

Fascist Ideology and Europe

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ABSTRACT

Some Fascists engaged in a process of reflection on Europe in a way that was disorganised at first, but then more systematic after 1930. From a liberal and nationalist viewpoint, Europe was an entity that should reflect a hierarchy of nations. This concept was developed in response to various competing models—the Geneva system, federalist ideas, Communism—and shaped by Social Darwinism. Through the process of totalitarian and imperialist radicalisation, it resulted in the idea that a ‘guide nation’ should give definition to a community of political values and assume the economic management of Europe.



The idea has taken hold in the historiography that Fascism did not have a coherent ideology but instead functioned as a testing-ground in which a constantly evolving doctrine was expounded. While the relationship between Fascism and Europe is no exception, it should nevertheless be emphasised that Europe, as a geographical entity, historical unit and ideal, was not beyond the scope of Fascist thought. A loose conglomeration of Fascist reflections about Europe developed which, under the influence of both domestic factors in Italy and the wider European system during the interwar years, set out ideas that allowed the regime to present Fascism, if not as a universally applicable model, then at least as a political authority that should influence the rest of Europe.

The Fascist vision of Europe was, until the early 1930s, shaped by its rejection of a series of other models and rather strongly dependent on traditional representations. After the signature of the peace treaties, Mussolini challenged the modern idea of Europe as a balanced collection of sovereign states: in his eyes, this liberal notion was ill-suited to the consequences of industrialisation, colonialism and the Great War. Similarly, he dismissed the confederative idea of the United States of Europe because of its democratic origin founded on the recognition of equal rights. Moreover, the cultural geopolitics of Fascism remained largely dependent on ideas inherited from the liberal period and on nationalist trends before 1914, which emphasised the dichotomy between East and West, between a Latin Occident and an Asiatic Russia, and between civilisation and barbarism. Between these poles, a hierarchy of European nations was imagined, stemming from the reflections of Camillo Pellizzi on "ethical imperialism": "Hungary was seen to possess all the qualities of a civilised state, while Czechoslovakia was disqualified because of its multinational character, thus reviving the image of Austria-Hungary as an unmanageable state. Poland was excluded for its otherness as an 'Asiatic [...] military camp' (Dino Grandi), as was previously the Ottoman Empire. In their understanding of the elements that made up Europe, Fascist intellectuals and leaders did not update or replace these ideas but used them for a different purpose.

Belief in the inviolability of national sovereignty was not, however, incompatible with an almost incantatory invocation of Europe. In *Il Popolo d'Italia* on 1 January 1921, Mussolini spoke of the need for European unity to defend the values of civilisation. In 1929 Asvero Gravelli published the first issue of *Antieuropa*, seeking to give life to a pan-European Fascist movement. "Antieuropianism" should be understood here not as a rejection of Europe itself, but as a rejection of the political models advocated by other nation states: the "Genevan" Europe of the League of Nations, the communist, materialist Europe of the USSR, and the liberal materialist Europe of the United Kingdom associated with the United States. Fascist thinking on Europe was not formalised, however, before Aristide Briand's speech of 5 September 1929. The development of a European doctrine of Fascism thus came to be grafted onto pre-existing, though marginal, ideas thus leading to a multiplicity of autonomous centres of thought that were expressed in *Antieuropa*, *Critica fascista* and older reviews such as *Nuova antologia*, all vying for the attention of Mussolini and the government.

The Italian response to the Briand memorandum was above all tactical, seeking to denounce a Europe under French hegemony. But it drew its strength from the fact that it did not completely renounce the notion of a higher European interest, skillfully using the legacies of Mazzini and Wilson, interwoven with the question of precisely what kind of Europe had to be defended. As Alberto De Stefani, unofficial emissary to the German conservative right, put it at the start of 1930: "a defence of Europe against the forces which threaten it will only be possible if every people strives to maintain its spiritual and cultural heritage, instead of losing it in a supposed Europeanism and cosmopolitanism."

Rather than advocating that Italy turn in on itself, the Fascists maintained the firm conviction that they stood at the dawn of a new age for which a new European doctrine had to be invented. The writings of intellectuals, hierarchs and diplomats expressed the desire to recreate a community of political values in Europe, which would be the source of a community of law and a community of will. According to the clerical-fascist school of thought, Europe would be saved by Catholic Rome. Members of the nationalist school of thought such as Francesco Coppola, meanwhile, extolled the universalist civilisation of Ancient Rome. In this regard, the Volta Congress (14-20

November 1932) continued the process of reflection on European unity by linking it to the conservative European intelligentsia. It pleaded for a *pax fascista* inspired by the model of the Roman Empire: Italy, it was argued, should impose a system of rule on Europe compatible with both its own national interests and Fascist values, a system in which peace was not assured in a democratic manner, by respecting the sovereign rights of all states, but by a higher authority.

These ideas also shaped economic approaches to Europe. At first, Fascism opposed concrete attempts at sectorial cooperation between European states: in July 1929, Arnaldo Mussolini, the brother of the Duce and a representative of the clerical-fascist school of thought, rejected "the United States of Europe [...] founded on cartels for steel and potash." The early 1930s saw Fascist diplomacy devote great efforts to making Italy the pivot of a Danubian economic grouping, in which Rome would take on the role previously held by Habsburg Vienna. In imperialist ideas developed between 1936 and 1943, Italy became the "guide nation," responsible for directing and coordinating production within its empire and its sphere of influence.

The coming to power of the National Socialists encouraged the radicalisation of this model. The idea emerged of an Italian civilising mission, which would lead Europe in the establishment of a great geopolitical entity organised into nation states according to a hierarchy of values and rights. From 1936, racial arguments were incorporated into Fascist thinking on Europe and intellectuals sketched out what Italian-German condominium over Europe would involve. Giuseppe Bottai, a columnist for *Critica fascista* who had been sidelined in 1932, returned to the intellectual foreground. Advocating a truly revolutionary fascism and the "spiritual and political conquest" of Europe, Bottai put forward the idea of an "imperial community" in 1941, not a wholly new concept given that Italy would have been located at the centre of an Empire including parts of Europe, the Mediterranean and its African colonies, but nonetheless revolutionary as it involved constructing a new European order and thus implementing a totalitarian logic.

In sum, the Fascist debate on Europe developed more in reaction to external factors than driven by an internal dynamic. Fascist doctrine, itself changing, was superimposed on the European idea. In response to the concrete political problem, intensified by the First World War, of how to overcome the crisis of the nation state, Fascist Italy put forward a totalitarian model in which the European project was barely distinguishable from the will to dominate.

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