anti-fascist interpretation is largely outdated if one wishes to grasp and understand the effective and

---

7 Gentile, “Fascism in Italian Historiography,” 180.
varied reality of fascism in its ideal, political, and ultimately historical fullness."\footnote{11} Gentile also illustrates that in 1961, Renzo De Felice was among the first historians to proclaim fascism’s ideological relevance. In his book *Storia degli Ebrei Italiani sotto il Fascismo* (History of Italian Jews under Fascism), he illustrated that “Fascism was a unitary phenomenon resulting from the dialect of different forces, with which Mussolini himself had to reckon, at times conditioning them, at other times being conditioned by them.”\footnote{12} This study sparked new interests towards the ideological components of the regime.

By 1976, De Felice in *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del Consenso, 1929-1936* (Mussolini the Duce. The years of Consensus) analyzed the regime in depth, including the building of popular consensus and the relationship between Mussolini and Fascist organizations.\footnote{13} Gentile explained that, “De Felice continued the analysis of the inner life of the regime, by now defined by its specific characteristics; he examined the relations between the duce and the Fascist National Party (PNF).”\footnote{14} The historical productivity of the 1970s paved the way for a reconsideration of fascism as a political ideology that, regardless of its coherence to a unitary system of beliefs, used unique methods of socialization to gain popular consensus. As a result, historians who came later devoted attention to the leading aspects of fascism’s social history.

In 1985, Tracy Koon was among the first pioneers to explore the role of rhetoric in fascism’s success. *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* is an exquisite portrait of the societal, cultural, and political changes

\footnote{11}{Gentile, “Fascism in Italian Historiography,” 182.}
\footnote{12}{Gentile, “Fascism in Italian Historiography,” 183.}
\footnote{13}{Gentile, *The Origins of Fascist Ideology, 1918-1925*, 222.}
\footnote{14}{Gentile, “Fascism in Italian Historiography,” 185.}
young Italians experienced during twenty years of fascist rule. Koon argued that schools and youth groups became the fundamental channels to spread myths that portrayed fascism as a hope for the future. She also noted, “There was a contrast from what fascism promised to youth and what it offered to them.” Koon concluded that the regime failed in its attempt to create a new fascist ruling class as youth was disappointed with fascism’s inability to live up to its original revolutionary ideas.

By illustrating how Mussolini used old myths and created new ones to gain popular consensus, Koon demonstrated that Fascist hierarchs conceptualized young Italians as the foundations of the regime’s survival. She argued, “National themes emphasizing the past coexisted with those that portrayed fascism as a revolution.”

Believe, Obey, Fight was a remarkable addition to the historiographical understanding of totalitarianism as it focused on social strategies to gain consensus. During the 1980s, a new generation of cultural historians reevaluated the use of tradition and culture for political purposes. Lynn Hunt is an example of this first group of scholars who analyzed the power of culture as a political tool and who led the way for a new generation of historical work on political ideologies. Fascist historians also began using culture as a lens for understanding political consensus.

Relating to the fundamental aspects of building consensus, in 1992, Victoria De Grazia provided a study of women’s experiences under the fascist dictatorship and analyzed the regime’s ideology with a gender-oriented approach. De Grazia describes the regime’s internal struggle between tradition and revolution from the women’s point of view. The book illustrates the contradiction within the fascist system between the goal to

---

15 Koon, 252.
16 Koon, 12.
assert traditional authority and the pressure to modernize the country. Mussolini’s regime supported the idea of a patriarchal society in which women’s most important duties were in the home; however, “at the same time, the fascist dictatorship celebrated the *Nuova Italiana*, or New Italian Woman.”\(^{18}\) Mussolini socialized women by making them feel important to the process of building the new Italian state.

In the 1920s, De Grazia explains that the Duce stressed the important role of women in bearing children. As a result, mothers became the future of Italy. During a public speech, Mussolini stated, “Go back home and tell the women I need births, many births.”\(^{19}\) Fascist propaganda manufactured two female images: “one was the *donna-crisi* (woman-crisis): she was cosmopolitan, urbane, skinny, hysterical, decadent, and sterile. The other was the *donna-madre* (woman mother): she was national, rural, floridly robust, tranquil, and prolific.”\(^{20}\) Propaganda exalted figures of mythical women as “the bearers of numerous children and the mothers of the soldiers.”\(^{21}\) The fascist woman had to commit to her family’s needs by also devoting herself to the nation.

Koon and De Grazia shared the view that Mussolini and his collaborators scrupulously planned every aspect of the social and political role of the regime. In the 1980s, *Believe, Obey Fight* provided a unique study of rhetoric but offered a general starting point on youth experiences. *How Fascism Ruled Women* narrowed the topic to the female responses to propaganda, underlying that every social group played an essential part in Mussolini’s ideological puzzle. Koon and De Grazia portrayed fascism as contradictory but unitary at the same time. The regime presented traditional values

---

\(^{19}\) De Grazia, 41.
\(^{20}\) De Grazia, 73.
\(^{21}\) De Grazia, 73.
under a mask of new; but regardless of practical contradictions, fascism unified under its scope of involving Italians in the life of the state.

During the 1990s, scholars began devoting attention to the figure of Mussolini and his role as a political mediator between Italian institutions, underlying political compromise as a fundamental element in the regime’s success. “Renzo De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism” by Borden W. Painter Jr. contributed to the 1990s focus on social history and the creation of national consensus. Painter’s article departed from Renzo De Felice’s interpretation of the Fascist ideology in *Mussolini il Duce. Gli Anni del Consenso (1929-1936)* instead seeing fascism as a mixture of new and old. Whereas, De Felice argued that “part of the regime’s appeal was its claim to a revolution that was, first of all, a restoration of the traditional culture and a fulfillment of the Risorgimento,” Painter acknowledged this interpretation but clarified an important aspect of the creation of consensus.\(^\text{22}\) He distinguished between material and moral consensus indicating the first as “the security the regime offered to Italians”\(^\text{23}\) and the latter as “the spark of revolutionary fervor that there is within fascism itself and that tends to construct something new.”\(^\text{24}\) Connected to both material and moral consensus was Mussolini’s role as intermediary between the state and other social establishments.

Painter agreed with Koon and De Grazia about the superficial character of the popular support for fascism; however, he went beyond by analyzing the necessity of consensus as implying a compromise between the regime and other institutions. Painter noted,


\(^{23}\) Painter, “Renzo De Felice,” 393.

While De Felice’s Mussolini tried to appear as the infallible Duce who alone knew how to control the masses, he was in fact a behind the scene political mediator who had to keep a number of constituencies sufficiently happy to avoid ‘putting into crisis the general equilibrium on which the system was founded.’

Mussolini was indeed a powerful orator and manipulator of the masses; however, to make fascism work within the Italian social frame, he often had no choice but to compromise with other political institutions such as the Catholic Church, the monarchy, and the elites.

An important element that emerges from the analysis of the historiographical output of the 1990s is an abandonment of Marxist interpretations in favor of cultural and social history. In 1994, “Fascism in Italian Historiography, 1986-93: A Fading National Identity” by Niccolo Zapponi energetically delineates this new trend. Zapponi noted that “A global change in culture experienced by, rather than caused by, historiography is in progress.”

The Cold War climate of the 1980s, with its attention towards issues related to Communist political ideologies, broadened the attention towards cultural and social studies of fascism. Following Gentile’s path in recognizing the historical value of the fascist phenomenon, Zapponi realized the importance of analyzing fascism in its entirety.

From a historiographical point of view, the 1990s indicated a definitive abandonment of Marxist interpretations. Zapponi argues that, “historiographical research has reflected the cultural upheaval of the 1980s which culminated in the disaster of the so called ‘real socialism’ and in the contemporary rejection of the apparatus of interpretation

---

25 Painter, 394.
derived from the Marxist tradition.”

According to Zapponi, “scholars have started to reflect with greater calm on the ‘unity within diversity’ of the fascist phenomenon.” The fall of the Soviet Union and the reemergence of extreme right youth groups in the 90s also contributed to the need for analyzing totalitarianism in depth.

Zapponi’s main contribution was contextualizing fascism as among the modern phenomena of the twentieth century: “The existence of a fascist view of the world may deserve to be classified ‘among twentieth century mentalities.’”

Orthodox historical interpretations tended to a “reductio ad unum” of all fascisms without any further evaluation as mass movements. Zapponi pointed out how World War I laid the base not only for the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, but also for the birth of modernity in the twentieth century. During the 1990s, George L. Mosse stressed the importance of unveiling “the most ancient roots of the myths which pervade twentieth century mass politics” and “that the Great War had broadened the role and meaning of those myths ‘drawing out at the same time, their most disturbing face.’” Zapponi ultimately illustrated how negating the existence of a coherent system of fascist beliefs should not preclude historians from evaluating fascism as a unique ideology.

The effort to delineate the mentality and the cultural attributes of fascism defined the historical debate of the late 1990s. *L’Uomo della Provvidenza: Iconografia del Duce 1923-1945* (The Man of Providence: Iconography of the Duce) by Giorgio Caproni Armani, Maria Fede Di Genova, and Massimo Duranti contains a collection of pictures, sculptures, drawings and various finds that fit with the historical awakening towards

---

27 Zapponi, 549.
28 Zapponi, 548.
29 Zapponi, 554.
30 Zapponi, 549.
31 Zapponi, 553.
cultural studies and the social re-evaluation of the Fascist phenomenon. The authors addressed the reluctance of past generations to analyze the twenty years of the regime: “This ignorance is the rotten fruit of ostracism, which can neither be justified from an ideological slant nor from a historical standpoint. It is therefore essential to counter such ignorance using all possible means.”  

The intellectual hostility towards Mussolini’s dictatorship paved the way for a re-evaluation of Fascist symbolism. 

*L’Uomo della Provvidenza* explained how “Mussolini was the focus of a cult of a person” that played as a central idea in the Fascist ideology. Artists of the time portrayed the Duce as “the man of providence,” a loving father to Italian children and a strong general who cared for the future of his patria (fatherland). Images of the Duce also ranged from an innovator “with an allusion to the builder of Italy’s new destiny” to a general in Roman uniform. Like their predecessors, Giorgio Caproni, Maria Fede Di Genova, and Massimo Duranti juxtaposed the glory of Italy’s past with the revolutionary theme of rewriting a new Italian history. 

Since 2000, historians have devoted increasing attention to specific aspects of the Fascist regime that helped in evaluating its theoretical and pragmatic attributes. To classify fascism as a political doctrine, it is imperative to consider the tools that the regime used to create consensus. An even deeper analysis requires a study of the methods that Mussolini utilized to insinuate fascist values into the life of the people. Contemporary historians have developed a substantial interest towards cultural history; as

---

33 Caproni, Di Genova, and Duranti, 28.
34 Caproni, Di Genova, and Duranti, 28.
a result, they have devoted more attention to the analysis of specific aspects of Italian folklore that the regime coopted to its advantage.

*Propaganda and War, 1939-1945* by Robert Cole is a detailed analysis of the tools that the nations fighting in World War II used to win the people’s support. Regarding Italy, Cole illustrated how the fascist regime used instruments of mass communication to spread its political messages. Cole noted, “Propaganda channels included the press, broadcasting, film, posters, and public oratory and mass marches.”

During the 1930s, in order to indoctrinate all social classes, Mussolini centralized state institutions and instruments of mass communication. For example, radio reached both urban and rural areas. Cole writes, “The radio aimed at connecting Italian youth to young Germans. By 1934, radio interchange had begun between Fascism and Nazism, and was used to foster personal contacts between Italian and German children.” In 1938, Italy launched a special radio program titled *Voices from Germany* with the specific goal of promoting a deeper connection between the two nations.

Posters offered iconic representations of Mussolini and youth groups aimed at “fascistizing” Italian society. Cole argued, “They featured heroic images of the Duce, fascism and fascists, the army, Italian workers, youth movement members, fund raising, military enlistment of both males and females, and anti-Allied materials.” The author emphasized the importance of youth groups in educating in the Fascist way. For example, by utilizing the Roman myth of *I figli della Lupa* (The children of the she-wolf) the

---

36 Cole, 238.
37 Cole, 241.
regime was able to inspire children to emulate the heroism and glory of the founders of Rome (Romulus and Remus).38

*Propaganda and War* and *The Man of Providence* both emphasized the primary function of indoctrination during the Fascist regime. Cole conducted a propaganda-focused study of totalitarianism utilizing the most important tools of mass communication like broadcasting and militarism. In contrast, Caproni, Di Genova, and Duranti, as art historians, offered a unique interpretation of fascism as a cult centered on Mussolini’s personal image that manipulated visual art to increase popular support. Both works explicitly delineated cultural and social aspects of fascism.

During the present decade, some historians have narrowed their interests to an analysis of people’s daily life under the regime and to the distortion of particular aspects of Italian folklore during the Fascist era. *Garibaldi in Camicia Nera: Il Mito dell’Eroe dei Due Mondi nella Repubblica di Salò, 1943-1945* (Garibaldi in Black Shirt: The Myth of the Hero of the Two Worlds in the Republic of Salo) by Elena Pala focuses on Giuseppe Garibaldi, hero of the Risorgimento. Garibaldi is an emblematic figure that aids the understanding of the romantic struggle for the Italian national unification during the nineteenth century. Pala explains that the fascist reinterpretation of Garibaldi’s figure is essential to comprehend “the passage to mass politics.”39 She explains that for Italians, Garibaldi was a man of action that impersonated the values of courage, generosity, dedication, and leadership. The success of Garibaldi’s myth was his “extraordinary and

---

38 One of the most popular Italian legends is the one that describes the birth of Rome’s founders, Romulus and Remus. Rhea Silvia, mother of the twin brothers, was forced by her uncle to abandon her children in the river, where they remained until a she-wolf found and nursed them. Mussolini used this legend to create *I Figli della Lupa* (The Children of the She-Wolf), a youth group that functioned as breeding ground to spread the regime’s propaganda to children. Koon, 90.

immediate popularity connected to the exceptionalism of his heroic actions and at the same time to the narrative that was offered to the Italian and European public.°40° As an expert in manipulation of the masses, Mussolini was aware of the importance that Italian cultural heritage played in gaining political and moral support.

Pala explains how the Duce used Garibaldi to reinforce Italian nationalism and the people’s sacred devotion to the regime. To support this view, she cites Dino Mengozzi’s interpretation of Garibaldi’s myth as “a laic cult that emulates religious languages and practices to act as a substitute to the Catholic Church as an autonomous fount of divinity.”°41° During the twenty years of Fascist rule, the regime often portrayed Garibaldi as a hero in a black shirt. Pala explains, “The fascistization of Garibaldi was systematically realized by the regime’s propagandistic machine.”°42° His image was included in baptismal records, textbooks, posters, and stamps. Garibaldi in Camicia Nera also notes how Fascist filmography in general offered a contemporary reinterpretation of the Italian past and particularly the Risorgimento and it constantly portrayed Garibaldi as “an obedient man of the people.”°43°

According to Pala, the apex of Garibaldi’s fascistization took place in 1932, during the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of his death. Mussolini used the opportunity to describe the hero as the “Homeric fighter who created the concept of voluntary militias.”°44° The regime also manipulated the role of Garibaldi’s wife, Anita, to fulfill propagandistic purposes. Anita accompanied her husband during the expeditions of

°40° Pala, 11.
°41° Pala, 13. See also Dino Mengozzi, Garibaldi Taumaturgo. Reliquie Laiche e Politica dell’ Ottocento (Roma: Lacaita Editore, 2008), 8.
°42° Pala, 16.
°43° Pala, 17.
°44° Pala, 17. See also “Il Capo del Governo Visita la Mostra Garibaldina. Il significato dell’Avvenimento, Il Regime Fascista 1, (May 1932), 1.
1848 and represented the apotheosis of the female hero. The display of her remains was a key event to provide Italian women with the image of “the woman warrior who sacrificed her life to support her man and her nation.” The celebration gave Mussolini the opportunity to build on the image of an Italian woman committed to the state.

Pala’s work is essential to understand that the culmination of the Fascist ideology was to idealize the regime as the heir of the romantic ideals of the Italian unification. Pala notes, “Mussolini does not merely construct his image in the likeness of Garibaldi, but he transcends that image as the fulfillment of a mythical hero. Where Garibaldi represents the epic past to remember, the Duce represents the present and future.” Pala clarifies that Mussolini valued Garibaldi’s heroism but also underlines how his figure belonged to the past while fascism represented the hope for the future. Ultimately, this work is a valuable example that shows how the regime adapted aspects of the national past for propagandistic purposes.

Recent works focus on the topic of “fascistization” of Italian society with more depth, including specific details of everyday-life, propaganda, and education of the masses. More precisely, “A Fairy Tale Dictator: Children’s Letters to the Duce” by Paola Bernasconi addresses new historiographical interests towards the children’s cultural experiences during fascism. The article concerns the creation of the “Fascist man.” The first part of Bernasconi’s work explains how myths and rituals constantly poured into school curricula. The second part examines the letters that Italian children sent to Mussolini unveiling their feelings and perceptions towards the regime. Bernasconi

45 Pala, 17.
46 Pala, 19.
argues, “These letters constitute a vital record of the way in which consensus was created and of the means used to consolidate it.”⁴⁸ The author’s analysis reveals essential information behind the relationship between the Duce and the Italian people. These letters uncover new aspects of the cult of Mussolini’s persona, including “Mussolini the father, the hero, the god, and at times, even the mother.”⁴⁹ They show how the regime successfully created a deep connection between the leader and the people.

By citing fascism’s theorist Giovanni Gentile, Bernasconi points out how “discipline, order, obedience to the state and its legitimate organizations, which constitute the bedrock of any civil society,”⁵⁰ played a fundamental role in supporting the Fascist ideology. For example, events such as the planting of a tree in memory of a soldier or a dead Fascist were high-points in the daily lives of young people. Even at a young age, Italians felt a sense of belonging to the regime as the highest power through which they could change their future.

The invasion of propaganda into daily life also led to the alteration of traditional fairytales. “Pinocchio, A Political Puppet: The Fascist Adventures of Collodi’s Novel” by Caterina Sinibaldi examines retellings of the fairytale Pinocchio under fascism. Sinibaldi argues that, “Collodi’s puppet is re-framed and re-interpreted according to different political and educational priorities.”⁵¹ Sinibaldi specifically explores the Fascist appropriation of mythical characters of children’s literature to satisfy ideological demands. Sinibaldi sees a connection between Fascist ideology and folklore and underlies

⁴⁸ Bernasconi, 129.
⁴⁹ Bernasconi, 131.
⁵⁰ Bernasconi, 132.
the subtle character of the latter. The role of Italian traditions as channels of indoctrination is essential for comprehend Mussolini’s methods of persuasion.

Fascism constantly presented itself as a revolutionary movement, purifying Italy from the failure of the past liberal system; however, its ideological and political legitimization could not transcend the past and its traditions. Sinibaldi notes, “In this context, the rewritings of a children’s classic such as Pinocchio are particularly revealing of an ongoing process of negotiation with the past underlying fascist ideology.”52 As Pala reveals relating to Garibaldi, the regime did not devalue the importance of myths of the past; in the same manner, Sinibaldi illustrates how the fascists reframed the novel. Pinocchio was important in the past but his new image reinforced loyalty towards the regime: “He was perceived as the national hero of Italian children’s literature, as such contributing to the patriotic cause.”53 This adaptation of Pinocchio is essential for envisioning how the regime used tradition to insinuate fascist ideals into Italian life. Sinibaldi explains that in 1923, Giuseppe Petrai distorted Pinocchio’s original story to boost Fascist ideals of devotion and violence. The original story promoted Pinocchio’s good behavior with the reward of becoming a real child. Under fascism, “Collodi’s naughty, but nonetheless good-hearted character is replaced by a violent and resolute fascist militant.”54 The fairytale praised Pinocchio’s bad behavior in leading punitive expeditions against political opponents. In the end, he remained a puppet and continues to work for the regime.

The connection with Italy’s glorious past is also evident in relation with Geppetto’s character. Sinibaldi cites an interesting conversation between Pinocchio and

52 Sinibaldi, 334.
53 Sinibaldi, 337.
54 Sinibaldi, 339.
his father: “As Cicero would say, ’be good, work, and practice the manganello (police baton).’” The exhortation has the typical imperative tone of fascist slogans; in this case, the manganello represents a national rejuvenation that the regime achieves through brutality. The mention of Cicero is a reference to the Roman past, which exemplifies the ways in which the regime merged various aspects of the past into daily life to fortify its legitimation for present and future.56

Following the most recent trend towards the historical evaluation of specific channels of indoctrination, Sinibaldi illustrates the Fascist reinterpretation of Pinocchio to emphasize the totality of propaganda, writing: “The idea of Fascism as a force of national renovation, which also found legitimacy in the past, is mainly evident in the relationship between Geppetto and Pinocchio described above.”57 Sinibaldi clearly sparks a new historiographical interest towards the necessity of a deeper analysis of the Italian culture during Mussolini’s dictatorship.

This historiographical analysis of fascism indicates the difficult yet nonetheless valuable path that scholars embraced to comprehend the phenomenon of fascism. This chapter describes the struggles that historians had to overcome to approach the subject without earning negative labels. The intellectual prejudice that surrounded fascism in the immediate period after its downfall gave way to a general reconsideration of its relevance as a political ideology in recent decades. Although most historians agree that the fascist doctrine resulted from a combination of different forces, they are now focusing on understanding the specific dynamics that highlight the uniqueness of the fascist

55 Sinibaldi, 332.
56 Sinibaldi, 339.
57 Sinibaldi, 339.
experience. They also view fascism as a phenomenon beyond politics and investing social and cultural aspects of national life.

The main trend is now to comprehend how propaganda focused on specific social and cultural aspects of Italian history and folklore. As a result, historians now study how the regime’s appropriation of the national past took place. The continuation of this trend has an enormous potential. Devoting time to considering the unique role of popular traditions in a society will help illustrate how manipulation and cooptation of folklore become political tools. In comparison to other forms of propaganda, the use of a people’s own folklore is particularly insidious.

A general study of the fascist ideology is fundamental to evaluate how the phenomenon reflected a unique momentum for mass society without historical precedence. Benito Mussolini presented fascism as a revolution that intended to create a “new Italy” as an alternative to democracy and to communism; however, in the process of creating a “new destiny,” the regime constantly used and coopted specific aspects of Italian folklore and of the national past to legitimize its power. Beloved Italian folk figures were often instrumentalized to convey specific propagandistic messages. An interesting instance of this particular strategy was the establishment of the *Befana Fascista*.

*La Befana* is one the oldest and most popular figures of Italian folklore. The cooptation of this specific legend and custom explicitly shows how the fascist re-appropriation of the national past took place and how insidious the role of folklore became in terms of political indoctrination. Through the cooptation of the *Befana*, the regime intended to reestablish social order and to support certain gender roles. The
original legend ties to Christian religious beliefs. Every year, on January 6th, in conjunction with the Epiphany, a good witch called *befana* flies through the sky and brings children candy, cookies, and gifts with the hope of finding the Christ Child. The beginning of the story dates back to the night that Christ was born. The *befana* was a lonely woman who spent her days sweeping the floor and cleaning her house. One night, three kings stopped and asked old *befana* to show them the road to Bethlehem as they were looking for the Child King. The old witch decided to join them but was never able to find the Christ child. As a result, the legend tells that every year, the *Befana* brings gifts to all children as they sleep, in hope of finding that special one.\(^{58}\)

My own research has shown that *la Befana* is one of the most relevant examples of fascist cooptation. On January 6th, to celebrate the Catholic Epiphany, the regime distributed gifts (candy and uniforms) to less fortunate children and exploited the occasion to promote Mussolini as “the man of providence.” In this case, even Christmas celebrations were animated by the same idea of fascism as an instrument of modernity and social order. The regime inaugurated various public works on Christmas day with the clear intent of portraying the Duce as a magnanimous father distributing gifts to Italy. The regime reinforced nationalistic ideals by rejecting “contaminants” of Italian national culture such as the Nordic Christmas tree in favor of Italian traditions.\(^{59}\)

The figure of the old witch in this instance becomes Mussolini and the regime with all its organs. Starting on the night of December 31st, “men of the regime” instead of going out to celebrate New Years’ Eve, worked incessantly “to prepare hours of serene


joy for all children of the city and of the region.”\textsuperscript{60} Newspapers of the time described poor children as waiting with excitement for the Epiphany. The article noted, “Providence exists and the name is ‘Fascist Befana’ to bring joy to less fortunate children.”\textsuperscript{61} The central message of the article is the social and political relevance of the Befana’s celebrations. Fascism attempted to change popular loyalties from the private to the public sphere, thus shifting Christmas from the family to the nation.

The goal of the regime was to provide Italians with practical and moral stability. By eliminating as much as possible the painful experience of social disparity, the people would be grateful to fascism and its ideals of social justice. Newspapers explained how the creation of this custom “assumed the character of a day of pure joy in which even the poor had the impression of not being abandoned and forgotten.”\textsuperscript{62} The festival was scrupulously planned and it involved a significant amount of resources.

\textit{The Ente Opere Assistenziali, (EOA)}\textsuperscript{63} provided the Fasci\textsuperscript{64} of each province with a certain number of gifts to distribute. Preparation started a week prior to the Epiphany. The article illustrates how in the Province of Rome, the regime planned to distribute about twenty thousand packages. About ten thousand were destined for children of the city, eight thousand to children living in the Province, and the rest were given to organizations particularly close to the regime such as the \textit{Mutilati di Guerra} (War Veterans with disabilities), to other associations of public employees, and to less fortunate children in hospitals and hospices: “Nobody would have thought about these

\textsuperscript{60} “Si Prepara la Befana Fascista: Balocchi, Dolci e Divise,” \textit{Corriere della Sera} (January 1, 1935), 8.

\textsuperscript{61} “Si Prepara la Befana Fascista,” 8.

\textsuperscript{62} “Si Prepara la Befana Fascista,” 8.

\textsuperscript{63} Organization for Social Relief.

\textsuperscript{64} Fascist Organizations.
little ones if it was not for the Federation.” The article clearly celebrates the magnanimity of fascist organizations in taking care of every group in the nation, regardless of social classes or physical disabilities.

The packages that were distributed were carefully prepared to fit the regime’s ideological agenda in terms of social justice and gender roles. There were four types of packages, corresponding to the specific needs of each group. All children received a toy suitable for their age and gender and a *panettoncino*. The packages were also different in terms of certain additional items with specific utility. In some of them, besides the cake, organizers added *balilla* (male youth group) uniforms for boys and *Piccola Italiana* (female youth group) uniforms for girls. This particular choice connected to the militaristic style of fascism and aimed at integrating everyone into the fascist machine. The article also emphasized the children’s desire of voluntarily participating in the regime’s activities: “Youth organization coordinators know that for children, not having a beautiful uniform like their peers is a mark of worry and degradation.” As a result, the fascist Federation surprised many children with a “new shiny uniform.” A pair of shoes instead of a uniform constituted a third category of gifts (about seven thousand). The fourth type of package (about eight thousand) contained clothes prepared by the female laboratory of the EOA. The article underlines the function of the *Befana fascista* not only as an act of kindness but also as a true commitment of the regime to social welfare. As the article explains, the theme of the gifts assumed a special role relating to gender functions in fascist society.

---

65 “Si Prepara la Befana Fascista,” 9.
66 Small traditional Italian Christmas cake.
67 “Si Prepara la Befana Fascista,” 9.
Fascists reinterpreted gender roles in accordance to the political agenda. In the traditional festival, the good witch brings candy and gifts to all children in hopes of finding the Christ Child. In the fascist version, the nature of the gifts must satisfy the ideological agenda. Boys received cannons, trains, cars, motorcycles, shotguns, and horses to underline the dynamism of fascist males who function as patriarchs. Girls collected dolls, baby carriers, and toy furniture, to underline their place as bearers of children and housewives in fascist society.

Another significant fascist theme that emerges from an analysis of la Befana fascista is the cult of the leader. In another article from Il Popolo d’Italia, the author changes the term la befana fascista to la befana del Duce (the Duce’s befana), indicating a clear connection between the tradition and the cult of Mussolini’s persona. Fascism intended to refashion the Italian cultural heritage to create a new national enthusiasm towards the regime and particularly towards the leader. In the process of renovating the country, the Cult of the Duce became an essential aspect of fascistization and of national rejuvenation. The article explained, “In every city, the rite has been characterized by fervid expressions of gratitude on the part of the children’s families towards the Head of Government (Mussolini).”

Every package contained an image of the Duce with a clear connection to the Catholic belief of worshipping sacred images of saints. The cooptation of the Italian traditional heritage shows how Mussolini became the epicenter of aspirations for social order and equality where all Italians regardless of nature, culture, and experience were expected to unite under fascism. Fascistization aimed at creating a national in culture, economy, government, and society through

---

nationalism. The regime interfered with all aspects of Italian life so that the masses were educated and encapsulated into the new national program. Daily ceremonies and public projects inculcated faith and devotion towards the regime as a kind of civic religion in which Mussolini was the supreme entity and fascism was the ultimate faith. The regime patiently built consensus over the years, instrumentalizing particular historical circumstances to reinforce popular loyalties.
Figure 1. “La Befana del Duce,” Il Libro per la Seconda Classe dei Centri Rurali (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1941), 221. Ministry of Public Education. National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research.

Figure 2. “Held by his mother, a boy figlio della lupa happily shows a package saying ‘Befana del Duce,’” January 6 1934, Archivio Storico Luce, http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/jsp/schede/fotoPlayer.jsp?doc=18642&db=fotograficoLuceCRONOLOGICO&index=1&id=undefined&section=/.
CHAPTER III

ORIGINS OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY AND FASCISTIZATION OF ITALIAN SOCIETY, 1920S TO 1930S

A general study of fascist ideology and of the regime’s development during the ventennio\(^1\) provides context for evaluating how Mussolini’s political movement evolved during the 1920s and why the 1930s were significant to the centralization of propaganda. Fascism reflected a specific post-World War I mentality and a unique momentum for mass society without historical precedence. Mussolini’s regime was an anti-liberal and authoritarian mass movement that used youth as an agent of national rejuvenation. The spread of nationalistic and militaristic values aimed at creating a new social order through the exaltation of youth, nation, violence, and war as sublime myths. These tools, Mussolini thought, would help unify the Italian nation and erase divisions.

While the 1920s balanced the relationship between fascism and other Italian traditional establishments, the 1930s represented the apex of the fascist regime relating to the creation of consensus and to the centralization of state institutions and instruments of mass communications. This chapter analyzes the birth and development of fascist ideology from romanticism to its concrete transformation into a political force after World War I by illustrating fascism’s rise to power and the regime’s program of fascistization during the 1920s and 1930s. This historical context will provide the background for comprehending the significance of the Bellinian celebrations relating to both national cohesion and to the creation of the new Italian Mediterranean empire.

\(^{1}\) Term historians use relating to the twenty-three years of Fascist rule in Italy.
A general but precise definition of fascism has to take into account the polymorphic nature of its genealogy. As a mixture of diverse elements such as socialism, syndicalism, anarchism, romanticism, nationalism, futurism, avant-garde, militarism, and anti-liberalism, fascism ultimately presents itself as the exasperated cry of a still young and deeply uncertain mass society. Although most historians agree that the general cultural crisis of fin de siècle laid the foundation for the birth of the fascist ideology, World War I and its repercussions were the ultimate cause of its development into a concrete political and mass phenomenon. In the specific Italian case, Romanticism and Risorgimento also played an essential role relating to the desire of creating a unified modern Italy.

The intellectual forces that paved the way to the birth of fascist ideology originated during the Romantic movement of the 1800s. During that time, a politically separated Italy sought to unify under a common government. Patriotism and nationalism began to emerge as essential forces to achieve social change and to concretize dreams of national unification. The Italian process of unification, the Risorgimento, pursued political and cultural rebirth through the creation of a politically and culturally unified state. Nationalism and patriotism sparked popular revolutions aiming at creating a unified Italy.²

Despite the creation of an Italian state in 1861, various Northern regions such as Trentino Alto-Adige and Istria, which belonged geographically and ethnically to Italy, were still under Austro-Hungarian dominance. The intellectual movement of Irredentism played a crucial role in expressing the political frustration connected to the incomplete

unification “keeping the government always aware of the necessity for redemption while at the same time instilling in the public the desire for that achievement.” During the 1890s, intellectual efforts to address the issue of rescuing *le terre irredente,* and a general rebellion against the materialism of the Second Industrial Revolution contributed to the re-emergence of Neo-Romantic ideals such as nationalism and patriotism. The spread of education in the countryside as well as the working class acquisition of culture encouraged “an increased consciousness of national identity.”

The *fin de siècle* witnessed modernization at an unprecedented speed. The high demands of industrialization with “the creation of new wage earners proved that modernization worked against socialism.” Marxist revisionism resulted as a logical consequence of attempting to solve persistent social problems. As years passed, Marx’s revolution remained elusive and intellectuals of the time sought to replace Marxist materialistic values with subjectivism, vitalism, and irrationalism. As Neo-Romanticism flourished at the end of the century, Gustave Le Bon stressed the importance for a political leader to dominate the emotions of the masses with myths, images, and feelings. Georges Sorel emphasized the role of violence to achieve change and rejected Marxism’s pure materialism in favor of heroism and sacrifice. According to Sorel, “violence was the only weapon against the ruling bourgeoisie and a historical necessity.” Both Neo-Romanticism and Marxist Revisionism paved the way to the birth of fascism as a political

---

4 Unredeemed lands.
6 Sternhell, 14.
7 Sternhell, 198.
ideology by underlying the role of nationalism and violence as valuable means to achieve social change.

Fascism was indeed a cultural movement prior to becoming a political force. Zeev Sternhell portrays fascism as an eclectic philosophy that culturally rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the dehumanization and fragmentation of industrialization without destroying the achievements of modern technology. Although fascism did not originate from a single political ideology, Sternhell sees it as a “coherent, logical, and well-structured totality.” In the fascist new view of the world, myth took a predominant role; “the faith in the power of myth was the motive force of history,” where the fascist nation was a dynamic and metaphysical entity.

Sternhell’s main argument is that Mussolini’s political ideas were not a direct outcome of the Great War but rather resulted from “an intellectual evolution and growing awareness of European and Italian realities that existed before the war.” Beginning with Mussolini’s youth, Sternhell illustrates the future Duce’s socialist views: “he saw the proletariat as the new social elite that would replace the decadent bourgeoisie.” By 1912, Mussolini supported Georges Sorel’s idea about violence and Marxist revisionism (syndicalism) and slowly began distance himself from socialism. Furthermore, in 1914, Mussolini realized that solving the Italian national question was a priority over class conflict. Syndicalism could be beneficial to the nation in creating a sense of cohesion. After the failure of Red Week, by 1914, Mussolini left Avanti! and embraced more

---

8 Sternhell, 8.
9 Sternhell, 231.
10 Sternhell, 198.
11 Sternhell, 197.
aggressive nationalistic views.\textsuperscript{12} He understood that the proletariat could not create a new social order and advocated collaboration between classes for the good of the fatherland.

While nationalism sparked much fervor in Italy during the process of national unification of the nineteenth century, however, fascism’s extreme devotion towards the fatherland resulted from the spiritual crisis of the interwar. \textit{Rites of Spring} by Modris Eksteins is instrumental in understanding how the post-war cultural, social, political, and economic background was essential to the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. The war was fundamental to the creation of a new mass society in which violence and nationalism became dominant forces. Although Eksteins devotes attention to the German experience, his argument is still valuable for a general European consideration. He illustrates the Great War as “an all-consuming enterprise”\textsuperscript{13} that demolished the world of the nineteenth century.

The war had such a total effect on society and soldiers in particular, that when veterans returned, some regarded war as “an exhilarating experience” and saw violence as the only means to achieve change. Eksteins writes, “The war as essence of a sublime experience; war both revelation and education.”\textsuperscript{14} Eksteins addresses how the war caused the collapse of the external world and how it sparked “a retreat into a private world of spirit where the only redoubt of integrity became the individual personality.”\textsuperscript{15} The brutality of the conflict also generated social isolation between soldiers and civilians. The general spiritual and economic crisis brought by post-war treaties, sparked a “craving for

\textsuperscript{13} Modris Eksteins, \textit{Rites of Spring} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 143.
\textsuperscript{14} Eksteins, 201.
\textsuperscript{15} Eksteins, 211.
newness”\textsuperscript{16} in society, and particularly among youth. Ekstein explains that fascism intended to produce a “new man” in a “desire to create mankind anew.”\textsuperscript{17} Eksteins’s thesis is that the front experience is fundamental to understanding the development of National Socialism and the total mobilization of society. Through the glorification of violence, fascist movements were able to instill into the people a new sense of national identity in the collective interest of the Fatherland.

Identifying fascism as a generic European phenomenon is essential for studying the peculiarity of the Italian experience. \textit{A History of Fascism, 1915-1945} by Stanley Payne is an excellent source for comprehending how fascism ultimately resulted from a cultural, social and political phenomenon typical of the crisis of the interwar. Arguing that fascist movements were different from one another and adapted to diverse historical realities, Payne explores the origin and development of fascist ideology, noting its common characteristics in authoritarian nationalism, imperialism, romanticism, mass mobilization, and exaltation of youth. Payne argues that “although generic fascism never existed in pure empirical form, it constitutes a device which serves to clarify the analysis of individual political phenomena.”\textsuperscript{18} The political, social, and economic unrest caused by the Great War secured the existence of fascism as a successful movement.

The advent of World War I is central in understanding the development of fascist totalitarianism. In \textit{Red Carnation}, Italian author Elio Vittorini noted that younger generations were attracted towards the violent aspects of the regime.\textsuperscript{19} Avant-garde and Futurist movements valued the war as the supreme instrument for social change. Futurist

\textsuperscript{16} Eksteins, 260.
\textsuperscript{17} Eksteins, 261.
\textsuperscript{19} Tracy H. Koon, \textit{Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 22.
Filippo Marinetti described war as, “the world’s sole hygiene, a noble bath of heroism, in the absence of which the races slumber in a lazy egoism, economic arrivism, and in leprosy of the spirit and of the will.” The Italian *Arditi* supported the fascist movement particularly for its brutal and violent connotations. Many, including Mussolini, also recognized the failures of socialism as a mobilizing force capable of solving national issue, so instead turned to violence as a motivating ideal.

In the precarious interwar European world, fascism promised to make all social classes indistinguishably part of the nation. Payne makes the case that the “Florentine Avant-garde called for spiritual and cultural regeneration, proclaiming the need for a kind of secular religion” where the Fatherland became a living being. The socialization of the youth was the key to permeate society and to establish a new order. Through the re-interpretation and re-adaptation of the national past, Mussolini portrayed fascism as the heir of the romantic ideals of the Italian *Risorgimento*. Inspired by Georges Sorel’s syndicalism and cult of violence, the *Duce* defined fascism as “an Italian movement, revolutionary, anti-dogmatic, anti-demagogic, and innovative.” With the promise of an exhilarating future, Mussolini used the appealing power of nationalism to unify all social classes under the supreme ideal of the nation.

Payne presents the political figure of Benito Mussolini as a direct product of the disappointments of the postwar. The fascist leader intended to create a national revolution that attracted youth and would restore national identity. He rejected

---

20 Sternhell, 234.
21 Sternhell, 205.
22 Payne, 63.
24 Payne, 73.
parliamentary democracy in favor of the myth of the nation. Political theorist Carl Schmitt saw Mussolini’s success in displacing parliamentary democracy as early as the 1920s, writing, “The theory of myth is the most powerful symptom of the decline of the relative rationalism of parliamentary thought.”

Through myths, the Duce portrayed his movement as a re-establishment of social order and a protector of patriotic authentic values. The life of Mussolini is essential in comprehending the dynamism of Fascism as a reaction to the spiritual and political crisis of the interwar. The dictator experienced in first person the disasters of the trenches and was wounded in battle. After his return, he connected the disappointments of the peace treaties to a general failure of the liberal systems. As a result, he sought to create a new social order that emphasized nationalism through authoritarianism and exaltation of traditional national values.

Biographer Anthony Cardoza argues that the Duce’s personal experiences, including his family background, shaped the political outcome of the fascist movement. Violence and extravagance were fundamental aspects of Mussolini’s personality as a child when “he preferred dominance over companionship.” Mussolini’s political contradictions were also part of his family background as his father was anticlerical and his mother Catholic. The young Duce’s political development evolved from being anarchist and anticlerical to socialist, to syndicalist, nationalist, and ultimately fascist.

According to Cardoza, fascism resulted from a mixture of Mussolini’s turbulent nature and contradictory philosophical ideas with the tragic historical reality that followed the First World War. He portrays Mussolini as the “first prototype for a new

---

27 Cardoza, 7.
kind of populist dictator, and the first political figure to make extensive use of modern mass media to construct an image of the leader that captured the public imagination.”

During the 1910s, Mussolini denounced religion as “a gangrenous and shameful sore of superstition,” but signed the Concordato with Catholic Church later in 1929. Mussolini began his political life as a journalist, working for Socialist newspaper Avanti! but by 1914, he started to see war as an extraordinary opportunity to transform Italian society into a world power. As a result of his support for interventionism, Mussolini was expelled from Avanti! and from the socialist party in late 1914.

The Great War is essential for understanding Mussolini’s cult of violence and ultra-nationalism: “He envisioned a government led by the ‘trenchocracy,’ a new elite of warriors, whose shared experiences in the front lines of the war gave them the strength and moral credibility to guide the country in the post-war era.” In fact, the majority of Mussolini’s early supporters were Arditi, a special militia that fought during World War I and saw violence as the fundamental instrument to achieve social change. Stanley Payne argues that political violence was crucial to fascism’s rise to power. Mussolini used the disappointments connected to the loss of Istria and Fiume in 1918, and the political unpreparedness of the Italian governing class to cope with the post-war economic and spiritual crisis, to present his program as a solution to Italy’s problems and as an alternative to “the mediocrity” of parliamentary democracies. The 1920s witnessed growing discontent towards liberalism. For example, during the 1920s, political theorist Carl Schmitt criticized parliamentarism as threatened by mass democracy, arguing that

---

28 Cardoza, 11.
29 Cardoza, 15.
30 Cardoza, 33.
31 Payne, 96.
fascism and bolshevism were more vital ideologies than liberalism and “that dictatorship is not antithetical to democracy.” Despite the symbolic March on Rome in 1922, Mussolini seized power legally as King Victor Immanuel III granted him the position of Head of Government. Mussolini presented his movement as a viable option against both Bolshevism and the “mediocrity” of parliamentary democracies.

Part of Mussolini’s success was his charisma in attracting the masses but also his political talent as a mediator between Italian political institutions. According to Cardoza, “Mussolini’s genius lay in his ability to use the threat of violent seizure of power both to maintain the allegiance of his belligerent supporters and to facilitate legal parliamentary bargaining with other political forces.” This was true relating to the Matteotti crisis of 1924, but also to the compromise with the traditional institutions such as the monarchy, the Catholic Church, and the elites.

The brutal experiences of the Great War and unresolved issues of national unification that resulted from the peace treaties were catalysts of fascism’s success. Italy saw in World War I an opportunity to gain new territory and to assert its political power in the world. The disappointments that came with postwar treaties generated among Italians feelings of repulsion against liberalism. Young fascists accused the liberal system of passively accepting the loss of Fiume and Istria without rejecting the unjust conditions of the Treaty of Versailles. As a result, liberals appeared weak and incapable of protecting Italy’s interests. Roberto Farinacci, Secretary of the Fascist Party, clearly stated this concept in one of his speeches: “The duty of fascism is to transform the

32 Schmitt, 29.  
33 Salvemini, 381.  
34 Cardoza, 47.  
35 Salvemini, 22.  
36 Salvemini, 199.
democratic and liberal Italy of the past from a Cinderella into a daughter of Rome that will dictate laws to the whole world.”

Since political unification in 1861, liberalism had been the center of Italian politics. With the creation of the Fascist National Party (PNF) in 1921, Mussolini offered a radically new political program that aimed at improving the Italian social, economic, and political conditions by offering an alternative to the “inefficient” liberal system and to the threat of bolshevism: “The new party was defined as a revolutionary militia placed at the service of the nation.” In the platform of the FIdC (1919) a socialist influence is evident especially relating to social security laws and to the protection of the workers. The platform demanded, “extensive development of security for old age” and “a legal workday of eight hours.” Due to the inclusion of minimum wage and the participation of workers’ representatives “in industry’s technical affairs,” the FIdC appears to have a strong syndicalist orientation as well. Youth also became actively involved in the political life of the nation through education and the lowering of the minimum voting age to eighteen in this document.

Immediately after his appointment in June 1922, the Duce and important leaders spent the first three years establishing the regime in the political arena and working with other Italian traditional establishments such as the monarchy, the elites, and the Catholic Church. It was only in 1925, after the crisis created by the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, socialist member of the Chamber of Deputies, that Mussolini began to build the fascist dictatorship through a program of fascistization. As Cardoza argues, “the transition from

37 Roberto Farinacci, *Periodo Aureo del Partito Nazionale Fascista* (Foligno: Franco Campitelli Publisher, 1927), 104.
38 Payne, 102.
39 Schnapp, Sears, and Stampino, 3-6.
a constitutional governing party into a dictatorial regime was less the product of a carefully orchestrated plan of action than the outcome of a crisis that enveloped Mussolini and his government in the second half of 1924. Matteotti accused the regime of accepting bribes from American oil companies in exchange for drilling sites in Italy and requested the annulment of the electoral vote. Soon after these declarations, a group of Blackshirts kidnapped and murdered the deputy.

The Matteotti Affair is emblematic in the study of the transition of Mussolini’s regime from a semi-constitutional to a dictatorial regime. Since five members of the group that kidnapped Matteotti were part of Mussolini’s secret police (Ceka), the murder created an institutional crisis. The leftist minority in the parliament decided to abandon the chamber and to move to the Aventine Hill where they created a sort of parallel parliament known as the Aventine. After six months of crisis, on January 3 1925, Mussolini opened a new era of fascist dictatorship by stating, “I declare that I, and I alone, assume the political, moral, and historical responsibility for all that has happened…If Fascism has been a criminal association…responsibility for this is mine.” After dismissing parliament, Mussolini assumed full executive responsibility for the Italian government. This bold move proved successful.

Mussolini’s first moves to launch the fascist dictatorship focused on controlling the press, silencing political opponents, managing the armed forces, and suffocating the power of local societies such as the Mafia. The creation of myths like the cult of the Duce and of youth groups and other leisure activities followed, with the goal of controlling Italian culture and society. Soon after Matteotti’s murder, the regime instrumentalized
the crime as an excuse to gain dictatorial powers and to fascistize the press. Mussolini and his followers recognized the importance of “normalizing” the threatening situation caused by the crisis through a deeper involvement of the state in public affairs. In reality, Mussolini clearly intended to silence all political opposition and to strengthen the fascist dictatorship. In the process of creating such radical change, he had to convince the public that such action was necessary to ensure peace and the well-being of the country.

Roberto Farinacci’s (Secretary of the PNF) writings are instrumental in understanding the dynamics of fascist rhetoric. Connecting the idea of a prosperous and positive future for Italy to the survival of fascism was an important strategy the regime used to build consensus. Mussolini and Farinacci constantly downplayed the death of Matteotti and justified it as an act aimed at defending the existence of fascism and the survival of the fascist revolution. Farinacci argued, “We must act decisively when it is necessary to defend the fruits of the Fascist revolution, fruits on which we base the welfare and the safe future of the Nation.”

On June 24 1924, Mussolini spoke to the Senate of the fascist goal to give Italy five years of peace and steadier employment, emphasizing the “envy” of political opponents who had been writing against the regime simply because they intended to block the rebirth of “our wonderful people.”

Controlling the press was the imperative first step in fascistizing society, so it was vital to avoid the possibility that opponents could use the unfortunate murder of Matteotti to “poison public opinion with lies and exaggeration.”

---

43 Payne, 115.
44 Roberto Farinacci, Andante Mosso (Milano: Mondadori, 1929), 37.
45 Farinacci, Andante Mosso, 34.
46 Farinacci, Andante Mosso, 35.
Persuading the public to believe that by strengthening state authority, the regime would successfully eliminate illegality and ensure domestic peace was a dominant theme of fascist rhetoric. Although it was common knowledge that fascism used punitive expeditions against political opponents to gain power, Mussolini argued by 1925, that through centralizing the state, the regime would not need to use *squadrismo* and other illegal means to guarantee public order. Mussolini claimed that pacification was crucial for Italian development: “only a strong state, with exceptional laws, can lead us to pacification.” As a result, through an absolute control of the press, the state could become strong enough to eliminate all illegality that threatened the Italian rebirth.

Another important step toward state centralization was the fascistization of the armed forces. Once again, Farinacci emphasized the importance of fascism in conquering the State “with all its organs and institutions.” He argued, “The politics of our nation against the enemy must be fascist, therefore, all organs of the state and especially the armed forces must act in accordance to respecting Mussolini as their supreme leader.” Once the military was on the regime’s side, it was crucial to ensure that fascism did not have any local competitors with whom to share its power.

On April 16, 1925, Farinacci requested from parliament all the necessary laws to defend the continuation of the fascist revolution such as the death penalty, confinement, and the loss of Italian citizenship. Farinacci’s main concern was to regulate the activities of illegal groups such as the Mafia that threatened the regime’s exclusive monopoly of power, especially in the South where fascism had a tenuous hold. Under Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, the liberal government sponsored a system of “differentiated politics”

---

between North and South “favoring industrialization in the North and supporting immigration from the South.” As a result, while the north kept growing economically, the south remained underdeveloped. Sicilian landowners supported the liberal government who in exchange suffocated peasants’ revolts. At the time, the Mafia undertook a specific function to control public order and to obstruct peasant rebellions against oppressive landowners. Relating to the problems of underdevelopment in the south, Farinacci noted, “Fascism must centralize the fight against all the local cliques. It must break from its path every obstacle that may hinder its reconstructive work.” Therefore, fascism needed to combat alternative sources of power such as the Mafia. The regime began a repressive campaign against the Mafia, in order to centralize its control of the nation. Farinacci stated: “the fascist state cannot admit the existence of other authorities above itself.” From 1924 to 1929, Prefect Cesare Mori’s campaign proved effective in undermining Mafia power in Sicily, and as early as 1925, newspaper Sicilia Nuova reported fascism’s success in eliminating Mafia customs that liberalism allowed to exist.

Besides asserting the regime’s role in the South and stamping out the Mafia, the fascist government also faced the issue of keeping political opponents under control. Farinacci requested “exceptional laws to defend the fascist revolution from political delinquents, to prevent the repetition of crimes perpetrated by communists against

50 Polo, 25.
52 Farinacci, *Andante Mosso*, 218.
53 Polo, 58.
fascists.” In this instance, the Secretary of the PNF was clearly referring to the Aventine Secession and was portraying the opposition as “delinquents” and fascists as “the victims.” The depiction of fascism as a reconstructive force masked the true goal of eliminating any competitor in the struggle for power.

After several attempts on Mussolini’s life, the regime banned all political parties and took special measures to punish subversion. The Duce took personal initiative to eliminate the most violent individuals in the movement by abolishing the squadre. On May 23, 1925, the fascist government began to purge the bureaucratic system and to weaken the power of local unofficial groups. The bureaucracy was purged by expelling all “unfaithful workers,” while the party requested new penal reforms in order to achieve and complete the goal of reconstructing the country. The regime transformed the illegality of the squadre into a Militia whose main goal was “to maintain efficiently the spirit of the revolution” and to silence all political opposition.

The changes towards the creation of a totalitarian system proceeded at a slow pace. In 1926, Alfredo Rocco, ideologue of the Italian Nationalist Association (ANI), drafted the so called leggi fascistissime (ultra-fascist laws). The laws established the corporatist system and carefully regulated the structure of national syndicalism ensuring state surveillance of labor activity. On April 21, 1925, Farinacci expressed his opinion about the issue by reiterating the essential role of the party in supervising labor activity: “Syndicalism must be controlled and has to depend strictly on the Party. The Party has to

---

54 Farinacci, Andante Mosso, 209.
55 Withdrawal of the Socialist Party from the Chamber of Deputies in 1924-25.
56 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo (Roma: Libreria del Littorio, 1929), 34.
57 Payne, 115.
be responsible for the syndicalist movement and has to become one with it.” The regime’s intention was to control labor activities to avoid strikes and other types of protests that could menace public order.

Through fascistizing the Italian state, Mussolini planned for the first time in history to create what in fascist doctrine is defined as a *stato totalitario* (totalitarian state), where “all is within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.” Knowing that popular support was the essential ingredient for its survival, the regime built its image as re-establisher of social order in opposition to the failure of liberal democracy. According to Giovanni Gentile, philosopher of fascist doctrine, the most important element of fascism was the totalitarian character of its doctrine: “fascism does not pertain merely to government and the politics of the nation, but it expresses the will, the thought and the feelings of the nation.” This statement incorporates the essence of the fascist totalitarian goal. Gentile described the nation as a dynamic and living organism that had the ability to want, to think, and to feel what Italians needed. As a result, fascism appears as a phenomenon that went beyond politics and as a force invading every aspect of life. The role of the political leader became essential in building popular support.

Mussolini, as a journalist, was an expert in capturing the political imagination of the crowds. Tracy Koon argued, “Mussolini’s real uniqueness lay not in the depth of his political analysis or in the originality of his thought but in the conception of the political process as the art of political communication.” The Duce realized the importance of

---

59 Cardoza, 62.
60 Giovanni Gentile, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*, 36.
61 Koon, 3.
rhetoric in turning the irrationalism of the masses into a positive social force. Mussolini and his followers organized a propagandistic plan to “fascistize” society and to create a ‘totalitarian’ regime that penetrated into both public and private areas of everyday life. Fascism created a constant connection to the national past: “the government celebrated a host of holidays, commemorating the founding of Rome, national unification, the monarchy, and important anniversaries of the regime.”

Youth groups like Gioventu Italiana del Littorio (Student Vanguard, GIL) and the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) “aimed at supplementing the academic propaganda of the schools with social, military, and sports activities liberally laced with ideological indoctrination.” The regime portrayed Italy as “the cradle of civilization” with a particular emphasis on the Roman past and the military history of Augustus and Caesar.

The cooptation of traditional holidays and national celebrations also served as a channel through which the government spread the fascist agenda. The Befana Fascista became a moment during the Christmas season when authorities distributed gifts to poor children to demonstrate that the regime cared about the nation. The commemorations that honored Vincenzo Bellini’s centenary in 1935 provided a means through which the regime underlined its connection to the mission of the Risorgimento and prepared the Italian nation to imperialism.

Fascist propaganda portrayed the regime as an instrument at the service of Italy and of Italians, and an epic savior of the Fatherland. Because of post-World War I territorial disappointments, Mussolini’s political program aimed at building for Italy a new position of prestige in the international arena and at protecting Italianism. Fascists

---

62 Cardoza, 68.
63 Koon, 90.
constantly depicted fascism as a movement with a sincere patriotism, which was the “concrete expression of what is found in the soul of every Italian.” World War I was often invoked to show that fascists joined the conflict to protect Italy’s honor and because they sincerely believed in the Italian Risorgimento. Mussolini’s service in the trenches gave him particular war credentials. Farinacci illustrated fascist interventionism as a heroic mission to fulfill romantic ideals of national unification and to break Austro-Hungarian imperialism. He claimed that nationalists joined the Great War with high hopes of annexing “unredeemed” lands such as Trentino Alto-Adige and parts of Dalmatia. In this instance, rhetoric used Italy’s historic past to give the Blackshirts’ heroism exclusive credit for the Italian victory.

Gentile also used post-war treaties’ disappointments to attack the liberal system. He described the peace after the Great War as “unjust and inglorious” and described the Italian people as “unaware and dragged down by the arrogance of liberals who had no moral values.” Fascism was described as the savior of a national pride forgotten by liberals and as a rescuer of “the true consciousness of the fatherland.” Gentile emphasized fascism as the creator of a new Italy where “a river of heroic blood flows” and as definitive rupture with liberal Italietta (little Italy).

The idea of social and cultural purification from liberalism through youth and a devotion to the Italian past are essential elements through which fascist doctrine diffused its principles into society. Fascism intended to “create in youth’s conscience a strong

---

64 Farinacci, *Andante Mosso*, 133.
65 Farinacci, *Andante Mosso*, 133.
68 Giovanni Gentile, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*, 34.
feeling against liberal politics and a fervid desire to renovate the nation.”

Gentile portrayed Mussolini as a special guide with the unique mission to destroy the “anti-Mazzinian” and anti-idealist socialist and liberal opposition. This concept is crucial for comprehending how fascism gained popularity by connecting its program to the Risorgimento and its heroes, and by constantly accusing the liberal and socialist opposition of being “incapable” of solving social problems, as “inept,” and as betraying the Italian cultural identity.

Gentile connected the success of fascism to both its appealing program and its unique leadership. Fascists described the FI dC as a party of action with the goal of rescuing the Italian pride against the liberals they depicted as ‘men without faith, and with empty hearts.” In the light of all the “national deficiencies caused by liberals,” fascism’s arduous goal of rebuilding national strength had to be accomplished in a totalitarian way, through discipline and “the rearrangement of social and political forces inside the State.” Gentile argued that many veterans found in fascism a refuge where their voice could be heard against the “deceptive and vile” liberals. He claimed that fascism attracted Italians because Benito Mussolini had “a flaming will” and he genuinely believed in the “sanctity of the fatherland.”

Gentile described the fascist doctrine as “integral politics,” a morale, a philosophy, and a religion all based on the concept of the Stato Nazionale (National State). He noted, “The State is not a result but a beginning; it is inside ourselves, it

---

69 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo, 23.
70 Giuseppe Mazzini was an Italian patriot actively involved in the Risorgimento during the 1800s.
71 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo, 23.
72 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo, 30.
73 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo, 30.
74 Giovanni Gentile, Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo, 29.
matures and it lives and it must live, grow and rise to the dignity of the great purposes for which it is called.”

According to this theory, the State was the center of fascist politics but it also transcended its political role by injecting fascist concepts in every aspect of social, cultural, and even spiritual life. Gentile ultimately presented Mussolini as a synthesis of Mazzinian heroism and a creator of progress through violence and struggle.

To realize the ambitious goal of fascistizing society, the Duce believed that it was essential to mold youth under fascist ideas both at school and outside. On June 21, 1925, Farinacci explained the fascistization of youth as essential for both military preparation and family indoctrination. The most important function of the party was to mobilize political consensus by indoctrinating the young. As a result, teachers were expected to follow state decisions on education and school curricula. In 1928-29, a new official state textbook was adopted for political indoctrination that “linked fascism and its mission to the glories of ancient Rome and Italian national unification.”

Ideologically, the regime regularly connected the fascist program with the Italian past; including this element in education and extra-curricular activities was an essential step to manipulate public opinion. For example, the regime altered the character of Pinocchio by presenting it as an active participant in punitive expeditions, thus impressing youth in following the puppet’s path.

In addition, fascism created youth groups to manage all aspects of life and particularly preparation of war, sports, and ceremonial rituals. The Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) held a monopoly on youth activities. Children joined I Figli della Lupa

---

75 Giovanni Gentile, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*, 46.
76 Farinacci, *Periodo Aureo*, 156.
77 Payne, 62.
for boys and girls between the ages of five and seven, *Balilla* and *Piccole Italiane* for boys and girls between the ages of eight and fifteen, the *Avanguardie* and *Giovani Italiane* for boys and girls fifteen to eighteen. While in all groups obedience, order, and discipline were instilled as fundamental values, boys were highly indoctrinated for war and militarism, while girls were taught to be good mothers and subjects to patriarchal authority.\(^{79}\)

Mussolini’s regime supported the idea of a patriarchal society in which women’s most important duties were in the home. In the 1920s, De Grazia explains that the Duce stressed the important role of women in bearing children. As a result, mothers became the future of Italy. The National Institute for Maternity and Infancy (ONMI) sponsored programs that exalted maternity and motherhood as essential to the survival of the fascist state. Cardoza noted that ONMI “also attempted to develop a variety of educational, medical, health, and welfare programs for needy mothers, infants, and children.”\(^{80}\) While building the image of a regime that provided the nations with its essential needs, in reality, fascism interfered and invaded all aspects of life.

Mussolini’s totalitarian system also aimed at controlling leisure activities and free time by creating the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (The National After-Work Foundation, OND). The OND ran theaters, orchestras, libraries, and organized popular festivals by using traditional forms of recreation and tying them to the regime’s objectives. The government’s goal was to indoctrinate every Italian to a civic religion based on

---


\(^{80}\) Cardoza, 64.
nationalism. Mussolini intended to refashion the Italian cultural heritage to create a new national enthusiasm towards the regime. In the process of renovating the country, the Cult of the Duce became a central aspect of fascistization and national rejuvenation.

Fascist rhetoric regularly worked at exalting Mussolini and his ideas while degrading the liberal history of pre-Fascist Italy. Liberals and Socialists were labeled as “traitors of the Risorgimento,” while Mussolini was described as “the man that Italy needed” as an interpreter of the needs of the Italian soul and a charismatic leader. Farinacci noted, “Nobody else had the power to create so much energy.” Fascism emphasized the catastrophic connotation of pre-Fascist Italy, while giving Mussolini’s victory value as a new phase in the history of the country. Both revolution and war were described as starting points in the historical process and as “acts of life.” The regime portrayed il Duce as the main actor of a revolution that was “a continuation of the uplifting experiences of the trenches.” Mussolini was described as a courageous and intelligent leader that rescued the country from a sort of liberal “tragic-comic misery,” while Giolitti (liberal leader) was referred to as “a master of puppets.”

On March 21, 1921, il Duce proclaimed in Il Popolo d’Italia: “Make room for the youth of Italy. If the nation has founded itself again and is headed towards victory and to a better destiny, it is only thanks to the action of fascism.” Propaganda also described Mussolini as a bearer of cohesion in a culturally and socially divided nation. As a result, the Duce became the epicenter of aspirations for social order and equality where all

---

82 Roberto Farinacci, Storia del Fascismo (Cremona: Cremona Nuova Publisher, 1940), 49.
83 Farinacci, Storia del Fascismo, 51.
84 Farinacci, Storia del Fascismo, 51.
85 Farinacci, Storia del Fascismo, 265.
86 Farinacci, Storia del Fascismo, 257.
Italians regardless of nature, culture, and experience, were fused under fascism as a unifying national sentiment.\textsuperscript{87}

Fascists exalted Mussolini’s figure as custodian of the Italian heritage through excessive and denigrating attacks against liberalism. Farinacci described the liberal government as a “Franz Joseph of the old Italy,”\textsuperscript{88} when the \textit{Risorgimento} was commemorated with annoyance. In this instance, Mussolini’s figure acted as “a purifying fire that absorbed in his spirit the Italian civilization, its glories, its ancient and recent thought for a new creation.”\textsuperscript{89} Describing the liberal system as a “Franz Joseph” is an extreme that Farinacci used to mark the tyrannical pro-foreign attitude of nineteenth-century Italy. On March 22, 1925, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the FIIdC, Farinacci shouted, “We need to remind Italy what our country was in 1918-19, when our veterans returning from the front were mocked, and when waving the \textit{tricolore}\textsuperscript{90} was considered a grave sin.”\textsuperscript{91} Through defaming liberals as “ashamed” of the Italian national identity, fascists asserted their movement as the only viable option for a dignified future.

In opposition to liberal ideas, Farinacci offered the image of a Mussolini that was the apotheosis of Italian nationalism, who was committed to protecting every aspect of Italianism. Ultimately, fascism appeared in its own propaganda as a romantic movement tied to the spiritual and ideal traditions of the \textit{Risorgimento} where Mussolini became one of its heroes. The fascist dictator intended to give Italians the idea of the regime shaping a new national horizon in which the Duce’s figure became the center of the universe.

Mussolini was seen as an infallible genius leading Italy into a new era of unity,

\textsuperscript{87} Farinacci, \textit{Storia del Fascismo}, 222.
\textsuperscript{88} Farinacci, \textit{Storia del Fascismo}, 273.
\textsuperscript{89} Farinacci, \textit{Storia del Fascismo}, 275.
\textsuperscript{90} Nickname for the Italian national flag. It means “three colors.”
\textsuperscript{91} Farinacci, \textit{Storia del Fascismo}, 53.
development, and expansion. Farinacci reaffirmed this idea when appointed as Secretary of the PNF: “Fascism is not a temporary phenomenon, but it is a passion, a history, it is the soul of the Italian race that shapes its glorious future.” To illustrate the innovative force of fascism in reshaping the future, the year of the March on Rome (1922) became the beginning of the new Italian calendar.

Fascistization aimed at creating national unity in culture, economy, government, and society through nationalism. The regime interfered into all aspects of Italian life so that the masses were educated and encapsulated into the new national program. Daily ceremonies and public projects inculcated faith and devotion towards the regime as a kind of civic religion in which Mussolini was the supreme entity and fascism was the ultimate faith. The Official Scuola di Mistica Fascista (School of Fascist Mysticism) was inaugurated in 1930. Payne noted, “Myth was held to be true not as existing empirical fact but as a meta-reality of the past and the absolute goal which would be realized in the future.” In 1931, the party introduced the most well known of Fascist slogans: Credere, Obbedire, Combattere (Believe, Obey, Fight).

Fascistization in Italy required the regime to work extensively with Italian traditional establishments to make fascist ideals coincide with values in which Italians could identify. One way to appropriate Italian values was by orchestrating museum exhibitions and cultural events to enforce popular indoctrination. As an example, fascist hierarchs carefully planned and designed the centennial of Bellini’s death to satisfy a specific propagandistic plan that would target Sicily and the South. The process extended from the Matteotti Affair in 1925 to the Concordato with the Catholic Church in 1929.

---

92 Payne, 120.
93 Farinacci, Periodo Aureo, 39.
94 Payne, 215.
Historians refer to the period 1930s as the “Years of Consensus” in which fascist centralization of state institutions was at its peak.\(^95\) The political socialization of the youth reached its highest levels during the middle of the 1930s, as the regime prepared thousands of young Italians for war. Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Public Education from 1936 to 1943, brought the schools “into line with totalitarian and expansionist fascism.”\(^96\) In September of 1934, Mussolini created the Secretariat for Press and Propaganda, “a move that marked the real beginning of the regime’s attempt to centralize its institution of cultural control.”\(^97\) As a result, fascism extended its power over all aspects of communication such as press, cinema, tourism, theater, and radio.

This analysis of fascist ideology and fascistization show the rise of Mussolini’s totalitarian aspirations as a phenomenon transcending politics. Although most historians agree that the fascist doctrine resulted from a combination of different forces, understanding the specific dynamics of fascistization highlights the uniqueness of the fascist experience as a phenomenon beyond politics, invading social and cultural aspects of national life. This chapter clearly underlines the cultural, social, spiritual, and economic functions of the Italian regime. Regardless of its success or failure, the ambitious program of indoctrinating society in such extensive ways emphasizes the relevance of fascism as a specific mass-oriented ideology.

---
\(^{95}\) Koon, 164.
\(^{96}\) Koon, 164.
\(^{97}\) Koon, 159.
CHAPTER IV
THE CENTENNIAL OF VINCENZO BELLINI’S DEATH, 1935

During the twenty-three years of Fascist rule, Benito Mussolini constantly portrayed his regime as a protector of nationalism and the ultimate promoter in the development and re-discovery of Italian culture. The 1930s represent the highest involvement of the regime in cultural activities throughout the country. Such events took the form of commemorations, museum exhibitions, and celebrations with the specific propagandistic goal of ingraining the idea of fascism as a solution to persistent social and cultural problems in the country, particularly poverty and cultural disunity between north and south. An ongoing theme of propaganda was connecting fascism’s mission to the glory of the Italian past and of its most illustrious protagonists. As a result, the Duce and his followers built the idea of a new political establishment that legitimized its rule through a reassertion of the past.

The celebrations of the hundredth year anniversary of music composer Vincenzo Bellini’s death in 1935 as well as the institution of the Anno Belliniano\(^1\) epitomize the pillars of fascist ideology such as nationalism, violence, social welfare, national unity, the cult of youth, and ducismo. Besides displaying the regime’s genuine involvement as a sponsor of culture and as a seeker of national renovation through the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Italy’s most important figures, the celebration reveals the instrumentalization of Bellini as a means of achieving national unity and consensus through culture. This chapter will begin by illustrating Bellini’s life and its relevance

\(^1\) Year of Bellini.
relating to fascist ideology. It will describe the program of the *Anno Belliniano* and its translation into propaganda—programs of social welfare and cultural renovation. It will show the regime’s endeavor in forging national unification between north and south through the exaltation of a Sicilian figure. Ultimately, fascism emerges as a political and cultural force whose legitimizing pillars were the cooptation of the national past and the assimilation of specific Italian popular characters into fascist ideology.

Vincenzo Bellini was born of humble origins in Catania, Sicily, on November 3, 1801. Since early childhood, young Bellini showed a deep interest in music and learned to play the piano when little more than five years old. Bellini’s character as a young adult was “mercurial, ruled by swiftly fluctuating moods, extremely volatile and self-centered.” In 1819, the young musician left his homeland for Naples to study music at the *Real Collegio di Musica di San Sebastiano*, where he remained until 1827. The only recorded political involvement of Bellini’s life occurred in 1820-1821, when he was a student.

During that time, general popular discontent with Bourbon absolutist policies characterized the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The people requested a constitution, which the king temporarily granted, and “huge crowds clogged the street to rejoice over the illusory victory.” Bellini and his best friend Florimo actively participated in the revolt: “Bellini and I shouted ‘Liberty’ and took part in that revolutionary movement and were among the first to glorify what we then believed to be a happy event.”

---

3 Weinstock, 18.
4 Weinstock, 18.
5 Weinstock, 19.
and Florimo enrolled in the secret society of Carbonari, however, their patriotic dreams vanished once the Austro-Hungarian troops entered the city in March of 1821. Don Gennaro Lambiase, rector of the Collegio and “a bourbonist to the bone,” took advantage of the restoration to convince young Bellini to abandon the carbonari cause and threatened him with imprisonment and expulsion.

By 1827, Bellini’s romantic perfectionism soon garnered him both national and international fame. Il Pirata (1827), La Straniera (1829), Zaira (1829), La Sonnambula and Norma (1831), and lastly I Puritani (1835) are among his most important works. Norma did not gain much success immediately after the first performance; however, Bellini dearly loved this particular work. In one of his letters, he stated, “the second act which included “The Hymn of War” and proceeds was a piece of music of a kind and pleases me so much that I should confess I should be happy to create their likes for the rest of my life.” I Puritani, on the other hand, represents the apotheosis of Bellini’s melodic style and was composed during his last years in France. Due to an intestinal infection, the Sicilian composer’s brief life ended in Puteaux, on September 23, 1835, six weeks before his thirty-fourth birthday. After forty years in the Paris cemetery of Père Lachaise, in 1876, the government of united Italy organized the transfer of Bellini’s body to Catania. A hundred years after his death, the fascist regime sought to reframe Bellini’s life and works.

Since the early stages of fascist rule, the regime had shown profound concern with culture and museum preservation. On November 29, 1923, Mussolini was directly

---

6 The Carboneria was a secret society that pursued the creation of a constitutional government during the early 1800s.
7 Weinstock, 20.
8 Weinstock, 105.
involved in the purchase of the *Casa Bellini* and in its proclamation as a national monument. The house of the musician was not only his home but “it represented Catania as a whole,”¹⁰ as the city always identified with Vincenzo Bellini’s experiences. One of Catania’s most succulent dishes is called “pasta *alla Norma*”¹¹ to honor the musician whose memory continued to live in popular imagination.¹² After years of renovations, the museum finally opened to the public in 1930, with an exclusive visit of King Victor Emanuel III. During that occasion, citizens of Catania and fascist hierarchs gathered to celebrate the “noble initiative.”¹³

The decision to honor the centennial of Bellini’s death came directly from the Duce and served as a unique occasion to show Italy’s cultural superiority and the regime’s organizational skills to the nation and to the world: “the celebration, that affects the entire world, has been wanted in Italy by the DUCE who has provided direction and guidance.”¹⁴ Fascist Italy established the *Anno Belliniano* as an homage “to celebrate the sublime glory that the genius of our race has conquered with his immortal name.”¹⁵ Although the commemorations took place all over Italy and abroad, the regime aimed at involving Catania as the ultimate progenitor of the centennial.

Catania became a channel to demonstrate that Sicily aligned with fascist ideals and that the regime, as a successful agent of cultural national unification, was the ultimate solution to the social problems between north and south. In Catania, the celebrations were a “logical necessity and will demonstrate the degree of culture and civilization of the

---

¹¹ Traditional Sicilian dish made with tomato sauce, eggplant, and ricotta cheese.
country in which we live.” As a result, Bellini acted as a tool to prove that, thanks to fascism’s innovating power, Italy had finally reached internal balance and deserved international respect.

In 1901, the city had tried to organize a major event on the centenary of the birth of Bellini. According to fascism, the celebration failed, due to an economic crisis and because “the government neglected the city.” In contrast, the *Anno Belliniano* “for our spiritual superiority” was a valuable tribute to the memory of the Sicilian musician. For Mussolini and the regime, the centennial played a significant role relating to popular consensus and deserved close supervision in terms of planning.

The preparation for the centenary began in 1934 and culminated with the *Mostra Belliniana*. The exhibition showcased fascism’s profound commitment to making culture accessible to the people. The extensive correspondence between the *Museo Belliniano*, other museums, and musical institutes throughout Italy and Europe shows the regime’s effort in organizing the event. In 1934, Stellario Guzzetta donated to the museum a pictorial documentation created by artist Saitta in 1876, for the transfer of Bellini’s body in St. Agatha’s Cathedral. The *Museo Civico Correr* of Venice provided “what our library owns on this subject that will serve to give more light to the glory of the great master.” Such statements emphasize the theme of the fascist protection and enhancement of Italianism, implying that before 1935, Bellini was not glorified as he deserved. The Correr Museum also provided collections of drawings, booklets of operas,

---

18 Document 66, (AMCB).
19 Document 26, (AMCB).
and paintings by Francesco Bagnara that were used to reproduce Bellini’s performances.

The Museo Belliniano also attempted to make contact with descendants of the musician’s friends to reproduce specific portraits. Professor Benedetto Condorelli, director of the museum, also contacted Ricordi Publishing to collect articles and documents relating to Bellini. On September 26, 1934, the Conservatorio of Naples, agreed to photograph all the portraits of Bellini owned by the institute and to send them to Catania. The Istituto Musicale Gaetano Donizzetti of Bergamo also contributed to the celebration by sending lithographed portraits. Correspondence exchange between the Museo Belliniano and Istituto Donizzetti testified to the profound cooperation between museums in support of the spread of culture. On that occasion, both museums bartered poems written by Donizetti in 1835 for Bellini with letters that the Sicilian composer wrote to Donizetti.

The opening ceremony of the Bellinian celebrations took place on January 25, 1935, with the reproduction of I Puritani. Two weeks prior, on January 14, the municipal administration announced the creation of the Comitato Esecutivo per la Celebrazione del Centenario di Vincenzo Bellini with the scope of overseeing the celebrations. The Minister of National Education, together with representatives of the Accademia d’Italia, Corporation of Performing Arts, and high personalities spoke in the historic rooms of Castello Ursino on the theme “the genius of Bellini and his immortal work,” and

---

20 Document 26, (AMCB).
22 Document 54, (AMCB).
23 Executive Committee for the Celebration of Vincenzo Bellini’s Centennial.
24 Castello Ursino was originally built by Emperor Frederick II in 1250. The Fascist regime purchased and renovated the castle during the 1930s.
inaugurated the exciting Mostra Belliniana, featuring precious heirlooms loaned by various Italian and French musical institutes.

The following day, the Minister of Education and other hierarchs participated in a grand popular procession and paid their respects by laying wreaths on the monument dedicated to Bellini, to his grave, and to the house of the supreme melodist.\textsuperscript{26} Newspapers of the time reported the event with much enthusiasm, “today the Fascist government wants us to remember the anniversary of the death of the Swan of Catania and the Duce adds that the celebration should shine throughout the world as well as in the sky of the motherland.”\textsuperscript{27} The Ministry of Corporations was the organization that drew the main organizational lines for the centennial. The major points of the commemoration included organizing conferences relating to Bellini’s life and works, coordinating performances of his known and unedited works both in Italy and abroad, and involving all social classes through government welfare programs.

On the national level, the Italian opera houses were invited to represent, in the year 1935, each a work of Bellini, possibly different, so to have the reproduction of all ten works and to hold official celebrations in major Italian cities, and in all schools and conservatori of the Kingdom. Internationally, the ministry suggested subsidizing the representation of some of Bellini’s works and organizing conferences and celebrations.\textsuperscript{28} In Catania, in particular, the ministry planned to represent all ten works of Bellini (including unedited compositions), and to perform Norma in an outdoor theater, “so that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Document 4, Prefettura Gabinetto, b.77. c.1672, Archivio di Stato di Catania (ADSDC).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Document 4, (ADSDC).
\item \textsuperscript{27} “Celebrazioni Belliniane” Lo Stato Fascista, November 25, 1934.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Document 234, (ADSDC).
\end{footnotes}
\end{footnotesize}
the show, for its grandeur, assumes particular importance for tourism.”

The Ministry of Corporations also decided to convene a special meeting in Catania for the National Confederation of Trade Unions of Fascist Professionals and Artists and to organize a conference with musicians from all over the world. Organizing popular cruises with destination Catania was also suggested as an essential aspect of the centennial.

For the purposes of propaganda, the ministry decreed the creation of wall posters in color to be spread all over Italy with smaller posters to be placed in trains, steamships, and public places. An announcement, in four languages, could be potentially launched in the first part of 1934 as well as a brochure evoking important places both in Italy and abroad where Bellini stayed. The ambitious plan of the Ministry of Corporations ultimately included the distribution of commemorative postcards, the creation of about 3,000 copies of a comprehensive historical record, the production of a movie by the Istituto LUCE with fragments of Bellini’s works, and a train ticket reduction of seventy percent during the period of the celebrations.

The decision to commemorate Bellini was a fascist homage to the musician “to express to the ‘immortal genius’ the thought and the greetings of Fascist Italy.” For instance, the Podestà (mayor) authorized reproductions of Bellini’s bust, executed by Dantan in 1835, to sell them “at a minimum price so that all may honor the Catanese swan.” Such intense programming clearly confirms that the *Anno Belliniano* was an important occasion to mobilize fascist propaganda at its pinnacle. The nature of the

---

29 Document 234, (ADSDC).
30 Document 234, (ADSDC).
31 Document 71, (AMCB).
32 Document 23, (AMCB).
celebration strictly tied to the regime’s agenda as the government sought national unity through culture.

One of the most important aspects in the dissemination of ideas was the creation of a *Numéro Commemorativo* as a “historical allusion to the life, loves, works, and memorabilia”\(^{33}\) of the musician. The Committee was not concerned with selling the book for economic gain but in distributing it in large quantities.\(^ {34}\) The museum retained the earnings to pay the people involved in the sale.

The *Numéro Commemorativo* devotes attention to Bellini’s life, works, curiosities and legends “that have yet to be revealed.”\(^ {35}\) At the same time, it provides a picture of Fascism as exclusive discoverer of Italian cultural aspects that no one else before had any interest to unveil. The volume described Bellini as “Lord of Music” and a “child prodigy” in “an era in which Italians were wandering with their dreams of independence.”\(^ {36}\) Bellini’s time is essential for fascist ideology as it represented the age of the most fanatic romanticism, “which exalted the hearts and molded men and events.”\(^ {37}\) In this instance, the parallel with fascist ideology is clear as the regime intended to appear as the ultimate fulfiller of the *Risorgimento* and as the concretization of patriotic dreams of independence.

The ideal of freedom was a constant in the romantic musical atmosphere of the nineteenth century. During the *Risorgimento*, because of the social gap between intellectuals and the rest of society, “opera was one medium in which the unrest brought

\(^{33}\) Document 78, (AMCB).

\(^{34}\) Document 101, (AMCB).


\(^{36}\) “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,”58.

\(^{37}\) “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,”57.
about by the social changes in progress at the time could be combined, interpreted and represented onstage in suitably epic form.”\textsuperscript{38} As with other intellectuals of his time, Bellini used the art of theater as a voluntary deception and illusory refuge created to escape the obsession of an ideal that was not allowed to confess and “burned the heart of every Italian.”\textsuperscript{39} In this sense, the composer represented the hope of materializing Italian dreams of national unity during the nineteenth century. The \textit{Numero Commemorativo} defined Bellini’s years as “the first resurrection” where “the music became the people”\textsuperscript{40} and a means to express aspirations of independence.

In the years following the Restoration of 1815, because of the Austro-Hungarian repression, plays were strongly constrained by the restriction of censorship.\textsuperscript{41} When Bellini composed \textit{La Straniera}, “he was no longer just a composer, but a fanatic conspirator, and a hero and the living symbol of an art that inspired national unity and for which you could easily hear pronounced the word 'Italy' without giving shade to the Austro-Hungarian police.”\textsuperscript{42} As a result, the \textit{Catanese} musician appeared as deeply devoted to his fatherland. Such a strong anti-Habsburg stance had important resonance for a modern Italy who had just fought a war against the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The regime portrayed Bellini as an Italian, but also as a Sicilian who contributed to fueling the dreams of unification. The volume often emphasizes the musician’s affection for his native land and city, underlying his attachment to the homeland. A vast section of the book is devoted to the “Catanese heart of Bellini” and to letters where the musician

\textsuperscript{39} “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 63.
\textsuperscript{40} “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 63.
\textsuperscript{41} Patriarca and Riall, 67.
\textsuperscript{42} “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 65.
declared his love for his native land. For instance, during the years in London, Bellini wrote of his desire to go back to Catania: “London is magnificent, if it was not so far away from Italy, I would go back often; life is good, but I am not as happy as when I am in the breast of my Sicily; I have in my mind not to spend so much time away from my native land.”

Overall, Bellini functioned as both a patriot and a creator of passionate music linked to the process of national unification; however, the regime tied the musician’s activism to its own nationalistic agenda to emerge as a re-establisher of order. Throughout the ventennio, Mussolini and his followers presented fascism as a romantic movement connected to the spiritual traditions of the Risorgimento. The use of examples familiar to the people is an essential component of fascist rhetoric. The Numero Commemorativo became a channel to depict fascism as deeply concerned with cultural, political, and social rebirth. The regime also deliberately used Catholic religious figures and practices to inculcate fascist values. Just as St. Agatha, protector of Catania, was mutilated by a pagan consul, but healed in one night by an angel, Italy had abandoned mediocrity: “thanks to the new lingering spirits in Italy, the new Italian music, for too long mutilated of beautiful melodies,” may soon flourish, “for a miracle of God, or for the work of a few good men.” Parallels between fascism’s actual situation and the past were common expedients to enforce popular loyalty towards the regime. The mutilation of St. Agatha

44 Roberto Farinacci, Periodo Aureo del Partito Nazionale Fascista (Foligno: Franco Campitelli Publisher, 1927), 39.
45 Since the third century A.D., St. Agatha has been the protector of Catania. She was a Christian and at only fourteen, she was tortured and ultimately condemned to death by Decius in 253. Today, she is still venerated by the citizens of Catania.
46 “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 83.
47 “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 83.
and the miraculous growth of her breasts acted as a metaphor to describe the current situation of rebirth after fascism.

The restoration of nationalism and Italian culture are ongoing concepts of fascist ideology and propaganda. The Bellinian celebrations are used as the culmination of the Risorgimento’s ideals. They were an excellent source of patriotism and a channel through which the regime proved its commitment to the rediscovery of Italian traditional culture. The Numero Commemorativo explained that prior to the fascist era, “raged at our house a wave of modernism that seemed to break down and submerge all greatness of the history of Italian music.” Part of the National Government’s mission was to honor the glorious fathers of the past in contrast to foreign influence and “modern” music. After World War I, it was important for regimes to re-avow their love and protection of national and cultural greatness. Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues, “the expansion of consumer capitalism and mass culture raised fears of eroded national and social boundaries, giving rise to protectionist measures in both democracies and dictatorships.” To fascism and its supporters, the re-interpretation of national culture offered a sense of stability and security. Fascism appealed to many intellectuals as a new model of modernity based on a reassertion of the national past.

The juxtaposition with liberal Italy is often a necessity for those exalting fascism and fascists expressed abhorrence of any contamination with foreign influence and modernism. For instance, prior to Fascism, “Donizetti and Bellini were relegated to the status of archeological reliquary and Verdi was considered the disgrace of Italian music. These things are no longer written nor thought,” thanks to the restoring mission of

fascism as rescuer and protector of Italianism.\(^{50}\) By describing the liberal government as an “enemy” that neglected Italian culture and history, fascism appeared as Italy’s exclusive alternative for rising as a dignified nation.

An essential aspect of fascist rhetoric was to insinuate political ideas with a mask of sincerity as fascism acted as a unique promoter of national needs. The purpose of the Mostra Belliniana was to show Bellini’s human and artistic personality in its wholeness and in unprecedented ways. Prior to 1935, the new fascists claimed other biographers did not describe “Bellini’s real humanity.”\(^{51}\) The official façade justified the events as not planned for “political opportunism” but to prove fascism’s genuine commitment as a servant of culture. Fascists imagined their role as the purest guardians of Italianism and art. Fascism also made culture available to the masses as part of its paternal responsibilities. Therefore, once again, the occasion became a channel through which fascism acted as special interpreter of nationalism.

Podestà Longhena opted to use Ursino Castle as the site for the Mostra Belliniana (Bellinian exhibition). Longhena undertook the challenge “with appropriate sense of environmental opportunities,”\(^{52}\) as the regime had recently renovated the castle, and gathered all the items that Italian and European musical institutions had sent. Guido Libertini, director of Ursino Castle, Benedetto Condorelli, director of the Museo Belliniano, and maestro Francesco Pastura were directly involved in the organization of the exhibition. The mostra was arranged in three main rooms: the Hall of Cimeli (heirlooms), the Hall of Scenography, and the Sancta Sanctorum which “contained the most valuable and meaningful items that belonged to the great musician and were a direct

---

\(^{50}\) “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 108.
\(^{51}\) “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 108.
\(^{52}\) “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 103.
expression of his genius." All three rooms were coordinated in details to show particular aspects of Bellini’s life and personality relevant to fascist ideology.

The Hall of Cimeli contained several portraits by Pelagio Palagi loaned from the Conservatorio of Naples, another by Giuseppe Platania coming from Conservatorio in Palermo, and two reproductions of portraits by Giuditta Cantù. The room displayed a piano (sent from Paris by Princess Gangi) that Bellini used in his last hours, and various letters, manuscripts, and rare editions. Other objects and portraits featured women that Bellini loved during his life. The last letters are “the current expression of Bellini’s genius but also of his soul in constant anxiety caused by the distance of his homeland.”

This example is essential for unveiling the role of the fatherland as the center of fascist life. The letters displayed in the Hall of Cimeli reveal the musician’s inner feelings relating to his love for the fatherland. Bellini was cosmopolitan but regardless of his fame abroad, no other country could replace his homeland. As a result, the exhibit reinforced the fascist concept of patria as the supreme good.

The Hall of Scenography displayed the eighteenth-century door (sent by the Conservatorio of Naples) from Bellini’s bedroom during his stay in Naples, and one of the most emotional items of the exhibit, the desolate plaster mask that sculptor Jean-Pierre Dantan created from Bellini’s cadaver before doctors began the embalming process. The decision to show the mask aimed at creating an object of worship. In Catholic tradition, the same procedure is performed on pious people who die and become candidates for sanctification. The Hall of Scenography also featured autographed musical scores of Zaira, Il Pirata, and Bianca and Fernando, as well as various letters.

53 “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 106.
54 “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 104.
autographs, posters, portraits, and printed material from the Paris’ Opera Library as well as the National Conservatory of Paris. The Museum of La Scala sent the sketch of a bronze statue of Bellini executed by sculptor Borghi and the Municipal Library of Palermo contributed to the room with two oil portraits of Bellini’s (by Platania) and fifteen letters written to friend Filippo Santocanale. A unique characteristic of the second room was the Rosario Bellomia’s reproduction of little theaters depicting the scenes of Bellini’s works.\textsuperscript{55} By featuring Bellini’s statue and his personal belongings and works, this room particularly emphasized the role of the musician as an idol of the fascist civic religion.

The third room is described in the commemorative number as the Sancta Sanctorum of the exhibition. A bust of Bellini surrounded a circular showcase featuring the musician’s works: “the bust of the Swan surrounds the works as constellations. The great heart of Catania beats at the center.”\textsuperscript{56} The purpose of the room is imbued with fascist rhetoric as Bellini plays the role of the sun upon which all other elements depend. The message of the exhibition is to let fascism nurture the lives of Italians as Bellini did with his music. In the exhibit, the musician emerged as the ultimate human incarnation of patriotism and as a symbol of national rejuvenation. His involvement with the Carboneria and his unofficial political activism through his works played an essential role in encouraging Italians to fight for unification.

Although Bellini had a brief career, he was both musician and patriot with the mission of “awakening the Italian souls.”\textsuperscript{57} Bellini represented the Italy of the nineteenth century, as both a “romantic and a conspirator” who nourished the Italian souls with his

\textsuperscript{55} “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 107.
\textsuperscript{56} “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo,” 107.
\textsuperscript{57} “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 109.
music and gave them a hope for the future. Francesco D’Ovidio, whose works illustrated re-enactments of the men of the *Risorgimento*, supported this conception of Bellini’s music, writing: “Bellini was cosmopolitan, and eliminated the differences between people by unifying with his music; on the other hand, he was the purest representative of his fatherland.” As a result, this interpretation of Bellini’s character provided fascism with an opportunity to reinforce cultural harmony within the Italian nation.

There is a clear attempt on the regime’s part to create a connection between Sicily, Bellini, and cultural unification with the rest of Italy. Although Italy had been a unified state since 1861, fascism struggled to nationalize the country. While the north was industrialized and advanced in education, the south was rural and regional in outlook. Fascists emphasized the idea that modernization in the south would eventually undermine social inequalities, thus boosting unity with the rest of Italy.

Newspapers of the time explained that, during the events of 1837 and 1848, Italian immigrants (coming from various regions of Italy) that lived in France, fled on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Bellini as it represented their distant homeland. In this instance, Bellini became a symbol of love for the country and synonym of Italy itself. The article noted, “Even away from our land, the name of Bellini and his memory were symbols of freedom and patriotism.” Rhetorical questions were used to link the history of Sicily to the *Risorgimento* and to unify a culturally and socially divided nation with a common Italian heritage. A newspaper asked: “Didn’t the Bourbon tyranny perhaps impede the transfer of Bellini’s body to Sicily because of the adhesion of all Sicilian cities to the

---

58 “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 113.
ceremony? Didn’t they fear the desire of this limb of Italian land to join the rest of the country?”  

This example defines the role of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies as enemy of the Risorgimento, but it also seeks to tie the history of Sicily to national unification. By marking Sicily’s desire of becoming a part of Italy, the rhetorical questions are strategies to find common ground in the present and to illustrate that Sicily adhered to the fascist mission. Fascism’s reinterpretation of Bellini’s as “son of the Fatherland” and “the master who Mazzini was awaiting,” 62 are strategic expedients to incorporate the Italian national values into a Sicilian artist.

Director Condorelli also emphasized the connection between the Anno Belliniano and the Risorgimento. He stated to a reporter: “through the celebration, fascist Italy links to the best tradition of our country; the one that has given us pride for our path.” 63 This statement is an explicit indication of the regime’s connection to the struggles for national unity. Condorelli continued, “Nobody can escape the high moral and patriotic significance of the year dedicated to the musician who lived when it all started.” 64 Bellini’s important historical role also emerged from his desire to show his contemporaries how Italy, although nonexistent politically, was already united in the hearts of the people. Condorelli lastly proclaimed, “Let's say that with Vincenzo Bellini, the Italian Risorgimento imposes itself in the cities of the world.” 65 Such declarations confirm the role of Bellini’s music not only as the work of a great artist, but as central to

61 “Celebrazioni Belliniane” Lo Stato Fascista, November 25, 1934.
Italian unity. Because of his commitment to patriotic ideas of national unification, Bellini is portrayed as a secret patriot who inspired many to rebel.

Consequently, Bellini was also used to reinforce the fascistissimo theme of war as a necessary instrument for human change. The opera Norma has relevance relating to the heroic and violent component of fascist ideology, and fascists praised Norma for its final “Hymn of War.” In 1848, the Austrian police banned artists from performing this chorus, giving this opera even more symbolic political power.  

During that time, “the ‘Guerra Guerra’ chorus of Norma was interpreted patriotically as a genuine hymn to Italian independence arousing approval in the politically charged climate of the time.” Norma played an important role in the history of Risorgimento as a spark to rebellion. For instance, on the eve of the Second War of Independence against Austria in 1859, with the hymn “Guerra Guerra!” of Norma, Milan expressed its will for independence and his sense of Italianità. Before 1923 (pre-fascist era), the final part of Norma was changed compared to Bellini’s original version. The Anno Belliniano became an occasion for Maestro Gino Marinuzzi, to resume the final chorus’ “unjustified mutilation” that incited war.

Another work of Bellini, Il Pirata, was also used to exalt the regime’s mission and the concept of war as a fundamental value of fascist ideology. The performance of July 20, 1935, became an occasion to underline fascism’s positive influence and to share the importance of war as a necessary evil. Il Pirata had not been performed in Catania since 1919. During that time, the city struggled to return to normality after the war and

---

67 Patriarca and Riall, 67.
68 “Celebrazioni Belliniane” Lo Stato Fascista, November 25, 1934.
69 “Il Ciclo di Conferenze,” 115.
opened the doors of *Teatro Bellini*. In reality, the situation in Catania did not normalize as “the illusion that the war was only an interlude lasted a brief time. Everyone knows what happened in Catania, in Italy, and in the world and how the nation became aware of the abyss that had been dug between *'i tempi di prima'*\(^\text{70}\) and *'i tempi di dopo'*\(^\text{71}\) Fascist newspapers praised Gualtiero, one of the main characters of *Il Pirata*, for being loyal to his fatherland and his family. As it was done to explain the magnificent reconstructing work of the regime, once again, St. Agatha was used in Fascist rhetoric to deliver the importance of the theme of war. *Lo Stato Fascista* resumed the last day of the representation of *Il Pirata* in 1919 to illustrate the idea of war as an essential tool of fascism in achieving social change. On that occasion, the devotees that followed the saint’s relics through town were described as “a group of free soldiers from which rose the cry of the trenches.”\(^\text{72}\) The concept of trenchocracy was central in fascist thought where the Duce became the supreme leader and center of the nation’s life.

*Ducismo* emerges from the Bellinian celebrations as both essential component of fascist ideology and a pillar in the creation of consensus. In 1934, the central government informed *Podestà* Longhena that “the whole Italian Nation, for the Duce’s will is preparing to commemorate with solemnity the glory of the Italian musical genius that had wide resonance in the world and that even today, after a century, continues to remain the purest expression of melody.”\(^\text{73}\) Since the early 1920s, Mussolini had shown interest in the purchase of the *Casa Bellini* and to its transition into a museum. As a result, Condorelli decided to place a plaque at the entrance of the museum to honor Mussolini’s

---

\(^{70}\) The terms translates to “the times of before” “the times of after” clearly referring to the situation prior to the advent of fascism.


\(^{73}\) “Il Rotary Club per Bellini” *Rivista del Comune di Catania*, Anno VII 2, (March-April 1935): 120.
interest in donating a personal contribution for the purchase of the musician’s house and for declaring the Casa Bellini a National Monument. The tag stated: “By decree of Benito Mussolini, Head of Government and Duce of Fascism, the house where Vincenzo Bellini was born, was declared a National Monument, November 29th 1923.”

Mussolini also acted as a central figure on the organizational level and as supreme judge over disputes relating to budget. On April 3, 1935, the Provincial Fascist Trade Unions of the Show-business Industry Group, “fearful of seeing neglected by apathy or incompetence all those good initiatives to well honor the name of our great fellow citizen” wrote a letter of complaint to the Secretary for Press and Propaganda relating to the abandonment of a project destined to involve all popular strata. In the program's initial plan, it included a course of recital that Carro di Tespi Lirico would provide at the end of the festivities.

The Bellinian Committee abandoned the idea once it had knowledge of the expenses necessary to hire Carro di Tespi for its first appearance in Sicily. To fill this gap in the program, Podestà Longhena suggested organizing some of Bellini's opera performances in the Giardino Bellini “with the specific intention of involving the masses of public that, due to the high cost of the tickets, were not able to attend theater performances.” While waiting for the answer, the Comitato decided to abandon the project for lack of funds and to organize a Concert Band instead.

---

74 Document 167, (ADSDC)
75 Unione Provinciale Sindacati Fascisti Lavoratori Industria Gruppo Spettacolo.
76 Document 23, (ADSDC).
77 Sottosegretario per Stampa e Propaganda.
78 Document 23, (ADSDC).
On April 8, 1935, the Provincial Fascist Trade Unions of the Show-business Industry Group received an answer. They learned that the “magnificent Duce” had already intervened in the matter. Mussolini indeed provided funds for the aforementioned performances thus solving the controversy. The Trade Unions enthusiastically described Mussolini’s intervention as reinforcing “love, faith and gratitude” towards the DUCE, “beloved and always and everywhere present in the hearts of the Italian people.”

On another instance, on February 19, 1934, the Duce received an anonymous complaint, relating to the incompetence of certain people involved in the celebration. The message specified its scope as preventing “the damage caused to the prestige of our beloved leader.” The letter claimed that the Prefect had organized a commission of 68 elements, 90% of whom were absolutely incompetent and irreverent to the ideals of the Bellinian festivities and that Longhena had announced a concert performed by the students of the Conservatorio of Palermo instead of a performance of professionals. The letter appealed for a direct intervention of the Duce, as supreme organizer of the centennial to avoid a scandal that might harm the respectability of the Duce, of Sicily, and of Italy. Although the archive did not document Mussolini’s response, these two letters are a great example of the dictator’s direct involvement in the celebrations.

The Duce’s intervention emphasizes his character as magnanimous father of Italy and his commitment to propaganda. The examples show that the fascist system was mainly centered on the figure of the Duce as paternal protector of the people, particularly in terms of organizational problems. Ultimately, Mussolini’s participation demonstrates

---

80 Document 47, (ADSDC).
81 Document 265, (ADSDC).
how fascism’s pledge to functionality and success was important for Italy and for the regime’s reputation abroad.

In the mid-1930s, Italy’s goal was to bring its cultural products to the international community and to make southern cities such as Palermo and Catania major centers of a new Mediterranean renaissance.\(^{82}\) By the end of 1935, the decision to invade Ethiopia was the culmination of fascist ideals of imposing the ‘Latin civilization in the Mediterranean.’\(^{83}\) Bellini’s centenary was suitable for portraying the regime as a global cosmopolitan force deserving the admiration of other nations. The idea of *bella figura*\(^{84}\) was central for Italy to rise to the level of Western powers. Domestic success was the necessary ingredient to achieve expansionism abroad.

The Rotary Club of Catania drew the attention of the whole world to “the beauty of this celebration which takes an active part in a gathering of Rotarians that will honor the man who seems to symbolize the ‘eternal youth of art.’”\(^{85}\) Other members of Rotary around the world responded with joy to the celebration by honoring the musician all over in Italy and even in the United States. On January 21, 1935, the Prefect of Catania, Guido Beer, Vincenzo Zangara (Federal Secretary and member of the National Directory of PNF), and *maestro* Marinuzzi, as well as large numbers of Rotarians from Rome, Palermo, Messina, Brescia, and Genova gathered at *Teatro Bellini* to inaugurate the Opera season.

On that occasion, Gino Bandini (Rotarian of Rome) entertained the masses “on the great excitement generated in the Italian groups of North America by a memorable

\(^{82}\) Ben-Ghiat, 124.

\(^{83}\) Bosworth, 279.

\(^{84}\) A beautiful figure; to give a good impression.

performance of *Norma,*” exalting the union of the Italian race throughout the world as a fundamental element of culture. In another instance, Sicilian immigrants in New York City paid a tribute to the young musician’s memory. The *Cenacolo Artistico Letterario Siciliano* “Vincenzo De Simone” of New York stated, “We immigrants wanted to illustrate and commemorate the centenary of such a great musician with a small vernacular volume where we honor the star from our land of Sicily.” This example explains the efficacy of the strong fascist network in terms of cultural involvement of Italians all over the world. It also displays the commitment to serve the Fatherland and a strong sense of belonging to the nation. The Italian National Agency for Tourism (ENIT) also requested to the Committee for the Centenary of Vincenzo Bellini to be able to hire translators in both English and French to spread the news about the festivities abroad. Lastly, the Ministry of Communication ordered a complete series of postage stamps created to commemorate the centenary of the death of Bellini.

The age of the composer plays a role relating to the importance of youth in the creation of consensus. The fact that Bellini died at only thirty-four is significant in underlining youth as an eternal value. As a result, his legacy as a young successful Italian, involved in both culture and national issues, made him a perfect object of propaganda directed to younger groups; however, the regime aimed at involving in the celebration not only youth, but all ages and social strata.

---

86 “Il Rotary Club per Bellini” *Rivista del Comune di Catania,* Anno VII 2, (March-April 1935): 120.
87 Document 144, (AMCB).
88 *Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo.*
89 Document 47, (AMCB).
90 Document 4, (AMCB).
Because of such an extensive project, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND) scheduled visits to the museum “in order to increase its recreational and cultural activities to have a better understanding of the important monuments and works of art of our city.”92 The Committee undertook a plan designed to attract people from all over Italy to participate to the events in Catania. As a result, Galeazzo Ciano, the Secretary for Press and Propaganda, requested the Ministry of Communication to grant discounted train rates for those wishing to visit Catania during the Bellinian celebrations and particularly a reduction of 50% in the period from 15 June to 15 July and from September 1 to 30.93

The Anno Belliniano gained success abroad, in Italy, and certainly in Catania. Pictures of the time show the response to the celebration and the intensity of popular participation. Numerous parades took place in Catania, some spontaneous, other organized by the regime. The celebrations began with processions through the main streets of the city, to bring wreaths to Bellini’s statue and to his grave at the cathedral. Newspapers of the time described the spontaneous parade of January 2 as a sincere Catanese tribute to Bellini’s memory. Il Popolo di Sicilia described the city as “throbbing with enthusiasm, visibly demonstrating the love for his beloved son.”94 Following the initial parade, with the same spontaneity but with more preparation, another floral tribute took place on January 25 to commemorate the centennial of I Puritani.

A massive crowd gathered in Piazza Mazzini where the procession started in the presence of municipal authorities and of a band. The shops in the main streets of the city

---

92 Document 211, (AMCB).
93 Document 59, (ADSDC).
were decorated with flowers and with Bellini’s portraits.\footnote{\textquotedblleft Celebrazioni Belliniane\textquotedblright{} Lo Stato Fascista, November 25, 1934.} An intense popular participation with “more than 15,000 people of all social categories”\footnote{Document 10, (ADSDC).} accompanied the presence of fascist hierarchs such as the Prefect, the Podestà, the Dean of the Province, Senators, Deputies, maestro Marinuzzi, and opera artists of Teatro Bellini. The procession moved from Piazza Mazzini directly to the house that saw the birth of Vincenzo Bellini, where hierarchs laid wreaths of laurel. Along the route, the procession “increased for the constant influx of people eager to honor Bellini”\footnote{Document 10, (ADSDC).} and went to the cathedral to pay homage to the tomb of the great musician. Immediately after, the procession continued to honor the statue of Bellini in Stesichorus Square. The ceremony was also attended by the florists of the Riviera Ligure “thus giving it a high sense of national solidarity,”\footnote{Document 10, (ADSDC).} while honoring an important exponent of the Italian glorious past. The presence of the most prestigious florists in Italy accentuated the value of the event relating to its national significance and prestige.

Documents of the time refer to the celebration as “the Bellinian pilgrimage” as if the composer had divine attributes. The use of words as “pilgrimage” and “immortality” is essential for grasping the regime’s commitment to adulating Italian personages as divine beings of a religion centered on ultra-nationalism. Fascist rhetoric often created parallels between important characters of Italian history and religious practices as a means of increasing popular involvement. For instance, Director Condorelli organized a pilgrimage from the Cathedral to the Museo Belliniano while carrying the composer’s
embalmed heart. The intent was to allow the people of Catania to put their hearts concretely close to Bellini’s.99

Newspapers, journals, and official documents of the time constantly referred to Mussolini as the organizer of the celebration; however, he did not attend the festivities in Catania during 1935. Early in January, the Prefect Beer had invited the President of the Chamber of Deputies who had regretfully declined the invite, due to “commitments that I cannot postpone.”100 During that time, Mussolini and French Prime Minister Pierre Laval had met in Rome to find an agreement over colonial disputes in Africa.101 The physical participation of the Duce and other functionaries seemed a logical consequence of Mussolini’s involvement as master of the show. The absence of the dictator and of other hierarchs may suggest a superficial attitude towards the event; however, responsibilities of government such as the invasion of Ethiopia (started in October 1935) might have played a role in keeping Mussolini physically away from the celebrations.

Despite the reasons behind the organization of the centennial, the regime succeeded in involving the people in the parades and other cultural events. The Anno Belliniano became an occasion to educate in the history of romantic Italy and to broaden the knowledge of the Risorgimento. Regardless of Mussolini’s absence, the Duce’s role in the purchase of Bellini’s house and his involvement in resolving economic and organizational issues display the regime’s commitment to culture. The coincidence between the Bellinian celebrations and the plan to invade Ethiopia also shows the regime’s quest for international prestige and its pledge to involve the south in the dream of a new Mediterranean empire.

100 Document 137, (ADSDC).
The one-hundredth year anniversary of Bellini’s death serves as an excellent illustration of the dynamics of fascist propaganda. The *Anno Belliniano* celebrated the Sicilian musician’s artistic and personal attributes by matching them with essential elements of fascist ideology. The regime clearly instrumentalized Bellini’s Sicilian origins and his intellectual involvement with romantic Italy to create cultural cohesion in the fascist nation. As a familiar figure of the national cultural heritage, Bellini embodied the ultimate synthesis of fascism’s totalitarian style of political indoctrination. Ultimately, fascism emerged as the sole interpreter of national needs, as the political force fulfilling the *Risorgimento*, and as the creator of a new Italian superpower.
Figure 4. *Hall of Scenographies*, “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo”

Figure 5. *Hall of Cimeli, “Vincenzo Bellini: Numero Commemorativo” Rivista del Comune di Catania* Anno VII 1 (January-February 1935): 104.
Figure 7. *In front of Bellini’s House, Rivista del Comune di Catania*, Anno VII 2, (March-April 1935): 123.
MANIFESTAZIONI DI CARATTERE POPOLARE

L’anno belliniano già si era iniziato con un corto quasi improvvisato che, percorrendo le principali vie della città, aveva portato corone alla statua di Vincenzo Bellini ed alla tomba di Lui alla Cattedrale.

Con la stessa spontaneità, ma con maggiore preparazione, un altro omaggio floreale ebbe luogo il 25 gennaio, la data che segnò il centenario del triunfo dei Funtani. Una folla imponente si adunò alle ore 9 nella piazza Mazzini.

duce si formò il corteo che, preceduto dalle Au-
dernità e dalla Banda Comunale, raggiunse alla casa-
di di Bellini, sul cui prospetto fu posta una coro-
della Cattedrale dove il popolo che canti-
ei cori in poco tempo la lastre funebri che cul-
tano in piazza Garibaldi. I negozii

Figure 8. Homage of Flowers of January 25, Rivista del Comune di Catania, Anno VII 2, (March-April 1935): 122.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

The fascist desire for cultural renovation assumed a high significance in Sicily through the regime’s special interest towards the purchase and rehabilitation of museums and places of historical importance. Fascism’s involvement in culture and modernization in Sicily was not exclusively limited to Bellini. Valuable examples of fascism as architect and restorer of the national historical conscience are the purchase and restoration of Ursino Castle and Biscari Palace in Catania. Today, both structures constitute two of the most important historical buildings of the city, testifying to Catania’s cultural relevance throughout the centuries.

Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II built Ursino Castle in 1239. For centuries, the castle served as a fortification to defend the city. From the late 1200s until the early 1600s, it served as the royal residence of the Spanish rulers from Aragona. In 1836, the city renounced the castle, ceding it to the Bourbon ruler of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. During that time, the structure fell into ruin and was used as prison until the end of World War I.¹ The fascist resurrection of Ursino Castle took place in the early 1930s. The regime assumed full responsibility in an extensive plan of external and internal renovation. Journals of the time saw the undertaking as “another prodigious work of the fascist era.”² Furthermore, commentators thought that under the Bourbon government, the castle lost its historical prestige and was reduced to “an old prison that stunk like a

lazaretto.” In other words, because of the Spanish government’s negligence, the people had forgotten the historical importance of the building. After denigrating the past caretakers of the castle, the journal goes on to describe the new regime: “today, Castello Ursino seems a temple that resurrected as a creature that after a long suffering and silence has freed itself from the dangers of death.” In such instances, fascism is openly attacking the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies as an enemy of culture and history. The statement also provided a parallel often used by fascist rhetoric: since the March on Rome, Italy resurrected from mediocrity to embrace a new brilliant future that fascism offered.

In 1926, historians Federico De Roberto and Vincenzo Finocchiaro, with the cooperating efforts of the municipal administration of Catania, took on the project of restoring the castle to its previous splendor. Journals described the initiative as a “fascist dream” that became a reality in 1930, when the castle was emptied out for restoration. The comune’s ultimate goal was to use the castle as a museum containing artworks and historical items of ancient Catania.

Under the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the castle’s appearance had been deformed beyond recognition. The Bourbons transformed valuable medieval rooms into dining rooms and kitchens. Beautiful doors built in the sixteenth century were all cut, chiseled and covered with plaster. Few architectural details remained intact and the original structure of the castle was almost unrecognizable. Renovation brought to life, when possible, the medieval architecture, leaving the style of the 1500s where it had

---

5 “Castello Ursino-Museo Comunale,” 255.
profoundly altered the previous aspect of the building. The fascist restoration also aimed at consolidating the walls damaged by the earthquakes of 1693 and 1818.

The regime utilized the renovation of Ursino Castle to prove its commitment to building a future that emphasized the country’s epic past. Journals of the time described the conclusion of the renovation by stating that the castle “now wants to live a new life and not just survive with gravity and melancholy of its glorious past.” In this instance, the parallel with the regime’s agenda is clear: Mussolini and his followers envisioned the creation of a new Italy that honored its past with pride, but that looked to the future as a new imperial power. Cultural renovation assumed an essential role in preparing Sicily to join such ambitious plan.

The year 1930 is also important for the purchase of another piece of Catania’s history, Palazzo Biscari. Ignazio II, prince of Biscari, built the palace in rococo style towards the end of the 1600s. The Biscari family was highly involved in archeological discoveries in Catania. Several excavations recovered various ancient Greek and Roman items; the Biscaris were also responsible for re-discovering the Greco-Roman amphitheater that several volcanic eruptions and earthquakes had previously covered. The Biscarian collection included Greek and Etruscan vases, Greek statues and Greek and Egyptians marble inscriptions. Under fascism, after more than a half a century of inextricable disputes relating to ownership, the comune obtained full possession of Palazzo Biscari.

---

8 Domenico Sestini, Descrizione del Museo d’Antiquaria e del Gabinetto d’Istoria Natuarale del Principe di Biscari di Catania (Livorno: Pier Carlo Giorgi, 1787), 2.
9 Sestini, 8.
10 “Castello Ursino-Museo Comunale,” 257.
On July 3, 1929, the podestà authorized the expropriation for public use of Palazzo Biscari and provided more than 200 million lire for the purchase of those shares that heirs did not spontaneously donate to the comune.\textsuperscript{11} The resolution allowed the Administration of the city of Catania to accept the donation of various shares. The document described the podestà’s initiative as “a patriotic decision” aimed at organizing and protecting all the relics and objects of art that belonged to the Biscari Museum.\textsuperscript{12} Heirs that spontaneously donated their quotas such as Stefania and Giuseppina Pulvirenti were called “patriots” for wanting to contribute to the preservation of the Sicilian heritage.\textsuperscript{13} On May 7, 1931, the Contracts Office of the comune reported that the podestà intended to bring together the entire collection of antique objects constituting the Biscari Museum and to buy the shares owned by all those heirs that did not donate them spontaneously.\textsuperscript{14} The municipal administration constantly emphasized that a high sense of patriotism accompanied the purchase of the museum. On October 24, 1930, in the document pertaining to the donation of Annunziato Sciuto, the comune thanked the heir by stating “the administration wished to complete the entire purchase more for sentimental reasons than for actual need,”\textsuperscript{15} thus reiterating the idea of cultural preservation as a patriotic duty.

In 1929, as the comune was completing the last bureaucratic steps to conclude the purchase, a dispute arose relating to some of the Biscari collections that risked being sold at an auction. On July 29, 1929, the Sopraintendenza alle Antichità della Sicilia (Superintendency of Antiquities of Sicily) requested the Prefect of Catania to block the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Document 23569 Prefettura Serie I, Elenco 43, Cass. 1-14, Archivio di Stato di Catania (ADSDC).
\textsuperscript{12} Document 58781 Prefettura Serie I, ADSDC.
\textsuperscript{13} Document 58781 Prefettura Serie I, ADSDC.
\textsuperscript{14} No number, Prefettura Serie I, ADSDC.
\textsuperscript{15} Document 47163, ADSDC.
\end{flushright}
proceedings. On August 4, 1929, “with urgent ticket,” the Prefect suspended the sale to protect the collections. As the municipal administration was completing the purchase, on March 8, 1930, the Superintendency stated to the Prefect its concern with the preservation of the aforementioned collections. Once the comune deposited the money for the expropriation, the Superintendent requested the transport of the precious objects to a public institution as temporary storage, pending the completion of the practice of expropriation.

Given the state of complete abandonment of the collections in question, the Superintendent considered that transportation was essential because the objects were “located in a building without a guardian and risking ruin because of the lack of maintenance.” The Superintendent suggested storing the collections at the new Museo Civico, located at Ursino Castle. Guido Libertini, director of the new Museo Civico Ursino, began his work with “an act of considerable significance” by immediately transferring valuable objects of the Museo Biscariano inside Castello Ursino to protect them during the restoration of the palazzo.

The regime’s interest in preserving Sicilian historical buildings and in publicly commemorating famous characters such as Bellini provides important elements for evaluating fascist ideology. Such undertakings helped educate the people about Italian cultural heritage; however, they also functioned as essential channels through which the regime subtly insinuated its values into society.

---

16 Document 9028, ADSDC.
17 Document 9028, ADSDC.
18 Document 9028, ADSDC.
This paper does not dispute the eclectic and flexible nature of fascist ideology. Fascism was indeed a mixture of many ideologies that evolved over time. Mussolini’s idea of a stato totalitario never materialized as the Duce had to adapt some ideological standpoints to compromise with the Catholic Church, with the King, and with powerful elites. The conclusion of this study elucidates the unity of fascism as a concrete political force that used consistent rhetorical strategies to build consensus. Despite the contradictions between wanting to revolutionize and modernize the country through a reassertion of the past, fascism’s most unitary pledge was its perseverance in wanting to achieve modernization and relevance at all costs.

The Duce’s ultimate promise was completing a revolution that aimed at bringing Italy to the level of other Western powers. To achieve such ambitious plan, Mussolini had to deal with serious domestic issues such as criminality, poverty and ignorance in Southern Italy. In Sicily, Cesare Mori’s anti-mafia campaign proved effective in terms of temporarily undermining mafia power; however, in the 1930s, social and cultural inequalities still hindered the country’s path to modernization.\(^{20}\)

Mussolini’s idea of fascistization rested on the promise that fascist propaganda made that its regime would renew the glory of the Italian national past. My analysis of the Bellinian celebrations demonstrates how the regime used Bellini as a vehicle to promote essential elements and goals of the fascist agenda. Planning to begin the invasion of Ethiopia by October 1935, the regime forcefully implemented through Bellini’s centennial its legitimate goal to honor the Risorgimento and to achieve modernization and social change.

The emphasis on the Risorgimento unveils essential elements of the fascist ideology, its specific connection to the romantic tradition and to post-World War I disappointments. Constant attacks against the liberal government of pre-fascist Italy certainly served to portray fascism as an innovator; however, they also unveiled the frustration that arose after the end of the conflict. Fascists accused liberalism of passively accepting post-war treaties that stipulated the loss of Istria and the city of Fiume. Such dissatisfaction sparked fascism’s success in the interwar years as the apotheosis of Italian unresolved issues of national unification.

Because of the political disappointments that followed the Great War, fascists saw their movement as the only viable option to fulfill the dream of uniting all Italians under one political entity. This study shows various instances where fascist rhetoric attacked “enemies” of the Risorgimento. Documents of the time constantly denigrated governments that ruled Italy prior to 1861, such as the Austro-Hungarians and the Bourbons. Propaganda also labeled liberals as traitors of the patria, trying to infect Italianism with foreign influence.21

Relating to both the purchase of museums in Catania and to Bellini’s centenary, fascist rhetoric constantly denigrated the Bourbon rulers for neglecting Italian culture and for opposing political unification. In contrast, fascism acted as the supreme guardian of culture. By sponsoring various public works and cultural commemorations, the regime portrayed itself as a re-establisher of the social order that Italians had craved since political unification.

Liberal democracy was under siege for failing to create an Italian imperial power. Propaganda attacked liberalism for being complacent in the face of Western powers’

21 Roberto Farinacci, *Storia del Fascismo* (Cremona: Cremona Nuova Publisher, 1940), 49.
decisions and for failing to assert Italian nationalism. In fascist thought, the desire to promote a cosmopolitan Italy and to rise to the level of other nations was crucial to the creation of an empire. In order to support expansionism abroad, fascism instilled in the population the idea that war was a necessary step to achieve social change domestically. Ben-Ghiat argued, “Throughout the two decades of dictatorship, war was considered the privileged motor of collective transformations that would allow Italy to assume a leadership role in a new international order.”  

The Bellinian celebrations contain various mentions of war as a sublime experience, particularly relating to Norma and to the chorus “Hymn of War.”

Fascism’s extensive involvement in public works and cultural festivals served to portray the regime as a sponsor of traditional values; however, such ambitious undertakings specifically functioned as channels to show fascism’s power and pledge to modernization both domestically and internationally. The centennial of Bellini’s death and the purchase of other museums in Catania aimed at renovating Sicilian culture, but they also propelled national cohesion by connecting the history of Sicily to the Italian Risorgimento. The fascist venture of the conquest of Ethiopia in October 1935, casts more light on the political function of Bellini’s centennial as an instrument of exhibitionism connected to the idea of bella figura.  

With the intent of “impressing” other countries, the Rotary Club mobilized in promoting the celebrations abroad, particularly among immigrants in the United States. Reaching across the Atlantic Ocean was essential to assert Italy’s new role in the world.

---

23 Litterally means “beautiful figure.” In this case, it also means “to give a good impression.”
The Italian nation as a whole, with its culture and values, had to exceed its borders and geographical limitations, thus providing a logical justification to embrace imperialism.

The fact that Mussolini spent various amounts of money to ensure the success of the *Anno Belliniano* is also indicative of its political significance. The year 1935 was challenging for Italy’s finances. As with all military campaigns, the Ethiopian expedition required vast expenditures. Propaganda also aimed at gaining support for the mission, “at home, the regime mounted its most obstreperous propaganda campaign to justify Italy’s unilateral act.” By Christmas 1935, fascists collected 312,000 wedding rings that patriotic Italian women had donated to support the cause. Therefore, the regime’s commitment to ensure the success of the Bellinian celebrations had a political scope connected to the creation of an empire. Fascists attributed a special role to culture as an instrument of popular awakening and expansionism. Sponsoring the uniqueness and advancement of the Italian culture compared to the rest of the world, boosted a sense of Italian superiority. On the other hand, such uniqueness promoted the desire to embrace imperialism as a burden in spreading Italianism.

In the struggle to expansionism and national regeneration, the figure of the Duce acted as sole interpreter of Italian needs and as the man of providence that intended to fix all problems. The constant parallels with saints and national figures had the purpose of portraying the fascist regime as a miraculous enterprise in which Mussolini was the master of puppets. The Duce carefully built his image as a leader concerned with protecting folk traditions and popular characters. The cooptation of the *Befana* functioned as a pseudo-religious figure connected to the Catholic tradition and as a popular folk hero.

---

24 Bosworth, 367.
26 Ben-Ghiat, 7.
able to capture the spiritual imagination of the masses. Bosworth noted, “As a dictator, at a public level, Mussolini seemed like a God.”²⁷ Relating to the organizational disputes of Bellini’s centennial, the fact that coordinators and citizens sent various complaints directly to the Duce indicate a trend in considering Mussolini as a magnanimous figure sincerely engaged in solving various controversial issues.

Ultimately, the decision to commemorate the centennial of Bellini’s death had various functions. The musician’s figure tied to the Risorgimento and to the romantic ideal of music and art as a means for expressing political messages. Bellini, as a member of the Carboneria, provided a good example for young Italians to honor their country in lieu of the Ethiopian adventure. Bellini’s character as a Sicilian musician devoted to national unification and attached to the fatherland served as a model for both younger and older generations to connect the history of Sicily to the rest of Italy. Sponsoring national cohesion was crucial for the regime in support of future imperial ventures.

To conclude, this study fits with newer historiographical trends that aim at explaining and analyzing fascist strategies of political indoctrination. It provides an original, if not exclusive, analysis of Sicily during the 1930s and of its role during the fascist regime. Comprehending the role of Sicily during the 1930s is vital in determining Italian imperial attitudes from 1935 onward. Cultural renovation and modernization benefited Sicily and the Italian state; however, embracing imperialism had an enormous economic and political cost. Many fascists saw 1935 as the apotheosis of the regime’s success. In reality, after the invasion of Ethiopia, fascist Italy slowly began its path to international isolation, and ultimately, to economic and political capitulation.

²⁷ Bosworth, 366.
REFERENCES

Archives

Archivio di Stato, Catania, Italy.

Prefettura Gabinetto, b.77. c.1672.


Archivio Museo Civico Belliniano, Catania, Italy.


Rivista del Comune di Catania, Anno VII 2, (March-April 1935).

Biblioteca Universitaria Ursino-Recupero, Catania, Italy.


Newspapers

Corriere della Sera. Milano, Italy.

Il Popolo d’ Italia. Milano, Italy.

Il Popolo di Roma. Roma, Italy.

Il Popolo di Sicilia. Catania, Italy.

Il Regime Fascista, Cremona, Italy.

Lo Stato Fascista. Catania, Italy.
The Times. London, United Kingdom.

Books


Periodo Aureo del Partito Nazionale Fascista. Foligno: Franco Campitelli Publisher, 1927.

Storia del Fascismo. Cremona: Cremona Nuova Publisher, 1940.


**Journal Articles**


