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# Fascist Cultural Diplomacy and Italian Foreign Policy in Norway from the 1930s until the Second World War

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the diplomatic relations between Italy and Norway during the fascist period, until the regime collapsed at the end of the Second World War. In particular, the paper seeks to reconstruct the main features of Mussolini's foreign policy, how it was perceived in Norway, how and how the propaganda machine of the Italian authorities tried to influence the image of fascism in Norway. The analysis of the relations between these two states will follow the constraints of foreign policy, which was characterized by alternating phases of openness and secrecy. Consequently, rather than a single phase, there were many stages in the diplomatic relations between the two countries. Cultural diplomacy played a significant role in the two countries' relations; these included numerous events and trips to Italy, organized by the fascist regime, for Norwegian intellectuals. These served to overcome the geographical distance, and showed a new face for Italy, which was more cultured and linked to its cultural heritage.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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This article aims to highlight Norwegian–Italian diplomatic relations from the 1930s until the end of the Second World War. In particular, the paper seeks to reconstruct the main features of Mussolini's foreign policy as enacted in Norway, or how the Italian authorities sought to influence and therefore to change Norwegian attitudes towards the fascist regime. The article is mainly based on diplomatic documents and the unpublished correspondence between the Italian Legation in Oslo and the central office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Directorate General of Italians abroad, for a period of about 40 years.<sup>1</sup>

Norway became independent from Sweden in 1905. The kingdom of Italy was among the first to recognize the new state as an independent country and to entrust a diplomatic mission to the special envoy and plenipotentiary minister in Copenhagen, Giorgio Calvi di Bergolo. Despite that, the Italian diplomatic representative only began to reside in the Norwegian capital from 1912 onwards.

Diplomatic relations during the war and the fascist period have been the subject of extensive investigation by Italian historians, especially since the 1970s. In particular, the contributions of Italian communities abroad to the spread of fascism in America and in European countries with high-density emigration have been analyzed.<sup>2</sup> The role of the *fasci* and the regime in the promotion and dissemination of fascist ideology in Italian communities abroad has also been studied.<sup>3</sup> If the studies of those countries where Italian immigrants were more numerous have been privileged, little has been written so far on the attempts made by to penetrate into those countries

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where there had been less emigration by Italians.<sup>4</sup> The relations between Italy and Norway up to that point had always been circumscribed and there were minimal numbers of Italian immigrants to Norway. We don't know what image Norwegians had of Italy given the sporadic contacts, especially considering that Italian immigrants in the nineteenth century were often traveling merchants or musicians, who were frequently frowned upon by the Norwegian government.<sup>5</sup>

There are therefore no studies concerning diplomatic relations between Norway and Italy and consequently on the attempts made by fascists to penetrate this Nordic country. The international historiography has paid limited attention to fascist initiatives that sought to gain support and recognition in other European countries, especially in terms of cultural policies in non-strategic nations like Norway.<sup>6</sup> This article aims to delve into the relationship between Norway and Italy – from 1930 to the Second World War – when cultural diplomacy was initially seen as a promising avenue for the expansion of fascist Italy.

Following the stabilization of the fascist regime post-1929, a more ambitious strategy of cultural infiltration began to emerge. Its goal was to present a reassuring image of the fascist experiment and its accomplishments, seeking to gain sympathy from the international public. Mussolini's idea was to provide fascism with a European dimension in terms of leadership and expansion, particularly in its early stages. During his address to the Italian Senate on 28 May 1926, while advocating for imperialistic policies and the pursuit of power as natural expressions of national vitality, Mussolini once again proposed an Italian model of imperialism that emphasized dignity, economic, and, above all, cultural expansion.<sup>7</sup>

This article will therefore try to fill some of these gaps by reconstructing the attempts made by fascist propaganda and Italian diplomacy to and to strengthen its doctrine and spread its ideology in Norway. How was fascism perceived in Norway? What attempts did the fascists make to penetrate the country? How was fascist propaganda spread in a country like Norway which had very low numbers of Italian present?

The article, divided into two parts, will first analyze the results obtained through cultural diplomacy, which included trade relations as an integral part. Subsequently, it will set out how Italian diplomacy responded to the Nazi occupation of Norway.

## **Cultural diplomacy in Norway**

Cultural diplomacy emerged as an essential instrument for tackling challenges in the international arena and for re-establishing the signification representation of Italy on the global stage. It became a strategic move on Mussolini's diplomatic chessboard to ideologically penetrate a distant and diverse country like Norway.<sup>8</sup> Cultural diplomacy has often been considered the third pillar in foreign policy, along with politics and the economy.<sup>9</sup> Culture when used as a foreign policy instrument has the 'soft' power to interfere and influence other dimensions and spheres of activity, giving space and opportunities for other relationships. The meaning of cultural diplomacy has been the subject of intense debate in recent studies.<sup>10</sup> It is generally defined as involving the exchange of cultural practices in various countries; it seeks to build and enhance relations, especially in the political and economic/commercial sectors. In short, as defined by Michael David-Fox, cultural diplomacy is 'the systematic inclusion of a cultural dimension in foreign relations.'<sup>11</sup> The use of culture as an influential tool is not a recent idea; it has been conceptualized by various intellectuals, including Gramsci, and forms the basis for Joseph Nye's inspiration and successful definition. Gramsci outlines his concept of cultural hegemony that represents a state of equilibrium and consent, which contrasts with 'domino' that was linked to moments of force.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, cultural diplomacy, as defined by Joseph Nye in terms of soft power – as opposed to hard power, serves as a powerful, yet gentle, means of influencing governments and indirectly foreign citizens to achieve foreign policy objectives.<sup>13</sup> Developed and already in widespread use by other countries, it had its origins in the cultural imperialism of European nations at the end

of the nineteenth century and particularly after the First World War. It had emerged precisely because of a crisis in hard power.<sup>14</sup> As Martin and Piller have pointed out, from 1919 to 1939 nearly all European foreign ministries established ‘cultural departments’, created cultural diplomatic institutions such as the German Academic Exchange Service (founded in 1925) or the British Council (1934), and enhanced the global operations of existing organizations promoting their national language and culture, such as the Alliance Française or Italy’s Società Dante Alighieri.<sup>15</sup> Italy had always lagged behind other states, but after 1930, they also developed a programme of cultural penetration abroad. Furthermore, in Norway, cultural diplomacy was seen to be the sole effective means of establishing a presence there because of the small immigrant population and the infrequent interactions between the two countries.<sup>16</sup> Eager to make up for lost time, Mussolini aspired, as Fabio Ferrarini explains, to show off his own strength or durability abroad, totally differentiating himself from the German model and claiming Mussolini as the father of fascism.<sup>17</sup>

Until the Ethiopian War, Italy was able to pursue its cultural diplomacy in Norway and the rest of Europe without hindrance from Germany. In fact, until the mid-1930s, as highlighted by Monica Fioravanzo, Nazi Germany was not perceived as an antagonist, due to the still marginal role of Italy’s future ally.<sup>18</sup> Italy tried to exert a culturally decisive role in Europe, pivoting on the relative freedom granted to it by other countries, especially France and Great Britain, who were willing to make some concessions due to concerns that Italy might align itself with Hitler. Germany, which was eager to overcome political and diplomatic isolation, sought to establish connections with Fascist Italy primarily through diplomacy: it formed a network of stable relationships that were effectively aligned with the goals of National Socialist foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> From Mussolini’s and the Italian government’s perspective, Hitler’s rise to power undoubtedly resulted in a complex evaluation: while on one hand, there were fears about the potential repercussions and competition on the international stage, but on the other hand, Germany was perceived as a potential ally in a plan for international upheaval.<sup>20</sup> It was the conflict in Ethiopia that accelerated Italy’s detachment from France and Britain and drew it inexorably closer to Germany. From this moment on, the interaction with their German ally became more intense, even if at times it was problematic, including on the cultural front. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the German Nazis, previously described as the ‘pupil to the teacher’ by Arnd Bauerkämper, shifted from a subordinate role to that of the dominant nation. This shift led to an asymmetrical power balance between the two former rivals.<sup>21</sup>

## The search for consensus

Mussolini considered Norway to be a significant nation, as he did with all the nations where movements inspired by fascism were emerging. As Salvatore Garau pointed out, Mussolini understood that he could use these fascist movements in other countries to expand Italy’s international influence. In fact, by spreading Fascism abroad, such movements would expand the influence of an Italian idea, and thus would promote Italy’s political and cultural importance in Europe. Such a new society would have produced a distinctively Fascist culture, which the regime would have first encouraged and then exported as a way of reaffirming the greatness of Italian genius and Italy’s importance to the West.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, he invested in a cultural program, which sought to influence the *Nasjonal samling* party, members of the other political party, as well as society more generally. The search for consensus among the élites and the Norwegian government was therefore among the primary objectives of fascist foreign policy.

The relations between the two states followed were characterized by alternating phases of openness and secrecy. We cannot therefore speak of a single phase in diplomatic relations between the two countries, but rather of multiple phases. The first, from about 1922 to 1935, aimed to strengthen the weak relations between the two nations. The second phase, from 1935

to 1939, the year of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, was conditioned by the sanctions imposed on the *Duce* by the Society of Nations, which both states were part of. Those measures created tensions that affected the agreements previously reached between the two countries. They caused the two nations to drift apart and then with new approaches to come closer together again. The rise to power of the Norwegian Labour Party sharpened the ideological distance between the two states, but it did not blunt the hopes of the fascist government to improve relations between the two nations, especially commercial relations. In the third phase, with the occupation of Norway in 1940, the relations between the two countries were initially minimized, but ideological affinities briefly brought them closer together. In this delicate period, the feelings towards Norway on the part of the Italian diplomatic authorities were diverging and were not always in harmony with what was imposed by the Italian government through its foreign policy.

The first phase begins when on 21 November 1932 the Minister Plenipotentiary, Count Alberto de Marsanich, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the Norwegian political situation and the possibilities for fascist ideology to penetrate Norway and influence its politics.<sup>23</sup> The dispatches, memorials, and telegrams sent to the Royal Minister of Foreign Affairs by the Italian Legation in Oslo translated the Norwegian newspapers and opinions to inform the fascist authorities of the political situation in Norway and the possible approaches the two states could take. According to several dispatches sent to Rome, the Italian diplomats had the impression that the Norwegian press and the major Norwegian political parties alike seemed to be divided in their views of fascism. During and after the march on Rome, the Norwegian newspapers followed the developments in Italy closely. The Italian diplomats assumed that the conservatives and the bourgeoisie looked on with sympathy at Mussolini's seizure of power, which had stemmed the danger of revolution in Italy. The conservative newspapers, *Aftenposten*, *Nationen*, and *Tidens Tegn*, called for some new force that could similarly stop the threatening advance of left-wing parties in Norway.<sup>24</sup> The newspapers that supported the major left-wing parties, in particular *Arbeiderbladet* and *Social-Demokraten*, remained strongly critical of Mussolini and his politics. These parties reacted in horror at the rise of the *Duce*, and in the aftermath of the march on Rome, headlines such as 'Italien under den fascistiske terror' appeared.<sup>25</sup> The Norwegian press was heavily influenced by the Italian radical press, since there were no Norwegian correspondent in Italy. In the near future, the censorship imposed by the Fascist authorities on the Italian newspapers would hinder Norwegian access to accurate information about the events which were unfolding in Italy.<sup>26</sup>

Fascist Italy was particularly interested in knowing how predisposed Norway was towards fascism. They also wanted to find out how close Norway was to communist countries, including the USSR. In this regard, the Legation in Oslo wrote a report, which was sent to Rome, that the left-wing parties were increasingly oriented towards Moscow:

Fatally, socialists and democrats seem to be moving towards Moscow, for whose support the Bolshevik apostles are not stingy.<sup>27</sup>

The Italian diplomats had the strong impression that Norway seemed to be a divided country: as a result the Italian diplomats on 31 November 1933, sent a dispatch to Rome in which they reported their impression that nationalists and conservative parties had a certain sympathy for Mussolini:

Nationalists and other parties look towards Rome, finding in the fascist idea the most concrete defence against the threats coming from various parts. Conferences in one sense and in the other are multiplying, with much public attention.<sup>28</sup>

Their 'looking towards Rome' gave hope to the *Duce* and the fascists, especially during the first phase, when they were able to intercede and influence Norwegian politics through a targeted diplomatic strategy. In another diplomatic report from the Italian legation on the situation in

Norway in 1933, it emerged that 'The anti-Nazi attitude of public opinion is currently relevant. The fascist idea and the personality of the *Duce* are taken into due consideration.'<sup>29</sup> Given this, Mussolini was able to aspire to have an impact on Norwegian society, implementing a program of cultural diplomacy and thus improving for his own benefit the relations between the two countries.

The first attempt at a political approach and possible alliance was made by the plenipotentiary minister Count Alberto de Marsanich, who, from his arrival in Oslo in 1930, worked hard to increase the political affinity between the two countries. A certain curiosity must have been aroused by the figure of Vidkun Quisling, defined by the minister in a letter to Rome as 'the mysterious man'. De Marsanich wondered if Quisling might become a potential leader of Norway.<sup>30</sup>

Quisling was first invited to the Italian Legation in Oslo, and then to participate in the CAUR meetings, or Action Committees for the Universality of Rome. The objective of the CAUR was not simply to spread the cult of the *Duce*, but also to make connections between parties with similar orientations and ideologies to fascism. The CAUR was a sort of official entity for foreign propaganda: it disseminated adherence to the myth of the universality of Rome as the 'framework of those spiritual alliances that can give the world, still troubled and discordant, its political restoration and civil and social salvation.'<sup>31</sup> The organization aimed to bring together various fascist national movements and establish an international fascist group. According to Arnd Bauerkämper and Salvatore Garau, CAUR was an instrument of power, which was used to retain fascist ideological supremacy over German Nazism.<sup>32</sup> When Quisling was invited to the CAUR conference in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1934, he agreed to attend.<sup>33</sup>

The meetings were a success, and Quisling participated in two other CAUR meetings in Paris and Amsterdam. Moreover, other meetings of rapprochement between the new plenipotentiary minister in Oslo, Marcello Roddolo, who had replaced Alberto de Marsanich, and Quisling took place at the diplomatic offices in Oslo.<sup>34</sup>

The Italian occupation of Ethiopia, among other things, wrecked the reputation of the CAUR, and Quisling thus decided to distance himself from Italy and fascism, and the visits to the local Legation became less frequent until they stopped. Moreover, even before the invasion of Ethiopia and the sanctions imposed on Italy, Quisling's previous CAUR meetings had been sharply criticized by supporters of extreme right-wing movements close to Quisling. These facts explain his decision to reduce his contacts and diplomatic relations with Italy. The right-wing movements and many of the sympathizers of *Nasjonal Samling*, the fascist party founded by Quisling himself, preferred an ideological rapprochement with far-right parties in the Germanic area rather than Mussolini's Italy.<sup>35</sup> Quisling considered *Nasjonal Samling* to be an independent national movement, but over time, Nazi Germany became the predominant role model. The Nazi influence and sympathy led also to a radicalization of Quisling's party, driven by the adoption of anti-Semitic and racist beliefs.<sup>36</sup>

Before the occupation of Ethiopia, the ruling liberals, as well as Quisling, had shown a degree of interest in Mussolini's fascism. In 1931, the Legation sent a telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that stated that a respected member of the agrarian party, whose name was not mentioned, had expressed an admiration that was 'all the more appreciable as spontaneous and sincere, for the work from our Regime.'<sup>37</sup> In particular, he expressed admiration for Mussolini's agrarian reforms. The letter continued with the desire of the politicians to propose to the *Storting* 'equally effective provisions, removing the model from the fascist reforms in Italy'. The Norwegian parliament would therefore have expressed its willingness to receive 'study material, in German or English.'<sup>38</sup>

Some associations of sympathizers held evening meetings, conferences, and events devoted to Mussolini and the fascist ideology. In 1933, the editor of the newspaper *Tidens Tegn*, Sven Elvestad, commented on the event described by Italian diplomats 'as a great connoisseur of Italian things' and one of the main Norwegian editors published an article entitled 'Youth, Parliament and the Homeland.'<sup>39</sup> Elvestad, in addition to writing articles, had held a series of

lectures on Mussolini at the Oslo and Bergen shipowners' company and at the Trondheim merchant company. Everything was reported and closely followed by the diplomatic authorities. Elvestad called for the desire for change, even in Norway, where 'new forces' should replace old and obsolete ideologies. 'What new forces should we establish in our country? The youth. It was the advance of the youth that saved Italy – wrote Elvestad – Mussolini was not forty years old when he assumed the bankruptcy legacy of the old Italian politicians and rebuilt the great power of Italy.'<sup>40</sup>

Another Italian evening was organized in Oslo at the 'League of Artists' by its president Salicath. De Marsanich telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome reported that the 'Hall [was] crowded with excitement and concern. The evening actually was a great public success and ended with the singing of the fascist hymn *Giovinazza* and other songs by the whole audience. Later, at the end of the evening, a telegram was sent to the *Duce* himself.<sup>41</sup> The evening was the subject of bitter controversy in the Norwegian media that the Legation communicated precisely with Rome.<sup>42</sup> In particular, many newspapers, especially left-wing ones like the *Arbeiderbladet*, harshly criticized the event in various articles. Many echoed the sentiments of the artists present, including those of the painter Erik Brandt, who claimed to have been present at the evening, but denied reading the telegram: 'I cannot remember that a telegram was read and approved by the meeting. In this case I would have immediately asked to speak and would have protested.'<sup>43</sup> The immediate reply of the president of the League of Artists in an article in the newspaper *Dagbladet* on 31 October 1932 stated:

It would be superfluous to explain how it is consistent with a general international courtesy that a tribute is sent to the government authorities in the country that we have come together to remember and to greet. Is there a country that has been closer to artists from all over the world since ancient times than Italy? The telegram was sent to the Head of Government and the fact that the Head of Government in Italy is Mussolini could not help but make the greetings of the artists less justified.<sup>44</sup>

The controversy went on for days, involving all the Norwegian newspapers and many prominent individuals from Norwegian politics and culture. The enthusiasm of a few, however, was in contrast to the cold detachment and scepticism of many others towards Mussolini, the fascist movement, and his foreign policy. The Italian Legation was forced to communicate this to the Italian authorities in Rome, who were always eager to know how Mussolini and his politics were perceived in Norway.

In this small country where foreign policy does not take place and where only outdated ideologies have run, the powerful and realistic speech of the *Duce* in the Senate did not have adequate comments in the local press.<sup>45</sup>

The perception of detachment and indifference to fascist politics became even more acute after 1935 with the rise of Johan Nygaardsvold's first Labour government and the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. In a dispatch sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they informed the Italian authorities how 'the Stresa conference did not have much importance in Norway'. 'It almost seemed that the slogan of the Labor Government was that of indifference to the great national event'. Only the *Tidens Tegn*, a newspaper usually sympathetic to fascism that had secured direct correspondence from Stresa, 'gave more space to the news than to the political scope of the Conference'. The report concluded with a personal comment by the Italian diplomatic authorities in Norway: 'It is true that in this small country, the interest in international issues is never very much alive.'<sup>46</sup>

The left-wing Norwegian government's and the media's detachment and aversion to fascism seemed to annoy the Italian authorities. They were further irritated by the attacks by some left-wing Norwegian newspapers on fascist foreign policy. On 28 September 1935, the Italian Legation informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that a media attack by *Morgenbladet* against Italy was considered 'very vulgar'. 'Since then – the Legation wrote – up until the last few days



the aforementioned newspaper had maintained a normal attitude towards us.<sup>47</sup> The article entitled 'Hungary and Italy', written by the vice president of the *Storting* and the second Norwegian delegate in Geneva, Carl Joachim Hambro, irritated the Italian diplomatic authorities with its anti-Italian sentiments. The article suggested that Italy after the First World War had become a great power only 'thanks to the moods of destiny' that made it 'among the victorious'. The Italian Legation in Oslo pointed out that 'this stupid statement' was written by 'a political figure, Carl Joachim Hambro, who formally wants to maintain the most correct contacts with this Royal Legation. Instead, through his newspaper, he occasionally looks for the opportunity to give way to clearly anti-Italian feelings'.<sup>48</sup>

The continuous derisive caricatures of the king that appeared in *Dagbladet* and the sarcastic articles in the same paper, described as 'too leftist and against fascist ideology', were seen as a very offensive.<sup>49</sup>

J'ai l'honneur de remettre à Votre Excellence la caricature ci-jointe du 'Dagbladet' (3.7.1931), dont l'intention grossière paraît assez évidente, surtout quand on pense que cela vient publié en manchette d'une nouvelle semblable, dont d'ailleurs je n'ai aucune confirmation jusqu'ici. Ce n'est pas la première fois que ce journal beaucoup répandu et quelqu'un parmi ses confrères permettent des inconvenances d'un goût douteux, attendu que, abstraction faite de toute opinion respectable, elles touchent à ce que mon pays a de plus cher.<sup>50</sup>

I have the honor to submit to Your Excellency the attached caricature from the 'Dagbladet' (3.7.1931), whose coarse intention seems quite evident, especially when one considers that it is published as a headline for a similar news, of which I have received no confirmation so far. This is not the first time that this widely circulated newspaper and one of its colleagues allow indecencies of questionable taste, considering that, aside from any respectable opinion, they touch upon what is dearest to my country.

## The beginning of cultural collaboration

The picture of Norway as presented to the Italian diplomatic authorities was that of a country divided and uninformed about what was really happening in Italy.

Mussolini was fully aware of the difficulties and distrust of his government on the part of Norway and the other Scandinavian countries, not only because it was informed by the local Legation, but because it seemed to be held in common. During a diplomatic meeting between Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian minister of Foreign Affairs, and a German representative, he warned him of the ideological detachment between Italy and the Scandinavian countries, making him aware that Italy should have no reason to sympathize with Norway and Sweden. On this occasion, Ciano was reminded that 'it was the Swedish Sandler who proposed sanctions against Italy'. He concluded that 'From the Nordic states there has always been a clear ideological aversion to Italy and Germany'.<sup>51</sup> The fascist authorities nonetheless decided to implement a skilful cultural diplomacy program that showed through clever propaganda the greatness and glories of Fascist Italy that Norwegians seemed to ignore. These cultural policy interventions were intended to open up new political and commercial opportunities for Italy, improve the relationship between the two countries, and to rehabilitate the image of fascism, showing Norwegians another face of Italy that was not the stereotypical 'solar and carefree land of mandolin players', but rather demonstrating the reach of its culture beyond national borders,<sup>52</sup> as well as improving the lives of the few Italian immigrants in Norway.<sup>53</sup> The diplomatic representatives and the cultural associations present there had to act as a hub for spreading culture among Italians, but above all among foreigners.

Italian cultural diplomacy was supported by a stable scaffold made up of various organizations that had been established by the regime at different points. They sought to adapt precise cultural plans for each nation; they involved institutions abroad and used a variety of forms of propaganda, including radio, cinema, publishing, art exhibitions, and cultural associations



abroad.<sup>54</sup> The latter were organized through various institutions, many of which, especially after 1928, were coordinated by the Directorate General of Italians Abroad (DIE).

Fascist cultural diplomacy in Norway was structured along two main fronts. A widespread cultural activity was organized in the country showing all Norwegians the greatness of fascist Italy, and one in Italy through a tourist policy that would allow them to see the magnificence of Mussolini's achievements. According to the correspondence between the diplomatic authorities in Norway and the headquarters at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these were the intentions of the fascist government:

It is in fact particularly through cultural exchanges, and not through direct and open propaganda, that in Norway the elements for respect and authority of fascist creation can be taught and disseminated.<sup>55</sup>

A program was launched to spread Italian culture, literature, and, above all, history in Norway. The fascist regime made widespread use of Italian history which served as a political tool in Italian communities abroad; they claimed to demonstrate the role of Italy as a 'teacher of civilization' over the centuries.<sup>56</sup>

Cultural diplomacy also had to involve all those few existing cultural associations in Norway, namely the Dante Alighieri Society and the University of Oslo, and at the same time create new ones to make it even more effective. Professor Mario Pensa was sent from Italy and, in addition to teaching Italian literature at the University of Oslo, he held the position of cultural attaché at the local legation. His job was to spread Italian literature and culture among the Norwegians. Pensa chose 200 Italian classics to be translated into Norwegian and distributed to the country's libraries.<sup>57</sup> The works were printed by the Norwegian publisher Gyldendal. In addition to the classics, some more modern books were also translated, in particular D'Annunzio, Deledda, and Pirandello. A book on the history of fascism was also published, over 450 volumes of Italian writers were donated to the University of Oslo, and another 200 were sent to the *Deichmanske Bibliotek*. Mario Pensa declared in an interview with a local newspaper that Norwegian authors had written very well about Italy, but many had made a mistaken distinction between the past and the present. They were able to write quite rightly about older periods, but fell short when it came to characterizing today's Italian culture. They did not see the continuous line, the correlation between the old and the new.<sup>58</sup> At the University of Oslo, Professor Mario Apollonio taught Italian literature courses. It consisted of three weekly lessons in the history of Italian literature in general, the reading of modern authors, and every Friday there was the 'Lectura Dantis'.<sup>59</sup>

The Dante Alighieri Society and its committee, founded in Oslo in 1923, was encouraged to hold conferences and organize events that were advertised with great emphasis by Norwegian newspapers. *Morgenbladet* on 27 October 1933 announced a conference with the Italian art historian Emilio Lavagnino to be held in the Ballroom of the National Gallery, entitled: 'From Romanità to Dolce Stil Novo'.<sup>60</sup>

From the mid-thirties, the design of a political and cultural continuity with Rome as the foundation of a fascist Europe became increasingly important with an ideological dimension, whether literary, journalistic, or architectural and economic. The primacy of fascist Italy over the future Europe was based on continuity with Roman civilization. De Francisci argued that the historical importance of Roman civilization surpassed that of any other, due to the durability, multiplicity, and relevance of the values it had created, stating, 'whose history (...) is the only true, great, and meaningful one'.<sup>61</sup>

The regime sought to create a new image that would exalt Italian genius worldwide through characters who had contributed to Italy's greatness. The new fascist program, aimed at depicting a more heroic image of Italy, was entrusted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which also had the task of overseeing the creation of the *Opera del Genio Italiano* abroad in several volumes. The task here was 'to go back over the centuries to find the innumerable and unmistakable traces of the Italian genius and to illustrate and exalt how much Italy and the Italians have offered to the

whole world with their spirit and their versatile genius'.<sup>62</sup> If some foreign countries did not have their own Italian heroes, leaders or explorers should therefore be sought. The documents of the shipwreck of the Venetian noble Pietro Querini in 1432 were found.<sup>63</sup> The Italian authorities 'had never heard of this event since it apparently occurred in 1432',<sup>64</sup> and promptly communicated it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Norway had therefore found its 'hero' in the person of the noble Querini, who in this way strengthened and legitimized the cooperation and even historical ties between the two countries, as well as the more advantageous fishing trade. In addition to the cultural institutions onsite, a 'cultural caravan' was created. The intent was to bring Norwegians to Italy so that they could personally realize the magnitude of fascist Italy. The cultural journeys had the purpose of showing to eminent individuals in science, arts, literature, industry, and commerce 'unknown parts of classical and fascist Italy', as well as the greatness and beauty of the country. The duration of the trip at the expense of the regime was one month, during which some Norwegians sought to discover the beauty of Italian art and culture.<sup>65</sup> Among other initiatives, a visit to the Bimillennial Exhibition of Augustus and one to the Black and White in Rome were included. During the same period, fashion shows were created, to which personalities of Norwegian culture were invited.

The propaganda was significant, and the cultural diplomacy was effective and had great impact on Norwegian society. The image of Italy presented by the Italian authorities in Norway really seemed to contradict the information about Mussolini coming from the rest of the world. In 1935, Olaf Solumsmoen, editor of the left-wing magazine *Arbeiderbladet*, decided therefore to take a journey to Italy to see what was really happening there and to verify personally the veracity of fascist foreign policy. The Oslo legation immediately sent a telegram to inform the Ministry.

Mr. Solumsmoen is a militant socialist, and is one of the most active editors of the *Arbeiderbladet*, a very popular newspaper in Norway, which has recently exceeded 100,000 copies in circulation. Convinced anti-fascist, Mr. Solumsmoen has on fascism all the prejudices that can be had when one does not know today's Italy. His journey wants to be information. He still believes that our regime does not have the unanimous consent, that in Italy all freedom is suffocated, that in Italy we live in a climate of terror and intimidation.<sup>66</sup>

The response of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was more positive than ever, and it was suggested that it be given to Mr. Solumsmoen:

The widest possibility of observing at ease what he wants so that he becomes directly aware of how much anger, how much falsity the anti-fascist propaganda abroad is subject to.<sup>67</sup>

Cultural diplomacy scholars have often questioned the real effectiveness of soft power in creating consensus abroad, emphasizing the difficulties of grasping its real impact, penetration, and effect on a given nation. David Clarke discusses the absence of clear criteria for understanding and measuring the effect of these cultural products in the countries where they are applied.<sup>68</sup> The interest of the Norwegian press in fascist cultural politics, the curiosity aroused towards Italy by a radical left-wing journalist opposed to the regime like Solumsmoen, the fact that he had decided to organize a trip to Italy to see for himself what was 'really' happening, the success of the evenings dedicated to Mussolini: all these elements can be interpreted as clear evidence that cultural propaganda had sparked a certain curiosity in some circles or individuals, at least until 1935. However, the overall success of fascist cultural diplomacy was very limited and short-lived.

### **More than culture: economic cooperation**

Cultural diplomacy was once again considered the best and most effective alternative to pave the way for profitable trade exchanges between the two countries through the creation of a climate of trust towards Italy. Trade between the two countries was regulated by an Italian-Swedish agreement signed in 1862. This agreement regulated maritime navigation and trade between the

two nations. The ambition of the Italian Legation was to bring Norway to sign a new and more modern pact with respect to economic cooperation and trade in tune with the changed situation of the two countries, given Norway's independence from 1905 and consequently its independent foreign policy.

For the Italian authorities, however, the new treaty should not be too rigid, but had to be based on the 'concrete interests' of the two countries and on 'specific trade problems considered case by case and without general formulas of formal agreements between states', to 'respond better to the Norwegian mentality, slow, a little suspicious against foreigners'.<sup>69</sup> In addition to the revision of the commercial treaty, Italian diplomats were working to win the trust of the Norwegian authorities in order to be able to enter the Norwegian market.<sup>70</sup> During the fascist period, a series of commercial accords between Norway and Italy were successfully concluded thanks to parallel cultural diplomacy. These agreements were organized through an arrangement that was defined as 'clearing', organized through an exchange of goods between the two countries. The clearing operations were often used in trade relations between Norway and other countries. According to Einar Lie, the clearing system was the result of a weak financial position that limited credit opportunities for Norway.<sup>71</sup> 1933 ended with an increase in exports to Norway for a total of 10,701,000 Norwegian kroner against imports of 19,094,600. Italy therefore aspired to increase exports to Norway in such a way that the figures were balanced to Italy's advantage. Italy 'fully absorbs the production of cod, stockfish and dried fish in general from Norway', and was thus Norway's most important customer in the trade of these products. According to a commercial report drawn up by the Italian Legation, in addition to fish, Italy imported cellulose, cod liver oil, newspaper paper, copper, nickel, chromium, leather, fur, and whale fat from Norway. Italy for its part exported salt, bran, citrus fruits, walnut flour, almonds, hazelnuts, tomato paste, linen fabrics, wool, jute and canvas, artificial silks, hats, tires, and cars. Usually, Italian merchant ships unloaded their cargoes in the ports of Tromsø, Trondheim, or Lofoten.<sup>72</sup> The Italian government was able to make important sales contracts with Norway and, in addition to traditional sectors such as fishing, began to sell ships and planes to Norway. These were the contracts that most interested the fascist authorities and that Italy aspired to consolidate. The sales of aircraft and ships would not only increase the number of exports, but also enhanced the prestige of the Italian mechanical industry. In 1934, the Italian company Breda sent a seaplane purchased by the Norwegian navy to Norway.<sup>73</sup> It was one of the first contracts of this type, followed by many others. These agreements often entailed skilful diplomatic work that in many cases involved intermediaries residing in Norway, and who therefore knew the reality of the country and the language. On 8 August 1934, a telegram was sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which it was communicated that it had 'happily flew from Italy to the military airport of Horten, the first of the Breda seaplanes'. 'Upon arrival, the Legation secretary announced: 'I was accompanied by the sales representative Luzi, and I had the opportunity to personally ascertain the full satisfaction of the local aviation authorities.'<sup>74</sup>

On 2 October 1935, with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the relations between the two countries reduced. As highlighted above, Norway officially disapproved of the invasion, and the Norwegian press was very critical. The Italian Legation in Oslo tried in every way to regain the Norwegian market and to unblock 'a series of projects and conventions presented at various times'. Despite the apparent Norwegian hostility towards Italy, the slowdown in relations between the two countries was strongly felt also by the Norwegian economy, to the extent that Norwegian authorities grew concerned about a rupture in commercial activities. The Norwegian authorities were led to define the sanctions imposed on Italy as 'unhappy', 'in which we took part during the Ethiopian war'. 'The Norwegian fishmongers suffered, suffer and will suffer considerable losses following Norway's participation in punitive action against one of the main buyers of our products.'<sup>75</sup>

After just over a year, the tensions between the two countries eased, and commercial transactions resumed even more strongly than before, to the great satisfaction of the Italians and

Norwegians. In 1937, through a clearing operation, Norway purchased five Fiat production fighter planes. The purchase was preceded by numerous trips to Italy by Colonel Trygve Klingeberg, Norwegian Air Force Chief Inspector, who had visited many Italian factories in order to find a convenient plane for military aviation in his country. The colonel expressed great satisfaction with the treatment received in Italy, declaring that he had found an atmosphere of real sympathy for Norway. The agreements seemed to satisfy both parties and were met with much approval in the Norwegian newspapers.<sup>76</sup>

A new compensation agreement was signed between the Bergen group of fish exporters through director Nile Marthinussen and Oslo's *Fiat Norsk-Italiensk*. It included the exchange of 120 Fiats for 450,000 kg of fish.

Again in 1937, the Norwegian trade minister enthusiastically communicated a new compensation agreement that 'will drain all the dry fish warehouses' and was reported by the main Norwegian newspapers, including *Arbeiderbladet*, *Dagbladet*, and *Aftenposten*.<sup>77</sup> Italy purchased from Norway 7,100 tons of dried fish at a value of more than 5 million crowns. Italy, for its part, provided to the Norwegian company Bergenske two ships of 9,000 tons and a speed of 19 knots. The price of the boat was around 6 and a half million Norwegian kroner, of which 60 per cent would have been paid in fish.<sup>78</sup> The ship was to be used by Norway for the Bergen-Newcastle line in the spring of 1938. The Minister of Commerce, Alfred Madsen, communicated the news to the Norwegian media with great satisfaction. From the Lofoten Islands and from the Finnmark region in the far north, great happiness was expressed, as the fish warehouses were entirely emptied and the entire fish production for the year was sold. This greatly boosted the economy of the poorer regions of northern Norway.<sup>79</sup> On 13 September 1937, the Italian Legation sent a telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to communicate that the *Trolla* steamer in Trondheim had left for Italy with 1,000 tons of Lofoten stockfish purchased by the *Glipesco* company in Rome.<sup>80</sup>

The year 1939 ended with an increase in exports to Norway for a total of 20,937,000 Norwegian crowns against imports of 23,712,300. The results were therefore evident compared to 1933.

## The occupation of Norway

On 9 April 1940, a dramatic event changed forever the fate of Norway and diplomatic relations with Italy. Norway's neutrality was violated, and the country was occupied by German troops.

The official news of the invasion was communicated by the German ambassador Von Mackensen to the Italian authorities in Rome. Mussolini expressed himself on 9 April 1940 in a note of praise for the military action of his ally, as reported by Galeazzo Ciano, Minister of Foreign Affairs:

I wholeheartedly approve of this Hitler action. It is a gesture that can have incalculable results and that is how wars are won. Democracies have been beaten in speed. I will order the press and the Italian people to unreservedly applaud the action of Germany.<sup>81</sup>

If Mussolini apparently showed himself in favor of the occupation of Norway, the words of Galeazzo Ciano, Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as Mussolini's son-in-law, were of a very different tenor. So he noted on April 9 in his diary:

From Norway come the first news of fighting and resistance. I hope that this is true, first of all because of the reactions that such an unequal struggle will provoke in the world and then to prove that there are still people who know how to fight to safeguard human dignity.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the alliance between the two countries and Mussolini's apparently positive opinion of the occupation of Norway, the first reaction of the Italian diplomatic delegation was to flee,

following in the footsteps of the Norwegian king and government. The representatives of the Italian government tried by getting on the first train to reach Hamar, where they had received information that the fugitive government had taken refuge but, having arrived at their destination, they found that the government had already left the town for a safer destination. Given these events, the small group of diplomats could do nothing but return to Oslo, now an occupied city.<sup>83</sup> On his return from Hamar, Niccolò Moscato wrote that the city remained calm and orderly.<sup>84</sup>

Quisling has issued a statement to the people saying that the capital is calm [...] Oslo is indeed quiet and all public businesses work. Here the war has destroyed morale. We also end up suffering the influence of the place.<sup>85</sup>

On 24 August 1940, the German authorities decided to close all foreign diplomatic missions in Norway. The Italian Legation in Oslo was closed and replaced by a consular authority managed by a single diplomat, the Legation secretary Niccolò Moscato and his family. The *Gerenza* remained open until 1942 in order to ensure the functioning of the consular offices and the protection of those few Italians remaining in Norway, as well as commercial interests between the two countries. It was one of the few diplomatic posts to stay open during the occupation.

Of those dramatic years, Niccolò Moscato noted in minute detail everything in his diary, helping to give an unprecedented record of that terrible period for Norway. The diary is one of the few sources about the Nazi occupation in Norway from a diplomatic point of view.

Despite the ideological closeness of Nazism and Fascism, the Italian diplomat in Norway seemed aware of the arrogance and abuses of the civilian population by his German allies, and his sympathies lay with the Norwegian population. Thus, in his correspondence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the first Legation secretary described the difficult living conditions in the occupied country:

The situation in Norway is notoriously difficult in the food sector. [...] The bread is very bad, the fish is scarce and very expensive, also due to the fact that fishing is done on a very small scale. [...] The situation offers a great contrast to the conditions of the country before the occupation. The shop windows of the capital offer a bleak look. The few things on display are in the shadow of signs with the word *kun utstilling* (only for display).<sup>86</sup>

The Legation secretary carefully recorded how 'the complaints of German oppression' were destined to remain a dead letter, 'and presented the difficult conditions of the population and the hardening of living conditions in a truthful manner to the fascist diplomatic authorities in Italy'.<sup>87</sup> He never expressed any sympathy or praise for their German allies; on the contrary, a lively sympathy was always expressed towards the oppressed Norwegian people. Likewise, the ideological distance between the Norwegians and the Nazis was described thus:

The spirit of the population is clearly contrary to Germany. In the public gardens, in the evening, one sees maids accompanied by German soldiers, but all the other classes of the population abstain from any contact with the Germans. The aversion reaches such a point that if a person in uniform asks for information in the street, he is not answered and turns his face away.<sup>88</sup>

There was no change in the internal situation of the country to report. It always remained characterized by the attitude of 'attesimo' 'to wait' (...) No sign of rapprochement and collaboration towards the Reich. Irreducible aversion and clear detachment for Quisling and his party: the feeling of hostility of the Norwegians towards Quisling, one can say without exaggeration, exceeds that nurtured towards the Germans. Quisling is the traitor par excellence, who sold himself to the enemy.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, the situation in Norway was getting worse, as the Italian military authority in Oslo noted: 'Both the German military authorities and the Gestapo do not hesitate, for their part, to take radical measures to suppress acts of espionage or anti-German propaganda. Various death sentences have been pronounced'.<sup>90</sup> The occupation of the country and the

resulting impossibility of trade between Italy and Norway due to the war and the naval blockades reduced the activity of the Legation to almost nothing. The only activity allowed was cultural diplomacy, which was carried out by the secretary Niccolò Moscato in person under the constant supervision of the fascist authorities and the central office in Rome that was at the same time under continuous scrutiny of the Nazi authorities.

In addition to the opportunities and challenges posed by the war, the Italian side had now to face competition with their German ally, which was demonstrating not only all its military superiority in the conflict but at the same time had taken on the role of the primary cultural organizing force in Europe, allowing minimal room for their Italian ally and the Latin cultural component.<sup>91</sup> The Nazi order was deemed the sole alternative, as asserted by 'Das Reich': 'Europe cannot exist without us.'<sup>92</sup> As Monica Fioravanzo highlighted in a war scenario with uncertain and disquieting outlines, confidence in the possibility of constructing a Europe where the positions of the German Reich and the Italian Empire were two dominant and parallel poles was diminishing.<sup>93</sup> Italy's role in Norway had changed and had become more marginal. Not being a Nordic-Aryan nation, Italy lacked the right 'racial' characteristic to play a more important role for *Nasjonal Samling*. This was exemplified by the exclusion of Italy even before the war, from Quisling's plan for a Nordic World Federation, an association that included the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and other 'Nordic countries.'<sup>94</sup> Mussolini was now aware of the superiority of his ally on all fronts and he confided to Ciano: 'Europe will be dominated by Germany. The defeated states will be real colonies. The associated states will be confederate provinces. Among them, the most important is Italy. We must accept this state of affairs because any attempt at reaction would demote us from the condition of a confederate province to the worse status of a colony.'<sup>95</sup>

Despite that, the cultural diplomatic efforts in Norway continued and culminated with the opening of the House of Italy, during the German occupation of Norway in the Second World War. The House of Italy was the last effort to strength cultural collaboration between the two countries. The idea came after a meeting between the first secretary of Legation Niccolò Moscato and Quisling in person, which took place on 1 June 1942. And this meant that Fascist Italy still enjoyed a certain sympathy in Quisling's eyes. The Norwegian newspapers gave ample space to the event, with photos showing handshakes between the first Legation secretary and Quisling.<sup>96</sup> The House of Italy was apparently a simple centre of aggregation, a sort of 'after work' of the Italian community in Oslo. According to correspondence between the Italian diplomatic authorities in Norway and the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the intentions of the fascist government were to continue to promote fascist culture for propaganda purposes. The diplomatic missions were aware, as has been pointed out previously, of the small numbers of Italians in Norway, and the House of Italy therefore had a propagandistic purpose, but one masked by a semblance of normal cultural activity.

The House of Italy had its beautiful headquarters in Nedre Slottsgate 1, in a building that was the former 17th-century town hall, granted free by the Norwegian government. Newspapers, magazines and books were available to anyone who was interested. Italian language courses were also given 'for beginners and for those who know the elements of the language'. Many events were scheduled, including a book exhibition of more than 700 volumes.

On 18 October 1942, the inauguration took place 'in the presence of the highest German civil and military authorities, Quisling and the governor of Oslo'. The *Aftenposten* devoted a long article to the event:

After expressing the hope that the House of Italy can cooperate to deepen understanding for Italy's great efforts in the struggle to free Europe from the Bolshevik danger and to create a secure and lasting peace in Europe, the Secretary of Legation declared the Casa d'Italia open.<sup>97</sup>

The speech was followed by the screening of the Italian documentary entitled *Two Years of War*. The House of Italy, despite its triumphant opening, had a very short life. For the German



authorities, its inauguration, the screening of the documentary, and the interviews issued by the Legation secretary to promote it had no other purpose other than propagandistic, which was altogether 'incompatible with the occupation regime'. Moscato was immediately recalled to Italy, and Giuseppe Setti was sent in his place. His return home would prove to be providential. The cultural activity he promoted in the House of Italy of Nedre Slottsgate would in fact be considered 'mere propaganda contrary to the Nazi ideology', and he would therefore have been presumably arrested for this if he had not left Norway in time. The House of Italy arose in the last period of Mussolini's cultural diplomacy, and marking its end was not only the 'direct propaganda' of Mussolini. His end was already marked by the events of the war and by the armistice that would bring Italy to the other side of war and transform it from a country friendly to Norway into its enemy.

In those years of war and occupation, from a good diplomatic relationship between Norway and Italy, there would be periods of great tension that culminated in the removal of the first secretary, considered an 'unwelcome person', and with the consequent closure of the Italian Embassy.

## Conclusions

The fascist government through targeted cultural diplomacy and profitable trade was really able to intensify diplomatic relations between Italy and Norway to its own advantage, at least for a period of time. Until then, the two countries, due to the lack of a consulate and a diplomatic headquarters, had had only sporadic contact. Despite the limited contributions made by Italian emigrants to the fascist cause, mainly due to their small number, Italian cultural policy was able to give Norwegians a different image of Italy and of Italians. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was in fact predominantly itinerant musicians who populated the streets of Norway and to whom many Norwegians, including the authorities, felt a certain apprehension, if not open hostility. In the fascist period, the propaganda of the regime through numerous cultural events and trips to Italy, which involved many Norwegian intellectuals, shortened the distance between the two countries, showing a new face of Italy that was more educated and more tied to its cultural heritage. Cultural exchanges were organized with a variety of organizations, including the University of Oslo, with the aim of promoting Italian culture and showcasing its greatness to Norwegians. These activities enjoyed some success, at least for a limited period. Cultural policy also opened the door to more profitable trade exchanges between the two countries. Norway and Italy became excellent trading partners during fascism, to the point that many conflicts and ideological differences were set aside for a while. Later, with the fall of fascism, war, and occupation on September 8, the two countries moved apart again, but only for a while. The postwar period brought relaxation and resumption of diplomatic, cultural and not least commercial contacts. The postwar period would be marked by a different approach to diplomatic relations: Italy would no longer be seen as a 'great imperialist power', but as a 'democratic power'. Italians would increasingly choose Norway as an immigration destination. Italian neo-realist films were shown in cinemas. De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* had extraordinary public success. The Norwegians identified themselves in the Italian misery that war and occupation had accentuated.

Cultural diplomacy would also be one of the main points of diplomatic relations between the two states, and conferences and cultural exchanges continued immediately after the war. On 28 April 1946 at the Nobel Foundation in Oslo, the new Italian ambassador held a conference entitled 'Italy after the signing of the peace treaty'. The conference was also attended by Norwegian Foreign Minister Halvard Lange, and its purpose was to strengthen diplomatic and commercial relations between the two countries, which had faded somewhat during the last years of the war.<sup>98</sup>



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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

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