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Consensus for Mussolini? Popular opinion in the Province of  
Venice (1922-1943)

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## **Abstract**

The thesis focuses on the response of Venice province population to the rise of Fascism and to the regime's attempts to fascistise Italian society. Key concepts discussed in this thesis include local identity, forms of individual and group loyalty, passive resistance, and social mobilisation – all factors that have been mentioned by historians in the past when discussing the Venice case but that have not yet been subject of a methodical study. Contributing to the ongoing historiographical debate on the nature of the Fascist dictatorship, the thesis argues that the regime did not manage to fulfil its totalitarian aspirations. This argument is developed around analysis of popular opinion and the way in which limited local consensus for the Fascist regime contributed to Fascism's downfall.

In order to offer a discussion of the extent to which Venetian society was fascistised, this thesis looks at numerous local social groups, at their attitudes towards the regime, and at how the rise of Fascism changed their internal dynamics. The thesis begins with a discussion of the Party, and to provides a clear picture of how 'national' and 'local' interacted alongside the establishment of the structures. The focus then shifts to the working class and the way it came to terms with the Fascist regime. The third chapter deals with two groups that provided a particular challenge to the regime's totalitarian aspirations: Venetian Youth and the Catholic Church with its attempts to resist and to jeopardize the regime's intention to monopolise every aspect of social life. The fourth chapter is a case-study of the Venetian Jewish community, of how the Race Laws affected the life of Venetian Jews. Lastly, the fifth chapter, by way of a conclusion, studies the 'Fascist War' (1940-1943) as a microcosm that explains for the local Venetian context how the lack of popular consent enhanced the regime's inability to survive war-induced challenges.

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# Introduction

## 1. Fascism and ‘Divided Memory’: politicians, historians and the post-war discourse on Fascism

Post-war Italy was characterised by divided memory.<sup>1</sup> Contested and contrasting interpretations of the country’s recent past made it extremely difficult for the political institutions to build a ‘shared memory’ relating to Fascism.

The formation of the Republic in 1946 was only a brief moment of unity when the contrasts and the factions were concealed. The creation of a dominant anti-Fascist culture and the exclusion of the narrative of the defeated created a discursive hegemony. Italian public opinion after the Second World War was completely immersed in the victors’ *vulgata* and the issue of the divided memory among Italians remained unsolved.<sup>2</sup> This narrative already started developing in the course of the war with the complicity of the monarchy, the Committee of National Liberation and the Allies. The aim of this national discourse was to blame Mussolini for having brought Italians into the war through an unnatural alliance with Germany and counter the *repubblicchini*’s accusations that anti-Fascists were traitors of the country. This narrative was further reinforced by two main events: firstly, Gen. Dwight

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<sup>1</sup>F. Focardi, *La guerra della memoria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005), 6. The war produced different experiences and multiple memories: the Italian African campaign veterans, those of Albania, Greece and Yugoslavia (D. Conti, *L’occupazione italiana dei Balcani. Crimini di guerra e mito della ‘brava gente’ (1940-1943)* (Rome: Odradek, 2008), the partisans of different parties, the fascists of Salò (R. Chiarini, *L’ultimo fascismo. Storia e memoria della Repubblica di Salò* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), the deported in the Nazi camps (L. Klinkhammer, *Stragi naziste in Italia* (Rome: Donzelli, 1977), the exiles from Istria and Dalmatia and those killed and put into the *foibe* (R. Pupo, *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l’esilio* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>J. Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12.



Eisenhower's public announcement of the surrender of Italy to the Allies and Italy's signature of an unconditional Armistice on the 8 September 1943; secondly, the deposition of Mussolini from power in favour of Gen. Pietro Badoglio, the man who had assumed power in Mussolini's stead by request of King Victor Emmanuel.<sup>3</sup> According to this narrative, Italians had no need to feel guilty about their Fascist past, the blame was only on Mussolini and his fellow Fascists. The scope of Fascism's demonisation was to establish an implicit distinction between 'good Italians' and 'bad Fascists'.<sup>4</sup> The resistance against Germany was portrayed as a new popular *Risorgimento* in which Italians, innocent victims of the fanatic Fascist regime, were revolting against Mussolini. This propaganda also contributed to establishing a widespread narrative of *Italiani brava gente* (Italians, good people), a myth which has been promoted by the new post-war Italian Republic, claiming the purported 'humanity' of the Italian people and soldiers during the war with the intent to blame Mussolini and the German allies for Italy's war crimes, while absolving the population from the responsibility.<sup>5</sup> The myth had traction, especially in its contrast to the image of the evil Germans portrayed as remaining fanatical, cruel and loyal to Hitler until the end.<sup>6</sup> The belief that 'good Italians'

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive account of the Republic of Salò period, see L. Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere. I combattenti, i politici, gli amministratori, i socializzatori* (Milan: Garzanti, 2010), A. Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini. Salò: il tempo dell'odio e della violenza* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999) and R. Moseley, *Mussolini: The Last 600 Days of Il Duce* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> P. Corner, *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism and Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122. See again Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 62-66 and A. Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> D. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 362. See also Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?*, 8. "The myth of the 'Italians good people' has covered infamies (...). It has neither right of citizenship, nor historical foundation. It has been used arbitrarily and cunningly for over a century and even today has its lovers, but the truth is that, in some situations, Italian conduct was extremely brutal, exactly like other people on the same occasions. Therefore, they have neither right of clemency, nor least of all self-absolution".

<sup>6</sup> F. Focardi, "Bravo italiano" e "cattivo tedesco". Riflessioni sulla genesi di due immagini incrociate', in *Storia e memoria*, V, 1996, 1, 55-83, 62-66.

were different from ‘bad Fascists’ was a manufactured perspective that was to become a key element of negotiation with the winners after the war, in order to regain the country’s international credibility.<sup>7</sup>

During the war and then on 2 June 1946, when Italians opted for the abolition of the monarchy, the resistance progressively became a political and moral legitimisation for the anti-Fascist parties.<sup>8</sup> Crucial elements like the existence of a popular consent towards the regime were omitted in this interpretation.<sup>9</sup> In the public discourse of the post-war an alternative narrative was not able to emerge and Italian politicians preferred to exalt the role of the resistance as a popular rebirth instead of inspiring a kind of French *union sacrée*.<sup>10</sup> As Filippo Focardi stated, politics and the Italian post-war ‘public memory’ increased the contraposition between the Fascist and the anti-Fascist memory.<sup>11</sup> Until the 1960s and 1970s, Fascism was deliberately removed from the public discourse, but also from the historians’ discourse. Paul Corner poignantly characterised the preference for mere chronicling at the expense of critical analysis as ‘convenient’ for some historians, likening the absence of any serious debate to Fascism ‘disappearing into a black hole.’<sup>12</sup> On an academic level, the history of anti-Fascism had been disconnected from that of Fascism. Historians studied Fascism and anti-Fascism as antithetical matters and the research did not take into account sufficiently social life under the regime. On the one hand the atmosphere in Italy of the 1960s and 70s was one of the public

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<sup>7</sup> For the decisions relating to the Italian peace treaty see A. Varsori, *L’Italia nelle relazioni internazionali dal 1943 al 1992* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1998), 27-42.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Mola, *Declino e crollo della monarchia in Italia*. (Milan: Mondadori, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 10. See also S. Colarizi, *L’opinione degli italiani sotto il regime 1929-1943* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 334-339.

<sup>10</sup> R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy: Life Under the Dictatorship 1915-1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 62-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 41-53. See also Corner, *Popular Opinion*, 122.

(and the media) searching for an anti-Fascist absolution, and historians providing the narrative that allowed it to develop. Historians established a narrative that provided some relief, especially to those who might have somehow supported the regime.<sup>13</sup>

The dominant imperative in post-war Italy to demonstrate allegiance to global politics and international community required an emphatic repudiation of Fascist rule. It was in this constructivist climate that the anti-Fascist ‘vulgate’ became successful also among historians, heavily influenced by the cultural turn. The memory of the new Republican Italy was forged through stories, monuments and other cultural artifacts that came to serve as memory places (*lieux de mémoire*) within the country. Italian intellectual and political elites deliberately produced a memory, which has been consumed by the Italians.<sup>14</sup> The key feature of this narrative has been portraying Italians as victims of Fascism and of a war desired almost exclusively by Mussolini, which redimensions the responsibility of Italy within the Axis. The anti-Fascist narrative aimed at displaying a sense of new beginning for the entire country.<sup>15</sup> The result of the focus on an anti-Fascist narrative was that only a modest amount of attention was devoted to local history; and what little local history there was, had a tendency of viewing it through distorted reconstructions of the Fascist period. However, local forms of memories were not completely replaced by the state memory created from above. People continued to identify with the past of their home town or region, even when national authorities tried to impress a ‘national memory’ upon them. “Because of its materiality and its sheer ‘presence’, the local mnemonic framework cannot simply be downsized by memories which are constructed at a higher level”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> C. Karner-B. Mertens, *The Use and Abuse of Memory: Interpreting World War II in Contemporary European Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 139.

<sup>16</sup> Beyen-Deseure (ed.), *Local Memories*, 8.

The effect of the diffusion of a hegemonic narration from the state channels and media, was that local works about the life under the regime, especially those coming from a neo-Fascist side, were seen as counter-memories, or as counter-information with respect to the official memory of the state.<sup>17</sup> Examples of neo-Fascist counter-memories were diaries of former army officials or *repubblichini* which started to spread between the mid-1950s and early-1960s. An example is Gen. Rodolfo Graziani's *Ho difeso la Patria*. Graziani (1882-1955) was a prominent Italian military officer in the Italian Royal Army, primarily noted for his campaigns in Africa (Libya and Abyssinia) before and during World War II as Commander in Chief of Italian North Africa and as Governor General of Libya. Graziani was the only Italian Marshal to remain loyal to Mussolini after the Grand Council meeting which dismissed the Duce from the role of Prime Minister in 25 July 1943. He was appointed Minister of Defence of the Italian Social Republic by Mussolini. He was sentenced for his collaboration with the Nazis in 1948, but he was released after serving only a few months of the sentence. In the early 1950s, Graziani became the 'Honorary President' of the post-Fascist party MSI (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) in 1953.<sup>18</sup> *Ho difeso la Patria* was a memoir written by Graziani during his imprisonment at Procida in 1946. Published by Garzanti in December 1947, when Graziani was under trial, this autobiographical book served as a defence against the accusations of war crimes in Africa.

A challenge to the main anti-Fascist narrative was also presented by Giorgio Pisanò's works (1924-1997). Pisanò was a war veteran in the XMAS (*Decima Flottiglia Motoscafi Antisommergibili*: Tenth Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron), an Italian commando frogman unit

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<sup>17</sup> Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> See R. Graziani, *Ho difeso la Patria* (Milan: Garzanti, 1948). For a profile of Rodolfo Graziani, see R. Canosa, *Graziani. Il maresciallo d'Italia, dalla guerra d'Etiopia alla Repubblica di Salò*. (Milan: Mondadori, 2004).

of the Italian Royal Navy created during the Fascist regime. Pisanò was Senator for the neo-Fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* from 1972 to 1992. During the post-war period Pisanò worked as a journalist and essayist for the Rizzoli Group, writing about the Second World War, Fascism during the Italian Social Republic and the so-called 'Civil War'. Pisanò's *Sangue chiama sangue* and *Storia della guerra civile in Italia (1943-1945)* wanted to give voice to the legacy of Salò. Pisanò underlined the role of the RSI in protecting Italy from the Nazi project to occupy Italy. He wanted to discredit the fact that RSI was merely an instrument in the hands of Nazi Germany.<sup>19</sup>

A different perspective was also prompted by the memories written by war prisoners and later the soldiers of the Italian Social Republic, like the Venetian army official Armando Boscolo who later will work as a journalist and essayist, collaborating with important national newspapers. Among the prisoners there were eminent profiles like the writers Giuseppe Berto, Dante Troisi, Gaetano Tumiati and Vezio Melegari, the painters and Alberto Burri Alberto Fagan, musician Mario Medici, the future politicians Roberto Mievilte, Beppe Nicolai, the labour law expert Gianni Roberti, the mathematician Mario Baldassarri or the journalist and the writer Fernando Togni. They all refused to cooperate with the allies and the US government after their capture and serve in the 'Italian Service Unit' after the 8th September armistice, being interned in the *Hereford Military Reservation and Reception Center* (commonly known as 'Fascists Criminal Camp') in Texas. The detention camp was the second largest of the United States POW (prisoner of war) camps built during the Second World War and it housed approximately 5,000 Italian prisoners. The life within the camp was well described in Boscolo's *Fame in America*. He explained the reason behind their choice to not collaborate with the Allies, which was to remain loyal to their country (and to Mussolini),

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<sup>19</sup> See G. Pisanò, *Sangue chiama sangue* (Milan: Pidola, 1962) and G. Pisanò, *Storia della guerra civile in Italia (1943-1945)* (Milan: Edizioni FPE, 1965).

rejecting the King's *volte-face* which brought Italy in being allied with the Allies and turning against the Germans.<sup>20</sup>

Neo-Fascist 'public memory' was relegated to be something like commemorations of the Fascist period or pro-Fascist leanings in the memorialisation of the Fascist period.<sup>21</sup> This happened because neo-Fascist memories, even local ones, would have contested the image of the Italian Republic promoted by the post-war governments, that was born spontaneously from a popular rising against Fascism, rather than how it had actually been established, from a civil war.<sup>22</sup>

After the 1973 Pinochet's coup in Chile, there was cooperation between the PCI and DC that became a political alliance in 1976. After the happening in Chile, Berlinguer thought that

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<sup>20</sup> A. Boscolo, *Fame in America* (Milan: Edizioni Europee, 1954). Italian service units (ISU) was the official name given by the US authorities to the Italian prisoners and soldiers cooperating with the US military after the proclamation of the Armistice of Cassibile (8 September 1943). See M. De Prospo, 'I prigionieri di guerra italiani negli Stati Uniti e il dilemma della cooperazione (1944-46)' in *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea*, 1, 2 (2010), 1-15, and F. G. Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani 1940-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> For more towards the Republic of Salò see R. Chiarini, *L'ultimo fascismo. Storia e memoria della Repubblica di Salò* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009) and M. Borghi, 'Tra fascio littorio e senso dello Stato: funzionari, apparati, ministeri nella Repubblica Sociale Italiana (1943-1945)', in A. Ventura, *La società veneta dalla Resistenza alla Repubblica. Atti del convegno di studi. Padova, 9-11 maggio 1996* (Padua: Cooperativa Libreria Editrice Università di Padova, 1997), 118-139. For what concerns the treaty of peace see Varsori, *L'Italia nelle relazioni internazionali*, 27-42. See also the Alcide De Gasperi's discourse pronounced during the conference of peace in Paris (10 August 1946): "The punitive character of the treaty is clear in its territorial provisions (...) as Italian I am not asking any particular concession (...) I ask you to give scope and credibility to the Italian Republic: 47,000 people of workers are ready to connect their scope with yours to create a righter and human world".

<sup>22</sup> See P. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 256-257. For the connection between the Republic and the popular discourse, see Saragat's speech during the inauguration day: "The Republic was born from the Resistance (...) it was born spontaneously from all the classes (...). Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati-Senato della Repubblica, IV Legislatura, *Seduta comune di martedì 29 dicembre 1964, Giuramento e messaggio del Presidente della Repubblica*.

the Communist Party could not lead the country without allying with the moderate forces of the country. Berlinguer distanced the party from the USSR by launching 'Eurocommunism' along with the Spanish Communist Party and the French Communist Party. The egemonic antifascist narration highly benefited from this political climate of national unity. The PCI started to provide external support to the Christian Democratic one-party government led by Andreotti. However, several radical communists in the PCI, mainly non-members of the parliaments, boycotted the government and there was an increase in far-left terrorism, mainly led by the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*). The centre-left governments and their response to terrorism tackled both the criticism made by the radical communists (*sinistra extraparlamentare*) and that one led by the neo-fascists supporters of an antagonist memory. However, the Brigade Rosse kidnapped Aldo Moro, the then Party President of DC, on 16 March 1978. After several consultations in the Italian Parliament, the government refused the terrorists' conditions, and Moro was killed on 9 May 1978. A strong anti-communist sentiment raised, and the PSI, along with the far-right Italian Social Movement (MSI) increased their votes in the 1979 general election. Nevertheless, the Compromise continued but it was in decline. On November 1980 Berlinguer announced the end of the Historic Compromise (*Compromesso Storico*).<sup>23</sup>

These political developments of the 1970s indicated that the time was right for a re-evaluation of the Fascist period, and indeed, Renzo De Felice's pioneering work on Mussolini was followed by a serious debate about the Fascist regime and resulted in the revision of the previously dominant image of popular support for the resistance.

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<sup>23</sup> The Historic Compromise (*Compromesso storico*) was an Italian historical political alliance and accommodation between the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the 1970s.

If the 1960s and 70s demonstrated the close connectivity between political developments and popular discourse about the Fascist past, the 1980s presented further evidence of this relationship, if with different political actors and a focus on the political left rather than right. The political leadership of the anti-Communist socialist Bettino Craxi triggered a renewed popular debate about the previously largely uncontested anti-Fascist vulgata. The determining factor that increased the level of criticism towards the anti-fascist memory, was the change of the political framework and the born of the *pentapartito*, a coalition of five parties formed by Christian Democrats, Italian Socialist Party, Italian Democratic Socialist Party, Italian Republican Party and Italian Liberal Party which politically isolated the Communist Party. An important stimulus to the revisionism of the anti-fascist memory came from the political necessity of a deep institutional renewal promoted by Bettino Craxi. The so-called "Grande Riforma", was thought by Craxi as an important step to modernise Italian institutions in order to promote the growth of the country. The anti-fascist constitution constituted an important obstacle for the Craxi attempted reform. Revisionism promoted by Craxi led eventually, in 1991, to Claudio Pavone describing the period of 1943-1945 as a 'Civil War', a definition widely rejected by the Communist Party and, until then, used exclusively in neo-Fascist narratives to describe the period of 1943 to 1945.<sup>24</sup> Neo-Fascists used the definition of 'Civil War' to support their accusation that the partisans to have caused a fratricide war. Pavone, a former partisan who worked for many years as a State archivist in Rome when the war ended, asserted in his controversial work *Una guerra civile* that the main cause of the removal of the 'Civil war' from Italian history was the political needs of anti-Fascism to found the post-war Italian republic on the values of the anti-Fascist resistance. For the author, this process divided Italy between 'good Italians' (the partisans) and the 'bad Italians' (Mussolini's last-hour Fascists). Pavone's use of the definition of 'Civil War' shocked Italian public opinion as

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<sup>24</sup> C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), 10.



it was coming from an eminent historian, himself a former resister. However, more recently, the Left wing journalist and writer, Giampaolo Pansa, has recuperated the theme of the ‘Civil War’, writing a series of books on the partisans’ violence and crimes during and after the period 1943-45, which was highly criticised by the Left wing audience.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of the resistance representing one faction in what could be understood as a civil war between different sections of Italian society representing Fascist and anti-Fascist attitudes, gained some ground also with the former partisan Vittorio Foa agreeing to the idea of the resistance as a war between Italians in which Fascist and anti-Fascist beliefs collided. But despite these relative revisions, the myth about Italians having been opposed to Mussolini’s regime remained largely intact.<sup>26</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the break down of established Cold War symbols such as Berlin Wall and more locally,<sup>3</sup> of established party political patterns, led to a questioning of what had previously been regarded as an immovable status quo. This significant change in the Italian political landscape also impacted on the memorialisation of Italy’s past, and the political instrumentalisation of public memory. It made the pacification between Fascist and anti-Fascist memory more pressing.<sup>27</sup> The political utilisation of a relatively positive memory of Fascism increased under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi (1994-2011). During Berlusconi’s premiership, the trial against the former SS-Hauptsturmführer Erich Priebke, one of those responsible for the infamous Fosse Ardeatine massacre in Rome in March 1944, revived the stereotype of the ‘cruel German’

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<sup>25</sup> G. Pansa, *Il sangue dei vinti* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2003) and then *I vinti non dimenticano. I crimini ignorati della nostra guerra* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Vittorio Foa, “L’Unità”, 25 April 1995. See also Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?*, 124-127.

<sup>27</sup> *Tangentopoli* is a term which was coined to define the pervasive corruption of the Italian political system verified in the ‘Mani Pulite’ investigations between 1992 and 1996. The scandal led to the disappearance of the dominant parties. The Christian Democratic and the Socialist parties collapsed. This process redefined the Italian political landscape and brought about the formation of new parties: Forza Italia, Lega Nord and the post-Communist party *Democratici di Sinistra*. See also Ginsborg, *Italy and its discontents*, 249-285.

and accentuated again the distance between the different memorial discourses.<sup>28</sup> Many important anti-Fascist scholars had argued against the image of the ‘good Italian’. The important studies of Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, Enzo Collotti and Nicola Labanca investigated the Italian crimes committed in the colonies and in the territories under Italian occupation in South-eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup> A heated debate developed between the nostalgic supporters of the ‘good Italian’ and those who proposed a revised interpretation. The discussion primarily involved Indro Montanelli and Angelo Del Boca and focused on the Italian use of gas against the indigenous population in Ethiopia in 1936.<sup>30</sup> Other Italian war crimes surfaced including the occupation of Greece and Albania. The persecution of Jews by the Fascist regime also went under scrutiny. Researchers such as Michele Sarfatti vigorously attacked the long presumed absence of Italian racism and Anti-Semitism.<sup>31</sup> The relative dismantling of the traditional ‘First Republic’ parties increased the importance of the role of the president of the republic as the holder of the ‘official national memory’, an official anti-Fascist line.<sup>32</sup> Thanks to their popular appeal, the presidents Sandro Pertini and Carlo Azelio Ciampi, both former partisans, and later the post-Communist President, Giorgio Napolitano,

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<sup>28</sup> Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 72-74.

<sup>29</sup> See the works N. Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002), G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall’impero d’Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005) and A. Del Boca, *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la guerra d’Etiopia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996) and E. Collotti, *Fascismo e antifascismo, rimozioni, revisioni, negazioni* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Montanelli, *Del Boca e l’Etiopia: le guerre non finiscono mai*. “Corriere della Sera”, 1 October 1996. In this article Montanelli declared: “Those who speak about brutality (against the Ethiopians), or even genocide, lies because the Italians even endeared themselves to the Abyssinians (...) I have never seen these gasses”.

<sup>31</sup> See M. Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell’elaborazione delle leggi del 1938* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani, 1994) and M. Sarfatti, *La Shoah in Italia. La persecuzione degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> See C. A. Ciampi, *A un giovane italiano* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012), and G. Napolitano, *Una e indivisibile. Riflessioni sui 150 anni della nostra Italia* (Rome: Rizzoli, 2011).

became the guardians of this widely-accepted memory.<sup>33</sup> Having explored how the political establishment in post-war Italy attempted to usurp historical memory, we will now investigate some of the historical debates around totalitarianism and ‘Generic Fascism’ in Italy and beyond, which allowed such an instrumentalisation.

## 2. Totalitarianism and ‘Generic Fascism’: the Historiographical Debate

Before looking at the historiographical debate regarding the totalitarian aspirations of the Fascist regime, it is essential to understand how totalitarianism and Fascism have been defined by historians. The notion of totalitarianism as a total state political control and power was firstly formulated in 1923 by the anti-Fascist Giovanni Amendola, who described Fascism as “a promise of total dominium and complete and unchallenged mastering of political and administrative life”.<sup>34</sup> The term was later assigned a positive meaning by the Fascist regime, and its principal theorist, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, used the term totalitarian to refer to the ultimate goal of the regime as the subordination of the individual to a ‘totalitarian’ state that was to control all aspects of national life.<sup>35</sup> “Gentile’s use of the term ‘total’ conveyed Fascism’s claim to ubiquity and a comprehensive, all-encompassing outlook on life, like a religious faith inspiring all facets of existence”.<sup>36</sup> In Gentile’s work, the State was an ethical state which embodied and inculcated values. Such a theory was endorsed by

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<sup>33</sup> *The New York Times* defined Napolitano ‘King George’ for his political ability in closing the Berlusconi ‘ventennio’, replacing Berlusconi with the economist Mario Monti as new Prime Minister. ‘From Ceremonial Figure to Italy’s Quiet Power Broker’. *The New York Times*, 2 December 2011. “In the topsy-turvy world of Mr. Berlusconi’s Italy, where the prime minister’s personal life came to overshadow the work of governance, Mr. Napolitano had emerged as the anti-Berlusconi. With his elegant yet feisty wife, Clio, by his side, a lawyer whom he married in 1959, Mr. Napolitano came to be seen as embodying a different Italy, one of civic virtue”.

<sup>34</sup> G. Amendola, ‘Maggioranza e minoranza’, *Il Mondo*, 12 May 1923. My translation.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 73.

<sup>36</sup> P. Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1915-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004), 96-97.

Benito Mussolini, who during a speech in October 1925 declared that the Fascist Totalitarian State had to be characterised by “everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state”.<sup>37</sup> The notion of totalitarianism started to be extensively studied in the early post-war period. The most widely accepted definition of totalitarianism came from Hanna Arendt who provided a relational analysis of totalitarianism and propaganda. Her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* laid the foundations of the subsequent totalitarianism debate. Also, and of particular importance for the discourse on popular attitudes, consent and dissent is the use of violence within totalitarian regimes. According to Arendt, the three key pre-conditions indispensable for the rise of totalitarianism were the weakening of the national State and the rise of Imperialism; the demise of the class system and its values; and the atomisation and individualisation of modern mass society.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and even in the 1970s, the main interpretations tended to identify totalitarian regimes as political machines which ruled with coercion rather than consent. The general trend of this interpretation led to emphasis upon a population reduced to helpless passivity by the repression and terror of the state. The notion of totalitarianism was frequently utilised during the Cold War by political scientists used a meter of comparison to study the Soviet Union. The authors primarily responsible for reformulating the concept of totalitarianism were Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in their work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. For the authors, a totalitarian system could be defined as a single hierarchical mass-party usually led by one man, monopolistic control of the armed and police forces and full state-control of the media and the economy.<sup>39</sup> For Friedrich and Brzezinski, their list of characteristics represented the best way to assess whether regimes were totalitarian or not. In

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<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>38</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: World, 1961), 341, 372-388.

<sup>39</sup> C. Friedrich-Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

this sense, they were moving in the opposite direction to Arendt. While Arendt thought that totalitarianism was applicable only to Nazism and Stalinism, Friedrich and Brzezinski, studying totalitarian systems on a more empirical and comparative footing, found that other regimes like communist China and Mussolini's Italy possessed totalitarian characteristics.<sup>40</sup> However, as Giulia Albanese suggested, "theorists of totalitarianism may have disagreed whether the population was terrorised or mesmerised, in fear or thrall, but even the latter condition precluded the independence of mind necessary to give consent".<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this thesis will explore in the case of the Veneto, the interconnectedness of popular appeal, mesmerisation, opportunism, but also fear and terror, in an attempt to come to a view as to whether the region willingly consented, acquiesced or dissented.

The discussion about Fascism within social science and the history of ideas stimulated Anglo-Saxon scholars to elaborate a model of 'Generic Fascism' that could include all the features of the authoritarian movements and regimes that rose in Europe between the wars. Discussion about a 'Generic Fascism' involved eminent scholars such as Ernst Nolte, Stanley Payne, George Mosse, Roger Eatwell and Roger Griffin. Stanley Payne argued that fascism was the vaguest as well as the most abstract word of the major political terms in the twentieth century. In his assessment, the common characteristics of the fascist movements were the specific philosophical and moral beliefs in their ideology and their palingenetic characterisation.<sup>42</sup> The authors who were proponents of a generic definition of fascism referred to it as an international alternative response to modernisation. However, according to

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<sup>40</sup> S. Tormey, *Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 70.

<sup>41</sup> R. Pergher-G. Albanese, 'Historians, Fascism, and Italian Society: Mapping the Limits of Consent', in G. Albanese-R. Pergher (eds.), *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-28.

<sup>42</sup> S. Payne, *A History of fascism 1914-1945* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3-6.

Stanley Payne and Roger Griffin, fascism was a phenomenon not limited to the interwar period; on the contrary, it is was a 'continuing phenomenon' which is meant to be studied in our time.<sup>43</sup> Or as Griffin would formulate it, fascism was inspired by the conviction that a process of national rebirth (palingenesis) has become essential to bring to an end a protracted period of social and cultural decadence, and expressed itself ideologically in a revolutionary form of integral nationalism (ultra-nationalism).<sup>44</sup> Griffin's original definition focused on the ideology, considering style and organisation irrelevant for its conceptual definition.<sup>45</sup> Progressively, he enriched this definition of 'Generic Fascism' by supplementing it with additional characteristics such as the introduction of mass support as a distinguishing feature. His most recent interpretation in *Modernism and Fascism* is the most sophisticated version of his views. Here Griffin introduces new significant elements. In particular, he defines fascism as a revolutionary form of political modernism and he specifies that his palingenetic characteristic is related to the national and ethnic 'rebirth'.<sup>46</sup> He argues that fascism is a form of 'programmatically modernism that seeks to conquer political power in order to realise a totalising vision of national or ethnic rebirth'. This interpretation has been contested in particular because Griffin explored fascism in terms of ideology rather than regime. The main criticism of generic fascist studies is the lack of focus on the manifestations of the movement with all its violence and suppression.<sup>47</sup> Studies about an archetypal definition of a 'Generic Fascism' provided historians with an opportunity to seek out analogies and differences among the various forms and manifestations of Fascism, enhancing a series of new 'Fascist comparative studies'. Iordachi's latest work, *Comparative Fascist Studies*, refers to Fascism

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<sup>43</sup> R. Griffin, *Fascist century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), IX-XI.

<sup>44</sup> R. Griffin, *International fascism. Theories, causes and the new consensus* (London: Arnold, 1998), 35.

<sup>45</sup> See R. Griffin, *The nature of fascism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> C. Iordachi, *Comparative fascist studies* (London: Routledge, 2010), 25.

<sup>47</sup> M. Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

as a highly eclectic ideology, a mixture of both rightist and leftist ingredients in a ‘new key’, a ‘Third Way’, as an alternative to both liberal democracy and revolutionary socialism.<sup>48</sup>

Fascism was not a static or immutable phenomenon and it adapted to the local conditions where it developed. Thus, in the next section we focus on Italian Fascism, highlighting its peculiarity among totalitarian regimes and zooming in on the theme of consent or coercion.

### **3. Totalitarianism in Italian Fascism**

A study of Venetian life under the dictatorship, like any other research on Fascist state-control of individuals and organisations needs to show an awareness of the historiographical debate surrounding the totalitarian aspirations of the regime. Over the last three decades the success (or otherwise) of the project to fascistise Italians has become a most controversial historiographical field with two interesting trends. Firstly, there is a line of argument established by Renzo De Felice in the 1960s and 1970s, and recently defended by his pupil Emilio Gentile, which argued that the Fascist regime possessed a coherent totalitarian ideology. The second stance is primarily represented by foreign contributors to the Fascism debate who contested the notion of meaningful consent to Fascism.

A challenge to early totalitarianism theorists’ stereotype about Fascist Italy as less totalitarian than its German and Russian counterparts was instigated by Renzo’s De Felice’s work from the late 1960s. In *Interpretations of Fascism*, De Felice referred to the Fascist regime as a totalitarian one, although some totalitarian characteristics were not implemented in their entirety.<sup>49</sup> Comparing the different authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, De Felice concluded that – despite their differences – the Italian and the German regimes stood out as

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<sup>48</sup> Iordachi, *Comparative fascist studies*, 1-2.

<sup>49</sup> R. De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 60-66.

being genuine Fascist and totalitarian regimes; therefore he argued for a distinction between Fascism and other forms of ‘local’ authoritarian and conservative regimes, like Latin American *caudillismo*.<sup>50</sup> More recently, his most prominent student, Emilio Gentile, developed further the idea of an Italian totalitarianism. Criticising Hanna Arendt’s interpretation of early Fascism as non-totalitarian,<sup>51</sup> Gentile recalibrated the Fascism debates by reconceptualising Fascism as faith, as a political and coherent religion made up of ‘true believers’.<sup>52</sup> He focused attention on Fascist language, theatre, art and architecture in order to confirm that the regime had its own ideology and culture that involved people and generated popular consent.<sup>53</sup> Gentile argued that Fascism was born in Italy after the First World War as a social, nationalist, modernist, revolutionary, totalitarian, mystic and palingenetic new political movement. This movement was organized into a new political regime based on police control, the cult of the leader, the mobilisation as well as the organisation of masses under State control<sup>54</sup>.

Gentile did not discuss whether these true believers were a mass or not. He shifted the historical discourse from the issue of consent to more cultural aspects. He focused on Futurism and on ‘the sacralisation of politics’ that was not only a prerogative of the

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<sup>50</sup> On Latin American ‘caudillismo’, see R. Campa, *Antologia del pensiero politico latino-americano: Dalla colonia alla seconda Guerra mondiale* (Bari: Laterza, 1970) and the more recent work, H.M. Hamill, *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

<sup>51</sup> E. Gentile, *The Origins of the Fascist Ideology 1918-1925* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), XIV.

<sup>52</sup> E. Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), XVIII

<sup>53</sup> Corner, *Popular Opinion*, 125. See E. Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); E. Gentile, *The sacralisation of politics in fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) and E. Gentile, *Il fascismo di pietra* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2007). See also Z. Sternhell, *The birth of fascist ideology. From cultural rebellion to political revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and R. Griffin, *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (New York, Routledge, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> E. Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e Interpretazione* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2002), 62; Gentile, *The origins of fascist ideology*, XIV.



dictatorships but also of democracies, as in the United States.<sup>55</sup> Gentile's approach attracted criticism in Italy but it found many supporters among non-Italian and in particular British and American historians.<sup>56</sup>

However, his idea of Fascism as an 'imperfect' totalitarianism, was contested by some scholars like Alberto Acquarone and MacGregor Knox who queried the validity of the totalitarian label for a regime that never achieved "the complete integration of society into State".<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, outspoken criticism of Gentile's characterisation of Fascism have come from two other prominent Anglophone historians, R.J.B. Bosworth and Paul Corner, who have challenged De Felice's and Gentile's positions on the totalitarian nature of Fascism.

Bosworth's *Mussolini's Italy* is a series of "journeys through a totalitarianism that somehow never became fully normalised and that always remained open to some form of manipulation or at least to the expectation of it".<sup>58</sup> The main theme of the book is to demonstrate that the regime met with difficulties to break the traditional background of Italian society, made up of Catholicism and patronage. The regime reaffirmed ancient customs, where women – even upper-class women – could not challenge men. People were merely an instrument for the regime's propaganda.<sup>59</sup> Bosworth focused on the extent to which the regime was able to realise its totalitarian project and which forms of adaption were

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<sup>55</sup> E. Gentile, *La democrazia di Dio. La religione americana nell'era dell'impero e del terrore* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> In particular Stanley G. Payne.

<sup>57</sup> A. Acquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), 290. See also M. Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33. Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11-2, 401.

<sup>58</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 11-16.

assumed by the Italians during the Fascist dictatorship. The author demonstrated that even when at its most intrusive, the regime was not able to control its 'subjects' and manage their consciousness.<sup>60</sup> Bosworth, influenced by the New Historicist writing, focused on the anecdote as a means of describing vast complex social structures,<sup>61</sup> focussing on the local Fascist ambitions – a mix of corruption and pragmatism – that contributed to the destruction of the totalitarian Fascist project to build the 'new Fascists'. The practice of patronage, one of the defining features of Liberal Italy, still remained commonplace during the entire Fascist period. There was nothing ideological – Bosworth argued – in corruption.<sup>62</sup> Bosworth strongly criticised De Felice's work as too closely connected with the political changes in Italy above explained.<sup>63</sup>

Roger Griffin, in turn, challenged Bosworth's interpretation of Fascism and he considered *Mussolini's Italy* "an intricate patchwork of individual case studies elegantly sewn together".<sup>64</sup> For Griffin, Bosworth's work possessed a 'frog view' which was merely at ground level, in contrast with the 'bird-eye-view', typical of Generic Fascism research.

With Paul Corner, the historical analysis moved in a significant new direction, namely local and regional history. Corner analysed popular opinion in the provinces on the basis of Fascist Party documentation — especially the reports on popular and public opinion by a vast network of police informers. Accepting the premise that the Fascist regime had a totalitarian

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 16.

<sup>61</sup> See G. Levi, 'On Microhistory', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Politi, 1991), 93-113. Giovanni Levi characterises the anecdote as scientific knowledge of the particular itself, which refuses to be defined only in relation to its subject matter at large.

<sup>62</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian dictatorship: problems and perspectives in the interpretation of Mussolini and fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), 237. The "anti-anti-Fascists" version was useful for those who saw Silvio Berlusconi's and Gianfranco Fini's post-fascist agreement, the possibility of building a new modern conservative party. In few words, the anti-anti-fascist version helped to switch off the First Republic and shift Italy into the Second Republic.

<sup>64</sup> R. Griffin, 'Mussolini's Italy (review)', in *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 14, n. 1, January 2007, 171-174, 173.

ideology willing to create new Fascist men and women and to nationalise Italians, the central theme of most of his work, nevertheless, is the failure of the Fascist totalitarian project. Corner highlighted that Fascism was a “series of essentially local movements, centred on a town, or at most, a province, in which the aims of the Fascists might be very different from one another, according to local circumstances”.<sup>65</sup> Historiographically, Corner contested Gentile’s interpretation of Fascism as ‘political religion’, arguing that Fascism was only an extreme solution to the problem of nation-building, which had not been achieved since territorial and political unification. In his oeuvre Corner attempts to reconstruct the world of provincial Fascism as it was actually shaped by its exponents and experienced by the Italian people, using it to produce a compelling portrait of, and explanation for, the PNF’s totalitarian failures at regional and national level. His core observation is that the Fascist Party, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF), was the main totalitarian instrument through which the Fascist regime sought to ‘fascistise’ Italians involving them in a wide range of activities. Yet, it proved incapable of nationalising itself and of superseding the Fascist movement’s provincial and local origins.<sup>66</sup> This mutual interdependence of local, regional and national events will be at the core of this study of the Veneto. As much of this regional analysis will evolve around the question of popular consent to Fascism, it is imperative to explore the historiographical debates around consent, acquiescence, dissent and resistance in some more detail.

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<sup>65</sup> P. Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 1-10.

#### 4. The Debate on Fascist ‘Consent’

In the fourth volume of his monumental Mussolini biography, *Mussolini il duce I: Gli anni di consenso, 1929–1936*, Renzo De Felice established the parameters that delineate the historiography of Fascist Italy to this day. As his work’s subtitle suggests, De Felice asserted that by the late 1920s, Fascism had achieved genuine and widespread popular consent. He argued that Mussolini had eliminated internal opposition (anti-Fascist parties); he had won admiration for the 1929 Lateran Pacts, which resolved the old dispute between the Italian state and the Catholic Church; and many Italians lent their moral support to the regime, enthusiastically participating in its rallies and rituals. Furthermore, consent for Mussolini’s regime was bolstered by recognition abroad and through the Fascist organisations offering moral and material security to families and working class during the Great Depression. De Felice qualified his notion of consent, placing it at its strongest point in the period from 1929 to 1934, curiously leaving the Ethiopian war out, which is where historians have conventionally located the peak of the regime’s popularity.

Thus, De Felice reassessed what had been the prevalently anti-Fascist historiography of the 1950s-1960s, where the only relationship portrayed between the populus and the regime was one of antagonism. The argument challenged orthodoxies that had prevailed in Italy since 1945: namely, that the Fascist regime had been a brutal imposition on the Italian people and that the anti-Fascist Resistance had been the genuine expression of the national will.

De Felice returned to the anatomy of ‘consent’ in the fifth volume of the biography, asserting that widespread discontent was emerging among all social classes and groups in the period between 1936 and 1940, but at no point did it become active anti-Fascist opposition. De Felice’s claim that a not insignificant part of the country displayed attitudes of consent to

the regime, its ideology and the person of the Duce himself, was controversial.<sup>67</sup> He was attacked for both the methodology and content of his work. Critics of De Felice's interpretation portrayed De Felice as dazzled by the personal magnetism of Mussolini and he was accused of methodological shortcuts in his archival research, by relying too much upon documents from Fascist archives without resorting to a broader range of alternative sources.<sup>68</sup> The 15-year period between 1974 and 1988 saw the Fascism debate transgress from a primarily academic discourse into the media sphere, not unlike the *Historikerstreit* in Germany in the mid-1980s.<sup>69</sup> De Felice and his opponents used the public media platform to publicise their views and argue their cases, thus allowing the historical debate to be instrumentalised politically and conversely the political debates to be instrumentalised for historical 'scholarship'.

In subsequent decades, De Felice's 'consent' thesis was perceived as provocative. Social historians sought to demonstrate the depth of popular support for the regime or, conversely (and especially on the left), to document working-class resistance and resilience in the face of Fascist coercion. At the same time, cultural historians explored the regime's 'sacralisation of politics' and its use of aesthetics and ritual to manufacture consent and engineer a 'New Man' and a 'New Italy.' Not surprisingly, De Felice's views on Mussolini reignited interest in Fascism research in other countries. A number of De Felice's works' (although not his monumental biography) were translated into English.<sup>70</sup> The extent of de Felice's influence is

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<sup>67</sup> See R.J.B Bosworth, 'The Italian Novecento and its historians', in *Historical Journal*, 49, I, 2006, 317-329.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 123-124. "Given his fame in the media, it was predictable that De Felice should be drawn into a new world of "infotainment", of popular exhibitions, TV documentaries and films, which now portrayed the Fascist era as an alluring time of pretty fashion and quaint but 'modernising technology'. See also B. W. Painter Jr, 'De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism', in *The American Historical Review*, 95 (2) (1990), 391-405, 395. See also R. De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1975).

<sup>70</sup> M. A. Ledeen, 'Renzo de Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11(1976), 269-283. De Felice's fifth volume, *Mussolini il duce II: Lo stato totalitario, 1936-1940* also

evident in the reception of his work by historians from diverse backgrounds including those with Marxist leanings, such as Giorgio Candeloro, Marco Palla, Patrizia Dogliani and Alberto De Bernardi. Despite their critical attitude of De Felice's interpretation, many utilise De Felice's scholarship and adapt his notions of consent for the regime in the 1930s.<sup>71</sup> For example, Patrizia Dogliani in *Il Fascismo degli italiani* admits that between Fascism and Italians existed a deep relationship, but that the regime was not able to impact on Italian society in a profound way as they would have liked in accordance with their totalitarian aspirations<sup>72</sup>. De Felice's influence has been amplified by his exposure on state television, by his journal, *Storia contemporanea*, but first and foremost by the work of his students. In regard to a penetration of the English-speaking world, De Felice's evident successor has been Emilio Gentile, who moved on from the question of consent to a more culturally oriented study of Fascism as a movement and as an ideology. Influenced by George Mosse, Gentile portrayed Fascism as a new a new 'political religion' with the regime attempting to achieve a 'cultural revolution'. Gentile owed much to the work of George Mosse, introducing the process of the 'nationalisation of masses' and the concept of 'lay religion' into the Italian Fascist historiographical categories.<sup>73</sup> Gentile concluded that despite Fascism's failures and limitations Mussolini presided over an example of genuine 'totalitarianism'.<sup>74</sup> The difficulty in evaluating the relationship between the Italian people and the regime is also underlined by Simona Colarizi in *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime*, who describes consent as a delicate balance between coercion and persuasion and whose work raises the significant

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met negative criticism, but most of the debate remained on a scholarly level, with little of the public controversy of 1975.

<sup>71</sup> Painter Jr., 'De Felice', 401.

<sup>72</sup> P. Dogliani, *Il fascismo degli italiani. Una storia sociale* (Turin: UTET, 2008), IX.

<sup>73</sup> Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 127-128.

<sup>74</sup> Bosworth, 'The Italian Novecento and its historians', 58.

question of the nature of popular opinion.<sup>75</sup> Ian Kershaw, who researched popular opinion under the Nazi dictatorship, distinguished between ‘popular opinion’ and ‘public opinion’. According to him, public opinion refers to the plurality of freely and publicly expressed opinion; in contrast ‘popular opinion’ is non-quantifiable, diffuse, and is comprised of ill-coordinated opinions held by large but indeterminate sections of society.<sup>76</sup> These eclectic views are essential to an understanding of consent and dissent; as Victoria De Grazia argued in *The culture of consent*, it was the strategy of the little groups, the families and individuals that caused the reciprocal adaption between regime and society.<sup>77</sup> The most recent responses to De Felice’s challenge of *consenso* have approached the question transcending its original framework. Christopher Duggan’s ambitious *Fascist Voices* (FV) scrutinises Italians’ sentiments and attitudes towards the regime in great detail. Moving beyond De Felice’s consensus theory which was based more on the absence of active resistance to the Fascist regime than direct interrogation of people’s sources, Duggan explores “how men, women and children experienced and understood the regime in terms of their emotions, ideas, values, practices and expectations”.<sup>78</sup> One of Duggan’s most important claims is that the values of the church and the regime formed a single ‘emotional continuum’, contesting previous scholars – above all Emilio Gentile – who have portrayed Fascism as a ‘political religion’. Therefore, Duggan suggests that for many Italians, being a good Fascist meant being a good Catholic, and vice versa.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the author argues that Mussolini’s personality cult (*Ducismo*) was the most powerful driving force. Within the Fascist movement, Mussolini

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<sup>75</sup> Colarizi, *L’opinione degli italiani*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> I. Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (New York: The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.

<sup>77</sup> V. De Grazia, *The culture of consent. Mass organization of leisure in fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22.

<sup>78</sup> C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices. An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), XII.

<sup>79</sup> Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 198.

functioned as ‘an element of cohesion’ which performed the vital function of deflecting criticisms towards the regime.<sup>80</sup> Whereas Duggan foregrounded the intimate relationship between the Duce and the masses, the series of essays collected in *In the Society of Fascists*, edited by Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher, emphasise the complexity and the flexibility of the relationship between the Fascist regime and Italians.

The work tries to engage with De Felice’s consensus thesis arguing for a different approach that explores the importance of intermediary structures. Albanese and Pergher argue that previous historians’ obsession with testing Renzo de Felice’s assertion that Fascism enjoyed the broad support of Italians has meant that, whether one agreed that Italians consented to Fascism or not, the focus has been almost entirely on how Italians responded to the regime. This potentially obscures “the ways in which the population (or significant segments thereof) may have set the agenda for the regime, forcing a course of action upon the dictators and their inner circle, rather than the other way around”.<sup>81</sup> Second, the assumption present in the consent/coercion binary that consent is born of ‘positive’ propaganda and personal benefit from the regime’s policies and, conversely, that coercion and repression must always give rise to fearful and begrudging submission is flawed.<sup>82</sup>

An important perspective is added by Baris, who introduced the term ‘passive consent’ to avoid the historians’ difficulty in moving beyond the old binaries of consent and coercion. He asserted that de Felice’s claims of middle-class ‘consent’ did not explain how Fascism could rule a country for over twenty years.<sup>83</sup> The problem of terminology comes to the fore when analysing De Felice’s work in an international context. As Albanese and Philip Morgan

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<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, 103. The common refrain in complaints of Fascist corruption and inefficiency was: “if the Duce only knew” what misdeeds were being performed in his name.

<sup>81</sup> Albanese-Pergher, *In the Society of Fascists*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem, 1-28.

<sup>83</sup> T. Baris, ‘Consent, Mobilisation, and Participation. The rise of the Middle Class and its Support for the Fascist Regime’, in Albanese-Pergher, *In the Society of Fascists*, 69-71.



argued, there is a problem with the use of the words *consent* and *consensus* when analysing the relationship between people and the regime.<sup>84</sup> While in Italian the word *consenso* is used to signify both *consent* and *consensus*, in English *consent* and *consensus* imply a slightly different quality in this relationship. The word *consent* suggests an enthusiastic mental and physical act of endorsement and therefore an active engagement with the regime. *Consent* can be individual, while *consensus* suggests something broad and it is related to agreement with the opinion of a group and not an individual agreement. *Consensus* also denotes a passive attitude which describes people merely responding to the policies of the regime. *Consent* is used to emphasise the difference with the traditional full-group *consensus* model. As Morgan noted, De Felice borrowed the term from sociology as well as ordinary usage, without making a distinction between the two terms consent and consensus.<sup>85</sup> Neither consent nor coercion can be understood without the corrective of the other and both terms, inadequately reflect the “balance between pressure and voluntarism, imposition and contestation, allegiance and evasion, high-flying rhetoric and grubby reality” that shaped life under Fascism.<sup>86</sup> What we still lack is a full exploration of what the terms that might replace or supplement ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’, entail. Discourse outside Italy has contributed to a widening of the conversations about the nature of Italian Fascism and the issue of consent and dissent. Philippe Burrin, for instance, who worked on Vichy France, investigated the varied forms of French ‘adaptation’ or ‘accommodation’ (beyond simple collaboration) to German hegemony, including behaviours by government leaders, sectors of civil society, and

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<sup>84</sup> Albanese-Pergher, *In the Society of Fascists*, 1-20 and P. Morgan, ‘“The years of consent”? Popular attitudes and resistance to Fascism in Italy, 1925–1940’ in T. Kirk-A. McElligott (ed.), *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163-179.

<sup>85</sup> Morgan, ‘*The years of consent?*’, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Albanese-Pergher, *In the Society of Fascists*, 2.

partisan groups of assorted persuasions.<sup>87</sup> Burrin refuses to characterise the French people as either a nation of collaborators or a nation of resisters - or to label those in the middle ‘functional collaborators’ or ‘functional resisters’.<sup>88</sup> His characterisation that “to be a hero is honourable; not to be one is not necessarily dishonourable” is also applicable to the Fascist case. This means that the general historians’ approach to the dominant tone of ‘the black years’ of the Fascist *ventennio* may need to abandon the binary interpretation of consent and dissent in favour of a more nuanced approach. Thus, as has been demonstrated convincingly for the German case, historians of Italian Fascism, too, are beginning to discern polycratic rule and the hybrid co-existence of multiple power centres and resulting societal complexities.<sup>89</sup>

## 5. Local Fascism: Themes and Debates

The tension between the national and local dimension is a familiar theme in Italian historical studies, especially given the marked Italian regionalism that survived the country’s Unification. The relationship between the local and the national becomes even more important for the analysis of the Fascist movement that claimed to be centralised and totalitarian (“everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state”) at a time when most Italians would continue to define themselves and their identities in

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<sup>87</sup> P. Burrin, *Living with Defeat: France Under the German Occupation, 1940-1944* (London: Arnold, 1996), 176.

<sup>88</sup> J. Sweets, ‘Hold that Pendulum! Redefining Fascism, Collaborationism, and Resistance in France’, in *French Historical Studies* XV, 4 (Fall 1988), 731-758.

<sup>89</sup> Coined originally by Carl Schmitt, ‘polycratic rule’ was used by Karl Dietrich Bracher, Wolfgang Sauer, and Gerhard Schulz in *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung. Studien zur Errichtung des totalitären Herrschaftssystems in Deutschland 1933-34* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1974). See also Geoff Eley, ‘Hitler’s Silent Majority? Conformity and Resistance under the Third Reich’ in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 42, 2(2003), 550–83.

regional terms.<sup>90</sup> The theme of the organisation and the functioning of the Fascist regime at local level was first addressed in the 1970s from Ernesto Ragionieri for the case of Tuscany. Ernesto Ragionieri identified new angles from which to study Fascism: the role of the PNF in the periphery, the formation of a ‘fascistised’ ruling class and the adhesion of civil society to the totalitarian project of the regime.<sup>91</sup> The work of Ragionieri has been a reference point for subsequent historians;<sup>92</sup> not least for Marco Palla, one of his students who developed Ragionieri’s ideas further.<sup>93</sup> A central theme to these local studies, has been the role of the Fascist Party. As Palla highlighted, the Party with its flexibility and hold over the society at local level “became an instrument of coordination of the local life, essential for the functioning of a State and a dictatorship in the periphery”.<sup>94</sup> Significant works on Ferrara, Bologna, Florence and Brescia appeared in the mid-1980s with a special reference to the formative phase of Italian Fascism, providing a valuable insight on the economy and pre-Fascist political affiliations.<sup>95</sup> In that period, special attention to the urban and regional history of Italy had been paid by Anglo-American scholars like Paul Corner, Frank Snowden, Alice Kelikian and Anthony Cardoza who gave local Fascist studies an international circulation. As Alice Kelikian noted, much of the effort has been put on testifying to the

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<sup>90</sup> See above discussion about the definition of totalitarianism, in particular, Mussolini’s definition.

<sup>91</sup> E. Ragionieri, *La Toscana nel regime fascista (1922-1939)*, 2 Vol. (Florence: Olschki, 1971).

<sup>92</sup> T. Baris et al., *Fascismi Periferici. Nuove ricerche*, Istituto Romano per la storia d’Italia dal fascismo alla Resistenza, L’Annale Irsifar (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2009), 7-24.

<sup>93</sup> M. Palla, *Firenze nel regime fascista (1929-1934)* (Florence: Olschki, 1978).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> See also P. Corner, *Il fascismo a Ferrara (1915-1925)* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1974), A. L. Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism. The province of Bologna (1901-1926)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), P. Pombeni, M. Degl’Innocenti, A. Roveri, *Il PNF in Emilia Romagna. Personale politico, quadri sindacali, cooperazione* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988), A. A. Kelikian, *Town and Country under Fascism: The Transformation of Brescia 1915-1926* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), F. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany, 1919-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989).

“highly localised and loosely integrated” structure of Italy even after national unification.<sup>96</sup> These works have proved to be an effective attempt to highlight ‘local diversity’ under the regime. For example, Alice Kelikian’s work on Brescia contrasted the works of Paul Corner on Ferrara and Anthony Cardoza on Bologna, which emphasised the rapid growth of the Fascist movement among both the rural and town middle-classes in 1921-1922 under the impact of the squads’ punitive expeditions.<sup>97</sup> What most of the local studies lack, however, is a detailed discussion of how Fascism impacted on popular attitudes and vice versa. Yet, as Tommaso Baris argued, despite the absence of this and an adequate comparative analysis which could allow to draw up a clear balance sheet of the individual works, local Fascism is undoubtedly one of the most appropriate paradigms through which we can verify the various interpretative models about the Fascist experience.<sup>98</sup> Over the past few years, provincial studies have re-generated great interest thanks also to the larger availability of archival documents. Recent works demonstrated that the province is an appropriate observatory for a discussion of the effects of Fascist politics on Italian society. Tommaso Baris’ *Il Fascismo in provincia. Politica e società a Frosinone (1919-1940)*, for instance, reconstructs the physiognomy of Frosinone province. With a focus on the Party, Baris’ analysis explains the relationships between the national processes activated by the regime and their implementation at local level. Baris’ work confirms a general trend identified in other local and regional studies that showed pre-Fascist political and social forces surviving under the name of Fascism.<sup>99</sup> The important theme of who effectively ran the provinces and to what extent the Fascist totalitarian project took place in the periphery has been well-documented by Paul Corner’s latest work, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy*.

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<sup>96</sup> Kelikian, *Town and Country under Fascism*, 45.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>98</sup> T. Baris, *Il fascismo in provincia. Politica e società a Frosinone (1919-1940)* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2007), IX.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*.

Based on original archival research, the author reconstructs the world of provincial Fascism as it was implemented by its proponents and experienced by the Italian people. The central theme of his discussion is the regime's attempt to reform Italian institutions and society. The regime abolished local elections and imposed unelected mayors (*podestà*) appointed by the Ministry of Interior under the supervision of the prefect. The regime centralised the selection of the local elite in order to pursue its totalitarian ambition, achieve control of the province and avoid mismanagement of power. Crucial for the Fascist totalitarian system was the role of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF), as the main instrument through which the Fascist regime sought to fascistise the Italian society. Yet, Corner demonstrates that the PNF proved incapable of educating Italians to be 'good Fascists'. The failure of the project was mainly due to the lack of competence of the provincial Fascists leaders and their inability to deliver an intransigent Fascist message. What mattered to the local Fascist leaders was the contest for local power, patronage and status. The consistency of these themes throughout the documents analysed by Corner, is a clear indicator that, as Baris already argued, the *modus operandi* and the dynamics through which the various local factions competed for power were similar across the country.<sup>100</sup> In this respect, the failures of the Fascists resembled that of the liberal state: both failed to overcome the strong power bases of the local elites required for a genuine transformation of Italy commensurate with the political ambitions of either political project. Although the Party remains a crucial subject for the study of local Fascism, a new generation of historians has highlighted the necessity to cross-checking the levels of analysis (*histoire croisée*-crossed history) utilising a diversified approach which comprises an intertwined study of the social, administrative and institutional history of Fascism.<sup>101</sup> The recent literature on local Fascism has shed light on aspects of the subject that have not yet received sufficient historiographical attention. Corner and Galimi's recent edited collection, *Il Fascismo in*

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<sup>100</sup> Baris et al., *Fascismi Periferici*, 15.

<sup>101</sup> R. Camurri (ed.), *Fascismi locali* (Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni, 2011).

*provincia: Articolazioni e gestione del potere tra centro e periferia*, is a useful snapshot of the current focus of historical interest in this respect. It extends the spectrum of research to other Fascist institutions, such as the GUF (Fascist University Groups), ONMI (National Organisation for Maternity and Childhood), industrial groups and the Fascist trade unions. Its aim is an inclusion of ‘local Fascism’ into the national debate in order to explain national processes.<sup>102</sup> A core aspect of the different contributions is the process by which the Fascists attempted to nationalise the provinces by establishing dynamic relations with the periphery. The volume argues convincingly that local Fascists were not mere executors, but they were able to translate the national input into a more digestible message for the periphery. This thesis will add to the debate by exploring in detail how this relationship between the centre and the periphery developed in the Veneto, in particular with regard to the Fascist attempts at generating popular consent through regional forces.

## **6. Veneto and *Venezianità***

Since the 1970s, the case of the Veneto Region has already been scrutinised by eminent authors like Silvio Lanaro, Mario Isnenghi, Emilio Franzina and Ernesto Brunetta.<sup>103</sup> The peculiarity which has come to the light from the Veneto region characterised by the leadership role of the Church, is the continuity with the political structures of the liberal age under Fascism.<sup>104</sup> In other words, a new Fascist generation of politicians appeared incapable of challenging the power of the traditional local elites. However, this is not to say that, over

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<sup>102</sup> P. Corner, V. Galimi (ed.), *Il fascismo in provincia: Articolazioni e gestione del potere tra centro e periferia* (Rome: Viella Edizioni, 2014).

<sup>103</sup> As an example see E. Brunetta, ‘Dalla grande Guerra alla repubblica’, in S. Lanaro (ed.), *Le regioni dall’Unità a oggi. Il Veneto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 911-1035; M. Isnenghi, *L’Italia del fascio* (Florence: Giunti, 1996); E. Franzina, *Il Veneto ribelle. Proteste sociali, localismo popolare e sindacalizzazione tra l’unità e il fascismo* (Udine: Paolo Gaspari Editore, 2001).

<sup>104</sup> Brunetta, ‘Dalla grande Guerra alla repubblica’, 965.

time, the Veneto did not see the emergence of a new Fascist ruling elite, but as Baris noted, the replacement of the old traditional elites happened only towards the end of the regime's life, around 1942 and therefore was not instrumental in shaping the relationship between the centre and the periphery in its formative phases.<sup>105</sup> Renato Camurri had already argued that the network of local notables had not been corroded by the attempt of the various local *federali* found a new political order at local level.<sup>106</sup> On the contrary, the Fascist Party made use of the local aristocracy to pacify the internal situation of the Party by appointing them to hold offices of crucial importance. In 2011, the official historical journal of the Veneto's universities (Venice, Verona and Padua), *Venetica*, dedicated an entire volume to the study of the regional Fascism. This *Fascismi Locali* made an important contribution to the history of Veneto under Fascism. The volume confirmed a new interest in local Fascism from a new generation of historians. It examines the rise of local élites and their relationship with the National Fascist Party (PNF) in the provinces of Padua, Belluno, Verona and Rovigo. The clear focus of the book is on an agrarian brand of Fascism (Padua, Verona and Rovigo), with the only exception of the province of Belluno which geographically (mountain community) and politically (consistent socialist political pre-Fascist affiliation) is not comparable with the other provinces which are object of the study. The articles of Alessandro Baú, Francesco Chiari, Carlo Monaco and Valentino Zaghi, with minor differences from province to province, substantially confirm previous accounts on the Veneto region: the regional Fascist ruling class is a hybrid, a mix between old and new elites, where the new Fascists were much weaker than what was suggested by the regime's propaganda.<sup>107</sup> And in some cases, as argued by Alessandro Baú for the case of Padua, Fascism "was born weak and hesitant and

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<sup>105</sup> Baris et al., *Fascismi Periferici*, 20.

<sup>106</sup> Camurri, *Fascismi locali*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, 10-11.

remained so also in the following years”.<sup>108</sup> Although *Fascismi Locali* provides interesting ideas regarding the development of Fascism in the region, it does not include more detailed analysis of developments in the province of Venice which held a strong leadership role within the Veneto movement, yet, in stark contrast with the rest of the region, possessed a marked urban frame.

The theme of Fascism in Venice has been touched upon by a number of historians of the region. For years, the work *Venezia*, edited by Emilio Franzina, has been the main point of reference for the general historiography of Venetian Fascism, until the turn of the century when in 2001 Giulia Albanese published *Alle origini del fascismo. La violenza politica a Venezia 1919- 1922*. This, in 2002 was supplemented by the multi-volume *Storia di Venezia*, edited by Mario Isnenghi and Stuart Woolf. Albanese made a significant contribution to our knowledge of the formative phase of the Fascist movement in Venice. However, the book does not provide an account of Fascism in power as the narration stopped at 1922. *Storia di Venezia* covers the entire Fascist period from a local perspective, contains different contributions on the Fascist regime from different local historians. The most significant article is that of Renato Camurri, *La classe politica nazional fascista*, shedding new light on the local Fascist ruling class though again with a focus on the earlier period, and without specific focus on Venice City and its relationship with the rest of the province and the region.<sup>109</sup> The above-mentioned authors have made a great contribution to emphasising the specificity of the Venice province political tradition. However, this work is asking a set of

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<sup>108</sup> A. Baù, *All'ombra del Fascio. Lo Stato e il Partito nazionale fascista padovano (1922-1938)* (Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni, 2010), 4.

<sup>109</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, *Storia di Venezia* (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).



questions that has not been explored in detail before, such as the mental attitude of the Venetian people and their response to the various challenges presented by the regime.

Recently, Venetian Fascism has also attracted the attention of non-Italian historians. In *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929-40*, Kate Ferris uses an approach similar to that of Sheila Fitzpatrick's work on Russian Stalinism,<sup>110</sup> exploring microhistories related to young people, popular celebrations, Fascist autarchic policy, and Fascist funerals. Inspired by De Certeau's *The practice of everyday life*, she investigates the 'tactics' excogitated by local people to respond to, and sometimes resist, the regime's policies. One of the principal strengths of the work is Ferris' ability to provide a detailed socioeconomic overview of the city in the interwar period together with an account of the local manifestations of the hardships of the Great Depression that its people shared with other Italians. In addition, Ferris describes well Venice's distinctive history and artistic patrimony, and the city's reliance on tourism. Ferris provides an analysis of the efforts made by the regime in order to reach the local population and she also explains convincingly how the regime made frequent recourse to the myth and the rituals of the Venetian Republic, Risorgimento nationalism, and the Catholic Church, to find support for Fascist indoctrination. Unfortunately, as suggested by Anthony Cardoza, the documentary evidence in the individual case studies does not always sustain the authors' claims and aspirations.<sup>111</sup> In particular, she makes creative use of forty-seven essays submitted by nine- and ten-year-old students for a local writing competition in 1935 in order to give voice to Venetian middle class children. Likewise, the chapter on the

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<sup>110</sup> K. Ferris, *Everyday life in fascist Venice, 1929-40* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012). See also S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999). These works are inspired by the work M. De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>111</sup> See A. L. Cardoza, 'K. Ferris, *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929–1940* (Review)', in *The Journal of Modern History*, 86, 3(2014), 706-707.

regime's efforts to appropriate pre-existing festivals, and celebrations is not convincing, since its assessment of popular reception relies largely upon the memoirs of a single source, Gino Damerini's wife, who was a member of the Venetian social elite. Bosworth's *Italian Venice: A History* explores Venice city from the fall of the Republic in 1797 and the Risorgimento up through the present day.<sup>112</sup> It contains interesting accounts on the two faces of the city: modernisation-consumerism and culture. With regards to the Fascist period the author discusses local Fascism with a particular focus on the process of industrialisation of the city driven by the leading figures of the Venice's resurgence, such as the industrialist Giuseppe Volpi. Before joining the Fascist regime and being appointed Minister of Finance, Volpi was already a successful businessman who was entrusted with several political and administrative missions under Giovanni Giolitti. He served as a delegate at the Peace Conference in Paris and was appointed governor of Tripolitania (Libya).<sup>113</sup>

Despite imperfections, what is clear in both Ferris and Bosworth is that Venice is not only important for its diversity in terms of origins, physiognomy of power, economy, religious affiliation and geography, but first and foremost for its dynamic relation with local identity (*Venezianità*). Venice city and its territory had developed in large measure an independent identity from the other Italian areas since the Risorgimento. References to *venezianità* have continuously been made in the main works on the local history of the province and of the city of Venice, and also more recently. To a large degree the history of Italy has been the country of the *cento città* (one hundred cities), each with its own characteristics. The negotiation between municipal, regional and national identities has involved the liberal as well as the Fascist elites, with the main preoccupation being to turn a country into a nation and 'make Italians'. Similar tensions were played out in Venice. However, nationalism was not a contradiction in term of loyalty to the Venetian past and neither precluded loyalty to Italy.

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<sup>112</sup> R. J. Bosworth, *Italian Venice: A history* (London: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>113</sup> S. Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi: industria e finanza tra Giolitti e Mussolini* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979).

*Venezianità* could sit quite comfortably with the commitment to the nation and to Fascist imperialism and *romanità*. Some of the rhetoric and myths of the *Serenissima* (ancient Republic of Venice) were recuperated to invent and express the new paradigm of the nation. Therefore, Venice's singularity was seen as a strength at the service of *italianità* (Italianess).<sup>114</sup> Not dissimilar to what Celia Applegate and Alon Confino have demonstrated for Germany, the province, and in this case Venice, presented a singular case which strengthened national identity. *Venezianità* has been a building block for nationalism and Italianness.<sup>115</sup> As Elsa Damien argued, the spatial identity appears to be relevant for a better understanding of Venetian history. In addition, the relationship between *venezianità* and nationalism and Fascism helps to demonstrate that identity can evolve, circulate and be appropriated by most diverse political agendas.<sup>116</sup> However, the Fascist recovery of the Venetian past was achieved through a compromise which had to be found between the traditions of *venezianità* and modern financial planning and the regime's political requirements. In this perspective, the Venetian ruling class aimed at linking local identity and Fascist ideology to the common object of Venice's economic *rinascimento*.

## 7. Thesis Outline

The aim of this thesis will not be confined to challenging the historiographical debate surrounding the Fascist regime. This dissertation will focus on the relationship between consent and dissent in order to investigate local active support or resistance to the regime.

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<sup>114</sup> D. Laven-E. Damien, 'Empire, City, Nation: Venice's Imperial Past and the "Making of Italians" from Unification to Fascism', in S. Berger-A. Miller (ed.), *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 511-552.

<sup>115</sup> A. Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor. Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); C. Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>116</sup> E. Damien, 'Spatial identities in the nineteenth century: Venice as a case study', 93-102, in *MDCCC*, 1, 2012.

Attention will be paid to the variety of attitudes of local people towards the regime. This research will emphasise the crucial role of societal responses in supporting or undermining Italian Fascism.

The Italian research on Fascism has often focused on political or military history, whereas this work will contribute to developing the field of social studies of Fascism which the Anglo-Saxon historians such as Richard J. B. Bosworth, Paul Corner and Philip Morgan have lately been moving towards. Based on a thematic structure, this research aims at offering a more comprehensive social and cultural history of an important province of Italy.

This thesis will consist of five chapters, each describing and analysing a different piece of the Venetian social jigsaw and asking a set of questions that has not been explored in detail before. The chapters will be devoted to different sections of local society, to their actions, and to their complex relations with the Fascist regime from 1922 until 1943.

Given the amount of the available literature on popular opinion under the regime, this work has needed to select what kind of sources, perspective and methodology to apply to this research. Of the works available, Paul Corner's and Philip Morgan's large output on Italian Fascism has arguably been the most inspiring for the drafting of this thesis. Morgan's and Corner's research about Italian Fascism has crucially contributed to inspire this work to examine in depth the 'question of consent'.<sup>117</sup> These authors have also influenced the methodological approach of this research by influencing the choice of the kind of primary sources to scrutinise, namely the local and national Fascist archives with a focus on the police reports, in order to investigate the relation and the relation between people and regime. In

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<sup>117</sup> Morgan, 'The years of consent?', 163-179.

addition to these two important authors, this thesis has drawn inspiration from studies on other European countries like Nazi Germany. In this respect, we have concentrated our attention on the excellent works of Ian Kershaw and Philippe Burrin on Nazi Germany and the German occupation of France which have provided additional guidance on the kind of social grouping to investigate, and they have significantly impacted on the way this work has questioned documents in order to answer the main questions of the research. On one side, Kershaw's *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* has provided a further framework for the kind of sources to be investigated, namely the reports on opinion and morale compiled during the regime by party, state, police, and other official agencies.<sup>118</sup> On the other side, Burrin's *Living with Defeat: France Under the German Occupation, 1940-1944* has encouraged me to explore the institutions of Venice society: the Communist Party, the trade unions, the Church, the business community, and the intellectuals.<sup>119</sup> This thesis aims to paint a clear picture of Venetian society during the Fascist era, by describing how the various Venetian social groups fundamentally maintained and defended their autonomy.

We shall be focusing in turn upon five chapters, all of which manifested the basic elements of consent and dissent during the dictatorship. The first chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to the local ruling elite, to its process of fascistisation (whether complete or not) and the related role of Fascism in stabilising power at the local level. This chapter will also introduce some of the social groups that will be playing a crucial role during the regime, like industrialists and other groups of interests. The key element will be the relationship between centre and periphery and the role of the notabilities (*podestà*, *federale* and *prefetto*) in

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<sup>118</sup> See Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*

<sup>119</sup> See Burrin, *Living with Defeat*.

controlling power at local level.<sup>120</sup> This chapter will attempt to demonstrate the limited success of the regime in winning over local traditional elites as even those considered to be ‘true’ Fascists were able to retain the style and political transaction attitudes typical of the pre-Fascist period. After the first chapter, the focus will shift onto the relationship between workers and the regime focusing on the Depression period. The second chapter will look at working class participation in the Fascist regime. So far, research on the Italian working class has benefited from the works of Tobias Abse and Tim Mason, with Abse focusing predominantly on the years of the Fascist seizure of power in 1918-1922, whereas Mason concentrated on last two years of the war (1943-1945).<sup>121</sup> This analysis will redress the lack of research with regards to the workers under the regime by taking inspiration from the rigorous scrutiny that Richard Bessel, Conan Fisher and Detlef Muhlberger have conducted of the German workers under the Nazi regime. The chapter will argue that the regime failed to achieve consent from the workers.

The third chapter will then look at youth under the regime with a particular focus on the Catholic Church youth groups and its strong social power over the Venetian population during the Fascist era. A particular reference will be made to its capacity to organise and

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<sup>120</sup> During the Fascist era, the *podestà* was the nonelected equivalent of the mayor and as such he had very significant administrative and financial functions. The *podestà* was in charge for five years with the possibility of removal by the prefect or of reconfirmation beyond the five canonical years. The *federale* led the *fasci di combattimento* at provincial level, the party's basic organisational structure. The *prefetto*, dependent on the Ministry of the Interior, must be considered the first local authority representative of the state at provincial level. In the Fascist era, prefects were the instruments Mussolini used for centralizing and strengthening the power of the government. At provincial level, the tensions between the prefects and PNF federali were not uncommon were really frequent.

<sup>121</sup> See T. Abse, ‘The Rise of Fascism in an Industrial City: The Case of Livorno 1918–1922’, in D. Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism: capitalism, populism and culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 52-82 and T. Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, edited by Jane Caplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

mobilise local society. The chapter will analyse the complex relationship between the Catholic Actions youth groups and the Fascist youth groups, as well as the extent to which both high prelates and parish priests managed to keep themselves from entering political debate (whether to support or to challenge the regime). The most crucial part of the chapter will present the success of Catholic youth organisations – between 1929 and 1931 - that closely resembled those of their Fascist counterparts. I will also underline the capacity of local and traditional society initially to resist through their involvement in the catholic organisations, the *Azione Cattolica* and the FUCI (federation of catholic students), and then I will focus on the compromise made by the local Church in order to accommodate the regime in the late 1930s.

Catholic youth groups represented a serious blow for a dictatorship whose ambitions of total social control were essentially based on the regimentation of the Italian population and on constant displays of popular support. Catholics possessed their own youth and social organisations which represented a real source of alternative education and indoctrination for people (and youth in particular), being a source of real challenge for the regime's project to fascistise Italians. Therefore, this chapter will question the regime's formation and education of a new and completely fascistised ruling class. In order to do that, this thesis will examine the level of repression of alternative and pre-existent local groupings like the Catholics and the degree of mobilisation produced by the regime's mass organisations like *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*, *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* and *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia*.

The fourth chapter will be dedicated to the local Jewish community, the dynamics of integration within the Venetian society and the crucial role they played in various Venetian

social and interest groups. This chapter will analyse the effect of the Race Laws on the Venetian Jewish community, the reaction of the local people and how local Fascists and Fascist elites collaborated in persecuting or rescuing Jewish citizens. The chapter will provide further background on the institutions and the decision makers that were responsible for the implementation of the Race Laws at local level. This section will also focus on the peculiarity of the Venetian experience of the Race Laws, namely how the laws were executed compared to other similar regions of Italy, such as Ferrara, Turin and Trieste.

The final chapter of the thesis will focus on Venice society's shift away from the regime during the first three years of the Second World War (1940-1943). I will move on to an analysis of the 'fracture of the consent' produced by the conflict and its social impact at all levels: politics, economy, women and youth. The war contributed to the rapid collapse of the regime which officially happened on 25 July 1943 with Mussolini's dismissal enacted by the King. However, this chapter will end with Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio's taking of power, the armistice signed with the Allies on 8 September 1943 and the following proclamation of the Italian Social Republic allied with the Nazis in the north of Italy. The speed of disintegration is one of the ways in which the regime differed most obviously from Nazi Germany and may point to a significantly different composition of popular support for the regime. This chapter will discuss the process of people's detachment from the regime during the progression of the conflict.

## **8. Methodology and Sources**

Much of this work is based on research I conducted on the files of Fascist archives at the State Central Archive in Rome which I have visited multiple times during the period of the doctorate. The material was selected to throw light on the core theme of consent and dissent



during the chosen time period, and the work predominantly draws on the police reports on popular opinion.

This work predominantly draws on the reports of the regime police that was controlling Italian society. The source of the reports could be some Fascist officials, the militia, syndicalists or state employees. In addition to sources produced by state employees, we can also find material supplied by private individuals such as businessmen or hotel and pub owners, who were legally obligated to collect information on suspicious citizens for use of Fascist law enforcement.

These sources offer broad temporal, geographical, and social perspectives. The work entailed an enormous task, involving the close examination of more than 5,000 documents on the experience of particular groups (for example, the Party, the Fascist Youth, workers, the Jewish community, the Church and material relating specifically to women).

Although it seems that the research has relied on one typology of files which might appear to be a relatively narrow archival base, in reality this work has a broad perspective, as it also consisted of a meticulous scrutiny of local archives, such as the municipal archives of Chioggia, Portogruaro, Venice, Cavarzere and San Dona', or the archive of the provincial organisations of the regimes, like the GUF (University students), the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) and *Organizzazione Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (ONMI).

The documents about 'popular opinion' are not an objective description of the reality on the ground; they are sources provided by informers who had their own agendas, preconceptions, and interests in portraying certain people in a certain way at certain times.

But they nevertheless provide us with very useful information, and read critically and with the necessary caution and supplemented by alternative sources, they provide the researcher with an effective measure of shifts in public opinion. This is the reason why this research does not take documents at face value, but there is an effort to provide background and interpretation, also through robust support of secondary literature available for the province of Venice.

As Ian Kershaw already argued for the Bavarian case, the task of reconstructing trends in popular opinion in “a climate of ideological dictatorship with systematic and draconian repression of nonconformist opinion and attempted steering of opinion by means of a comprehensively organised propaganda machine backed up by coercion and control of Party and State, is faced with some obvious and daunting problems”.<sup>122</sup> One of the greatest problems is to establish whether patterns of development in political attitude and opinions were genuine expression of popular attitude or not. People’s lives and their political comments were recorded by others in reports that were meant to be compiled for the regime’s specific purpose to control society and they contain their own internal bias and colouring. For evident lack of alternatives, historians have used the voluminous archives of the police, prefects and Fascist Party. The problem with these reports is that they deliver a message which is from the perspective of the powerholders rather than the people. These surveys report attitudes and behaviours that the regime was meant to repress. Most of the reported incidents were triggered by economic hardship, especially during the Great Depression, and were often described as being isolated events, and promptly repressed by the police; therefore, they did not cause a serious threat for the regime.

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<sup>122</sup> Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, 5.

However, two different tendencies can be observed when scrutinising the police and prefectural summary reports to the Ministry of the Interior. The first is related to the prefect's summaries on the political situation of the province (*Situazione politica delle province*). As has been demonstrated in previous works, especially by Simona Colarizi's *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime*, these kinds of documents have the tendency to portray the local political situation in a 'positive' and 'constructive' way as the prefect, virtually in charge of the province, had to show to the Ministry of Interior, and therefore to his boss, that the situation was under control or at least that the 'public order' was recoverable under his leadership and directive. Despite being conveyed from a similar standing point and with a similar style, the police reports have a slightly different tone. Police reports are usually related and focused on recording anti-Fascist activities and the distinguishing factor was the absence or presence of anti-Fascists and their organisations in triggering or exploiting protest and agitations. What mattered to prefects was to prevent and repress popular attitudes that might have caused a threat to the Fascist 'system'. Meanwhile, police officers, namely anti-Fascist hunters, were more interested in reporting protests that might have been politically motivated and directed by clandestine anti-Fascist organisations and propaganda. "Despite the different tone of these documents, the reports of the internal authorities generally imply conformity and support for the regime, whatever the specific criticism alluded to".<sup>123</sup> On the contrary, the anti-Fascists of the clandestine Communist Party, who produced memoirs after the fall of the regime, emphasised the rejection of the regime. However, memoirs of the militants are understandably retrospective and judgemental and "the impression is conveyed of a regime which throughout has only minimal popular support".<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>124</sup> Ibidem.

The material collected by the Fascist authorities is variegated and it goes from the recording of an event, the reproduction of verbatim letters they intercepted, the anti-Fascist song appearing on public walls, the subversive songs sung in pubs and during moments of conviviality, insults passed by individual workers, confiscated posters and leaflets. However, one of the most interesting sources of information were the anonymous informers, especially when the OVRA, the special political police unit in the Ministry of Interior, was established in order to investigate anti-Fascist activity and social life. This was an exceptional source of information for the regime. As Morgan argued, “anonymous informers were expected to mix with people and register what they actually said, to gauge a public mood which had no open way of self-expression in a dictatorship”. They “were often used as a check on the operations of their provincial and local organisations (...)” and “they became the most important source of information for the regime’s leadership on the fluctuations in popular attitudes”.<sup>125</sup> However, as Morgan has also admitted, the sources have self-evident limitations, as “opinions and conversations overheard in various public places were welded by informers into the generalisations of their reports”.<sup>126</sup>

The sources regarding the popular mood and voice, the material is often so direct and expressive that there can be little mistaking the broad lines of mood and opinion.<sup>127</sup> For example, one of the approximations made by De Felice, especially regarding the regime’s surveys on popular opinion, was to assert that consent for the regime was demonstrated by the fact that agitations were primarily due to economic claims. De Felice excluded any form of anti-Fascism, but at the same time he failed to cross check his information with a large number of secondary sources.

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<sup>125</sup> Morgan, *The years of consent*?, 172.

<sup>126</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>127</sup> Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, 5.

Historians have explored alternative approaches, like the use of oral history. The work of Luisa Passerini on Turin has revealed a large span of political dissidence which remained hidden and not recordable during the regime. But the so-called ‘cultural resistance’ cannot fully explain the development of popular opinion under the regime. First and foremost, ‘cultural resistance’ refers to specific social groups; in Passerini’s work the protagonists were the workers. Secondly, oral sources are judgemental and recorded after the fall of the regime, and as Michael Frisch already noted, by using oral sources there is a danger of appropriating experience for theory rather than using theory to make sense of experience.<sup>128</sup> Alistair Thomson has argued, that historians want to explore how past events have subjectively impacted upon individuals, but they also need empirical evidence about what happened in the past.<sup>129</sup>

In what follows, as Kershaw has already done, the documents “will be given the full scope to speak for themselves, so that the full force of their contemporary comment can be seen”.<sup>130</sup>

The research is based on documentary evidence from an extensive number of public and private sources. An approximate number of three thousand documents have been consulted. The main sources are located at the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* in Rome. Particular attention has been paid to the documents of the Ministry of the Interior. I have consulted the documents related to the apparatus of control and repression of the regime related to *Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza* which provide crucial information about the regime’s system of control over the population. This material gives a clear panoramic view of

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<sup>128</sup> M. Frisch, ‘Oral History, Questions of Identity and the Representation of Culture’, Paper presented at the International Conference on Oral History, New York, 1994.

<sup>129</sup> A. Thomson, ‘Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History’, in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 9 (1999), 291-301, 301.

<sup>130</sup> Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, 10.

the regime's action of repression enacted over political dissidents. Popular opinion assessment has been conveyed by the police and prefects' reports on single cases and on the general situation of the province. These documents have been shown to be of particular interest in discovering local popular mood during crucial periods of the dictatorship, like the proclamation of the Race Laws and the outbreak of the war. In addition, a wide range of local newspapers were available to provide crucial information on the political, economic and cultural happenings of the time.

In the attempt to outline the profile of the local Fascist ruling class, the lack of accessibility of important family archives of eminent local figures like Pietro Marsich and Giuseppe Volpi, necessitated reliance on secondary sources and plausibility arguments. In some cases however, like that of the *federale* Giorgio Suppiej, primary sources could be consulted. The files of the *Segreteria Particolare del Duce*, for instance, provided interesting insights into the relationship between the Fascist leader and the local ruling class.

A crucial step towards the completion of the archival research has been the cross-checking of the information made through the consultation of local and municipal archives and local archives of the Fascist organisations. I consulted the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* with a focus on the files regarding the Prefecture of Venice (*Gabinetto di Prefettura*), as well as the municipal archives of Venice, Chioggia, Portogruaro and San Donà, which have been indispensable for understanding the functioning of the local Fascist administration at province level. Although in some cases documentation is incomplete, the municipal archives have been of particular interest in supporting the relevant national documentation scrutinised in Rome and monitoring the activity of some minor figures of the local Fascism, the *funzionari*. In addition to the municipal sources, I have been able to consult the *Archivio*

*Storico della Regione Veneto*, where two important Fascist organisations' archives are held: *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND) and *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL), which gave a good insight into the local Fascist organisations' internal structure and financial situation. However, the most interesting and what complex organisation archive consulted has been the *Archivio Storico dell'Università Ca' Foscari* with material concerning students' life, the *Gruppo Universitario Fascista* (GUF), the official university celebrations and the correspondence of the Rector. This documentation has proved to be of particular importance in assessing the level of integration of the new Venetian Fascist ruling class within the party (especially for the 1930s) and in discovering the biography of an eminent Fascist like Agostino Lanzillo who was the rector at Ca' Foscari between 1934 and 1938, that is, in the middle of the Staracian fascistisation of youth.

# 1. The Fascist Party in Venice province (1919-1943)

## Introduction

The Fascist regime had totalitarian ambitions; its totalitarian ‘project’ was to ‘fascistise’ Italians, to create new Fascist men and women and cohere a recalcitrant, individualistic, and locally-rooted people into a national and nationalised block capable of fighting and winning wars of imperial expansion. In this perspective, Fascism was an extreme solution to the problem of nation-building, which had not previously been achieved despite the late-nineteenth century process of territorial and political unification under Liberal governments.

This chapter explores how those messages were received at local level. Using voluminous State and Fascist Party archive documentation – especially the reports on popular and public opinion by a vast network of police informers and rank-and-file Fascists – we attempt to reconstruct the world of the Fascist movement as it was shaped by its local exponents.

The Fascist Party was the main instrument through which the Fascist regime sought to ‘fascistise’ Italians. This chapter will explore the extent to which the Fascist Party proved capable of nationalising itself, with the bureaucratic centralisation of its formal activities and responsibilities superseding the provincial origins of the movement. This chapter accepts that the Fascist regime had a totalitarian ideology with which the regime tried to build the ‘new Fascist man’ and nationalise a country that was organised largely on the basis of regional affiliations and structures. However, this work will argue that despite a process of organisation and propaganda, the regime failed in its central mission of educating Italians



(whether leaders or led) to be ‘good Fascists’. Despite the formal subordination of Party to State in the Fascist totalitarian framework, as already argued by Paul Corner, an endemic *beghismo* (infighting) diverted the totalitarian project of Mussolini and undermined the process of ‘making the Italians’, more specifically building the ‘new Fascist man’. In order to assess the failure of the regime’s ambitions, we will investigate the contest for local power, patronage and the struggles between old and new elites and the disputes and quarrels with competing actors, the State-appointed prefects and the *federale*.

The PNF managed to establish a new national centralised system to replace the old corrupt Liberal elites, but unlike Nazism, evidence shows that there was no homogeneous national image of Fascism; as the Venice case will demonstrate, in order to understand Italian fascism, one has to approach it through a particular local-provincial lens.

We will discuss how the policies implemented by Rome affected the province. Particular attention will be paid to the prominent role of the Venetian entrepreneurial bourgeoisie and big business led by the industrial captain Giuseppe Volpi. Volpi was a real source of the economic power that moulded the relationship with the political power exercised by the regime. We will highlight its political dimension, understanding Venetian big business as one of the major actors of the ‘authoritarian compromise’ that allowed Mussolini to consolidate Fascist power locally. In that sense, the Venetian business community appeared to have been an active counterpart in one of the several compromises reached by the Fascist regime in order to embrace a broader social base. In Italy, the Fascist regime supported a ‘financial oligarchy’ in which few selected groups monopolised Italian manufacturing and each of these groups was led by a man like Giovanni Agnelli, Giovanni Battista Pirelli, Guido Donegani,

Giorgio Enrico Falck, Vittorio Cini and Giuseppe Volpi. Giovanni Agnelli was the leader of the Turinese automotive group *Fabbrica Italiana di Automobili Torino* (FIAT);<sup>131</sup> Giovanni Battista Pirelli was the founding father of Pirelli, a company that initially specialised in rubber and derivative processes. Thereafter, Pirelli's activities were primarily focused on the production of tyres.<sup>132</sup> Guido Donegani was an Italian engineer, businessman and politician who was CEO and President of the Italian chemical industrial giant Montecatini from 1910 to 1945;<sup>133</sup> Giorgio Enrico Falck was the founding father of the *Società anonima Acciaierie e Ferriere Lombarde* in 1906, one of the oldest companies in the steel industry;<sup>134</sup> Vittorio Cini and Giuseppe Volpi made their fortune with the electricity company SADE (*Società Adriatica di Elettricità*), founded in 1905, and with the development of the industrial area of Marghera (Venice).<sup>135</sup> The Venetian entrepreneurial class was able to monopolise political cadres and not least to promote its leader Giuseppe Volpi through a process of 'transformism' (*trasformismo*).<sup>136</sup> Volpi had been a Liberal and former collaborator of

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<sup>131</sup> M. Ferrante, *Casa Agnelli. Storie e personaggi dell'ultima dinastia italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007).

<sup>132</sup> See the history of the Pirelli's family, Storia – Pirelli – I Protagonisti, La storia di una grande impresa fatta da uomini straordinari. Tre generazioni, un'unica anima industriale La passione per la gomma, la vocazione per l'imprenditoria, la spinta all'internazionalizzazione, [https://www.pirelli.com/corporate/it/about\\_us/history/aboutUs-key-figures/default.html](https://www.pirelli.com/corporate/it/about_us/history/aboutUs-key-figures/default.html) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>133</sup> P. Amatori-B. Bella, *Montecatini 1888-1966. Capitoli di storia di una grande impresa* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990).

<sup>134</sup> M. Fumagalli, *Giorgio Enrico Falck*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 44 (Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1994).

<sup>135</sup> See the above quoted Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*.

<sup>136</sup> N. Perrone, *L'inventore del trasformismo. Liborio Romano, strumento di Cavour per la conquista di Napoli* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2009). *Trasformismo* (Transformism) refers to the process initiated by Agostino Depretis, the Italian Prime Minister in 1883, who was a member of the Constitutional Liberal Left party. He moved to the right and reshuffled his government to include Marco Minghetti's Conservatives in order to have a more stable government in 1883. This practice seems to have been largely used also by later governments. With regards to Fascism, the term refers to members of the Liberal parties who decided to join the Fascist Party after its seizure of the power. They 'transformed' their political frame. Volpi was a clear example of this process.

Giovanni Giolitti. However, he was able to guarantee himself a national role within government and a seat in the Fascist Grand Council.

The analysis will develop alongside an exploration of the evolution of the Fascist movement by discussing the interdependencies between what happened at the national and local level, exploring the balance of power between the centre and the periphery over time. Different phases of the evolution of Fascist support have been already analysed by De Felice. He identified two different stages in the development of the Italian Fascism: Fascism as a movement and Fascism as a regime. During the movement phase, consent in favour of Fascism came as a result of the successful mobilisation of certain social groups of the middle class, those who joined *squadristo* (Fascist Armed Squads) to fight the advancement of leftist political groups (Socialist and Communist parties), with the aim to take power by replacing the failing and corrupt Liberal ruling class. By going back to the movement's origins in 1919, we will highlight the weaknesses already prevalent before Mussolini's 'March on Rome' in October 1922 and the high level of violence which brought the movement to power. By contrast, the second phase (regime phase) saw support for Fascism as a consequence of accommodation and acceptance, based on the regime's capacity to offer material advantages such as education, career and political opportunities.<sup>137</sup>

### **1.1 The Rise of Fascism: Periphery and Centre before 1924**

This section will demonstrate that the victory in the Great War, despite constituting a great moment of national unity for Italy, did not put an end to the permanent state of crisis of the Liberal government and society. On the contrary, the divisions which had been partially

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<sup>137</sup> Baris, *Consent, Mobilisation, and Participation*, 70.

suppressed during the conflict now made themselves felt with full force. A shift to violence among the Italians was rooted in the horrors of the trenches and the dramatic economic challenges posed by war and its aftermath. There were many reasons which led to the violent involvement of various political groups during the post-war period: the sacrifices made during the war, without any form of material compensation; inflation which threatened many people's standard of living; and a job market which had been radically altered by the war with an acceleration in industrialisation and a corresponding increase in the size of the working class.<sup>138</sup> The end of the war had provoked, especially among the working classes, an expectation of radical social change, and the course of the war had increased resentment against the Liberal State on both the right and the left.<sup>139</sup> On the left, sections of the Socialist Party (*massimalisti*) aspired to change radically the distribution of wealth, looking at the Russian Revolution as an example of how the 'Bourgeois State' should be superseded by Socialism. At the other end of the political spectrum, the right became more strongly attracted by ideas of hierarchical restoration.<sup>140</sup> The Italian Liberal State was unable to find an adequate political response to these challenges and popular resentment found expression in a massive and violent anti-State movement.

Historians such as Giulia Albanese emphasised that the militarisation of society and the brutalising aspects of the conflict had the inevitable consequence of the violent civil war that characterised post-war Italy and Germany. For Albanese, the war anticipated many of the most distinctive features of the totalitarian regimes and created the preconditions for their rise

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<sup>138</sup> V. Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy, 1860–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>139</sup> P. Corner, 'State and society, 1901–1922', in A. Lyttelton (ed.), *Liberal and Fascist Italy: 1900–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17–43.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.

in power.<sup>141</sup> As Lorenzo Benadusi suggested, the war created space for antidemocratic ideas in Italy, France and Great Britain, even in countries which had not taken part such as Spain. While France and Great Britain underwent a gradual reform of the State and demilitarisation of society in order to avoid internal conflicts, in Italy, the situation of social, political and economic impasse immediately after the war, triggered a clash between different political groups. The consequences of the war were particularly severe in Italy as the Liberal State was not able to find adequate answers to the social and political demands. Italy had joined the war on the side of the Allies with the promise that Italy would receive specific territorial gains once the war had been won (Pact of London). The Pact of London was broken at the Versailles Conference in 1919 and Italy did not receive all other territories negotiated as the other nations and the great powers were worried about Italy's imperial ambitions. The failure of the negotiations was greeted with disappointment by Italian public opinion and the nationalists and irredentists used the Allies' volte-face to sow the idea that Italy had been betrayed. This feeling of discontent against the international community was exploited by the nationalist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio who coined the term *vittoria mutilata* (mutilated victory) leading to dissatisfaction with the democratic system. The crisis of Fiume in 1919 triggered the perception of Italy's weak Liberal government. Mussolini embraced the ideals of D'Annunzio's mutilated war and capitalised on the Liberal State crisis forming the *Fascio di Combattimento* in 1919, an association devoted to violence, imperialism, and the repression of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). It was precisely the incapacity of the Liberal elites to manage the memories of the war that delegitimised the rule of the Liberal State in the eyes of the population.<sup>142</sup> The Liberal government's inability to extrapolate from the war a

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<sup>141</sup> L. Benadusi, 'Borghesi in Uniform: Masculinity, Militarism, and the Brutalization of Politics from the First World War to the Rise of Fascism', in G. Albanese, R. Pergher (eds), *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 29-48, 39.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibidem*, 41-42.

unifying symbolic message similar to the French *union sacrée*, exacerbated the old divisions between interventionists and neutralists and put the country in a state of permanent mobilisation with paramilitary squads mainly formed by *arditi* (First World War assault units) and Socialist massimalists continuing the war internally as a civil war. In this perspective, the crisis of the Liberal State triggered the birth of Fascism. To confirm this interpretation, after his rise to power in 1922, Mussolini would continue to refer to the Mutilated Victory in Fascist rhetoric.

As we have above mentioned, the crisis of the Bourgeois State led to the formation of Mussolini's ultra-nationalist movement *Fasci di combattimento*, which were predominantly based on violent *squadristo*. As already suggested by Mimmo Franzinelli, the roots of Fascist *squadristo* are to be found in the so-called *arditismo*, "the spirit that had driven young men who had fought as volunteers in assaults units" during the First World War.<sup>143</sup> Yet, the social makeup of the backbone of the first Fascist squads was much more diverse than has been suggested by the traditional historiography.<sup>144</sup> The first Venetian Fascist *squadristo* it is a good example of this. While the first wave of Fascism born in Milan in March 1919 attracted a very disparate group of urban journalists, writers, artists, revolutionary syndicalists expelled from labour unions, students, and former soldiers, the first Venetian Fascism was born from Republicanism and Liberal Radicalism. The leadership of the Venetian interventionists' front was held by the movement *Democrazia Sociale*, a political group characterised by Republican and Liberal Democratic elements of the Left. The first *Fascio di Combattimento* originated from a wing of the *Democrazia*. As to confirm this,

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<sup>143</sup> M. Franzinelli, 'Squadristo', in R. J. B. Bosworth (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91-108.

<sup>144</sup> Benadusi, 'Borghesi in Uniform', 38.

the same emerging leaders of Venetian Fascism, Pietro Marsich and Giovanni Giuriati, belonged to both the *Democrazia* and *Fascio*, holding a double membership.<sup>145</sup> As it has been noted by Francesco Piva, throughout 1919, the *Fascio* did not engage in any significant political activities and it did not show any peculiarities which could distinguish them from those of the democratic interventionist Left groups.<sup>146</sup> In addition, as it was reported by the local Fascist fiduciary to Mussolini, the Venetian *Fascio* was characterised by internal infighting, personal hatred and lack of means. In essence, the Venetian *fascio* represented a secondary appendix of the interventionist area hegemonised by *Democrazia Sociale*.<sup>147</sup>

In parallel with the birth of the *Fasci di Combattimento*, another important event for Italian politics was to happen in 1919, but this time with regards to the political parties of the Left. The Socialist Party held its national congress in Bologna. The meeting showed that the Socialists were divided into two factions: the reformists, led by Turati and Lazzari, willing to promote collaboration between classes; and the maximalists, led by Giacinto Menotti Serrati, willing to import the Russian brand of revolution in Italy. The result of the local congress was the victory of the maximalist faction in Venice, bringing the local party to an extreme position. The political situation was further complicated by the newly formed Italian Popular Party which could draw on the extensive associations of the Church for support.<sup>148</sup> The Italian Popular Party's ideological and inspirational sources were principally Catholic social teaching, the Christian democratic doctrines developed from the nineteenth century within the Church, and the political thought of Romolo Murri and Luigi Sturzo. Sturzo, a Sicilian Catholic priest, was the founder of the party in 1919 and the leader of the Christian Democratic doctrine which combined traditional Catholic beliefs and modern democratic

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<sup>145</sup> F. Piva, *Lotte contadine e origini del Fascismo. Padova-Venezia 1919-1922* (Venice: Marsilio, 1977), 134.

<sup>146</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 134.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibidem*, 135.

<sup>148</sup> Duggan, *Fascist voices*, 30.

ideas.<sup>149</sup> Romolo Murri was the promoter of the Catholic University Group (FUCI) in 1894 and of the political movement *Democrazia Cristiana Italiana* in 1901. His thought had been spread among Catholics thanks to his collaboration with numerous journals like *Vita nova* (1895), *Cultura sociale* (1898), *Il domani d'Italia* (1901), *Rivista di cultura* (1906), *Il commento* (1910).<sup>v150</sup> In addition, the Italian Popular Party could also count on the support of Pope Benedict XV (and consequently of the majority of the Catholics) who backed the Catholic party with the aim to oppose the advancement of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).<sup>151</sup>

Long before the Catholic party was founded, religion had played a vital role in influencing politics. In Venice province, Catholic political affiliation was polarised between those aligned with the conservative and anti-Socialist views of the Patriarch and the *Opera Congressi* (1874), and those more progressive forces which were predominant within the organisation *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action). Despite the papal decree *non expedit* (1868) instructing Italians not to participate in the electoral life of the nation, local politics had been always heavily influenced by the Venetian Catholics who formed electoral coalitions with the conservatives and won consecutive local elections between 1895 and 1920. Catholics' support to the moderate Liberals was therefore targeted to prevent Venetian Socialists from governing councils in the province.

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<sup>149</sup> G. De Rosa, *Luigi Sturzo* (Turin: UTET, 1977). See also L. Sturzo (1947) 'The Philosophic Background of Christian Democracy', *The Review of Politics*, 9(1), 3–15.

<sup>150</sup> L. D'Angelo, *Il radicalismo sociale di Romolo Murri, 1912-1920* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007).

<sup>151</sup> J. M. Laboa, *La Chiesa e la modernità, Volume 2, I papi del Novecento* (Milan: Jaca book, 2001), 127.



As suggested by Adrian Lyttelton, the crisis of parliament was accompanied by a crisis of the public order with a growth in violence between Fascists and Socialists.<sup>152</sup> The *squadristi* proudly emphasised that they did not belong to the traditional political system, aiming at distancing themselves from the Liberal politics which they considered corrupt and ineffective. This was not a new complaint: it echoed criticism levelled at Giolitti's government in the years preceding the Great War by adherents of the various currents of 'national radicalism' and interventionism. As Emilio Gentile already suggested, *squadrisimo* gave to Fascism its way of life and its 'integralist' political mentality, according to which Fascism required absolute power to re-model the entire Italian nation along the lines of the *squadrista* "apostle-warrior".<sup>153</sup> However, Fascists were not the only force willing to use violence. Other political actors contemplated the use of violence. As Albanese argued, "a significant part of the Socialist Party was convinced that a Soviet-style revolution was imminent. Events in Russia had incited the hope of the party's most militant members, who often transformed violent words in deeds organizing strikes, riots and protests in the *piazza* (*square*)".<sup>154</sup> This phenomenon was visible also in the province of Venice. As remembered by the Venetian Socialist activist Li Causi, the name of Lenin started to circulate increasingly more frequently among the local Socialist sections and his name "became as the one of a Messiah who is announcing the advent of a new historical era for the humanity".<sup>155</sup> The most active and violent elements were to be found among the youngest in the party, who were

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<sup>152</sup> A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29. See also what is reported by Socialist Girolamo Li Causi for the case of Venice in G. Li Causi, *Il Lungo cammino: autobiografia 1906-1944* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974).

<sup>153</sup> See Gentile, *The origins of Fascist ideology*.

<sup>154</sup> G. Albanese, 'Violence and Political Participation during the Rise of Fascism (1919–1926)', in G. Albanese, R. Pergher (eds), *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 49-68, 50.

<sup>155</sup> Li Causi, *Il Lungo cammino*, 65.

leading strikes and protests, whereas the oldest communists who had initiated the movement became progressively more cautious.<sup>156</sup>

Until almost the end of the 1919, the activities of Fascist squads (*arditi*) remained sporadic and usually marginal in their political effect. It was Gabriele D'Annunzio in the Fiume adventure who succeeded in creating a new political style. Initially, the movement of *fasci* was heavily overshadowed by Gabriele D'Annunzio's subversive occupation of Fiume in September 1919. The course of the Paris Peace Conference had been another important source of *squadristo*'s mobilisation creating the so-called myth of the "mutilated victory". In April 1915, Italy signed had a secret treaty (Treaty of London) with Britain, France and Russia and under this pact, Italy was to declare war on Austria and Germany and in the event of a victory would receive Trentino, the South Tyrol and Trieste, Istria, much of Dalmatia, the islands of the upper Adriatic, the Dodecanese islands (partially owned by Italy after the invasion of Libya in 1911), a protectorate over central Albania, the port of Valona, and Asian colonies. For Venetian nationalists, those territories were even more important as they had been part of the former domains of the *Serenissima* empire called *Stato da Mar* (State or Domains of the Sea). It was one of the three territorial subdivisions of the Republic of Venice's domains. The other two were the *Dogado* (that is Venice city and its coast), and the *Domini di Terraferma* (the mainland domains in northern Italy.) The *Stato da Mar* comprised the maritime and overseas possessions, including Istria, Dalmatia, Albania, Negroponte, the Morea, the Greek possessions of the Aegean islands of the Duchy of the Archipelago, and the islands of Crete (Candia) and Cyprus.<sup>157</sup> The refusal of Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson to concede the Adriatic littoral to Italy was outrageous to the Italian government and it was even more a blow to *venezianità*. Towards the end of the First World War, the French,

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<sup>156</sup> Ibidem, 71.

<sup>157</sup> F. C. Lane, *Venice, a Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

British and Americans had become annoyed by Italian imperialist claims about the *venezianità* or *latinità* of Dalmatia.<sup>158</sup>

Promises were made in 1915; these could not be delivered in 1919. For Italy, the carrying out and the terms of the peace treaty and its ratification was humiliating. With the peace failing to feed the expectations, many senior army officers claimed that there was a conspiracy against Italy and they followed the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio in the occupation of the contested city of Fiume and declared it Italian in September 1919. As Corner suggested, "the exploits of D'Annunzio during 1919 and 1920 did little to help Mussolini's cause. For several months after September 1919 it was the poet to hold centre stage, probably much to Mussolini's annoyance".<sup>159</sup> D'Annunzio found his best allies among the ranks of the Venetian *fascio*. During the occupation, the Venetian *ras* Marsich often visited D'Annunzio in Fiume, and the other emerging leader of the Venetian movement, Giovanni Giuriati became the Head of D'Annunzio's Presidential Cabinet. The Venetian *fascio* supported the military operations and Venice city functioned as a logistical base for D'Annunzio legionaries throughout the period of the occupation of the city.<sup>160</sup> The close relationship between the poet and Venice was not a coincidence. D'Annunzio envisaged that Venice could be a model to which Italy should aspire.<sup>161</sup> This aspiration had long been shared by Venetian intellectuals since the Liberal age and in particular by Pompeo Molmenti.<sup>162</sup> Molmenti was a Venetian art historian and literary critic who served in the parliament from

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<sup>158</sup> Laven-Damien, 'Empire, City, Nation', 538.

<sup>159</sup> Corner, 'State and society', 23.

<sup>160</sup> See the above mentioned Piva, *Lotte contadine*.

<sup>161</sup> M. Isnenghi, 'D'Annunzio e l'ideologia della venezianità', in *Rivista di storia contemporanea* (1990), 3, 47-61.

<sup>162</sup> M. Donaglio, *Un esponente dell'élite liberale: Pompeo Molmenti politico e storico di Venezia* (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2004).

1890 to 1909 within the Liberal conservatives and he was made senator in 1909. Molmenti, leading those opposing the modernisation and re-development of Venice city, was interested in fostering the Venetian model for the Italian nation. Venice's superiority "to the rest of Italy was, therefore, premised in part both on its capacity to resist outside threats, most notably from the Turks, and on its dominance of the seas".<sup>163</sup> A look back to 1910 throws light on the special relationship between Venice and D'Annunzio, when the poet's play *La Nave*, dedicated to the city, was performed in Venice. The event was managed by the patrician Piero Foscari, one of the future leaders of Fascism and patron of the local nationalist movement (*Associazione Nazionale Italiana*). Despite criticism from Catholic circles, *La Nave* succeeded, as remarked by Margaret Plant, in repositioning Venice "in the Adriatic as powerfully as in the days of the first Republic (...) [with] a vision of historic energy with contemporary relevance".<sup>164</sup> *La Nave* was such a source of inspiration for nationalists to claim Italy's control over the Adriatic that, before the First World War, the Austrian naval minister used to keep a copy on his desk as a reminder of the potential 'Italian threat'.<sup>165</sup> The effect of D'Annunzio's campaign for the resurgence of Venice's political influence also stimulated a debate regarding the economic renovation of the city. The debate manifested itself in two different and parallel schools of thought. One more conservative strand led by the above mentioned historian Pompeo Molmenti, local patricians and old Liberals, focused on the urban preservation of the city; and another, more progressive line of the new imperialist and capitalist bourgeoisie was embodied by the future new 'Doge', Giuseppe Volpi. Volpi represented the new local ambitious industrialist bourgeois spirit which had proved its strength in the development of the port and the new industrial area of Maghera

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<sup>163</sup> Laven-Damien, 'Empire, City, Nation', 529.

<sup>164</sup> M. Plant, *Venice, Fragile City: 1797-1997* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 208-251.

<sup>165</sup> Laven-Damien, 'Empire, City, Nation', 531.

which, approved by the government in 1917, started to be developed in 1920.<sup>166</sup> Volpi had made his fortune with the electrification of the Veneto and the creation of SADE (*Società Adriatica Di Elettricità*) from 1905. Rather than being a Fascist ‘new man’, Volpi had begun his career in Liberal Italy through deals in the Balkans and the Middle East on behalf of the King, Giolitti and *Banca Commerciale*. He was already a powerful industrial and local figure in 1921 for having been assumed the governorship of Tripolitania. Volpi’s group was commonly known as the ‘Venetian Group’ (*gruppo veneziano*).<sup>167</sup> The ‘Venetian group’ comprised Giuseppe Volpi, Vittorio Cini, Achille Gaggia and other leading businessmen who began to invest large amounts of capital in the development of the project of the renewal and industrialisation of Venice which found its final accomplishment in the development of the industrial area of Marghera. Cini started as a businessman in the field of transport and construction at the beginning of the 1900 and by mid-1920, he held positions in several societies like SADE, *Credito Industriale*, *Società di Navigazione Interna* and *Società di Navigazione Libera Triestina* (transport), *Officine Meccaniche Italiane di Reggio Emilia* (mechanical industry), and *Alti Forni e Acciaierie della Venezia-Giulia* (steel industry).<sup>168</sup> Achille Gaggia became part of the Venetian group in 1905 when he was appointed General Director at SADE; and at the beginning of the 1930s, he was holding shares in 61 companies in the mechanical, construction and transport sectors.<sup>169</sup> Volpi, Cini and Gaggia were the new elements of local economic life, embodying a wealthy elite that had invested in civic enterprises and industries since the end of the First World War, creating partnerships between

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<sup>166</sup> See M. Reberschak, ‘‘Gli uomini capitali: il ‘gruppo veneziano’ (Volpi, Cini e gli altri)’’, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>167</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, 63-80.

<sup>168</sup> M. Reberschak, ‘‘Gli uomini capitali: il ‘gruppo veneziano’ (Volpi, Cini e gli altri)’’, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*, 1278.

financiers, industrialists, and elderly members of the aristocracy like Antonio Revedin, Nicolò Papadopoli Aldobrandini, Alberto e Mario Treves de' Bonfilii, Piero Foscari, Giancarlo Stucky, Amedeo ed Edoardo Corinaldi, Nicola e Tito Braida, Carlo ed Enrico Ratti, Gino Toso, Giuseppe Da Zara, Luigi Ceresa, Mario Nani Mocenigo, and Giulio Coen.<sup>170</sup>

Volpi's main goal was the penetration of the Adriatic, Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the region of Veneto was ranked as the third most important industrial district in Italy after Piedmont and Lombardy with a particularly flourishing textile production based on foreign investments from financiers such as Neville, Stucky, Junghans, Layet and Rothschild.<sup>171</sup> Volpi's rise in prominence under the regime would be connected with the project to transform Venice into a modern and industrial productive area and develop the industry of cultural tourism in order to sustain the economies of the historical centre. This project would become clearer in the 1920s and the 1930s with the progressive development of Marghera, the construction of the bridge connecting Venice to the mainland and the enhancement of the *Biennale* and the Film Festival.<sup>172</sup>

Returning to the 'question of Fiume', Mussolini, despite supporting D'Annunzio, had little desire to join the poet in his adventure. He had reason to fear that his burgeoning leadership could be overshadowed by D'Annunzio.<sup>173</sup> Mussolini's support for Fiume was restricted to rhetoric rather than sacrificing the nascent movement for Fiume. Mussolini continued to campaign for Fiume, only because it involved a nationalism which favoured his

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<sup>170</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>171</sup> See Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, 200.

<sup>172</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>173</sup> Corner, 'State and society', 40.

designs. In the *Popolo d'Italia* of 25 September he wrote: "Revolution is here. Begun in Fiume, it may be completed in Rome", but in private he did his best to dissuade D'Annunzio from any such project.<sup>174</sup> He would not have been prepared for D'Annunzio marching on Rome and establishing there, as at Fiume, his own dictatorship. However, someone among the Fascist ranks, especially those from the Venetian *Fascio*, *dannunziani* and directly involved in the Fiume operations, had considered the possibility of such a march. As reported by Rossi, on September 1919, Giuriati wrote to the Trieste *fascio* that "the exploit of Fiume must be consummated in Rome".<sup>175</sup>

Rather than focusing on the issue of Fiume, Mussolini was directing his attention to the fast-approaching national elections in which he was standing as a candidate in Milan. The result of the November 1919 national elections humiliated Mussolini and clearly showed that the Fascist movement was still irrelevant in electoral terms, as it failed to send a single deputy to parliament. On the contrary, the first post-war election marked the victories of Catholics and Socialists. The Socialists secured 32 % (156 deputies), three times many as the previous elections, and the Popular Party gained 20 % (100 deputies). The Socialists became the prominent party in almost every region and especially in Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Lombardy, Tuscany and Umbria, while the Popular Party was the largest party in Veneto (42.6 %).<sup>176</sup> As it is shown in Appendix 3 – Electoral Results (Table 1), in the province of Venice, the Socialist Party, led by the revolutionary wing, was the first party securing 43 %

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<sup>174</sup> A. Rossi, *The rise of Italian fascism, 1918-1922* (London: Methuen, 1938), 49.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>176</sup> P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

(25.303 votes).<sup>177</sup> Support came from workers of the pre-industrial district of Mestre, the glass-blowing factories of Murano Island and the working class quarters of the greatest urban centres of the province like Venice and Chioggia. In addition, as shown in the Appendix 4 – Proportion of votes per area (Table 2), the Socialists secured an indisputable predominance in the rural district of Adige (Cavarzere and Cona), controlled by the ‘red-leagues’ of workers.<sup>178</sup> The Popular Party was the second largest party (28 %) and could count on a solid base in the rural district of Brenta e Dese where the Catholic ‘white leagues’ of workers were predominant and Catholics had no challenge for the votes of the farming families and could corner an absolute majority of votes (51 %).<sup>179</sup> In Venice city, the elections were a complete failure for the *Democrazia* which had been supported by the Venetian *fascio* and the veterans association (9,013 votes). The elections showed the weakness of the Venetian *fascio* which was essentially the expression of ex-combatants, the professional petite bourgeoisie and private and public clerks, without being able to challenge the Socialist organisations in the votes of the factory workers.<sup>180</sup> The elections also highlighted the clear decline of the Italian governing coalition (8.940 votes) which managed to retain only 29 % of the overall votes. The bulk of their consent was gained in the rural Livenza e Tagliamento (57 %) and Piave (59 %), supported by the rural aristocracy and some groups of interests (See Appendix 4 – Proportion of votes per area (Table 3)). The Liberals had intended to contain popular discontent by reforming the electoral law and extending the vote to all who served at the front and to every man aged over twenty-one, raising the electorate to 11 million. In reality, the

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<sup>177</sup> M. Isnenghi, *L'Italia del Fascio* (Florence: Giunti, 1996), 51. In the Province of Venice, the Venetian Socialist Party was on radical positions, being led by the anti-interventionist Elia Musatti who won a seat to the Chamber of Deputies in 1909 and was leading the ‘maximalist’ faction in parliament, and assumed a high profile in his party opposing the colonial invasion of Libya in 1911-1912.

<sup>178</sup> See G. Scarpa-S. Ravagnan, *Chioggia nel '900 tra fascismo e democrazia: fatti, documenti e testimonianze per una storia locale* (Padua: Centro Editoriale Veneto, 1986).

<sup>179</sup> See Appendix 4 – Proportion of votes per area (Table 1).

<sup>180</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 130.



new electoral law benefited the parties able to mobilise voters on a large scale – the Socialists, with their network of trade unions, cooperatives and chambers of labour, and the nascent Popular Party (PPI), which could count on large social base and the support of the Church. The Liberal governing coalition lost the absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Liberals were characterised by fragmentation and a lack of an efficient organisation to compete with the modern mass parties. The ‘Liberal parties’ or rather the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘interest-group parties’ had already been in decline from 1913, the year in which many Liberal candidates, signed a secret pact, also in Venice, with the Church, the so called *Patto Gentiloni*, to be supported by the Catholic electorate at the general political elections.<sup>181</sup>

In 1920, everywhere in Italy the situation was deteriorating and the intense revolutionary period, known as *Biennio Rosso* (1919-1920), was entering its most crucial moment as social conflicts were coming to the fore in a context of heavy economic crisis, with high unemployment and political instability.<sup>182</sup> After an initial phase of post-electoral disbandment, the Fascists increased the level of violence in order to continue the ‘war’ against the Socialists. Between the end of the 1919 and the beginning of the 1920, the Venetian *fascio* and its leaders Marsich and Giuriati, dropped all contacts with the *Democrazia Sociale* which dissociated themselves from the occupation of Fiume.

By 1919 Pietro Marsich, who had been granted the leadership of Venetian Fascism and held a seat on the National Committee of Fascism, acknowledged the failure of the electoral alliance with republican radicalism. Now convinced that the success of Fascism was achievable only

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<sup>181</sup> A. Tornielli, *La fragile concordia. Stato e cattolici in centocinquanta anni di storia italiana* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2011), 88-89.

<sup>182</sup> See F. Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile. L'Italia dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo. 1918-1921* (Turin: UTET, 2009).

through action of the Fascist squads and by adopting an anti-party ideology, he decided that the local *fascio* had to act autonomously in order to put an end to the corrupt Liberal State and to the Socialist movement.

In Venice province, Fascists were joined by irredentists, nationalists, war veterans and legionaries who had been supporting the occupation of Fiume. Mass strikes, worker demonstrations, factory occupations, and street conflicts between left-wing and Fascist blackshirts militias led by the Venetian Fascist *ras* (word use by Fascists for ‘provincial leader’), Pietro Marsich, with numerous dead and injured, became a daily occurrence.<sup>183</sup> The physical demolition of the Socialist organisations was, for Marsich, an indispensable condition for establishing a new productive and social order. He and his supporters had long been fascinated by D’Annunzio. Marsich’s Fascism retained its original features such as being anti-bourgeois, anti-clerical, anti-Socialist, and anti-parliamentarian. Marsich considered Fascism to be a transitory revolutionary phenomenon that would translate into a new national democracy, based on D’Annunzio’s *Carta del Carnaro*. Thus, the first Venetian brand of Fascism may be called *Fiumanesimo*.<sup>184</sup>

The local elections of autumn 1920 became a turning point in the fight between Fascists and Socialists. Fearing another Socialist or Catholic victory, local Liberal elites throughout Italy (Liberals, moderates and conservatives) built alliances, *blocchi nazionali* (national coalitions), especially in those areas where the Socialists and Catholics had achieved their

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<sup>183</sup> See G. Albanese, *Alle origini del fascismo. La violenza politica a Venezia 1919-1922* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2001). The word Ras comes from the Ethiopian language and it was used to refer to the provincial leaders (inferior to the Negus).

<sup>184</sup> R. Camurri, ‘La classe politica nazionalfascista, L’ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

greatest success in the previous national elections. Where Fascists had already created local groups, they were welcomed into these alliances and given financial support for their activities, although their role was limited to electoral propaganda and armed harassment. The *blocchi* won the local elections in 4,655 out of 8,327 councils and in 33 out of 69 districts, limiting the mass parties' (*partiti di massa*) influence and in some case reversing their victories of 1919. In the whole Veneto region, Liberals gained 252 councils out of 797 (222 Socialists and 333 PPI). Venice itself was an example of skilful Fascist coalition building with the aim to dismantle the local Socialist predominance. The nationalist Giovanni Giuriati (future Secretary of the PNF) formed a list called *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance) which included Liberal, monarchic, nationalist, Fascist and democratic forces. Giuriati managed to come to an agreement with the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* led by Iginio Magrini and the local Catholic Popular Party which entered the electoral coalition. The Fascist *ras* Marsich supported the *Alleanza*, presenting Fascist candidates for the list, engaging in armed harassment, destroying opponents' electoral posters, verbally threatening opponents, and in some cases attacking Socialist candidates in their strongholds.<sup>185</sup> The *Alleanza* won the elections with 13,180 votes against 11,263 of the Socialist Party, the list gained 48 seats out of 60 and the Liberal Davide Giordano was appointed mayor of Venice. Although the *blocchi* managed to contain the advancement of the main mass parties, the electoral results of the Socialists and the Catholic *Popolari* remained impressive. In particular, Socialists won the majority of the councils in Emilia (65.2 percent) and in Tuscany (52.1 percent) and the majority of the district in Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia, Tuscany and Umbria, while the PPI scored major victories in the councils of Veneto (42.9 percent). In Venice province, although the administration of the city of Venice remained under anti-

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<sup>185</sup> Albanese, *Alle origini del fascismo*, 84.

Socialist control, the results of the administrative elections in 1920 established Socialist predominance in Chioggia (second largest city of the province), Cavarzere, and Cona.<sup>186</sup>

After the elections, the Fascists intensified the militarisation of their groups and developed the method of the “punitive expeditions”. As reported by Li Causi, the then secretary of the Venetian Socialist Party, the fight against the Fascist squads had become a permanent necessity as the Fascist “punitive expeditions” against local Socialist leaders and syndicalists had become more frequent.<sup>187</sup> In Venice province, the punitive expeditions developed with particular intensity after the elections of the autumn of 1920, when the Fascists targeted the new Socialist council administrations. Cavarzere, Chioggia and Cona remained under Socialist control until they were attacked in summer 1920. In contrast to the main Fascist movements of the Po Valley, monopolised by the agrarians, the Venetian *fascio* was essentially an urban movement and therefore the movement had to expand to the countryside and the attack on the ‘red administrations’ was part of this plan. As reported by the local Socialist newspaper *Era Nuova* of Chioggia in November 1920, the “Fascist group who had ‘terrorised’ St. Mark’s Square a few months before, had now reached Chioggia, where they attacked Socialist militants inside bars, fighting them violently and firing revolver shots”.<sup>188</sup> The Fascists’ main targets were the Socialists, but the squads also attacked other political groups like Catholic *Popolari*, Democrats and occasionally Liberals.<sup>189</sup> The Fascist expeditions were often carried out by *squadristi* with the implicit or explicit support of the

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<sup>186</sup> Socialists gained 222 councils out of 797 in the whole Veneto region (252 liberals and 333 PPI). M. Degl’Innocenti, ‘Il socialismo italiano ed europeo tra ’800 e ’900. Il caso Veneto’, 40, in G. Berti (ed.), *Socialismo, anarchismo e sindacalismo rivoluzionario nel Veneto tra Otto e Novecento* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2004, 21-40, 40.

<sup>187</sup> Li Causi, *Il Lungo cammino*, 83-86.

<sup>188</sup> “Era Nuova”, 1 November 1920.

<sup>189</sup> G. Battelli, *Cattolici. Chiesa, Laicato e società in Italia (1796-1996)* (Turin: Sei, 1997).

police as well as sectors of the local ruling classes, like the agrarians who financed them.<sup>190</sup> Because it happened widely across the Po valley, municipalities of the province were forced to resign either due to the threat of the Fascist violence or under the pressure exerted by the local prefect. The prefect would then select a commissioner to preside until the local climate allowed new elections. This process was in evidence when the Socialist mayors of Chioggia, Cavarzere and Cona were obliged to succumb due to constant attacks and thus the 'red administrations' were replaced by 'demo-Fascist administrations'.<sup>191</sup> Consequently, the effect of the Venetian *Biennio Rosso* was a gradual shift of allegiance from 'red' to 'black', as Fascist *squadristi* were progressively winning ground and councils from Socialists. Although the Italian government issued repeated orders to the prefects to ensure the law was impartially respected, local police and army units tended to sympathise with the *squadristi*, sometimes providing them with the necessary weaponry to assault the Socialists. The Venetian *fascio* was particularly supported and equipped by the Royal Navy.<sup>192</sup>

Whereas the question of D'Annunzio and Fiume was to be one of the rallying points of the opposition to Mussolini from within the Fascist ranks, the failure to obtain positive negotiations for Italy at the Peace Conference of Paris, provoked the resignation of the Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando. His successor Francesco Saverio Nitti, feeding the anger of interventionists and nationalists, conceded Dalmatia to Yugoslavia and agreed that Fiume should become an independent Free State (*Reggenza del Carnaro*) under the

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<sup>190</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 191. A large group of *squadristi* used to reside in the countryside villa of the businessman Giancarlo Stucky.

<sup>191</sup> T. Merlin, *Angelo Galeno e il socialismo veneziano (1912-1924)*, 64, in Berti (ed.), *Socialismo, anarchismo e sindacalismo*.

<sup>192</sup> A contemporary account of the early Venetian Fascism and squadristism is provided by R. Vicentini, *Il Movimento fascista Veneto attraverso il diario di uno squadrista* (Venice: Stamperia Zanetti, 1935).

control of the recently formed League of Nations.<sup>193</sup> During this phase, Mussolini failed to stamp his authority on a movement which was still undisciplined and which still depended on the provincial *ras*. A national opposition to Mussolini's political line came to the fore from those *ras* who were closer to the idea of Fascism of San Sepolcro (*sansepolcristi*). Among the critics we could predominantly find *arditi* and Dannunzians who were blaming Mussolini for having opportunistically changed the original position of Fascism. They not only criticised Mussolini for his attempt to make peace with the Socialists, but also for his lukewarm support of the occupation of Fiume. This wave of internal opposition was led by Dino Grandi and Pietro Marsich who described themselves as 'followers' of D'Annunzio and refused to recognise Mussolini as the unquestioned leader of Fascism. In fact, Grandi and Marsich believed that 'true' Fascism was in the provinces and not in the centralised headquarters of the movement in Milan. Ideologically, they thought that Fascism should have been a continuation of movement of Fiume.<sup>194</sup> Marsich held that all the principles of Fascism had found their full application in the experience of Fiume through the application of the *Carta del Carnaro* and in accordance to D'Annunzio, he wanted Fiume to be recognised as a State.<sup>195</sup> Marsich believed in Fascism as a transitory revolutionary phenomenon which would give life to a new national democracy, designed by D'Annunzio's *Carta del Carnaro*<sup>196</sup>. In contrast, Mussolini held the view that Fascism could not achieve power only through violence; he needed alliances in order for Fascism to become a credible political force. As a

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<sup>193</sup> P. Alatri, Nitti, *D'Annunzio e la questione adriatica (1919-20)* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1959).

<sup>194</sup> Gentile, *The origins of fascist ideology*, 176-177.

<sup>195</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 156. "I have just returned from Fiume and I have talked a lot with the *comandante* (D'Annunzio) that I have found, despite the recent aversions, perfectly serene and sure of success. The project of the constitution (*Carta del Carnaro*) is noble and magnificent. All the principles of Fascism are applied. (...) D'Annunzio agrees with our plan to have the State of Fiume recognized and for the real application of the Pact of London".

<sup>196</sup> E. Gentile, 'The Problem of the Party in Italian Fascism', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19, 2(1984), 251-274, 253.

consequence, alliances were formed, especially in the north of Italy, with agrarians or with patriotic or nationalist associations. In Venice, the compromise found expression in the establishment of a mutually beneficial working relationship with Volpi's group. As Mussolini himself explained to De Bagnac:

It was Piero Marsich, noble companion in the initial battle of the Fascist movement against an Italian leadership proud of the stagnation in the country's history, who first introduced me to Count Volpi, the brilliant Italian plenipotentiary who had led Turks and Italians to peace many years earlier in 1912. The same Count Volpi who, then simply known as *Commendatore* Volpi, was hesitant about the 1919 Fascist programme. He told me it was necessary to soften a dozen or so anathemas, in order to achieve the consensus without which any victory would have remained a mere Utopia.<sup>197</sup>

The advice of Volpi substantially reflected the plan of the moderate forces to prevent a radical drift of Venetian Fascism. On one side, the dismissal of Marsich would have encouraged Volpi to continue his project of Venice's renewal and redevelopment; on the other side, it would have consolidated Mussolini's leadership at the head of the Fascist movement by depriving his opponents of a charismatic element. In addition, Volpi's seductive imperialistic and modernising vision would have placed Venice firmly within the framework of the nationalist agenda under Fascism.<sup>198</sup> Volpi's group was supportive of the Venetian nationalists in their view of the cultural and historical links of the Adriatic territories with the *Serenissima*. The political pursuit of the Adriatic coasts as an expression of the *Serenissima*, helped Mussolini to stress not only the powerful inheritance of the *venezianità* in the region, but also the essential *italianità* of the Yugoslavian coasts. However, the patterns of development of Fascism greatly differed from province to province. The

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<sup>197</sup> Y. De Bagnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990), 506.

<sup>198</sup> Laven-Damien, 'Empire, City, Nation', 532.

Venetian example (but also Ferrara and Bologna), served to demonstrate the degree to which the early provincial movement became quickly linked to already established centres of local power. In Venice, Volpi's intervention meant the strengthening of a 'normalised' Fascism, which remained predominantly an urban movement. In other areas of Italy, like Ferrara and Bologna, the agrarians definitely launched the local *fasci*. As Corner explained, "sometimes the proprietors would hide behind a veil of anonymity, trying to give the impression that the Fascists were operating autonomously, albeit admittedly in a direction favourable to the proprietors themselves. It was very rare that these local businessmen controlled the *fasci* directly".<sup>199</sup> Ironically, Volpi, as many of the other financiers of the *fasci*, belonged to the same Giolittian class of industrialists that the 'first hour Fascists' (those Fascists who joined the movement in 1919 and attended the meeting of San Sepolcro from which Fascism originated in 1919) had firmly denounced as profiteers in 1919. The management of the "question of Fiume" demonstrates well the level of influence Volpi possessed at local level and made it even clearer how the future new "Doge" was going to manage the development of the Fascist movement, standing initially outside the party. Although Marsich was followed by the majority of the local movement, Volpi was manoeuvring successfully to isolate Marsich and expel the intransigents and therefore prevent them holding leadership roles in the future. At the end of the 1920s, there were some signs that showed the movement was moving towards Volpi. In November 1920, the prefect requested his appointment as Count (*Conte*) for being a "good citizen", a "good patriot" and for his influence over the nationalist and the young Fascists.<sup>200</sup> Also, the increasingly ambiguous position taken by the other key leader of Fascism, Giovanni Giuriati, helped Volpi's standing. Giuriati had already distanced himself from the Fiume movement in December 1919, when D'Annunzio, pressured by the most intransigent wing of legionnaires, refused to compromise with the Italian government.

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<sup>199</sup> P. Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara 1915–1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>200</sup> As cited in Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 157.



Giuriati resigned from the role of Head of D'Annunzio's cabinet and since then he consistently opposed a revolutionary movement against the Monarchy.<sup>201</sup> The decline of Marsich coincided with Giuriati building an alliance with Iginio Maria Magrini, secretary of the *Arditi* Society and Commissioner of the National Association of Combatants. Magrini became popular by establishing a wide range of clients and interests thanks to his partnership with Davide Giordano, who later became Mayor of Venice (1920-23) and royal commissioner at the Venice Business School of Ca' Foscari (1927-30) before being appointed Senator.<sup>202</sup> In combination, these regional developments pointed strongly towards Volpi's strengthening position as the rising star in regional political affairs.

The circumstances within the Venetian movement were reinforced by the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), designed to solve the dispute over some territories in the former Austrian Littoral in the upper Adriatic, and in Dalmatia. According to the treaty, the city of Fiume would become the independent Free State of Fiume, thus ending the military occupation of D'Annunzio's troops known as the Italian Regency of Carnaro. This part of the treaty was revoked in 1924, when Italy and Yugoslavia signed the Treaty of Rome, which gave Fiume to Italy and the adjacent port of Sušak to Yugoslavia. Volpi was part of the Italian delegation who accompanied Giolitti's negotiations. The successful conclusion of the treaty revealed that Volpi was playing a double game. While financing the local Fascists to defend his local interests from the risk of Bolshevism, he was also manoeuvring to support his keen interest in the expansion of his business in the Balkans. At the same time, Marsich radicalised his position, increasing the number of violent actions, – frequently against

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<sup>201</sup> J. Woodhouse, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: Defiant Archangel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 338.

<sup>202</sup> E. Savino, *La mia nazione operante: Profili e figure di ricostruttori* (Milan: Esercizio Stampa Periodica, 1928), 136.

Socialist leaders – further failing to generate Volpi’s enthusiasm for the Fascist cause.<sup>203</sup> According to the local secretary of the Venetian *fascio*, Giuseppe Lanfranchi, former Socialist and Mussolinian, the role played by Volpi in the negotiation of the Treaty of Rapallo worsened the relationship between Volpi and the Fascists of Marsich. The commercial deals achieved by Volpi and the Serbian government during the negotiations at Rapallo and the continued volatility of Volpi’s position in an increasingly volatile regional setting was evident in the plan of the local *Direttorio* to assassinate Volpi, which was avoided by the intervention of Lanfranchi who made Volpi aware of this plan.<sup>204</sup>

After the ‘Bloody Christmas’ of 1920 (*Natale di sangue*), a series of clashes in Fiume between the legionnaires and the Italian army which led to the conclusion of the Fiume campaign carried out by D’Annunzio, the situation of the Venetian movement became critical. Marsich criticised Mussolini and the Monarchy for their attitude towards the question of Fiume. The same local secretary Lanfranchi was aware that “the crisis experienced by Fascism, once resolved, will reinforce it (Fascism)”. But as he reported in January 1921, Venetian Fascism was ‘set out for ruin’, with Marsich becoming the major national opponent to Mussolini’s line of normalisation of the movement.<sup>205</sup> Marsich’s criticism led to a division within the Venetian movement and to a creation of an alternative *Fascio*, independent from the main movement. Neither the majority of the local Fascists, nor the vast majority of the public opinion, approved Marsich’s radical opposition to Mussolini’s leadership and to the main national course chosen by the Fascist movement. In order to bring order within the

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<sup>203</sup> R. Camurri, ‘La classe politica nazionalfascista, L’ottocento e il novecento 2 - La societa veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>204</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, 122.

<sup>205</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 159.

movement, Mussolini had to address the question of Fiume which was politically damaging his leadership.

A major source of Volpi's influence was his financial clout, making him both less dependent on political success as a power base, while at the same time providing him with a platform to use as a regional as well as ultimately national political power base. Within the regional power struggle over the direction of Fascism, his independent means were similarly essential. After the Treaty of Rapallo, Marsich found it difficult to generate income from the Venetian group, as Volpi was not disposed to finance a radical Fascism as he was aware that that his project of Venice's renovation required political stability.<sup>206</sup> The financial problems of the movement caused by the drop-in financing from Volpi's group were made clear by Marsich to the Central Committee of Fascism:

The Venetian fascio thought it could count on a large financing from the local industrial group. But, as all the industries and banks are monopolised by Volpi, the fascio now excludes that it will be possible to count on this help which would represent a political and moral tragic compromise. Other than the Volpi's companies, it is really difficult to receive funds in Venice.<sup>207</sup>

Mussolini's support of a normalised Fascism was most evident in places where economic power was highly concentrated, such as in Turin (with Agnelli's family) or in Venice (Volpi). The regime granted local business elites significant autonomy in their relations with the local community, gaining the support of important segments of the old ruling classes. However, Marsich had his own momentary victory by managing to exclude the Mussolinian secretary Lanfranchi and replacing him with a trusted man, Vincenzo Bucca. The question

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<sup>206</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 505-508. As Mussolini reported to De Begnac, "Count Volpi told me what he had been saying to Marisch for some time: 'revolutions need time to mature'".

<sup>207</sup> As cited in Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 157.

for Mussolini was one of discipline and the problem would become immediately apparent in the summer of 1921 when Mussolini proposed a pact of pacification with the Socialists. Mussolini surprised the internal opposition by signing a peace deal with moderate Socialists and the main trade union organisation, the General Confederation of Workers (*Confederazione Generale del Lavoro*, or CGL). This deal was part of Mussolini's attempt to make the Fascist movement more respectable and tackle local independent activities of the *ras*. The deal was rejected by several *ras* like Marsich (Venice), Dino Grandi (Bologna) and Italo Balbo (Ferrara) who went to urge D'Annunzio to replace Mussolini. The *fasci* of Venice, Bologna, Ferrara, Cremona, Modena, Piacenza, Rovigo, and Forlì declared they completely opposed to the peace treaty. As Marsich himself argued:

We have come to the turning point of Fascism. Mussolini realises it, but he appears to me to have lost his way. In effect there are two solutions, one national, and the other parliamentary. We are for the national one, he for the parliamentary.<sup>208</sup>

A split within the movement was avoided only when Mussolini abandoned the pact. He then resigned from the Fascist Central Committee in an attempt to outmanoeuvre the *ras*. Mussolini's strategy was successful and, in October 1921, he persuaded the majority of the members of the *Fasci di Combattimento* to re-form the organisation into a political party, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF). Following this victory, Mussolini persuaded the Fascist National Congress to elect him as leader in November 1921. In return, he agreed to end the fight with the Socialists, re-organising all the local Fascist squads. Although the local *ras* still had considerable influence and some autonomy, Mussolini could now present himself as the clear and undisputed leader of an organised and united political party.

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<sup>208</sup> Rossi, *The rise of Italian fascism*, 151.

The foundation of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in November, 1921 marked a crucial turning point for the Venetian movement. Mussolini's process of disciplining the *squadristi* into a national organisation provoked the protest of the most radical elements at provincial level.<sup>209</sup> Between autumn 1921 and February 1922, Marsich reinforced his anti-Liberal campaign, but he started losing the support of the petty bourgeoisie which was unhappy with the climate of terror provoked by the Fascist squads in Venice.<sup>210</sup> In the period 1919-1922, 200 clashes between Socialists-communists and Fascists were recorded with 11 people dead. The same Fascist journal "Italia Nuova" took the responsibility for the violence.<sup>211</sup> While pursuing violence, Marsich was embracing the idea of a schism from Fascism, creating a movement with D'Annunzio as its head. A letter addressed to the national secretary by Marsich was published at the beginning of February in the journal of the Fiume legionnaires "La Riscossa dei Legionari Fiumani". In this letter, Marsich revived the theme of the divergence between parliamentary and national interests, and blamed Mussolini for advocating a coalition government led by Giolitti.<sup>212</sup>

Marsich also proclaimed that D'Annunzio was the "only great man" who could oppose "the iniquitous hegemony of a man" (Mussolini) who was forcing his politician's tricks on to the party.<sup>213</sup> Yet, the idea of a split was rejected by Balbo and Grandi in a meeting with Marsich in Venice in the same month. As Balbo would declare later, he regarded Marsich as a dreamer with his head in the clouds, evident in his anti-parliamentarian attitudes.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> J. Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 57. See also Lyttelton, *The seizure of power*, 268.

<sup>210</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 269.

<sup>211</sup> Albanese, *Alle origini del fascismo*, 17.

<sup>212</sup> G. Albanese, *Pietro Marsich* (Sommacampagna, Cierre, 2003), 65.

<sup>213</sup> Rossi, *The rise of Italian fascism*, 181.

<sup>214</sup> Albanese, *Pietro Marsich*, 102.

While the radical positions of Marsich were progressively isolated within the national movement, the same happened at local level where the front against Marsich broadened thanks to the work of Giovanni Giuriati and Iginio Magrini. Marsich accused Giuriati of being two-faced: close to the *squadristi* when in Venice, while searching to collaborate with the conservative right in Parliament.<sup>215</sup> Although having been one of the protagonists of the Fiume revolution alongside D'Annunzio, Giuriati was aware the occupation of Fiume had come to an end and it urged Fascism to negotiate with the other political forces in order to create political opportunities for the movement (Giuriati was the only Venetian Fascist MP elected to Parliament). In addition, Giuriati did not approve Marsich's radical positions and he joined the negotiations led by the prefect Agostino D'Adamo to pacify the factions in Venice in June 1921 in order to take the leadership of the Venetian Fascist Party.<sup>216</sup>

Abandoned by Grandi and Balbo and contested by local supporters, Marsich decided to quit the party in June 1922 and his followers were expelled by the PNF. Marsich, with Cesco Bonaldi, Pio Leoni, Ippolito Radaelli, Mario Stoppoloni and Camillo Favero, founded an autonomous *fascio* which was short-lived as Marsich had definitively lost any capacity to attract local support. The *autonomi* were re-admitted to the party, but they argued that Giuriati and Magrini had manoeuvred with the 'big bourgeoisie' (Volpi) in order to marginalise those who had joined the movement from its origins (first hour Fascists). In January 1923, Giorgio Suppiej would be appointed *federale* and this choice would reflect the new internal balance within Venetian Fascism, with Giuriati and Magrini leading the movement and Volpi taking advantage of it. It was Volpi and his increasing interest in the Fascist project which created the conditions for Marsich's fall. Firstly, he deprived Marsich of any possible source of support from the Venetian bourgeoisie. Secondly, he represented

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<sup>215</sup> Piva, *Lotte contadine*, 283.

<sup>216</sup> Albanese, *Alle origini del fascismo*, 135.

himself as the most suitable alternative to Marsich in Venice. In addition, Volpi's brand of fascism 'won the day' as Marsich's positions were irreconcilable with those of Mussolini, and Mussolini himself thought that Volpi could be that moderate man who could re-build the local party and along the lines of his project of Venice's renewal, Volpi would have re-established the relationship between the party and the local economic elite.<sup>217</sup> However, although the Venetian 'lagoon Fascism' had lost his charismatic leader Marsich, as the Venetian *squadrista* Raffaele Vicentini argued, it never lost his fascination for D'Annunzio and for the renewal of the supremacy of Venice over the Adriatic sea.<sup>218</sup> However, as we will see in the following paragraphs, the expectations of Venetian Fascism to re-establish Venice's importance would be met by Volpi and his group's project of industrialisation of the lagoon through the developing of Marghera.

## 1.2 The Elections of 1924

Despite the generally limited progress made by the Fascist Party in the Province of Venice after 1922, the PNF managed to establish a number of centres of activity. In July 1923, the process led to the creation of an increasingly dense network of Fascist branches, which meant that the party was present in 46 out of 50 councils, even though most of the branches were relatively small in terms of membership.<sup>219</sup> Yet in the same period the Fascist Party underwent a profound reorganisation, beginning with its fusion with the Nationalists in 1923. The Fascist Party expanded beyond the historical bases of support, opening to those who joined Fascism because it was the political party in power. The construction of the

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<sup>217</sup> Ibidem, 212.

<sup>218</sup> See Vicentini, *Il Movimento fascista Veneto* and L. Pes, 'Il fascismo adriatico', in M. Isnenghi-S. Woolf, *Storia di Venezia: L'Ottocento e il Novecento*, vol. IX (Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Treccani, 2002), 1313–1354.

<sup>219</sup> PNF, *Il Gran Consiglio del Fascismo nei primi quindici anni dell'era fascista* (Bologna: Stabilimenti Poligrafici Editori de "Il Resto del Carlino", 1938), 105.

regime's institutional structure thus went hand in hand with the incorporation of the Fascist *fiancheggiatori* (the moderate and conservative state leadership classes: high bureaucracy and the political class of the old liberal regime, the social forces which continued to hold effectively political and economic power) into the dictatorship. The Fascist Party's compromise with big business became evident at the 1924 elections. Mussolini's adoption of a more conciliatory posture attracted moderates, rightists, entrepreneurs, industrialists, and members of the upper class, who felt it more appropriate to choose Fascism as an alternative to Socialism. After 1923, various groups that formerly belonged to nationalist, conservative, or Liberal parties joined Fascist circles. Giuseppe Volpi officially joined the PNF in 1924. By that time Venetian Fascism had consolidated its image as an acceptable form of political expression for members of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie.

In order to pursue the normalisation of the party, in January 1923, Mussolini had decided to reform the Fascist squads and put them under the authority of the newly formed Volunteer Militia for National Security. The foundation of the militia was seen as an important act of 'normalisation', providing, as it did, the legal framework for their operations in as much as it provided a structure to the operations of the mass of blackshirts participating in the March on Rome. The Fascist squads were incorporated into a national paramilitary and revolutionary army that was expected to act in a disciplined way. Yet the mystique of the Fascist squads survived the formation of the official militia.<sup>220</sup> Many blackshirts resisted the discipline of the MVSN.<sup>221</sup> The spirit of the squads, strongly based on volunteerism, group solidarity and feelings of camaraderie was difficult to reconcile with the new requirements of discipline.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Lyttelton, *The seizure of power*, 24.

<sup>221</sup> Morgan, *Italian Fascism*, 65.

<sup>222</sup> Lyttelton, *The seizure of power*, 244.



Conversely, the generals of the regular army looked at the creation of the MVSN with some suspicion. They appreciated the function of public order control of the militia but they were aware of the possible dangers connected with the existence of a paramilitary force recruited on a political and ideological basis, outside their control.<sup>223</sup> The opposition of the generals, in alliance with the Nationalists, to the creation of the militia was evident in the positions of the nationalist Luigi Federzoni and the General Maurizio Gonzaga. Federzoni, together with Gonzaga, hoped to transform the militia into a military force integrated into the Army.<sup>224</sup> In addition, Mussolini's immediate aim was to go towards a kind of "normalised authoritarianism" and the creation of the MVSN was part of the revisionists' attempt to return to politics rather than carry on with violence. Mussolini did not want to renounce Fascist supremacy in order to compromise with the local establishment, but he aimed at weakening the role of the local squads in the development of the movement. The period until January 1925 is marked by the transition from the Liberal parliamentary system to the Fascist State, and the 'normalisation' of the movement, as Morgan argued, was "an untidy and complicated process, a hybrid of elements of the old and new political order as one overlapped with and superseded the other".<sup>225</sup> The tensions were between the various forms of 'normalisation' wanted by the conservatives within and outside the party and the 'radicalisation' demanded by the *squadristi*. It was the dualism between Party and State, and confusion about the role of the *ras* which created ambiguities within the movement.<sup>226</sup>

The ambiguities of the Fascist movement became evident in the Acerbo electoral law in the run up at the 1924 national elections. The legislation, which resulted in a single-majority

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<sup>223</sup> Ibidem, 245.

<sup>224</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), B. 111, Informer to the Minister of Interior, 27 October 1926,

<sup>225</sup> Ibidem, 212.

<sup>226</sup> Ibidem, 78.

first-past-the-post system, had a great impact on the relative strength of the different parties. Few doubted that Fascism benefitted from this change. Although Mussolini insisted on a system in which the MPs list was compiled by the party in order to contain the election of the local *ras*, the law allowed single member constituencies. However, the Grand Council managed to approve an ‘incompatibility clause’ that would force the provincial leader to resign from their local role once elected, so preventing them from accumulating further power. In the 1924 elections the PPI still held 28 % of the vote. In the rural districts, Catholics and the position of the PPI’s local dignitaries and control of local politics were practically unassailable before the rise of Fascism. Religiosity in the province was high and this translated into political affiliations.<sup>227</sup> Despite the troubled relationship between the Vatican and the Liberal State, the Papacy continued to fulfil its age-old role of moral authority, impacting upon families, education, welfare and social assistance.

The *effect* of the law was to transfer choice of the candidates from the electorate to the governmental list.<sup>228</sup> The results were that the *listone* (National List) of Fascism gained 60% of the votes providing Mussolini with a solid majority. The enormous success of Mussolini’s *listone* was largely due to the inclusion of the old ruling class. Fascism gained support from many new voters and converts from the Liberal bourgeois parties. Most convert to Fascism had been won not through their belief in the “Fascist Revolution”, but through the expectations that their self-interests would be best served by a Fascist regime.

The results achieved by Fascists in the various councils of the Venice province are illustrated in the tables in the Appendix section. The first electoral success of Fascist in the election of 1924 bore the character of a coercive victory. The Fascist movement gained its main electoral

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<sup>227</sup> Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice*, 44.

<sup>228</sup> Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1915-1945*, 82.

benefit through the use of violence and threats during the elections.<sup>229</sup> As in the rest of Italy, Fascists prevented the PPI and Left parties' candidates and voters from campaigning or voting. After that voter support plummeted. Support from agrarians and other interest groups collapsed, and was swallowed up by the Fascist Party in 1924. As the table in the Appendix 3 – Electoral Results (Table 3) clearly shows, the Fascist Party gained its main electoral benefit from the demise of the interest group parties. Differently from what happened at the national level, Fascists in Venice were much less successful in penetrating the other two electoral blocks of the Left and the political Catholicism.

Although the nationalists led by the Minister of Interior Federzoni had attempted to contain the violence of the squads during the election campaign, the general climate had been characterised by the general climate of violence directed predominantly against local Socialist and Catholic candidates. In Venice, the violence predominantly involved the countryside where the Catholics and the Socialists still had a strong following. For example, a few days before the elections, the house of the President of the Catholic circle of Civè was surrounded by a Fascist squad from the neighbouring village of Cona.<sup>230</sup> In the days following the elections, the Socialist MP Angelo Galeno, consecutively elected in the parliament in the 1904, 1909, 1913, 1919, 1921 and 1924 elections and operating in Venice province, denounced the Fascist violence of the squads and drew the attention of the minister of the interior to the crimes in Chioggia (Sottomarina and S. Anna) and in some villages near the Brenta river (Codevigo and more).<sup>231</sup> In particular, Angelo Galeno wanted to draw

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<sup>229</sup> R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38.

<sup>230</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, The Prefect to the General Directorate of the Police, March 1924.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibidem*. For a biographic profile of Angelo Galeno see Archivio Biografico del Movimento Operaio, 'Angelo

attention to “the beatings, injured, bans, devastations of houses and cafes”.<sup>232</sup> He was complaining on behalf of two Socialists, Giovanni Groppo and Vittorio Renuncini, who had been murdered by Fascists and whose bodies had been found in the river Brenta by *carabinieri*.<sup>233</sup> Despite violence and coercion perpetrated by the Fascist squads during the 1924 elections, taken together, the parties of the left were still able to hold onto a significant proportion of votes within the province. Leftist parties were the largest coalition in the Brenta e Dese area, by securing 39 % of the votes, as shown in the table in the Appendix 4 – Proportion of votes per area (Table 4). The predominantly rural and moderate character of the province, the limited industrial development, the prevalence of small businesses, and not least the widespread anti-Bolshevism, all mitigated against the worker parties and confined the Left to lasting opposition. Most converts to Fascism had been won not through their belief in the “Fascist Revolution”, but through the expectations that their self-interests would be best served by a Fascist regime. As we will see in the following chapters, this was so for politicians and businessmen.

### **1.3 The Establishment of Fascism during the Secretariats of Farinacci and Turati**

This section will explore the ups and downs of Fascism during the secretariats of Roberto Farinacci (1925-1926) and Augusto Turati (March 1926-October 1930). The sub-chapter will explain the local and regional developments of the movement and the relationship between centre and periphery and between different forces shaping the development of Fascism

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<sup>232</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, The Prefect to the General Directorate of the Police, April 1924.

<sup>233</sup> Ibidem. The *carabinieri* is the national gendarmerie of Italy, policing both military and civilian populations. It was originally founded as the police force of the Kingdom of Sardinia. During the process of Italian unification, it was appointed as the "First Force" of the new national military organisation.

nationally and in the region. This chapter will show the failed attempt made by Farinacci to mould Fascism as a squadrist-like movement. Furthermore, we will demonstrate that his successor, Turati, failed to reform the State and the Fascist Party in a way that would supersede completely its provincial origins and tackle the ‘plague’ of intra-party infighting.

After the March on Rome, Mussolini’s project to widen his political base by appealing to moderate elements with the aim of a ‘normalisation’ of the Fascist movement and distancing himself from the violence of the Fascist squads, generated a more general hostility among his local *ras*, who reacted to Mussolini’s moderation with more violent actions such as the murder of the Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti in June 1924.

On 30 May 1924, the Socialist MP Matteotti had denounced in the Chamber of Deputies the Fascist use of the violence in the parliamentary election of April 1924. Matteotti was kidnapped and murdered on 10 June 1924. When the news of his kidnapping spread, Italian public opinion had no doubt that the Fascists were implicated in the crime. In reaction to Matteotti’s murder and to protest against Mussolini, the anti-Fascist opposition withdrew from the Chamber, in an action later known as the ‘Aventine secession’ (*Secessione dell’Aventino*). The anti-Fascist action proved ineffective in triggering public opinion against Mussolini who decided to take full responsibility of the murder on 3 January 1925 during a speech to the Chamber of Deputies. The responsibility for the murder remained uncertain, although five fascists, Amerigo Dumini – a prominent member of the Ceka (the Fascist secret police), Giuseppe Viola, Albino Volpi, Augusto Malacria and Amleto Poveromo were arrested a few days after the kidnapping. Only Dumini, Volpi and Poveromo were sentenced, but, shortly after been convicted, they were released under amnesty by King Victor

Emmanuel III.<sup>234</sup> As Corner suggested, “although the murder of Matteotti was not itself the work of provincial *squadristi*, it sprang nonetheless from very much the same kind of contempt for legality and love of violence the *squadristi* had always shown”.<sup>235</sup>

The Matteotti crisis marked a turning point in the history of Italian Fascism. The ‘Matteotti affair’ was exploited by the intransigent wing of Fascism to boost the process towards the establishment of a totalitarian Fascist regime, forcing Mussolini to abandon any plan of working within parliament legality that had marked the first two years of Fascist government (1922–24). The murder of Matteotti obliged Mussolini to take the necessary steps towards the creation of a totalitarian State based on suppression of the opposition press, exclusion of non-Fascist parties, and formation of a secret police.

The Matteotti crisis highlighted the tensions between leaders and led and served to show that the Fascist victory was only incomplete. Having learnt the lesson from the Matteotti affair and knowing the implications of his own policies, Mussolini decided that it was necessary to react against a wave of criticism towards his political line.

For Mussolini, the Matteotti crisis became, first and foremost, a problem of legitimacy. At this time, both the direction of the Party and Mussolini’s authority within it were far from being uncontested. The intransigent *squadristi* still claimed their legitimacy which arose out of their defeat of Bolshevism. As explored above, the foundation of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in 1921 had, among others, been a move towards controlling the independent actions of the local *ras*. But this had not been entirely successful and ‘normalisation’ as a political direction remained contested with the agitation of *squadristi* intensifying after the election of April 1924.

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<sup>234</sup> M. Canali, *Il delitto Matteotti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004).

<sup>235</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 52.

Other dictators faced similar issues and they were able to defeat the opposition. Hitler pursued the physical elimination of uncontrollable and potentially threatening companions during the Night of the Long Knives; and Stalin purged the dissident comrades with the full force at his disposal throughout his rule. Mussolini's approach was more measured as he had no SS to turn against dissidents. Furthermore, he was well aware of the fact that he needed a forceful and if necessary violent wing to pursue his dictatorial project and to secure permanence in power. Therefore, his approach to the more radical elements of the Fascist movement was to "ride the tiger, convinced that he could dominate the beast, but equally sure that the tiger would continue to snarl and terrify his opponents".<sup>236</sup>

The years 1925-1926 marked another important and distinct phase in the establishment of the Fascist movement – a movement that was still characterised by 'disparate alliances' and that was 'internally divided over both ends and methods'.<sup>237</sup> The appointment of the intransigent *ras* of Cremona, Roberto Farinacci, as party secretary in February 1925 apparently showed that the more radical force had gained the upper hand in the battle to rule Fascism.

Yet, Farinacci's appointment was an ambiguous move from Mussolini that provided evidence of his skills as an intelligent and skillful operator. On one hand he gave the archetypal Fascist *ras* the job to control the other provincial *ras*; on the other hand, he was trying to regain legitimacy among the *squadristi*. Farinacci, for his part, was conscious of the fact that his brand of Fascism depended on the continuing activity of the squads, and he carefully constructed his base within the provincial movements and with the intransigent

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<sup>236</sup> Ibidem, 53.

<sup>237</sup> Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1915-1945*, 77.

Fascism of the *squadristi*.<sup>238</sup> The aim of Farinacci was to insert the Fascist Revolution into the State with the Party pursuing an autonomous role in order to realise the Fascist Revolution.

With Farinacci's appointment Mussolini attempted to construct a situation in which he would provide the political leadership of the movement, whereas the Party Secretary would take charge of and control the more radical elements of the movements through the armed wing of the Party. Farinacci's course immediately reaffirmed the supreme role of the Party in the attempt to regain its autonomy and authority where Fascists attempted to accommodate local elites and group of interests. This resulted in a 'renewal of the rhetoric of new versus old, with fiery denunciations of commercial and professional middle classes accused of thinking that, with socialism defeated, they could move back into the driving seat as if nothing had happened'.<sup>239</sup>

At the provincial level this campaign for Fascist supremacy presented once again many of the questions that had been posed during the first years of the movement. In some respects, Fascism was still well placed in its search for support. Many among the local bourgeoisie continued to look to Fascism essentially as the lesser evil; it was better than the revolutionary socialism they had faced in 1919 and 1920. Although Socialist leagues and unions had now disappeared in most areas, and had been replaced by Fascist syndicates and the 'red administrations' had been dissolved and defeated by the Fascist squads, during the Matteotti Crisis there had been signs of criticism from the press. In Venice, the *Gazzettino di Venezia* had publicly criticised the *squadristi* by repeatedly publishing the names of the murderers of the Socialist leader.<sup>240</sup> For Venice, the question of the press deserves a mention. The only Fascist newspaper, the *Italia Nuova*, closed with the departure of Marsich from the

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<sup>238</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 55.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>240</sup> M. De Marco, *Il Gazzettino: storia di un quotidiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 1976), 63-64.



movement in 1922. The federation never felt the need to possess an official newspaper as the major local newspapers, including *Il Gazzettino*, had been aligned with the Party since the beginning of the movement. The main problem with *Il Gazzettino*, owned by the Talamini family, was that the newspaper remained semi-independent because of the personal protection of the *federale* Giorgio Suppiej who had married Agnese Sartorelli, granddaughter of Gianpietro Talamini. Suppiej had been a front-line soldier during the First World War and he was awarded with two crosses for valour and one for merit and two solemn tributes. Suppiej was appointed *federale* in 1925 and again 1929.<sup>241</sup>

The political protection of Suppiej allowed the newspaper to follow a non-orthodox line during his time as the head of the federation. In reality, the line of *Il Gazzettino* mainly reflected the moderate political line of the federation in 1925 and the ‘normalising’ project of Mussolini. It was not just a question of protecting his “family”; the *federale* Suppiej also worked to substantiate a normalising image of Fascism against the intransigence of the provincial squadrist. Suppiej was a moderate ‘first hour Fascist’ elevated to the role of *federale* in order to lead the transition of the party from the purge of Marsich’s intransigents to the compromise between Giovanni Giuriati, Iginio Magrini and Giuseppe Volpi. As we will see later in this chapter, Suppiej found himself managing a difficult period of the Party in which he was called upon to deal with the difficult balance between Giuriati and Volpi and their increasing will to control the party and consequently the local press, attempting the acquisition of the *Il Gazzettino*. Suppiej’s return to lead the federation in 1929 would be linked to the fight to control the ownership of *Il Gazzettino*. Thus, the issue of *Il Gazzettino* was a question of power which involved all the factions contending the local power. Thus the federation never felt the issue of the press a to be a serious one and only started the

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<sup>241</sup> ACS, Segreteria particolare del Duce (SPD), b. 49, Prefect of Venice to Minister of Interior, 8 December 1928.

publication of its own monthly party bulletin, *Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale Fascista*, in 1929.<sup>242</sup>

The Matteotti crisis and the appointment of Farinacci radicalised the national positions of the Party and the policies to be implemented at local level. From Farinacci's point of view, the issue was not so much dealing with traditional elites and big business (with whom he had good business connections), but providing Fascism with the space to manoeuvre that would allow the movement to negotiate with the other players from a favourable position.

This period saw a significant shift in political alignments. Thirty-two *federali* were removed in the first months of Farinacci's secretariat and many of these federations were put under the control of special commissioners sent from Rome to impose the party line. Suppiej himself suffered this fate, being removed from his office in March 1925 and replaced by a 'pentarchy' led by the commissioner Taletto Barbieri, a first hour Fascist and war veteran. However, Suppiej's removal was not caused by new national radicalised framework of the party, but the result of the conflict between the MP Iginio Maria Magrini, leader of the veterans, and Giovanni Giuriati. Volpi made the best use of the opportunity to gain control of the federation. In Venice, as in Ferrara and Genoa, important economic interests had been central to the development of the movement. The presence of financial, commercial, industrial or agrarian interests had produced tensions and competition for ultimate control since 1921. Internal rivalries within the *fasci* were triggered by the re-affirmation of the supremacy of the Party under Farinacci. As was to be expected, Suppiej did not go quietly, claiming, without ever naming Volpi, that the latter had been the cause of the internal crisis of the *fascio*, as "Venetian Fascists were divided between those inclined to support the projects of the financier and therefore accepting his manipulation of the party, and those not

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<sup>242</sup> In 1925, the federation could only count on a monthly periodical called *Le tre Venezie* directed by Giovannello Giuriati, son of Giovanni Giuriati. The focus of the magazine was on issues related to local economy, arts and tourism.

willing to accept his intrusion in political affairs”.<sup>243</sup> Suppiej reported to the prefect that Volpi’s industrial group “tended to grab every economic and governing position in order to monopolise the party”.<sup>244</sup> In order to execute his plan, Volpi was willing to reduce Venetian Fascism to a patriotic society with a marked Liberal frame. Although Venetian local Fascists wanted to play a more decisive role within the movement, they were not in the position to seriously damage Volpi’s leadership. Giuriati, interrogated by Suppiej on how the Party could rescind the relationship with Volpi’s interest group, was not able to provide an effective solution. Giuriati himself had been involved in the compromise with Volpi which determined the departure of Marsich from the party in 1922.<sup>245</sup> Despite his moderate attitudes Suppiej tended towards the preservation of the original qualities of the Fascist project. He explained that:

the ‘good old elements’, (...) have to be approached, supervised with love and care due to their qualities of first hour Fascist fighters. They have to be given to their place for their value and for what they deserve, remembering that if fascism has sometimes created criminals, those who are deserving have to be put in a position to redeem themselves. In this way we will obtain the fusion of spirits.<sup>246</sup>

As in many other provinces, Farinacci called for the *squadristi* to re-establish a radical brand of Fascism. To this end, he pursued a fight against autonomous centres of power like freemasonry. The documents of the *Carabinieri* of Chioggia in 1925 provide a good clear example of fascists thought that freemasons were infiltrated into the state structures. An example is the document, written by a *squadrista*, following a clash between radical Fascists

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<sup>243</sup> As cited in A. Bau, A. M. Furio, C. Monaco, ‘Il Veneto nei rapporti di Mussolini ai segretari federali (1930)’, in R. Camurri (ed.), *Fascismi locali* (Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni, 2011), 125-178, 163.

<sup>244</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>245</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>246</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Iginio Coffari to Benito Mussolini, 19 July 1925.

and the *Carabinieri*. The *Carabinieri* had arrested several fascist militiamen who complained with Giuriati that one of them was “still cockily and provocatively working in the city, with the support of the brotherhood, because notoriously a freemason”.<sup>247</sup> The feeling of the *squadristi* was that the life of “the *fasci* of the province is undermined by the State functionaries subjugated to anti-Fascist masonry”.<sup>248</sup> Fascists reported to Giuriati that the State was working against the Fascists and there was a lack of the necessary cohesion between state authority and the Party. By appealing to Giuriati, *squadristi* argued that the “radical solution to this anomalous situation that shakes the foundations of our strong Fascist group can come only from you [Giuriati]”.<sup>249</sup>

Farinacci’s approach had a limited effect and it was characterised by evident contradictions. His course resulted in the reorganisation of the Venetian federation along the line of a “pentarchy” that was led by a ‘first hour Fascist’, Talete Barbieri, who had been a Fascist before the March on Rome. However, the overall composition of the committee was far from reflecting Farinacci’s radicalism and intransigence. The moderate forces affiliated to Volpi prevailed within the new directorate. Alongside Barbieri, the Party appointed three pro-Volpi members: Carlo Brandolini D’Adda, Vilfredo Casellati and Giuseppe Toffano. Carlo Brandolini D’Adda and Vilfredo Casellati, who had been recruited from the Venetian aristocracy, belonged to Volpi’s personal network.<sup>250</sup> Vilfredo Casellati was Volpi’s local plenipotentiary in political affairs, while Carlo Brandolini d’Adda was an emergent figure of patrician origins and Liberal background operating in the world of sports clubs. Brandolini D’Adda was president of the Venetian section of the National Federation of Gymnastic and

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<sup>247</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Dario Galimberti to Giovanni Giuriati, 10 March 1925.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>250</sup> E. Savino, *La nazione operante: Profili e figure di ricostruttori* (Milan: Esercizio Stampa Periodica, 1928), 537.

president of the important gymnastics society *Costantino Reyer*.<sup>251</sup> The presence of a young Liberal in the Fascist committee meant that Volpi was not only able to manipulate the local Party, but he could clearly inject emergent figures into the Party, even if they were not necessarily from a Fascist background. Giuseppe Toffano was a First World War veteran decorated with a silver medal for having served on the battle of the Carso. A nationalist and journalist for the newspapers *Dovere Nazionale* founded by the nationalist Alfredo Rocco in 1915 and then contributor for *Idea Nazionale*, *Giornale Veneto* and *Arena di Verona*, Toffano had recently become close to Volpi. Towards the end of the 1920s, he would be elevated by the Volpi group to the role of co-editor of *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, before eventually completing his career with the appointment as Prefect of Siena in March 1930.<sup>252</sup>

Another controversial point which marked a failure for Farinacci was the resolution of the many internal struggles that plagued the Party after its affirmation and even more so after the Matteotti affair. It was understood by the local elites, old and new, that Fascism was there to stay. Local power bases had to be fought for and local elites manoeuvred in order to influence and become a key part of the new political order. An analysis of the province of Venice confirmed that the intensification of the power struggle at national level was mirrored locally. The struggle for control intensified and was triggered by the new radicalised course with regional and national policies overlapping. The struggle involved Giuriati and Volpi. The internal contest for power started with Giuriati's appointment as Minister of the Public Works in January 1925 and further evolved in the following months with Volpi's appointment as Minister of Finance in July 1925. His personal power was further extended

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<sup>251</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>252</sup> E. Savino, *La nazione operante: Profili e figure*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Esercizio Stampa Periodica, 1934), 1007.

with the appointment of Casellati to control the federation in May 1926. These very significant national elevations did, indeed, signal a change of political fortune of the Venetian moderates, and this enhanced status made itself felt in the Veneto region, too.

Farinacci's idea of continuing revolution was discredited when it became clear that violence with discipline proved difficult to achieve. Violence at this particular juncture appeared to be counterproductive in broadening the political base of Fascism, especially in the north of Italy, where powerful industrialists, including Volpi, were asking for the end of the violence. Farinacci was dismissed in early 1926, after the 'events of Florence' where intransigent *squadristi* and their leader, Tullio Tamburini, murdered several people and many more were injured. The Grand Council decided finally to dismiss *squadristi*, opting to accommodate the more moderate forces, and this found expression, in the choice of the new Party Secretary.

On a national scale, the dismissal of Farinacci and the persecution of the intransigents meant an increased and intensified control of the centre over the provincial federations. This was in order to tackle any possible action taken by the local *squadristi*. The last months of Farinacci's rule as party secretary had seen a purge of *federali* and who were considered excessively independent.

Farinacci's successor in the role of national secretary, Augusto Turati, was well-known for his activity in the syndicalist wing of the Party. The change at the top of the Party meant a radical shift in the political line of the PNF that went beyond a change of style and instead gave his preoccupation with discipline, obedience and stability a different ideological

meaning to his predecessor.<sup>253</sup> Mussolini chose Turati as someone who would be able to unite, rather than divide, as Farinacci did. For Mussolini, Farinacci was a provincial leader unable to prevent local intra-party fighting between opposed factions. As we have previously argued, Farinacci was the man of the ‘continuing revolution’ and dynamism.

Turati re-shaped the role of the party within the Fascist system. For Turati, the difficulty of the Party in implementing a real change was not only due to the opposition of the radical Fascists. The Fascist system had significant malfunctions that needed to be addressed in order to pursue real change. Turati pragmatically focused on extinguishing local Fascist leaders’ independence, but he also made clear that there was an issue with the lack of competence of the provincial *federali*.<sup>254</sup>

Turati looked to the Party as the means to convert Italians to Fascism and regarded this as a long-term process of societal transformation. He accepted the idea that the Party would have been to be purged drastically in order to widen the structure of the new Fascist State, and to do so the Party had to recruit more suitable, but, above all, more moderate people. Turati knew that *squadristi*, who used to refer to themselves as *uomini nuovi* (new men), were ‘remnants’ of the First World War. A corollary of this was that the ‘new Italians’ had yet to be born. For Turati, the bureaucratisation of Party and society was the way to transform the Italian character. As Corner puts it,

Such people would not be exactly the mirror-image of many of the first *squadristi*, usually anything but silent and educated. It was logical, therefore, that the *squadristi* should be relegated to that of

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<sup>253</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 62.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibidem*, 63.

glorious memory, as the new Fascist guard of voiceless, determined, confident men gradually took their place. Turati's project for the PNF was designed to realise the objective and in this sense it cut directly and inevitably across the bows of many in positions of influence within the provincial federations.<sup>255</sup>

At local level, in Venice province, it was logical that this idea of a highly bureaucratic party, led by educated men able to deal with business management, meant the gradual takeover of Volpi's entourage. Volpi's men were people who had been involved in local organisations and businesses. The dismissal of the party commissioner Talete Barbieri, one of the early Fascists, was a first inevitable step, with the role taken over in December 1925 by Vilfredo Casellati who was to be, from 1925 onwards, Volpi's plenipotentiary in local affairs. The convention for the election of the new *federale* was held at the Theatre Rossini in Venice in April 1926. After the speech of the Senator Giordano, the Party proceeded with the Party consultation. Casellati was elected with 1,868 votes out of 1,885 voters. Despite the landslide victory of the person who clearly embodied Volpi's brand of moderate Fascism, internal discussions continued and Volpi was accused of monopolising the party. The meeting was an opportunity for the *squadristi* to criticise Volpi's progressive monopolisation of the party. Canizzo, a Venetian *squadrista*, believed that Fascism had lost its way and it had to return to a movement of a few intransigents: "the Fascist Party has been diverted from its origins of purity and intransigence because it has welcomed in its bosom people coming from other parties".<sup>256</sup> Since the dismissal of Suppiej in early 1925, the man able to sustain the compromise between Volpi and Giuriati, the federation was plagued by increasing infighting. For the *squadristi* and especially for the early party members and ideologues, Turati's

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<sup>255</sup> Ibidem, 63-64.

<sup>256</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 19 April 1926.



political line was difficult to understand. Turati's course triggered a season of *beghismo* (infighting),<sup>257</sup> the factional feuding that hampered local administration. Groupings contested power, sometimes being forced into opposition. From the peripheral view, this crisis could also be related to the impact of Turati's new thinking. As the prefect of Venice reported, "The spirits are agitated as rumours and serious accusations have spread towards the person of Turati and the numerous Fascists who joined the federation from Fascists against the federation".<sup>258</sup>

Turati imposed discipline on the provincial federations and local *fascio*, through the appointment of commissioners. However, discipline was also imposed through a process of a revision of membership and many contesters were expelled from the party between 1926 and 1930. On 29 January 1928, during the annual Party conference, in the presence of the party secretary Augusto Turati, *federale* Casellati declared that after a tormented period of internal infighting the party had found its equilibrium. But he announced that the PNF memberships registered were only 4,240, in comparison with the 5,160 of 1922. The internal struggle had weighed on the growth of the party.<sup>259</sup>

Under Turati, the press was also subjected to scrutiny, with many local and semi-independent newspapers being suppressed in favour of a fascistised press. The example of Venice not only shows that local newspapers were progressively more strongly controlled by the regime. But it also demonstrates that the control of local media exacerbated the local

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<sup>257</sup> S. Lupo, *Il fascismo: la politica in un regime totalitario* (Rome: Donzelli, 2000), 165.

<sup>258</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 22 July 1926.

<sup>259</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La societa veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

infighting. Under Turati, the ownership of *Il Gazzettino* again became the terrain of confrontation for the factions contending the leadership of the federation, Volpians and Giuriatians. Between December 1925 and February 1926, during Casellati's period at the helm, the newspaper was subjected to a number of requisitions and strong censorship. As the documents of the *Segreteria Particolare del Duce* demonstrate, there was a precise project of the *federale* Casellati (in agreement with Volpi) and the prefect Iginio Coffari to take control of the newspaper.<sup>260</sup> Requisitions and intimidations lasted until October 1926 when Casellati decided to close *Il Gazzettino*. In order to re-open the newspaper, the editor Gianpietro Talamini had to accept to be flanked by Giuseppe Toffano as co-editor. Toffano was the Venetian Fascist *vice-federale* and a man of Volpi's entourage. The newspaper re-started its activity in mid-November 1926 with a line clearly favourable to Volpi's group.

However, while Gianpietro Talamini accepted co-direction of the newspaper, his son Ennio Talamini was reluctant to give in to Volpi's group and he established a secret alliance with Giuriati's. Developments surrounding the leadership of the *Il Gazzettino* demonstrate not only the significance of the press for the Fascist notables, but also indicate factionalism between the two dominant groups around Volpi and Giuriati. Furthermore, as will become apparent, it was an accurate reflection – at least at the regional level – of the balance of power between the factions. In fact, Ennio Talamini's appeal to Giuriati provoked the irritation of the other group. The Volpi-Casellati-Toffano group, with the approval of the national secretary Augusto Turati, tried to gain the complete control of *Il Gazzettino*. Turati invited Gianpietro Talamini in Rome and in the presence of Casellati, Toffano and the prefect Coffari, they managed to make Talamini sign an agreement to sell the majority of the newspaper's shares to Volpi's group. However, the operation was blocked at the very last

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<sup>260</sup> ACS, Ministero Cultura Popolare (MinCulPop), b. 5, Gazzettino di Venezia – Ennio Talamini direttore del “Il Gazzettino”.

minute thanks to the intervention of Ennio Talamini and Giuriati who appealed directly to Mussolini in order to safeguard Talamini's ownership of *Il Gazzettino*.

The unsuccessful coup coincided with the almost simultaneous dismissal of Volpi from the role of Minister of Finance and Casellati's replacement as *federale*. This change meant the return of Giorgio Suppiej in December 1928 and the elevation of Giovanni Giuriati at the role of President of the Chamber of Deputies. As we can see, up until the end of 1929, the prevalence of a faction over the other, meant the related dismissal of officeholders belonging to the losing faction. But what is also clear is that Mussolini, as a capable game player, was able to play with the delicate local balance by alternating promotions and dismissals and rotating Volpi and Giuriati in national cadres by following the sequence and the result of the local battle for the power which involved their local lieutenants Casellati and Suppiej. Casellati and Suppiej alternated four times in power between 1923 and 1929. Therefore, Mussolini was able to adjust the national balance of power according to what was happening in the periphery. Although the Duce was able to impose his authority and the authority of the Party from a centralised point of view, it was always events in the periphery that led to decisions taken in Rome.

The news of Casellati's resignation did not have any dramatic repercussions among the Venetian Fascists, But Suppiej's appointment was welcomed "with aversion from the industrial circles which depended on Volpi, as they remember his hostility towards their group".<sup>261</sup> Again the sequence of the events related to the *Il Gazzettino* was linked to those of the federation. The appointment of Suppiej was unlocked by the resolution of the question of *Il Gazzettino*. As Michele Bianchi reported to Mussolini in December 1928, Suppiej

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<sup>261</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.178, Prefect Iginio Coffari to the Minister of Interior, 23 December 1928.

apologised for his late response to the Duce's call to lead the Venetian Federation again; he "found it appropriate to wait until the question related to *Il Gazzettino* was solved".<sup>262</sup>

#### **1.4 Party and State: the Organisation of Power in the Province (1926)**

This section of the chapter will deal with power at local level following the reorganisation of the local administration under the regime in 1926. We will discuss the figure of the *podestà*, who was to replace the elective major, the role of the *federale* and the position of the prefect at provincial level. This part of the chapter will focus on the conflict between State and Party authorities and the attempt of the central State to control the periphery.

The delicate balance between *federale* and prefect had been at the centre of the Fascist reorganisation which started in 1926. The government's enhancement of the prefect as the senior administrator of the province (1927) and the creation of the *podestà* (1926) helped Mussolini to pursue the aims of creating a disciplined party, depersonalising local politics, and controlling the personal ambitions of local Fascists.

In general terms, the resolution of the dualism between *federale* and prefect was largely resolved at the expense of the *federale* and the party and in favour of the prefect in 1926. Mussolini found himself in a position to pursue centralisation while limiting the spectrum of action of the local Fascists. The laws and decrees concerning provincial and communal administration issued after 1926 strengthened central control over the periphery, decreasing the power of the party *federale*. The *podestariale* reform was enacted in 1926, was legislated in order to eliminate any democratic form of political election. The Liberal elected *sindaco* (mayor) was replaced by a *podestà*. The mayoral reform of November 1926 placed the

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<sup>262</sup> ACS, SPD, b.49, Michele Bianchi to Benito Mussolini, 12 December 1928.

municipal administration under the direct control of the Ministry of Interior by making the *podestà* a direct appointment of the provincial prefect.<sup>263</sup> The *podestà* was responsible for the entire administration of the local council. Financial administration and public welfare funds were delegated to the *podestà*. By royal decree, the prefect had to recommend the appointment to the Ministry of Interior. The Party *federale* had merely a consultative role. The *podestà* was dependent on the prefect and his administrative decisions were subject to the approval of the prefect. In this way the local ruling class was always co-opted by the centre. A centralised selection of the local officials allowed the appointment of talented people to local roles of crucial importance. The elimination of electoral contest and local factionalism for the local councils in 1926 was also pursued with the aim of enabling the *podestà* to operate with impartiality and so benefit the community with strong modernization action.<sup>264</sup> The aim of the regime was to deconstruct the client networks of consent at the local level and promote a new ruling class which completely fascistised. In this respect, the government's enhancement of the prefect as the senior administrative figure in the province (1927) had not been unusual. Between 1923 and 1926 Mussolini's plan for centralisation had taken a decisive step, especially in local municipalities which were distinguished by non-governability or bad administration, and the mayor had been removed and replaced by ministerial *commissari prefettizi*. This was the case in the province of Venice, where in 1924 the conflict between Giuriati and Volpi had provoked the resignation of the elected mayor, Davide Giordano. Giordano was replaced by the royal commissioner Bruno Fornaciari, who remained in charge from August 1924 until September 1926 when the mayoral reform was

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<sup>263</sup> P. Morgan, 'I primi podestà fascisti: 1926-1932', in *Storia contemporanea*, 9, no. 3 (1978), 407-423.

<sup>264</sup> Baris, *Il fascismo in provincia*, 45.

completed by the government.<sup>265</sup> The party infighting played a crucial role in the resignation of Giordano. This time it was the deteriorating relationship between Giuriati and Magrini that caused instability within the party. The commissioners were intended to express neutrality in local conflicts but also to discipline Fascist groups which had become ungovernable. They were particularly important as they were directly appointed by the prefect in order to guarantee the control of the central State over local conflicts. Frequently, they were local people and therefore not capable of resisting local pressure or breaking the hold of the local elites. The function of the commissioner was to re-establish order in the Venetian Business School of Ca' Foscari, affected by a series of protests against the director Ferruccio Truffi. In June 1927 Truffi sent an account to the then Minister of Finance Giuseppe Volpi about his experience:

When I entered the school I was received with uproars and whistles by a group of 50 students. (...) They protested about the publication of the new exams calendar and they said that they could not accept it. (...) Students walked away carrying on shouting, and then I knew that at the moment to leave the building, some of them removed the calendar and they burnt it<sup>266</sup>.

The protest was carried out by members of the Fascist university group. Truffi explained that the discontent was led by a group of students of the university Fascist group who were asking him to violate official procedures in their favour, extending to them the concessions made by the Ministry in favour of First World War veterans. The political instigator of the disorders was the secretary of the Fascist university group, Pio Leoni, a former close collaborator of Marsich, expelled and then re-admitted into the party, who was acting independently to

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<sup>265</sup> For a biographic profile of Bruno Fornaciari, see M. L. D'Autilia, 'Bruno Fornaciari', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 49 (1997)*, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bruno-fornaciari\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bruno-fornaciari_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>266</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b. 31/b, Ferruccio Truffi to Giuseppe Volpi, 1 June 1927.

pressure Truffi to concede privileges to the Fascist students.<sup>267</sup> This was a typical example of the clash between the State institutions and the local structures of the Fascist power, where the local Fascist Party tried to impose its authority over the representatives of the State.

Truffi complained about Leoni's behaviour but the Party confirmed him in the position of political secretary of the university group.<sup>268</sup> Truffi resigned and Senator Davide Giordano was appointed commissioner for the period between 1927 and 1930. Following Turati's national guidelines, during his first speech at the inauguration of the new academic year, Giordano's intentions were to restore the authority of the State over the local Party, the new Turatian approach needed obedience to the regime from the periphery. Youth were expected to represent a new, self-confident Italy and, as Giordano argued, "no more a derided country and neither the 'country of the Carnival'".<sup>269</sup>

## 1.5 'Poor Personnel': the Inadequacies of the Ruling Elite

How significant a problem of the lack of good administrators and politicians within the Fascist movement and Party was, became apparent in the local struggle for power, which disrupted local politics and local government. On a national level, the educational requirements for office excluded a surprising number of the people linked with the origins of the movement. Venice province is a good example of the prefect's need to rely upon former Liberals or eminent local personalities to hold the office of *podestà*. The *podestarile* reform presented the traditional local ruling class with the opportunity of utilising Fascism to retain

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<sup>267</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>268</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>269</sup> D. Giordano, *Relazione del R. Commissario dott. Davide Giordano Senatore del Regno su l'anno accademico 1926-1927*, in *Bollettino della Associazione Primo Lanzoni fra gli antichi studenti della R. Scuola superiore di commercio di Venezia* (Venice: Libreria Emiliana editrice, 1929), 7-20.

local political control. The *riforma podestarile* was characterised by similar political continuity with the Liberal period. The biography of the first *podestà* of Venice, Count Pietro Orsi, appointed in 1926 and in charge until 1929, confirmed the preference of the Party for a man of the traditional establishment rather than a radical change within Fascist institutions. 65 years old, Pietro Orsi was a member of a prominent Venetian family. Son of Count Alessandro Orsi, a scholar of electricity, Orsi was a fervent early nationalist and an eminent historian. First, he taught as a free lecturer in Modern History at the University of Padua, then he became lecturer in Diplomacy (1901-1934), Political History (1934-1936) and Corporatist Law (1936-1938) at the Royal Business School of Ca' Foscari in Venice. He briefly served as MP in 1912 and in 1934 was appointed Senator.<sup>270</sup> As the director of Royal Business School of Ca' Foscari asserted in 1927, Orsi had already demonstrated in many ways, through his political experience, that he knew what the expectations of a great city like Venice were and the need for its material, moral and spiritual development.<sup>271</sup>

The tenures of Orsi and later Alvera suggested that, 'for the best people, Fascism's rule in Venice was largely changing things so that they could remain the same'.<sup>272</sup> This is borne out by the fact that the subsequent office-holders, Ettore Zorzi (1929) and Mario Alverà (1930-1938) were both members of patrician families and also claimed to have had *Serenissima* ancestry.<sup>273</sup> Moreover, they had already been elected politicians during the

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<sup>270</sup> See Savino, *La nazione operante: Profili di ricostruttori*, 572. See also the Italian Senate website, Senatori d'Italia, Senatori dell'Italia fascista, 'Pietro Orsi', <http://notes9.senato.it/web/senregno.nsf/5bf1b82e3eb231fdc1257134005792c0/cef7d5ea28a29a764125646f005dfdc7?OpenDocument> (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>271</sup> F. Truffi, *Relazione del prof. Comm. Ferruccio Truffi sugli anni accademici 1924-1925 e 1925-1926*, *Bollettino della Associazione Primo Lanzoni fra gli antichi studenti della R. Scuola superiore di commercio di Venezia* (Venice: Libreria Emiliana editrice, 1928), 13.

<sup>272</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 127.

<sup>273</sup> Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice*, 38.



Liberal period. Alvera', Volpi's client, held the *podesteria* for an unprecedented length of two full terms, which perpetuated the hegemonic control of Volpi over the political, industrial, commercial, and cultural affairs of Venice. The trend was similar for other parts of the province. In San Dona', the eastern part of the province with a predominantly agrarian Fascism, the hold of the traditional elite was personified in the figure of Costante Bortolotto. Bortolotto graduated in Agrarian Science, and was a member of a prominent family of the town. Elected mayor of San Dona' in 1923 and appointed vice-commissioner of the Venetian federation in 1926, Bortolotto returned to manage the *comune* of San Dona' as *podestà* in 1927 and remained in charge until 1932.<sup>274</sup>

The significant role played by the agrarians in the eastern province is also confirmed by the political influence of Count Camillo Valle in Portogruaro. Valle was a estate owner, President of the Agrarian Union, partner of the Perifosfati factory, President of the Land Reclamation Authority of Lugugnana, Director of the Cooperative Land Reclamation Authority of Portogruaro, deputy president of the Land Reclamation Authority of Venice and Mantua, and member of the Supreme Council of Public Works. Valle was an elected mayor of Portogruaro in 1913, and then he became a prominent exponent of Social Democracy, a local Liberal with republican tendencies. In 1928, he became Fascist *podestà* of Portogruaro and he was also appointed Senator in 1929. Valle became a national exponent of the land reclamation movement.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> M. Biason, *Un soffio di libertà: La Resistenza nel Basso Piave* (Portogruaro: Nuovadimensione, 2007), 17.

<sup>275</sup> R. I. Pellegrini, *L'altro secolo: Cent'anni di storia sociale e politica a Portogruaro, 1870-1970* (Portogruaro: Nuovadimensione, 2001), 207-208. See also the Italian Senate website, Senatori d'Italia, Senatori dell'Italia fascista, 'Camillo Valle', <http://notes9.senato.it/web/senregno.nsf/6e64fa6139df0ba6c125711400382712/2ea48881046113c74125646f0061509b?OpenDocument> (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

The intention behind the creation of the *podestà* was to avoid the divisions and the excessive influence of local lobbies and the divisions they caused. The *podestà* was intended to be an impartial administrator, but in reality, for several years after the appointment of the first *podestà* in 1926, the office became a further cause of conflict between prefect and *federale*. As Corner has already argued, “the prefects looked for the ability and political fidelity in the people they appointed, but when they found, as they often did, that the two did not always go together, they looked for the first rather than the second”.<sup>276</sup> In Venice province, the same issue affected also the appointment of the *federali*. Some prefectural choices either offended Fascists who considered themselves candidates for the office or local leaders that would have preferred a *federale* more favourable towards their factions. The prefect’s choice of relying upon an ‘first-hour’ Fascist meant a clear lack of new suitable people, even after almost a decade of the regime’s life. As the prefect Bianchetti argued in 1929, Venice needed a competent Fascist for the task and the efficient collaboration of political and economic forces in order to solve the conflict among local factions. When Bianchetti became prefect of the province, he attempted a rapprochement between Giuriati and Volpi. However, the mediation between the different local factions could only be achieved through the incisive collaboration with Suppiej, as a Party *federale*.<sup>277</sup>

This contest was not simply a question of accumulating personal influence. Prefect and *federale* would be likely to have different criteria for appointments, the first looking primarily for administrative and technical competence, the second to loyalty to the party. The two office holders also had very different interests and objectives. While the PNF *federale* was concerned with the affirmation of the Party at local level, and was therefore usually ready to stand by his supporters, even when unruly and undisciplined, the prefect’s main interest was

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<sup>276</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 88.

<sup>277</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

the assertion of the dominant position of central government and the maintenance of public order.

The lack of suitable Fascists at provincial level was to become a problem that would last throughout the entire regime. The difficulties experienced by the regime reflected the incapacity of the movement to develop. As we shall see in the subsequent analysis, the Fascists of the first hour remained victims of the local battle for power that would see the prevalence of moderate and compromising positions over the radical positions. A further factor in limiting the pool of the personnel available was represented by both the requirements and the strategies of Rome. The most popular politicians at regional level were called to serve the government in Rome and worked in the centre on behalf of the region and to strengthen the interest of their particular base. For Venice province, the most prominent examples were Giovanni Giuriati and Giuseppe Volpi, who were promoted to the role of minister in 1925. The simultaneous call to serve in Rome of the two leaders of the major local factions in Venice, each of them wanting to be the city boss and thus to strengthen the periphery at the expense of the centre, was also determined by exclusively functional considerations. Mussolini preferred them to pursue a career in Rome rather than becoming too prominent at local level, provoking local destabilisation. However, although Mussolini tried to control the leaders of Fascism from Rome, he could not prevent them from using their influence to achieve control of the province. Mussolini's strategy was particularly ineffective with Volpi. Mussolini himself admitted that he "could not picture him in the role of beggar of fortune. Even without property, Count Volpi would still embody the supreme dignity of the doge of Venice".<sup>278</sup> Even more telling was his remark that "Count Volpi willingly accepts, almost with a smile, the epithet of 'the last doge', which the people's voice of Venice has

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<sup>278</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 508.

unanimously awarded him. (...) I surprise myself by calling him ‘Most Serene Doge’”<sup>279</sup>  
When Mussolini was asked why he released Volpi from his office of Minister of Finance, he made clear that Volpi preferred to focus on his local interests rather than pursuing his role in Rome. . As the Duce reported to De Bagnac:

I did not dismiss him, my eminent friend begged me to release him from direct responsibility. He explained to me that he would have been more incisive if liberated from governmental responsibility. The doge would have been more useful to the President from Venice than he could have been in Rome.<sup>280</sup>

With Fascism in power, Volpi came to embody the classic example of a fellow-traveller who joined the regime aiming to protect his own interests and manage all cultural and economic activities of Venice and the province, rather than implementing the regime’s ideology. According to De Bagnac, Mussolini described Volpi more as a pragmatic business leader rather than a man imbued with ideology. Volpi would have been pleased to have seen Fascism liberated from the yoke of its ideology and removed from sterile disputes. Fascism, in his view, had to embrace a more pragmatic attitude and solid economic policies. Volpi continued to remain loyal to Fascism in public, which was a logical stance to take for a pragmatist industrialist aiming to maximise business opportunities such as those that came from the industrial project for Marghera, which was a clear driving force for his political manoeuvring.<sup>281</sup>

The resolution of the battle between prefect and party in the period 1923-1929 ended in favour of the *prefetto*. In the local battle for the power, there was a third actor, the *Questore*

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<sup>279</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>280</sup> Ibidem, 515.

<sup>281</sup> As cited in Distefano-Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, 101.

(Police Chief) who crucially addressed the battle in favour of the prefect at the expenses of the *federale*. If the party had been able to get the control of the *Questore*, the *federale* could have gained much more power at local level. The Fascist Party had its own political police, the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN). The effect of the formation of the MVSN was certainly that of slowly but progressively drawing the sting of *squadristo*. The foundation of the militia was seen as an important part of the project of 'normalisation'. The private armed forces of Fascism became legal. Unlike the German Nazi SS, local blackshirts had few formal and autonomous repressive powers. Any arrests made locally would be followed up at Fascist headquarters and, in case of formal action being taken, the case would enter the administrative channels linked to the *Questura* (local police headquarters) and the Ministry of the Interior<sup>282</sup>

The use of the *Questura* was central for Federzoni's effort to suppress the terrorism of the squads. The Ministry of Interior made extensive use of the *Carabinieri* to countervail the local Fascist intransigents. For example, the *Carabinieri* of Chioggia had arrested seven Fascists for the illegal violence perpetrated against the Socialist Deputy Angelo Galeno during a political meeting in late 1924. During the violence the blackshirts assaulted the *Carabinieri*. The leader of this attack was the Secretary of the Fascist Unions, Dario Galimberti. The documents present the evidence of both sides involved in the accident. On one side, the arrest of the local Fascists provoked a strong reaction from the provincial Consul of the MVSN, Iginio Maria Magrini, who denounced the *Vice-Questore* (deputy-police chief) Francesco Morelli for referring to the local *squadristi* as criminals and "Bolsheviks paid to create troubles". On the other side, the *Vice-Questore* Morelli replied that the Fascists were arrogant and accused the police of having caused the incident. During his deposition, Morelli made clear that he had merely reminded the Fascists, especially their

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<sup>282</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 75.

leader Galimberti, to respect the authority of the *Carabinieri* and refused all the accusations put forward by the *squadristi*.<sup>283</sup> As it is clear from this local case, the *Questura* did not act in the interest of the Party and the police chief also made clear that *Carabinieri* were the greater authority in the field regardless of the people they were going to repress, whether they were Fascists or not.

The reversal of fortune for the local Fascists of Chioggia was described to Giuriati by the same local leader of the *squadristi*, Dario Gallimberti in March 1925:

We all welcome you [Giuriati] and we all congratulate you, but we speak to you as a friend and master of our strong faith and we hope you to manage to save the fascism of Chioggia. (...) Fascists cannot move any more in any sense, just now that is due a quiet, but efficient activity to organise the party, without having on the way an anti-Fascist authority hidden by mantle of the honourable uniform [of *Carabinieri*] or protected by their authority of being a State officer.<sup>284</sup>

This document clearly shows that the contest between party and prefect was a contest that, in many areas, seriously affected the efficient working of the Party machine. Formally, the prefect was confirmed to be the ultimate authority of the State in the province by royal decree in 1927. But local Fascists were reluctant to accept the situation, precisely because of their belief that Fascist control of the State meant, very logically, their control of the locality.

The powers of the *prefettura* were further increased by new laws on public order introduced in 1926 which restored many of the discretionary repressive powers the prefect

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<sup>283</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Iginio Maria Magrini to prefect Iginio Coffari, 12 March 1925.

<sup>284</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Dario Galimberti to Giovanni Giuriati, 10 March 1925.

enjoyed during the First World War.<sup>285</sup> For example, only the prefect could decide whether someone was eligible to be sent to *confino* (domestic exile) after having consulted the Ministry of Interior. The typical phrase employed by the prefect, as used, for instance in local Venice documents for Venice, was that the prefect responsibility to “propose to the Ministry of the Interior for [somebody] to be sent to *confino*”.<sup>286</sup> In addition to the “extraordinary powers” granted to the prefect, the Circular of the 1927 also made clear that the *prefettura* was “the supreme authority of the State” at provincial level.<sup>287</sup>

The *federale*'s power to intervene directly in the administration of the province and the municipalities had been severely undermined during the period 1925-1927. However, the *federale* still had a considerable authority and power. He was the provincial head of the PNF, and consequently the head of the *fascio* of the capital city, with the power to appoint the *segretari* of the *fasci* of the other municipalities (*comuni*). The *federale* had the power to appoint the leaders of the university groups (GUF – *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*) and after 1931 those of the newly created *Fasci Giovanili di Combattimento* (FGC). In addition, he was responsible for the disciplinary issues involving local Fascists, including members of MVSN, youth groups and Fascist syndicates, and he could determine expulsions from the party, which could hamper or destroy an individual's political life.<sup>288</sup> Another crucial role which the *federale* could play from 1927 until 1937 was the presidency of the *Comitato intersindacale* of the province, which was meant to hold negotiations between employers and

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<sup>285</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 76.

<sup>286</sup> For the province of Venice, examples can be found in ACS, Affari Generali e Riservati, Confino Politico, b. 117 and b.118.

<sup>287</sup> See P. Morgan, ‘The prefects and party-state relations in Fascist Italy’, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 3 (1998), 241-272.

<sup>288</sup> P. Morgan, “‘The Party Is Everywhere’: The Italian Fascist Party in Economic Life, 1926-40”, in *The English Historical Review*, 114, 455(1999), 85-111.

workers and develop the regime's corporative strategy of class collaboration. The *federale* was in the position to influence industrialists, syndicalists, agrarians and workers in negotiations for labour agreements. His role became increasingly important during the period of the Great Depression which affected Italy between 1929 and 1934. The Party had to face the task of controlling employment, especially with regard to employment of local Fascists in local administrations. The failure to satisfy the hunger of local Fascists for jobs frequently meant the departure of the *federale*. This happened to Casellati in Venice in 1928, when he had to leave the post. During his last speech before the election of the new Party *federale*, Casellati admitted that "despite having pushed hard to find jobs for the local Fascists, the goal was not achieved because not all people who presided over the public authority felt obliged to help the party in this mission".<sup>289</sup> Evidently, failing to supervise labour relations internally and externally to the Party meant the incapacity to efficiently govern the province. Given the way that the Party was progressively extending its influence into many areas of everyday life, the *federale* became an extremely bureaucratic and organisational role. *Federale* and *podestà* were to become functionaries of the Party who were to deliver the party's directives. Under Turati, they were no longer representing the driving force of a revolution, but an established mechanism which had to respect the prevalence of the State authority over the Party. At a local level, in this perspective, the replacement of Casellati with Suppiej meant the shift from someone representing particular interests (Volpi's group) to someone who had proved to be a competent implementer of orders (Suppiej). Suppiej was a thirty-year old man with an irreprehensible moral conduct and economic independence. According to the prefect, he was well-educated, a person with energy, capacity and assessed moral rectitude and could benefit

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<sup>289</sup> M. Mezzalana, *Tra controllo e autonomia. Ordinamento e funzionamento dell'ente locale nell'esperienza dell'Amministrazione comunale di Venezia in periodo fascista (1928-1938)*, tesi di laurea, Anno Accademico 1993-1994 (Università degli Studi di Bologna, 1994), 85.



from admiration of the Fascists, having efficiently managed the inter-syndicate committee and collaborating with profit to solve any problems of local interest.<sup>290</sup>

## 1.6 Provincial Battle for Power

As we have seen, even in the late 1920s the Fascist federations faced considerable problems on a national scale. The Fascist Revolution which had to represent a radical change with Italy's previous political tradition, in contrast, replicated the same parochial mechanism which had characterised the Liberal age. The Venetian federation, despite its individual and distinct local character which was played out locally, in essence confirmed the nationwide trend that saw the battle focused on the confrontation between old and new elites. The explanation for the continuing infighting which had characterised the first decade of the regime's life was inherent in the institutional problem we have previously examined—the relationship between prefect, *federale*, and, to a lesser extent, *podestà*, and their struggles to make an impact at local level. Volpi himself, towards the end of the 1920s, warned Mussolini about the architecture the Duce himself had created for the Fascist State. According to De Bagnac, the “most serene doge” (*Il Doge Serenissimo*) was concerned that Mussolini would become a prisoner of the system he had created. Yet, Mussolini was confident that have demolished pointless blockages between administration of the State and the working masses.<sup>291</sup> However, the “institutional struggle” was not the only reason for the intra-party conflict at local level. Whereas the victory against the radicals had already been achieved in 1922 when Marsich left the party, the conflict between Volpians and Giuriantians was about differing visions of what Fascism was meant to achieve at a local level. Political rivalries masked deeper divisions between interest groups and lobbies within the province and to a

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<sup>290</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, The prefect Iginio Coffari to Benito Mussolini, 15 February 1929.

<sup>291</sup> De Bagnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 541.

higher extent, in Venice city. Volpi and Giuriati conflicted over the future development of Venice city and the clash reached its peak over the question of approving the project of the bridge to connect Venice city to the mainland. As Giuriati himself reported, the journey towards the approval of the project accelerated in 1928 when the local lobbies led by Volpi put pressure on Mussolini who, until then, had not taken sides, the one against the construction of the bridge, the Giuriatians, and the other in favour of the project, the Volpiani. Mussolini, perceiving that public opinion was predominantly favourable to the bridge, and therefore to Volpi, decided to delegate to the Venetian party the decision on its construction. In October 1928, the meeting of the Venetian *Direttorio* decided to proceed with the approval of the project. As Giuriati reported, he found himself in clear minority in a 'lion's den' of people in favour of the bridge.<sup>292</sup> The project of the bridge was slowed down by the same Giuriati as he was to hold the role of Minister of Public Works until 1929. Giuriati's removal from the Public Works and his consequent appointment to the President of the Chamber of Deputies in 1930, allowed the municipality to start with construction in 1931.<sup>293</sup> This is a case of national interference at provincial level because of the strength of popular and public opinion. This confirms that Mussolini was capable of reading the local situation, supporting the construction of the bridge and profoundly changing the mechanisms at work.

The question of the bridge demonstrates the clash between the internal factions within the party regarding the strategic urban and industrial development of the city. While Giurati was focusing on proposing a conservative and monolithic view of Venice which had to re-

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<sup>292</sup> As cited in R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>293</sup> Ibidem.

discover its maritime traditions, Volpi supported the idea of a modern and dynamic Venice, far from the tradition of the *tropo languida regina* (too languid queen), in which Venice had to combine industry and cultural tourism. In this respect, Volpi had a non-Fascist, merely local agenda, but he was able to better understand the change and the time in which this change was to take place. The resolution of the question of the bridge reflected the profound difference between the two characters, Giuriati and Volpi. As Mussolini reported to De Begnac, Giuriati could be catalogued among the “Venetian people who were (...) desperate for the fall of the republic (of Venice) and tried to oppose the results of the Campoformio treaty”.<sup>294</sup> On the other side, Volpi “does not limit himself to venerate the history, to revitalise its memories. He wants Venice to live its new time (...). He does not want the gondola to be the symbol. He wishes the ship, dannunzian or not, to be the insignium”.<sup>295</sup>

In this context of the disagreement between Volpi and Giuriati, the relations Party-State were not directly affected. However, Mussolini continued to manoeuvre the equilibrium of the local-national relations from Rome, mainly be concerned with the health of the party at local level, and was therefore usually prepared to stand by the predominant side. On the other side, the “question of the bridge” showed the inability to asserting the supreme State authority in the province.<sup>296</sup>

As we have already seen, if in the early days infighting was often about the kind of Fascism that should be implemented and the revolt against centralisation, by the mid-1920s

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<sup>294</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 481. The Treaty of Campoformio was signed on 18 October 1797 by Napoleon Bonaparte and Count Philipp von Cobenzl as respectively representatives of the French Republic and the Austrian Empire. The treaty followed Napoleon's victorious campaign in Italy, which definitively ended the history of the Republic of Venice.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibidem*, 513.

<sup>296</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

the contest was about local power and the struggle between interest groups. After 1925, a closer look at the local battles can provide a clear portrait of the varying fortunes of provincial *federali*, but more in general about local leaders. Fascism often reproduced a clash between group interests and the prefect had to act as a negotiator. One problem for the prefect was that, even if he was able to come to terms with local factions, the local party balance was rarely stable. The complexity of local interests, the unpredictability of local allegiances over different issues and the fluctuation of individuals in important positions led to great fluidity and difficulty in predicting outcomes. As one observer remarked, ‘positions could be reversed with great speed if necessary, as people transferred from one group or one leader to another’.<sup>297</sup> That this kind of situation was not unusual was made even clearer by the report sent by the prefect Bianchetti to Mussolini in 1930. As Bianchetti reported about Suppiej, “his dismissal in 1925 had been determined by the dissent between Giuriati and Iginio Maria Magrini, dissent which altered the political group Suppiej was part of, and his return in 1928 has been the natural consequence of the new order given to the party by the rapprochement of the two above mentioned personalities”.<sup>298</sup> This confirms that the Party was influenced by the internal dynamics and the consequences of this dynamism could determine the fortunes of the *federale*. However, if ambitious, the Fascist fallen into disfavour, rarely walked away from the movement. The Party was the only means for a political career and leaving the office on good terms with the Party was the only way to hope to regain the position. Suppiej was nominated by Michele Bianchi in 1923, and had to leave under the leadership of Farinacci. But it would be Bianchi who would push for his return, as confirmed by a letter to the personal secretary of the Duce, Alessandro Chiavolini, in December 1928.<sup>299</sup> A few months earlier, Suppiej had sent a letter to Mussolini asking to be re-inserted into the political life of

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<sup>297</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 101.

<sup>298</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

<sup>299</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.49, Alessandro Chiavolini to Giorgio Suppiej, 16 December 1928.

the movement. In his letter he made clear that after he had to resign from the role of *federale* in 1925 due to the difficult situation that developed in Venice, “it was suggested to me to remove myself and after that I remained at the regime’s disposal pursuing my job and business”.<sup>300</sup>

Suppiej’s case mirrored a national phenomenon: a change in the national party secretary, or the arrival of a new prefect could completely reverse the situation at local level. Here, the appointment of Suppiej was facilitated by the arrival of the new prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti and the dismissal of Iginio Coffari, who had supported Volpi in his pricy of monopolisation of the party. Leaving the position, Coffari was to take the role of prefect in Florence in 1929 and then he became senator in 1931.<sup>301</sup> If the previous two prefects were from the South of Italy and reflected the party to appoint a “foreigner” to resolve the local battle for the power, the appointment of Bianchetti, who was born in Castelfranco (Treviso – Veneto Region) meant the role of managing the province was given to a local bureaucrat of the State who did know very well the local situation. As the intervention of the previous prefects brought relatively more confusion to the local scene and intensified the local battle for power, with Coffari taking the side of Volpi in pursuing the interests of the industrialist group (see the above mentioned case of the *Il Gazzettino*), the appointment of Bianchetti was a national escamotage orchestrated by Mussolini and Michele Bianchi to bring more stability at local level. The intervention of Michele Bianchi was meant to contain Volpi’s ascent to the

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<sup>300</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.49, Emilia Manetti Suppiej to Benito Mussolini, 24 October 1928. The singularity of this case is that not just Suppiej asked to be reintegrated within the ranks of the regime, but one year before, in October 1927, his mother Emilia Manetti Suppiej directly asked to Mussolini to provide her son with a new office without Suppiej’s knowledge of her request to the Duce: “My son, the lawyer Giorgio Suppiej, first hour fascist, political secretary of Venice at the beginning of Fascism, operated in the interest of his country with his young passion, sacrificing his own interest and risking his life during the war. He would be ready to serve his country and he is sad he cannot do it. If you have time and will, please talk about him with the honourable Bottai and with some others who I hope still appreciate him. I have just one request: please do not tell to my son about this letter”.

<sup>301</sup> A. Cifelli, *I Prefetti del Regno nel ventennio fascista* (Roma: SSAI, 1999), 78.

top of the local party. Mussolini mentioned that Volpi “hated Michelino Bianchi whose Socialist revolutionary origins he condemned”.<sup>302</sup> If Bianchi played a crucial role in the return of Suppiej, the substantial correspondence between Giuriati and Bianchetti held at the Archive of the Chamber of Deputies for the period 1929-1933, demonstrates that Bianchi was manoeuvring with Volpi’s most enemy (Giuriati) to bring the operation to a good end.<sup>303</sup>

The decision to re-appoint Suppiej to the federation confirmed the impression that the centre of power of Fascism had gravitated towards the province. As the prefect Coffari confirmed to the Minister of Interior, although Suppiej was offered the nomination to be an MP, “he prefers to return to the role of *segretario federale*”.<sup>304</sup> Suppiej was not the only Venetian Fascist who wanted to play his cards in Venice. As we have already seen, Volpi, after being appointed Ministry of Finance in 1925, decided to return to Venice in 1928 to play a consistent role at provincial level.

## **1.7 The secretariat of Giuriati (1930-1931)**

The return of Suppiej might be seen as a striking victory for Fascist centralisation of authority, but, in reality, it was not quite as impressive as it might seem. Certainly Rome was able to manoeuvre and influence the political balance at local level, but the effects of the struggles of the 1920s would continue to impact on relations between the centre and the periphery as well as between the moderates and radicals well into the following decade in fairly similar fashion. After the appointment of Suppiej, the prefect Bianchetti reported to Mussolini that, according to his assessment, the local equilibrium could change anytime. In 1930, after one year of Suppiej being in charge again as party *federale*, he still believed that

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<sup>302</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 511.

<sup>303</sup> *Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati* (ASCD), Fondo Giovanni Giuriati, Correspondence Giovanni Battista Bianchetti – Giovanni Giuriati, 8 July 1929- 10 September 1933.

<sup>304</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 15 February 1929.

“any reason, even small, even a simple misunderstanding, could alter the balance, reached with hard work, but still not stable”.<sup>305</sup> The main problem was that the solutions were far from being definitive. As soon as the *federale* was removed and a new *federale* was appointed, ambition would be rekindled and resentment remembered. In Venice, the return of Suppiej to lead the Party in the province was greeted with suspicion by the circles of industrialists led by Volpi, because they remembered Suppiej’s earlier hostility to their group.<sup>306</sup> The significant failure of the regime to make an impact at local level both in terms of finding good people for the local administration and to resolve the provincial disputes was already confirmed by a report of Suppiej to Mussolini in January 1930 who confirmed that the Party “lacked in managing to depersonalise (local politics)”, but also “lacked good people and the Liberals have been able to retain all the positions”.<sup>307</sup> Suppiej was blaming Giuriati who “stood for disinterested purity and Fascist faith, but lacked the ability to organise”.<sup>308</sup>

Mussolini, ignoring the *federale*’s advice about organisational inadequacy, appointed Giuriati national secretary of the PNF. Giuriati’s secretariat (October 1930–December 1931) was a period of transition towards a mass-mobilising system and membership which would develop further under his successor, Achille Starace. First and foremost, Giuriati’s task was to mediate with his predecessors, Farinacci and Turati. On one side, Farinacci, as we have already seen, had launched a “continuing revolution” with the aim of strengthening and perpetuating *squadristo* and the Party’s control over Italian Society. On the other side, Turati’s campaign against the intransigents aimed to dismantle Farinacci’s radical idea of permanent revolution and violence to perpetuate Fascism, and to centralise the PNF’s

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<sup>305</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

<sup>306</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 23 December 1928.

<sup>307</sup> Bau-Furio-Monaco, ‘Il Veneto nei rapporti di Mussolini’, 163.

<sup>308</sup> Ibidem, 163-164.

functions in order to subordinate the Party to the Fascist State. Turati abolished the acclamatory election of the *federale* by the local followers and the appointment made by to the centre through the mediating figure of the prefect who, in addition, was to become the senior figure of the province at the *federale*'s expense.

Although described as a transitional figure for his short tenure, Giuriati was well known for having been alongside D'Annunzio during the experience of Fiume, but also for his dedication to the fascist movement and the monarchy. Mussolini thought that "only Giovanni Giuriati could calm down the storm which hit the party under Turati".<sup>309</sup> One of the characteristics that set Giuriati apart from his predecessors was that he was not a provincial *ras* or at the least the kind of leader with a large following. As we have seen, the clash within the Venetian party was based on personal interests and on the vision for Venice, which Volpi and Giuriati wanted to develop, rather than ideological. Giuriati's supposed non-partisanship indicated to Mussolini that would not trigger factional struggles within the provincial party, as the Farinacci and Turati tenures had done, and that instead the party would be governed in a competent, disinterested, incorruptible and non-factional way.<sup>310</sup>

Giuriati's appointment aimed at removing 'the trash who are obstacles in our way', targeting the anti-Fascists, former-Liberals and freemasons who had found their way into the party under Turati.<sup>311</sup> Turati had extended the influence of the party over a wide range of sectors of Italian life, and now Giuriati had the task of purifying the Party of alien elements and realise a model of a 'new civilisation'. As Mussolini argued, Farinacci fought against

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<sup>309</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 481.

<sup>310</sup> P. Morgan, "'The Trash Who Are Obstacles in Our Way': The Italian Fascist Party at the Point of Totalitarian Lift-Off, 1930-31", in *English Historical Review*, 127(2012), 303-344, 309.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibidem*.



those that he used to call “enemies”. Turati built the walls around the castle of the party. Giuriati had only one fear: the prevalence of the wing of the unenthusiastic inside and in front of the Party.<sup>312</sup> For Mussolini, ‘unenthusiastic’ was synonymous with being ‘not sincerely converted’ to Fascism.

During his brief tenure, like to Farinacci, Giuriati aspired to being about the fusion of the party and nation and therefore he worked towards reasserting the position of the party against the State. He also extended the range of the party’s totalitarian organisations, introducing a new body the *Fasci Giovanili di Combattimento*, a new youth group which was designed to recruit young men between 18 and 21 years of age passing out from the *Avanguardisti* of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB). The *Fasci Giovanili* were to be an alternative to the GUF (University Group), with the aim of attracting skilled or semi-skilled young workers who were already in jobs or who were training for work. This policy of empowering of the youth groups brought the Party and the regime into open conflict with the Catholic Church, triggering the battle for the monopoly of youth education. As we will see in the following chapters, the battle was particularly harsh in Venice, where Giuriati himself led the offensive against the Catholic youth groups, with the whole province involved in the battle. Giuriati earned the ire of the Patriarch La Fontaine because of the closure of 238 catholic youth circles in 3 June 1931.<sup>313</sup> However, the most significant initiative of Giuriati was the purge of party membership. Giuriati demanded that *federali* and prefects purge the party of the corrupt, inactive and opportunist. Venice could boast one of the more illustrious examples of this. Giuriati took the opportunity to record the unrestrained behaviour of his old enemy from the *Cavalieri della Morte* (Knights of Death), Gino Covre, who was found renting a flat on the lido with his lover, while his legitimate wife was found living as the concubine of a

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<sup>312</sup> De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, 481-482.

<sup>313</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 130.

pensioned-off colonel.<sup>314</sup> The purge also involved a thorough check on dates of membership in order to correct any fraudulent backdating of membership, which was a common phenomenon under Turati. In Venice province, the Party inspection revealed that Volpi was among those who falsely backdated his membership of the Fascist Party in order to progress within the regime.<sup>315</sup> One of the effects of the purge was that it facilitated the return of extremist ex-squadristi into the ranks of the Party. Although the last two versions of the Statute of the Party in 1926 and 1929 did not allow re-admissions, many of those sidelined or expelled from the party under Turati, especially Farinaccians, returned under the secretariat of Giovanni Giuriati. For example, the Venetian *squadrista* Raffaele Bordignon and the leader of the Fascist students, Pio Leoni, close collaborators of the former *ras* Marsich, were expelled and then re-admitted under Giuriati. Giuriati's revision came to represent the last breath of life for intransigent Fascists, and attempted to remould the Party before the membership would reopen more widely to everybody in 1932. The process of infighting would restart and alongside the battle for the leadership, the fight would involve the large number of jobs made largely available for the party with the expansion of the *parastato* (organisations) under the regime. Members of the party were aware of these opportunities which could potentially be open to them. Those excluded were to complain about their exclusion. In the early 1930s, for example, the prefect of Venice wrote that in recent days there had been protests of discontent among the Old Blackshirts, who complained that they were neglected and unemployed, and that, in preference to them, jobs and positions in the Party were given to people of recent and doubtful Fascist faith.<sup>316</sup>

Morgan suggested that:

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<sup>314</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>315</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>316</sup> ACS, DGPs, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 4 July 1930.

... in some provinces, extremist Fascism found a temporary coherence and self-awareness, generated by the opportunities offered by the Giuriati revision to reverse the trends of the Turati Secretaryship. The extremist campaign never, however, became a coordinated regional or national movement, largely because the prefects and police worked very hard to contain the spread of dissidence.<sup>317</sup>

This was played out in Venice where Giuriati's secretariat brought significant changes to the local balance in Venice. Suppiej and Giuriati could work together against Volpi in order to stabilise power at local level. Giuriati's appointment seemed to give his coalition the chance of a total victory. However, it was again the fight for control of *Il Gazzettino* that showed that the local battle was a persistent one and the duo of Suppiej-Giuriati was not a certain winner of the contest. As Ennio Talamini stated to Galeazzo Ciano, Suppiej had repeatedly tried to force Gianpietro Talamini from the editorship of the newspaper. The reason for Talamini to contact Ciano was obvious. Ciano was one of the most influential personalities of Mussolini's entourage. He became a key figure of the Fascist regime after his marriage to Mussolini's daughter Edda (1930) and therefore he could have talked to Mussolini in order to resolve the situation. In addition, Ciano became Minister of Population Culture (MINCULPOP) in 1935. The MINCULPOP was competent for Press and Propaganda and it was intended to be the Italian analogue of the German Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. This office controlled not only press, but literature, art, theatre, music and tourism as well. Despite Talamini's attempt to block the climb to his newspaper by contacting the most influential personalities of Mussolini's circle, Suppiej was able to persuade the director (Gianpietro Talamini) to release a letter addressed to Giovanni Giuriati in which Talamini proposed Suppiej for the co-direction. In addition, in his first act as *federale*, he appointed trusted people to the editorial staff. Suppiej went even further, threatening him with the worst

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<sup>317</sup> Morgan, "The Trash Who Are Obstacles in Our Way", 335.

of consequences if he was not to accept the agreement.<sup>318</sup> Giuriati was never directly mentioned by Ennio Talamini in his long letter to Mussolini. However, it is clear that the renewed impulse given by Suppiej to the attempt to monopolise the activity of the newspaper, was the direct consequence of the new role played by Giuriati. The progressive intrusion of Suppiej into activities which did not directly involve the Party was also confirmed by the report of the Prefect Bianchetti in the mid-1930:

There is no shortage of critics of the action of Suppiej: some people accuse him (...) of an excess of action, for the intrusion in activities in which the party should not be involved, for his exorbitant desire to distinguish himself and for his excess of arrogance.<sup>319</sup>

The repeated attacks on the *Il Gazzettino*, were another incident of Party-State, over control of the levers of opinions in the province, which, however, did not have an outcome until the late 1930s, when the intervention of Mussolini made it clear that the Talamini family could still own and edit it while Gianpietro Talamini was alive. The failed bid for the control of the newspaper was also the cause of the progressive detachment between Giuriati and Suppiej. The intervention of Gabriele D'Annunzio temporarily prevented Ennio Talamini, son of Gianpietro, from being excluded from the direction of *Il Gazzettino*. However, it was only a question of time before Volpi acquired the newspaper.<sup>320</sup>

Giuriati mentioned in his diary that around 120,000 members were expelled from the party in the period 1930-31.<sup>321</sup> The actual figure was probably even higher, around 200,000.<sup>322</sup> While

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<sup>318</sup> ACS, MinCulPop, b. 49, Ennio Talamini, Teresa Talamini, Mario Talamini, Gian Antonio Talamini to Galeazzo Ciano, 18 October 1934.

<sup>319</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

<sup>320</sup> ACS, MinCulPop, b. 49, Galeazzo Ciano to Gabriele D'Annunzio, n.d.

<sup>321</sup> G. Giuriati, *La parabola di Mussolini nei ricordi di un gerarca* (Bari: Laterza, 1981), 130.

some degree of purging may well have been in Mussolini's interest as a means of purifying Fascism and fascistising Italy, the extent of the purge proved to be excessive. Giutiati was dismissed from the role of Party Secretary and replaced by Achille Starace—a strong defender of the Party's function in a totalitarian system and a man known for his fierce, almost fanatical, loyalty to Mussolini.

Many would later attribute to Starace the responsibility for having transformed the PNF. But many of the organisational changes within the party were instigated and partially implemented by Turati and Giuriati. The transformation of the PNF, which occurred in parallel with its juridical integration into the new Fascist regime, was accomplished between 1926 and 1932. The internal situation of the Party had been greatly altered by the purges ordered by the Secretary, Augusto Turati and by his successor, Giovanni Giuriati. Many *squadristi* who were resistant to discipline were expelled and a good number of opportunists had been transferred into the social body of the party and this considerably altered its composition. Given the development of the PNF in the Fascist regime after 1926, reference to its social composition becomes less relevant for the functioning of the party. Mussolini had decided to reduce the party's political autonomy as much as possible. As Emilio Gentile already argued, "one has to take into account the important differences in the ideas and policies of Turati and Giuriati as secretaries of the PNF, but one must also recognize that their work was decisive for the transformation of the PNF in a way consistent with the new function it was gradually assuming in the totalitarian Fascist system".<sup>323</sup> The Party owed to Turati, who was secretary of the PNF from March 1926 to October 1930, the liquidation of the Farinaccians and the PNF's adaptation to its new position as subordinate to the state. With Turati, the PNF assumed an eminently educative role both towards the masses and, above all,

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<sup>322</sup> Morgan, "The Trash Who Are Obstacles in Our Way", 336.

<sup>323</sup> Gentile, 'The Problem of the Party', 265.

the younger generations. From this point of view, the period 1926-32 may be considered a distinct phase in the history of the PNF, a phase characterised by its transformation into a popular institution of the Fascist State.

## **1.8 Starace and the Party During the 1930s**

The importance of the brief tenure of Giuriati lay in what happened after his dismissal. The appointment of Starace was followed by the announcement that PNF membership, closed since 1926 to anybody other than the graduates of the Fascist youth organisations, would be opened up to new requests for membership from October 1932. At the provincial level, Starace's removal of the ban on new members brought an apparent end to almost six years of party reorganisation aimed at locating the PNF firmly within the totalitarian State. Starace was convinced that he could form the new character of the Italians by the imposition of rituals which would make them more permeable to the myths of fascism. Starace's Party extended the boundaries of its power in the society. Starace, as PNF Secretary between December 1931 and October 1939 perfected, with manic attention to detail, the capillarity of the PNF. Under the orders of Mussolini and with fanatical personal zeal, Starace developed the totalitarian party machine with the aim of involving millions of men and women of every age in a system of collective life. For example, the Venetian Party was able to extend its influence to over 179,852 people involved in the various organisations of the regime by 1934. The number corresponded to 31 % of the overall provincial population.<sup>324</sup>

During the years of Starace, the regime's organisations extended their area of influence to school, work and leisure time. In this respect, popular mobilisation reached levels never

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<sup>324</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

seen before in Italy and people joined in mass the events organised by the Party. As Corner argued, “by March 1940 the PNF had more than 3.5 million enrolled and around 20 million Italians—little short of half the total population—were involved in the various capillary organisations, unions included.”<sup>325</sup> At least on paper, Italy was achieving so-called ‘fascistisation’. The change of the regime’s relationship with Italians, was described in a circular sent by the prefect Francesco Benigni, who had been appointed to lead the prefecture of Venice in 1934, to all the *podestà* and commissioners of the province. The prefect was condemning the practice of establishing *patronati* and committees of honour during official Fascist events. The committees of honour or *patronati* were very popular in the liberal age. They were set up to highlight the prestige of events organised at local level and they were composed of personalities, also institutional, of major importance. Adherence to a committee of honour was therefore an expression of local institutional support to the initiative. They were a symbol of a politics based on personalism and *patronage*, a system where the MPs had the direct relationship and control of his *collegio* (electoral district), and politics was extremely regional. The regime believed that this represented a practice of old times which had to be stopped altogether to allow control of the State over the periphery. The ‘new times’ required discipline during public events and this discipline had to correspond to the Fascist discipline.<sup>326</sup> This was a clear example of how the regime and Starace were pursuing the regimentation and fascistisation of the society at local level, namely through elimination of any possible alternative and providing people with clear rules on how to behave with regards to the regime.

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<sup>325</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 129-130.

<sup>326</sup> Archivio Comune di Chioggia (ACC), b.5, 10 January 1935, Circular of the Prefect Francesco Benigni to the Podestà.

As Emilio Gentile suggested, “Starace was the high priest of the ‘cult of the Duce’ and the key figure in staging the liturgical ceremonies of Fascism”.<sup>327</sup> Consequently, the PNF became his “armed wing” in implementing *mussolinismo* at local level. An example was the letter sent by the Provincial Head of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, Angelo Meloni, to the *podestà* of Chioggia on occasion of the beginning of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935:

In every office there must be exhibited the clear and the sculpted words of our Boss that in this memorable time for our *patria*, needs the spontaneous and passionate collaboration of the all Italian population that have to contemplate the supreme words delivered by the Duce to the legionnaires of the Oriental Africa.<sup>328</sup>

*The Gioventù italiana del Littorio* (GIL) claimed a membership of over 8 million in October 1940 which was larger than that of the Hitler Youth at the same time.<sup>329</sup> As the Fascist newspaper of the local *fascio* of Chioggia, the *Foglio d’Ordini* declared:

The continuity [of Fascism] is today represented by the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*. (...) like to the “Civis romanus” who received a virile education from a young age, nowadays - under the Mussolinian regime – the Fascist learns and put into practice marvellous spiritual and warrior virtues. The G.I.L is a glorious army which is trained to continue the glorious time we are now living [Fascist Revolution].<sup>330</sup>

During the 1930s, Starace gave much attention to numbers. During his period of office, *federali* were requested monthly (sometimes bimonthly) reports on the situation and the activities of the Party.

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<sup>327</sup> Gentile, ‘The Problem of the Party’, 264.

<sup>328</sup> ACC, b.6, Angelo Meloni to Podestà Piero Ravagnan, 11 October 1935.

<sup>329</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 129.

<sup>330</sup> Biblioteca Civica di Chioggia (BCS), Catalogo Periodici, “Il Foglio d’Ordini”, 1 July 1938.



As Lauren E. Forcucci argued “women's organizations of the regime were not excluded from this count. While the regime exalted Italian women as child bear-ers, men assumed their traditional role as “bread-winners””.<sup>331</sup> Mussolini emphasised the importance of motherhood for women. This gave Italian women a public purpose. The Italian family was not merely encouraged to be prolific but was viewed as being linked with the state, of which it was meant to become a fully functioning component. There was a definite connection between the fascist ideology and increasing the birth rate, mothers had to grow the future warriors of the regime. The battle for births took place during the inter-war years of 1925 to 1938. The regime associated the demographic campaign and therefore motherhood, children, family, and virility with maintaining national greatness. The regime promoted mass propaganda, mobilisation, and state incentives to increase the birthrate, especially within the working class, by increasing welfare benefits, legislating tax breaks, making available better health care.

In order to enhance the success of the demographic campaign, the regime announced the creation of the *Opera Nazionale per la Maternità ed Infanzia* (ONMI: The National Organisation for Mothers and Infants) in 1925. The scope of ONMI was to cooperate with Italian communities in the effort to protect women, care for mothers, and provide aid to children up to the age of five. The leaders (*patroni* or *patronesse*) were generally chosen among the local elites. These were important personalities, often chosen by the *podestà*, among those who had already gained significant experience in the field of assistance to population in difficulty. Through the development of ONMI, the regime offered care and

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<sup>331</sup> L. E. Forcucci, ‘Battle for Births: The Fascist Pronatalist Campaign in Italy 1925 to 1938’, in *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe* 10:1 (2010), 4-13.

protection to mothers and their children. Women were thought by female instructors in children care and were trained to be educated mothers and develop the fascist youth culture.

At the beginning of 1933, Mussolini established 24 December of each year to be set as *Giornata della Madre e del Fanciullo* (Mother's and Children's Day) to honor Italian mothers and their children. Mussolini purposely decided upon this date in order to include the Catholic Church and to associate the event with Mary the Mother of Christ and Jesus' birth.

The "Day of Mother and Son" was created by Fascism to awarding highly public medals or certificates and recognition to those women who produced more than the state's target of five children per family or they had their children fallen in war for the national cause. Prizes were awarded by the president of each provincial section of ONMI. In Chioggia, for example, the *prefetto commissario*<sup>332</sup> proudly reported the result achieved by ONMI, during the "Mother's and Children's Day" in 1936. The *commissario* listed the benefits for the poor:

During the "Giornata della Madre e del Fanciullo", we have baptised those poor kids born in December, distributed as below:

Chioggia n. 14

Sottomarina n. 6

S. Anna n. 3

Ca' Bianca n. 2

Cavanella d'Adige n. 2

Mothers and young Fascist women were godmothers.

During the ceremony, we have distributed 24 prizes for the good upbringing (20 of £50 and 4 of £100) and a wedding prize of 500 lire; we have also distributed 18 certificates of "Good Mother" and

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<sup>332</sup> The *prefetto commissario* was an institutional figure of extraordinary administration and was usually appointed following the dissolution of a municipal or provincial council during the liberal age, but it was widely used under Fascism to 'normalise' the local level. Nowadays is still used.

8 certificates for “Demographic merit” (to the mothers with more than 10 sons still alive) and two pre-schooling scholarships called “Maria Pia di Savoia”. The *fascio femminile* donated clothes to each baptised child”.<sup>333</sup>

ONMI was a parastate body and the party involvement on his activities was crucial. As we have seen in this document, the *fascio femminile* donated clothes to ONMI to be distributed to children during the “Mother’s and Children’s Day”. The grip of the Party on this organisation became tighter starting from April 1933, when the regime progressively replaced the volunteer workers with professional social workers (*visitatrici fasciste*). Fascist women belonging to the local fascio who visited the families in need for moral and material help, with special care for maternity and infancy, reporting periodically to the Secretary of the fascio from whom they were dependent. Similar to the ONMI movement, *La Massaie Rurali* wanted to affect the thinking and behavior of peasant women. *La Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili* created in 1933, also attempted to reach the peasant masses. Although their declared goal was its declared goal was promoting knowledge of small-scale farming methods, domestic techniques, childcare, and moral, social, and technical assistance to women in rural areas, the real mission was political mobilisation. Women used these organizations for mobilisation and expression. *La Massaie Rurali* eventually developed into a massive association amounting to over one million members on the eve of World War II.<sup>334</sup> Considering that women were excluded from other active duties, these organisations provided a sense of belonging and support to the establishment of a fascist society.

The above report is really interesting as it provides us with a flavour of what Starace was effectively requesting of the local party. However, welfare was undoubtedly one of the most

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<sup>333</sup> ACC, Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (ONMI), Podestà Piero Ravagnan to Provincial Federation of ONMI, 24 January 1937.

<sup>334</sup> A. De Grand, *Women Under Italian Fascism* in *The Historical Journal* 19, (4): 957–961. (1976), 961.

effective instruments of the regime. Especially during the Great Depression, some families could not do without the help of the ONMI. In addition to a welfare organisation, another strong card played by the regime was the organisation of the Italians' leisure time through the *Ente Sportivo* and the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*.<sup>335</sup>

The OND, founded in 1925, greatly expanded its activities under Starace. As the *federale* Michele Pascolato and the provincial secretary of the OND Piero Calderazzo informed all the *podestà* and the local inspectors of the OND in October 1935, it was time for the OND to contribute to the greatness of the country. The Venetian OND offered the medals won by the Venetians in the various national OND competitions to be melted down in order to support the African Campaign. The document wanted to “testimony the full adherence of the *dopolavoristi* to the will of the DUCE”.<sup>336</sup>

At the provincial level the party became less political and more an administrative and bureaucratic centre of power. Participation became more important than the ‘Fascist faith’. In this respect, the regime was successful in involving a large part of the population in activities that were apparently non-political, but that inculcated a “way of life” based on physical virility and paramilitarism. The activities of these agencies represented a real penetration into people's life. These organisations made extensive use of local festivals and regional folklore in the effort to involve people. In Chioggia, the NUF (*Nucleo Universitario Fascista*) was responsible for the organisation<sup>1</sup> of a national “Fish Festival” (*Sagra del Pesce*). This event was established for the first time in 1934 to support the regime's autarchy propaganda. The Festival was chaired by the Duke of Genoa and the Minister Edmondo Rossoni. In August 1939, the same NUF was able to organise a magnificent regatta of 400 characteristic boats

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<sup>335</sup> ACC, b. 11, Franco Olivetti to Podestà Piero Ravagnan, 13 March 1935.

<sup>336</sup> ACC, b. 11, Circular of the Provincial Secretary OND Piero Calderazzo and Federal Alessandro Pascolato to all the provincial leader of OND, 10 October 1935.

(*bragozzi*) from Chioggia to Venice. The yacht of Giuseppe Volpi and his guests, the Italian and the German Ministers of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri and Joseph Goebbels, attended this event.<sup>337</sup> These activities demonstrated the great care that the Fascist centre took in enlisting the periphery for the purpose of nation-building. What at first sight might have seemed like a counter-intuitive strategy of strengthening local feeling and this working against the centre, proved an important mechanism in winning over the regions for the national course. For the construction of the national identity, was crucial the binomial relationship *piccola patria-grande patria* (small fatherland-great fatherland). The young people of the university group were moved by the intention to make people love *the piccola patria*, but as a daughter of the *grande patria*, the *patria fascista*. The main investment of the fascist government in local rituals and festivals in which people could largely identify happened with the aim to end the contrast between ‘local’ and ‘national’ identity. It is not coincidence that there are illustrious representatives of the Fascist government to chair these events. In the case of Chioggia were invited Alfieri and Volpi, and even prestigious representatives of international politics such as Goebbels have been invited to attend these local events, so that he could see how the small and the great Italian homelands were united under the fascist effigy. Fascism attempted to integrate the small homeland into the national homeland, harmonising the two apparently conflicting feelings. In accentuating “regional and provincial peculiarities, ... Fascist organizers were sufficiently astute to realise that cultural manifestations of regional or specific communal identity were very different from affirmations of political separateness and could be used to strengthen a sense of national belonging”.<sup>338</sup> As Stefano Cavazza has demonstrated, the use of the concept of the *piccola patria* and of the traditional popular festivals—sometimes taken over by the Fascist organisations, represented a clever way of combining popular participation and enjoyment

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<sup>337</sup> BCS, Catalogo Periodici, “Il Foglio d’Ordini”, 19 August 1939.

<sup>338</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 132.

with indoctrination, in which the national and regional were fused with Fascism in an effort to create a single entity.<sup>339</sup> The regime disrupted the various local identities and placed them within national dynamics and situations that responded to stimulations coming from the centre. For the case of Chioggia, the 'Fish Festival' had to respond to the major national impulse given to the campaign of autarchy and the myth of Italy's self-sufficiency.

The concept of the *piccola patria*, was not new for Venice city. It was D'Annunzio who first suggested that the *Grande Venezia* (Great Venice) could again find its importance and its place within the nation. This project had found a leader and developer in Volpi. However, Volpi's Venice was not prisoner of its past. Venice had to regenerate itself through its modernisation (Porto Marghera) and providing the tourism industry with a new impulse. Volpi acted as mediator between the world of the national politics and Venice's own aspirations of economic revival. In this way, the Venetian manufacturing of cultural entertainment was the product of an ambitious programme of economic reform moulded by the city's traditional tourist interests imposed through the directives of the central government.<sup>340</sup> As Longo argued,

the main aim of the 'Grand Strategy' was to separate industrial production from the historic city, in order to defend its artistic heritage. In more practical terms, the development of a commercial port on the one hand and a tourist infrastructure on the other, would serve the economic interests of both branches of his [Volpi] own business groups.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> S. Cavazza, *Piccole patrie: feste popolari tra regione e nazione durante il fascismo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997).

<sup>340</sup> S. Longo, *Culture, tourism and Fascism in Venice 1919-1945*, PhD thesis, University College of London, 2004, 75.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibidem*, 91.

Volpi was not only was shareholder of many industrial and financial organisations, among the most important being the *Società Adriatica di Elettricità* (SADE) and the *Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi*, a group operating on a global luxury hotels business. He was also appointed President of *Confindustria* (Italian Industrialists Association) in 1934, the year which confirmed Volpi as the greater authority in Venice. 1934 was a real turning point for Venetian Fascism. Giuriati was dismissed from the role of President of the Chamber of Deputies and appointed senator and he left his seat at the *Direttorio del Fascismo*, and with it his role of provincial Fascist. In addition, Suppiej was dismissed the role of *federale* and Volpi facilitated the appointment of his protégé, Michele Pascolato, from who was already leader of the OND. Pascolato was a lawyer related to Maria Pezze' Pascolato, professor and pedagogist who had been head of the Venetian *fasci femminili* and head of the OMNI (Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia) in 1927.

The mid-1930s demonstrated that Fascism was not an impediment to the continuation of Volpi's successful career and project of restructuring Venice. By the 1930s, Volpi had established himself as the greater authority in Venice and he was able to assume the credit for the successful promotion of the economic interests of the city. This allowed him to access the heart of the regime and control all the most important local organisations of the regime: the federation with Pascolato, and the *comune* with Alverà who started his second mandate in 1935 alongside his deputy Casellati, political plenipotentiary of Volpi's group. Volpi did not stop with the control of the *federale* and *podestà*. Since the beginning of the 1930s, he had extended his influence over the regime's agencies, like the *Ente Sportivo*, managed by Alessandro Brass, the OND led by the same *federale* Pascolato; and the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo di Venezia*, presided by Ludovico Foscari. These were all people destined to play a crucial role in the following years of the regime. Foscari would replace Pascolato in the role

of *federale* in 1937, while Brass would be appointed deputy *podestà* in 1938, providing Volpi's hegemony with political continuity. Meanwhile, the new generation of Fascist notables, protected and favoured by Volpi to lead the major posts of the Fascist *parastato*, was to monopolise all the major positions of the party. Volpi accomplished the final act of his hegemony with the acquisition of the *Il Gazzettino* which started in 1934 and was finalised in 1939.<sup>342</sup> It was Farinacci in a letter to Galeazzo Ciano, Minister of the Propaganda, who expressed all his disappointment regarding Volpi's final assault on the ownership of the newspaper.<sup>343</sup>

In the late-1930s, while Volpi was monopolising the economic, cultural and political life of Venice, his old opponents were progressively forgotten by the regime. Suppiej, after being temporarily appointed deputy national secretary of the PNF in 1939, was dismissed; and he regretted to observe to Mussolini that Fascism had “put me aside and defamed me, even though I served you and I would like to serve you with all my strength”.<sup>344</sup> Suppiej, as well as Giuriati, would not play any further decisive role in Venice. Giuriati would end his career as senator, while Suppiej, after being considered for the Senate, would conclude his political career being nominated president of the *Ente Zolfi Italiani* (Italian Sulphur Agency) in April 1940.<sup>345</sup>

Volpi's declaration many years later to the Biennale of Arts committee meeting of 12 May 1941 was significant. He made this point:

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<sup>342</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>343</sup> ACS, MinCulPop, b.5, Roberto Farinacci to Galeazzo Ciano, 11 October 1934.

<sup>344</sup> ACS, SPD, b.49, Giorgio Suppiej to Benito Mussolini, 6 December 1939.

<sup>345</sup> *Giorgio Suppiej nominato Presidente dell'Ente Zolfi Italiani*, "Il Messaggero", 6 May 1940.



You know well how my one and only goal was always that of reviving my native town. In the period of time between Caporetto and Vittorio Veneto I brought to life the project of Porto Marghera. At present, Marghera counts 107 industries, with a capital investment of about 4-5,000 million lire; it employs 20,000 workers, and given that for any worker there is a family of three, as a consequence Marghera benefits around 60,000 people ....<sup>346</sup>

The coincidence of political and industrial interests, well represented by Volpi, were essential to the development of Marghera. The project of Marghera was seen, firstly by the Liberal government, and then by the regime, to serve national interests of industrialisation and modernisation of the country. For his part, Volpi's primary interest had been his own business and Volpi knew how to relate national politics to local circumstances. The 'question of Marghera' and the industrialisation of Venice city will be discussed in the next chapter; suffice it to say here that Volpi had found political support for his entrepreneurial aspirations in the Fascist regime, regardless of the depths of his ideological commitment. The regime, on the other hand, had found a man capable of expanding Fascism's business and international exposure. Volpi reportedly declared: "It is not my fault if my interests happen to meet those of the State".<sup>347</sup> This raises the question whether he had been ever committed to Fascism's ideology or whether his alignment with Fascism was first and foremost opportunistic, focused on promoting his business interests – a question we will return to below.

This chapter has argued that the regime made strong efforts to organise, through the PNF, an unprecedented numbers of people; yet, it proved incapable of becoming a nationalising force. As demonstrated by the role of Volpi, Fascism did not manage to create a

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<sup>346</sup> As cited in Longo, *Culture, tourism and Fascism in Venice*, 92.

<sup>347</sup> As cited in Distefano-Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, 114.

new fascistised elite of politician and had to rely upon members of the old elite to ensure the control of the periphery. The Venetian case history also demonstrated that the Fascist movement achieved a bureaucratic centralisation of its activities, but it never really managed to resolve the issue of the contest for local power (*beghismo*). Patronage and prestige were what mattered to provincial Fascist Party leaders, especially for those like Volpi who were deeply involved in the economic life of the country. The outcome of the Fascist project was a continuing struggle not only between old and new elites, but also between competing actors such as the prefect and the *federale*, and the conclusion is that the provincial based power of the local Fascism proved to be stronger than any kind of regime's totalitarian attempt of centralisation and nationalisation.

## **2. Protest and repression: the Regime and the Workers' during the period of the Country's Changing Economic Fortunes (1925-1939)**

### **Introduction**

This chapter deals with the destruction of the anti-Fascist organisations and clandestine propaganda between 1925 and 1934 and highlights the degree to which the political police and the other organisations of the state played a crucial role in their repression. This section looks at the regime's strategy to control local anti-Fascism during a period of economic challenges such as the Great Depression (1929-1934). The chapter will examine how the regime dealt with the negative economic conjuncture and show that Mussolini tried to tackle the growing popular dissatisfaction by launching the colonial campaign of Abyssinia in October 1935. By extending our discussion to the year 1937 (the year after the victory in Abyssinia), it will be demonstrated that the victorious military campaign of Abyssinia did not manage to attract significant popular support. In fact, the majority of Venetian people were disappointed with the regime as they could not see any significant material improvements to their everyday lives.

Much of this chapter draws its evidence from the files of the Fascist regime's political police. These files include material from prefects, Interior Ministry officials, police and Party officials, and secret informers, but also 'ordinary' people, private individuals acting as the regime's spies. These sources offer broad temporal, geographical, and social perspectives. Documents reveal how political repression evolved over time in Venice province and how it adjusted its targets in response to the development of local anti-Fascism and dissent. This

chapter will demonstrate how the regime managed to maintain stability through repression and a constant surveillance which was accompanied by manufactured propaganda. In addition, this part of the research will show that people were often not consenting, but had only limited opportunities to express dissatisfaction given the tight control of the regime. What the documents show is that large-scale organised dissent was hampered by the regime's policies of control, repression and, where deemed necessary, violence, which were in this period pursued by the state rather than by the Fascist squads.

## **2.1 Breaking the anti-Fascist network: towards the Fascist State (1925–1931)**

This section describes the regime's campaign to suppress anti-Fascist resistance, that of the Italian Communist Party in particular, and the consequences suffered by those communities. This chapter will focus on the second half of the 1920s until almost the end of the Great Depression in 1932, and will offer an analysis of the evolution of public security legislation.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, between 1925 and 1926, the violence of the Fascist squads still represented a big problem for Mussolini. With Farinacci as Party Secretary in 1925-1926, Mussolini issued laws and created institutions, under the control of the state, able to politically repress any kind of anti-Fascist opposition, whether from Socialists, Communists or Catholics. The repressive activity of the state received a great boost after Mussolini escaped an assassination attempt by the young anarchist Anteo Zamboni in Bologna in October 1926. The government approved a series of 'extraordinary measures' (*misure straordinarie*) in 1926 marking the definitive institutional break with the

Liberal democratic order.<sup>348</sup> The new legislation dissolved all political parties and other anti-Fascist organisations, introduced a new police code and created the Special Tribunal in 1927 which strengthened the police's power to control people, including the use of political confinement and censorship of newspapers. With the reform of public security, Fascist violence had visibly been incorporated into the state machinery. The consequence of the new legislation was that violence remained a central tool in the attempt to spread Fascism as an ideology and political practice, but it continued in different forms under the legitimisation of the state law. Although Mussolini opposed the radicalisation of the movement between 1925 and 1926, he continued to rely upon violence, which remained central to Fascist style, transforming it into 'violence of the State', but with the PNF and MVSN still to playing a critical role. As Michael R. Ebner argued, "the Mussolinian economy of violence that emerged out of the seizure of power represented a synthesis between the dictator's strategy of carefully calibrated state repression and the squadrist ethos for spontaneous punishment of 'internal enemies'" .<sup>349</sup>

The task of implementing emergency legislation and reorganising the police apparatus was largely carried out by Arturo Bocchini. A career Interior Ministry official, Bocchini had served as a prefect of Brescia, Bologna and Genoa between 1922 and 1926. He distinguished himself in the suppression of the left-wing and Catholic organisations in Brescia (1924) and in the breaking of the maritime workers' union in Genoa (1925). Noticed and then recommended by Farinacci and Turati to the Minister of Interior Federzoni for his

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<sup>348</sup> S. Lupo, *Il Fascismo*, 196. See also F. Fucci, *Le polizie di Mussolini, la repressione dell'antifascismo nel Ventennio* (Milano: Mursia, 1985) and B. Dalla Casa, *Attentato al duce. Le molte storie del caso Zamboni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000). See also F. Fucci, *Le polizie di Mussolini, la repressione dell'antifascismo nel Ventennio* (Milano: Mursia, 1985) and B. Dalla Casa, *Attentato al duce. Le molte storie del caso Zamboni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

<sup>349</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 46.

intelligence, energy and administrative ability, Mussolini appointed Bocchini Chief of Police in September 1926.<sup>350</sup> Bocchini introduced strict directives in order to repress opposition and dissent. The two main divisions charged for political repression were the Division of Political Police (*Divisione polizia politica*) and the Division of General and Confidential Affairs (*Divisione affari generali e riservati*). With the total reorganisation of the police under Bocchini and the provincial prefectures through the *leggi Fascistissime* in 1926, the regime institutionalised surveillance of and information gathering on its opponents, with the *polizia politica* gathering information on anti-Fascist movements, PNF members, and public opinion. The regime developed a vast network of spies on citizens' activity, which infiltrated anti-Fascist organisations to watch opponents.<sup>351</sup> Informers and denouncers were an integral part of the repressive apparatus. New research, including that of Mauro Canali and Mimmo Franzinelli, has provided concrete evidence of the structure and inner workings of the OVRA, the Polpol (*polizia politica*), and the political policing offices of the *questure*. Their works reveal the ruthlessness of the police under Fascism, but also that the police relied on the widespread complicity of spies, informers, and 'ordinary Italians' who spontaneously denounced their fellow citizens to police authorities. In particular, this research has provided considerable archival research and a systematic reconstruction of the Fascist political police administration and its network of spies that has been indispensable for historians of Fascism to understand how opponents were watched and to find evidence of the complicity of some anti-Fascists in the system of informing and political repression.<sup>352</sup> In addition, In 1927, Bocchini set up a secret police organisation called OVRA (*Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e*

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<sup>350</sup> For a general overview on Arturo Bocchini, see D. Carafòli, G. Padiglione *Il viceduce: Arturo Bocchini capo della polizia Fascista* (Milan: Mursia, 2003).

<sup>351</sup> See M. Franzinelli, *Delatori: Spie e confidenti: l'arma segreta del regime Fascista* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

<sup>352</sup> M. Franzinelli, *I tentacoli dell'Ovra: agenti, collaboratori e vittime della polizia politica Fascista* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), M. Canali, *Le spie del regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004).

*la Repressione dell'AntiFascismo*). OVRA was assigned to control and stop any anti-Fascist activity. The OVRA became an important tool for Mussolini and his police chief. Not only did it allow them to circumvent the authority of the state and party in the provinces, it also functioned as a secret and elite corps with a cross-functional team provided by the *questure*, *polizia politica* and *carabinieri* which were all collaborating with OVRA and sharing informants and territorial resources.<sup>353</sup> Collaborating with embassies and consulates, OVRA and political police were also active in the major centres of anti-Fascist immigration like Paris, London and Geneva, monitoring anti-Fascist activity abroad and preventing the rebuilding of local cells of anti-Fascism with the return of Communist and socialist leaders to Italy. Neighbouring countries like France and Switzerland were monitored at an early stage (mid-1920s) of the regime due to the large number of exiles and anti-Fascist organisations such as *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom). OVRA recruited their informants from a variety of sectors, but two kinds of informants were largely recruited. Firstly, there were old Socialists and Communists who had been sentenced, to whom the OVRA could offer a plea bargain and amend most of their charges or money in exchange for information. Secondly, they could recruit people from people managing public shops such as bars, pubs and taverns. Most of the bar owners or shop holders received their business permits from the police, but they often had to serve as police informants in exchange.<sup>354</sup>

The information required by the police was not only related to the potential anti-Fascist tendencies or activities of the individual monitored. For the chief of police, prefects, and all the hierarchies involved, it was essential to get a complete biography of the person investigated, criminal records, details about the style of life, personality, any friendship with anti-Fascists or the family situation, because these factors often determined the nature of the

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<sup>353</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 55.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibidem*, 242.

punishment. For example, an individual with no previous record, but described to be with ‘good moral character’ could be treated less harshly than a recalcitrant *sovversivo* with ‘bad moral character’.<sup>355</sup> The worst case scenario available for an anti-Fascist was the *confino di polizia* (police confinement), a sentence which was usually passed by a provincial commission headed by the prefect in the presence of the police chief, senior officers from *carabinieri* and MVSN and a magistrate (*procuratore del re*). Only occasionally, the *federale* would join the commission.<sup>356</sup> This would happen when the denunciation came from the Party or the Party itself was involved with any of its members. The commission met when, following an arrest, the police chief presented the request of *confino* supported by the result of the *questura*’s investigation. The prefect would sentence someone to *confino* when the individual was involved in collective anti-Fascist activity (*nuclei di officina* or *nuclei di strada*). Although the measures were applied widely in the first years, Mussolini was concerned that foreign governments and domestic forces would perceive the Fascist style of rule as exceedingly authoritarian. Moreover, Mussolini was mindful not to make anti-Fascism appear to be a mass phenomenon by deporting thousands of Italians.<sup>357</sup> To reinforce this impression of clemency, individual and general amnesties, far more common were the individual acts of clemency and the general amnesties were granted by Mussolini on Fascist anniversaries or on the occasion of important events. This was a more long-term practice which fitted well with Mussolini’s strategy to deliver a conciliatory image of Fascism with examples well into the 1930s, such as the amnesty conceded on 25 September 1934 for more than 10,000 prisoners. The occasion was the birth of the eldest daughter of Umberto II of Italy and Marie-José of Belgium on 24 September 1934. In Venice Province, the amnesty was welcomed with pleasure by those detained for political crimes. As the police reported,

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<sup>355</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 58.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibidem*, 60.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibidem*, 61.



someone was found singing on the street “long life to the princess, long life to the prince who has provided us with a great thing by releasing prisoners like me”.<sup>358</sup> More pragmatically, the worker Antonio Nascimben, employed at the shipyard Breda in Marghera, was hoping that when “the princess finally gives birth to the ‘calf’, all the traffic penalties will expire due to the amnesty”.<sup>359</sup>

The role of the PNF and the MVSN in repressing dissent and anti-Fascism has been controversial. Unlike the Nazi regime, where the state was progressively ‘Nazified’, Mussolini normalised the Party and put it under the control of the state. The normalisation of the squads proceeded with their integration into a formal military structure which reported directly to Mussolini, with the aim to control the autonomy and the violence of the *squadristi*. Mussolini “was unable to renounce the militia as a tangible and living sign of the permanence of the Fascist revolution and its attributes of bellicose virility.”<sup>360</sup> Despite some examples of activity against the regime’s opponents, the MVSN never developed into a Fascist political police like the Nazi SS. Most of the MVSN reserve force was inactive, its members living as simple civilians. In addition, militiamen benefited from their membership with regards to discounted rail travel, free public transportation, and free admission to public facilities.<sup>361</sup> Curtailed by the late 1920s, the MVSN continued to conduct its own political monitoring through provincial investigative offices (UPI) responsible for recruiting informers and pursuing investigations into people, but the UPIs reported to the police chief in order to formally imprison and charge a suspect. In extraordinary cases, the MVSN were authorised to use force and take the suspect to the militia command in a form of pre-detention. The PNF

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<sup>358</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Police Chief to the Minister of Interior, 18 July 1934.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>360</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 67.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibidem*, 68.

also conducted monitoring and intelligence activities. The surveillance from the Party increased in the 1930s alongside Storace's project to fascistise Italy. Starting from 1935 the PNF could count on the Capillary Investigative Units (*Organizzazioni capillare investigativa*), which operated at a local level with the intent to monitor suspects (inside and outside the Party) and receive denunciations and complaints from citizens. While the PNF and MVSN had an ambiguous and collateral role within this repressive state apparatus, Mussolini invested the Interior Ministry and its political police with enormous power. This meant that, after Mussolini's normalisation of the Party, Italians who had experienced the violence of the Fascist squads were now subjected to even more powerful terrorism coming directly from the state.

## **2.2 The Destruction of the Anti-Fascist Communities**

This section will deal with the situation of daily surveillance and intimidation of opponents created by the state police after Mussolini's speech of 3 January 1925 in which he took responsibility for the murder of the socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti. This part of the research will show how Fascists destroyed the dense anti-Fascist socio-cultural network of the province of Venice and how the members of the anti-Fascist parties (predominantly the workers' parties) initially repulsed this attack. In fact, in Venice, as well as in the rest of Italy, the anti-Fascists tried to keep the fight alive by entering the world of underground resistance. In addition, we will demonstrate how the development of restrictive police measures was also beneficial to the regime's implementation of the Fascist corporatist system.

After the promulgation of the new legislation on public security, the most important anti-Fascist leaders were arrested. The experiences of the leaders and militants of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) during the years from 1926 to 1934 reveal the difficulties of

organising an effective resistance to the regime. Well before 1926, the Fascist squads and police had dismantled most of the major anti-Fascist parties and movements – Socialists, Republicans, Catholics, Liberal democrats. The exceptional decrees then enabled the regime to complete the task by repressing the remnants of such groups within a few months. In some provinces of Italy like Venice, the anti-Fascist movement proved to be more resistant. Differently from other areas of Italy, where the anti-Fascist movement was completely disabled before 1926, in Venice province, the major workers' organisations such as the Communist Party (PCI), the Socialist Party (PSI), the Republican Party, *Italia Libera* society, and the Italian Federation of Workers (FILIL) were still active in September 1925 even if well-downsized in term of numbers.<sup>362</sup>

The situation worsened immediately after fifteen-year-old Anteo Zamboni's failed assassination attempt on Mussolini in October 1926.<sup>363</sup> Among the anti-Fascists, only the Communists would manage to survive and rebuild in subsequent years, although PCI leaders, cadres, and militants were arrested and prosecuted. The Ministry of the Interior had already been informed in December 1925 by the MVSN High Command that the "new Communist systems of organisation ... [were] corresponding to the lines and directives drawn in the last V Congress of the Third International held in Moscow in March of the current year".<sup>364</sup> The prefect of Venice Iginio Coffari reported that although the local Communist Party was being dissolved at the behest of the *Questura* and with the prefecture decree of 15 January 1925, it was to be believed that the Venetian section was still in existence but without having stable

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<sup>362</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect Ignio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 11 September 1925.

<sup>363</sup> P. Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano: Gli anni della clandestinità* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), 60. Turin experienced the higher number of arrests (300). Venice proved to be an important location which the government targeted jailing around 100 Communists. Other significant arrest followed in Chioggia in 1927 after the promulgation of the new legislation.

<sup>364</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, 8 December 1925, MVSN to Minister of Interior.

headquarters and without organising official meetings.<sup>365</sup> The prefect's note was not limited to a general observation of what was happening. He was also able to inform the Minister about the names of the major Venetian Communist leaders like Ignio Borin. Borin was sent to confinement to Favignana island (near Sicily) in 1926 and then to Ponza island and Ventotene after 1937. Borin would remain in Ventotene until 1943, and when released, he would join the resistance in Venice, being the partisan leader of the 'First Brigade Gramsci' against the Germans in the area of Chioggia and Riviera del Brenta.<sup>366</sup> The repression of the anti-Fascist organisations was pursued by the *fascistissimo* prefect Iginio Coffari who was appointed in 1925 under Farinacci in order to replace Angelo Pesce, the Neapolitan prefect who had been accused in 1922, as prefect of Naples, of being an 'anti-Fascist' and still belonging to the Giolittean era of bureaucrats.<sup>367</sup>

The Venetian prefecture was a fundamental element of the fascist system of repression at local level. Thanks to the prefecture, the Fascist government came to know that the workers' parties, in particular the Communist Party, had abandoned the territorial movement based on public propaganda. Given that the regime put the Communists outside the law, they replaced the traditional system with one based on clandestine propaganda relying upon cells based in factories (*cellule di officina*) and shops (*cellule di strada*) in order to safeguard the movement.<sup>368</sup> Therefore, in Venice province, most of these activities were not conducted in permanent headquarters, but instead, major socialists' and Communists' meetings took place

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<sup>365</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Ministry of Interior, 28 May 1926.

<sup>366</sup> For a biographic profile of Iginio Borin, see Donne e Uomini della Resistenza, 'Iginio Borin', <http://www.anpi.it/donne-e-uomini/2408/igino-borin> (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>367</sup> For an overview about Angelo Pesce, see G. Padulo, *Un prefetto conservatore (1909 - 1925): Angelo Pesce*, in *Annali dell'Istituto italiano per gli studi storici*, VI (1979 - 1980), 299-315.

<sup>368</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 8 December 1925.

on militants' boats at sea, and occasionally inside shops of local supporters.<sup>369</sup> As a secret informer's note reported, the Communist re-organisation of the cells was promoted by Moscow and it included a structure based on a triangular figure. This meant the cell had to be built on a minimum number of three people with a cell leader (secretary). Each member of the triangular cell was obliged to find two other people to create another cell to be linked to the main one (see the picture attached). Each secretary of the cell was responsible for the functioning of the cell itself. The cell (triangle) which was the seed of subsidiary ones, had more political responsibility than those that originated from it. In addition, the system had to satisfy the following conditions: secrecy, proliferation and the prevention of identification by the police. According to the informer, the system was effective in the Balkans, but it possessed notorious deficiencies due to the over-exaggerated hierarchical reporting line. In Italy, this system proved to be efficient and met the requirements requested by Lev Kamenev for the worldwide organisation of the Communist movement.<sup>370</sup> As confirmed by the prefect in September 1925, the Venetian Communist Party had embraced a Russian brand of Communism by clandestinely establishing permanent subversive Communist cells within the metallurgical factories of the City of Venice. Therefore, Communist fiduciaries could still propagandise "among the mass of workers with the scope of proselytising and raising funds for 'red assistance' and Communist newspapers".<sup>371</sup> The new Venetian clandestine Communist sections merged with the youth group called Karl Marx and in some cases, took over leadership. This was not unusual. With each wave of arrests, new, often younger militants stepped up to take the place of jailed comrades. Between 1925 and 1926 the Venetian Communist opposition was deprived of its major leaders: Elia Musatti, Giacinto Serratti and Girolamo Li Causi fled the province, while Riccardo Ravagnan and Iginio Perini

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<sup>369</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect to Minister of Interior, 11 September 1925.

<sup>370</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 111, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 8 December 1925.

<sup>371</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect to Minister of Interior, 11 September 1925.

escaped to France, and Iginio Borin was sent to confinement. The left-wing parties were greatly thinned not only by the departure of the major Communist leaders, but also by the confinement of the major revolutionary socialist leaders, like Angelo Galeno who was very active among farmers and metal workers. Galeno had managed to establish socialist cells in the metallurgical factories of Giudecca and Marghera (Breda), which meant that the socialist fiduciaries of FIOM (the left-wing trade union of metal workers) could still spread propaganda to convince the workers to leave the national Fascist Trade Unions and return to the 'red' Confederation of Workers (CGIL).<sup>372</sup>

As the left-wing British newspaper *The New Leader* reported in the article 'Party of Matteotti rallies against Fascism', "the cavalry of [the Italian] working-classes is more than ever the painful reality which agonizes the world and which no political party which claims to be Socialist, can ever forget".<sup>373</sup> From 1926, the patterns of repression established during six years of squad violence continued under the police state, especially directed at the destruction of the working-class. The police activity of monitoring anti-Fascist organisations was even more intense as Venice was located near the border with the Yugoslavia, with the necessity not only to monitor Communist propaganda, but also to oppose the irredentist Yugoslav movement.<sup>374</sup>

The emergency decrees of 1926 marked the definitive institutional rupture between the Liberal constitutional order and the new Fascist police state. The public security code curtailed individual rights and subordinated them to the interests of the state. The new law gave the state authorities the right to intervene in an unlimited series of public and private

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<sup>372</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>373</sup> *Party of Matteotti rallies against Fascism*, "The New Leader", 1 May 1926.

<sup>374</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Ministry of Interior, 9 May 1925.

situations in order to align people with the Fascist ideology. This means that police could aggressively control vast sectors of people's lives such as popular opinion, economic activities, employment, and other areas of national life. Documents related to the file *Associazioni per provincia 1926-1934* for the Venice province provide us with an interesting insight of the wide activity in which the police apparatus was involved. The political police monitored a large number of *associazioni* (associations), charities and ex-combatants' groups possessing local political influence or deeply involved in Venetian politics. With regards to Venice, the personnel of the *questura* censored mail, recruited informants, performed interrogations, made arrests, monitored the Fascist Party and labour syndicates, conducted surveillance on suspects and ex-political detainees. Yet, the prefect and *questore* needed approval from Rome to sentence an individual to confinement; police could arrest, detain, and assign political probation without any authorisation from a court or the Interior Ministry in Rome. The new legislation increased the control over the press and therefore it was not unusual that even the Venetian *Circolo della Stampa* (Press Club), led by Gino Damerini, the filofascist director of *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, was subjected to meticulous control of the prefect after 1927.<sup>375</sup> The deputy president of this circle was Giuseppe Toffano, a first hour Fascist, and most of the members were pro-Fascist; but this seems not to have been enough to avoid monitoring by the police. An even clearer example that the new regime had no inhibitions in prosecuting even high-ranking officials and Fascists with considerable credentials was that the newly appointed Minister of Finance, Giuseppe Volpi, was under investigation as President of the Venetian section of the Rotary Club. The prefecture could rely upon the full list of members who were described by the prefect as notable members of the Fascist Party (with the exception of the American consul James Barclay Young and the English man Alan Napier). As reported by the document, the Venetian *rotarini*, (members of

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<sup>375</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 8 December 1927.

the Rotary Club) used to meet at the Hotel Danieli every Tuesday in order to discuss local and national industrial and commercial affairs as they predominantly belonged to the economic elite which owned interests in the most important commercial and maritime industries of Venice and Italy.<sup>376</sup> The shadow of the regime not only covered the anti-Fascist organisations and eminent personalities, but also a variety of crucial sectors of the Venetian life such as irredentism and culture. To confirm this, the documents clearly show that the regime was following all the local major organisations formed by former veterans and irredentists like the association of War volunteers<sup>377</sup> and the local Pro-Dalmatia association which had been joined by former veterans, Libyan volunteers, *arditi* and Fascist students.<sup>378</sup> Culture was not to avoid the monitoring of the regime and groups of intellectuals such as the *Circolo della Fiamma* managed by the Fascist student Francesco Pasinetti, who would be later known as a pioneer in the study of the history of cinema, were subjected to surveillance.<sup>379</sup>

The breaking of the anti-Fascist organisations and communities was not purely pursued for political reason. It also supported the Fascist reform of the labour market initiated in October 1925 with the Pact of the Vidoni Palace which was signed between Fascist workers syndicates and the regime. The pact completely changed the perspective of the anti-Fascist resistance. According to the new laws the only legal way of representing workers was through the Fascist trade unions. Although there was no legal obligation on the part of the workers to join them, the reality was that they were still obliged to pay union fees and agree with the unions' decisions, despite the fact that the leaders did not represent the workers, but

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<sup>376</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 25 February 1928.

<sup>377</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 6 January 1929.

<sup>378</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 31 May 1929.

<sup>379</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 12 August 1930.



instead were often members of the upper class and ideologically aligned to Fascism.<sup>380</sup> In addition, as we will see in the following section of this chapter, the political significance of the workers' movement was further curtailed by the abolition of the right to strike and a restrictive Fascist-enforced wage policy.

The purpose of this legislation was to further weaken the working class, but also to launch off the ground the Fascist corporative system. The 1926 syndical legislation was not crucial in launching off the Fascist system which fervent corporatists such as Giuseppe Bottai, Junior Minister of the Corporations, had conceived as a unitary body able to manage and coordinate all the parties involved in production, from the employers to the workers and the managerial staff.<sup>381</sup> In fact, the corporatist system was greatly developed only in response to the Great Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s as the non-Communist alternative to the state of crisis. The regime implemented the plan initiated in 1926 with the creation of the National Council of Corporations in 1930. The Council of Corporations grouped employers and workers' representativeness in order to discuss the main areas of the economy and had them represented on an executive Central Corporative Committee.

The Fascist syndicate certainly contributed to the monitoring of workers and to the denunciation of all those workers who were members of the subversive network. However, the campaign to break the anti-Fascist network was made very difficult in those areas of Italy where numbers of ordinary people hostile to Fascism were offering support to opposition activities. Resistance was common in areas which had been involved in defending their communities with the *Arditi del popolo* and setting up barricades and taking arms against the Fascist squads during the *Biennio Rosso* (1919-1920). The establishment of the dictatorship

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<sup>380</sup> C. Giordano, G. Piga, G. Trovato, 'Fascist price and wage policies, and Italy's industrial Great Depression' in *Macroeconomics Dynamics* (2004), 689-720.

<sup>381</sup> Morgan, "The Party is Everywhere", 86.

meant the persecution of those communities where a general subversive tradition persisted. In Venice city, for example, the Fascist efforts were directed at controlling the quarters of S. Polo, S. Croce, Castello and Giudecca, in which the families had been sympathetic to Socialism and had formed an invaluable stronghold for the socialist resistance during the *Biennio Rosso*. These communities continued to help the anti-Fascist movement in secret, providing Communists and socialists with support (*soccorso rosso*). It was in these quarters of Venice that red flags and anti-Fascist slogans like ‘Abbasso Mussolini’ (Down with Mussolini!), ‘Viva il Comunismo’ (Hurrah for Communism!) and ‘Viva la Russia’ (Hurrah for Russia!) were still being intercepted by the police.<sup>382</sup>

The regime focused also on destroying all those workers’ organisations which represented a source of economic financing and fund-raising for the anti-Fascists, in particular for the Communist Party. For instance, the prefect of Venice reported that the well-known Communist Arturo Brustolon, administrator of the syndicate of wood workers, was jailed because he financed a strike in Verona in 1926 with the funds of the syndicate.<sup>383</sup> Another example is the syndicate for construction workers which had to support its members during periods of unemployment and sickness. The syndicate was formed of:

... people belonging to the ranks of Communists and maximalist socialists. ... [The syndicate] counts on 350 members and the president, a Communist propagandist, frequently meets the members and he delivers, in defiance of the *questura*, Communist propaganda which is really harmful for the workers, especially for the *sestrieri* of S. Polo and S. Croce. The Communist MP Iginio Borin has joined this organisation.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> See ACS, DGPS, b. 178, b.170, b.334, b.8, b.7, b.10.

<sup>383</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 3 February 1926.

<sup>384</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 15 April 1925.

In certain quarters of Venice city, the subversive tradition was never completely eradicated, but only destroyed in its official forms like the workers' unions. As Ebner argued, the 'breaking of the anti-Fascist communities' sometimes had to pass through an urban redevelopment of the workers' quarters in order to destroy bonds of class solidarity.<sup>385</sup> Venice represented one of the most significant examples of this strategy. The occasion was presented by the development of the new industrial district of Marghera. Between 1920 and 1945 the port of Marghera experienced large-scale industrialisation within a short time that established a populous factory proletariat in an area where none had existed earlier. Although the plans had been set up during the Liberal era, the above-mentioned transformation indeed occurred during the period of the Fascist regime. According to the original plans, the scheme for Marghera would have meant drawing on Venetian skilled workers employed in the major factories of the city centre, those situated in the popular red quarters of Castello and Giudecca. Most had taken part in the *Biennio Rosso*. Under the clever direction of Giuseppe Volpi, the industrialists manoeuvred to recruit the overwhelming majority of their workforce among members of the Venetian peasantry as they wanted to hire people with no experience of class struggle whatsoever. As a result, only the fertiliser plants of Breda and Montecatini employed workers coming from the city centre, but the most combative elements, the former *Arsenalotti* (workers of the *Arsenale*) were very much a minority of the work force working in Marghera during the period 1924-1945. Industrialists, alongside the Fascist minister of Finance Volpi, did not provide strongholds of what was perceived to be 'old subversives' with any opportunities to preserve their communities and continue their ideological resistance.<sup>386</sup> Although repression was the main means to disrupt workers' networks, in

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<sup>385</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 82.

<sup>386</sup> See M. Reberschak, "Gli uomini capitali: il 'gruppo veneziano' (Volpi, Cini e gli altri)", [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

Marghera, the government adopted the alternative method of the physical separation of the working-class community and the recruitment of a new working class. Industrialists and government took great care to ensure to employ adaptable, consistent, and disciplined people by hiring peasant men and women from the rural hinterland. Peasants commuted between factories and fields. This meant that they remained closely tied with the land, lived in essentially rural settings, and retained a moderately rural mentality and culture.<sup>387</sup> In addition, the production system of the new factories in Marghera was based on the division between skilled and unskilled labour, which exposed workers to a high turnover and did not allow them to form a homogeneous and cohesive mass of workers.<sup>388</sup> The new system implemented in Marghera isolated the old subversives, causing ideological disorientation within the local working class, and above all, it also triggered a feeling of resignation among them. Red flags, graffiti, and other symbols still occasionally appeared in Venice, but the police and local Fascists were quickly able to identify the authors and repress such behaviour.<sup>389</sup> Consequently, the working class was temporarily neutralised as a political force. Some members of the older generation attempted to keep the fight alive, but the overwhelming majority of the workers, especially those ones of the ‘new generation’, had become largely immune to the influence of the *Biennio Rosso*.<sup>390</sup> Reconstituting the PCI network after 1931 became difficult, as the social cohesion of Venice disintegrated and ordinary people, who disliked the regime and sympathised with the PCI (even if they were not formally affiliated with it), felt constantly harassed and controlled. However, after operating as an underground

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<sup>387</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>388</sup> R. Bessel, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: comparisons and contrasts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54.

<sup>389</sup> Many of examples can be found in ACS, DGPS, b. 7, b.8, b.10, b.17, b.19, b.23.

<sup>390</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 9 February 1926. At the end of the 1920s, despite Fascist surveillance, the Communist Party was still vigorous even if under the permanent and constant control of the police authority. The other parties, apparently disoriented, were more subservient to the Fascist laws.

organisation for several years, the Communist Party had managed to develop a robust clandestine network. Approximately 1,000 Communists were in captivity, however the Central Committee calculated that, as of May 1927, about 5,000 militants were still operating effectively within the region.<sup>391</sup>

### **2.3 The Effectiveness of Fascist Policy from the Great Depression to the End of the Abyssinian War (1929-1937)**

So far we have concentrated primarily on working class repression. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the reactions of the population to the economic and social policies the regime was implementing. The period we have been looking at here — from broadly 1929–30 until 1937, the year that followed the victory of the war of Abyssinia in May 1936 — corresponds to the period that Renzo De Felice defined as the ‘years of consensus’. For De Felice the regime was not facing consistent problems which could undermine its existence.<sup>392</sup> We can generally agree with De Felice’s statement. However, this interpretation requires a great deal of qualification which clearly involves an understanding of the nature of this supposed consensus. We have chosen this time frame to check how the Great Depression affected Italians, what the government did to help, how the regime controlled people, and to verify if the victorious Abyssinian campaign constituted a mean of propaganda to convey mass support at local level.

The main problem faced by historians when looking at a dictatorial regime is to know how many voluntarily accepted the legitimacy of the regime itself. In a dictatorship opinions are never freely expressed, free discussion is restricted and power is achieved and maintained

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<sup>391</sup> Ebner, *Ordinary Violence*, 75.

<sup>392</sup> R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*. Vol. I: *Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

through violence. Therefore, it was crucial that the regime should indoctrinate Italians through propaganda about the positive results achieved by the dictatorship and make sure that the population reacted positively to it. Mandatory involvement in the regime's activity could not be avoided and people were obliged to cooperate with the regime. If necessary, they had to behave as 'true believers'. But what kind of feeling was the secret police able to capture at local level? The main mood of the population was a general apathy and tiredness provoked by the regime's protocols of regimentation, rather than a popular consensus that would imply a favourable attitude towards the local Party. It is possible to see an initial sense of growing disjunction around 1929-30. Despite Mussolini's apparent success and the elaborate propaganda machinery portraying him in heroic terms, the experiences of the population at the time were far removed from the images of Italy's greatness and success. Discontent was linked to the Party and often to the economic crisis (Great Depression) which was gripping Italy as well as most parts of Europe. The crisis developed in Italy after the revaluation of the lira in 1926-7 and worsened the Italian economy until the Wall Street crisis of 1929, reaching its peak in 1931. Living standards of the working class started declining only in the middle of the Great Depression, but they had been deteriorating since the imposition of the new exchange rate *Quota Novanta* in 1927.<sup>393</sup> With the establishment of the new currency rate the Fascist economy needed the systematic support of banks to supply defaulting companies and factories with financial backup.<sup>394</sup> The new exchange rate *Quota 90* meant adjustments in national wages and the inflation increased.<sup>395</sup> Workers were compelled to accept a significant decline in real wages in 1927 and 1930. The regime's measures to cut salaries particularly affected women's salaries, to which the government imposed a drastic 50 % reduction in

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<sup>393</sup> P. Corner, *Riformismo e fascismo. L'Italia fra il 1900 e il 1940* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2002), 171-172. For the economic examination of the period see V. Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy 1860-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 243-271.

<sup>394</sup> Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy*, 298.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibidem*, 252.

1927.<sup>396</sup> Reductions in wages, high cost of living, and unemployment provoked a pearl workers' strike in Venice in 1927;<sup>397</sup> and in the spring of the same year the attempt from a group of unemployed women of Chioggia to occupy the headquarters of the local council.<sup>398</sup> Female employment was often portrayed negatively in Fascist propaganda and was singled out as one of the main causes of men's poor employment prospects.<sup>399</sup> According to Mussolini, work was essentially for men and he considered it as the root cause of women becoming sterile.<sup>400</sup> The regime's attempt to ban women from work was in order to restrict middle class women's access to intellectual and public employment – with the specific aim of re-establishing the gender hierarchies broken down during the First World War.<sup>401</sup> These policies were also motivated by the perceived necessity to increase the Italian birth rate. While boys would be educated to become Fascist warriors, girls would grow up to be Fascist mothers. With this aim, Mussolini introduced the 'Battle for Births' alongside all the other similar 'economic battles'. As Carl Ipsen stated, the Battle for Births had to demonstrate

to the world Italy's relative youth and virility, its demographic advantage relative to France, Britain, and Germany. The examples of rapidly-growing Slavic and US populations instead posed a double threat and source of concern. Evidently Mussolini's policy had come just in time to arrest a process of demographic decline (first as a result of emigration and then lower

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<sup>396</sup> For the condition of women under Fascism see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism ruled women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>397</sup> M. R. Cutrufelli, *Il Novecento delle italiane: una storia ancora da raccontare* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2001), 87.

<sup>398</sup> T. Agostini-R. Ianuale, *Serenissime. Viaggio nel Veneto delle donne* (Portogruaro: NuovaDimensione, 1999), 19.

<sup>399</sup> On female work conditions under Fascism, see P. Willson, *Peasant women and politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie rurali* (New York: Routledge, 2002); P. Willson, *The clockwork factory: women and work in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>400</sup> Bosworth, *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, 205.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibidem*.

fertility) that had already begun. Only time would reveal the ultimate futility of that policy.<sup>402</sup>

In fact, the regime's birth rate campaign did not produce the expected results.<sup>403</sup> Unlike the Battle for Grain or the Land Reclamation Campaign (*bonifiche*), which were considered to be moderately successful, the Campaign for Births was a failure. Marriage rates remained constant during Mussolini's regime, and birth rates decreased until 1936, after which there was a modest increase.<sup>404</sup> In addition, while women were expected to stay at home, raising large numbers of children as part of a 'patriotic mission', Fascism could not prevent them from finding employment as they had done in Liberal Italy. Women were found in a wide range of occupations, but predominantly in domestic work. In Venice, women were employed in domestic service, but also in industry such the pearl manufacturing, the clothing industry and artisanal shops.<sup>405</sup> During the interwar period female employment saw only a partial decline, clearly ascribable to the economic crisis and the high number of dismissals that hit the female workforce.<sup>406</sup> It is also surprising to record strikes promoted by women<sup>407</sup> in a province where employed women had been committed to Catholic and conservative organisations, totally adverse to class struggle.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> C. Ipsen, 'Under the Stats of Fascism: The Italian Population Projections of 1929-31', in *Popolazione e storia*, 1(2002), 95-111, 108.

<sup>403</sup> On the 'birth rate campaign' of Fascism see C. Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and M. Minesso, *Welfare e minori: L'Italia nel contest europeo del Novecento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2011).

<sup>404</sup> A. Caporali, A. Golini, 'Births and Fertility in Interwar Italy: Trends, Images, Policies and Perception', in *Population Review*, 49, 2(2010), 30-46.

<sup>405</sup> See Appendix 5 – Population per economic sector (Table 1)

<sup>406</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 31 May 1930.

<sup>407</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 19 December 1931.

<sup>408</sup> Bessell, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, 45. The situation was similar to that portrayed Anna Cento Bull for the case of the province of Bergamo in A. Cento Bull, *Capitalismo e Fascismo di fronte alla crisi: industria e società bergamasca, 1923-1937* (Bergamo: Associazione editoriale il filo di Arianna, 1983). For the study of the



The Great Depression led also to the collapse of the Italian bank system and the crisis involved those major banks which were extensively involved in rescuing Italian industry. Between 1930 and 1931, the two major Italian banks, the *Credito Italiano* the *Banca Commerciale*, were declared insolvent. There was a substantial degree of tension inside the government as the regime saw the *Banca Commerciale* as the major source of investments for the country.<sup>409</sup> The crisis also involved the Venetian local banking system which was predominantly based on member-owned financial cooperatives (Catholic and not), controlled by its members which operated for the purpose of promoting savings and providing credit at competitive rates and other financial services such as health insurance or pensions. The idea behind the cooperative banks was not only to provide credit, but also to promote the development of the local community. For this reason, there was a high degree of cooperation between these institutions and their members. The Venetian case is interesting as the general crisis of the national bank system almost led to the collapse of some important Venetian cooperative banks. For example, the debt of the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* (ONC) was restructured by the regime.<sup>410</sup> The safeguarding of the ONC's credit was particularly important for the regime as many of its ex-combatant members had joined Fascism in its early days. The organisation was principally focused on the re-placement of the army veterans into the labour market, providing them with mortgages and insurances at favourable prices. For instance, the ONC was able to provide training to army veterans, and various initiatives in the field of land reclamation and agricultural financial assistance.<sup>411</sup>

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catholic women movement in Venice see L.Gazzetta, *Cattoliche durante il Fascismo: ordine sociale e organizzazioni femminili nelle Venezie* (Rome: Viella, 2011).

<sup>409</sup> H. James- K. O'Rourke, 'Italy and the First Age of Globalization, 1861-1940', in *Quaderni di Storia Economica*, 16(2011), 18.

<sup>410</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 220, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 27 December 1925.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibidem*.

With regard to the major local credit institutes, the situation was problematic. The *Banca Popolare Cooperativa* of Chioggia opted for a merger with the large national bank institute *Banca Nazionale del Lavoro*. The decision was taken as with the progressing of the crisis and the spreading news of a possible collapse of the bank, the account holders were withdrawing their money, closing their accounts.<sup>412</sup> In 1930, the Venetian *Cassa di Risparmio* had to refund the account holders for an overall amount of 12,895.000 lire, closing 981 accounts and experiencing a total loss of 18 million lire. Rumours about the potential collapse of the *Credito Veneto e Polesano* convinced the fishermen of Chioggia to close all their accounts.<sup>413</sup> By December 1930 the *Credito Veneto* had already sold its investments portfolio and converted its debt to promissory notes.<sup>414</sup> The wide local Catholic financial network was not immune from the crisis and most of the local Catholic credit cooperatives were close to collapse. Only the direct intervention of the government prevented the default of the Catholic *Banca delle Tre Venezie*, as its collapse would have brought “incalculable consequences to the economy of the city”.<sup>415</sup> In addition to the rescue of the Italian banks, the regime was involved in several industrial recovery operations. The most important for the province of Venice was that one which led the telecommunications company Telve to be acquired by the national *Banca Commerciale*, traditionally affiliated to Volpi’s group.<sup>416</sup> After the experience of the Great Depression, which involved the government in numerous industrial recovery activities, the regime decided to create the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI), an Italian public holding established in 1933 in order to rescue, restructure, and fund defaulting banks and companies.<sup>417</sup> The regime’s response to the Great Depression and the collapse of

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<sup>412</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 220, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 25 January 1931.

<sup>413</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, ACS, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 7 January 1931.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>415</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 27 November 1930.

<sup>416</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.220, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 6 July 1932.

<sup>417</sup> See V. Lutz, *Italy: A Study in Economic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

the Italian banking system was interesting for a series of reasons. Firstly, Italy was one of the countries most committed to the Gold Standard, even in the presence of a chronic balance of payments deficit. Secondly, industrial relations were governed by a corporatist system controlled by the regime. Thirdly, the corporative system and the systematic intervention of the state, favoured the positive management of the panics and bank runs that characterised the American bank system and that of other countries in Central Europe.<sup>418</sup>

The Great Depression represented both an opportunity and a test for the regime; and within the Italian scenario, the Venice Province presents an interesting case history. Although the regime was relatively successful in bank salvages, providing a distinctively original response to the crisis, conversely it was rather inefficient in tackling unemployment. The unemployment rate doubled between April 1930 and April 1931. In 1931, the number of people unemployed reached a peak of 23,000. The city of Venice contributed with an overall number of 14,000 unemployed workers which amounted to 60.8 percent of the total number for the province. Unemployment became so severe during the Great Depression that it required extensive security measures such as detaining workers in temporary camps in Marghera.<sup>419</sup> As Fabrizio Mattesini argued, “the intense deflationary process .... was not followed by a complete adjustment of nominal variables. This was true especially for wages .... This nominal rigidity was partially responsible for the output contraction”.<sup>420</sup> Research on the Great Depression suggests “that increasing barriers to trade, together with real wage rigidities, can explain a large proportion of the economic downturn experienced by Italy at

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<sup>418</sup> F. Mattesini, ‘Italy and the Great Depression: An Analysis of the Italian Economy, 1929–1936’, in *Explorations in Economic History*, 34(1997), 265-294, 266.

<sup>419</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 8 March 1931 and ACS, DGPS, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 31 May 1930.

<sup>420</sup> Mattesini, *Italy and the Great Depression*, 282.

the beginning of the 1930s”.<sup>421</sup>

During the period of the Great Depression the regime was unable to tackle unemployment consistently and the crisis could potentially trigger the re-formation of Communist cells in the industrial factories. The period of the most robust clandestine anti-Fascist activity in Italy was from 1930 to 1933 when the effects of the Great Depression provoked widespread social unrest. In this period there were a number of trials of anti-Fascist individuals and groups, including those in Venice. On a number of occasions, the old generation of *sovversivi*, the small ‘nucleo’ (nucleus) at the Breda factory in Marghera, which had led the workers’ movement during the ‘*Biennio Rosso*’, tried to prompt the younger generation to demonstrate. An example can be found in December 1930, when an ‘old subversive’ (words of the writer) led 300 unemployed industrial workers of Marghera to Mestre in order to protest against the regime and only the intervention of the police managed to block them.<sup>422</sup>

Although agricultural production was not affected as significantly as industrial production by the Great Depression, agricultural labourers also displayed similar discontent towards the regime’s policies and this involved specific criticism of the Fascist syndicates. A clear example of criticism towards the Fascist syndicates was provided by a document which recounted the attempt made by the Venetian fiduciary of the Fascist Agrarian Syndicate, Vincenzo Bortoluzzi, to avoid the land expropriation of a local tenant, Edmondo Bodi in the island of Cavallino in June 1930. The expropriation was announced after Bodi was found guilty of having broken contractual conditions by not paying the rent for the land. Local

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<sup>421</sup> F. Perri, ‘The Great Depression in Italy: Trade Restrictions and Real Wage Rigidities’, <http://fperri.net/papers/italyall.pdf> (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>422</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 9 December 1930.

syndicates had previously denounced the high rate of the contracts that the *Società Agricola del Cavallino* had imposed on its local tenants; and the local community of tenants consisting of around 500 tenants had repeatedly protested in order to adjust their agreement with the company. When Bortoluzzi arrived at the place to support the instances of the local tenants, he found them openly expressing their hostility towards the police and the *Società Agricola del Cavallino*. Even though Bortoluzzi requested that intervention of the national secretary of the Fascist Agrarian Syndicate, Luigi De Castri, could intervene, the Venetian fiduciary was dismissed with the accusation of exhorting farmers to complain against the company without supporting the intervention of the police.<sup>423</sup> This example shows how weak the position of the Fascist syndicate was with regard to negotiations with employers. During the Fascist regime, employers used to bypass syndicates, being aware that Mussolini was not inclined to break his alliance with industrialists and the business supporters of the regime.<sup>424</sup> The general picture given by Fascist syndicates was that they tried to implement 'class collaboration', disrupting collective solidarity in order to prevent the re-formation of a large workers' network. Between 1926 and 1928 Fascist syndicates made also an attempt to denounce the abuses committed by employers, but they never managed to establish themselves as a serious stakeholder to counterbalance the predominant role of the employers in negotiations and labour affairs. In addition, employers and the Fascist Party never intended to allow the re-establishment of a strong labour organisation, and therefore the role of the Fascist syndicate was essentially focused on exercising surveillance over workers.

The intention behind Fascist agricultural policy was that the regime wanted to reduce the

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<sup>423</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.334, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 5 June 1930.

<sup>424</sup> For the history of the Fascist trade unions, see D. D. Roberts, *The Syndacalst Tradition and Italian Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) and F. Cordova, *Le origini dei sindacati fascisti* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1990).

predominance of farm labourers in the countryside throughout Italy in favour of sharecropping. However, with regards to the province of Venice, Fascist agricultural laws did not solve the problem of the massive presence of day labourers. In some depressed areas such as Cavarzere and Cona, the Fascist legislation that increased the contracted power of employers, still favoured internal migration of day labourers looking for better working conditions and higher wages.<sup>425</sup> Mussolini did not make immediate changes to the institutional framework of Italian agriculture, and despite the passing of an act in 1923 concerning land reclamation it was only in the late 1920s that the regime devised a unified programme of reclamation.<sup>426</sup> Mussolini's law of 1928 on integral reclamation favoured investments of private bodies such as cooperative societies, financial groups such as the *Banca Commerciale*, one of the largest banks of the time, and land reclamation companies. These privately-owned companies often defaulted, and the living standards of peasant workers did not improve. Moreover, companies, Party members and fascist syndicalists were often denounced for corruption. It was not unusual for the government to be sometimes considered as the 'profiteer of the peasantry'.<sup>427</sup>

The leader of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti (1893–1964) saw in the creation of the syndicate an opportunity to penetrate the institutions of Fascism and to create a network between anti-Fascism and masses.<sup>428</sup> Togliatti admitted that the main mistake had been

not to understand in time that we could and should have taken advantage of every legal and semi-legal opportunity still allowed by the Italian situation. It was necessary to utilise the fascist unions to

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<sup>425</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 334, Prefect to Minister of Interior, 25 June 1930. Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy*, 262.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibidem*, 258.

<sup>427</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 6 March 1934.

<sup>428</sup> E. Ragionieri, *Opere: Palmiro Togliatti*. III, 2, 1929-1935 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 438.

disseminate basic demands (the right to elect workers' commissions, the observance of agreements, a basic level of internal democracy) with the aim of inoculating them 'with the virus of the class struggle'.<sup>429</sup>

Born into a middle-class family in Genoa, Togliatti joined the Italian Socialist Party before the First World War. He served as a volunteer officer during the First World War. He helped to found the PCI following the schism in the Italian Socialist Party at the Congress of Livorno in 1921. Togliatti became a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1924 and while he was representing the party in a meeting in Moscow in 1926, Mussolini's Fascist government outlawed the PCI and arrested all the other leading Communists, including Antonio Gramsci. Togliatti became PCI Secretary in 1927 and he remained in exile, organising the PCI clandestinely for nearly twenty years. On his return to Italy in 1944 Togliatti led the PCI in the *Svolta di Salerno* (the Salerno Turn), joining the government of national unity led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio.<sup>430</sup> Togliatti and other eminent figures of anti-Fascism such as Eugenio Curiel, an Italian physicist from a Jewish family who became a member of the clandestine *Communist Party* in Venice and then founder of the Youth Front (Communist Youth), murdered by the Fascists in February 1945, developed the strategy of *lavoro legale* (legal way), exhorting comrades to join Fascist organisations in order to penetrate its institutions and remain in contact with the masses.<sup>431</sup> The clandestine resistance was to complement a 'legal resistance' in which the PCI was to take advantage of all 'legal' opportunities offered by the regime, such as joining the fascist syndicates or other influential positions within the regime's organisations.<sup>432</sup> Curiel worked as a contributor of

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<sup>429</sup> A. Agosti, *Palmiro, Togliatti: A Biography* (London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 59.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>431</sup> For a general overview on Eugenio Curiel, see N. Briamonte, *La vita e l'opera di Eugenio Curiel* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979).

<sup>432</sup> *Ibidem*, 443.

the magazine *Il Bò*, the newspaper of the GUF of the University of Padua, and wrote articles about syndicalism, thus facilitating the penetration of some anti-Fascist elements within the editorial staff of the magazine.

A boost to the Communist Party is visible in 1932, with the number of clandestine militants reaching the number of 10,000. However, Communist cells were easily broken up by the police, which decreased their number to 3,000 in the middle of the 1930s. Workers protests were frequent among the Italian workers during the Great Depression. The reason of the protests was mainly due to the material conditions of the working class. However, they were not compromising the stability of the regime. Therefore, the chance of rebuilding the working-class network never materialised.<sup>433</sup> As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the Fascist repression in Italy was very effective, even if mainly limited to preventive detention or forcing employees to continue working, and in rare cases the prefect ordered the arrest or confinement of the convicts. In Germany, the level of repression was higher. The industrial workforce in Germany was constantly subject to surveillance, intimidation by the Nazi authorities and pressure of the police state.<sup>434</sup> Workers were banned from work or from other forms of welfare available to the German population.<sup>435</sup> In addition, whereas the general standard of living for the German population at the end of the 1930s could be considered, as Timothy Mason argued, a ‘flourishing consumerist economy’ with a reasonable increase of food consumption and luxury goods, there was no sign of such improvement in Italy whatsoever.

Popular opinion seems to have changed to some extent during late 1932 and 1933. This

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<sup>433</sup> Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani*, 69-135.

<sup>434</sup> Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, 71.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibidem* 79-80.



was a result of a slow climb out of economic crisis. Apparently, the change in trend of popular opinion was not only due to the progressive passing of the harsh period of the crisis, but also because the PCI entered a period of dormancy and even local propaganda became easily identifiable and effectively repressed. In addition, the regime not only repressed the Communist Party (PCI), but also the ‘Justice and Liberty’ movement. The anti-Fascist organisation *Giustizia e Libertà* (GL) was founded in Paris in 1929 by the anti-Fascists Carlo Rosselli, Emilio Lussu, Alberto Tarchiani, and Ernesto Rossi. Mainly formed by exiled intellectuals in Paris, GL organised the resistance against Italian Fascism between 1929 and 1945, forming clandestine groups in Italy and setting up an intense propaganda campaign. The strengthening of the regime’s grip on *Giustizia e Libertà* is confirmed also by a large investigation on one of its leaders operating in Venice, the engineer Domenico Pastorello who, according to the prefecture, “does not miss any occasion to carry out anti-national propaganda and demonstrate his aversion to Fascism and his rebellion to the authority”.<sup>436</sup> As the political police had already reported in April 1933, a ‘reliable’ informer who attended a meeting with Carlo Rosselli and Claudio Cianca, came to know that Pastorello was the Venetian fiduciary of GL. Carlo Rosselli (1899-1937) , the founding father of *Giustizia e Libertà*, was one of the most influential of antifascist intellectuals in Europe. He was born into a wealthy Tuscan Jewish family and he had a successful career as a professor of political economics. Rosselli was a reformist, a Liberal Socialist (non-Marxist) theorist who had been inspired by the British Labour movement. He took part to the Spanish Civil War fighting on a Republican side. Rosselli devoted most of his life to fight against Fascism. He established the first underground antifascist newspaper *Non Mollare* (Don’t give in!) in 1925. He was imprisoned by the regime for his subversive political activities and after his escape, he found refuge in Paris becoming the mind behind the political movement based in France ‘Justice

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<sup>436</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 213, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 26 July 1934.

and Liberty'. Rosselli was one of Mussolini's most feared anti-Fascist leaders. He was assassinated on Mussolini's order alongside his brother Nello in France in June 1937.<sup>437</sup> Claudio Cianca (1913-2015) was a partisan who took part in the resistance firstly within the framework of *Giustizia e Libertà* and then in the Communist Garibaldi Brigade. During the resistance, Cianca joined the Communist Party for which he was elected MP in the Chamber of Deputies in 1953.<sup>438</sup> Pastorello reported hierarchically to Cianca and would have communicated with him through boats which serviced the Croatian coast of Dalmatia and Fiume.<sup>439</sup> Unlike the other GL divisions which predominantly operated from abroad, namely from France, as confirmed by the police in January 1934, Pastorello "never travelled abroad".<sup>440</sup> Pastorello was in charge of a division which had to maintain relations with those anti-Fascists who were actively operating in the Yugoslavia coast.

Police surveillance and PNF vigilance largely tackled the majority of the well-known anti-Fascists and anti-Fascism entered a phase of almost impossible resistance. Even activities like discussing politics in taverns or restaurants, or telling jokes, led to arrest and confinement. The Venetian prefect also ascribed the turnaround of the popular opinion to a changed situation within the party. As we have seen in the previous chapter between 1929 and 1934, the Venetian Party had achieved a political balance which provided it with an apparent stability with Suppiej playing a more independent role (from Giuriati) and with Volpi finally achieving the full control of the Venetian PNF. This situation was the basis of

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<sup>437</sup> S. Pugliese, *Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>438</sup> For a profile of Claudio Cianca see Donne e Uomini della Resistenza, 'Claudio Cianca': <http://www.anpi.it/donne-e-uomini/2158/claudio-cianca> (Accessed: 19 september 2016).

<sup>439</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 213, Director of the Division of the Political Police to Division General and Private Affairs, 6 April 1933.

<sup>440</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 213, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Ministry of Interior, 3 January 1934.

Suppiej's success, because it meant that internal divisions were no longer producing paralysis. The *federale* succeeded as the head of the *comitato intersindacale* to negotiate labour agreements with workers and industrialists, mediating between the sides.<sup>441</sup>

In the second part of the chapter we are using records of the police which are an excellent source as they provide us with first-hand information of what was happening on the ground. However, they are an unrepresentative source because of their tendency to concentrate on dissent with virtually nothing on consent, as they are records of an organisation tasked with punishing protest. However, if it is enthusiasm that we are looking for in the police records — even if in a dictatorial environment — then the Fascist conquest of Ethiopia between October 1935 and May 1936 would seem to be the right place to look. The war represented the moment that saw the greatest spirit of unity between the regime and the population. It moved Fascist Italy into an international arena, raising expectations of greatness among all sectors of Italian society. The Ethiopian crisis and the military campaign need to be seen in the context of the situation described above, which was of considerable economic depression for the Italian economy. What is clear from the documents is that the population had much more pressing problems nearer home in the months leading to the Ethiopian campaign. People were not satisfied by what the regime had achieved so far and the war was not a priority for the Venetians. As reported by the Fascist syndicate of industry, people thought that it was becoming “useless to turn to the job centre to find a job, ridiculing the Fascist welfare system”.<sup>442</sup> A particular place of honour in this trend of disaffection has to be reserved for the Fascist militia— the MVSN. People often reacted to Fascist arrogance because of the arrogance of the members of the militia. As a Breda worker argued discussion with colleagues, the *Milizia stradale* “was giving so many tickets to kill people financially

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<sup>441</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 49, Venice, The prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Benito Mussolini, n.d.

<sup>442</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Fascist Syndicate of Industry to Minister of Interior, 20 April 1934.

and in order to fatten up those pigs in Rome”.<sup>443</sup> Workers did not want to be associated with “the Italy of Mussolini, but instead, with the one of [the King] Vittorio Emanuele”.<sup>444</sup> It also happened that large-scale demonstrations were initiated by those who had earlier been anti-Fascist, such as the unemployed stone worker Vittorio Busatto who was therefore sent to confinement by the authorities.<sup>445</sup> More than one thousand documents scrutinised for the period 1929-1934 demonstrate that the protests took the form of forbidden activities, such as telling anti-government jokes or having regular conversations with like-minded friends. In order to criticise the regime, workers were frequently found provocatively singing the Communist hymn “Red Flag” (*Bandiera Rossa*), such as the butcher Desiderio Bonini in May 1934, or referring to the cruel murder of socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti,<sup>446</sup> or they simply used expressions like ‘down with Fascism and hurray for Communism’ or sang along to anti-Fascist propaganda songs such as ‘Red Flag’ in a public place.<sup>447</sup> Workers hoped that they would “screw the [regime] very soon” if they were patient enough.<sup>448</sup> Some others openly declared that “since the blackshirts [were] around, they [would] not work anymore”.<sup>449</sup> People were disgruntled because their own living conditions were deteriorating, but the regime still felt it appropriate to spend money on celebrations for something the populace was ambivalent about anyway. Some Venetians believed that “instead of spending a lot of money on celebrations, it would have been better to reduce taxation”.<sup>450</sup> 28 October 1934, the anniversary of the March on Rome, became for some Venetians “the anniversary of

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<sup>443</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Police Chief to to Minister of Interior, 22 July 1934.

<sup>444</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Police Chief to Minister of Interior, 22 July 1934.

<sup>445</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 9 March 1934.

<sup>446</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 13 May 1934.

<sup>447</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 23 May 1934.

<sup>448</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 2 March 1934.

<sup>449</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>450</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 14 June 1935.

misery”.<sup>451</sup> People criticised the regime that celebrated this event every year, spending a lot of money, even if people were starving and poverty was widespread.<sup>452</sup> The volume and variety of sources testifying to these sentiments of dissatisfaction indicate that these were not isolated complaints, but a general mood among the population (or at least the population of a certain political leaning). As John Brown reported for *The Spectator* in 1935:

... as I have talked to some of the ministries of Rome, corporatism seemed a reality. But to the workers (...) the corporative state remained a platform phrase. (...) Skilled workers in the textile factories are earning only sixpence per hour, and there are thousands who do not earn the equivalent of £1 a week in England. (...) The maximum employment rate pay is only five shillings a week, although this may be supplemented by a grant from the local *Fascio* if a man is a party member. (...) The mass of the working population is outside the unemployment-scheme.<sup>453</sup>

As well explained by Brown’s article, the Fascist corporative system was clearly in favour of the employers. Locks-out and strikes were prohibited and strikes leaders were liable to detention. For the employers the new Fascist system was much easier to deal with than the old socialist unions as the new Fascist syndicates were firmly controlled by the regime and influenced by the employers themselves.<sup>454</sup> In fact, the Fascist syndicates played a crucial role for the employers in forestalling any attempt at mass action or demonstration and if a really serious dispute arose, it was managed directly by the Party and the Labour Court.<sup>455</sup>

The decision to launch the Ethiopian campaign in October 1935 has often been seen as a response to this situation. Mussolini was conscious of the possible effects of the war on the

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<sup>451</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Francesco Benigni to Minister of Interior, 20 November 1934.

<sup>452</sup> ACS, DGPS, Prefect Francesco Benigni to Minister of Interior, 31 October 1934.

<sup>453</sup> “*The Spectator*”, 26 July 1935.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibidem*.

home front. The war could serve to feed domestic public opinion and divert the focus of the internal popular opinion from the economic hardships to the question of the greatness of the country and its potential effects on the economy of the nation. It could serve to give the regime that stimulus to emotionally connect Italians with the regime. The Ethiopian war was also part of a diplomatic game and Mussolini pictured Italy as an offended country denied its right to international expansion.

Popular opinion had little real chance of influencing decisions as Mussolini wanted to use the war to turn around popular opinion and launch a message of national unity. The crucial steps towards the war had been in late summer and early autumn 1935 when the Ethiopian crisis reached its peak. The peak of the propaganda campaign was reached with the organisation of the *adunata generale* (general mobilisation)—a country-wide public demonstration, called on 2 October 1935, in which national unity was to be demonstrated to the world in all the principal squares of Italy. The *adunata* was announced in September 1935. What is important to assess is that, prior to the *adunata*, the Fascist informers reported on many occasions that the war was negatively commented on. In 5 September 1935, a few days before the *adunata*, Venetian workers were complaining that “the Duce [believed he could] feed the population with his chatter (...) everybody [had to] know how much vileness [was] hidden under the mantle of Fascism that with all means [was] trying to hide the extreme poverty”.<sup>456</sup> Venetians did not reject the war, but they claimed for themselves “the right to join the war as well as have the right to have a job”.<sup>457</sup> The trend of popular opinion is even clearer when looking at university students, who should have been the generation of Italians educated under the Fascist regime but who had their reservations about the war. In October 1935, a Venetian student asserted “I’ve heard university students in Padua complain

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<sup>456</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Francesco Benigni to Minister of Interior, 5 September 1935.

<sup>457</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 5 September 1935.

like those in Milan about the Fascist Government ... and I repeat that among them there is no enthusiasm for the war. They say that many young people have rushed to enroll in university (in Venice, at Ca' Foscari) in the hope of avoiding being called up".<sup>458</sup> That disjunction between the party and the people that we have noted in the course of this chapter was not bridged by the victorious Ethiopian campaign. The Ethiopian war was only an illusory victory.<sup>459</sup> The war only revealed the continuing need for regimentation and coercion in moving Italian popular opinion in support for Fascism. As reported from Venice, soldiers who returned from Africa to face further unemployment constituted a common difficulty in the later 1930s. Those workers who had hoped to achieve better living conditions fighting in the regime's wars were soon disillusioned. They had helped secure Italy's position as an imperial power and when they returned to their own country they did not "find Italy wealthy, but they could only see its extreme poverty".<sup>460</sup> According to workers, "Italy [had] become worse than Russia, because there [was] no employment whatsoever",<sup>461</sup> and those who were lucky to get a job underlined how badly "the worker [was] obliged to eat after a day of hard work".<sup>462</sup> For example, a rail worker threatened that if he could meet the "petty politician" Mussolini again, he would give him "a piece of iron to strike by himself".<sup>463</sup> In reality, looking at the statistics, the image of Russia as a "country of starvation" was a mere consequence of Fascist propaganda. If compared to the US, in which the high unemployment rate (up to 25% in 1932) and decline in production were the most tangible indicators of Great Depression, in the Soviet Union unemployment was absorbed by great demand for labor to reconstruct the old and build the new plants, mines, canals and roads, and also by

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<sup>458</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*,

<sup>459</sup> Corner, *Riformismo e Fascismo*, 182.

<sup>460</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 10, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to Minister of Interior, 22 May 1937.

<sup>461</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 10, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to Minister of Interior, 20 June 1937.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibidem*.

concentration camps (the GULAG system).<sup>464</sup>

The Ethiopian War clearly confirms the gap between Mussolini's promises and his actual achievements. This picture of rejection of the message of the Party is confirmed by Renzo De Felice, who identified a much qualified mass consent for Fascism in the early 1930s, but had no difficulty in arguing for a 'psychological detachment from the Regime' after the Ethiopian War. There was no evidence whatsoever of improvement in workers' living conditions or their consent to Fascist policies. What is really surprising is the speed with which the old pattern of complaints, grievances, and resentments reappeared among the population. This continuity is more than anything an indication that the Ethiopian War had not served to change the realities of provincial Fascism but it had further triggered structural deficiencies. The war raised expectations that could not be fulfilled and destabilised the regime. Never high during the Great Depression, between the moment of Ethiopian victory in 1936 and Italy's entry into the Second World War in June 1940, popular consent appeared to have declined further. Despite victory and the establishment of empire, the authority of the Party had not increased. The measures of the regime from the Great Depression to the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 did not substantially repair the growing disaffection with the regime or the bad reputation of the Party. The provincial federations lost contact with the people they controlled. As reported by the prefect Catalano in September 1937, criticism towards the Fascist hierarchies came also from those who had a reputation as a "good Fascist", like Riccardo Bortali, employed in the *ente portuale* (port agency). The political police had received reported from a "serious and reliable informant that the above mentioned individual (Bortali) was frequently found commenting and publicly criticising the regime using

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<sup>464</sup> See E. Zaleski, *Stalinist Planning for Economic Growth, 1933-1952* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).



disrespectful words towards the top hierarchies of Fascism”.<sup>465</sup> Bortali was accused of having commented about Fascist politics and speaking ill of Starace, the *federale*, the *podestà* and the *consulta*. In particular, Bortali criticised the local Fascist system of organisation in comparison with the one in Rome that he had recently visited. Bortali argued that the current “*federale* of Venice (Ludovico Foscari) was to be too young for the job (...) and he preferred Suppiej (the former *federale*) who used to listen to the old Fascists”.<sup>466</sup> He also added that Starace and the Venetian *federale* Foscari should be replaced soon and disappointedly he argued that Venice was going to be transformed into a governorship of Volpi or Cini.<sup>467</sup> Abuse of power had many manifestations, especially in the militia. The archives are full of documents which bear witness to the fact that ordinary citizens got in trouble over expressing dissatisfaction with the arrogance of the MVSN, like the docker Giuseppe Zanon who, harassed by some militiamen, asked them to take their blackshirts off as the times were about to change and they “would be beaten soon”.<sup>468</sup> Letters and anonymous denunciations produced a fairly standard list of abuses. People talked, and very quickly even the smallest rumour could inflate beyond all measure. A further factor in determining popular disaffection with the regime was the way in which Fascist officials treated ‘ordinary’ people. After the mid-1930s, people visited the regime’s agencies in order to get benefits. However, lack of employment availability and the Fascist bureaucracy’s inefficiency was nothing but frustrating for people. A typical example was when the unemployed butcher, Gaetano Camper, met with the delegate of the Fascist syndicate Enea Sandrin, in San Stino di Livenza in order to find a job. Sandrin was responsible for recruitment for the industrial district of Marghera. Once Camper found out that the syndicate could not provide him with new

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<sup>465</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 10, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to Minister of Interior, 21 September 1937.

<sup>466</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>467</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>468</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 10, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to Minister of Interior, 30 June 1937.

employment as the number of people the syndicate could recruit was only limited, he aggressively referred to Sandrin as “being worse than Russian”, namely meaning that the situation in Italy was not as good as the regime was claiming.<sup>469</sup> The situation did not change towards the end of the 1930s. For example, the *popolano* Fulvio Bellomo who went to the local *fascio* offices in Venice in order to ask for benefits, and shouted at the local Fascists arguing that “he would have willingly repudiated his Italian citizenship as Italy was an ignoble country”, and this happened because Fascists had rejected his request.<sup>470</sup> In the late 1930s, the repression of a street cell located in a cobbler shop in Mestre demonstrated that, despite widespread criticism against the regime, only little space was left for the Communist propaganda. From the investigation pursued by the secret Fascist informer, Vittorio Krainz, two cobblers, Leone Moressa and Luciano Visentin, were deploying active Communist propaganda, whose scope was to “open the eyes of the young in order to show that truth was not that one taught by the Fascist regime” by lending books about the Russian Revolution.<sup>471</sup> In the cobbler shop the young unemployed used to meet in order to discuss anti-Fascist politics.<sup>472</sup> Krainz was simply a customer and he came to know about Moressa’s and Visentin’s Communist orientation just spending time at the shop as a customer, but he quickly became a Fascist informer. This is how the police came to know about their clandestine propaganda. Further investigation and the direct intervention of the police quickly stopped the cobblers’ activity which could not be continued further.<sup>473</sup> As we have seen during the period 1926-late 1930s, the political police and their spies assigned to repress political dissent, played a central role in keeping people under control and allowed the regime

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<sup>469</sup> See E. Zaleski, *Stalinist Planning for Economic Growth, 1933-1952* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

<sup>470</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.17, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 13 October 1939.

<sup>471</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.10, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to Minister of Interior, 23 January 1937.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibidem*.

to have some stability on its road to the Second World War. This role is confirmed by the words of the Venetian prefect Catalano in 1939 writing to the Minister of Interior:

The measures (...) have been welcomed with disciplined consent in this city (Venice): we cannot exclude that someone (...) commented unfavourably (...). For what concerns the identification of these elements who do not publicly express their opinion, they are not easy (to be found); however, we will do everything we can, also through our informers, to find them in order to take rigorous restrictive measures.<sup>474</sup>

In late-1930s the work of the police was sure facilitated by the termination of the peak of the economic crisis in Italy and the launch of the colonial campaign which contributed to instill new hope in the society. Despite Catalano meant that the regime's stability was never in real danger, this was far from saying that the level of police control of society decreased. For 'disciplined consent' in the province, he meant that not significant 'political' protests happened. The documents consistently show that the State organisations were involving many people and, in one way or another, the regime had entered into the lives of ordinary people in a very novel way.

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<sup>474</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.17, Prefect Giuseppe Carlo Catalano to Ministry of Interior, 2 February 1939.

What certainly did remain a constant of the period before the Ethiopian war and then in the following years, was the poor reputation of the regime and the local Party. What emerges from this chapter is that the regime was overall successful in implementing and managing a police system which guaranteed surveillance and control over the anti-Fascists and the dismantling of their local networks of solidarity. The break-up of the anti-Fascist communities was not implemented by the regime only through repression. The regime focused also on an urban renewal of the local communities which could prevent the re-formation of an organised workers' movement such as it happened in Venice with the development of Marghera.

However, although the regime never felt a serious threat from the crisis which affected the country during the Great Depression, this work confirms that the regime substantially failed in its mission to improve people's everyday material conditions. This is even more visible when Mussolini launched the campaign of Abyssinia in order to tackle popular discontent and feed population with propaganda of greatness for Italy. However, only after a year from the victory in 1937, as it is clearly visible in Venice province, people had realised that the regime could not keep its promises. As we have seen in this chapter, economic dissatisfaction underlined a progressive lack of enthusiasm for the regime in the face of sustained economic hardship as well as political repression.

The next chapter will move on to a different facet of the tension between established non-Fascist constituencies like the Catholics and their negotiations for autonomy with a regime that was ideologically at odds with the principles of those constituencies.

### 3. Challenges to the Regime: Venetian Catholics and Youth under the Regime (1922-1942)

#### Introduction

In late 1926, the promulgation of the *leggi Fascistissime* began the transformation of the jurisdictional order of the Kingdom of Italy into a totalitarian, nationalist, corporatist and imperialist one. This process of integration of the state apparatus into the new Fascist order was to guarantee, through the work of the secret police, the political reliability of institutions and surveillance over private citizens. Similarly to the Nazi regime, Fascism took over not only the political system but also society as a whole. In Germany, the process of nazification of the country became known as *Gleichschaltung* which translated into English language as ‘coordination’ or ‘synchronisation’. It was the process by which Nazi Germany exerted totalitarian control of all areas of life in Germany from economy and politics to media, culture and education.<sup>475</sup> As for the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*, with the fascistisation of society and its integration into the Fascist State, independent associational life also came to an end. The regime disbanded political groups, workers organisations and professional associations (like press), and even local clubs dedicated to various activities. In their place, the regime founded or expanded numerous affiliated organisations intended to marshal support from particular groups of Italians. As part of the Fascistisation of the Italian State and society, the Fascist regime had set particular importance on winning over young people, which was particularly important for a regime that was based on an ideology and that was, even more importantly, trying to establish itself as an alternative to earlier or current forms of

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<sup>475</sup> C. Epstein, *Nazi Germany: confronting the myths* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 50. The metaphor *Gleichschaltung* came from the workings of electricity. It suggested that the entire society was on one circuit. A single master-switch could activate or shut down the whole system.

government. According to Simona Colarizi, Mussolini needed to organise Fascism to survive effectively and be perpetuated as a regime after its consolidation phase.<sup>476</sup> In fact, the political socialisation of the youth in an aspiring totalitarian system is essentially a problem of succession and continuity. The aim of a totalitarian regime is the formation of a politically orthodox subsequent generation that will keep the regime in power and carry out its political programme. It is surprising, therefore, that Fascist youth organisations have received limited scholarly attention. Only a few historians like Alessio Ponzio, Connor Douglas, Robert A. Ventresca, and Sarah Morgan, have focused their attention on the complex Fascist youth organisation.<sup>477</sup> Moreover, the only substantial and comprehensive monograph on the Fascist youth was written more than twenty years ago by Tracy Koon and it has never been translated into Italian.<sup>478</sup>

When focusing on youth organisations in the Province of Venice, this chapter presents two rather distinct, but related aspects. Firstly, it examines the efforts made by the regime to establish a network of youth organisations which clashed with the pre-existing establishments like the Catholic groups. The analysis of the quarrel between Church and regime, aims to shine new light on the development of the relations between local Party and local Church, with prime focus on the youth organisations. The second section will scrutinize the GUF (*Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*) and the regime's attempt to create a generation of men

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<sup>476</sup> Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani*, 32.

<sup>477</sup> See A. Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); A. Ponzio, 'A forgotten story: The training for teachers of physical education in Italy during the Fascist period', in *Sport in Society* 11(2008), 44-58; C. Douglass, *Political Socialization and its Discontents: Youth in Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union*, Dissertation (University of Delaware, 2014); R. A. Ventresca, 'The Vatican and Mussolini's Italy', in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21(2016), 146-153; S. Morgan, 'Mussolini's boys (and girls): Gender and sport in Fascist Italy', in *History Australia*, 3 (2006), 1-12.

<sup>478</sup> T. H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

completely educated under the Fascist regime. The regime set up youth organisations in order to inculcate the basic elements of Fascism (the cult of the Duce, sense of the nation, and the acceptance of war and violence) in young minds, to counteract the traditional model of socialisation (by the Church), and to provide physical and paramilitary training.<sup>479</sup> The reason why we have chosen to single out these two specific strands of the Venetian youth for analysis is that these were areas that traditionally had relatively large autonomy, and therefore they were particularly threatening. In contrast schooling proper was easier to influence for the state and is therefore less interesting as a case study.

### **3.1 The Origin of the Dispute between Church and State**

In order to appreciate the success or failure of the Fascist regime to persuade Italian youth to invest into the Fascist project – often in competition with the previously most prominent provider of youth work in Italy, the Catholic Church – it is important to reflect on the relationship between Church and State in the decades leading up to the rise of Fascism. Therefore, this section will illustrate how the relationship between Church and State evolved since the formation of the new Italian State in 1861 and in particular during the decades until the rise to power of Fascism. Particular attention will be paid also to the evolution of the Catholic movement and its organisations under the different pontificates which characterised the Church on the road to face the challenge of the regime.

The dispute between the Italian State and the Catholic Church, the so called ‘Roman Question’, had its origins in the conflict between the secularising tendencies of the Italian Liberal State. As Pollard has written:

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<sup>479</sup> A. De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: the ‘Fascist’ style of rule* (London: Routledge, 1995), 65.

Like other European Liberals, the Italian Moderate Liberals led by D'Azeglio and Cavour enacted a series of laws, first in Piedmont and then in the rest of Italy, which wrestled control of such matters as education, marriage and censorship from the Church, established freedom of religion for Protestants and Jews, dissolved many of the contemplative religious orders and confiscated a substantial portion of the property of the Church.<sup>480</sup>

The relationship between the Italian State and Catholic Church differed from those in the other European countries as the Pope had been not only a religious authority, but also the head of a territorial state on Italian soil. In addition, the process of Italian unification involved the progressive dismantling of the Papal State which had comprised a large territory within central Italy. The last act of the destruction of the temporal power of the Papacy was the Piedmontese infantry corps of *Bersaglieri's* occupation of Rome city (*Breccia di Porta Pia*) in September 1870. When Rome was taken by the Italian army, Pope Pius IX (1846-78) retreated to the Vatican and proclaimed himself a prisoner of the state. In addition, he excommunicated the king and the leaders of the Italian government and forbade good Catholics from recognising the Italian State, running for political office, or voting in elections.<sup>481</sup>

The Roman Question was a big obstacle in the process of the formation of a national identity. The war between Church and State lasted for decades and excluded Catholics from the political life of the country and as some historians argued, it widened the distance

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<sup>480</sup> J. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929-1932: a study in conflict* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>481</sup> R. Aubert, *Il Pontificato di Pio IX (1846-1878)* (Turin: S.A.I.E., 1970).



between the 'real Italy' and the 'legal Italy'.<sup>482</sup> The quarrel between the Church and the Italian State made it "very difficult to be both an obedient Catholic and a good Italian. In this way, the 'Roman Question' constituted a grave spiritual wound in the Italian Risorgimento".<sup>483</sup> Despite attempts on the part of successive governments following the unification of Italy, to find a solution to the Roman Question, the papacy could not be persuaded to relinquish its temporal powers and responded to governmental attempts at forcing with issue with excommunication of political leaders.

After having lost its temporal power, the process of revitalisation of the Church, aimed at re-evangelising Italian society, started with the creation of *The Opera dei Congressi* in 1874, a Church organisation that promoted Catholic ideas and culture. Adhering to the Pope's conservative line, the *Opera* served Pius IX and strictly observed his positions publicised in the encyclical *Non Expedit* (1874) which promoted Catholics' abstention from participating and voting in political elections. The *Opera* was hierarchically organised with headquarters in Venice and offices at local level. The *Opera* did not have a political remit *per se* but it had progressively been involved in protesting against certain Italian Liberal government policies which were believed to be anticlerical. In addition, the *Opera* played a crucial role in reaffirming the Pope's temporal power and acting as a mouthpiece for the view that his position effectively made him a prisoner of the State in the Vatican.<sup>484</sup> From 1887, the *Opera*, under the leadership of Paganuzzi, made a vigorous drive not only for expansion, but also for organisational centralisation. Paganuzzi belonged to an aristocratic family of Bolognese origin which moved to Venice in 1750. Paganuzzi had been municipal and provincial

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<sup>482</sup> J. Pollard, *Catholicism in Modern Italy: Religion, Society and Politics Since 1861* (London: Routledge, 2008), 35.

<sup>483</sup> Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 2.

<sup>484</sup> A. Gambasin, *Il movimento sociale nell'Opera dei Congressi, 1874-1904. Contributo per la storia del cattolicesimo sociale in Italia* (Rome: Università Gregoriana, 1958).

councilor in Venice, supporting the anti-socialist coalition of Catholics and conservatives with the aim of restoring the rights of the Church to intervene in political matters. The underlying theme of the life of Paganuzzi was the commitment to the Catholic laity against the anti-clerical Liberal state. Paganuzzi was elected president of the *Opera* in 22 September 1889. He retained the post until 1902 when, in conflict to the young Christian Democrats of Romolo Murri, he left in favour of the Count Giovanni Grosoli Pironi.<sup>485</sup> Paganuzzi's course responded, as Poggi already argued, to "the novel impulse given to Catholic movements all over Europe by the grandiose plan of Leo XIII for the reconquest of the masses".<sup>486</sup> The appointment of Leo XIII (1878-1903) led to a normalisation of the church-State relationship the Church after the tumultuous years which followed the 'occupation of Rome'. The Pope's intellectual and diplomatic ability helped the Church to regain much of the prestige lost with the fall of the Vatican State. He tried to reconcile the Church with the working class, particularly by dealing with the economic and social changes which had triggered growing impoverishment of the working class and had resulted in the working class becoming anti-clerical and being attracted by socialist ideas. Leo helped to reverse this trend. As one commentator put it, as the Holy See at the time of the accession of Leo XIII was on bad terms with many governments, and as relations between Catholic Church and the people were strained, the task of reconciling the papacy with both was "a colossal enterprise requiring the

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<sup>485</sup> See the biographical profile of Giovanni Battista Paganuzzi written by S. Apuzzese for the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - S. Apuzzese, 'Giovanni Battista Paganuzzi', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* - Volume 80 (2014), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-battista-paganuzzi\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-battista-paganuzzi_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016). During the thirteen years of Paganuzzi Presidency, the *Opera* extended its presence geographically and numerically up to 188 diocesan committees, 3892 parish and 708 youth sections in 1897. These numbers were the result of the commitment of Paganuzzi to reunite the Catholic masses in a compact formation to serve the Pope.

<sup>486</sup> G. Poggi, *Catholic Action in Italy: The Sociology of a sponsored organization* (Stanford: Stanford, 1967), 17.

utmost efforts of his genius".<sup>487</sup> The 1890s opened the way for the Catholics to begin to become socially active. Giuseppe Toniolo's foundation of the Catholic Union for Social Studies in 1889 and the publication in 1891 of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, triggered the development of Catholic social thought in Italy, France, Belgium, Austria, Britain and Switzerland. With regards to the economy, Catholics' efforts concentrated in the creation of rural credit unions (which rose in number from 30 in 1892 to 779 in 1897), cooperatives and farming.<sup>488</sup>

Soon a good number of Catholic rural banks appeared in Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto and Rome, and the volume of the Catholic cooperatives increased.<sup>489</sup> Venice province was one the leading Italian provinces in terms of the Catholic expansion into economic and social life of the country. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, most of the Catholic fortunes in the province had been achieved by the work of the priest Luigi Cerutti. Cerutti was ordained priest in 1888 and he was appointed vicar of Gambarare (Venice countryside village). Cerutti was a typical example of Catholic cooperative leaders. He believed that the rural banks were not only a real support for the local population, but also a means for Catholic ideals to penetrate the countryside (*la campagna*) and oppose socialist advancement.<sup>490</sup> Cerutti organised a rural bank modelled on those which Leone Wollemborg

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<sup>487</sup> J. M. Miller, *Life of Leo XIII: From an Authentic Memoir Furnished by His Order: Written with the Encouragement, Approbation and Blessing of His Holiness the Pope: the Complete Life of the Venerable Father* (Washington: Christian Press association, 1903).

<sup>488</sup> S. Zamagni, V. Zamagni, *Cooperative Enterprise: Facing the Challenge of Globalization* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010), 48.

<sup>489</sup> For a overview of the *Opera Congressi*, see the aboved quoted A. Gambasin, *Il movimento sociale nell'Opera dei Congressi*.

<sup>490</sup> S. Tramontin, *Cerutti Luigi*, in F. Traniello-G. Campanini (ed.), *Dizionario storico del movimento cattolico in Italia 1860 - 1980, II, I protagonisti*, (Milan: Marietti, 1982).

was setting up throughout the Veneto in 1890.<sup>491</sup> The rural banks provided local cooperatives with the necessary financial help to be invested in their business such as purchasing seeds, fertilisers and other agricultural materials. Such rural banks were a novelty in Italy and they rapidly spread throughout the Veneto and Northern Italy. Cerutti's ideas were particularly welcomed by the *Opera Congressi* and the president Giambattista Paganuzzi appointed Cerutti a member of the organisation's board in 1893. When Cerutti became vicar of Murano in 1897, he tried to extend his ideas to the working class by setting up a local bank for the glass factory-workers, but his new initiative was met with a lot more resistance as the bank met the hostility of both industrialists and socialist leagues.<sup>492</sup> On one side, industrialists were not keen to deal with organized workers movements, on the other side, the Catholic workers banks and cooperatives were competing with the already local well established socialist organisations.

Due to the vast parish network the Catholic social system, built on rural banks and labour cooperatives, spread rapidly. The speed of diffusion was due also to the commitment of Catholic intellectuals like Ercole Chiri, Don Lorenzo Guetti, Luigi Cerutti, Don Luigi Sturzo, Nicolò Rezzara and Giuseppe Toniolo who continued the work begun by the first Catholic leaders.<sup>493</sup> Such thinkers thought that only Catholic cooperation would be able to elevate the

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<sup>491</sup> Leone Wollemborg was an Italian economist and politician. He made significant contributions to the spread of cooperative enterprises, specifically rural credit unions and agricultural cooperative banks. See R. Marconato, *La figura e l'opera di Leone Wollemborg* (Treviso: La vita del popolo, 1984).

<sup>492</sup> S. Tramontin, *La figura e l'opera sociale di Luigi Cerutti: Aspetti e momenti del movimento cattolico nel Veneto* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1968).

<sup>493</sup> P. Cafaro, *Chiri Ercole*, in Traniello-Campanini (ed.), *Dizionario storico del movimento cattolico in Italia, 1860-1980*, II, I protagonisti (Milan: Marietti, 1982), VII-511. Even if the name of Luigi Sturzo stands out in the collective memory, as a politician he was involved in and wrote on many issues related to Catholic cooperativism; we must not forget also Ercole Chiri, among the main architects of Confcooperative.

status of the agricultural and industrial proletariat.<sup>494</sup> The increased importance of the Catholics in the economic and social life of the country “raised the question which of two evils might be the worse – the consolidation of the bourgeois regime, or the strengthening of the ‘subversive’ forces”.<sup>495</sup> This problem aroused different positions within the *Opera Congressi* and the clash was between those of conservative positions and a modernist wing led by the young priest Romolo Murri who had been the promoter of FUCI (Catholic Youth Group) and founded the movement *Democrazia Cristiana Italiana* in 1901, a Catholic movement with a progressive approach which intended to open a dialogue with the moderate wing of socialism like Filippo Turati.<sup>496</sup> In 1903, the death of Pope Leo XIII, who had seen with benevolence the development of Murri’s movement and the election of Pius X who was closer to the more conservative wing of the *Opera*, blocked the development of the *Democrazia*. As many of *Opera Congressi* members were now siding with the *Democrazia*, Pius X decided to dismiss the *Opera* in order to stem its modernist drift, curtailing the organisation to pastoral activity.<sup>497</sup> In order to replace the *Opera* and set an organisation to supervise all the social and economic activities of the Church, the Pope founded *Azione Cattolica* in 1905. Catholic Action was established as a non-political lay organisation under the direct control of the bishops. One of the first leaders of *Azione Cattolica* was count Ottorino Gentiloni, appointed by Pope Pius X (1903-1914) head of the Catholic Electoral Union and in such capacity he co-authored in 1912 with Giovanni Giolitti the *Patto Gentiloni* which won the Italian elections in 1913.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> Zamagni-Zamagni, *Cooperative Enterprise*, 22.

<sup>495</sup> Poggi, *Catholic Action in Italy*, 17.

<sup>496</sup> Please see M. Guasco, ‘Romolo Murri’, in Traniello-Campanini (ed.), *Dizionario storico del movimento cattolico in Italia*, 414-422.

<sup>497</sup> See F. Fonzi, *I cattolici e la società italiana dopo l’Unità* (Rome: Studium, 1953).

<sup>498</sup> F. J. Coppa. ‘Giolitti and the Gentiloni Pact between Myth and Reality’, in *Catholic Historical Review*, 1967, 53, 2, 217–228.

In the period of transition between the birth of the *Opera Congressi* and the creation of the Catholic Action, the Veneto region – and consequently the province of Venice – was deeply affected socially and politically by the blossoming of the Catholic movement. A large number of educational, social, cultural, and welfare associations sprang up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the dynamic growth continued until the birth of the Popular Party in 1919, spanning every sphere of activity, politics included. Religiosity in Venice and even more so in the Venetian countryside had translated into political affiliations. Local politics had been heavily influenced by a coalition of Catholics and conservatives since the late nineteenth century. Despite Pius IX's *non expedit* instructing Italians not to participate in the electoral life of the country, the list of clerical-moderates led by Mayor Filippo Grimani won consecutive elections from 1895 to 1919.<sup>499</sup> In the first two decades, similarly to the national movement, Venetian Catholics were polarised into those aligned with the conservative and anti-socialist views of the former *Opera Congressi*, and the ones who were more progressive and fell into step with Catholic Action.<sup>500</sup>

The role of Catholic Action was greatly enhanced during the pontificate of Pius XI (1922-1939) when the organisation was to play a crucial role in the reorientation of Catholics. Pius XI's first encyclical, *Ubi arcano*, promulgated in December 1922, was directed to counter secularism and 'Christianise' all aspects of the society. "Pope XI is called 'the Pope of Catholic Action' because of the vigour and persistence with which he urged the creation and the establishment of Catholic Action organisation not only in Italy but throughout the world".<sup>501</sup> Pius XI had always been suspicious about his predecessor Benedict XV's plan for

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<sup>499</sup> Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice*, 44.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>501</sup> Poggi, *Catholic Action in Italy*, 21.

a Catholic Party. For Pius XI the Catholic movement had to develop at the level of civil society and play more of a background role in education and proselytism rather than being a political organisation. The Pope also had doubts regarding the economic, social and political line of the newly formed Popular Party (1919) which, in the Pope's opinion, tended too much towards modernist positions.<sup>502</sup> In the early days of Fascism, following the March on Rome, he sent a document in which he invited all the clergy not to cooperate with any political party, even with those of Catholic origins. In addition, the Pope called Don Luigi Sturzo, a 'clerical socialist' who was regarded as one of the fathers of Christian democracy, to resign from the post of secretary of the Italian Popular Party. Sturzo resigned in July 1923, before being forced into exile in 1924 due to his opposition to Fascism.<sup>503</sup>

Pius XI's strategy was largely influenced by the political situation of the country which was facing a serious threat to constitutional democracy with the rise in the power of Fascism. Pius XI thought that the project of the constitutional development of a Catholic party was a path that was no longer practicable. Conversely, at local level, although the Popular Party corresponded to a model of the Christian laity, many Italian bishops looked at the role of a Catholic party as an opportunity for the representation of the Catholics' political interests.<sup>504</sup> For example, in Venice Province, under the leadership of the Patriarch Pietro La Fontaine, Venetian Catholics, concerned about the socialists' advance, thought that a Catholic party could be the natural expression of a revitalised Catholic movement which needed support and protection.<sup>505</sup> In accordance with this view, the Catholic newspaper *Il Veneto* wrote that the

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<sup>502</sup> Ibidem, 21-22.

<sup>503</sup> E. Fattorini, *Pio XI, Hitler e Mussolini* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), 28-29.

<sup>504</sup> R. P. Violi, *I vescovi: dalla svolta antimodernista a Pio XII*, in *Cristiani d'Italia*, Vol. II, A. Melloni (ed.) (Rome: Istituto dell'enciclopedia italiana, 2011), 829-840.

<sup>505</sup> S. Tramontin, 'Patriarca e cattolici veneziani di fronte al Partito Popolare Italiano', in *Storia Contemporanea*, 4(1973), 521-565.

Popular Party was “devoted to the cause of the Church and the Pope, and characterised by a narrow orthodoxy, projected into social action, an alternative to the Catholic tradition of ‘moderate and conservative politics’”.<sup>506</sup>

Since Mussolini came to power in 1922, the relations between the Church and Mussolini had improved. In his youth, Mussolini had been a notable *mangiapreti* (priests’ eater) like many of the virulent anti-Catholic Fascist backers such as Farinacci. As a young man, Mussolini had shared his father’s opinion of the Roman Catholic Church. Mussolini senior, disliked the power of the Church and the young Mussolini referred to priests as ‘black germs’.<sup>507</sup> However, in some conservative sectors of the Catholic Church in Italy, Mussolini’s anti-socialist fight was seen with a benevolent eye. We may even include Pope Pius XI amongst these, at least for the first decade or so of Fascist rule.<sup>508</sup> An example is Cardinal Pietro Gasparri who was favourable to Fascism and anxious to put an end to the ‘Roman Question’. Gasparri who was Secretary of the State under Pius XI, held secret meetings with Mussolini (the first one in 1923), where they discussed agreements which led to the sign of the Lateran Pacts in 1929.<sup>509</sup>

A similar scenario was displayed in Venice province. Initially, relations between Fascists and Catholics were not particularly warm. The core of the first wave of Fascism was linked to the figure of Pietro Marsich who came from anti-clerical and radical-democratic background.

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<sup>506</sup> L. Nardo, ‘Il tessuto cattolico’, *L’ottocento e il novecento 2 - La società veneziana*, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-il-tessuto-cattolico\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-il-tessuto-cattolico_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 september 2016).

<sup>507</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 117.

<sup>508</sup> D. I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: the secret history of Pius XI and the rise of Fascism in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 51.

<sup>509</sup> J. Pollard, *The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism, 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 122-159.



However, in Venice as well as in Milan and Turin, on the occasion of the municipal elections of 1920, the bishops, fearing the socialist victory, encouraged Catholics to join the National Block (*Blocchi Nazionali*), and therefore an alliance with the Fascists. In Venice, the deal had been possible thanks to the good relations between the Patriarch La Fontaine and Giovanni Giuriati, the major exponent of the moderate Venetian Fascism who was opposed to Marsich's radical positions.<sup>510</sup> It was also the future Fascist *federale* Giorgio Suppiej, a practicing Catholic and with a family network among eminent members of the local Catholic movement, who facilitated an agreement with the local Catholics.<sup>511</sup> On his side, the Patriarch La Fontaine did not hide some sympathies for the Fascist movement after it rose in power and, convinced that Mussolini's regime could promote full adherence to Catholicism, La Fontaine took a line of collaboration with the public authorities.<sup>512</sup> La Fontaine had been a fervent patriot who, during the First World War, engaged the Venetian Church in materially supporting people, especially after the dramatic retreat of the Italian Army following the defeat of Caporetto in October-November 1917 which directly involved the diocesan territory in the theatre of military operations.<sup>513</sup> Once leader, Mussolini had to decide whether to negotiate with the Roman Catholic Church in Italy or not. He chose to work with it and to get the Roman Catholic Church to accept the Fascist state while offering the Roman Catholic Church an acceptable agreement. To gain credibility with the Church, Mussolini had his children baptised in 1923. In 1926, he had a religious marriage ceremony to his wife Rachele. Their first marriage in 1915 had been a civil ceremony. Although the favourable actions of

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<sup>510</sup> R. Camurri, 'La classe politica nazionalfascista, L'ottocento e il novecento 2 - La societa veneziana, Storia di Venezia (2002), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/1-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-la-classe-politica-nazionalfascista_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>511</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>512</sup> G. Vian, 'Pietro La Fontaine', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 63* (2004), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-la-fontaine\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-la-fontaine_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (Accessed: 19 september 2016).

<sup>513</sup> Ibidem.

Mussolini towards the Church could elicit positive impressions, Venetian Catholics still looked at Fascism with skepticism, especially with regards to the anti-clerical origins of Fascist ideology and the violence of the squads which was totally contrary to the Catholic principle of *pietas*. The majority of Venetian Catholics active in the various local Catholic associations still primarily sympathised with the *popolari*.<sup>514</sup>

The hardest obstacle encountered by Fascism in Venice Province was the aversion of the local priests, most of them educated during the last years of the nineteenth century, under the reforming pontificate of Pope Leo XIII and therefore belonging to the season of social Catholicism promoted by the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and prepared to revitalise the role of the Church in society.<sup>515</sup> Those were the priests who were called to ‘approach people’ and become protagonists in the renovation of the Catholic movement. It was the local priest who had to translate the renewal promoted by the Holy See on a national scale to the local level. Thanks to the leading role played by priests, the parish became “the fundamental cell of religious and civic development, dominated by the bell, but also gravitating around the conference room, the oratory, and religious and social organisations”.<sup>516</sup> Even Sturzo and the Popular Party needed the support of the local priests to mass-mobilise the Catholic electorate. They could not ignore the fundamental relation between the priest and the churchgoers.<sup>517</sup> Gaetano Salvemini underlined the strong link between Italians and Church: “the overwhelming majority of the Italian population, especially those living in the countryside, is

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<sup>514</sup> S. Tramontin, *Cattolici, popolari e fascisti nel Veneto* (Rome: Cinque Lune, 1975).

<sup>515</sup> A. Lazzaretto, *Vescovo clero parrocchia. Ferdinando Rodolfi e la diocesi di Vicenza (1911-1943)* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 1993), XIV.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibidem*, 62. See also G. Miccoli, ‘Vescovo e re del suo popolo. La figura del prete curato tra modello tridentino e risposta controrivoluzionaria’, in G. Chittolini-G. Micoli (ed.), *Storia d'Italia, Annali 9, La Chiesa e il potere politico dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi 1986), 881-928, 925-926.

<sup>517</sup> A. Scottà (ed.), *La Santa Sede i vescovi veneti e l'autonomia politica dei cattolici 1918-1922* (Trieste: Edizioni Lint, 1994), XXI.

formed by tireless workers. (...) The person observing the monumental religious ceremonies held in the small villages of Italy is easily persuaded to think that the religious feeling of the Italian population is really intense”.<sup>518</sup> This appears to have been particularly pronounced among people in the Veneto region whose predisposition (*razza veneta*) had made them even more adaptable and more responsive to clerical propaganda. “The traditional, ritual soul of the Veneto people, is cadenced by the rhythm of the oratories (...) [The Veneto people] are universally loved for being (...) of a good character [*razza*], being good, moderate, parsimonious and hardworking people”.<sup>519</sup> This intense relationship between local Church and people from Veneto was the major cause for the initial negative attitude of the Venetian priests towards Fascism. Their opinion had been widely captured by the local police, and one of the most striking cases was Antonio Cercariolo, the vicar of the village of Scorzè. Antonio Cercariolo displayed immediately his aversion towards the local Fascists and “in 1923 he declared from the pulpit that the Fascists were criminals (*lazzaroni*) in black shirts at the service of the lords”.<sup>520</sup> Although Cercariolo later mellowed in his antipathy towards Fascism, he would never conform to the regime. This is evident in the size of the file that documents the Fascist military police’s interest in him. His file was continually updated until the mid-1930s.<sup>521</sup> Already enjoying an important social role in the local community prior to the advent of Fascism, the local priest looked at the Fascists as criminals imbued with anti-clerical ideology who wanted to destroy the prestige of the Church (and therefore his prestige) among the people forming local society. As we will see, despite accepting the directives of the Patriarch La Fontaine to find a deal with Fascism, the majority of local priests remained highly suspicious of the Fascists.

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<sup>518</sup> *The Daily Express*, 3 April 1928.

<sup>519</sup> Scottà, *La Santa Sede*, XIV-XV.

<sup>520</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 5 April 1934. The fact was mentioned in a report sent to the Minister of Interior in 1934.

<sup>521</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 5 April 1934.

The negative feeling of the local Church towards the regime was also captured by the reports of the prefect Iginio Coffari to the Interior Ministry, both before and after the *leggi Fascistissime* (1926-1927). The prefect tended to highlight the close interpenetration between Catholic Action and *popolari*, allowing the idea of the Popular Party to continue its political propaganda under the veil of a religious organisation. Frustrated by this suspicion, Fascists launched a wave of violence against the Venetian Catholic Action offices.<sup>522</sup> On the night of 26-27 August 1926, 250 young *avanguardisti* (Balillas between 14 and 17 years old) surrounded the Catholic circle of San Pantalon in Venice city crying “down with the *popolari!*” and only the intervention of their officials prevented them from destroying the Catholic offices. The group of *avanguardisti* then moved on to Campo San Barnaba to beat up a group of young Catholic *esploratori* (Catholic scouts) wearing the Catholic uniform.<sup>523</sup> In the months that followed, the prefect reported a steady stream of similar stories of attacks on local Catholic clubs, and priests. Sometimes the Fascists’ attacks possessed a preventive character with the aim of intimidating Catholics. An example is the case of two priests of the village of Ceggia (North East of the province). Although they had been considered by the local police as “disciplined” and of profound patriotism, Don Eugenio Salce and Don Andrea Zanette were threatened and insulted by a group of Fascists led by the local Fascist secretary Sigismondo Ferraresi in October 1926. In the villages where the Church had established deep roots in the local community and the figure of the priest was crucial for the life of the community with the Church possessing large popular support, as in the case of Ceggia, Fascist action had the opposite effect, putting local people at odds with the Party. This happened in the case of Salce and Zanette as the prefect disappointingly had to admit that the raid had been inappropriate as the priests were very popular in the village and people were

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<sup>522</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.8, Command of MVSN to Minister of Interior, 5 April 1934.

<sup>523</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 27 August 1926.

disappointed by their removal.<sup>524</sup> Most frequent were attacks led by the most intransigent wing of the Fascist Party on local Catholics and their organisations. A typical example is the case of the Venetian Fascist Pio Leoni. Former close collaborator of Marsich, Leoni led a group of students of the Party in conducting raids against local Catholics, especially against those involved in the youth groups. Leoni was a quite typical example of the young Fascists who firmly believed that a good Fascist should be radical and emulate the gestures of the *Arditi* during the First World War.<sup>525</sup>

The events of 1926 have usually been underestimated by the literature relating to the relations between Church and State. Historians' focus has been primarily on the negotiations leading to the sign of the Lateran Pacts and the events which led to consequent stabilisation of the relations between Church and regime as discussed for instance in the works of John F. Pollard and David I. Kertzer.<sup>526</sup> Conversely, the year 1926, constituted an important passage for the Veneto Church, as the events opened an intense discussion among the various currents of thought within the local Church. During the episcopal conference of 24 November 1926, the bishops of Padua, Treviso, Vicenza, Belluno, Verona, Ceneda, Adria-Rovigo, Chioggia and the Patriarch of Venice, discussed the general situation of the local churches and they could not avoid discussing the fact that priests, men, women and young people were beaten and even imprisoned by the Fascists.<sup>527</sup> From that meeting, it was also possible to understand what path would be chosen by the Veneto Church with regards to Fascism. The discussion brought to light two currents: one led by the bishop of Vicenza, notoriously anti-Fascist, who intended to complain to Mussolini about the Fascist violence, and another one which

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<sup>524</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 151, Prefect Iginio Coffari to Minister of Interior, 27 October 1926.

<sup>525</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b. 31/b, Venice, Ferruccio Truffi to Giuseppe Volpi, 1 June 1927.

<sup>526</sup> See the above mentioned Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini* and Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*.

<sup>527</sup> S. Tramontin, 'Chiesa e Fascismo nel Triveneto', in G. De Rosa et al., *I cattolici isontini nel XX secolo dal 1918 al 1934*, II (Gorizia: Tipografia sociale, 1983), 63-83.

comprised the majority of the local bishops, led by the Patriarch of Venice La Fontaine, who intended to promote a more moderate and conciliatory line towards Fascism. The line of La Fontaine prevailed and instead of confronting the regime resolutely, the Veneto bishops decided to mediate and send a letter to Mussolini regretting the episodes of violence which involved local Catholics, but minimising them as a dynamic effect of the ongoing normalising process within the Fascist Party.<sup>528</sup> The letter was a condemnation of the Fascist violence, but the impression given was that the Patriarch La Fontaine and the majority of the Veneto bishops thought that the Fascist violence would be a ‘transitory storm’ and after that, the Church would be able to educate a Catholic generation under the mantle of the dictatorship. 529

The Patriarch miscalculated what the future would be for the Catholic movement in Italy. The events of 1926 happened in a climate of intimidation. The laws of public security of 1925-1926 had put all the non-Fascist organisations outside law, intensifying Fascist control over society. In addition, the Fascist movement was experiencing a profound transformation which heightened the level of the clash between ‘intransigent’ and ‘moderate’ Fascists, leading to the dismissal of Farinacci in March 1926. Having defeated the intransigent wing of the movement, Mussolini was now looking at how to fascistise society starting with the youngest sections of society, giving the former *ardito* and *ras* of Carrara Renato Ricci, the task of reorganising the Fascist youth movement from a moral and physical point of view. In April 1926, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* was founded, supervised by the Ministry of National Education. The ONB was instituted for the physical and moral benefit of youth and it was initially meant to be an autonomous *ente* (Italian word for a State organisation) with the task of instructing youngsters to become good Fascists. Nonetheless, in Venice and throughout the peninsula as well, the regime sought to regulate and gain control over children’s leisure time

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<sup>528</sup> Ibidem, 34.

<sup>529</sup> Ibidem.

activities and private lives. The formal control over the movement was passed on to the Ministry of National Education in 1929, which created an undersecretariat for physical training and unified boys and girls under a general school programme. The transfer of the ONB to the Ministry of Education was an important step considering the fact that it spread the movement through the entire school system and made membership obligatory for all boys and girls. The ONB was placed under the supervision of provincial committees and it was also given its own rigid command structure, leading down through at least five ranks from *caposquadra* to humble cadet. ONB had a pyramid structure and teachers and members of the MVSN were assisted by priests and military chaplains concentrating on local and provincial discipline. The MVSN had the primarily task of preparing the young for party membership through pre-military training. From its foundation, parents were pressured into enlisting their children into the ONB. The ONB was the first step towards the fascistisation of new generations and it meant the beginning of the process of forming a national youth organisation allied with the Fascist movement. The ONB managed out-of-school activities for youngsters aged between 6 and 21. The perfecting of the functioning of the organisation coincided with the act of banning any alternative ‘free time’ groups – the original lay ‘scouts’ were suppressed in 1927, whereas the Catholic scouting organisation called *Esploratori* went into voluntary dissolution in 1928.<sup>530</sup>

The Catholic youth group had nearly half a million members at the beginning of the regime. However, there was a significant decrease in its headcount in 1928 due to the dissolution of the *Esploratori* and other sporting organisations. Only three catholic youth organisations remained operative on a national level: Catholic Action (AC), the Italian

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<sup>530</sup> For the Catholic scout movement see M. Sica, *Storia dello scoutismo in Italia* (Scandicci: La Nuova Italia, 1987).

Catholic University Student Federation (FUCI), and the Catholic Graduate Association.<sup>531</sup> It was Catholic Action that caused the most concern for Fascist authorities because it was among the youth that it had its greatest recruiting success.

### **3.2 Church and State Relations after the Signing of the Concordat (1929-1936)**

In Venice province, like in many other Italian provinces, the Catholics experienced harassment, violence and limitation of freedom. However, as argued by the Venetian *federale* Suppiej in 1928, the relations between the Church and the State were “formally” good.<sup>532</sup> As we have previously seen, the tendency, or more concisely, the strategy of the Patriarch La Fontaine was to collaborate with the government and to be “always” supportive of the PNF from the beginning of the regime.<sup>533</sup> In 1929 the time had come to make a step forward in these relations and officially finalise the details of the cohabitation between Catholics and Fascists. By 1929 the Fascist Regime had virtually completed the development of its structures: a one-state, a secret police state, led by a charismatic leader. As an essential part of this process Mussolini had defeated the most intransigent wing of the party led by local *ras*, and had reduced them to a subordinate role in the structure of the Regime. As Pollard has written, “In fact the history of the period 1925-29 is in large part a history of the process by which Mussolini eliminated the resistance of the Fascist movement to measures by which he achieved a stable entente with these institutions”.<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 121.

<sup>532</sup> See Bau-Furio-Monaco, ‘Il Veneto nei rapporti di Mussolini’, 125-178.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>534</sup> Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism*, 10.



Fascist anti-clericalism lost considerable ground inside the Fascist Party and the resolution of the quarrel between State and Church in 1929, the so called *Conciliazione*, was a remarkable achievement for the Church and the Fascist state. With this agreement, Mussolini was trying to bring the Roman Catholic Church onto his side to get its support and give added credibility to his government. The Concordat guaranteed the sovereignty of the Catholic Church in Italy concerning all religious matters, but it also prohibited any sort of political activity. The Concordat was a move towards including those dark corners of the Italian society that had still been excluded from the political life of the country and it allowed Mussolini to propagandise himself as the ‘man of providence’ (Pius XI’s words) who resolved the ‘Roman Question’. The Church’s endorsement of Fascism helped to change the perception of the movement previously too heavily associated with violence.<sup>535</sup>

In a speech delivered at the Catholic University of Milan on 14 February 1929, Pius XI declared that the Concordat, and consequently Fascism, had “given to God back to Italy and Italy back God”.<sup>536</sup> The deal had led Pius XI to hail Mussolini as his “Man of Providence”.<sup>537</sup> The Concordat was welcomed with satisfaction by most Catholics and the Patriarch La Fontaine, who held a conciliatory position.<sup>538</sup> The concept of Providence recurred also in the speech of the Patriarch La Fontaine on the occasion of the celebration of the signature of the pact:

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<sup>535</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 182.

<sup>536</sup> Reported in BCS, Catalogo periodici, “Il Foglio d’Ordini”, 24 February 1937.

<sup>537</sup> G. Lentini, *Pio XI, l’Italia e Mussolini* (Rome: Città Nova Editrice, 2008), 53.

<sup>538</sup> E. Fattorini, *Hitler, Mussolini, and the Vatican: Pope Pius XI and the Speech That Was Never Made* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 29. See also A. Lazzaretto, *Il governo della Chiesa veneta tra le due guerre: atti e documenti delle conferenze episcopali venete e trivenete (1918-1943)* (Padua: Cleup, 2005).

We needed the commanding word of Providence that ordered at the opportune moment: Let There Be Light! The word was pronounced and light there was. Two men it (Providence) linked together. On one side the Pope Pius XI, on the other side the man indeed called by Providence, the *Duce*. Do you not see how Providence led to it? (...) The spiritual authority of the Pope that might have been cancelled from the earth, is emerging strong and reinforced for the good of Christianity and the Nation.<sup>539</sup>

This was not surprising, coming from La Fontaine, who was said to have been “instrumental in the diplomatic negotiations between Church and State leading up to the 1929 conciliation and again during the 1931 ‘crisis’ to prevent any official rupture between the regime and the papacy”.<sup>540</sup>

As a consequence of the Concordat, Catholic Action thought they could co-exist with Fascist youth organisations and might be able to use Fascism to restore Catholic influence and power over the Italian population. Immediately after the signature of the Lateran Pacts, as reported by the local bulletin of the Venice Diocese, Catholic Action had to be

...of support for the Church; it is an instrument in the hands of the Ecclesiastic Hierarchy to spread the word, and therefore to bring the benefit of our divine religion to every corner of the society. (...) The collaboration [with the State] (...) will never have political scope like that of a party. (...) However, this does not mean that we will not be able, on an individual basis, to collaborate in political affairs.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> *La Conciliazione fra la S.Sede e l'Italia 11 Febbraio 1929*, in *Bollettino diocesano del Patriarcato di Venezia*, XIV, April 1929, 3, 44.

<sup>540</sup> Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice*, 44.

<sup>541</sup> *Dopo la Conciliazione: L'Azione Cattolica e la sua collaborazione*, in *Bollettino diocesano del Patriarcato di Venezia*, XIV, April 1929, 3, 62.

The attempt of the Church to educate youth clashed with the regime's project to monopolise education in the attempt to give birth to the 'new Fascist man'. As Colarizi argued, "the impossible coexistence of two exclusive faiths opened a chasm between the regime and the Church which was in theory unbridgeable".<sup>542</sup>

Although appealing to the Catholic electorate, Mussolini always looked at the Catholic movement as a political and social force that stood in his way, as well as Socialism. As Kertzer suggested, "at the local level, this obstruction included Catholic Action groups — groups of Catholic laymen and women engaged in religious activity under ecclesiastical supervision — and various Catholic cooperatives".<sup>543</sup> Under the supervision of Catholic Action, newspapers, workers and student organisations, but more importantly Catholic educational institutions flourished. Mussolini was obsessed with achieving the monopoly of youth education; this would have clearly meant the possibility for the movement to breed the 'Fascists of tomorrow'. The issue was expressed clearly by a Mussolini in a speech of the 1929: "The child, as soon as it is able to learn, belongs to the State and to the State alone".<sup>544</sup> The hope that Catholics could openly discuss economic and social issues, or that they could simply reinforce their lay organisations such as Catholic Action, was therefore illusory.

The growth of Catholic Action constituted a serious threat for the regime regarding its newly acquired hegemony over Italian youth. In June 1929, Mussolini instructed prefects to monitor the clergy and the activities of Catholic Action, showing that he did not believe that

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<sup>542</sup> Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani*, 116.

<sup>543</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 28.

<sup>544</sup> P. B. Quattrocchi, *Al di sopra dei Gagliardetti: l'Arcivescovo Schuster: un asceta benedettino nella Milano dell'era fascista* (Milan: Marietti, 1985), 154.

the problem of youth organisations had been entirely resolved by signing the Concordat.<sup>545</sup> Even the president of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, Renato Ricci, explained to Mussolini that the Church “[had been explaining] the Gospel every Sunday for twenty centuries, consider[ing] blasphemy any other interpretation”.<sup>546</sup>

Vigilance came in the form of an investigation by the *carabinieri* into the activities of the Church in July 1929. The earliest police files on Catholic Action date back to 1927 when the Ministry of the Interior first instructed prefects to collect data on the numerical strength of catholic organisations in their provinces. The prefect of Venice executed the first report in 1929, which was followed by a second one in 1931. Similar inquiries were performed in other provinces as well, which clearly tended to highlight the presence of *popolari* among both the rank and file and leadership cadres of Catholic Action. The findings cannot have been unexpected, since many *popolari* continued working inside Catholic Action after the demise of the Popular Party in 1926 without ever abandoning their democratic and reforming approach. As it was reported, “the spies of the regime were everywhere, in the churches, in oratories, in the Catholic circles, in the FUCI, in the bishoprics and naturally inside the Vatican. And the opinions collected are generally not favourable to Fascism. (...) The development of a creeping anti-Fascism is more than suspected in the spring of 1930”.<sup>547</sup> More than anti-Fascism, the regime was worried by the progressive detachment of Catholic public opinion, especially in the ‘white regions’<sup>548</sup> where Fascism had encountered resistance in its attempt at penetration. This was the case of the Veneto and the province of Venice.

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<sup>545</sup> For a general overview on the relationship between fascism, the Pope and the Vatican State see P. Scoppola, *La Chiesa e il Fascismo: documenti e interpretazioni* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1973).

<sup>546</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Renato Ricci to Benito Mussolini, 20 January 1932.

<sup>547</sup> Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani*, 118.

<sup>548</sup> B. Jenkins-S. A. Sofos (ed.), *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 170.

Here, compared with the almost complete destruction of the socialist and communist organisations, Catholic organisations were characterised by an extraordinary degree of strength and vitality which constituted a real threat for the regime. Catholicism could still be a political threat as it could count on a dense network of clubs and associations, welfare and youth organisations, a flourishing and influential Catholic press, and members who were ideologically oriented to the defence of the Catholic faith and institutions against the intrusion of the state. Catholic expansion in the Province of Venice sparked growing intolerance among Party organisers. In Venice Province, the anti-Catholic-Action campaign was sanctioned by Giuriati who was also governing the national Party between October 1930 and December 1931. The conflict began at the beginning of the 1931 in the newspapers as the local Fascist press acted in accordance with the Party line, accusing Catholic Action of political activity.<sup>549</sup> The impression provided by the prefect about the Venetian Catholic organisations warned the party that Catholic Action's ranks were increasingly moving towards forms of non-political organisations, which, however, could suddenly become political.<sup>550</sup> A report had identified that the people involved in the Catholic movement of the Venetian diocese were largely professionals and traders in the city of Venice, whereas the members linked to the labour movement were predominantly peasants who represented the real social base of the movement.<sup>551</sup> In April 1931, the *federale* Giorgio Suppiej requested a report on the local Catholic organisations' activity from all the local Fascist secretaries of the province. Local Fascist secretaries informed him that local Catholic groups had a generally negative attitude towards the regime, being highly influenced by the local priests.<sup>552</sup> In Musile di Piave, the

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<sup>549</sup> Tramontin, *Cattolici, popolari e Fascisti*, 257-261.

<sup>550</sup> See the reports sent by the prefect held in ACS, SPD, b.33.

<sup>551</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 20 June 1932.

<sup>552</sup> Tramontin, *Cattolici, popolari e Fascisti*, 318.

local Fascist secretary complained that “the farmers care more about the priests than about us”.<sup>553</sup> In Fossò, subversives were among the members of the Catholic organisations, those who “could not frontally attack Fascism anymore and try to attack it from the rear”.<sup>554</sup> The local secretaries of San Stino di Livenza, Martellago, Chioggia and Strà simply reported the vast presence of former *popolari* among the ranks of the Catholic Action. The local fiduciary of Scorzè had noted the reluctance of the members of the Catholic youth groups to join the *Balilla*.<sup>555</sup>

It was the dynamism of the Catholic youth organisations which was the most worrying aspect for the regime. The youth branches of the Venetian Catholic Action had their greatest recruiting success in 1931, when the number of official members of the organisation reached 8,520 while only a tiny minority of them had also enrolled in Fascist organisations.<sup>556</sup> This confirmed the national trend which saw 83 % of the *Uomini cattolici*; 67 % of the Catholic youth, 88 % of Catholic Women, and 100 % of the university students not holding PNF membership.<sup>557</sup> Fascists’ frustration with the strong Catholic youth local support provoked a series of clashes. Violent acts of intimidation against young Catholics, principally from members of the GUF, were initially reported in early May 1931.<sup>558</sup> The escalation of the conflict provoked the prefect’s cancellation of the Council of Ephesus celebration organised by the Patriarch La Fontaine for 27 May 1931. The ceremony was meant to be performed with the Patriarch surrounded by young Catholics marching and wearing the yellow ribbons

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<sup>553</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>554</sup> Ibidem, 319.

<sup>555</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>556</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 13 June 1931. It was true that, until the passing of the *Carta della Scuola* (School Charter) in 1939, it was technically possible to avoid membership of the ONB.

<sup>557</sup> F. Pronotari (ed.), *Nuova antologia*, Vol. 533 (Rome: Direzione della Nuova Antologia, 1978), 453.

<sup>558</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 5 May 1931.

which had been emblematic of the Catholic scout groups.<sup>559</sup> On 29 May 1931, Mussolini decided to outlaw all non-party youth groups and decreed the closure of Catholic youth circles, which resulted in a further deterioration of the relationship between the State and the Church. There were many clashes between Fascist and Catholic groups between the end of May and June 1931, which meant that incidents occurred in all provinces. In Venice Province, violence was engaged by the blackshirts and those belonging to the outspokenly anti-clerical university groups.<sup>560</sup> On 26 May 1931, a day before the dissolution of Catholic Action, young Venetian Fascists accosted catholic churchgoers and ripped their ribbon club signs off their jackets.<sup>561</sup> On the same day 30 students of the GUF stormed the Catholic university circle of Palazzo Morosini in Venice where 40 members and the spiritual assistant, priest Scarpa, were holding a meeting. Several chandeliers, chairs, tables, and other pieces of furniture were damaged.<sup>562</sup> A few days later, following the official termination of Catholic Action, groups of 50-100 young Venetian Fascists mostly belonging to the GUF tried to invade the 37 Catholic circles of the province. “They were able to penetrate (...) seven youth clubs (...) destroying furniture, chandeliers, shattering glass (...). They fought with thirty young Catholics and three of them were slightly injured (...).”<sup>563</sup> The attacks were justified by Mussolini who expressed his regret over “the manifestly parasitical attitude and hostility of some sectors of Catholic Action”.<sup>564</sup> Fascism was “absolutely determined not to tolerate a multi-colored anti-Fascist

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<sup>559</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Prefect Giovanni Battista Bianchetti to Minister of Interior, 5 May 1931. The prefect acted in order to prevent “the large concentration and deployment of Catholic youth forces which had never had similar precedent in Venice”.

<sup>560</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 30 May 1931.

<sup>561</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 26 May 1931.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>563</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 29 May 1931.

<sup>564</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Mussolini’s script with no date.

movement finding refuge and protection under either old or new flags”.<sup>565</sup> This document is really important as it shows that Catholics had a genuine agency which could contest Fascism. The process of shutting down the Catholic youth leagues took place in stages between May and September 1931. On 3 June 1931, the prefect of Venice communicated to Mussolini that he had closed 238 catholic youth groups.<sup>566</sup> Mussolini exhorted the ecclesiastical hierarchy “to overcome the old grudges and outdated ideologies of the Popular Party that had become the Catholic Action (...)”<sup>567</sup> as “the Fascist regime sincerely wants peace but is not afraid of war”. He made clear that when Fascism “goes to war it endures until the end with indomitable energy”<sup>568</sup>. Mussolini’s closure of Catholic Action triggered a united reaction of all the hierarchies of the Church. On 29 June 1931, Pope Pius XI defined Fascism as a “pagan worship of the State” and a “revolution that snatched the young from the Church and Jesus Christ, and which inculcates hatred, violence, and irreverence in its own young people”.<sup>569</sup> The regime drew intense criticism from the lower clergy, especially from those local priests who had always been suspicious about Fascism, such as the parish priest of Spinea, Eugenio Florian who actively participated in managing and building up the local Catholic youth groups. He defined the Fascists as “contemporary false prophets and Pharisees”.<sup>570</sup> The reaction of the local priests was vehement and not even the Patriarch La Fontaine renounced the publication of the encyclical *Non abbiamo bisogno* (We do not need) issued by Pope XI in June 1931 to condemn the crisis between State and Church.<sup>571</sup> The encyclical “protested that Catholic Action, both by its nature and essence and by our specific and

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<sup>565</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>566</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 3 June 1931.

<sup>567</sup> ACS, SPD, b. 33, Mussolini’s script titled *Appello al clero* with no date.

<sup>568</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>569</sup> J. J. Norwich, *The Popes: A History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), 418.

<sup>570</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 13 June 1931.

<sup>571</sup> See G. Vian, ‘Pietro La Fontaine’, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 63* (2004),

[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-la-fontaine\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-la-fontaine_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (Accessed: 19 september 2016).



categorical directives and dispositions, is outside and above any kind of political activity. (...) they said it had banners, badges and membership cards and all the external elements of a party. As if banners, badges and membership cards are not common to various associations nowadays”.<sup>572</sup>

The quarrel between the Church and State over Catholic Action was resolved by an agreement published on 2 September 1931 whereby the organisation was allowed to devote itself exclusively to providing spiritual education and caring for the religious needs of its members.<sup>573</sup> Mussolini’s directing and seeking to channel youth activities away from Catholic circles did not discourage Catholics from reorganising their movement. They were able to rebuild a dense network from the beginning of 1932. The restorative process was much faster in the Province of Venice than elsewhere, as some youth groups continued meeting the Patriarch La Fontaine covertly during the period of being banned from doing so. As was already reported by the prefect in June 1931, “the combative clerical element, after being a bit quiet apparently, now began to show signs of activity again”.<sup>574</sup> Having shrunk to slightly more than half of its earlier membership, Catholic youth circles reappeared in January 1932 and were able to attract 5,944 members (3,133 men and 2,811 women). Another noticeable aspect was that the majority had still not joined the regime’s organisations with only 104 members adhering to the Fascist Party.<sup>575</sup> This leads to the conclusion that the totalitarian grip of the Catholics sought by the Fascist Party through violence and military discipline ended up increasing Catholic resistance. Catholic discontent stemmed from the

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<sup>572</sup> *Lettera Enciclica del Santissimo Signor Nostro Papa Pio XI ai Venerabili Fratelli Patriarchi, Primate, Arcivescovi, Vescovi e altri Ordinati aventi pace e comunione con la Santa Apostolica: per l’Azione Cattolica*, in *Bollettino diocesano del Patriarcato di Venezia*, XVI, July 1931, 150.

<sup>573</sup> P. Dogliani, *Propaganda and Youth*, in Bosworth (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, 188.

<sup>574</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 15 June 1931.

<sup>575</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Venetian Prefecture to Minister of Interior, 20 January 1932.

policy of youth fascistisation conducted by the regime with even greater insistence after the plebiscites of March 1934 and December 1934, when military training became mandatory for the male population from the age of 18. As a matter of fact, local priests and youth organisers even discouraged the youth from joining the *Balilla*. In 1934, the local Fascist secretary of Scorzè was surprised that the posters bearing the effigy and some sayings of the Duce were removed by young Catholics on the instigation of priest Antonio Cercariolo whose aversion to the regime was widely known.<sup>576</sup> The note reported that Cercariolo “had always hindered the enrolment of children in the ONB and he had never attended official patriotic demonstrations. He propagandised among young people not to join the activities of the party, and conversely, he encouraged them to join organisations run by Catholic Action”.<sup>577</sup> Concurrently, the prefect also certified the re-building “of real scouting teams within the Venetian Catholic Action which are give the name of a saint”.<sup>578</sup> He added that in the previous months in Mirano, likewise “in other municipalities of the dioceses of Treviso, Venice, and Portogruaro, the clergy was more eager to increase the number of members of Catholic youth associations without trying to hinder Fascist organisations”.<sup>579</sup>

La Fontaine’s adherence to Fascism was more ambivalent than suggested by Renzo De Felice.<sup>580</sup> Until he died in 1935, like Pius XI, the Patriarch preferred to maintain some distance between the Church and matters of State and he was, above all, concerned with the preservation of the moral authority of the Church and the Pope. Despite the fact that the Church regarded the Fascist regime as the first line of defence against the possible socialist conquest of power, the State had to “respect the fundamental rights of the Church and of the

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<sup>576</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, MVSN to Minister of Interior, 5 April 1934.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>578</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 8, Prefect Guido Beer to Minister of Interior, 8 March 1934

<sup>579</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>580</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 129.

family over Christian education”. For the Pope “every educational and scholastic monopoly that obliges all families physically and morally to join the school of the State was unequal and illegal”.<sup>581</sup> “It was unlikely that La Fontaine was a devout Fascist as was his successor, Cardinal Piazza, who went as far to suggest the ‘inseparable unity’ of the ‘Christian tradition of the House of Savoy and the imperial power restored with the *fasci* of Rome””.<sup>582</sup> The real leap of quality in the Catholic adherence to the Fascist regime was found when the sanctions of the League of Nations were imposed against Italy. As Gerolamo Lino Moro suggested in his article in the Catholic newspaper *La Settimana Religiosa*, “the decision to starve a land that is ‘the mother of all knowledge and the cradle of all progress’ (...) pushes us to rally around the leader, in the belief that the embargo might produce the effect of bringing the nation to a more soberer and therefore more Christian lifestyle”.<sup>583</sup>

### **3.3 Sustainable Fascism? The Fascist University Groups (1927-1942)**

This section will examine the role of the so-called ‘second generation’ of young Fascists and their attitudes towards the regime. Considerable research has been devoted to the complex organisation of the Fascist Party in Italy. However, little interest has been shown in the history of the GUF (*Gruppi universitari Fascisti*) up to now. This is particularly surprising given that the GUF was the keystone of Fascist expansion into totalitarianism. Destined to take over the political and intellectual leadership of the nation, university students represented the elite of the middle class from which Fascism derived its social base. Young people were accorded a privileged position as it was especially important for the regime to generate a second generation of true young Fascist believers willing to succeed the ‘first hour’

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<sup>581</sup> ‘Allo Stato’, in *Bollettino diocesano del Patriarcato di Venezia*, XV, February 1930, 40.

<sup>582</sup> Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice*, 45.

<sup>583</sup> G. L. Moro, *Aggressione sanzionista*, “*La Settimana Religiosa*”, 10 November 1935.

Fascists. Those born between 1910 and 1920 formed a generation entirely grown up under Fascism and should theoretically have been most convinced by Fascist indoctrination.

Generally, this theme has been studied by paying little attention to the organisational and ideological instruments applied by the regime to establish a new generation of Fascists. In addition, the claim that the regime failed to fascistise university students has been used as the main evidence to prove that it was unable to create its own ruling class, thereby undermining its totalitarian ambition of regeneration through the Party. The explanation reduces the historical and political significance of the Fascist regime. Conversely, Italian historians like Luca La Rovere and Simone Durante have recently been scrutinising university groups with the precise aim of reconstructing the structure, formation, selection, and employment of the new political elite. La Rovere and Durante have substantially dismantled the traditional ‘memorialistic’ theory in which the young generation had rejected Fascism, and moreover, they argued that historians have intentionally underestimated the results of the fascistisation process of university students in order to rehabilitate the educated youth *en masse* and allow their reintegration into the democratic life of the country after the Second World War.<sup>584</sup>

Initially, the student groups were set up spontaneously and were greatly extended in the mid-1920s owing to Secretary Augusto Turati, who worked towards the absorption of pre-existing independently formed university groups.<sup>585</sup> During that period, the GUF had a weak national organisation with modest results in terms of recruitment. The steady decline in the number of students joining university groups during this period had two main reasons. Firstly,

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<sup>584</sup> On the GUF see S. Durante, *Lo spirito gregario: i gruppi universitari Fascisti tra politica e propaganda, 1930-1940* (Roma: Donzelli, 2008) and L. La Rovere, *Storia dei Guf: organizzazione, politica e miti della gioventù Fascista 1919-1943* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

<sup>585</sup> L. La Rovere, ‘Fascist Groups in Italian Universities: An Organization at the Service of the Totalitarian’, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 4, 3 (1999), 460-464.

there was the still persistent link of faculties with the former Liberal culture. Higher Education was still reliant on professors with marked Liberal backgrounds and therefore university education was still not a vehicle for Fascist cultural indoctrination. Most professors in Venice were old Liberals and some eminent ones like, Gino Luzzatto and Silvio Trentin, signed Benedetto Croce's anti-Fascist manifesto of intellectuals in 1925.<sup>586</sup> Secondly, students were by far the group holding the most radical positions within the movement, and they were largely purged from the Party by secretary Augusto Turati during his vast campaign of 'normalisation' of the party. For example, radical fascists were still looming large within the Venetian student movement. Until 1927, the Venetian GUF had been notably involved in clashes with the Catholic youth groups, and in violently manifesting criticism towards the hierarchies of Venice University. As was reported by Ferruccio Truffi, Director of the Venice Business School, in 1927, the protest was caused by the duration and contents of the courses. "The discontented (...) were led by a group of Fascist students",<sup>587</sup> and their secretary Pio Leoni expected the regime to grant them "the privileges afforded by the ministry in favour of ex-combatants".<sup>588</sup> As Truffi reported to Volpi, now Minister of Finance, on 1 June 1927:

When I entered the school I was greeted by uproars and whistles from a group of 50 students. (...) They protested for the publication of the new exams calendar and they said that they could not accept it. (...) Students walked away carrying on shouting, and then I knew that at the moment to leave the building some of them removed the calendar and they burnt it.<sup>589</sup>

The leaders of the attack were members of the Fascist university group. As Truffi reported:

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<sup>586</sup> Gino Luzzatto and Silvio Trentin decided to sign the Manifesto and were being forced to leave the Royal Business School.

<sup>587</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b. 31/b, Ferruccio Truffi to Giuseppe Volpi, 1 June 1927.

<sup>588</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>589</sup> Ibidem.

Discontent appeared suddenly in March, when a group of students expected that I violated the procedures in their favour, extending to them the concessions made by the Ministry in favour of the ex-combatants. For what has been reported to me then, the discontent of March was led by a group of students of the university Fascist group. (...) Some days later, I knew that during a meeting of the Fascist students [the secretary of the Fascist students group] affirmed that those concessions were made directly to him by the School Board.<sup>590</sup>

Truffi communicated to Volpi on 13 June 1927 that he had decided to close the school in order to avoid a new wave of violence. Truffi had already identified the secretary of the Fascist university group, Pio Leoni, as the political animator of the disorders. Truffi wrote:

Mr Pio Leoni secretary of the university Fascist students group, led the protest at least in its first phase and he aimed to obtain not only the modification of the exams calendar but also my resignation. Leoni sent me a letter that was, for its form and substance, really unpleasant, in which he wanted to impose on me new conditions not only from equal to equal but from superior to inferior.<sup>591</sup>

The appointment of the new Party secretary Turati, with his project of a ‘party like a Church’ in which the Party had to control all aspects of society, meant the removal of pockets of radicalism and independence within the Fascist movement and the integration of the youngest into the regime’s life.<sup>592</sup> The leader of the university students, Pio Leoni, had been expelled from the party and Turati appointed a party commissioner to re-establish order within the Venetian Business School of Ca’ Foscari. As we have seen in the first chapter, Turati made ample use of party commissioners to normalise the party at local level. Truffi was replaced by

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<sup>590</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>591</sup> ASUV, “Scatole lignee”, b. 31/b, Ferruccio Truffi to Giuseppe Volpi, 1 June 1927.

<sup>592</sup> See R. Chiarini, *L’armonia e l’ardimento. L’ascesa del fascismo nella Brescia di Augusto Turati* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988). For what concerns the organisation of the Party see A. Turati, *Il Partito e i suoi compiti* (Rome: Libreria del Littorio, 1928).

the Senator Davide Giordano who was appointed extraordinary commissioner for the period between 1927 and 1930. Giordano was a surgeon and a famous historian of medicine. He was a proud nationalist and one of the founders of the National Alliance together with Pietro Orsi and Giovanni Giuriati. Giordano had been Mayor of Venice between 1920 and 1923. In 1924 Giordano was appointed Senator.<sup>593</sup> Following Turati's national guidelines, during his first speech at the inauguration of the new academic year, Giordano immediately reaffirmed the centralising force of his figure as member of the regime. Giordano's intentions were to restore the authority of the regime at local level. He declared:

My first aim is to express my admiration and appreciation to prof. Truffi. (...) The surgeons tend to (...) prune the suspect branches so that the healthy will be not deprived of the support and they will not be contaminated (...). It is reasonable to impose pruning. (...) If someone tells you that my words are severe (...) do not believe in that. New times and the country are waiting for you (...) They solemnly need you to be virtuous citizens of this great Italy and to serve it with indefatigable study. Because only by studying does the spirit dominate the material and give life to the brute material. *Mens agitat molem* [The mind moves the matter]. (...) Many of you will have the magnificent responsibility to represent this Italy over the mountains and the oceans, so that it is no more a derided Italy called the 'country of the Carnival'.<sup>594</sup>

In a predominantly moderate environment like the province of Venice, the persistence of radicalism among Fascist university groups was a discouraging factor which prevented students having more moderate backgrounds from joining Fascist student organisations. For example, the Statute of FUCI had forbidden the members of the Catholic university group to join the GUF. The fact that FUCI members had been reluctant to join the GUF was also

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<sup>593</sup> Savino, *La nazione operante: Profili di ricostruttori*, 136.

<sup>594</sup> D. Giordano, *Relazione del R. Commissario dott. Davide Giordano Senatore del Regno su l'anno accademico 1926-1927*, in *Bollettino della Associazione Primo Lanzoni fra gli antichi studenti della R. Scuola superiore di commercio di Venezia* (Venice: Libreria Emiliana editrice, 1929), 7-20.

greatly influenced by the still high number of *popolari* among their ranks, but first and foremost, by the local hierarchies' concern regarding the preservation of the moral independence of the Church from political affairs, as the Patriarch La Fontaine aimed to do in Venice.<sup>595</sup> However, the fascistisation of the education system was realized between 1929 and the early 1930s. The process took many forms. First and foremost, the regime increased the political content of school courses including the study of the 'Fascist doctrine'. Secondly, the Grand Council decreed in March 1930 that all the faculty heads and the university rectors should be chosen from among those professors who had been member of the PNF for at least five years.<sup>596</sup>

Although Turati's course (1926-1930) had normalised the party and reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Party over the provincial Fascism, Carlo Scorza,<sup>597</sup> member of the Fascist Direttorio and *ras* of Lucca (Tuscany), appointed to direct the University Group in 1930, reported to Mussolini in July 1931 that worryingly, the university groups still possessed "complete autonomy (...) towards Fascist federations (...), with loss of prestige for both educational and Party hierarchies".<sup>598</sup>

It was under Achille Starace, the so-called 'mastiff of the revolution' and Party Secretary from 1931 to 1939, that Fascist youth organisations underwent an extraordinary expansion.<sup>599</sup> From this point of view Starace was much more effective than his predecessors Augusto Turati and Giovanni Giuriati and the expansion of the regime's youth organisations reached

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<sup>595</sup> S. Tramontin, 'Il Cardinal La Fontaine. Patriarca di Venezia e I Fascisti dopo la Marcia su Romà, in *Storia contemporanea*, 3(1979), 481-519.

<sup>596</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 63 and 66.

<sup>597</sup> See C. Rastrelli, *Carlo Scorza, l'ultimo gerarca* (Milan: Mursia, 2010).

<sup>598</sup> ACS, SPD, b.33, Carlo Scorza to Benito Mussolini, 11 July 1931.

<sup>599</sup> R. Festorazzi, *Starace. Il mastino della rivoluzione Fascista* (Milan: Mursia, 2002).



its peak between 1936 and 1940, concurrently with the growth of party membership from 2,027.440 to 3,169.846.<sup>600</sup> Starace developed a new strategy by assigning the PNF to control the *Gioventú Italiana del Littorio* in 1937. The organisation was created to replace the *Organizzazione Nazionale Ballilla*. Starace rearranged the entire Fascist youth movement along the lines of the Hitler Youth (*Hitler-Jugend*).<sup>601</sup> He was appointed Party Secretary primarily for his unquestioning and fanatical loyalty to Mussolini. Nonetheless, he managed to make the presence of the GIL in the Italian society remarkably influential and he also worked towards enhancing the maniacal ‘Myth of the Duce’ from an early age of children’s lives by staging massive parades and marches in favour of Mussolini. School propaganda was an important means of conveying the heroic image of the Duce. As it was reported by the Venetian girl Rita Ballarin in her primary school diary, teachers constantly promoted the image of Mussolini as a the man who pacified the country by rallying “the best fighters who had returned to their homes mutilated in the war, and they came together in a bundle led by the Duce heading for Rome. The king was pleased and gave the command of the homeland to the Duce, so since 28 October 1922 Italy has always been walking towards the good”.<sup>602</sup>

Starace not only focused on familiarising children with *Mussolinismo*. He also targeted his attention on creating an authentic Fascist ruling class able to take positions of responsibility within the PNF. Starace worked towards expanding the movement by investing in the GUF half of the budget assigned to the PNF.<sup>603</sup> From 1932 onwards, elite university students could participate in the so-called *Littoriali dello Sport* (Lictors’ Sporting Games). The *Littoriali della Cultura e dell’Arte* (Lictors’ Culture and Arts Games) were

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<sup>600</sup> Baris, *Consent, Mobilisation, and Participation*, 79.

<sup>601</sup> For a comparison, see De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*.

<sup>602</sup> Private Archive of Paolo Voltolina, Diario di Scuola di Rita Ballarin – 1934, 28 October 1934.

<sup>603</sup> La Rovere, ‘Fascist Groups in Italian Universities’, 469-470.

announced the following year and the Venetian GUF's *Il Ventuno* became the official national newspaper reporting on the cultural and arts games. In 1932, the board of *Il Ventuno* described their work as a literary and cultural *avant-garde*. Later, the journal became "the official magazine of *Littoriali* of Sport, Culture, Art and Labour" appointed to record the events and results of competitions.<sup>604</sup> The *Il Ventuno* forged high profile figures both in the cultural and political fields. Francesco Pasinetti, the founding father of *Il Ventuno*, was the first Italian student who graduated with a thesis topic about the history of cinema, Armando Boscolo was responsible for writing articles on sports, and thus he became a successful sports journalist. 605

It was the *Littoriali* competitions that could serve best to illustrate the centrality that Fascism now gave to physical strength. As *Il Ventuno* reported, sport was the privilege of a few amateurs before the Fascist Revolution,<sup>606</sup> whereas it was popularised and made accessible to a wider public under the regime. This meant that even the tiny desolate village of Concordia Sagittaria in the eastern part of the province of Venice could establish its annual cycling competition.<sup>607</sup> As some clandestine anti-Fascist leaders admitted, sports remained the most effective means of neutralising and indoctrinating youth. Especially by the mid-1930s, it was difficult to distinguish sports from military training with youth embracing such kinds of virile sports as marching, boxing, shooting, or hard individual sports such as cycling and alpinism. Although sports became increasingly popular also among the Venetian lower classes, activities involving literature, art, cinema, fashion, and consumer items that were advertised in the official GUF newspaper *Il Ventuno*, remained practically confined to the middle and

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<sup>604</sup> ASUV, "Il Ventuno", July 1936, 2.

<sup>605</sup> M. Reberschak (ed.), *La scoperta del cinema: Francesco Pasinetti e la prima tesi di laurea sulla storia del cinema* (Rome: Luce, 2012).

<sup>606</sup> ASUV, "Il Ventuno", December 1936, 4.

<sup>607</sup> U. Perissinotto, "Sull'astro della miseria". *Un paese e la dittatura. Concordia 1923-1939* (Trieste: Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione nel Friuli-Venezia Giulia, 1999), 169-170.

upper middle class elite. The most educated members of the upper middle and upper youth classes found an entity in the regime that supported their social expectations and interests about nationalistic themes, physical and paramilitary activities. In Venice province, many nationalist upper-middle and upper class clubs and their leadership had already declared their support for physical and paramilitary education. Even though the *Littoriali* succeeded in obtaining the passive consent of the Italian bourgeoisie and mobilising the upper-middle and upper classes of the province, they struggled to evangelise the Venetian working class in which the myth of the new man failed to resonate. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Venetian workers' parties thought that any kind of sports activity was "a disguised form of nationalism and irredentism (...) a war cry, a snare and delusion for those committed to the brotherhood of people". According to Elia Musatti, the first Socialist deputy in Venice, elected for five consecutive legislatures from 1909 to 1929 and very popular among the proletariat, workers should have rejected sports as they did not match the interests of the proletariat. Consequently, nationalism, irredentism, and sporting activities were condemned in socialist youth branches and Musatti "harshly criticised those better-off youths in the City (of Venice) who for decades had been involved in modern sports, target shooting, gymnastics, basketball, cycling, rowing, and football being evident examples".<sup>608</sup> Under Fascism, with none of this socialist counter-propaganda, sport could be used to 'nationalise' young workers. As Corner argued "for most young people, youth, educational, and sporting organisations would be the principal point of contact with the regime, but there would be a radical difference for those who left school at thirteen or fourteen (the vast majority) and those who carried on to a higher level".<sup>609</sup> Generally, Italian working teenagers were forced to perform manual labour in fields or factories; therefore, they tended to flee the organisations of the

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<sup>608</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 70.

"Il Gazzettino", 2 May 1911.

<sup>609</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 176.

regime. What shed additional light on the attitude of the working class towards physical and paramilitary activities was an internal study of the GIL completed in May 1939 which highlighted the regime's inability to contact many young people in the *Mezzogiorno* and the most rural corners in the North of Italy.<sup>610</sup>

Popular sports such as football, alpinism and cycling became more available for the lower classes through the Fascist *Dopolavoro*, although sports still remained an activity for better-off young. The *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND) was set up with the aim of involving and mobilising masses in favour of the Fascist regime and involving people in a countless number of events. The events were often jointly organised by the OND and GIL, (*Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*), also co-operating with Fascist university groups. The OND proposed a series of activities: theatrical dramas, excursions, visits, and sport events. Participation was sometimes compulsory as in the case of the public clerks of Chioggia, whereas in the countryside it was rather an occasion for the community to come.<sup>611</sup> The Venetian OND in conjunction with the GIL, focused on re-educating the new generation about seafaring culture which had made most of the city's fortunes at the time of the *Serenissima*. This happened by assigning young people to manage cultural, recreational, and sport events. For instance, the NUF (*Nucleo Universitario Fascista*) of Chioggia was directly responsible for organising the local 'Fish Festival' (*Sagra del Pesce*), which was established for the first time in 1938 in order to support the regime's autarkic propaganda. The opening of the ceremony was chaired by the Duke of Genoa and the Minister Edmondo Rossoni. As reported by booklet of the event sponsored by the local NUF and the OND:

You, foreigner, who come to Chioggia for this 'Fish Festival', think that the event has been organised

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<sup>610</sup> Baris, *Consent, Mobilisation, and Participation*, 82.

<sup>611</sup> Scarpa-Ravagnan, *Chioggia nel '900*, 93-94.

not only to eat the fresh fish cooked by the *chioggiotti* (people from Chioggia) (...), but the event has also been arranged, first and foremost, to promote the most glorious fleet of the world that first understood the directives of the *Duce*: (...) having all the coasts at our disposal, we have to realise complete autarky in the field of fishing.<sup>612</sup>

The regime insisted on the Venetian identity with a particular reference to the ‘return to the sea’. As quoted in F. Mariani-F. Stocco-G. Crovato, *La reinvezione di Venezia: tradizioni cittadine negli anni ruggenti*, “youth and adults had to be educated to the seafaring life and a new generation steeped in the ancient and eminent traditions of the city (...) had to be formed. (...) The seafaring tradition of the *Dominante*, which had to be known and remembered by all the citizens, was revitalised by the Fascist organisations and the sports clubs thanks to the picturesque regatta”.<sup>613</sup> For example, on 19 August 1939, the NUF of Chioggia was able to organise a magnificent regatta from Chioggia to Venice with 400 traditional boats (*bragozzi*). Giuseppe Volpi chaired the event supported by the attendance of both the Italian and German Ministers for People’s Culture, Dino Alfieri and Joseph Goebbels. The presence of Volpi at such kinds of events was not unusual as the Venetian GUF could obtain financial support from the ‘Venetian Group’ (*Gruppo Veneziano*) of industrialists backing Volpi.<sup>614</sup> The use of the GUF was not confined by Starace to creating the structure of training concerning the new ruling class. The feeling of being an already active element of a new ruling class was expressed by Armando Boscolo, the local secretary of the university group of Chioggia:

Education has finally found a solid place within the regime as Fascism wants to train its future leaders.

Those young already been called to hold positions of responsibility in GIL and the Party, they will

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<sup>612</sup> NUF di Chioggia (ed.), *La sagra del pesce: Chioggia 19-20-21 Agosto XVII, Numero unico* (Rovigo: coi tipi dello Ster, 1939).

<sup>613</sup> F. Mariani-F. Stocco-G. Crovato, *La reinvezione di Venezia: tradizioni cittadine negli anni ruggenti* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2007), 35-36.

<sup>614</sup> See ASUV, “Scatole lignee”, b 31 and b.31/A.

not be going to be only ‘future’ bosses (*capi*) of the lazy bourgeoisie. On the contrary, they will be the vanguard that precede the small mass of students (*goliardi*) who are going to realise the Mussolinian motto of ‘make way for youth’ in everyday life.<sup>615</sup>

The vital role that the GUF had in the life of the party under Starace was also confirmed by Venetian *federale* Suppiej who reported that the party’s management was heavily influenced by “the disproportionate number of activities carried out by the university group (...)”.<sup>616</sup> Documents regarding the Venetian GUF confirm that this trend did not change in the following years.<sup>617</sup> The Venetian secretary of the GUF, Gianluigi Dorigo, wrote to Chancellor Lanzillo in 1938, hoping that Ca’ Foscari could “adequately” finance the Venetian GUF due to the importance of their action, initiatives and especially for their contribution to developing “the integral education of the Fascist university students as the DUCE required.”<sup>618</sup> Several elements indicate that the Venetian *gufini*, other Italian Fascist students, considered themselves the embodiment of the regime during the 1930s and they also hoped to take over the leadership of the country in order to carry on with the project set out by Mussolini. Unsurprisingly, this belief of the *gufini* sparked confrontation with all those who were critical of Fascist integralism. Having been educated entirely within the framework of the regime, the *gufini* were among the most ardent supporters of the Fascist totalitarian project. Therefore, any reluctance to deliver the regime’s messages by the regime provoked their institutional criticism as well. For example, criticism arose regarding the rector Agostino Lanzillo towards the end of the 1930s. Agostino Lanzillo was appointed rector of the Royal Advanced Institute of Economics and Commerce in Venice in 1935 and remained in charge

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<sup>615</sup> NUF (ed.), *La sagra del pesce: Chioggia*.

<sup>616</sup> ACS, PNF, b.28, Giorgio Suppiej to Minister of Interior, 11 August 1933.

<sup>617</sup> ASUV, “Scatole lignee”, b. 28, Secretary of Venetian GUF Gianluigi Dorigo to Rector Agostino Lanzillo, 1 September 1938.

<sup>618</sup> ASUV, “Scatole lignee”, b. 28, Secretary of Venetian GUF Gianluigi Dorigo to Rector Agostino Lanzillo, 1 September 1938.

until 1939. At the beginning of his career he was a revolutionary syndicalist, but later on he became a close collaborator of Giuseppe Bottai and contributor to the journal *Critica Fascista*, which was founded and edited by Bottai himself from 1923 to 1943. The journal sparked the cultural debate on the future ruling class. *Critica Fascista* also focused on the interactions between Fascism, youth, and society. Furthermore, the publication rallied the critical vanguard (*fronda*) within Fascism, insisting on reforming the State and society. Lanzillo was appointed a few months before the appointment of Bottai as Minister for National Education. His directorate seems to have been characterised by the increasing instability of the relations between the GUF and the members of the Royal Institute, which was probably due to his critical stance on the failure of the economic and social policies of the regime.

The organisation of *Littoriali* provided the opportunity for young Fascists to express their criticism of Lanzillo's work, and such situations sometimes escalated into real institutional clashes. For example, Lanzillo called the secretary of the GUF to order in 1938 because "when someone is connected to the Royal Institute, certain indispensable forms shall be maintained".<sup>619</sup> Lanzillo also complained about not having been invited to the *Littoriali* of cinema organised by the Venetian GUF.<sup>620</sup> The rector was also criticised for his "pliable" attitude towards professors not completely aligned with the regime. More specifically, Lanzillo was accused of tolerating anti-Fascist professors within the institute. A striking example was the case of Italo Siciliano, an expert on French studies and professor of French language and literature, who became rector of Ca' Foscari in 1953. Siciliano received anonymous threats (later identified to have been sent by members of the GUF) that focused on the anti-Fascist nature of his political views, and likewise, Lanzillo was targeted as well

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<sup>619</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>620</sup> Ibidem.

for tolerating Siciliano's anti-Fascist stance. Fascist students knew "the (political) likes and dislikes of the professor very well".<sup>621</sup> The *gufini*'s main demand was for a generational change in order to give a boost to the Fascist revolution. Even though the youth valourisation campaign of the regime was launched in 1934, the number of students in responsible positions began to rise dramatically with Italy's entrance into the war, reaching a peak of 10,776 students (equivalent to about 8 % of all the students enrolled in the GUF) in 1941. In Venice province, this process was slower due to the solidity of the traditional local elite power and the tendency to an internal co-opting. Therefore, it was only in 1942 that the Venetian party saw the first *gufino* to be appointed *federale* of the Province of Venice.<sup>622</sup> The widespread intransigent behaviour of the Venetian *gufini* and their criticism of the institutions of the regime seems to confirm that the regime reached its goal of educating a second integral generation of Fascists in the province of Venice. In agreement with La Rovere and Duranti, the present thesis also aims to dismantle the long-standing proposition accredited by the memoirs and historiography of the GUF and supported by De Grand, which holds that the infiltration of discontent of the late 1930s "took on an air of *fronde* as the young Fascists engaged in their own generational warfare against an ageing Fascist political class".<sup>623</sup> What emerges from this work is that young people demanded generational change motivated by their resolute political faith in Fascism which indeed brought about situations that occasionally led to real institutional criticism. They invariably aimed to continue the 'Fascist revolution'. Although historians have questioned whether the critical propositions of the *gufini* towards the regime really constituted a form of hidden anti-Fascism or not, there is no doubt that young Fascists during the closing years of the 1930s were calling for a better and

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<sup>621</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b.32/A bis, Anonymous letter to Rector Agostino Lanzillo, 10 August 1938.

<sup>622</sup> Gustavo Piva former Secretary of the Padua GUF and prominent anti-semitic campaigner among the university students.

<sup>623</sup> De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, 68.



reformed Fascism.<sup>624</sup> In my view, extending the search concerning the origins of the new anti-Fascism to all university students was often inappropriate, even though it constituted a specific objective of a tiny minority. Despite post-war reminiscences contributing to the emergence of the idea that youth were gradually abandoning the activities of the GUF in order to join the militant anti-Fascist groups, it remains an interpretation that can only be considered retrospectively.<sup>625</sup> Furthermore, this way of understanding the course of events can be explained by the post-war political necessity to rehabilitate a generation educated under the regime, in order to enable their reinsertion into democratic life.

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<sup>624</sup> Corner, *The Fascist Party*,

<sup>625</sup> R. Zanigrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo: contributo alla storia di una generazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962).

## 4. The Venetian Jewish Community under Fascism (1922-1944)

### Introduction

This chapter will discuss the racial campaign launched by Benito Mussolini against Italian Jews between 1938 and 1943. This section will investigate the origins of the Fascist Race Laws, discussing the influence of the colonial ventures of the regime in Africa and Middle East on the development of race legislation within the Fascist regime. In order to do that our analysis will begin with the success achieved by Mussolini in Ethiopia in 1936. The discussion will provide a serious challenge to the established narrative of the ‘Good Italian’, which involved the fallacious assumption that the Italian Race Laws did not constitute a serious threat for Italian Jews because they were not completely enforced and could be easily evaded.<sup>626</sup> The chapter will discuss the racial campaign until 1943, when Italy was occupied by the Nazis. It will demonstrate that the implementation of the Race Laws was also influenced, but not officially encouraged, by the progressively closer relationship between Mussolini and Hitler after the Pact of Steel in 1939, which formally ratified the pact of friendship, and military and political alliance, between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

The Italian historian Renzo De Felice was the first historian to draw attention to the severity of Italian Race Laws. His study, *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*, was based on extensive research conducted in Italian Fascist archives as well as the study of Italian Jewish primary sources. The first edition of the monograph was published in Italian in 1961 and revised in 1993. However, De Felice’s book was for a long time confined to the Italian language audience. The author’s work had a limited international circulation as an English

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<sup>626</sup> M. A. Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy: Mussolini’s Race Laws, 1938-1943* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

language translation only appeared forty years after the original and after the author's death in 1996.<sup>627</sup> However, the study of the Italian Jewish Community under Fascism (in the English language) progressed significantly between the late 1970s and the late 1980s with the research of Meir Michaelis, who documented the relations between the Fascist and Nazi regime with regard to the development of the anti-Semitic campaign.<sup>628</sup> Michaelis argued that Fascist Italy's embracing of racism was determined by Mussolini alone. Italian Race Laws were not forced on him by Hitler nor by the radical racist wing of the Fascist Party. With this contention, Michaelis refuted De Felice's tendency to put the blame for antisemitism and the Holocaust in Italy on the country's German occupiers during the later stages of the Second World War, leaving the Italian people and Mussolini relatively free of guilt (the myth of the 'Good Italian'). By the 1990s, the work of a new generation of historians such as Michele Sarfatti and Liliana Fargioni Picciotto shed further new light on the topic (in the English language too), extending the debate to an international audience. They established that anti-Jewish policies in Fascist Italy began earlier than had previously been accepted in the historical literature. Michele Sarfatti's *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from Equality to Persecution* established that the Fascist regime waged a debilitating campaign against Italian Jews during the period 1938-1943 and therefore before the Nazi occupation of Italy in September 1943. This placed Mussolini at the head of a puppet Fascist state known as the Republic of Salò and the Nazis, in collaboration with Mussolini's republic, implemented their

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<sup>627</sup> For the main debate see J. D. Zimmerman (ed.), *The Jews of Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922–1945* (New York-Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-10. For De Felice, see the work R. De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962).

<sup>628</sup> M. Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy, 1922–1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978) and S. Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

‘Final Solution’ on Italian soil.<sup>629</sup> The Italian Race Laws in certain respects went further than the initial German equivalent of 1933 which had primarily regulated miscegenation and mixed marriages. In contrast, the Italian Laws ruled that Jews could no longer join the military service; they were banned from any state employment and from owning businesses, land or urban buildings. They also contained specific provisions relating to revocation of Italian citizenship from those who had obtained it after 1919. In addition, Susan Zuccotti and Alexander Stille, alongside the German historian Klaus Voigt, were among the first to establish that the Italian regime’s attitude toward Jewish refugees in 1933–45 was considerably less friendly than previous studies had claimed.<sup>630</sup>

Regional studies have already discussed the ‘Jewish Question’ from a local perspective and these include books by Fabio Levi for the case of Turin, Enzo Collotti for Tuscany and Silvia Bon for the account of Trieste in the North East. The Venice archives offer no great surprises. Sources are generally consistent with the picture at the national level. An examination of the Race Laws and a comparison with other northern communities reveals a number of similarities, but also some interesting differences. These differences can be understood as a result of the differing size and composition of the relevant communities; of differences in regional history and culture: of more geographical factors, like proximity to the border (accounting in part for the large number of foreign Jews in Turin and Trieste). Different levels of organisation in the Jewish communities were also important factors. Some

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<sup>629</sup> See M. Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), L. Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria: Gli ebrei deportati dall’Italia* (Milan: Mursia, 1991) and S. Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>630</sup> For Voigt, see K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, Vol. I (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1993) and K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, Vol. II (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1996)

of these differences relate to factors such as the size and wealth of the Jewish community, the level of commercial competition, and the organisation and priorities of the local Fascist Party. This research will provide some opportunities for significant comparisons with the communities of Turin, Trieste and Ferrara. The chapter will highlight the differences between the communities with regard to the implementation of the Race Laws and thus revealing how they impacted on the local economy of Venice province. This will allow us to demonstrate that Venetian Jews were holding important positions within the local economy, and it will investigate close links of the economically powerful sections of the Jewish community with local Fascist leaders such as Giuseppe Volpi.

The question of Italians' participation in the Fascist campaign of racism deserves further exploration. Therefore, this chapter on the Venetian Jewish community is meant not only to serve as survey of the measures taken against Venetian Jews after 1938, but also as a reconsideration of the question of the popular support for Mussolini's race campaign. The chapter will focus on the local Jewish community, the dynamics of integration within Venetian society and the crucial role Jews played in various Venetian social and interest groups. It will analyse the effect of the Race Laws on the Venetian Jewish community, the reaction of local people and the way in which Fascists and elites responded to the persecution of Jewish citizens.

The principal source material will be the police and prefectural reports held in the *Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza*; they will be supplemented by a variety of secondary sources. The aim is to explore the behaviour of police, prefects, Fascist organisations and ordinary Venetians which would be difficult to measure at the national level. At the same time, this chapter aims to point out that Fascist anti-Semitism was not

shaped according to Nazi racial laws, but on an autonomous basis, following previous racial legislation introduced in Abyssinia by the colonial government. The argument of this chapter will dismantle the post-war myth of the ‘Good Italian’ which proved to be important in minimising the extent of the impact and the implementation of the Race Laws in Italy. Thus, it will demonstrate the culpability of the Fascist regime and local Fascists in persecuting Jews. Furthermore, it will show that despite awareness of the ongoing Holocaust, Italian military and civilian authorities supported the Germans in deporting Jews from Venice.

## **4.1 From the Ethiopian Campaign to the Publication of the Racial**

### **‘Manifesto’ in 1938**

Arguably, the Mediterranean and North African colonial ventures of the Fascist regime were crucial in influencing the racial turn which was established in Italy after the promulgation of the Race Laws. Almost simultaneously with the anti-Jewish campaign, the regime was heavily involved in an expansionist campaign in Africa to conquer Ethiopia and Somalia in order to integrate them with the previous colonial possessions in Libya. The ‘civilising’ mission implemented by Mussolini in the colonies which turned into a genocidal colonialism carried out under the regime, appeared to have been increasingly implemented with a racist vision in mind.<sup>631</sup> The conquest of Ethiopia underlined the racial distinctions between the ‘white Italian soldiers’ and the ‘African natives’.<sup>632</sup> Imperial expansion – together with the increasing phenomenon of racial mixing, which was a political embarrassment for the regime – occasioned a new body of legislation, the laws for the protection of the Italian race in the colonies which for the most part predated the Race Laws against Jews. The colonial laws and the Race Laws inevitably shared a number of common

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<sup>631</sup> I. Law, *Mediterranean Racisms: Connections and Complexities in the Racialization of the Mediterranean Region* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

<sup>632</sup> See J. Andall-D. Duncan, *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005).

principles, including prohibition of interracial and extramarital relationships, and other provisions designed to preserve the dominant role of the white Christian Italians and prevent races mixing which was considered morally and racially dangerous. The colonial laws shared certain ideological assumptions with the Race Laws and were presented as part of a common program on both an intellectual and propaganda level.<sup>633</sup>

Therefore, these Mediterranean and North African colonial ventures appear to have influenced the racial rule which had been established in Italy, opened the doors to a relatively new premise of scientific racism, and influenced governmental decisions with regards to the implementation of racial legislation in Italy. This situation laid the foundations for the publication of ‘The ‘Manifesto of Racial Scientists’ or the ‘Manifesto degli Scienziati Razzisti’ in July 1938, a collaborative of ethnic Italian intellectuals and university professors chosen by Mussolini. The Manifesto was intended to promote the biological, cultural, and natural primacy of race, eugenics, and racial stratification as basic parameters of Fascist imperial expansion. The ideas promoted by the Manifesto provided diverse and often contradictory concepts regarding racial discourse, which included the Nordic Aryan racial identity of Italian citizens, anti-Semitic ideas, anti-Africanism, and references to the uniqueness of the Italian race by providing a biological definition of race. According to the Manifesto, human races biologically exist and the majority of Italians were an Aryan race; and it established which races were intended not to belong to this group.<sup>634</sup> The Aryan group did not include those of African, Oriental or Jewish origins. The Manifesto also claimed that the Italian Race was more closely related to Germans than North Africans.<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy*, 67-68.

<sup>634</sup> See Law, *Mediterranean Racisms*.

<sup>635</sup> A. Gillette, ‘The origins of the manifesto of racial scientists’, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 6:3, 2001, 305-323, 306.

The Manifesto proved to be a decisive shift to the development of Italian racism and promoted certain ideas with regards to conservation of the purity of the race. Conservation of the race included the banning of sexual relations with people of non-Aryan race. The prohibition of mixed race relationships shows that this racial ideology was promoted in reality.

## **4.2 The Proclamation of the Race Laws (1938-1939)**

On the eve of the racial laws, according to the Fascist census, 40,000-45,000 Jews lived in Italy, representing about 1.1 per thousand of Italy's entire population. Between 1931 and 1938, over 97 percent of Jews were recorded as living in northern and central Italy, more specifically between the Alps and the cities of Rome and Ancona.<sup>636</sup> Following a trend from the previous century, they had by now abandoned the small towns and minor provincial capitals in favour of mid-sized to large cities, focusing in particular on the major regional and national industrial and commercial centres. In 1931, Venice was the seventh largest Italian urban centre after Rome, Milan, Naples, Genoa, Turin, Palermo and Florence (in descending order). At the same time, Venice had the greatest concentration of Jews after Rome, Milan, Trieste, Turin and Florence.<sup>637</sup> Nationally, the process of urban concentration had started during the Liberal age, producing a growth in the number of Jews and the greatest demographic increase took place between 1911 and 1938, with a significant growth occurring also within the Venice community which increased from 1,405 in June 1911 to 2,365 in August 1938. Venetian Jews were concentrated in the capital rather than being spread over the province, and the community was medium-size, differing from larger northern Italian

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<sup>636</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, 25-30.

<sup>637</sup> R. Bachi, 'La distribuzione geografica e professionale degli ebrei secondo il censimento italiano 1931', in *Israel* 20, n. 1 (13 September 1934), 17-18.



communities like Turin and Trieste which respectively accounted for around 4,000 and 6,000 Jews in the late 1930s, being then among the largest Italian communities with Rome.<sup>638</sup> Like other northern Italian Jewish communities, the majority of Venetian Jews had Iberian ancestry.<sup>639</sup> Their assimilation into Venetian social and economic life occurred during the *Risorgimento*. A large number of Venetian Jews took part in the independence wars in 1848-49 with the Venetian Rabbi being a member of the provisional government of the San Marco Republic, led by Daniele Manin. Owing to the legacy of *Serenissima*, Venetians of Jewish background had long been integrated into political, commercial and social life, with their patriotism being clearly expressed in the First World War and commemorated in a memorial to the community's war dead at the *Tempio Spagnolo* in 1923.<sup>640</sup> Their integration had progressively produced a social fracture within the community itself and there was therefore a great diversity among Venetian Jews at the local level. Venetian upper class Jews were distinctive in their culture and attitude. Since the Liberal age, the upper class and predominantly secularised Jews who had progressively achieved an important status, had left the ghetto to live among other Venetians joining the main central quarters of Venice (San Marco); meanwhile, the Jews from lower classes, the poorest, remained confined in the ghetto area (Canareggio and San Geremia quarters). The story of the Venetian Jews reflected that of Jewish assimilation elsewhere. More prosperous Jews often visited the synagogue only for great celebrations expressly addressed to the wealthy class of Jews. In addition, they tended to employ private tutors to give elementary instruction at home because Jewish

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<sup>638</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, 20. Venice's data includes the provinces of Belluno and Treviso and the one for Turin includes the province of Aosta and Cuneo. More accurate data regarding Venice's local Jewish community is provided in P. Sereni, 'Della comunità ebraica a Venezia durante il fascismo', in G. Paladini and M. Reberschak (ed.), *La Resistenza nel Veneziano: La società, resistenza, repubblica*, 2 vols (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1985), I, 503-539, 512-513.

<sup>639</sup> For Ferrara, see Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy*; for Turin, see F. Levi (ed.), *Le case e le cose: la persecuzione degli ebrei torinesi nelle carte dell'EGELI 1938-1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

<sup>640</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 139.

schools were mainly designated for the Jews of lesser means.<sup>641</sup> Venetian upper class Jews had left the ghetto a generation ahead of many Italian Jews and tended to take a measure of political and social equality more or less for granted.<sup>642</sup>

Venetian Jews did not have a uniform economic status; nevertheless, documents confirm a national trend and demonstrate that Venetian Jews were, on average, higher earning than their Italian peers.<sup>643</sup> Even in their professional choices and fields of economic activities, Jews displayed specific characteristics that were frequently associated with their high educational levels and their urban status. On the eve of the Race Laws, Venetian Jews were bourgeois professionals employed in Liberal arts, businessmen, financiers, bankers but they were also teachers, lawyers, workers, merchants, and artisans, with a estimated 40 % of the community's children born 1932-35 resulting from 'mixed' marriages in.<sup>644</sup> In terms of social and economic status, the overwhelming majority of Venetian Jews possessed a great level of wealth, but the number of people assisted by the Community on a regular or occasional basis came to about 400 in 1937, which represented almost 23 % of the Community's membership.<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>641</sup> C. M. Bettin, *Italian Jews from Emancipation to the Racial Laws* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 58.

<sup>642</sup> Venetian Jews achieved emancipation under the *Serenissima* and Manin's *Repubblica di San Marco*. The process of emancipation was similar to Turin Jews who achieved emancipation under the Savoy monarchy in Piedmont.

<sup>643</sup> Bettin, *Italian Jews from Emancipation to the Racial Laws*, 49. An investigation pursued by the Chief Rabbi Adolfo Ottolenghi in 20 February 1930 in order to record Venetian Jews' participation in the First World War substantially supports the thesis that the Venetian Jews were predominantly upper middle class. Documents collected suggested that most possessed a degree in Law or Business and Economics or at least that they were educated at the higher school level.

<sup>644</sup> S. L. Sullam, *Una comunità immaginata. Gli ebrei a Venezia (1900 -1938)* (Milan: Unicopli 2001), 50.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibidem*, 61, 80-81.

While Venetian Jewry in many respects followed the national trends, with regard to economic activity they differed markedly from other north Italian communities. Venetian Jews were exceptionally concentrated in finance and insurance-related activities, unlike their counterparts in cities like Ferrara, where Jews had primarily rural interests, or Turin, the second largest industrial city after Milan in the late 1930s which included a large percentage of working class people, but also an important core of intellectuals. In addition, foreign Jews were almost absent in Venice. Foreign Jews were especially numerous in other regions bordering with Venice like Trento and Trieste which possessed a strong legacy of Austrian Empire domination and had, together, almost half of all foreign Jews in Italy, predominantly of German speakers.<sup>646</sup>

From the early days of the Fascist regime until the proclamation of the Race Laws, it appears that Fascist sympathies ran deep among Venetian Jews and as if to emphasise this point, Jews were present in many of the key organisations of the city, from the *Fenice* opera house to the Volpi-led *Assicurazioni Generali* insurance company, to the Fascist Party. Among the most important Fascist Jews was Max Ravà, businessman, president of the *Istituto di Credito Fondiario* who was to hold a leadership position within the national and the local Jewish community until the proclamation of the Race Laws. Ravà was friendly with various Fascist leaders, in particular with his patron, the *gerarca* Giuseppe Volpi. The former was determined in his support of Fascism, backing the Jewish newspaper *La Nostra Bandiera* (Our Flag) edited in Turin which had been founded by Ettore Ovazza in 1934 in order to tackle the idea that was spreading that Italian Jews were predominantly philo-zionists. This assertion requires a bit of background. The progressively negative attitude of the regime

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<sup>646</sup> Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia, *VII censimento*, 4, pt. 2, 284-287.

towards the Zionist movement was linked to the engagement of Fascist Italy with nations and governments in the Arab Middle East. The initial strengthening of political, military and cultural ties between the Arab nations, especially with Palestine, and Fascist Italy were meant to challenge the presence of the British authorities in the region. However, the Duce and other Italian nationalists increasingly began to fear that an influential Zionist movement could act as a rival nationalism and therefore alienate the Italian Jewish community. In particular, Mussolini thought that the Zionists possessed feelings of allegiance to two homelands, with a strong preference for Palestine. This was deeply disturbing to Mussolini who turned the Italian Zionists automatically into suspects. Therefore, Mussolini turned to support the Revisionist movement led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who was outspokenly anti-British and used Zionist revisionists to disrupt the British presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Jabotinsky was both a nationalist and a Liberal democrat whose Revisionist Zionism was based on the political Zionism built on the thought of Theodor Herzl, the founding father of modern political Zionism. His philosophy contrasted with that of the socialist oriented Labor Zionists, in that it focused its economic and social policy on the ideals of the Jewish middle class in Europe.<sup>647</sup>

Mussolini, following the failure of his attempts to enlist the support of the Zionist organisation for Italian ambitions to take over the Palestine Mandate from the British, attacked 'international Zionism' and turned his support to Arab nationalism.<sup>648</sup> From 1934 and then after the racial laws, the aim of the *bandieristi* (supporters of the *La*

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<sup>647</sup> B. Horowitz-L. Katsis (ed.), *Vladimir Jabotinsky's Story of My Life* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

<sup>648</sup> M. Williams, 'Between Arab nationalism and Zionism: Fascist politics and propaganda in the Middle East in the 1930s', in *Eunomia*, 2, 1(2013), 85-122.

*Nostra bandiera*) was to collaborate with the regime in order to isolate Zionist and anti-Fascist Jews and regain the trust of the regime.<sup>649</sup>

Venetian Jews with a general pro-Fascist attitude comprised the majority of their community, with *bandieristi* and Fascist Jewish commissioners leading the community until the Race Laws. As Levis Sullam argued, the process of nationalising and fascistising Venice's synagogues proceeded rapidly. For example, the prayer for the king was extended to include the Duce. The 25th anniversary of Vittorio Emanuele III's reign in 1925 and the founding of the empire in 1936 were celebrated. Depending on the occasion, Nationalist songs and the Fascist hymn 'Giovinezza' (Youth), were added to the official liturgy. These celebrations saw the majority of the Venetian Jews participating, sanctioning the fusion of Jewish and Italian Fascist ideals and increasing support of the Monarchy and the Duce.<sup>650</sup>

Although Venetian Jews were well integrated, the Zionist movement had some following within the community, distracting part of the members from their primary loyalty to Italy and the regime. A Venetian Zionist Federation had been already established in 1903 and in line with the national movement, it underwent a transformation in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, rejecting the philanthropic aspects of Zionism that had been dominant at the beginning of the century. As reported in the statute established in 1922, the Venetian Zionist Group aimed at supporting "the creation of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine based upon basic human rights" and "cooperating to realise the secular aspirations of Israel and re-establishing a Jewish Palestine". In addition, the group aspired to "raise the level of Zionist awareness among its members through the organisation of regular

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<sup>649</sup> For a more comprehensive debate on *La Nostra Bandiera*, see L. Ventura, *Ebrei con il duce: "La nostra bandiera": (1934-1938)* (Turin: Zamorani, 2002).

<sup>650</sup> Sullam, *Una comunità immaginata*, 126.

meetings, conferences, Hebrew language classes”, and working for the “the dissemination of the Zionist propaganda among the Jews within the Venetian Jewish community” and “outside propaganda directed at non-Jews aimed at defending Jewish dignity”.<sup>651</sup> These activities laid the foundation for the future realisation of a pioneering nationalist spirit on the part of the youngest Jews. The increase of the Zionist group’s activities at the beginning of the 1930s caused a period of instability within the Venetian Jewish community which resulted in the resignation *en masse* of the entire board chaired by the fascistophile Max Ravà in 1934. The period of uncertainty in Venice coincided with the period of Achille Starace as national secretary of the Fascist Party, who not only launched a grandiose Fascistisation campaign over Italians (‘Going to the People’), but also aligned himself with Mussolini’s attacks on international Zionism, and an imposition of a strict control over Italian Jewish communities as well. Although the majority of Venetian Jews were philofascist, Starace’s new policies created tension between Jews and Fascists. The government imposed the young Jewish lawyer Aldo Coen Porto (whose three immediate relatives were later deported to Auschwitz) as government commissioner over the Venetian Jewish community in 1934. Coen Porto was replaced in 1937 and his successor, the Jewish businessman, Aldo Finzi, remained in charge until a member of the community, Giuseppe Jona, was elected president in 1940.<sup>652</sup> Giuseppe Jona was born in Venice on 28 October 1866 to a Jewish family. He enrolled at the University of Padua and graduated in medicine in 1892. He practiced as a doctor at the Civil

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<sup>651</sup> Bettin, *Italian Jews from Emancipation to the Racial Laws*, 168-169.

<sup>652</sup> Aldo Finzi was one of the fighter pilots in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s campaign to drop propaganda leaflets over Vienna, Austria. He became one of the nine Jewish deputies elected to parliament for the *Fasci italiani di combattimento*. Finzi was also a Fascist government minister in the 1920s, and complicit in the murder of Matteotti. After the deposition of Mussolini by the Grand Council of Fascism Finzi became engaged in the resistance struggle against the German occupying forces. In February 1944, he was captured by the SS and identified as an opponent of the German Occupation. He was a victim of the Ardeatine massacre in 24 March 1944. See G. Cecini, *I soldati ebrei di Mussolini* (Milan: Mursia, 2008) and see, D. Carafoli, G. Bocchini-Padiglione, *Aldo Finzi - Il Fascista ucciso alle Fosse Ardeatine* (Milan: Mursia, 2004).

Hospital of Venice, which he entered in 1896, remaining there until 1936. On 10 April 1921 he was elected president of the *Ateneo Veneto* and he remained in charge for four years. In October 1938, following the promulgation of the Race Laws, Jona was forced to leave the University as were all the other Jewish staff. On 16 June 1940, a few days after Italy's entry into the war, he became President of the Jewish Community of Venice in which he had already worked as a counsellor from 1932 to 1934. During his presidency, the Jewish population went through hard times, under fire from heavily anti-Semitic propaganda. After the German occupation of Venice, following the armistice of 8 September 1943, the situation worsened, with raids in the ghetto and the deportation of Venetian Jews to the death camps. In order to ensure the Nazis did not obtain the list of Venetian Jews, Jona committed suicide on 17 September 1943.<sup>653</sup>

While the discord within Italian Judaism between philofascists and Zionists was intensifying, Fascism was engaged in the campaign for the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. The new colonial war was approved by the majority of Italian Jews in the synagogues and in the Jewish press. Venetian Jewish views were in line with the national trend, being inspired by pro-Fascist sentiments and patriotic ideals. Coen Porto and Finzi's administrations proved to be satisfactory to the authorities and the prefect, Catalano, reported the profound patriotism of the Jewish community, which donated four kilograms of silver stripped from the synagogues during the Ethiopian war, with Rabbi Ottolenghi joining Volpi in the collection. The Jewish community formally donated 50,000 lire to the local branch of the Fascist Party to celebrate the new empire in East Africa.<sup>654</sup> However, the conquest of Ethiopia led Mussolini officially to embrace racism and anti-Semitism. The foundation of the Empire, and

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<sup>653</sup> For a biographical profile of Giuseppe Jona see G. Reolon, 'Giuseppe Jona', <http://www.ateneoveneto.org/content/uploads/2013/10/26.Jona.pdf> (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

<sup>654</sup> Sullam, *Una comunità immaginata*, 97.

the acquired dominion over millions of Africans, pushed Mussolini from racist theory to practice, imposing an apartheid-like system on the colonies. In addition, Mussolini's increasing alignment with Hitler led him to promote more openly anti-Semitic positions. Given the supreme significance of racist antisemitism in Nazi Ideology, a Fascist-Nazi coalition could not function without the adoption of similar policies. Mussolini's decision to partner with Hitler and the conquest of Ethiopia inexorably led to the adoption of Race Laws.<sup>655</sup>

The racial turn taken by the regime with the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 had immediate consequences on a local level. The existence of a well-integrated and prosperous Jewish community, with wealthy Jews forming the backbone of Venice's economy, meant the anti-Jewish campaign from the beginning took on a particular flavour and accusations were to be worse than in many other cities. The 'work of paring down' had local Fascists as protagonists from 1936, and Venice's anti-Semitic campaign had centred on the real or perceived political and economic power of Jews. As a Fascist informer pointed out, the campaign was orchestrated by local Fascists with the approval of central authority, and it was organised in order to oppose the confirmation of the "well-known" Max Ravà as the head of the Venetian *Istituto di Credito Fondiario* in 1936. The aim of the campaign was to eliminate a "really powerful Jew" from the eminent position which he still enjoyed in Venice.<sup>656</sup> Ravà's removal was not an isolated phenomenon. Similar cases were happening in nearby provinces like Ferrara where a campaign was launched in the same year (1936) against the Jewish *podestà* Renzo Ravenna. From a local perspective, the case of Ravà represented only the first chapter of a process which closely involved the Party and the economy of the city in the late 1930s.

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<sup>655</sup> For the overall debate see the above mentioned Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations*.

<sup>656</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 1138, anonymous informer's note, 16 June 1936.



Ravà's dismissal from the *Istituto di Credito Fondiario* in 1936 directly involved Giuseppe Volpi who had patronised his ascent in Venice. Given the make-up of the Venetian business groupings and Volpi's friendship with Alberto Musatti and other leading figures of the Venice's Jewish community, the anti-Semitic campaign represented a drastic change in terms of local power relationship, as Venetian Fascists were cynically taking the seats left by Jews in economic organisations or in the Party, weakening Volpi's network of influence. As if to confirm it, the government requested local authorities to carry on an investigation of Volpi's entourage, and a file was opened on the Venetian Fascist *federale*, Ludovico Foscari, in November 1938. Foscari was suspected by the prefect of being married to a woman of Jewish origins.<sup>657</sup> The anti-Semitic campaign touched eminent national figures of Fascism and Volpi and other *gerarchi* with Jewish connections tried to safeguard their interests and those of their Jewish clients. For example, Volpi, Balbo, Federzoni and Grandi, spoke against the Race Laws during the meetings of the Grand Council.<sup>658</sup> The marginalisation of Jews started with those who held holding influential positions in society and therefore many Jews may at this stage have remained unaware of any persecution or limitation of freedom in the mid-1930s. However, the case of Ravà (1936) clearly demonstrated that the racist campaign had already started, well before the official promulgation of the Race Laws in 1938.<sup>659</sup>

Mussolini had an ambivalent attitude and tried to mediate diplomatically between international Jewry, the Western powers and Germany. However, his attempts to appeal to a

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<sup>657</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 2 February 1939.

<sup>658</sup> See I. Pavan, *Il podestà ebreo. La storia di Renzo Ravenna tra fascismo e leggi razziali* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

<sup>659</sup> Mussolini adopted a progressive removal of the Jews from the most important institutional and public positions. Alessandro Della Seta, Carlo Foà, Giuseppe Toeplitz, Guido Artom and Guido Beer were removed from influential position in academia and politics. Mussolini personally excluded Della Seta from the Royal Academy of Italy on racial grounds.

moderate Zionism had vanished by 1938 with the promulgation of the Italian Race Laws. Although it has been well established that the Germans never encouraged official racial legislation in Italy,<sup>660</sup> Mussolini's imitation of the Nuremberg Laws can be ascribed to the diplomatic positioning of Italy alongside Germany in the late 1930s and Mussolini's will to please his ally.

Although policies were already hostile to the Venetian Jews, in the months before the promulgation of the Race Laws in November 1938, an informer confirmed that the general attitude of the Venetian community towards the regime was still positive. As it was reported to Mussolini, the Rabbi Adolfo Ottolenghi as well as all the other leaders of the Venetian Jewish community were generally considered "subservient to the regime's institutions" and "of good moral and political conduct".<sup>661</sup> However, following the proclamation of the Race Laws, Venice settled into a pattern not wholly dissimilar to other cities. The 1938 racial campaign was conducted through the media, the central and local state administration and graffiti campaigns, and soon after the Race Laws had been promulgated, people could read on the windows of important Venetian cafe' and bars that "Jews were not welcome" anymore.<sup>662</sup> The history of a well-integrated Jewish community changed drastically as the racial legislation had immediate local impact and hit Jews badly. As reported by an anonymous informer, Venetian Jews were demoralised and materially hit by the Race Laws.<sup>663</sup> More clearly still, Rabbi Ottolenghi was slapped when Fascists congregated in the ghetto, and rocks and rubbish were hurled at the synagogue, which was stained with graffiti urging "death to all

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<sup>660</sup> See Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*.

<sup>661</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 220, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 20 January 1938.

<sup>662</sup> M. Coslovich, *I percorsi della sopravvivenza: storia e memoria della deportazione dall'"Adriatisches Küstenland"* (Milan: Mursia, 1994), 328.

<sup>663</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Anonymous informer to the Minister of Interior, 15 November 1938.

Jews”.<sup>664</sup> Another case pointed out by an anonymous informer, involved the well-known First World War veteran and lawyer Raffaele Levi. When Levi complained about not being served by the waiter at the cafe’ *Quadri*, he was rebuffed by the owner who stated that they did not serve “bloody Jews” anymore. Then there was a fight and Levi was beaten.<sup>665</sup>

Looking at the documentation, there are a number of decisions around relatively less significant questions like listening to the radio, bans to Jews to keep shops.<sup>666</sup> Most of these anti-Jewish actions were similarly on a national scale, and much of the effort appears to have gone into surveillance activities rather than enforcement of the law. A number of restrictions were implemented by Public Security, under the pressure from the Party, rather than *Demorazza*, which was the department responsible for the enforcement of the anti-Jewish legislation in the Ministry of Interior.<sup>667</sup> However, some significant differences with other Italian communities were apparent in respect of police surveillance. A first difference was the issue of foreign Jews. Of major importance in Rome, Turin, Trieste and other bigger Italian cities, it was largely absent in Venice. This meant that Venice did not face the problem of the persecution of Jews who had emigrated from other countries. This considerably simplified the process of identification of the people to persecute. A second difference relates to the denunciations. While in Venice the majority of denunciations and other reports came from individuals, while in Turin organisations such as Fascist syndicates and professional unions took the lead. This reflects the difference in size and composition of the communities, but also a higher degree of ideological involvement of various Fascists in the persecution of Jews. Given the relatively small size of the Venice community, the level of denunciations was not

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<sup>664</sup> S. Levis Sullam, F. Brusco’, *Il Ghetto. Piazza Barche* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2008), 18.

<sup>665</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Anonymous informer to the Minister of Interior, 15 November 1938.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>667</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Police Commissioner to the Minister of Interior, 28 June 1942.

as high as in a community like Turin or Trieste. A third difference relates to the level of Jewish community resistance. While in Venice, not unlike from other small-middle size communities like Ferrara, there was relatively little organised resistance to the racial laws, in Turin such actions were more common, ranging from simple administrative petitions to a variety of increasingly sophisticated strategies, often with the assistance of sympathetic non-Jews, designed to avoid or limit the effect of the racial provisions.<sup>668</sup> Lack of organisation was probably due to the individualistic composition of the community which mainly included wealthy Jews who cared only about their own safety. As one might expect, in Venice some petitions were made by middle and upper class Jews with some minor attempts made in some financial circles and certain key sectors where Jews possessed a great deal of influence. As the prefect of Venice reported, a petition was addressed to Mussolini by a group of war veterans and first-hour Fascists. Mainly employed in financial organisations, these Jews were willing to include letters, medals for valors and decorations received in the First World War, or patents of the March on Rome. They believed that the racial laws were only a temporary price to pay for Mussolini's alliance with Hitler.<sup>669</sup> The most characteristic aspect of the Race Laws in Venice was the issue of wealthy Jews. The archives include a steady flow of Venice police documents in which the main recurring theme was that the anti-Jewish laws had particularly impacted on some eminent Jews who were direct supporters of the regime. Upper class Venetian Jews were accused of working against Fascism and being part of a British-Masonic conspiracy or portrayed by the Fascist propaganda as unscrupulous usurers.<sup>670</sup> The Jewish members of the Volpi's entourage would not survive unaffected by the anti-Semitic legislation. Volpi not only faced losing important Jewish members of his entourage in Venice; similar results were observed also in Trieste where the *gerarca* had an extensive Jewish

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<sup>668</sup> Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy*, 75-119.

<sup>669</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 15 September 1938.

<sup>670</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Anonymous informer, 15 November 1938.

network of contacts through the *Assicurazioni Generali*. Venice and Trieste shared the operational centres of the insurance group which was the biggest in Italy. The *Assicurazioni Generali* had grown as a traditional Jewish stronghold since its foundation under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Much of the Fascist effort appears to have gone into the replacement of Jews within this organisation. Eminent Jews in both locations had to leave immediately after the promulgation of the Race Laws. Marco Ara, former decorated First World War captain, Venetian Fascist patriot who used to lead his *centuria* during the regime's official parades in Piazza S. Marco was obliged to leave as a board member in Venice; meanwhile, in Trieste, his cousin Edgardo Morpurgo had to resign from the role of president, being replaced by Giuseppe Volpi. Racial laws provoked an exodus of Jews from the company.<sup>671</sup> This involved managers and employees, and sometimes Jews decided to resign 'voluntarily' before being officially affected by the new racial legislation. As De Lagarda argued, unemployed Venetian *squadristi*, largely without adequate qualifications, occupied the empty chairs of the company.<sup>672</sup> *Assicurazioni Generali* was not the only big organisation where Venetian Jews were meticulously registered and expelled. In Portogruaro, the industrial group Perfosfati provided the regime with the list of all Jewish partners and expelled all "non-Aryans" in September 1939.<sup>673</sup>

Rules regarding financial groups, ownership of large enterprises and real estate questions

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<sup>671</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 15 September 1938. Ara gathered about thirty people in his villa in Mirano with the intention of collecting the signatures of all the old veterans, decorated for the valour in the World War I or possessing the patent of the March on Rome. Marco Ara was senior manager of the *Assicurazioni Generali* of Venice. Despite his belief in Fascism, he was not exempted from the discrimination.

<sup>672</sup> U. Facco De Lagarda, *Cronistoria dei fatti d'Italia: (1900-1950)* (Milan: Pan, 1975), 220.

<sup>673</sup> Pellegrini, *L'altro secolo*, 149-151. All the partners were obliged to provide to the company a birth certificate or an official declaration of baptism by a priest to demonstrate their racial status. Perfosfati's research lasted until 1940 and involved current and former partners of the company.

were very important for the regime and these were in order to take control of the major centres of power of the country. However, commerce and the professions did not escape attention altogether as Jews were prominent among professional bodies like the lawyers. Venetian Jewish lawyers were predominantly in civil and commercial law firms as they were heavily involved in banks, big commercial and industrial groups. 13 out of 23 Venetian Jewish law firms were involved in managing capital and legal activities for big interest groups, with an informer complaining that they were damaging the activities of the “aryan” firms.<sup>674</sup> Whether a business organisation or a professional association, the sector involved in the expulsion of the Jews contributed to implementation of the laws, providing the police with the necessary information. To reinforce this thesis, the most notorious case, regarding the expulsion of Jewish professors from the universities, shows that while sympathy may have been expressed on an individual basis, in general deans and faculties continued to apply the norms and expelled colleagues and students. This was because deans and the management of the universities did not have an alternative option and they could not avoid the application of the law; and the opposition to the directives of the government would have meant their exclusion from the university. For example, the Rector of Venice Business School, Agostino Lanzillo, investigated the Aryan status of students and professors and he communicated to the Minister Bottai the list of Jewish professors, assistants and readers to be expelled from Ca’ Foscari. On 3 November 1939, the Council of Faculty, through the words of Prof. Cesare Lombardi, emphasised the gravity of the loss of such diligent and efficient scientists and professors, but the order was executed according to the law.<sup>675</sup> In addition to the expulsion of Jewish professors, new courses on racial policy were instituted and academic books or textbooks edited or revised by authors of Jewish race were prohibited by Lanzillo, who

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<sup>674</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Pennisi to the Minister of Interior, 12 February 1939.

<sup>675</sup> ASUV, “Scatole lignee”, b. 31/b, Agostino Lanzillo to Giuseppe Bottai, 3 November 1939.

expressively wrote to the publisher Cedam to eliminate from Ca' Foscari collection all the "Jewish race authors".<sup>676</sup>

Venetian Jews did not receive much sympathy from their Venetian neighbours after the proclamation of the Race Law in November 1938. The notes of the police and their informants did not show any strong objection raised by Venetian society to the application of the laws. As revealed by the prefecture documents related to the 'subversive episodes' that occurred in Venice in 1938, signs of popular disapproval towards the racial laws had been very rare with minor cases among the popular classes.<sup>677</sup> Given the sources used – especially those of the police which whose repression focused on dissent towards the regime's decisions – if solidarity was to be shown, we should have found more cases of people protesting against the Jewish persecution. Indeed, people did not publicly protest, nor did the Venetian Jews receive much help from their Catholic fellows or hierarchies. Despite an anonymous informer reporting in November 1938 that the Venetian priests and churchgoers had an initial negative opinion about the Italian Race Laws, comparing them to the German ones, there is no record of following criticism. This does not mean that there was no criticism, but it was never to be public from the Catholic hierarchies. Nor did the patriarch of Venice Aldeodato Piazza do much to support the Jewish cause. He did not address any official or unofficial directive specifically in support of the Jews in the province. The Venetian Catholic hierarchies had been almost silent towards the Jewish persecution. The patriarch of Venice Aldeodato Piazza acted according to the official line of the Vatican. Piazza was a First World War veteran and a patriot. Like most of the Italian cardinals of the Fascist period, Piazza was conservative and anti-Communist. Piazza's views were those of the current of the Catholic Church that the priest and leader of the Italian People's Party, Luigi Sturzo, called 'clerico-fascism'. Some

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<sup>676</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b. 31/b, Agostino Lanzillo to Cedam, 29 October 1938.

<sup>677</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Prefect of Padua to the Minister of Interior, 23 November 1938.

members of his party, almost all laymen, were either drawn directly into the Fascist movement or followed Mussolini in order to rally Catholic support for the anti-Communist and pro-Catholic policies of the regime. However, from that time, the term clerico-Fascist was also applied to designate individual members of the clergy, like Piazza, who were supporters of Fascism on such issues as the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the introduction of the Racial Laws in 1938. The papacy (and thus the church hierarchies in Italy) was an essential component of ‘consensus’ on which the Fascist regime relied on during its over twenty years’ existence.<sup>678</sup> Piazza often publicly expressed words of appreciation for Mussolini. Despite the prefect reporting that he openly declared that the concept of “racism” was against the “universal values” of the Church,<sup>679</sup> in the famous ‘speech of the Epiphany’, Piazza declared he had understood the concern of the “superior people to preserve the hereditary purity of the race”.<sup>680</sup> The position of Piazza was related to the institutional role he held. The patriarch was not in a position to openly criticise the regime for the promulgation of the Race Laws. However, we do believe he could have acted differently, and maybe informally, to provide Venetian Jews with support, at least in the first phase of the persecution. As we will see later in the chapter, with the German occupation in 1943, things would be made more difficult, especially in order to provide any form of assistance to the Jews.

While in some cases Venetians expressed individual solidarity to Jews on a personal level, people’s compassion as a whole did not appear to present a serious threat to the regime

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<sup>678</sup> J. Pollard, “‘Clerical Fascism’: Context, Overview and Conclusion’, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8, 2(2007), 433–446.

<sup>679</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 2 February 1939.

<sup>680</sup> A. Ventura, *Sulla crisi del regime Fascista, 1938- 1943: la società italiana dal consenso alla Resistenza: atti del Convegno nazionale di studi, Padova, 4-6 novembre 1993* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 554. For a detailed survey of Piazzà’s profile see Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows*, 266-276.



for the informers. In 1938, the prefect reported that “the racial campaign [had] everywhere aroused much interest, but public opinion [was] aware of the eminently moral, social and political purposes that the Fascist government [was] pursuing and orienting in their favour”.<sup>681</sup> This does not mean that criticism was not present among sections of Venetian society, but the fear of the regime’s repression prevented people from openly expressing dissent towards the Race Laws. Open criticism would have led to persecution by the regime’s political police and, in the worst case scenario, imprisonment.

By 1940 that support allegedly diminished. Individual feelings of compassion became more frequent, but only because of the difficult conditions encountered by those Venetian Jews badly hit by the racial laws.<sup>682</sup> The moment of greatest economic hardship occurred in 1940 when the revocation of the street peddling licences affected poor and there was high unemployment among the Venetian Jewish working class.<sup>683</sup> In addition, among the wealthy Jews there was a general attitude of apathy towards the lower-class Jews’ living conditions and they were reluctant to give help. Indeed, better off Jews were accused of stinginess in a flyer circulated in Venice by a group of “poor fellow Jews” in 1940.<sup>684</sup> This tells us that there was not a strong cohesion within the community and therefore systematic resistance would have been almost impossible to organise. Diversity among the Venetian community created a gap and a lack of cohesion which prevented wealthy Jews from supporting poorer Jews during the persecution.

Throughout 1940, Venetian informants noted a general impression that the regime’s attention to the ‘Jewish Question’ and the vigilant application of its discriminatory measures had

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<sup>681</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 58, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 15 September 1938.

<sup>682</sup> Ibidem, b. 58, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Minister of Interior, 22 December 1940.

<sup>683</sup> From a circular issued by the Jewish community in Venice, dated 16 February 1942, reproduced in R. Segre, *Gli ebrei a Venezia, 1938-1945: una comunità tra persecuzione e rinascita* (Venice: Il Cardo, 1995), 135.

<sup>684</sup> Ibidem, 82.

waned. In reality, after Italy's entrance into the war, Venetian authorities engaged in a broader effort to prevent corrupt or 'defeatist' Jewish opinion from infecting the general population. This effort was assisted by local informers and a single incident can capture the spirit of this phenomenon in Venice. On May 1940, the prefect of Venice was reported by the Voluntary Militia for National Security (MVSN) that *discriminato* Jewish businessman Max Orrefice, owner of the company *Prati Nuovi*, was heard by a militiaman to express his criticism towards Mussolini, Starace and Ciano. Although Oreffice was investigated by the police and found innocent, the MVSN suggested that he deserved to be punished and subjected to surveillance by the Party in order to avoid these opinions spreading.<sup>685</sup> The prefect agreed to this on himself to put him under surveillance. This suggests a tighter and rigid central control over the periphery. In addition, a large portion of the local prefect's time was taken up with definitional or status issues, primarily over mixed marriages, the 'who is a Jew' problem, and the grant or a denial of *discriminato* status (in the period of the Fascist racial laws, these were Jews for whom the racial legislation was not applied for special military and civil merits). Anti-Semitic propaganda increased further in the media from 1941, when *Il Gazzettino di Venezia* edited by Diego Valeri, launched a vast campaign in support of anti-semitism. However, due largely to the complacency of the Fascist leaders, some Jews had already found expedient ways of evading the law. It is noteworthy that the bypassing of the Race Laws appears to have been carried out primarily by better-off or at least wealthier Jews, which is consistent with the trend observed at the national level. Rules regarding personal status were more easily evaded by rich Jews than those aimed at the working class or middle classes. One way to bypass the Race Laws was the conversion to Catholicism. For example, Jews'

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<sup>685</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 7/f, Command of MVSN to the Minister of Interior, 14 May 1940.

abjurations and conversions reached a peak of 39 in 1941<sup>686</sup> and most of them involved ‘secularised’ Jews with little or no connection with Judaism.<sup>687</sup> An overall number of 336 Venetian Jews (secularised and not), mainly belonging to wealthy families, decided to avoid any persecution by converting to Catholicism. All but three survived the Holocaust, including the notorious *bandierista* and Volpi’s supporter, Max Ravà.<sup>688</sup> Ravà represented a significant example of how rules could be evaded if you possessed a good network of local contacts: first and foremost, the affiliation to Volpi. As if to confirm this, one secret agent reported in 1942 that some Venetians disliked the way that *federale* Pascolato - and behind him, it might be assumed, Volpi - protected Jews.<sup>689</sup>

There is evidence of increasingly stringent application of the rules with the passage of time, but also some foot dragging by local officials, notably after 1943 when a more systematic effort to persecute Jews was made. Compared to the 2,189 members of 1938, a big drop to 1,209 was registered in 1942, as some families emigrated and others forswore or converted on the assumption that laws would not persecute Jews who became Catholics.<sup>690</sup> The last census of 1943 registered 1,203 Jews in the Venice region which included the province of Treviso and Belluno. Therefore, the local Venetian Jewish community did not exceed 1,000 in 1943.<sup>691</sup> Sarfatti has demonstrated that there was an essential continuity between the phase of the promulgation of the Race Laws and the Holocaust eras, which also

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<sup>686</sup> Sereni, *Della comunità ebraica a Venezia*, 512-513.

<sup>687</sup> Pellegrini, *L'altro secolo*, 159. There were also sensational cases of conversion like the sisters Giuliana and Gabriella Ravà, members of an eminent Jewish business family who received baptism and confirmation by the archbishop of Concordia with a solemn and public ceremony in 20<sup>th</sup> October 1938.

<sup>688</sup> P. Sereni, ‘Gli anni della persecuzione razziale a Venezia: appunti per una storia’, in U. Fortis (ed.), *Venezia ebraica: atti delle prime giornate di studio sull'ebraismo veneziano (Venezia 1976-1980)* (Rome: Carducci, 1979), 129-151, 133.

<sup>689</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 165.

<sup>690</sup> Sereni, ‘Della comunità ebraica a Venezia durante il fascismo’, 512-513.

<sup>691</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, 20.

involved Venice, after the German occupation in 1943. As Livingston argued, the continuity is demonstrable on both a formal and substantive level. Formally, there was not a clear break between bureaucratic decisions before September 1943 and those which came after that. In Venice, as at the national level, the registration of the Jews continued without interruption despite the fall of Mussolini, the Badoglio period, the beginning of the German occupation and the birth of the Republic of Salò in the following months.<sup>692</sup> From a substantive perspective, while there were no systematic deportations of Jews before 1943, information gathered in the period 1938-43, from census reports, professional bodies' lists, police reports and denunciations, provided an invaluable source for Nazis and *repubblichini* to identify and arrest Jews in the period following the occupation. These sources became even more important since the president of the Venetian Jewish community, Giuseppe Jona, committed suicide in the autumn of 1943 rather than turning over the names of his community members to *repubblichini* and Germans.<sup>693</sup> Liliana Picciotto Fargioni demonstrated that about half of these arrests, at a national level, were conducted by Italian or mixed German-Italian squads rather than exclusively being German round-ups. Even when Germans conducted the arrests, these was typically based on information generated by Italians. The Venice archives suggest a similar scenario with Italians and mixed squads arresting people with a noticeable increase after 1943. The German brand of anti-semitic deportation in the region was almost inevitable following the occupation.<sup>694</sup> However, what happened showed substantial continuity on the ideological and substantial level with what happened before 1943.

Between December 1943 and August 1944, 246 Venetian Jews were deported, and most would die at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A plaque announces their names in *Campo del Ghetto*

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<sup>692</sup> Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy*, 184.

<sup>693</sup> Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows*, 266.

<sup>694</sup> Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy*, 186.

*Nuovo*, along with the monument of the sculptor Arbit Blatas dedicated to the Holocaust. Most of those were arrested in their home or in the *Casa di Riposo Ebraica* (Jewish retirement home). The Venetian newspapers were totally silent about the round-ups and the deportations of Jews. *Il Gazzettino* denounced the dazzling careers and the illicit enrichment of the Fascist leaders, but the Fascist drive to fill positions vacated by fearful and persecuted Jews was never mentioned.<sup>695</sup>

Continuity was also shown by the Catholic hierarchies. The patriarch of Venice, Aldeodato Piazza, appealed to local German authorities, but he only suggested moderation towards those Jews who converted to Catholicism. Documents in Catholic and Jewish archives analysed by Susan Zuccotti show that the archbishops of Genoa, Turin, Milan and Florence worked with Jewish rescuers and recruited a conspicuous number of priests, monks and nuns to rescue Jews, while there is no evidence and no testimony to date of such involvement for Piazza.<sup>696</sup> In two reports provided by the patriarch to the Allied authority, Piazza declared that he had protested against the “inhuman treatment, illegal arrests and iniquitous deportations” without any specific mention to Jews. During the period of the Salò Republic, many of his public speeches were quoted in national newspapers, such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Regime Fascista* and *L’Italia cattolica*, as an example of patriotism in relation to the predicted victory of the Axis. During the Nazi occupation of Venice province, Piazza saw Germans as a bulwark against Bolshevism. According to the German consul, Koester, he condemned Badoglio’s betrayal, in league with Masons and Jews. For Piazza, the best solution to the situation would have been a German administration combined with “trustworthy Italian circles”. Piazza feared that a vacuum of power, after 8 September 1943,

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<sup>695</sup> “Il Gazzettino”, LV (1942)-LVI (1943).

<sup>696</sup> Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows*, 266-276.

would facilitate a Communist takeover and partisans' reprisals.<sup>697</sup> The link between Communists and Jews was quite an important factor explaining why the Church decided to support the government of the occupied territories in Venice. In fact, the Catholic Church increasingly viewed Communism as a fierce enemy and Fascism, even with its antisemitism, was considered as a lesser evil. For many church officials, communism included a large part of the Zionist Jews. There was plenty of anti-Semitic propaganda in Europe linked Jews with internationalism and Communism and claimed that 'Bolshevism was Jewish'.<sup>698</sup> What it seems is that antisemitism, in Venice like in the rest of the country, was basically motivated by anti-communism, rather than by religious reasons.

However, historians like Tramontin insisted that it is not possible to provide a clear answer about the behaviour of Piazza towards the Jewish persecution and his relations with the Nazi-Fascist authority when Venice was occupied.<sup>699</sup> Unlike Cardinals Schuster in Milan, Boetto in Genoa, and Dalla Costa in Florence, Piazza shared the feeble position of Popes Pius XI and XII on racism and endorsed the official political line of the Vatican. Tramontin justified the silence of the Patriarch as a way of protecting the activity of his assistants, Giulio Malpelli and Giovanni Urbani, who were helping Jews behind the scenes.<sup>700</sup> Tramontin's thesis is only partially credible. More convincing, as Susan Zuccotti argued, Piazza's activity regarding Jews during the German occupation of the province reflected the diplomatic path followed by Pius XII who provided no specific directives to the Cardinals. He probably believed that a public denunciation of the Holocaust would worsen the situation while

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<sup>697</sup> Ibidem, 271-272.

<sup>698</sup> A. Gerrits, *The Myth of Jewish Communism: A Historical Interpretation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>699</sup> See S. Tramontin, 'La Chiesa Veneziana dal 1938 al 1948', in G. Paladini, M. Reberschak (ed.), *La Resistenza nel Veneziano: La società, resistenza, repubblica*, Vol. II (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1985), 451-502.

<sup>700</sup> Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows*, 273.

helping no one. The Pope feared that a protest, even unofficial, would provoke violent Nazi reprisals against Catholics.<sup>701</sup> In fact, there are some cases in which the Venetian lower clergy acted independently to secure the life of Jews. These were sporadic and disorganised actions from which emerged a high civic and Christian sense of *pietas* of the local priests. As an example, archives documented the activity of Don Giovanni Barbaro, Don Alessandro Gottardi and the sisters of Holy Hearth and those of the King Christ in Venice city centre. Meanwhile, Imelde Pellegrini, in her work *Storia di Ebrei*, brought new light on the crucial role played in Fossalta di Portogruaro, in the north of the province, by don Marcello Labor, a priest of Jewish origins who actively helped to save numerous Jewish families who were fleeing the persecution in Trieste.<sup>702</sup>

What is gained is a sense and feel of the Race Laws in an important Fascist city and how ordinary Italians, police, prefects, private citizens, responded to them. Some of the features observed, notably the campaign surrounding the departure of the wealthier Jews from the nerve centres of Venice's economy, were unique to the city. Venice demonstrates the importance of local factors, but also some significant general trends, which although not unique to the city, are easier to observe and analyse at the provincial level. The Venice archives suggest that there were cases in which rules were enforced beyond the letter of the law. There were inevitably unwritten rules and regulations which extended the system beyond its official terms. First and foremost, there was the aggressive interpretation by public officials regarding dismissals and some Italian companies fired Jews.<sup>703</sup>

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701 G. Miccoli, *I dilemmi e i silenzi di Pio XII. Vaticano, Seconda guerra mondiale e Shoah* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000).

702 See I. R. Pellegrini, *Storie di ebrei. Transiti, asilo e deportazione nel Veneto Orientale* (Portogruaro: Nuova Dimensione 2001).

703 A clear example was the *Assicurazioni Generali* insurance group which widely fired Jews in Venice and Trieste.

For ordinary Venetians, the Race Laws might well have not been completely convincing, but they were enforced and respected, no more but certainly no less than any other law. Mythology that the racial laws in Italy were non-violent in nature and Jews were in physical danger only following the German occupation in the autumn of 1943, has been contested. While this may have been true in parts of Italy, it was rather less so in Venice, where violence attempted to isolate Jews and accompanied the racial programme even before the enactment of the 1938 laws.

The issue of antisemitic violence raises the question of timing, specifically, the relationship between events before and after 8 September 1943. Recent scholars, notably Sarfatti, have questioned this analysis with documentary evidence of Mussolini's plans to persecute Jews before the German occupation. This thesis has shown that Venice notably confirms this re-interpretation.



## 5. The Fascist War (1939-1943)

### Introduction

For the regime, the Second World War was to be the final stage of the Italians' fascistisation and the completion of Mussolini's expansionist project, which had started with the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. Despite the historical importance of the so called 'Fascist war' (1940-1943), most of the post-war research, especially from left wing historians, has focused on the events which unfolded between 1943 and 1945, when Italy started to fight alongside the Allies turning against its former partner, Nazi Germany. There are many reasons why historiography preferred to overlook the 'Fascist war': first and foremost, because of Italy's post-war political development which saw the anti-Fascist parties ruling the country with the post-Fascists substantially excluded from Italian political life. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, the creation of a dominant anti-Fascist culture after the Second World War and the almost complete exclusion of the narrative of the defeated had created a discursive hegemony in Italian historiography. Academic works were immersed in the victors' *vulgata* and Italy's war from June 1940 to July 1943, became a blank sheet in the country's historical consciousness, providing no space for the history of the defeated.<sup>704</sup> Secondly, and even more importantly, the Fascist involvement was one of military defeat and created a general sense of national shame. Italians had accepted the war in the belief that it would be short and victorious. The reality turned out to be different.

This concluding chapter examines the ways in which the first three years of the Second World War impacted on ordinary Venetians and how they responded to the growing pressure

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<sup>704</sup> Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 12.

of the hostilities, which lasted much longer than anticipated. As it has been presented by a growing European literature on civilian involvement in the Second World War, the conflict entailed increasing civilian suffering, and as we will see this was also the case in Italy.<sup>705</sup> This makes the initial war years an ideal backdrop against which to evaluate popular Venetian reaction to the increasingly challenged Fascist regime, and it allows a concluding evaluation of popular consent and dissent vis-à-vis Fascism in the Venice province.

The civilians found themselves on the ‘front line’ of the Second World War to an extent that was unprecedented. It has been demonstrated that the conflict provoked psychological side effects on the population. People were the target of enemy bombardment of cities, they were killed throughout the duration of the war, a greater number were injured, they suffered malnutrition and their houses were destroyed or damaged. The report *Morti e dispersi per cause belliche negli anni 1940-45* produced by the *Istituto Centrale Statistica* in 1957, estimates that an overall number of 291,376 soldiers died (this number includes soldiers missing) during the Second World War. If we consider the soldiers died and missing from each division of service, 201,405 soldiers were from the Royal Army, 22,043 from the Royal Navy, 9,096 from the Air Force, 354 from the Colonial Army, 91 were chaplains and 45,078 belonged to other groups such as the Fascist Militia (MVSN), police, *Guardia di Finanza* (Financial Police), firefighters and prison guards. With regard to theatres of war, 74,725 soldiers died and were missing in Italy, 2,060 in France, 25,430 in Germany (including

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<sup>705</sup> S. Kennedy, *The Shock of the War. Civilian Experiences, 1937-1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); S. L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); J. M. Veranneman, *Belgium in the Second World War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sward Military, 2014); E. R. Beck, *Under the Bombs: The German Home Front, 1942-1945* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986); R. Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); J. Noakes, *The Civilian in War: The Home Front in Europe, Japan and the USA in World War II* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992).

Austria), 49,459 in Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia, 82,079 in Soviet Union, 22,716 in Africa, 487 in Asia, 130 in America, 61 in Oceania and 28,438, during sea operations, while 4,619 could not be categorised.<sup>706</sup> With regards to civilians, the overall number of deaths was 153,147 with 61,432 of them caused by aerial strikes.<sup>707</sup> With regards to the place of residency, the Veneto region had overall losses of 40,603 (29,316 soldiers and 11,287 civilians) with the province of Venice mourning the deaths of 4,184 soldiers and 1,667 civilians.<sup>708</sup>

The question of popular opinion on the home front during the Second World War will be at the centre of this chapter and we will attempt to convey something of the diverse challenges that ordinary people experienced in the province of Venice during the Second World War. We will show how diverse the responses to the war were, drawing attention to the way in which different social classes were affected by the conflict and comparing various facets of the civilian experience.

This chapter will shift the reader's attention from the existing and extensive literature on Italian war operations of the Second World War, such as Giorgio Rochat's *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943: dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta*, to the daily experience of the population. Such a study will make an important contribution to the ongoing debate which has been opened by the works of Philip Morgan, Christopher Duggan and Richard J. B. Bosworth. Philip Morgan has done a remarkable job in demonstrating that the war served to show that the ideological commitment of most ordinary Italians to Fascism was by then fairly

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<sup>706</sup> Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Morti e dispersi per cause belliche negli anni 1940-45* (Rome: ISTAT, 1957), 11, 32-40.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibidem*, 3-17.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibidem*, 70.

superficial. This case-study will contribute to discerning the limited results achieved by the regime in fascistising Italian society and ‘making Italians’. This work will argue that the conflict certified the disintegration of Fascism and the dissolution of any sense of national community.

The chapter follows a chronological structure and – within that chronology – we have opted for an investigation of popular opinion as found in the police reports, with a supplement of a varied secondary literature, which allows us to identify specific shifts in popular opinion vis-à-vis the Fascist regime. As previously discussed in the introduction with regards to methodology, police reports are not an objective description of how things really were; they are impressionistic sources; they are sources provided by informers who have their own agendas, preconceptions, interests in portraying certain people in a certain way at certain times. But they nevertheless provide us with very useful information, and with the necessary caution and supplement of alternative sources, they provide the reader with an effective measure of shifts in public opinion. These sources are interesting as they reveal that there was not just one single experience of the war for the Venetians. The ways in which the conflict impacted on people varied according to a set of circumstances like age, gender, race, political beliefs, occupation, social class and personal psychology, which were unique to each individual. There were several variables concerning the war’s impact at a local level, but patterns substantially reflect lukewarm support for the regime’s war, such as lack of ideological conviction, disillusionment at the lack of achievements of the regime, lack of interest in the political changes, namely the fall of the Duce; genuine opposition to Mussolini and his ideas or the broader phenomenon of totalitarianism; opposition to the alliance with Hitler, opposition to the war in general, and frustration over the impact of the war on everyday life.

This chapter will show that while the conflict, created the demand for social unity, it also led to many pressures and divisions within Venetian wartime society. Therefore, attention will also be paid to the many sectors of everyday life affected by the conflict such as consumption and work, in order to assess what kind of popular attitude was progressively adopted in the course of the war. This chapter, which concludes our research on Venetians under the Fascist regime during the *ventennio*, will provide with clear evidence that the regime failed at “making Italians”. Soon, after the first defeats, in contrast to their German peers, many of whom fought until the end alongside Hitler, Italians turned to individualism, and more than other things, they stopped being patriotic (and Mussolinian) and failed to be the national Fascist community of true believers that the regime expected them to be.

## **5.1 Venetians and Italy’s Entry into the War (1939-1941)**

This section will discuss how Italy’s entry into the war was perceived by the Venetians and what feeling, whether patriotic or defeatist, was expressed by the population in the year before the war (1939) and during the first two years of the conflict. Among the different sections of the Venetian, as well as Italian, population, discussions about the potential entry of Italy into the war intensified towards the beginning of the 1939. Even then, Venetians looked at the conflict as something inevitable. According to police reports, the war became a regular topic with diversified approaches to it. On one side, some Venetians opposed the war, thinking that Italy should not join the war in alliance with Nazi Germany, praying that Mussolini would remain neutral. On the other side, some were positive towards Mussolini and the regime, hoping that the war would be short and victorious for the Axis.<sup>709</sup>

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<sup>709</sup> See ACS, DGPS, b. 17 and b. 19 for the years 1939-1940.

As early as September 1938, the Italian military had planned to invade Albania. On 7 April 1939, Italian forces landed in the country and within a few days, Italian troops had occupied the majority of the country. Albania represented a territory that could guarantee Italy its ‘living space’ (*spazio vitale*). The Fascist concept of *spazio vitale* was similar to *lebensraum* in German National Socialism, and its definition was “that part of the globe over which extends either the vital requirements or expansionary impetus of a state with strong unitary organisation which seeks to satisfy its needs by expanding beyond its national boundaries”.<sup>710</sup> The *spazio vitale* provided the basis on which Mussolini’s foreign policy was built and its territorial extent was to include the basin of the Mediterranean Sea (the Roman *Mare Nostrum*) and extended from southern France in the west, from Tunisia to Egypt in Africa, to Greece and the Balkans, and then to Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Palestine.<sup>711</sup> The concept of the ‘vital space’ was useful for Italy in order to propagandise the necessity to occupy neighbouring countries so as to ease its overpopulation and launch an aggressive expansionist strategy in the Balkans. Soon, after the occupation of Albania, Benito Mussolini consolidated the German-Italian relations which started in 1936 by signing a full defensive alliance with Nazi Germany (the Pact of Steel) on 22 May 1939. The pact was designed for a joint war against France and Britain.

According to Fascist intelligence, the plans of the forthcoming mobilisation were already known in the anti-Fascist environment. An example is the letter intercepted by Fascist

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<sup>710</sup> D. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>711</sup> N. Doumanis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 486.

ensorship in June 1939. The anti-Fascist, Renzo Casoli, was sharing secret information with his 'compagno' (companion) and father Remigio Casoli. The letter reported the following:

Remigio, the moment is critical and after a lot of efforts it will be difficult to safeguard the peace. The mercenary bourgeoisie will be the last one to play. We need to move quickly. The preparation for the mobilisation is ready. 2,000 tanks have been equipped and every division is now led by officials and generals. (...) We have listened to the radio and the situation is becoming darker.<sup>712</sup>

Although considered a great power, and on paper to have a strong army, Italy was relatively weak compared to the other European major countries involved in the war. Italy was still a predominantly agricultural-based country, with demographical and economic characteristics more similar to a developing country. Italy had a considerably lower industrial production in comparison with France and Britain, especially with regard to those sectors crucial for war operations such as mechanisation. Furthermore, most raw materials had to be imported and Italy was deeply affected by the blockade imposed at the outbreak of the war. This meant that Italy had to import raw materials such as coal from Germany, becoming deeply dependent on its ally. In addition, Italy's economy had been significantly debilitated by the campaign of Spain and Abyssinia which had increased the country's debt dramatically.<sup>713</sup> As Marco Fincardi argued, "the Italian political and military authorities, and equally the industrialists, who took lucrative government orders for the production of military aircraft and equipment for anti-aircraft defences, did not provide the armed forces with the means necessary for a modern military power".<sup>714</sup>

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<sup>712</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 17, Prefect Giuseppe Catalano to the Ministry of Interior, Seen by Mussolini, 5 June 1939.

<sup>713</sup> J. F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Princeton University Press, 1975), 404.

<sup>714</sup> M. Fincardi, 'Anglo-American Air Attacks and the Rebirth of Public Opinion in Fascist Italy', in C. Baldoli-Knapp-R. Overy (ed.), *Bombing states and peoples in Western Europe, 1940-1945* (London: Continuum, 2011),

The Italian Royal Army (*Regio Esercito*) was comparatively weaker than other armies. Italian armaments, including tanks, were of poor quality and the bulk of the artillery had already seen action in the First World War. Italian authorities were conscious of the need to modernise military equipment and investments were made before Italy entered into the war, but the country's weak economy did not allow the full implementation of the rearmament plans. Mussolini's Under-Secretary for War Production, Carlo Favagrossa, had estimated that Italy would have not be prepared for major armed conflict until at least October 1942.<sup>715</sup> In addition to the lack of economic resource and armaments, Italy had significant problems in establishing an efficient senior leadership for the war operations. The *Comando Supremo* (the Italian High Command) consisted of only a small nucleus of people who had to inform the individual commands about Mussolini's strategy. On some occasions, Mussolini took the lead of some operations such as the Greece campaign, to avoid any kind of miscommunication. Generally, the three service commands, Army, Navy and Air Forces were used to working independently, developing individual plans for the war. Therefore, the Italian army possessed a clear lack of belief in inter-service cooperation. This clearly affected the level of discipline among Italian army ranks.<sup>716</sup>

Despite these considerable military weaknesses when entering the war, Fascist propaganda portrayed Italy as a 'proletarian nation' fighting to become wealthier and gain a

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241-255, 241. See also M. Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 10-15.

<sup>715</sup> C. Favagrossa, *Perché perdemmo la guerra: Mussolini e la produzione bellica* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1946).

<sup>716</sup> A. R. Millett-W. Murray (ed.), *Military Effectiveness: Volume 3, The Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 151.



place of importance at international level.<sup>717</sup> The propaganda focused on ‘glorifying’ the superior will of the Italians, people of a still relatively poor country, who would fight against capitalistic and plutocratic Western democracies by compensating for their material inferiority with esprit de corps and with superior faith against their enemies, corrupted and impoverished by their materialistic societies.<sup>718</sup> As Christopher Duggan correctly wrote, “the regime’s obsession with the primacy of ‘will’ and ‘faith’ helped to perpetuate the anachronistic idea that it was the superior ‘spirit’ of a country that would enable Italy to win the war”.<sup>719</sup> Italians could finally express the values learnt from the regime’s pedagogy: the love for the Motherland, the pleasure of the heroic gesture, and the consistency of the Italians’ superiority of will and (Latin) race.

Based on the more than 800 documents scrutinised for the years 1940-1941, our research draws a rather less idyllic picture. Venetians seemed to have been worried about the war after only a few months of its start and an initial shift in popular opinion can be detected. In contrast to their predecessors in 1915, people had a fairly clear idea of what a major war would entail. Venetians, as with the majority of their fellow Italians, were not particularly enthusiastic about fighting a war. What was evident was a sense of people’s tiredness of living under the constant condition of a quasi-war. The regime’s wars and the autarkic policy had already inflicted upon them significant material limitations.<sup>720</sup> Ordinary Venetians were already exhausted after their recent contribution to Italian wars in Abyssinia and in Spain.

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<sup>717</sup> P. Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini. Italy, Italians and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>718</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>719</sup> Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 321.

<sup>720</sup> A. Gagliardi, *L'impossibile autarchia. La politica economica del fascismo e il Ministero scambi e valute* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2006); M. Franzinelli, M. Magnani, *Beneduce: il finanziere di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009).

Many Venetian *popolani*, like the peasant First World War veteran Umberto Dal Borgo, were aware that the war would worsen their lives and they thought, therefore, that poor people should not join the war, but should “let the Fascists go to the front [alone]”.<sup>721</sup> The general apprehension about the impact of the war was exacerbated by the fear of those Italians whose children were conscripted into the armed forces. They had first-hand experience of war and its brutality; and they would have been under no illusions about the chances of their sons’ return from the front. Parents knew that their children were under a mortal threat. The Venetian citizen Franco Rossi summed up the situation like this: “I have fought in the Ethiopian war and I have two sons in the army. I would prefer to cut off their heads and take them to Mussolini, instead of sending my sons to the front”.<sup>722</sup>

The war began on 10 June 1940 with Italy’s declaration of war on Great Britain and France. After having invaded France and started the war operations in East Africa in June 1940, Italy launched the invasion of Greece in October 1940. Although Greece was a less militarily prepared country, the Italian attack failed miserably with the Greek army able to counter-attack and force the Italians to retreat. The Greek counter-offensive was facilitated by the neutrality of Bulgaria and the support of Britain. As Sadkovich has written:

[The] Greeks not only expected the attack, but disposed of prepared positions, interior lines, and a rough equality in men and material, and the Italian divisions were rapidly forced onto the defensive and back into Albania. As the Greek quagmire consumed more equipment and men, supplies became scarce, the weather worsened and morale predictably plummeted.<sup>723</sup>

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<sup>721</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 19, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 1 July 1940.

<sup>722</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.32/A, Prefect Marcello Vaccari, 12 August 1941.

<sup>723</sup> J. Sadkovich, ‘Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy’s Role in World War II’, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24, 1 (1989), 27–61, 37.

If the invasion of Greece ended in failure, the war was also going badly in North Africa. Although outnumbered, the British army counterattack on 9 December 1940, caused heavy casualties to the Italians who were pushed back more than 500 miles. In addition, a month later, British troops were able to capture the port of Tobruk in Libya from the Italians. In December 1940, after the humiliating failure of Mussolini's attempt to achieve a *blitzkrieg* (quick victory) in Greece, the *questore* reported that the PNF had become the minority local faction that was still pro-war with the majority of local Venetians not committed to supporting the conflict. Ordinary Venetians were disorientated by the news reporting that the attack on Greece had failed. The majority blamed the army and the leaders with a particular reference to foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano in terms of responsibility.<sup>724</sup> Criticism of Ciano was directed at his flamboyant and luxurious life style which contrasted sharply with the living standard of the majority of Italians during the war.<sup>725</sup>

Mussolini decided to enter the war at a point when German troops were rapidly progressing in Northern and Western Europe, but as soon as Italy failed to achieve immediate victories and the war became prolonged and its outcome increasingly uncertain, people understood that the conflict would last longer than the regime had originally predicted.<sup>726</sup> This research on the Venetians' perception of the war confirms that Italians, to a large extent, disapproved of a war conducted in partnership with Nazi Germany. Despite Mussolini presenting the conflict as a 'parallel' war, fought alongside Nazi Germany but pursuing the specific Italian objective of controlling the Mediterranean, Germans continued to be perceived negatively, even when they came to the rescue of the Italian forces in the Balkans

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<sup>724</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.32/a, n.d., Leaflet.

<sup>725</sup> R. Moseley, *Mussolini's Shadow: The Double Life of Count Galeazzo Ciano* (London: Yale university Press, 199), 166.

<sup>726</sup> See the reports in ACS, DGPS, b.32/A and b.19 for the years 1941-1942.

in 1941. Police reported a deep suspicion about relying upon on a German ally that was permanently ‘Germanocentric’ in its approach. Anxiety and disapproval arose even among those who considered themselves as loyal supporters of Fascism. filofascist Venetians showed consternation about the ruthlessness of the German troops. Venetians were to a large extent unconvinced of the aims of a war conducted in alliance with Nazi Germany. As an anonymous Fascist wrote, Fascists should not have supported German rapaciousness: “We, Italian Fascists, have a blind faith in our leader. But it must not be said that the Italy of Vittorio Veneto will fire even a single bullet because the pederast Hitler wants to devastate Europe. The Roman Empire fell and Napoleon faded and they were much more powerful than Mr. Hitler”.<sup>727</sup> Documents show that Venetians were not enthusiastic about their nation having binding alliance with the Nazi regime. In Venice province, cultural and political anti-Germanism had traditionally been strong and was rooted in the difficult relationship with Austria, which had ruled Veneto for more than 60 years (1798-1866). Many Venetians had fought against the Habsburg Empire during the wars of independence, which led to Venice’s unification with the Kingdom of Italy in 1866. Numerous reports sent by the Police to Rome emphasised that the alliance with Germany was widely resented by the local population and it was still fresh in their minds that Germans had been enemies during the First World War (1915-1918). Leaflets invited Venetians not to fight alongside the Germans as a sign of respect for all the Italians who had been killed by Germans during the Great War.<sup>728</sup> There was a widespread belief that the friendship being displayed by the Germans was only a facade and in reality Italy was marching for the triumph of Pan-Germanism in Europe. The sense of fighting on the wrong side has also been reported by the author Anna Bruni Benson, who grew up in Venice during the regime and attended the University of Venice from which

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<sup>727</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 19, Anonymous leaflet, No date, Year 1940.

<sup>728</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 19, Anonymous leaflet, 15 April 1940.

she graduated after the war with a doctoral degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures.<sup>729</sup> She remembers that her father used to tell her that: “If we join Hitler and we win, it will be in effect a German victory and we will be Hitler’s slaves. If we lose, we will have to suffer all the consequences of a lost war”.<sup>730</sup>

From December 1941 Italy was also at war with the USA. The USA was still perceived by Italians, especially by the middle class, as the land of opportunities and prosperity, but first and foremost the land of migration. Although the USA was derided in the Fascist propaganda (even before the war started), Venetians, many middle-class Italians were strongly attracted by the consumerism and materialism of US culture. As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi suggested, “caught in the contradiction between economic rationales and cultural demands, the regime opted for an ambiguous co-existence with, and incorporation of, consumer culture – a coexistence it denied, however, at the level of rhetoric”.<sup>731</sup> The ambiguity of the regime towards the US had already been commented on by Italo Balbo when visiting the US in 1933. On that occasion, Balbo urged Italian immigrants to be proud Americans, but not to forget that they were also Italians, in this way reinforcing the dilemma of the relationship between the regime and the USA.<sup>732</sup> Given the ambiguity of the Fascist regime’s attitude towards the US, it was not unusual for the police to report, for example, that the wealthy Venetian middle class man and former broker, Domenico Biasotto, argued that the war would make Italy poorer. Biasotto thought that Italy could become a wealthier

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<sup>729</sup> Anna Bruni-Benson is Professor Emeritus at UCLA. Her biography is reported in her blog: <http://thelionandtheswastikabook.blogspot.co.uk/>.

<sup>730</sup> A. Bruni Benson, *The Lion and the Swastika* (London: Lion Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>731</sup> S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>732</sup> G. R. Gems, *Sport and the Shaping of Italian-American Identity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 91.

country thanks to emigration to America and there was no reason to fight against the United States as the war was an “unnecessary massacre of young people”.<sup>733</sup>

## **5.2 Communication and rationing: the failure of Mussolini’s strategy and Propaganda (1941-1942)**

Two aspects of war planning were of crucial importance not only for the war itself but also for how the conflict would be perceived by ordinary Italians in the Veneto and beyond: the feeding of the nation and the control of information. As Robert Mackay argued, “in two areas of pre-war planning – rationing and information – official concern for morale is discernible behind the ostensible purposes of seeing that people were fed and told what to do”.<sup>734</sup> This section will focus on Mussolini’s failure to deliver on either of those home front strategies.

Much of the war-time propaganda is faced with the problem of how to manage the discrepancies between the brutalities of the war and the need to present a positive picture of the progression of the conflict in order to persuade the population about the necessity to continue to engage in hostilities. The situation was particularly extreme in Mussolini’s Italy, as the reality – right from the start – was a bleak one with little opportunity to present the war positively.<sup>735</sup> Even given this proviso, it is difficult not to be critical of Mussolini’s ability to inspire his people. As the war progressed, Venetians and Italians of all classes became less and less trusting of his proclamations, rare as they were. Mussolini made only four public speeches during the war. His reticence caused widespread disappointment in the country.

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<sup>733</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 10 August 1942.

<sup>734</sup> Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 38.

<sup>735</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 80.

Mussolini's silence generated popular rumours about the reality of the war and about his ability to lead the country to the victory. The failure to speak became a cause of the Duce's decline in popularity.<sup>736</sup> Mussolini could not propagandise anything as Italy went through a series of demoralising defeats after it joined the war. Documents from the Venetian archives substantially confirm the general distrust towards Mussolini's propaganda and communication. The popular feeling is well described by an anonymous Venetian who commented when following one of Mussolini's speeches:

Mussolini has found the courage to speak. To say what? To say that Germans are strong, very strong, arch-strong and their weaponry can cover all of Europe including Italy. (...) In Rome, people applauded only when he spoke about the Nazi [victories]. In Venice, our hearts have become ice. We believe Mussolini has lost his dignity and his mind. He has also found the time to make sarcasm on the Greek situation, when the extraordinary Fascist army is going from defeat to defeat. (...) We all need to hope in a British victory as they will be kind with us and we will be free. Fascism and Germans is a dreadful combination.<sup>737</sup>

In addition to Mussolini's lack of effective communication, the inefficiency of the regime's political intelligence and the inability to control the spread of unfavourable and critical sentiments through effective censorship contributed to growing unease among the population. Allied radio broadcasting, such as "Radio Londra", made crucial information about Italian war operations easily accessible for ordinary people, spreading alarming news about the Italian war ventures that contrasted sharply with the regime's account.<sup>738</sup> Venetian people came to know that the Fascist army was unprepared and weak. For example, two ordinary Venetian postal officers, Scarso and Murru, were able to get substantial information about

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<sup>736</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>737</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 32/a, Anonymous, Year 1941.

<sup>738</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to Minister of Interior, 28 November 1941.

Italian military operations, kept secret by the regime, through simply listening to forbidden Allied radio broadcasts. The information related to the British occupation of Bengasi and the sinking of the *Duilio*, which cost the lives of 7,000 Italian soldiers.<sup>739</sup> As Fincardi suggested

After Italy entered the war, the arrival from the skies of appealing messages from the enemy, and the start of various Italian language broadcasts by enemy radio stations, put an end to the political monopoly of information which had lasted for some 15 years: this represented a sudden and powerful change for the stability of a totalitarian system. From then on, faced with Italy's obvious military disaster and exposed to a system of mass communication that was more credible than that of the Fascist dictatorship, a growing number of Italians saw the regime's propaganda as increasingly discredited.<sup>740</sup>

An example of successful Allied propaganda (especially from the British side) was the drop of leaflets advising on how to oppose the dictatorship, which was charged with direct responsibility for their miserable material conditions. Leaflets condemned Mussolini as the only person responsible for taking Italy into a disastrous war. The distinction made between the Fascist dictator and his people suggested that things would automatically get better for the Italians if Mussolini and his regime had gone, re-establishing democratic institutions within the country.<sup>741</sup> Mussolini and his intelligence service did not have a systematic information strategy to persuade and control people in order to keep the public in a positive mood and tackle defeatism. Defeats in battle seemed to have had a huge impact on the population, greater than the regime's propaganda, and this meant that people did not believe their leader and instead chose to believe Allied propaganda. In addition, the poor quality of air-raid shelters, the nature and the organisation of evacuation plans, united to the large shortages of

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<sup>739</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to Minister of Interior, 3 September 1942.

<sup>740</sup> Fincardi, 'Anglo-American Air Attacks', 244.

<sup>741</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 37.



food and supplies, promoted a perception of inefficiency and corruption of the regime's institutions. Therefore, people believed the regime was responsible for the suffering to which the population had been exposed.<sup>742</sup> Italian people, brought into a war which caused them years of longstanding uncertainty, did not react against their enemies, but instead, they criticised their government for the problems of their everyday life. The regime's credibility had been easily undermined by the war and, on the other side, the regime's propaganda was unable to trigger popular support for Mussolini and genuine conviction in the Fascist 'cause'. Consequently, the regime was not able to prevent scaremongering among the population or remove misconceptions. The regime failed in what the British Government did well: ranking home propaganda "at least equal in status to all measures of offence and defence".<sup>743</sup> Churchill believed that rumours and false intelligence could be harmful to morale and therefore he ordered the Ministry of Information to set up a campaign to tackle it.<sup>744</sup> Venetian soldiers back from the front on leave also contributed to the spread of alarming news. They complained about the superior equipment and weaponry of enemy troops and the non-availability and malfunctioning of their own. They blamed the technological gap and the incompetence and unpreparedness of the military command and the Fascist regime.<sup>745</sup> The repeated news regarding Italian army defeats progressively detached Venetians from Fascism and destroyed the image of Mussolini's infallibility.<sup>746</sup>

Much of Mussolini's propaganda, the imperial campaign of Ethiopia and the autarkic policies implemented within the country since mid-1930s had been designed to prepare Italy

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<sup>742</sup> Fincardi, 'Anglo-American Air Attacks', 244.

<sup>743</sup> Mackay *Half the Battle*, 38.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>745</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to Minister of Interior, 28 November 1941.

<sup>746</sup> See the documents related to the folders 'Offences to the President of Government' held in the ACS for these years.

and the Italians for a large war, but the clash between propaganda and reality was nowhere more visible than in Italy. Even a charismatic leader who did not deliver on what he had emphasised most strongly for years could hardly survive even with excellent war propaganda.<sup>747</sup> The unexpectedly long conflict became an enormous burden, especially for the working class, and food supply was another crucial area in which the regime failed to deliver. However, we have to go back to the autarkic system established by the regime since late 1930s to understand the extent to which the regime failed to deliver in this sector. Supported by a vast campaign of propaganda, autarky developed in the years 1937-1939, and practically consisted in reducing imports and increasing exports as much as possible. Firstly, the regime tried to prevent the importation of luxury or not strictly necessary goods, which were, as far as possible, replaced by surrogates. Secondly, the importation of raw materials was exclusively permitted only to state companies or governmental agencies such as AMMI (Italian metallic minerals company), ACAI (Italian coal company) or AGIP (Italian oil company). Thirdly, and more important for our discussion, the regime tried to achieve complete self-sufficiency in agriculture. In this sector, the Fascist government adopted a monopolistic system that consisted in *ammassi obbligatori* (mandatory stockpiles) of wheat and other cereals that were managed by the Italian Federation of Farmers (*Federconsorzi*), an organisation with provincial offices, in which big landowners loomed large. The food stockpiles controlled by the state were intended to make use of an eventual surplus of essential foodstuffs in order to guarantee regular supplies at stable and fair prices for both producers and consumers. Overall, the policy of autarky, apart from the positive propaganda, was a means by which the regime put into effect a forced development of some industries such as chemical, iron and steel, hydroelectric power, and artificial fibres. However, it failed

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<sup>747</sup> R. Mallet, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

to provide an adequate supply of consumer goods to the population.<sup>748</sup> As Gianni Toniolo suggested, “private consumption per *capita* (...) declines steadily until 1936 (the only partial exceptions being 1932 and 1935) when a recovery begins.”<sup>749</sup> During the pre-war period, the Venetian countryside had been self-sufficient in terms of agricultural production. The overwhelming majority of the province was dependent on the agricultural markets of Sottomarina, Cavarzere, Riviera and Portogruaro which already during the Liberal age had exported a substantial amount of their production to the rest of Europe.<sup>750</sup> Venetian agriculture, which in the years of the Fascist regime profited from the availability of manpower, started to suffer due to a reduction of the workforce during the war. Manpower was largely utilised by the regime to fight on the various Italian fronts and contrary to Nazi Germany, Italy could not rely on forced labour recruited in occupied countries.<sup>751</sup> In addition, falls in production had been triggered by the war’s massive demand for fertiliser and fuel. The regime should have done more to increase agricultural production from the Ethiopian war, as the campaign utilised most of the available resources of the country, and Italy did not have enough stockpiles to supply internal demand.<sup>752</sup> On the contrary, Mussolini pursued an aggressive foreign policy without paying much attention to the domestic situation.<sup>753</sup>

The problem was not only food production but also the system of food rationing. As in most war economies, since 1940 consumer goods had become scarce and consequently, if available

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<sup>748</sup> G. Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna. Il fascismo e le sue guerre 1922-1939* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002), 432.

<sup>749</sup> G. Toniolo (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Italian Economy since Unification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 172.

<sup>750</sup> Paladini-Reberschak, *La Resistenza nel veneziano*, 47-105. See Also Scarpa-Ravagnan, *Chioggia nel '900*, 25-29.

<sup>751</sup> Paladini-Reberschak, *La Resistenza nel veneziano*, 28.

<sup>752</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 65.

<sup>753</sup> C. Heltosky, *Garlic and Oil. Food and Politics in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 92-98.

at all, expensive in the 'official' market. The lack of consumer goods increased with the naval blockade and the necessity to supply the army. Food rationing started in autumn 1940 and concerned olive oil, butter, pasta, rice, and flour. The rationing of bread was applied in October 1941. Inflation, already rampant in the years before the outbreak of the war (1938-1939), increased dramatically, especially for food stuff. Inflation led to food shortages, non-existent rations and a thriving black market.<sup>754</sup> The system of the *ammassi* aimed at tackling the diffusion of the black market. However, requisitioning deprived Italians as well as Venetians of goods like coffee or even staple foods such as bread, flour, pasta, and corn. In reality, the black market was a response to rationing itself and to the lack of availability of food. While illegal, the black market became a driving force in the home front for those who could afford the prices.<sup>755</sup>

Rationed food disappeared from shops' shelves and its price on the black market increased dramatically. By 1941, Italy's wheat imports (coming mostly from Romania) were reduced dramatically from the previous two years, to be redirected to Germany. Food rationing and Italy's economic and military situation made the nation ever more dependent on Germany for war resource.<sup>756</sup> Between 1941 and 1943 the Fascist distribution system did not guarantee the basic food supply for Italians and *ammassi* regulations had been repeatedly violated by the producers, with the mandatory transfer of the production to the *ammassi obbligatori* being avoided in favour of the black market. The evasion of the *ammassi*'s rules by the producers made ineffective the regime's effective requisition of production and resulted in the impossibility to supply the provincial organisations set up to distribute the *ammassi*. It therefore became impossible for the government to supply the major cities

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<sup>754</sup> Ibidem, 92.

<sup>755</sup> Ibidem, 91.

<sup>756</sup> Ibidem, 107.

through the official channels of the regime.<sup>757</sup> Ordinary Venetians were obliged to access alternative markets. Food shortages forced families to find food on the black market, sometimes traveling to the Venetian rural mainland to buy products found only scarcely (and when found, at unreasonably high prices), or not at all in Venice's shops. On the streets and in workplaces, local Fascist officials became the target of criticism and insults from the population. As the primary sources reveal, Venetians affected by shortages only wanted the end of the war without caring about a Fascist victory. Criticism came from the workers to the management of the Workforce Office (*Ufficio di collocamento*) during the war. The *Ufficio di collocamento* was a job center that under Fascism was responsible for managing employment locally. The office was under the control of the corporative bodies. Employers were obliged to hire those workers registered to this office and they could choose among the list of members, giving priority to the PNF or fascist trade unions members, based on their seniority of membership. Therefore the system of the *uffici di collocamento* was very discretionary and re-established system clientelism or patronage like personal recommendations (*raccomandazioni*) from which the party members could clearly benefit. The *ufficio di collocamento* worked well in the periods of low unemployment level, while in periods of crisis like during the war, the office completely failed its mission.<sup>758</sup> This created a sense of detachment among the workers who were thinking to be paying the higher price for the 'Fascist war'. An example of criticism came from factory worker, Giacomo De Benedetti, employed at the *Montecatini* factory in Marghera who protested at the Workforce Office (*Ufficio di collocamento*) for having overpaid some tickets for the daily soup. De Benedetti criticised the local Fascist official as follows: "You [Fascists] always want to be right. We

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<sup>757</sup> G. Candeloro, *La seconda guerra mondiale, il crollo del fascismo, la resistenza 1939-1945* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), 113.

<sup>758</sup> U. Mancini, *Lotte contadine e avvento del fascismo nei Castelli Romani* (Rome: Armando, 1956), 241.

hope the British will come soon to beat the crap out of you".<sup>759</sup> The function of these offices was surely directed to minimising these protests, but at the same time, they were the 'eyes' and the 'ears' of the regime at local level, reporting this criticism to the local *questura*.<sup>760</sup> These local offices would tend to defend their activities against criticism, however, most of the time no drastic actions against the individuals were taken by the *Questura* and it became almost normal that critic people would look forward to the arrival of British (or American) 'liberators'.

Of all the restrictions, none were more irksome than those imposed by food shortages. The rationing system obviously also involved bars, taverns and cafes and certain kinds of food such as meat, bread and pasta, scarcely available in the market, had been forbidden by law on certain days of the week. Therefore, it was impossible for people to find meat or other restricted goods on the 'forbidden days'.<sup>761</sup> As a result, the Fascist rationing system became increasingly unpopular. A protest in a popular *osteria* in Venice led to the police arresting the *popolano*, Giuseppe Pedarsini, because persistently requested meat on a forbidden day. Questioned by the police, he replied: "I do not care about the laws. As far as I am concerned, those [Fascists] who make the laws can stay without meat. I want meat and chicken".<sup>762</sup> Rumours regarding how much better the Germans were supplied reached the Venetian population, worsening their attitude towards the regime.<sup>763</sup> However, the crucial difference between Italy and the other countries was in the overall implementation of the rationing system. Mussolini did not have a clear plan for rationing and distribution; neither was he able to improve the situation in due course. He expected Italian people, who had proven

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<sup>759</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 10 November 1942.

<sup>760</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect to the Ministry of Interior, 13 November 1942.

<sup>761</sup> M. Cuzzi, *Cibo di guerra. Sofferenze e privazioni nell'Italia dei conflitti mondiali*. (Milan: Biblion, 2015).

<sup>762</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect to the Ministry of Interior, 4 April 1942.

<sup>763</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect to the Ministry of Interior, 3 December 1941.

themselves during the autarkic period, to be capable of enduring more shortages and deprivation than their counterparts. Conversely, in countries like Great Britain and Germany, officials were well aware that failure to ensure an adequate food supply could lead to the collapse of morale. The British Government had prepared well in advance a fully comprehensive scheme for the rationing of essential foods. By the outbreak of war ration books had been printed, to be issued at the point when the Government judged shortages were serious enough to stoke unwanted inflation and cause discontent among the less well off.<sup>764</sup>

The food rationing system implemented in Germany or in the UK showed that keeping up morale was important for sustaining the war effort. As effectively explained by Morgan and Duggan, it was even more important for the very existence of the regime. In fact, morale was inherently linked to the peculiarity of Italy's situation which can be summarised a poor nation trying to become rich.<sup>765</sup> The regime's certainty that the supremacy of the 'will' and 'faith' of an army and a people would bring about victory, contributed to a catastrophic lack of preparation.<sup>766</sup> Italy's economy was never capable of withstanding a long war. When rationing had been introduced, food consumption reduced by 25 %. Soap, coffee and tobacco became luxury products and were sold at eight times the pre-war price on a thriving black market.<sup>767</sup> The Italians fought a *guerra dei poveri* (the war of the poor) and the total daily calorific intake dropped from 2,631 calories in 1940 to 2,112 in 1943 and 1,865 in 1944 - considerably below the First World War level of around 2,600 calories. Italy could not absorb the costs of total war, and lira notes in circulation doubled between 1939 and 1941, while the deficit increased fivefold.<sup>768</sup> As Morgan argued, rationing was introduced by the regime "as

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<sup>764</sup> Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 38. See also C. I. Talbot, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France, 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>765</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 42.

<sup>766</sup> Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 321.

<sup>767</sup> G. Corrigan, *The Second World War: A Military History* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 414.

<sup>768</sup> Sadkovich, 'Understanding Defeat', 36.

measure of social justice or as a necessary measure of social equalisation”, but in the end it led to the realisation of the full extent of difference between the facade and the substance of Mussolini’s propaganda.<sup>769</sup> This disparity between reality and propaganda clearly emerges from the documents consulted. When food became short and more expensive, ordinary working-class Venetians, unable to maintain their already quite low levels of food consumption, began to resent people who did not appear to be as badly affected as they were. The Venetian lower class complained constantly about those who were surviving the war unaffected and who were making profits out of the black market. The war increased material inequalities and profiteers took advantage of the situation. The police informer Paolo Sol denounced as ‘crooks’ two employees at Venice’s Supreme Court, Angelo Rizzo and Vincenzo Napoli, whom he claimed had been celebrating every Italian defeat; and they were able to earn ‘extra-profits’ by re-selling goods that were meant for the tribunal of Venice.<sup>770</sup>

National cohesion, one of the main aims of Fascist policy since 1922 and already fragile before to 1940, disappeared as the war progressed and one of Fascism’s main objectives, the ‘making of Italians’, was broken by the material conditions of the war.<sup>771</sup> Class difference was far from vanishing into a French kind of *union sacrè* as the poorest were complaining that the richest were being advantaged materially by the war.<sup>772</sup> Venetian *popolani*, as the majority of the Italian popular classes, felt that they were paying the higher cost for the war. Many, like the Venetian *popolana*, Elena Baessato, noting that the majority of Venetians were starving, stopped caring about the destiny of the country. She simply thought that “all

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<sup>769</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 42.

<sup>770</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, No date, Year 1942.

<sup>771</sup> Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 83.

<sup>772</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 166.



those praying for an Italian victory should get lost”.<sup>773</sup> In particular, among the workers, there was a fervent wish for the arrival of the Russians and it was not unusual to find the prefect reporting to his superiors that Venetian *popolani* were saying such things such as “the heroism of Italians cannot do anything against the audacity of the Bolsheviks”.<sup>774</sup>

### 5.3 Popular Disaffection with the Regime (Late 1941-1942)

From the beginning of 1942, it seems that disaffection towards the regime started to be expressed openly in bars, pubs, restaurants and shops, where people were often commenting sarcastically with a defeatist attitude on the ‘negative rumours regarding the war’, ridiculing the regime’s conduct of the war.<sup>775</sup> Police and informers were registering the progressive loss of appeal of the dictatorial charisma of Mussolini. Defeat by defeat, the Duce was losing credibility. The prefect Vaccari reported that *strateghi da caffè* (cafe’ strategists) were spreading anti-Fascist jokes regarding the regime in pubs and taverns. The mockery of Mussolini, the regime and the Party soon became an everyday activity among ordinary Venetians.<sup>776</sup> In July 1942, the police informer Angelo Piccoli argued that many people no longer believed in victory, but were hoping for a quick end of the conflict, whatever the outcome was going to be. Piccoli also added that the Venetian home front had been seriously undermined by the pernicious ‘plague’ of defeatism which was spreading among some sectors of Venetian society, and he suggested that the regime should adopt more restrictive measures against those wanting the end of the nation.<sup>777</sup> Despite we could reasonably doubt that Piccoli was using his real name or what he was reporting was authentic as the kind of

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<sup>773</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 15 July 1942.

<sup>774</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 24 April 1942.

<sup>775</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 20 January 1942.

<sup>776</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 7 January 1942.

<sup>777</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Angelo Piccoli to the Prefect Marcello Vaccari, 3 July 1942.

circles he moved in were unknown, he surely anticipated what would become a general shift in the public mood in early 1943. Although the regime introduced new measures in order to tackle the black market and replace incompetent or corrupt prefects or *federali*, the situation could not be turned around as the local administration and economy and morale had been irremediably affected by the course of the war, and the overwhelming majority of the people thought the war was already lost.<sup>778</sup>

In mid-1942, there was the feeling that many Venetians as well as the majority of Italians had ceased to be a national community. The low morale in the Venice Province was even more striking as Venice city had been spared Allied bombing. It stood safe most of the time and the population was not affected by the violent incursions that were wrecking so many European cities; and the province did not experience any dramatic evacuations like Milan, Turin and Genoa. In addition, the Veneto can be regarded as an example of how the Superintendencies for Monuments and for Galleries, played a crucial role in protecting works of art, creating numerous shelters in the region from 1940 to 1945.<sup>779</sup> Urban life was not completely disrupted and Venice suffered much less than in the First World War, when by 1918 it had been reduced to a small naval garrison and its economy ruined.<sup>780</sup> However, the regime's heavy-handed approach and its terror system could still work and sentiments of protest never translated into open rebellion, even when in the summer of 1942, isolated strikes hit Turin and Milan. According to the documents consulted for this period of 1942, threats were reported, such as the discovery of leaflets or wall writing encouraging opposition to the regime, but the police still seemed to keep control of the situation. For example at the factory *Vetrocoker* of Porto Marghera, writing appeared on the wall inciting

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<sup>778</sup> Candeloro, *La seconda guerra mondiale*, 180.

<sup>779</sup> Baldoli-Knapp-Overy (ed.), *Bombing states*, 101.

<sup>780</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 77.

workers “to organise a white strike”. After the police investigation, two men were arrested as responsible for instigating workers’ unrest.<sup>781</sup> Although this kind of protest did not constitute a serious threat for the regime, workers were progressively detaching themselves from Fascism. They were refusing to sacrifice their material life for the regime by manifesting openly their criticism requesting an increase on their wages and improvement of work conditions. In addition, the police chief of Venice reported cases in which groups of old subversives (the term to refer to Socialists, Communists and Anarchists) were trying to make contact with the Venetian factories’ workers in order to organise a collective protest in the industrial districts of Marghera and Mestre.<sup>782</sup> An example was the worker Virginio Fabbri, of the *Cantieri Navali*, secretly encouraging colleagues to “follow the teaching of Lenin and Stalin”.<sup>783</sup> During the first years of war, the police apparatus could still repress protests, but the regime could not prevent these protests to progressively become an act of political disagreement towards the fascist conduct of the war. Although still ill-coordinated, the workers actions in 1942 were becoming more and more ideological and the fall of Mussolini in September 1943 would manifest it very clear.<sup>784</sup>

Popular dissatisfaction with the realities of the war and disillusionment with the political and ideological manifestations of Mussolini’s Fascism were prevalent not only among the working classes. The disaffection increasingly undermined any support the regime might

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<sup>781</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect to the Ministry of Interior, 27 October 1942. The “white strike”, or in the Anglo-Saxon world “work-to-rule”, is an industrial action where employees do precisely no more than the minimum required by their contract. In this way, they also caused a production slowdown, impacting on working hours. Such action is considered less disruptive than a strike or lockout; and “work-to-rule” is less susceptible to disciplinary action.

<sup>782</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.29, Police Chief to the Prefect Marcello Vaccari, 11 June 1942.

<sup>783</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 13 January 1942.

<sup>784</sup> Colarizi, *L’opinione degli italiani*, 394.

have had from the elites on whose 'buy-in' Mussolini's power had relied for much of the Duce's time in power. It was the diminishing lack of support of this important section of society that became the final nail in the coffin of Mussolini's rule. If the early detachment of the popular classes is not a surprise, given all the problems caused by the war to their daily life, the progressive disengagement of the Venetian bourgeoisie from the regime is more striking. Political criticism from the bourgeoisie, which formed the backbone of the regime in the Venice province, started to appear with the growing fear of war-induced impoverishment. Lack of supplies, the negative impact of the war on the local economies and quality of life touched the lives of everyone, but more and more those of the better off in Venice in 1942. One branch of the local economy that suffered particularly strong setbacks during the war was the tourist trade. An example is the case of Luigi Soma, owner of the *Albergo Villa Pannonia* in the Lido of Venice, who criticised the regime's unreasonable rationing policy alluding to the better standard of living people were enjoying in other countries involved in the war. Soma complained also about the dramatic tourism decline in Venice.<sup>785</sup> There was a depressed mood in Venice province where businessmen and guest-house owners feared for their businesses. Increased taxation, problems in obtaining sufficient foodstuffs, and bureaucratic food rationing controls were said to be creating obstacles for local economy. Soma had to apologise to clients for the low standard of their meal and service, hoping that the following year everything would be better with a wider availability of food and possibly the war would have come to an end.<sup>786</sup>

Even the great German victories on many fronts failed to convince. Conversely, the Venetian bourgeoisie started to look at the Anglo-American-German duel with disillusionment, sure that whoever won, Italy would not get the reward expected by the

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<sup>785</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to the Ministry of Interior, 13 November 1941.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibidem*.

regime. They hoped that “this war would have neither winners nor defeated, in order to avoid a new Versailles for Italy”.<sup>787</sup>

The Venetian bourgeoisie withdrew its support very rapidly from about 1942 onwards. However, whatever discontent there was among the bourgeoisie, it was of no great political significance. Complaints focused on the regime’s incapacity to safeguard their economic interests. According to the Fascist informers, similar sentiments of discontent were expressed in many circles of industrialists and among the Venetian *noblesse*, who had actively supported Fascism in Venice province since its seizure of power. In this case, their detachment from Fascism mirrored that of their leader Giuseppe Volpi, who, by 1942, was openly expressing doubts about the future of regime.<sup>788</sup>

The general scepticism of the middle and upper classes never constituted a real political danger to the regime, but it started to translate into progressive ideological detachment.<sup>789</sup> With the progression of the war, they no longer associated themselves with Fascism. Wealthy Venetians and the bourgeoisie became progressively indifferent towards the result of the war. By the end of 1942, some eminent upper class Venetians not only became reluctant to renew their party membership, but as a Fascist informer reported, they were also regularly meeting at Harry’s Bar (the most exclusive and most expensive restaurant of the time in Venice) without caring about the destiny of the regime. They were leading luxurious lives and now openly expressing doubts regarding the regime’s conduct of the war. Among these *gagà* (young man who flaunts precise elegance, giving himself the airs of a great lord), we can also find Domenico Giuriati, the son of the former national secretary of the PNF, Giovanni

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<sup>787</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>788</sup> Volpi world will also take an active part on the dethroning of the *Duce* during the Grand Council of 25 July 1943, and was then arrested by the fascist republicans in December 1943.

<sup>789</sup> Colarizi, *L’opinione degli italiani*, 274-281.

Giuriati, who had been re-called to the army as Colonel of the Royal Navy.<sup>790</sup> The middle class no longer cared about the destiny of the regime. The bourgeoisie looked at Britain and America as the best model of a liberal society and they were now hoping for an Anglo-American victory, even at the cost of accepting the destruction of their own country as a positive thing.<sup>791</sup>

#### **5.4 The Rapid Collapse of the Regime in Venice (Mid-1942-1943)**

The final section of this chapter focuses on the last year of Mussolini's rule between summer 1942 and July 1943, with the specific aim of showing how the regime sought to use propaganda to involve people in the regime's war. Documentation related to the last year of the war when Mussolini was in charge of the regime substantially confirmed that the *Duce's* propaganda of hate against those countries that were inflicting defeats on Italy had rarely been accepted by Venetians of all classes and levels. Quite the contrary, they tended to blame the incompetence of their leaders who had taken them to war. People complained that Fascists did not know warfare, they were cowards and the ruling class was a 'bunch of crooks and delinquents'.<sup>792</sup> The revulsion towards the Fascist regime is also documented in the material consulted, especially with regards the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943. We can find documents in which ordinary Venetians recollected positive military achievements of the Liberal government in the First World War with still a tenuous appreciation for the Monarchy.<sup>793</sup> By contrast, Mussolini's popularity seemed completely doomed and Fascists were blamed for their military failures. Starting from mid-1942, there was the feeling that Venetians had already reached the conclusion that the war was lost and Mussolini was not the

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<sup>790</sup> ACS, DGPS, b. 20, Secret informer to Police, September 1942.

<sup>791</sup> Baldoli-Knapp-Overy (ed.), *Bombing states*, 247.

<sup>792</sup> ACS, DGPS, b.29, Prefect Marcello Vaccari to Minister of Interior, 20 November 1942.

<sup>793</sup> Example can be found in ACS, DGPS, b.32/a, b. 19, b.29, b.49, for an overall number of 1000 documents.

right man to lead the country anymore. It was also possible to capture the people's realisation that the Italian army was not strong enough to lead the country to victory.

What emerges from the documents consulted is that ordinary Venetians were not looking for the Italian final victory anymore, but they hoped to return to a normal life. Defeat by defeat, the disappointment carried a sense of expectation of peace. The desire to put an end to the war was greater than the humiliation of losing the war. However, the peak of the Venetian demoralisation can be located in the dreadful winter of 1942–1943, which coincided with the serious military reverses in the Russia and North Africa. Despite Italian soldiers showed to fight bravely without clear direction from senior leaders, Italians were largely defeated because of inferior equipment, superior British intelligence, lack of tactical skills, doctrine and organisation.<sup>794</sup>

However, by May 1943, the Italians had lost North Africa, receiving considerably less help from the Germans than they in turn gave Germany on the Russian front.<sup>795</sup> The heading towards a clear defeat and the manpower demands of the armed forces, which meant the deflection of millions of people from their personal careers, started to become also a psychological burden that was no longer acceptable. This shows that the support for the regime was only lukewarm; and in contrast to other countries which faced imminent defeat, such an experience did not lead to a national rallying cry, but to the population withdrawing support from the leadership. Conscription alone recruited 4.5 million people born between 1901 and 1923; very few Italians had welcomed it positively. Among them would be

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<sup>794</sup> Sadkovich, 'Understanding Defeat', 27–61. See again G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*. After the battle of Stalingrad in late 1942–early 1943, the Italian army was brought up to the front line, to hold it and cover the German retreat. Around 80,000 Italian troops died.

<sup>795</sup> Sadkovich, 'Understanding Defeat', 51.

workers, clerks, or students whose degrees had yet to be completed. By early 1943, students started to feel that the war was not worth the derailment of their future plans. As an example, the Venetian student, Antonio Marras, after having failed the Spanish language examination for the second time during the war, openly expressed his resentment and annoyance by threatening his professor.<sup>796</sup>

In July 1943, Mussolini fell after having been voted down by the Fascist Grand Council and he was arrested at the king's order. Throughout the country, Mussolini's departure generated a wave of patriotic enthusiasm and the mistaken belief that all the promises of Anglo-American propaganda were about to come true. It was reported that the population of Venice celebrated with a Carnival-like atmosphere.<sup>797</sup> Anti-Fascist political prisoners were released and the urban personnel, from the prefect Vaccari down, were also replaced. On 8 September the new Prime Minister, Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio, signed the Armistice with the Allies in an attempt to take Italy out of the war. Badoglio did not care about the territory still under German control and after September 1943 Venice province, like the rest of the northern Italy, was subjected to a new Fascist republic called the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* led by Mussolini under the control of the Germans. The Venetian members of the Grand Council who favoured the fall of Mussolini, Volpi and Cini, were arrested.

An account of the last days of 1943 underlines the diffidence and the scepticism of the overwhelming majority of ordinary Venetians towards the new Fascist Republican Party,

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<sup>796</sup> ASUV, "Scatole lignee", b. 32/A bis. Marras died in February 1943 without any possibility to return to his normal life. His funeral was attended by the higher army and political authorities of the province.

<sup>797</sup> Bosworth, *Italian Venice*, 170.



which in January 1944 was only able to enroll 4,140 members, 0.6 % of the province population, as opposed to the 88,684 who had been PNF party members in January 1943.<sup>798</sup>

The first four years of war saw a gradual and escalating popular disapproval of Fascism, its ideology and – more significantly – its policies. As dissatisfaction with the regime grew, criticism of Mussolini became more pronounced and the gradual breakdown of the Fascist regime culminated in Mussolini's dismissal in July 1943. Popular sentiment in the Veneto, as in Italy more generally, demonstrated that the Italian Fascist leadership had approached the conflict badly prepared economically and militarily. The picture drawn from the Venice province is that the regime managed the conflict poorly from a logistical, strategic and propaganda perspective. Mussolini raised expectations of a short and victorious war that he would never meet. In addition, the *Duce* never succeeded in convincing his people that being allied with Nazi Germany was the best option for the country. Italy faced disastrous military defeats which exacerbated already low morale. Venetians, alongside other Italians, suffered hardship and shortages of basic foodstuffs caused by the regime's lack of strategic preparation of the war. If nothing else, the rapid collapse of war is the most striking proof of the questionable ideological commitment of most ordinary Venetians (and Italians) to Fascism. Consent had been opportunistic and superficial. This does not make them 'good Italians', but it goes a long way towards explaining the volatile foundations on which the Fascist regime was built.

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<sup>798</sup> G. Bobbo, *Venezia in tempo di Guerra, 1943-1945* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2005), 198.

## 9. Conclusions

This thesis charts the development of the Fascist movement, Party and regime in the Province of Venice. It also contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate on the nature of the Fascist dictatorship. It constitutes a study of the local and regional allegiances, but with wider implications for our understanding of fascist *ventennio*.

In the first chapter, this thesis has shown that open support of the local elites to the regime manifested itself very clearly since 1924, the year in which Volpi officially joined the Fascist Party. The regime had to reach a compromise with men who opportunistically jumped on the bandwagon of Fascism to further their own goals without being convinced about Fascist ideology. However, Venice in itself did not act as a limiting agent for Fascism. On the contrary, the relationship between the local elites and the regime was one of mutual advantage. On the one side, the substantial failure of the regime in imposing “first-hour fascists” at local level, allowed the traditional elites to control the power. On the other side, the local elites made it simpler for the regime to control all the economic and political processes. An example is the project of the industrial district of Porto Marghera, supervised by Giuseppe Volpi and greatly developed under the dictatorship. From only one company in 1920, the number increased up to 16 companies in 1922, 27 in 1924. In 1928, the number grew to 55 with an overall number of 4,880 employees.<sup>799</sup> Porto Marghera emerged from Volpi's mind and it was not the product of local entrepreneurship. Instead, it was a complex and well-articulated financial and industrial capital investment project, with initiatives to

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<sup>799</sup> M. Reberschak, ‘‘Gli uomini capitali: il ‘gruppo veneziano’ (Volpi, Cini e gli altri)’, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il\\_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-ottocento-e-il-novecento-2-la-societa-veneziana-gli-uomini-capitali-il_(Storia-di-Venezia)/) (Accessed: 19 September 2016).

integrate Venice into national and international markets. Marghera attracted great Italian financial and industrial companies which were allowed to receive extensive settlements, significant exemptions and tax breaks, and reduced production costs. Marghera was probably the most spectacular result achieved by Volpi. On the other side, the project became an important instrument of propaganda for the regime, an example of the big Italian companies' investment.

The reason for the overlap in interest between the Venetians and Mussolini can also be ascribed to Mussolini's desire to defend the values of *romanità*, on his quest to Italianise the Adriatic coast (on the Yugoslavian side), and on his determination to restore Italy's "place in the sun" and to turn Fascist Italy into an empire. All this converged with Volpi's plan to restore the greatness of Venice, but also with the Venetian values (*venezianità*), with local traditions and culture characterised by a hint of nostalgia for the former *Serenissima* Empire. Throughout this thesis, the idea of a set of fascist values shared in large part by the local population has frequently been mentioned. A common set of values, therefore, made it easier for the regime to infiltrate these social groups such as local elites, entrepreneurs and ordinary people. However, different networks had different identities according to the social, cultural, and political background of their members. This fragmented local society created a complex social jigsaw which Fascism constantly struggled to fit in. As we have seen, Venetians workers and Catholics were sometimes openly in contrast with Fascism and its coercive methods. But, more than other things, certain Venetians groups were so tightly linked to the *Serenissima* culture, that obliged the regime to mediate with local powers in order to avoid a level of local fight. Intellectuals and local former liberal conservatives would not be ready to renounce the urban and cultural traditions of the city, making it difficult for the regime to implement changes. The clearest example of the clash between the 'new' fascist Venice and the 'traditional' Venice was the question of the construction of the bridge to connect Venice

to the mainland. In this respect, the clash between the most progressive wing led by Volpi, and the traditionalists, led by Molmenti initially, and then by Giuriati, was the most evident. Therefore, this thesis crucially focuses on the continuity of local tradition and the way in which the Fascist regime managed to fascistise (or not) local society. Continuity with the past was very important for the Venetian elites, which remained strong throughout the Fascist period, with their steadfast defence of the heritage of the *Serenissima* and of its centrality in Italian colonial history and predominance over the sea. However, the predominance of the traditional ruling class at local level would never be perceived as a threat to the regime; on the contrary, it seems that the old Venetian aristocracy allowed the regime to reach most of its goals. Although it is undeniable that Venice politically constituted a fertile terrain for Fascism, however, it would be a mistake to think that this meant that the traditional as well as the industrial and entrepreneurial elites, were fully committed to the regime. In an apologetic commentary which wanted to defend his father post-eventum, the son of Giuseppe Volpi declared in an interview that his father was not a “the fascist prejudicially described by many, but a man who gave work to thousands of Venetians”.<sup>800</sup> In Venice, the fascist dictatorship was not directly capable of establishing a rooted control and consensus among the Venetian social groups. As we have seen the overwhelming majority of the *podesta*’ or *federali* were coming from the traditional local elites and the resistance and the hostility of the Catholics to the regime were significant. This thesis shows that ‘fascistisation’ of the society was in many respects limited and superficial, and failed to displace or override regional traditions.

The second chapter, on the working-class networks, has demonstrated how difficult it was for the workers to avoid the force and violence of the regime. The anti-fascist network relied heavily on the continuity of their traditions dating back to the *Biennio Rosso*. The ‘old

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<sup>800</sup> M. Pagani, ‘Intervista di Giovanni Volpi a "Il Fatto Quotidiano"’, [http://www.impresaoggi.com/it2/1443-giuseppe\\_volpi\\_di\\_misurata\\_tra\\_elettricit\\_a\\_cinema/](http://www.impresaoggi.com/it2/1443-giuseppe_volpi_di_misurata_tra_elettricit_a_cinema/).

generation' of workers tried to keep the anti-fascist movement alive and organise, without significant results, a workers' movement, leading to some strikes against unemployment in the 1930s, which were promptly managed by the police. On the other side, the younger generation of workers was more attracted to the benefits that the regime could provide them. In addition, they had no experience of class struggle and therefore they had no reason to collide with the regime and therefore risk losing their jobs. A perspective of this kind reveals the importance of the intertwining of consensus-making and repressive policies, which should be viewed not as standing in contrast to one another but as an integral part of the establishment and consolidation of the regime. In this respect, this research is particularly significant as it emphasises the importance of the fascist use of violence by noting that it also involved ordinary Italians in the policies of the regime and the use of repressive measures as a strategy of self-defence or attack against possible opponents or enemies.

The third chapter dedicated to the Catholic Church, has demonstrated how traditional institutions with officially no political power, could still influence and direct the population and reduce – or even challenge and sabotage – the popularity of a dictatorship. Even after the closing of *Azione Cattolica* in 1931, the Catholic Church managed to mobilise a large number of people, re-establishing its youth organisations quickly in 1932. In Venice, there were Church personalities who enjoyed the loyalty of large sections of the population such as the Patriarch Pietro La Fontaine, who mediated with the regime during its seizure in power, but was never completely aligned to the directives of the regime. The success of the Catholic Church, was mainly personified in the leading figures of *Azione Cattolica* in a city where Catholicism was traditionally one of the most important features of daily life. The attempted co-optation of youth showed that the regime encountered resistance within the Catholic Church and among the strong Catholic milieu in the region. This chapter showed how the Catholic Church challenged Fascist organisations. Although, by the late 1920s, the Catholic

Church could no longer count on a political party like the *Partito Popolare Italiano*, the Church in Venice still constituted a serious threat to the totalitarian ambitions of the Fascist Party. It is true that the social aims of the Catholic Church and of the Fascist Party frequently coincided: for example, in the support to Franco in the Spanish Civil War, the opposition to Communism, or the attempt to push local families to a more 'moderate' and 'austere' style of life or women to uphold traditional values. However, as we have seen in this chapter, the reasons why these positions were taken by the two institutions were radically different, but both were aiming to control local society. When the social aims of Church and Fascism did not coincide, displays of the Catholic Church such as parades or simply the numerical success of Catholic youth organisations were not particularly welcome to the dictatorship.

A key theme throughout this thesis has been that of social mobilisation. The capacity of non-Fascist independent institutions to mobilise the forces of the entire city is an issue of extreme importance for an analysis of Fascist social power at the local level. The ability of Catholic groups showed that local traditional institutions such as the Church were still able to mobilise and influence a large part of the local population. More than the local working-class networks, the Church proved its strength and the ability to resist the Fascist regime in the 1930s. This ability to resist and mobilise did not just manifest itself in *Azione Cattolica*, but in the capacity of Catholics to safeguard their private sphere and in the ability to create a network of mutual assistance which, despite the tight control of the regime, protected them from the intrusion of the dictatorship.

This thesis has shown that Venice remained a complex site of fragmented small systems in which continuity with the past, sometimes, even if without being a serious threat, managed to challenge or resist to the regime, which could be seen as disregarding or openly opposing their local traditions. Practically, the regime did not manage to defeat the social power enjoyed by other traditional institutions in Venice.

Despite the resistance of certain traditional groups, Fascism's formal political success, even in Venice, should not be underestimated. The dictatorship, after all, rapidly managed to defeat political opposition. In addition, this thesis shows that the regime managed to create a vibrant, assertive and combative Fascist university students' organisation (GUF) in the city and province that sometimes collided with the 'old generation' of fascists who relied on more moderate positions in the 1930s. In past research, the claim was that the regime failed to fascistise the university youth and this has been used as the main proof that Fascism failed to create its own ruling class, therefore undermining its totalitarian ambition. In reality, this thesis demonstrates that the regime did not fail to prepare its own ruling class, but rather it created a group of party men entirely brought up according to the fascist myths who intended to continue the 'Fascist Revolution' and bring the totalitarianisation of the Italian society to its extreme consequences. However, the fragile Mussolinian regime was not able to ensure political space for this generation of new fascists and the war definitively broke any possibility for the regime to perpetuate itself.

Chapter four shows that the implementation of anti-Jewish policies in the province was largely effective. The documents which I have consulted do not show a significant rejection of the anti-Semitic legislation in Venice. On the contrary, they show how Catholic institutions, namely the Patriarch Aldeodato Piazza, and fascist officials profited from the legislation to pursue their own interests. In addition, documents confirm that ordinary people were generally silent and did not protest the persecution of Jews.

The last chapter reflects on the specific Venetian angle of the dramatic fall of Mussolini from power in July 1943. This part analyses both the causes and the consequences of this important event. The chapter shows how Venetians of different classes coped with the

pressure of wartime experience, both on the military and the Venetian home front, and how Venetians' experience of the country at war progressively distanced them from the dictator and his fascist regime. Over recent years, the debate in Italy has tended to concentrate on the role of the Italian Resistance and legitimise the role of anti-Fascism in the postwar time. This chapter addresses the issue of the rapid collapse of the regime during the first three years of the war, the so called 'Fascist war', focusing on how Venetian people responded to the burden of the war and how the Italian government at war failed to mobilise and allocate human and material resources, creating internal defeatism and detachment from the regime, based on a popular perception of everyday misery or inequality of sacrifice.

The heart of the thesis situates itself along the current debate about totalitarianism, Fascism and popular consent and connects them with the question of post-war memory. Linked to the capacity of independent institutions to mobilise their forces, the finding is that Fascism had to reach a number of compromises in order to stabilise and solidify its power in Venice. This thesis also argued that the dictatorship did not manage to fulfil its totalitarian aspirations and that the regime enjoyed limited and superficial consensus.



## List of abbreviations in the footnotes

### *Abbreviations*

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato di Roma
ACC	Archivio Comunale di Chioggia
ACSan	Archivio Comunale San Donà
ACP	Archivio Comunale Portogruaro
BCS	Biblioteca Civica di Chioggia ‘Il Sabbadino’
ASVe	Archivio di Stato di Venezia
ASPVe	Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia
ASUV	Archivio Storico Università di Venezia
ASCD	Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati di Roma
ASRVe	Archivio Storico della Regione Veneto
b.	<i>Busta</i> , box/volume

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### **Archivio Centrale di Stato (ACS) Roma**

Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

### **Archivio Centrale di Stato (ACS) Roma**

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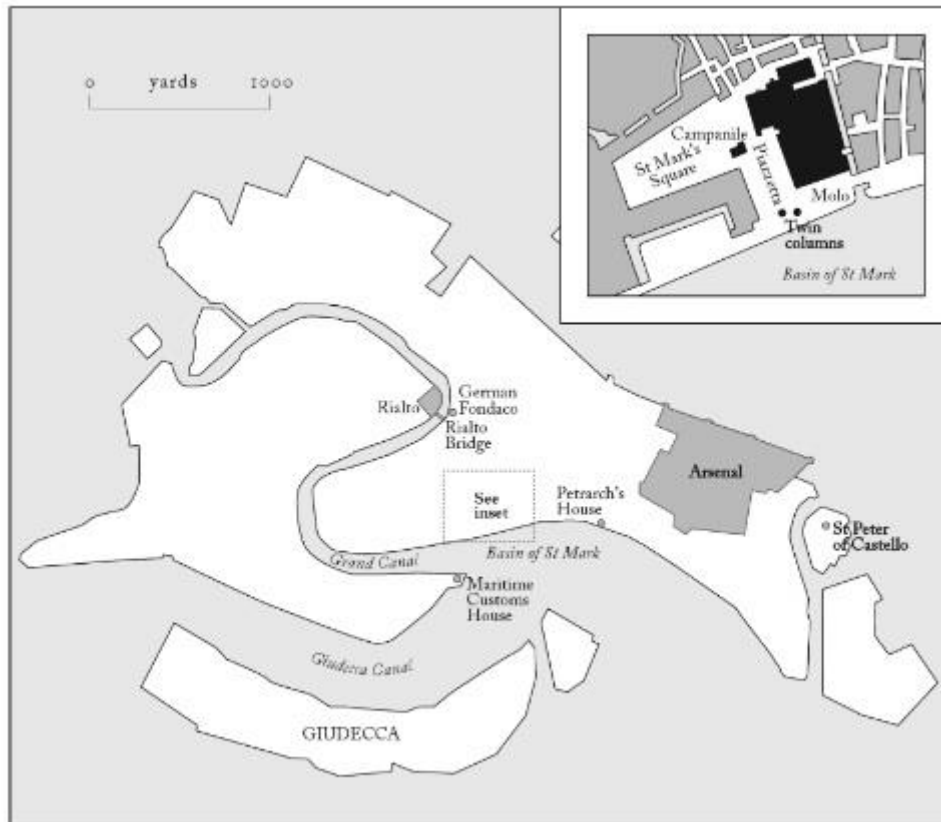
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# Map 1



**Source:** Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Catasto agrario 1929 - VIII, Compartimento del Veneto, Provincia di Venezia, Fasc. 27, Provincia di Venezia, Stabilimento Poligrafico per l'Amministrazione dello Stato, 1935, Anno XIV, 3.*

## Map 2



R. Crowley, *City of Fortune: How Venice Won and Lost a Naval Empire* (Croydon: Faber & Faber, 2011), XI.

### Map 3



R. Crowley, *City of Fortune: How Venice Won and Lost a Naval Empire* (Croydon: Faber & Faber, 2011), XII.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 - List of Venetian Federali 1921-1943

The Federation of the Fascist Party was founded in 21 November 1921

Name	Period
Rosalino Davy Gabrielli	10 June 1922
Ugo Leonardi ( <i>reggente</i> )	10 June-24 July 1922
Stefano Sciacaluga ( <i>reggente</i> )	24 July-8 November 1922
Talete Barbieri	8 November 1922-18 May 1924
Giorgio Suppiej	18 May 1924 – 17 March 1925
Pentarchy: Talete Barbieri, Vilfredo Casellati, Carlo Brandolini D'Adda, Luigi Cappelletti, Giuseppe Toffano	17 March 1925 – 20 July 1925
Vilfredo Casellati	20 July 1925 – 18 December 1925
Vilfredo Casellati	18 December 1925 – 10 May 1926
Vilfredo Casellati	10 May 1926 – 20 December 1928
Giorgio Suppiej	20 December 1928 – 20 May 1934
Michele Pascolato	20 May 1934 – 15 October 1937
Ludovico Foscari	15 October 1937 – 31 March 1940
Raffaello Radogna	31 March 1940 – 15 January 1941
Mario Macola	15 January 1941 – 30 July 1942
Gustavo Piva	30 July 1942 – 13 May 1943
Alessandro Bonamici	13 May 1943 -

**Source:** M. Missori, *Gerarchie e statuti del P.N.F. Gran consiglio, Direttorio nazionale, Federazioni provinciali: quadri e biografie* (Rome: Bonacci, 1986), 144.

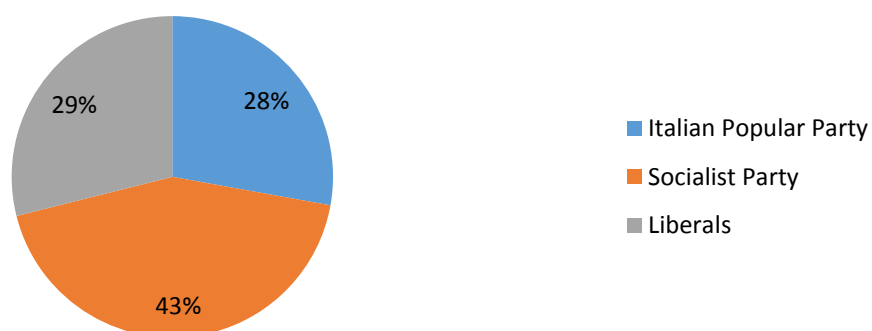
## Appendix 2 - List of prefects of the Venice Province 1920-1943

Name	Period
Agostino D'Adamo	20 April 1920 – 25 October 1923
Angelo Pesce	1 November 1923 – 1 January 1925
Iginio Coffari	3 January 1925 – 16 July 1929
Giovanni Bianchetti	16 July 1929 – 1 September 1933
Guido Beer	10 September 1933 – 14 September 1934
Francesco Benigni	14 September 1934 – 1 August 1936
Giuseppe Carlo Catalano	1 August 1936 – 21 August 1939
Marcello Vaccari	21 August 1939 – 20 February 1943
Luciano Celso	20 March 1943 – 1 August 1943
Ruggero Plamieri	1 August 1943 – 16 September 1943

**Source:** M. Missori, *Governi, alte cariche dello Stato, alti magistrati e prefetti del Regno d'Italia* (Roma: Bibliografia Nazionale, 1989), 622-623.

## Appendix 3 – Electoral Results

**Table 1: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the parties at the 1919 elections - Venice Province**

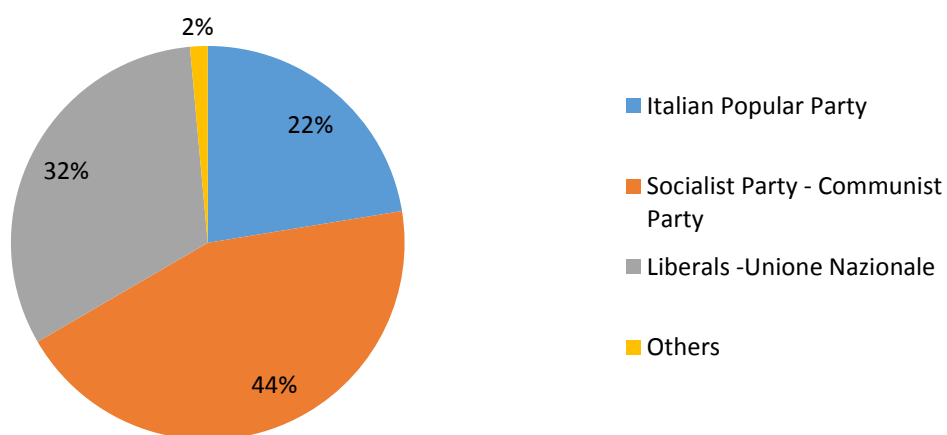


Coalitions	Votes
Italian Popular Party	16519
Socialist Party	25660
Liberals	17163

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM



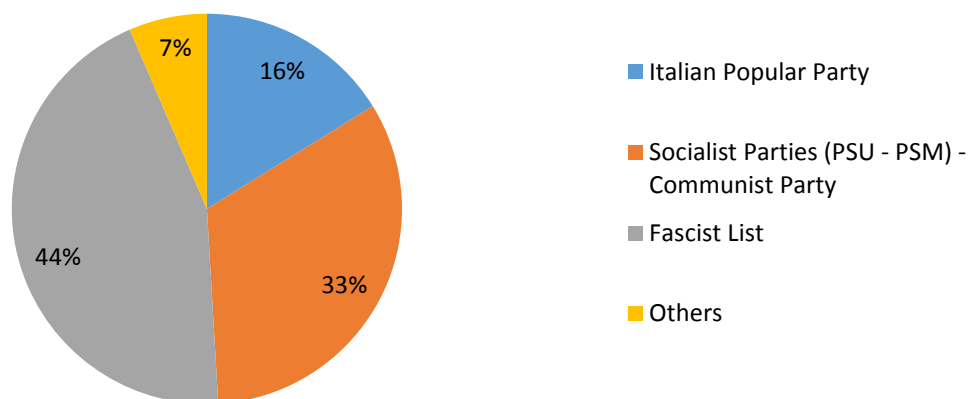
**Table 2: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the parties at the 1921 elections - Venice Province**



Coalitions	Votes
<b>Italian Popular Party</b>	15968
<b>Socialist Party – Communist Party</b>	31487
<b>Liberals – <i>Unione Nazionale</i></b>	22755
<b>Others</b>	1028

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

**Table 3: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the parties at the 1924 elections - Venice Province**



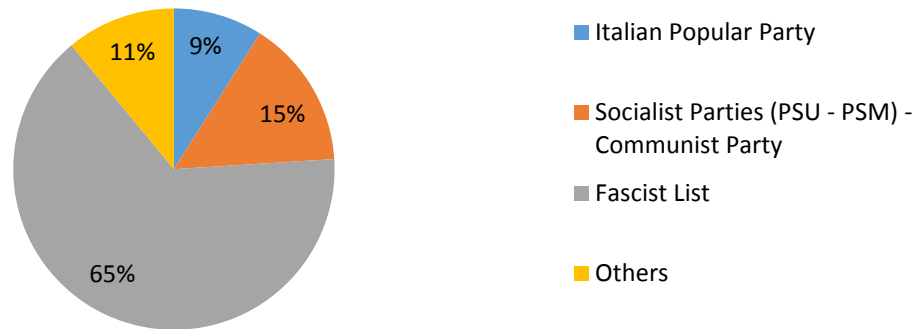
Coalitions	Votes
Italian Popular Party	13812
Socialist Parties (PSU* - PSM**) - Communist Party	28083
Fascist List	37956
Others	5523

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

\**Partito Socialista Unitario* (United Socialist Party), The party was founded in November 1922 by the reformist wing of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) led by Filippo Turati and Giacomo Matteotti, after they had been expelled in October.

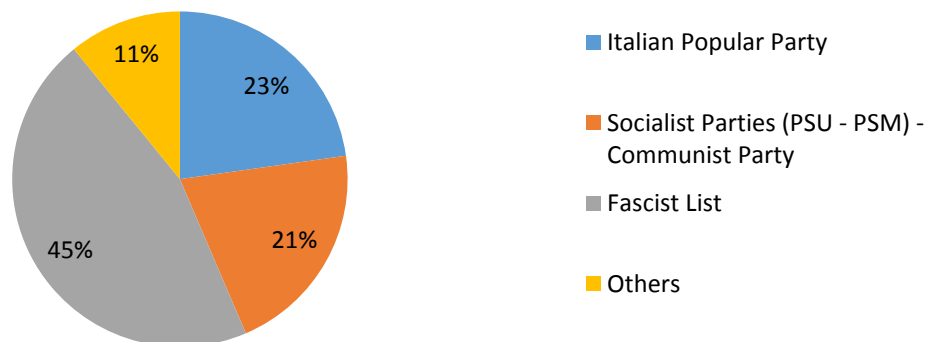
\*\* *Partito Socialista Massimalista* (Maximalist Socialist Party). This was the name of the far left wing of the Socialist Party which, after the expulsion of the reformists (Turatians) in 1923, merged into the Communist Party.

**Table 4: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the electoral lists at the 1924 elections - Kingdom of Italy**



**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

**Table 5: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the electoral lists at the 1924 elections - Veneto Region**



**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

## Appendix 4 – Proportion of votes per area

**Table 1: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the Italian Popular Party at the 1919 and 1921 national elections in Venetian macro-areas**

AREA	1919	1921
Livenza e Tagliamento	7%	15%
Piave	19%	30%
Brenta e Dese	51%	41%
Area Lagunare	19%	39%
Adige	3%	7%

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

**Table 2: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the Leftist coalition (Socialists and Communists at the 1919 and 1921 national elections in Venetian macro-areas**

AREA	1919	1921
Livenza e Tagliamento	36%	48%
Piave	22%	40%
Brenta e Dese	34%	40%
Area Lagunare	49%	44%
Adige	82%	62%

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

**Table 3: Proportion of votes (%) gained by Liberals at the 1919 and 1921 national elections in Venetian macro-areas**

AREA	1919	1921
Livenza e Tagliamento	57%	35%
Piave	59%	27%
Brenta e Dese	14%	18%
Area Lagunare	32%	39%
Adige	15%	31%

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

**Table 4: Proportion of votes (%) gained by the Italian Popular Party, the Left Parties and the Fascist Party at the 1924 national elections in Venetian macro-areas**

AREA	Italian Popular Party	Left Parties	Fascist Party
Livenza e Tagliamento	7%	18%	77%
Piave	17%	25%	44%
Brenta e Dese	28%	39%	29%
Area Lagunare	13%	38%	42%
Adige	2%	11%	87%

**Sources:** P. Corbetta- M. Serena Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861-2006)* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2008), CD-ROM

## Appendix 5 – Population per economic sector

**Table 1: Province of Venice – Population distribution into main sectors – 1931**

Economic Sector	Number
Agriculture and Forestry	90,622
Industry and Crafts	75,910
Transportation and Communication	17,809
Commerce	24,224
Bank and Insurance	2,223
National Defence	3,314
Public and Private Administration	6,632
Domestic Service	9,568
Religions and Liberal Professions	8,773
Land Owners	1,920
Non dependants without occupation (Students, Seminarians, Pensioners and Housewives)	202,511
Others –Status not declared	3,499
Totals	447,005

**Source:** Istituto Centrale di Statistica, VII Censimento della popolazione del Regno al 21 Aprile 1931, IX, Vol. III, Fasc. 27, Provincia di Venezia, Stabilimento Poligrafico per l'Amministrazione dello Stato, 1933, Anno XII, 39.

## Appendix 6 – Councils

<b>Table 1: Areas of the Province – Councils 1931</b>	
<b>Area</b>	<b>Councils</b>
Livenza e Tagliamento	Annone Veneto, Caorle, Cinto Cao Maggiore, Concordia Saggittaria, Fossalta di Portogruaro, Gruaro, Premaggiore, San Michele al Tagliamento, San Stino di Livenza, Teglio Veneto
Piave	Ceggia, Fossalta di Piave, Grisolera, Jesolo, Meolo, Musile di Piave, Noventa di Piave San Donà di Piave, San Michele del Quarto, Torre di Mosto
Brenta e Dese	Campagnalupia, Campolongo Maggiore, Camponogara, Dolo, Fiesso d'Artico, Marcon, Martellago, Mira, Mirano, Noale, Pianiga, Salzano, Santa Maria di Sala, Scorzè, Spinea, Strà, Vigonovo
Area Lagunare	Chioggia, Venezia
Adige	Cavarzere, Cona
<b>Source:</b> Istituto Centrale di Statistica, VII Censimento della popolazione del Regno al 21 Aprile 1931, IX, Vol. III, Fasc. 27, Provincia di Venezia, Stabilimento Poligrafico per l'Amministrazione dello Stato, 1933, Anno XII, 39.	

# Chronology of Italian Fascism

1919 – Mussolini founded the *Fasci di Combattimento*

1919 – Fascists win 2% of the vote in National Elections

1921 – Mussolini founded the National Fascist Party (PNF)

1921 – National Elections – Fascists win 35 seats

August 1922 – General Strike in Italy - Fascists help break a general strike

October 1922 – March on Rome – King nominates Mussolini Prime Minister

Nov. 1923 – Acerbo Law - the party that gained the greatest number of votes in the National Election would get two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament

January 1924 – Mussolini occupies Fiume

April 1924 – Fascists win 65% vote at the National Elections through violence and intimidation of opponents

April 1924 – Fascists murder Socialist Party leader Giacomo Matteotti. Opposition MP's resign from Parliament in protest (the Aventine Secession)

January 1925 – Press censorship introduced. All independent newspapers closed.

1925 – Pope Pius XI withdraws support from the Catholic Popular Party

1925 – Battle for Grain (1925-1929). Battle for the Lira. Battle for Land. Battle for Births

November 1926 – All political parties (except PNF) are banned. The secret police OVRA is established

1929 – Lateran Treaty between the regime and the Vatican

1934 – Mussolini opposes unification of Austria and Germany

1935 – Italy joins 'Stresa Front' with Britain and France to oppose German rearmament and expansion

1935 – Mussolini invades Abyssinia

November 1936 – Rome-Berlin Axis. First alliance treaty with Germany signed by Count Ciano (Foreign Minister)

1937 – Italy, Germany and Japan sign the 'Anti-Comintern Pact'

March 1939 – Italy issues ultimatum to Albania to accept takeover

April 1939 – Italy invades Albania. Albania defeated – King Zog deposed and replaced as king by King Emmanuel of Italy

May 1939 – Von Ribbentrop and Ciano sign ‘Pact of Friendship and Alliance’ – known as ‘Pact of Steel’.

Sept. 1939 – Mussolini declares Italy neutral when Germany invades Poland.

1940 - Believing a Germany victory inevitable, Mussolini enters war. Italian invasion of Egypt (from Libya) crushed by British forces

Oct. 1940 – Italy invades Greece from Albania – attack defeated. Germany intervenes to prevent Italian defeat

1941 – Italy loses Abyssinia.

1943 – Mussolini deposed but re-installed by Germans in Northern Italy

1945 – Mussolini is executed by the partisans