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Publication date

2011

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Kessel, T. M. C. (2011). *Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s*.

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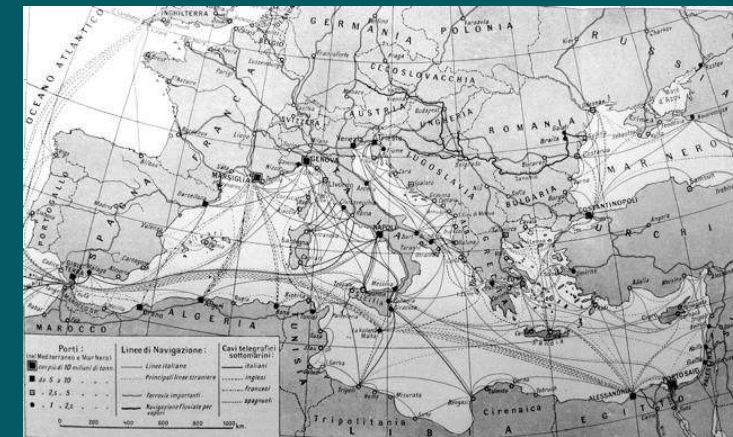
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CULTURAL PROMOTION AND IMPERIALISM

The Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council
Contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s



Tamara van Kessel

CULTURAL PROMOTION AND IMPERIALISM
The Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council
Contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties
ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit
op woensdag 1 juni 2011, te 11:00 uur

door

Tamara Maria Constance van Kessel

geboren te Rome, Italië

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PREFACE

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act I, Scene 3)

One of the inevitable questions in the globalized world of the twenty-first century is whether national cultural expression in an international context can ever be entirely free of moral or political values. Working from the beginning of 2004 until autumn 2006 for the European non-governmental heritage organisation Europa Nostra, I was confronted with the tension between wishing to protect cultural sites for their intrinsic value and justifying such protection with the argument that these sites strengthen the sense of a European collective heritage. Where does the cultural mission end and the political ideal begin? When, for example, heritage organisations in Western Europe try to transmit to former Communist countries their way of safeguarding cultural heritage, are they not hampered by their own national concepts of culture? Is there a way of encouraging greater knowledge and understanding of each other's cultures, for the sake of peace and stability, without conveying a particular model of society in the process? Intrigued by these questions, I embarked on a PhD dissertation that would deal with many such thorny issues. I decided to look at the phenomenon of foreign cultural policy in the early twentieth-century, where some of the developments we see today – soft power politics and the perceived need to win hearts and minds – were already emerging.

Now that I have completed the dissertation, I wish to thank my supervisor Pim den Boer and my co-supervisor Rob van der Laarse. Their unwavering faith in what I would be able to produce has been a source of encouragement throughout and so too their stimulating comments and advice. Whatever hesitations one may have about analysing the culture of two countries side by side, there can be no doubt that being supervised by two different personalities is a challenging but also enriching experience. Already when I was an MA student studying at the University of Amsterdam, Rob van der Laarse's lectures – full of exciting ideas, like a string of colourful beads – reminded me of what I loved about studying history. With this same flair and creativity he has given me feedback as I progressed with my PhD research. Pim den Boer, with passion for the classics and for concepts through time, never seemed depleted of curiosity or of edifying observations. He also encouraged me to look beyond the borders, both in the choice of research sources and

through the concrete opportunity to be involved in the organization of the 2010 International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Amsterdam.

As with most Ph.D. research, the road to the completion of the thesis has been a scientific and a personal odyssey, complete with tempting mermaids, multi-headed monsters and storms at sea, but also moments of smooth sailing and joyful discovery. I am extremely grateful to the Institute of Culture and History (University of Amsterdam) for having granted me the financial means and intellectual freedom to pursue this journey, and the Huizinga Institute for providing a fruitful academic platform that rises above the interests of individual universities. Thanks to the two scholarships awarded to me by the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome, I had the best haven from which to set out on my archive research that a scholar could wish for. I greatly appreciated the moral support and practical help that the staff there gave me: *grazie mille a tutti voi*. As a crucial mediator in the scientific and cultural relations between the Netherlands and Italy, and as the place where as a child I learnt to write Dutch, this Institute will always remain a part of my living history. Indispensable to my research was the access to the private archives of the Dante Alighieri Society in Rome, which was kindly granted to me. Dottoressa Padellaro, in charge of the archive, went beyond the call of duty in providing me with espressos and almost motherly care when a serious knee injury obstructed my research.

Participating in international conferences and using the wonderful tool of email communication has allowed me to exchange thoughts with several 'fellow travellers' in terms of research interests. Scott Anthony, Alice Byrne, Krishan Kumar, Peter Mandler, Peter Rietbergen and Perry Scott have been particularly stimulating in their comments and I hope to do them further justice in a future published edition of this thesis. Romke Visser has been a singular mentor to me, with great generosity of heart and spirit.

All this would not have been possible without some wonderful friends to share the highs and lows of the arduous PhD odyssey with. My 'guardian angel' at the National Archives, Roger, did much to make me feel at home in this bunker-like building and to help me find my way through the files. London can be an alienating place, even for someone like me who went to an English international school, but Anke, Anna and Astrid always make the sun shine for me in that city. I thank Emma, Minou, Nina, Machiel and Thomas for their warm support at all times. Furthermore, thinking of the colleagues I had the joy of sharing an office with, it is clear that I owe many of my smiling days working at my desk to Caroline, Cigdem, Claartje, Durkje, Hanneke, Karin and Roumiana. My regular coffees with Benjamin not only made me keep track of time but also showed me that my old school motto – *nil difficile volenti* – could be proven right. I ask Davide and Michele to forgive me for not having the Italian education that would have allowed me to understand so much more of what I wrote in this thesis: you have been helpful guides, also in the search for

where I stand. In the final stages of the thesis, I found in Carlos a patient, critical and illuminating listener and reader, as well as a mirror for the self-created obstacles in my quest.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Peter and Elisja, and my brother, Quinten, for their enduring love, their laughter and their untiring will to question and explore. People who need people are indeed the luckiest people in the world, in the sense implied by the Broadway song. Thank you for having helped me to understand this.

Researchers who need researchers are perhaps the second luckiest people in the world. For is it not in open, unguarded dialogue, "true to ourselves", that we learn to identify our own blind spots and biases? Only then can we come closer to what is, even if as ungraspable as a lizard that leaves you with only its tail in your hands, the present and past reality, a striving that I perhaps naïvely hold on to. I hasten to add that regardless of the dialogue, any errors or shortcomings in this thesis are entirely my own responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural foreign politics contesting the centre of the world

Ever since the first modern maps of the world were drawn, the Mediterranean Sea came to lie more or less at the centre of Western people's visual perception of the world. Gerardus Mercator's *Designatio Orbis Christiani* of 1569 realistically shows the modest size of this sea compared to the greater stretches of water surrounding the continents, but its location together with that of the European continent, made it clear where the heart of the world was considered to be. In the earliest cultural conceptions of Europe, whether those of Pope Paul II (1458-1464) who identified it with the *Respublica christiana*, or those connected to the burgeoning idea of a *Respublica litteraria* envisioned by the humanists as rooted in classical civilization, the Mediterranean Sea could not be overlooked.¹ In this thesis I shall be looking at how this pivotal geographical area was to be the setting of a cultural battle in the 1930s, in a period when European culture – with its classical and Christian roots – was undergoing a period of crisis. The players on the stage that I shall be dealing with are the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, two organizations promoting their respective national language and culture worldwide.

Europe divided by crises and ideologies

From the early nineteenth century up to the First World War, the major European states could each glorify their own nation whilst confidently sharing a sense of collective supremacy over the rest of the world.² They shared amongst themselves the colonial riches to be found in Africa and Asia and each indulged in the exaltment of their own national past. Self-assured Europe – or more broadly the 'Western civilization' – was confident of its capitalist economy that permeated the world markets, of its scientific and industrial progress that augmented its control over the physical reality, of its military superiority that allowed carving the cake among themselves, and of its higher

¹ Pim den Boer, *Europa. De geschiedenis van een idee* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker Publications, 5th revised and enlarged edition, 2007); Michael Wintle, *The image of Europe. Visualizing Europe in cartography and iconography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Den Boer, *Europa. De geschiedenis van een idee*, 121; David Lowenthal, 'Heritage and history. Rivals and partners in Europe' in: Rob van der Laarse ed., *Bezeten van Vroeger: Erfgoed, identiteit en musealisering* (Amsterdam, 2005) 29-39, 31.

sense of justice and political order.³ If ‘white man’ could bear a burden elsewhere in the world, it was because the future of Europe was expected to be heading for ever more progress.

The barbarity and collective trauma of the First World War severely shook this European self-confidence.⁴ A sense of approaching the end of ‘Western civilization’ and of losing former certainties had already been emerging in the late nineteenth century and found its catalyst in the Great War. Around the turn of the century, concern about decadence and degeneration – both spiritual and physical – fed the longing for ‘purity’, either in cultural, racial, sexual or medical terms.⁵ Developments in science that questioned the laws of causality in the universe and the constants of time and space; economic changes that favoured mechanisation, seasonal unemployment and the conglomeration of capital and business; the perceived atomisation of society, where the individual was drowned by the mass; the loss of organic communities caused by urbanisation; all these trends – culminating in the futility of so many young lives having been lost in the absurdity of trench warfare – were evidence for the cultural pessimists of a civilisational decline and reason for many movements to search for new responses to the challenges of modernity. The Great Depression, of which the Wall Street Crash in 1929 was arguably the cause or one of the effects, further exacerbated the crisis. The widespread consequences of the Crash for the connected European economies made clear that the problems of the day were of a global scale.

Political movements from the Left continued to mobilize workers and to threaten the establishment, receiving new impulses from the October Revolution of 1917 and Lenin’s creation of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919. Partly triggered by the Communist threat and supported by the discontent of many First World War veterans, Right-wing movements gained force too. These latter movements were inspired at times by the social solutions sought in socialist or revolutionary syndicalist circles, but were also introducing new myths of national regeneration or purification, authoritarian rule, corporatist or ‘organic’ theories and forms of sacralisation of politics. Increasingly aggressive and expansionist forms of nationalism became the natural allies of these Right-wing movements.

In Germany and Italy, the outcome of the First World War had produced strong, widespread resentment. Germans resented their defeat, their loss of territory especially where populated by Germans, and the reparations

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, 2nd ed. (London: Abacus, 1995).

⁴ Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle, ‘European Identity, Europeaness and the First World War: Reflections on the Twentieth Century – An Introduction’ in: Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle ed., *Ideas of Europe since 1914. The Legacy of the First World War* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 1-13.

⁵ Rob van der Laarse, Arnold Labrie and Willem Melching ed., *De hang naar zuiverheid. De cultuur van het moderne Europa* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1998).

demanding by the Allies. Italians deplored the many men they lost fighting on the Austro-Italian border and the insufficient recognition of this sacrifice by their Allies. These bitter feelings fed extreme forms of nationalism. Together with the European malaise of the interwar period, the indignation, the wounded nationalist pride and the collective war trauma provided a fertile ground for the emergence of new political movements. In Italy it resulted in the seizure of power by Mussolini, who by the early 1930s was clearly aiming to build an ever more totalitarian regime. As of 1933, Germany was in the grip of National Socialism. Communism, National Socialism and Italian Fascism: each had a cultural programme to go with their vision of a better future. International relations in Europe were becoming inexorably linked to political ideology and rivalry between European states took on a cultural component.

It is in the midst of this crisis of European civilization, in 1934, that the British Council was created. This was a non-governmental organization whose foremost task was to make British life and thought known abroad, to encourage the study and use of English, and "to promote a mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples".⁶ Why was the British Council created only then? In the other major European states such organizations already existed since the end of the nineteenth century. The German language and culture were promoted by the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Ausland (1881), which in 1908 was renamed as the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland. In France, the Alliance Française (1883) was set up to carry out the *mission civilisatrice* the French had assigned themselves since the French Revolution. In Italy too, the Società Dante Alighieri (1889) was created to defend the Italian language and culture abroad, primarily in areas that were not yet incorporated in the unified Italian state. These three existing organizations had comparable goals and used similar methods: language classes, lectures, libraries, concerts and other cultural activities. In the case of the Alliance and the Dante, they underlined their secular nature, though both succumbed to co-operation with missionaries in Africa because of their activities in education. Furthermore, all three professed to be a-political and non-governmental while being each to some degree co-financed by government funds. In all cases there was a continuous tension between the independence of these private organizations and the growing significance that governments attached to cultural foreign policy after the First World War.

The British Foreign Office was well aware of the foreign cultural promotion the Germans, French and Italians were engaged in, and tried to obtain information about how much these foreign governments were spending in that field.⁷ Government involvement in cultural propaganda was deemed

⁶ TNA, BW 151/1, Report by The Rt. Hon. Lord Eustace Percy, M.P. of Activities from 1st April 1936 to 15th July 1937.

⁷ Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain, British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 135-139.

unnecessary in Britain and even rather disreputable. Nevertheless, when it became clear that the British trade relations abroad were being threatened by the active foreign cultural policy of especially the Italians and the Germans, the practical need for an organization that would promote British culture abroad seemed to be proven. It was also evident that the socio-political changes in Italy and Germany affected the Società Dante Alighieri (Dante Alighieri Society) and the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, organizations that – each in their own way – were increasingly deployed for the spreading of ideological and aggressively nationalist propaganda. Although the spokesmen of the British Council were keen to underline that the Council was not in charge of propaganda but of diffusing information for the benefit of greater international understanding and world peace, the ‘factual’ information was not free of ideology either. It consistently emphasized the love of freedom, the liberal and democratic values, and the social justice that Britain was said to embody.

Trade and political ideology were central concerns for the British Council. But just as important if not even more so was the diminishing political and military control over the Empire that the Council was meant to compensate with its cultural activity. The model offered by the Dante Alighieri Society was explicitly recommended as example for the British Council in a fundamental policy document that lies at the origins of the Council.⁸ In this specific case, the person in question – the British High Commissioner to Egypt – was uttering concern about the cultural influence that Italy was gaining in Egypt whilst the British neglected that field of power. British diplomats regularly encountered the Dante’s activities around the Mediterranean Sea. For the British, control over the Mediterranean was of vital strategic importance to have access to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, the shortest route to its major colony India. Also, from the moment that Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty (1911-1915) provided for the transition of the British Royal Navy from coal to oil as fuel, it became indispensable to secure supplies of oil from the Middle East.

On the other hand, Mussolini was apt to declare the Mediterranean Italy’s ‘Mare Nostrum’, belonging to the country’s secular sphere of influence, and to express this in his colonial ambitions. Since the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), Italy was in possession of the Dodecanese Islands, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan. The latter three were unified in 1934 to form Italian Libya. In the 1930s Mussolini’s rhetoric increasingly referred to the revival of the Roman Empire that he envisaged and anti-British propaganda was being broadcast across the Mediterranean area by Radio Bari. Upon invading Abyssinia in 1935,

⁸ “Some central direction from London would, of course, be necessary, and I suggest that it might be more advantageous if the direction were rested in some unofficial body, similar to the Dante Alighieri Society, with, however, Government representation on the Managing Board.” (TNA, BW 29/3, Extract from despatch by Percy Loraine, British High Commissioner to Egypt, 9 November 1933, in British Council report ‘British Cultural Propaganda in Egypt’, March 1935.)

Italy began to pose a serious threat for British interests along the Suez Canal and the Red Sea as well as in the rest of Africa. The Mediterranean, including its gateway to India, was where British and Italian cultural, economic and political ambitions most evidently clashed.

Around this pivotal 'Middle Sea' the Dante Alighieri Society devoted itself to preventing the denationalisation (*snazionalizzazione*) of the numerous Italian communities that settled there, be it along the North-African coast or on the Eastern Mediterranean shores. It also supported the mission to turn the young nation Italy into an imperial power and as soon as Abyssinia was conquered it eagerly sought a role for itself in the new Italian East Africa. In so doing, it thought in terms of a nineteenth-century colonialist model. The British Council, on the contrary, tried to rescue Britain in what became a transition from an Empire to a leading nation among nations within the Commonwealth. In that respect it was helping Britain to find a new form of imperialism, presented as internationalism. By distancing itself from aggressive colonialism and purporting to promote international understanding, the British could still to some extent direct the world order but now through the maintenance of an allegedly neutral ground.

It has been pointed out that it was an initiative of the British Council during the Second World War that laid the basis for the creation of UNESCO.⁹ Upon the initiative of the British Council, starting from the autumn of 1942 a Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME) was held to discuss their countries' educational issues. Eventually, encouraged by the establishment of the United Nations, this Conference led to the setting up of UNESCO (November 1945). Curiously, the history of UNESCO as it is told in a study commissioned by the UNESCO itself makes no mention of the British Council having been a guiding light in the creation of a global educational organization.¹⁰ This omission must have been made due to the fact that in 1985 Britain stepped out of UNESCO. Whatever the exact relationship was between the Council and UNESCO, the British Council's conception of international cultural exchange may well have had a greater influence on post-war models of global co-operation than has so far generally been recognized. This makes its confrontations with the Dante in the Mediterranean on the eve of the war all the more interesting.

Although the war-time activities of the Council are a prelude to the British initial role in internationalist movements after the Second World War, the period covered by my historical analysis will extend more or less up to the

⁹ Frances Donaldson, *The British Council. The First Fifty Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984) 122-123. Donaldson quotes from Richard Seymour, 'Developments in the United Kingdom during the Second World War leading to the practice of collective cultural co-operation', June 1965 (unpublished paper commissioned by the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe) 3, 18, 25 and 29.

¹⁰ Martinez Fernando Valderrama, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1995).

outbreak of that war. From that moment on, the foreign cultural promotion of the countries taking part in the war needs to be considered side by side with war propaganda, in as much as there is a distinction between the two. This would have required taking into account new considerations, such as the unsafe conditions on the ground that foreign cultural policy had to take into account and the loss of young male staff.

Altogether, the aim of this book is to provide a better understanding of how cultural policy became a significant part of international relations; in particular how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council functioned in the cultural, political and economic rivalry between Italy and Britain. This was a rivalry between an emerging and a declining imperial power, and between on the one hand an authoritarian, Fascist regime eager to show the physical and spiritual prowess of a young nation, and on the other hand a constitutional monarchy proud of its parliamentary democracy, its liberalism and its pragmatism. Inevitably, the research results touch upon a wide range of topics. Some of these topics are closely related to the evolution of mass communication and the increased mobility of greater numbers of people that characterize modern society. Good examples of these are the development of tourism, the expansion of the book market, the formalized 'internationalisation' of European universities and twentieth-century forms of sociability. Such phenomena are unmistakably present in the functioning of organizations like the Dante and the Council, in part explaining their creation and viability. There are also more long-term factors, such as the history of missionary activity in European colonies. Although I mention many of the elements that interplay with the activities of the Dante and the Council in the Mediterranean during the 1930s, I have chosen to focus on a selection of these. The central themes in this study are: the emergence of foreign cultural policy in Europe and its relation with the state, the transnational influence present in foreign cultural policy, national identity as viewed from abroad, attitudes towards tradition and modernity, the clash in the Mediterranean between two imperial models as well as two political systems, and the role of religion, of the sacralisation of politics and of attitudes towards race.

Cultural promotion: a tool in international politics

In one of the few academic articles in which the British Council, the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute, usually seen as the successor of the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, are compared, the authors state that there is a

neglect of the cultural component in the study of international relations.¹¹ This article was published in 2003. Since then, a considerable interest has emerged for what has been coined 'soft power'.¹² This interest has been triggered by the re-orientation of United States foreign policy following the 9/11 attacks and is echoed in the current caution with which 'Western' observers analyse the soft power of emerging world powers, as is the case with the Chinese Confucius Institutes launched in 2004.¹³ Yet, despite the analogies one could make with soft power, research on the contemporary history of cultural foreign policy or cultural diplomacy remains scarce. This thesis will therefore elucidate the change in international diplomacy during the first decades of the twentieth century that induced European states to give greater importance to their cultural propaganda abroad.

As a result of democratisation, public opinion began to matter more to the official dealings with foreign relations. At the same time, technological advances offered new, more efficient ways of influencing public opinion. Cultural foreign policy was furthermore linked to the ideological oppositions that were becoming part of international relations, beginning with the fear of Bolshevism in Western Europe, passing on to the divisions of allegiance in the Spanish Civil War and culminating in the 1930s with the Axis of Steel defying the democratic countries. From the First World War onwards, European governments recognized the utility of this new instrument. The Dante Alighieri Society began as a private organization at the end of the nineteenth century, before this rise of official cultural foreign policy had taken place. How did it position itself in the 1930s as the Italian Fascist state reached its most totalitarian phase? Given that the British Council was created after the cultural dimension of international relations had gained more importance, did it operate differently and benefit from the insights of a latecomer?

Cultural foreign politics from a transnational perspective

What also distinguishes the article by Martens and Marshall besides their attention for foreign cultural policy, is their comparative approach. The authors are interested in how British, French and German organizations for cultural promotion abroad function. So far, none of the historical studies of the British

¹¹ Kerstin Martens and Sanen Marshall, 'International organisations and foreign cultural policy. A comparative analysis of the British Council, the Alliance Française and the Goethe-Institute' in: *Transnational Associations* 4 (2003) 261-272.

¹² Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Jan Melissen ed., *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); John McCormick, *The European Superpower* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹³ James F. Paradise, 'China and International Harmony. The Role of the Confucius Institute in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power' in: *Asian Survey* 49, 4 (2009) 647-669.

Council, the Alliance Française, the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Goethe-Institute or the Dante Alighieri Society have aimed to show how these organizations functioned alongside each other. Preference has been given to treating each single organization within its own national context and in terms of its national foreign policy.¹⁴ The same could be said about the history of cultural foreign policy as has been said about the development of cultural nationalism. Arguing for a more comparative approach in the study of nationalism, Joep Leerssen has posited that “[...] if we study national movements on a single-country basis, the study of national thought and nationalism will collapse into the history of a single country. In order to understand nationalism and national thought in their own right, and not just as factors playing into a country’s history, we must work comparatively and study various cases.”¹⁵ Although examining the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council jointly carried with it the risk of becoming an inconclusive juxtaposition, it has been my aim to use this juxtaposition precisely to show the distinctive characteristics of each organization. Simultaneously though, I also illustrate how the interaction and rivalry between the Dante and the Council has shaped their respective identities and strategies. It is the understanding of the dynamics between the foreign cultural policies of different nations that is the great added value of this approach.

National identity constructed from abroad

Those historians who do not endorse the notion of primordial nationalism have generally studied the construction of national identity as a process that takes place within the state borders, through mechanisms such as homogenisation, invention of tradition and canonisation.¹⁶ In this thesis I will argue that the way

¹⁴ Diane Eastment, *The Policies and Position of the British Council from the Outbreak of War to 1950* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leeds, 1982); Maurice Bruézière, *L’Alliance française 1883-1983 Histoire d’une institution* (Paris: Hachette, 1983); Donaldson, *The British Council*; Filippo Caparelli, *La «Dante Alighieri» (1920-1970)* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1985); Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995); Patrizia Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995); Eckhard Michels, *Von der Deutschen Akademie zum Goethe-Institut. Sprach- und auswärtige Kulturpolitik 1923-1960* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005); François Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française et la diplomatie de la langue. L’Alliance française (1883-1940)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006); Alice Byrne, “Boosting Britain”: *Démocratie et propagande culturelle, Britain To-Day 1939-1954* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Provence, 2010).

¹⁵ Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 18.

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and*

in which national identity was defined must also be studied in an international context. My prime interest lies in how presenting one's own national culture to a foreign audience in part reflects and in part shapes the characteristics of that culture. What definition was 'national culture' given in an international context and what does this say of the position of culture within the nation? In the case of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, they chose to define 'Italianness' and 'Britishness' in a foreign, 'other' context. However, unlike the post-colonial studies that are generally associated with analysing the construction of the 'Self' versus the 'Other', I am looking at the Italian and British assertion of superiority through cultural means in a rivalry among themselves and other European countries, rather than in the domination of 'exotic' people.

An inspiring example for this thesis has been Mark Choate's *Emigrant Nation*.¹⁷ As the subtitle - *The Making of Italy Abroad* - aptly suggests, Choate illustrates how Italy's emigrants abroad were inextricably part of the way in which Italian national identity was construed. The sheer numerical total of Italians that emigrated between 1880 and 1915 - thirteen million - with which Choate opens his book, is enough to make one realize how fundamental this phenomenon is to the nation's history. Concurring with Benedict Anderson's view that it is easier for those who have settled elsewhere to imagine the national community they have left, Choate refers to the many exiles - including Mazzini and Garibaldi - who forged the vision of Italian unification and points out that "the young Italian state adapted to a new global era with innovative policies to 'make Italians' abroad in a Greater Italy."¹⁸ Choate analyses the way in which emigration also shaped Italy's colonial policy, from the liberal concept of peaceful emigrant colonialism to Mussolini's more aggressive use of emigration to redeem conquered colonial territory. Although the Dante Alighieri Society's prime mission was to maintain alive - and in many cases teach - the Italian language and culture to the many emigrants who left while having hardly experienced the effects of unification, in my thesis I will concentrate on how the Dante presented Italy to non-Italians. In this focus on foreign cultural policy, I also take into consideration the interaction between a private initiative such as the Dante and the growing state control in this field.

In the field of British studies too, a greater attention for the interaction between national identity and the international context can be found. The latest volume of the Oxford History of the British Empire Series, *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas*, presents a successful combination of national,

Spread of Nationalism (London and New York: Verso, 1991); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation. The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 224. Here Choate cites the famous words spoken by Massimo d'Azeglio after the Italian unification about the need 'to make Italians'.

imperial and emigration history viewed from personal experiences to colonial policy.¹⁹ The significantly lower number of British emigrants makes the relationship between emigration and national identity different, although Scottish and Irish identity-building might reveal more similarities with the Italian case. Unlike the Dante, the activities of the British Council were mainly aimed at foreigners, not British emigrants. This difference reflects the national histories of Italy and Great Britain. Obviously a young nation would be more concerned about keeping its co-nationals bound to the motherland. The British, having had a longer history of national unity, had less concerns about their co-nationals losing their British identity abroad and through their colonial history had other instruments at their disposal to guard these barriers, as testified by the cliché of the British gentleman's club. The focus in this thesis is on how the British Council presented Britishness to foreigners when the changing international context required it to do so.

Clashing empires and political systems in the Mediterranean

In the 1930s, Great Britain was gradually coming to terms with the decline of its Empire, whereas Italy, under Mussolini's Fascist rule, was confident in an imminent revival of its imperial past and was eager to prove this with its colonial conquests, in particular the seizure of Abyssinia. How did this affect the cultural policy of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council? To understand the cultural rivalry between the two organizations and their differences in approach, our attention needs to turn towards the Mediterranean area. Both organizations referred to the imperial model provided by ancient Rome. The existing British Empire and Fascist Italy, which was aspiring to build a new empire, each in their own way appropriated the Roman Empire as the 'proto-empire' of European civilization. How was the classical heritage used in the national image that the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council respectively promoted in the particularly symbolic and strategic area of the Mediterranean, the 'cradle of Western civilization'? The British male elite were expected to have a thorough knowledge of the classics, essential for their future public roles as 'Roman senators' in parliament or as 'Roman officers' in the Empire's civil service.²⁰ From the murder of Matteotti in 1924 onwards, Mussolini's government in Italy exposed the undeniable traits of a totalitarian regime. As Italy's territorial ambitions in the Mediterranean took shape, the fact

¹⁹ Robert Bickers ed., *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen. The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992; 2005) 50 and 168-169.

that a rivalling and authoritarian state embraced the cult of *romanità* made it problematic for the British to continue claiming this Roman heritage.²¹ As will be shown in the third chapter, one of the ways in which the Council dealt with this dilemma was by emphasizing the similarity between the British Empire and the democratic colonial power of Athens, that was allegedly gained not by force but by trade. A shift in reference of this kind also helped to legitimize the British Council's development of activities in Greece, which as the Second World War broke out was to become an important component of British economic and political foreign policy. Studying the cultural claims made by the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean makes it possible to analyse the intricacies of the clash between the 'Pax Romana' envisaged by the Italians and the 'Pax Britannica' defended by the British.

Modelling modernity

The British Council felt itself called to defend the nineteenth-century capitalist, bourgeois Europe, with faith in gradual progress, liberalism, justice and parliamentary democracy. This was a reaction to the political ideologies it was meant to counter. Italian Fascism and National Socialism, though also incorporating (re-)created traditions, were perceived by the Council as products of modernization and of a growing state control that afflicted this period. Both ideologies repudiated the nineteenth-century liberalism that was still cardinal to British attitudes regarding the relation between state and society. This coincides with the considerable consensus nowadays on a generic definition of fascism - meaning Italian Fascism and National Socialism - as being "an ideologically driven attempt by a movement or regime to create a new type of post-liberal national community that will be the vehicle for the comprehensive transformation of political, social and aesthetic culture, with the effect of creating an alternative modernity."²² The historian Roger Griffin has recently provided many arguments for analysing both Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes from the perspective of the creation of modernism.²³

But modernity was not just connected to the contentious political ideologies developing in Europe. In the early 1930s, despite efforts by Mussolini's regime to form a new type of man, many Italian youths brought up in the Fascist educational system nevertheless discovered the appeal of

²¹ Romke Visser, 'Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità' in: *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 27, No. 1 (1992) 5-22.

²² Roger Griffin, 'Introduction: God's Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion' in: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, 3 (Winter 2004) 291-325, 299.

²³ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

American cultural products: novels by writers such as William Caldwell, John Steinbeck and Erskine Saroyan, but most of all American films. As Wanrooij has remarked, the new youth cultures, “which tried to imitate the customs of a consumer society even before its economic premises had come into existence”, made evident the failure of the regime to control their formation.²⁴ This statement says as much about the pervasive and highly successful influence of the American film industry as about the regime’s limited power. The consumer society associated with the emerging American commercial and cultural influence in Europe was closely connected to the rise of new media. Mass consumption, new media and global communication were perceived as aspects of modernity. British culture was experiencing the rising power of the use of media both by non-democratic forces such as Italian Fascism and by the ‘democratic’ forces of capitalist American expansion. Given the complex associations with modernity, it is worth analysing how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council used modern images and methods in their promotion of culture.

The Fascist movement in Italy had initially been close to the avant-garde artists known as the Futurists and in favour of all things modern. This desire for innovation partly persisted in the Fascist regime. However, the Dante Alighieri Society had its roots in the nineteenth century, in the literary and historical canons of the Risorgimento. At times in its activities we nevertheless perceive the desire to show Italy’s innovation and modernity. But on the whole, the Dante did not have the capacity or the ambition to reach out for the tools of mass communication. On the other hand, the British Council promoted Britain as the defender of tradition, of the old democracy and of European civilization. A former staff member of the British Council commented that at the end of the Second World War Great Britain “represented the continuity of Europe’s cultural past which had been interrupted everywhere else by Fascism, war, occupation, a repository of civilised values.”²⁵ This image of Britain was not only the result of the wartime experience. Already in the Council’s activities at the eve of the war it was evident that Britishness was meant to represent the tried and tested values of European democratic and liberal culture. Ironically, though being a harbinger of tradition the Council was right away geared towards an effective communication strategy, consciously targeting the influential circles in foreign societies and aware of the need to use communication tools such as richly illustrated magazines, film and broadcasts.

²⁴ Bruno Wanrooij, ‘Youth, Generation Conflict, and Political Struggle in Twentieth-Century Italy’ in: *The European Legacy* 4/1 (1999) 72-88, 76.

²⁵ From the unpublished papers of Richard Auty quoted in: Douglas Coombes, *Spreading the word: the library work of the British Council* (London & New York: Mansell Publishing, 1988) 145.

Citizenship, race and religion

Another consideration in the choice to analyse the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council is related to the issue of race and religion in foreign cultural politics. The way in which the Council made British life and culture relevant to all mankind was essentially more challenged by the Dante Alighieri Society than by the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein, the other ideological counterpart. The Dante was devoted to protecting *italianità* (Italianness) but also to showing how Italy's primordial creativity and genius had brought benefits to the whole world. In the hands of the Fascist regime, the Dante could serve to advance Italy's global ambitions. National Socialism was based on racism, on the biological, exclusivist concept of an existing race, the German *Volk*. The Fascist ideology, on the other hand, was one based on values that could be seen as transmittable.²⁶ Thus Italian Fascism, more so than German National Socialism, was seeking to create a new worldwide ideal of man and society that was considered to be 'exportable' to other countries.²⁷ Although the attitude of Italians towards the Africans living in the territories that they conquered was one of racial superiority and even if Mussolini accepted as part of his alliance with the Third Reich to introduce anti-Semitic laws, there was more scope for 'conversion'; an effect of Rome as capital of universal Fascism being the successor of Rome as capital of the Catholic world. This less rigid attitude towards race and the willingness to operate through local elites made British and Italian conceptions of colonialism similar and thereby more in rivalry with each other. Here we need to bear in mind the Roman Empire as model, where all subjects of the Empire, regardless of race, could through devoted service to the Empire acquire the Latin Right, a part of the legal benefits appertaining to Roman citizenship. The British and the Italian Empire inspired by this model, though not immune to thinking in terms of racial hierarchy that was still common in Europe then, did not in principle preclude the idea of universal citizenship. By contrast, one of the weaknesses of the Third Reich was that it saw no other rightful citizen than the German *Volk*.²⁸

²⁶ Renzo de Felice and Michael A. Ledeen, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Gius. Laterza & Figli: Rome and Bari 1975) 90; George Mosse, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the search for a "Third Force" in pre-nazi Germany* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970) 27-28; George Mosse and Michael A. Ledeen, *Nazism: a historical and comparative analysis of national socialism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1978) 42-43, 92-93 and 101. Renzo de Felice, the former *éminence grise* among the historians of Italian fascism, made the distinction between 'fascist movement' ('fascismo movimento') and the more conservative 'fascist regime' ('fascismo regime'), a distinction that I shall maintain.

²⁷ Michael A. Ledeen, *Universal fascism. The theory and practice of the fascist international 1928-1936* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972); Bruno Wanrooij, 'Il fascismo come merce d'esportazione' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome XLVI/11* (1985) 155-163.

²⁸ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (London: The Penguin Press, 2008) 181-184, 189.

What also comes to the fore is the religious heritage that can be traced in the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council. The nationalist and Masonic roots of the Dante had initially made the secular character of the organization a point of pride. Yet the growing number of rituals and ceremonies that became part of the Dante practice suggest that the 'sacralization of politics' was an essential aspect of the Society's appeal.²⁹ The Dante rhetoric also made references to the Catholic background most Italians still had, as is shown by the frequent use of the term *apostolo d'italianità* and even the production of a *Decalogo per gli italiani all'estero*, similar to a list of Ten Commandments to feed national pride in the Italian abroad, described at the Dante annual congress of 1927 as a kind of Catechism for the emigrant.³⁰ The British Council also reveals some traits that may be connected to a religious background, in this case Anglicanism. The Council's attitude to international relations rested on a model of civilisational development that assumed a moral hierarchy justified by Anglicanism. The English had for many centuries seen themselves as a 'chosen people' and the Church of England was closely bound to the British sense of identity.³¹ An echo of the old enmity towards the Catholic countries can be felt in the Council's concern about the 'Latinisation' of Egypt, that will be dealt with in Chapter Five. As we shall see, there was at the same time an Anglo-Catholic vein in the Council. This, however, does not exclude a negative attitude to Latin Catholicism, on the contrary. Inevitably this background influenced the Council's reaction to Italian cultural promotion, and more specifically to the activities of the Dante.

Outline of the chapters

The above-mentioned main themes will be dealt with in five chapters. The first chapter presents a brief history of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881) (later the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland), the Alliance Française (1883), the Dante Alighieri Society (1889) and the British Council (1934), analysed in the context of the emerging importance of cultural foreign policy in Germany, France, Italy and Britain starting from the end of the nineteenth century.

²⁹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 179; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Bari: Laterza, 1993); idem, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³⁰ 'Congresso di Ancona – XXXII (9-13 ottobre 1927)' in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (September-October 1927) 97-98, AS-SDA. The decalogue was written by Amy Bernardy, one of the few female members of the Dante not to be confined to organising fund-raising events and a very active advocate of more care for Italian emigrants, especially in the United States of America. (Maddalena Trabassi, "Ripensare la patria grande" – *Gli scritti di Amy Allemande Bernardy sulle migrazioni italiane* [Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2005].)

³¹ Colley, 'Protestants' in: idem, *Britons*, 11-54; Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples. Sacred sources of National Identity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Various factors will be shown to have played a part in this history, such as the loss of military power, economic rivalry, the growing influence of public opinion accompanying the extension of suffrage, the effects of national unification and the use of propaganda in the First World War.

Subsequently, the second chapter contains a more in-depth description of the two organizations that are central in this study: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council. The emphasis in this chapter is on the relationship between these two private organizations and their respective governments. Both organizations risked being incorporated by the state: the Dante by being merged with the Istituti di Cultura Fascista and the Council through incorporation by the Ministry of Information that was created shortly before the Second World War broke out. Similar arguments were used by the Dante and the Council to plead for their independence. What has been referred to as the 'fascistization' of the Dante is hereby shown to be a far more complex process than has been suggested. Furthermore, in order to understand what interest groups in society backed the activities of the Dante and the Council, this chapter will take a closer look at the people that led these organizations.

In the third chapter we examine how the Dante and the Council defined their respective concepts of *italianità* and 'Britishness' and what relevance to the wider world was attributed to these national cultures. Were they offering models of society that they believed could surmount the European insecurity of the interwar years? Did these concepts take into account aspects of the modern world, such as the development of mass-communication and the greater democratic participation? How did they refer to their national past? Besides representing scientific, industrial and political progress, the chosen images of Italian and British culture also - consciously or unconsciously - encapsulated the nation's spiritual heritage. Are there Roman Catholic or Anglican values or concepts traceable in the chosen definitions of *italianità* and Britishness respectively?

A fourth chapter concentrates on the case of Malta, a chess-piece in the Mediterranean around which British and Italian political interests severely clashed. Here the Dante and the Council participated in a political conflict that revolved around cultural influence. Malta was of utmost strategic importance for control over the Mediterranean Sea. Fearing that Malta would fall under Mussolini's - and not to forget, the Roman Catholic Pope's - sphere of influence if the Italian language were to gain too much ground on the island, in the 1930s the Governor of Malta banned the use of Italian in education and public administration. This caused indignation at the Dante headquarters in Rome and led to accusations of hypocrisy because the British had always purported to defend the freedom and stability of the Maltese. In 1938 the Council began to set up an Institute in Malta with the intention to win sympathy for British culture and in doing so reacted to earlier manifestations of cultural promotion

displayed by the Italian government and the Dante. What strategies did the Council adopt to appeal to the Maltese?

The fifth chapter brings us to Abyssinia and Egypt to further illustrate the role of the Dante and the Council in the imperial project that revolved around the Mediterranean area. Abyssinia is viewed here as an extension of the Mediterranean, a part of the strategic gateway to India that the Suez Canal meant to the British. After the Italian army invaded this country in 1935, the Dante hastened to establish itself in Addis Ababa, the newly proclaimed capital of Italian East Africa. How did the Dante envision its own role in Italy's imperial project? Meanwhile in Egypt the British government had come to realise that if it wished to maintain control over this protectorate, already given some degree of self-rule with the Unilateral Declaration of Egyptian Independence in 1922, it needed to buttress its military and political power with an effective cultural policy. The Council's activities in Egypt demonstrate how the British tried to counter what was perceived as the increasingly competing Italian cultural influence in the area.

In the conclusion, besides the final reflection on what the five chapters have explained about the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean area during the 1930s, some suggestions are made regarding further research that could lead to yet more new insights into the significance of cultural foreign policy, from the beginning of the twentieth century right up to today.

CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN CULTURAL POLICY

Before concentrating on the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the 1930s, it is necessary to reflect on the broader context wherein these organizations emerged. There is a transnational dimension to their creation that is most noticeable when we analyse all four similar initiatives to promote national culture abroad: the Deutscher Allgemeiner Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Alliance Française, the Dante and the Council. When we trace the origins of these four, what can we say about the development of the idea of promoting national culture beyond the nation-state? Through these organizations we are inevitably also exploring how governments dealt with such cultural promotion. The four organizations can serve as 'litmus tests' to indicate what traits the large states to which this phenomenon appears to have restricted itself - Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain - have in common or are instead very nation-specific. Are there peculiarities in the foreign cultural policy developed by the two young states of Germany and Italy, both created in the nineteenth century, when compared to France and Great Britain? Can we identify particular attitudes to national culture that appear typical for each country? Furthermore, the timing would suggest that foreign cultural policy was taken seriously either as young nations sought recognition among the great powers of Europe or as old imperial powers began to lose military and political power. In this chapter an introduction into the histories of the above-mentioned organizations will be given, so as to show the general (transnational) processes that they are part of.

The Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881) / Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland (1908) and the Deutsche Akademie (1925)

Uniting the Volksdeutschen

Following the Napoleonic Wars, a mounting political movement known as Pan-Germanism (or the *Alldeutsche Bewegung*) called for the unification of all German-speaking people, defined as the ethnic group of *Volksdeutschen*. The Austrian Empire was keen to propose a 'Greater Germany' (*Grossdeutschland*) that would include Austria. The most powerful of the German states, the Kingdom of Prussia, was in favour of a 'Lesser Germany' (*Kleindeutschland*) that

would leave out the Austrian Germans. Eventually the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War enabled Prussia to push through a 'Lesser Germany': the German Empire created in 1871. However, within the Austrian Empire – in 1867 transformed into a dual monarchy known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire – the recognition of Hungarian independence reinforced the idea of a German ethnicity. In 1880 a Deutscher Schulverein was established in Vienna, with the intention to help set up German kindergartens, schools and libraries wherever German-speaking communities in the Empire were unable to finance such institutions themselves.¹ Underlying this non-governmental initiative was the desire to prevent the Magyarization introduced by Hungary from affecting the German-speaking communities on the border between the two now united territories. Because this Austrian association received considerable support from Germans as well, a year later it was decided to set up an Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Auslande based in Berlin. Its founders, who included the renowned historians Heinrich von Treitschke and Theodor Mommsen, wished to strengthen the effort to maintain the *Deutschtum* of Germans living abroad and to this purpose also supported German kindergartens, schools and libraries.

Wholly in line with the still pervasive ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), language was seen as a vital expression of national identity and the emphasis was on keeping the German community united.² From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, apart from the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein numerous minor organizations emerged that were concerned with maintaining the ties with Germans abroad. This was connected to the German idea of *Volk* as a community that stretched beyond the state, as opposed to the concept of *citoyen* that the French Revolution had introduced and that tended to see the nation as coinciding with the state. German 'traditionalists' were concerned with the intrinsic value of *Volkstum* and felt compelled to take care of the cultural 'Germanness' of other members of the *Volk* outside their state borders. This aim was made even clearer when in 1908 the name of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein changed to Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland. Nevertheless, before the First World War, representatives of *Bildungsbürgertum* questioned the efficacy of the aggressive Wilhelmine power politics, preferring to develop some form of cultural diplomacy.³ At the time, the German government did little more than sponsor a number of *Auslandsschulen*, schools abroad meant mainly for German-speaking communities, and, as of 1909, a

¹ M. Streitmann, *Der deutsche Schulverein vor dem Hintergrund der österreichischen Innenpolitik* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 1984).

² For more on Herder's ideas regarding language and national identity, see: Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke ed., *A companion to the works of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009).

³ Eckard Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache? Franz Thierfelder, the Deutsche Akademie in Munich and the Promotion of German Language Abroad, 1923-1945' in: *German History*, 22, 2 (2004) 206-228, 206.

number of *Propagandaschulen* that taught exclusively non-Germans. On the eve of the First World War, when the *Propagandaschulen* were closed down, only thirteen of them were operational and all of them were located either in China, Turkey or Persia.⁴

With the Treaty of Versailles new state borders were imposed on Germany, creating several German minorities in the countries surrounding Germany.⁵ With no longer a strong army and economy to rely on, attention for the *Volk* was recognized as an important factor to help bring about a desired revision of the borders, especially those with Poland. It was also thought that spreading knowledge about German culture could help win the sympathy of other European powers. For had the Great War not shown that the country was in part defeated because of the effective propaganda campaign its enemies had led?⁶ Hence the German government began to play a more active role in foreign cultural policy. In 1920 the *Abteilung für Deutschtum im Ausland und kulturelle Angelegenheiten* was formed within the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *Auswärtiges Amt*. This new department, known simply as the *Kulturabteilung*, was not welcomed by all. The decision to shift the responsibility for *Deutschtumpflege* from the *Staatsministerium des Innern* to the *Auswärtiges Amt* was disputed by the former, leading to the agreement in 1923 that the *Staatsministerium des Innern* would remain involved in those areas that had only recently come to lie outside Germany. This clearly reflected the growing ambition fed by the despised Versailles *Diktat* to one day re-incorporate these 'stray' Germans within the national borders. To not raise the suspicion of neighbouring states, preference was given to financing private organizations such as the *Deutsche Stiftung*, created shortly after the Treaty of Versailles to support German schools and churches in Poland and in former Prussian areas. Government subsidy also went to the *Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland*.⁷ The *Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland* now worked closely with the *Deutsche Schutzbund für das Grenz- und Ausland Deutschtum* (1919), which was more politically active and focussed on the rights of the German minorities. The emergence after the First World War of relatively new organizations like the *Stiftung* and the *Schutzbund* did not prevent the *Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland* from further flourishing. By

⁴ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?' 212. See also Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 129.

⁵ Tammo Luther, *Volkstumspolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1933-1938. Die Auslandsdeutschen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Traditionalisten und Nationalsozialisten* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004) 27-30. Luther quotes the following figures: 1,700,000-1,900,000 Germans in Poland, about 60,000 in Eupen-Malmedy; 35,000-40,000 in Danish Schleswig-Holstein; 250,000 in South-Tirol; 3,3-3,5 million in Czechoslovakia; 550,000-600,000 in Hungary; 570,000 in Romania; about 650,000 in Yugoslavia; 88,000 in Baltic countries; in 1910 87,2 % of the population of Alsace-Lorraine was German.

⁶ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 206-207.

⁷ Luther, *Volkstumspolitik*, 38-39, 41-43.

1932 it had departments in all regions of Germany, 3200 local sections and 5500 school groups.⁸

Another private organization that was granted some government funding was a scientific society: the Deutsche Akademie zur Wissenschaftlichen Erforschung und Pflege des Deutschtums. Whereas the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland was specifically intended for the preservation of *Volksdeutschen*, the Deutsche Akademie became primarily concerned with promoting German language and culture among non-Germans.⁹ Primarily thanks to this shift towards the promotion of German culture among foreigners, the Akademie developed into what was the biggest cultural propaganda institution of the Reich during the Second World War.¹⁰ The founding fathers who started working on this organization in 1923 were all connected to higher education in Munich: a professor of Economics at the Technische Hochschule and four academics from the University of Munich, among whom Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), lecturer in political geography and the founding father of the German *geopolitik* school of thought. Together with the leader of the Bavarian People's Party, they sought a way to counter the French occupation of the Ruhr. Baron von Ritter, a Bavarian diplomat who during his years in Paris was inspired by the example set by the Alliance Française, also helped to promote the idea of creating a German equivalent.¹¹

At the official launch of the Deutsche Akademie in 1925, in the opening address mention was made of German cultural 'munition' that armies would use throughout the world and of making German language available to all world citizens.¹² In actual fact, the promotion of German as an international language was initially given little priority by the Akademie, probably because its founders had in mind that together with English, German was until the First World War the leading language in sciences. Furthermore, because of the territorial grievances and the German minorities resulting from the Treaty of Versailles, the Akademie paid far more attention to the *Auslandsdeutschen* than to the expansion of German culture abroad. Besides a scientific department assigned with research on the origins of place-names and settlements, the main activities were the sending of German professors to lecture abroad, the

⁸ Ibidem, 43-47.

⁹ See the illustrative description in the lemma 'Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland' in *Der Grosse Brockhaus*, alas without reference, "die Erhaltung des Einheitsgefühls in der ganzen Nation, gegründet auf die Gemeinschaft der deutsche Muttersprache und deutsche Bildung, Schutz der Muttersprache und Bildung, wo immer sie gefährdet erscheint". See: *Der Grosse Brockhaus*, 16, Vol. Unk-Zz (Wiesbaden 1957 – new revised edition) p. 99.

¹⁰ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 207.

¹¹ Ibidem, 208; Michels, *Von der Deutschen Akademie zum Goethe-Institut*, 11.

¹² Steffen R. Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis. Die Geschichte des Goethe-Instituts von 1951 bis 1990* (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2005) 66-67.

dissemination of German literature and an improved care for foreign students in Germany.¹³

As a private organization concerned with supporting German minorities abroad, the Deutsche Akademie had a number of competitors, such as the aforementioned Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland and the Deutscher Schutzbund. But also in the pioneer field of German foreign cultural policy, it faced a rival. In the same year that saw the launch of the Deutsche Akademie, in Heidelberg the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) was founded. The Austauschdienst was initially set up as a student exchange programme with the United States of America but soon reciprocal agreements with other countries were made as well. This initiative received government support on the grounds that it served to increase German international prestige. By soon moving to Berlin the Austauschdienst had the advantage of being better situated to lobby for funding than other such organizations.¹⁴ The Akademie may well not have managed to distinguish itself, were it not for Franz Thierfelder (1896-1963). Through his efforts as Secretary General from 1926 to 1937 the Akademie changed course, chose to focus on non-Germans and won the support of the Auswärtiges Amt.¹⁵ Thierfelder saw great potential in the international expansion of the German language, especially in the Balkans. He was probably aware of the success French foreign cultural policy had obtained by being based on the diffusion of the French language. He initiated an investigation into the international potential of the German language and wrote articles on the matter. In his view, the use of French in Europe was declining and the political situation after Versailles pointed towards the ever more widespread use of German.

Thierfelder and German language and culture for non-Germans

Thierfelder, like many German intellectuals, sustained the 'Conservative Revolution' that had been fed by the war experience, which in part explains his optimism about the future of the German language. This movement embraced a *völkisch* concept of the nation and intended to realize an organic community as opposed to the individualism of liberalism. Hence Thierfelder could hope for a post-liberal Europe, wherein especially the many new states emerging from the

¹³ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 209-210; Luther, *Volkstumspolitik*, 55-56.

¹⁴ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 210-211; Volkard Laitenberger, *Akademischer Austausch und auswärtige Kulturpolitik* (Frankfurt: Musterschmidt, 1976); Peter Alter, Manfred Heinemann and Friedrich W. Hellmann ed., *Spuren in die Zukunft: Der Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst 1925-1945* (Bonn: Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst, 2000).

¹⁵ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 212-217.

former Tsarist and Austrian empires would seek a common ground in the German language rather than in the language of Anglo-Saxon parliamentarism or of French civilization.¹⁶ The French *civilisation* here referred to was taken to be a superficial layer of culture, based on the Enlightenment ideal of the *citoyen*, as opposed to German *Kultur* which since the Romantic period was thought to be an inward process of self-education and elevation.¹⁷ What also strengthened Thierfelder's arguments in favour of an ambitious language policy abroad was the Neo-Humboldtianer trend in Germanic linguistics, noticeable in the 1920s, which held language to be crucial in shaping the way people think. At the same time, a more practical approach to language teaching in Germany - aimed at being able to speak rather than at learning about the grammar - opened greater possibilities.¹⁸

Having gained the support of the Auswärtiges Amt for his line of thinking, at an annual meeting in October 1929 Thierfelder was able to convince the governing bodies of the Akademie to set aside the activities aimed at *Auslandsdeutschen* and to focus instead on the promotion of the German language abroad.¹⁹ Language schools for non-Germans were subsequently opened, starting with Sofia and Split. In the absence of any other German institution for this purpose, these schools also served as small cultural centres. Furthermore, the Akademie took on the development of language teaching material and the organization of training courses in Munich for foreign teachers of German. In 1932, on the occasion of the centenary of Goethe's death, this latter branch of activities was assigned to a newly created Goethe Institute. This Institute continued to function as part of the Akademie and by the outbreak of the Second World War was able to draw to its trainings some six- to eight-hundred foreign teachers of German per year.²⁰ By 1941 the Akademie had established one-hundred-and-forty lectureships of German at universities abroad.²¹

¹⁶ Ibidem, 213-214.

¹⁷ Pim den Boer, 'Vergelijkende begripsgeschiedenis' in: idem ed., *Beschaving. Een geschiedenis van de begrippen hoofsheid, heusheid, beschaving en cultuur* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001) 15-78, 60-65; Emily A. Vogt, 'Civilisation and Kultur: Keywords in the history of French and German Citizenship' in: *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (1996) 125-145; John Rundell and Stephen Mennell, 'Introduction: Civilization, culture and the human self-image' in: Rendell and Mennell ed., *Classical Readings in Culture and Civilization* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 1-38. The German sociologist Norbert Elias was the first to investigate this historic juxtaposition between German *Kultur* and French *civilisation*, in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (The Civilizing Process), first published in 1939.

¹⁸ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 216.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 213-214.

²⁰ Ibidem, 218-219 and 223; Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis*, 66-67.

²¹ Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis*, 72-73.

Accommodating to Hitler's regime

The foreign policy makers recognized the value of this new orientation. This was shown by the presence of Julius Curtius, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Akademie's annual congress in 1930 and by the steadily growing annual subsidy that the Akademie received from 1931 onwards, beginning with 8,000 Reichsmark and reaching 65,000 Reichsmark in the mid-1930s, which was still only 25% of a budget that depended mainly on donations.²² Such government funding was so vital to the organization that after Hitler's rise to power good relations with the National Socialist officials were carefully cultivated. Although the Nazis conceived of *Volkstum* as a matter of race, not language, what helped make the cooperation mutually acceptable was that the Akademie had always been conservatively nationalist: members of trade unions or social democrats were kept out.²³ In order to secure its position in the regime, the Akademie purged its own top in accordance with the *Führerprinzip* and made Haushofer its president. Even content-wise some accommodations were reached. The language courses organized by the Goethe-Institute began to include subjects such as racial hygiene.²⁴

After a one-time grant from Joseph Goebbels' Propagandaministerium in 1934, the Akademie's precarious funding remained dependent on the contribution given by the Auswärtiges Amt.²⁵ Thierfelder, who was not a Nazi Party member, intended to keep cultural policy separate from political propaganda. This would better serve his ulterior mission to convince foreigners that Germany's leading role in Europe was based on its culture. He could count on approval of the Auswärtiges Amt and support from many within the Akademie. Nevertheless, by the end of 1937, Haushofer's concerns that Thierfelder stood in the way of closer ties with the Nazi government resulted in his removal from the organization.²⁶ Haushofer's geopolitics, with its organic view of the state as justification for the conquest of more *Lebensraum* for Germany, had considerable influence on Hitler and his following. This made it easier for Haushofer to maintain the goodwill of the regime but still his own objections to the politicization of the Akademie created tensions that forced him to step down as president by the end of 1937.²⁷ In the meantime growing

²² Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 218.

²³ Ibidem, 219.

²⁴ Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis*, 68-69.

²⁵ For more about the intergovernmental row between Joseph Goebbels and the Auswärtiges Amt regarding the control over foreign cultural policy, see: Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 220 and 222.

²⁶ Ibidem, 218 and 221-222.

²⁷ See Perry Wijnand Pierik, *Karl Haushofer en het Nationaal-Socialisme. Tijd, werk en invloed* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, 2006) 78. Haushofer became honorary member and representative of Rudolf Hess at the Akademie. As president he was succeeded by the geologist and national-socialist Leopold Kölbl.

attention was given to international cultural propaganda, as manifested in Hitler's *Kulturrede* at the Nuremberg party rally in September 1937, by the appointment of cultural attachés at German embassies and by a number of cultural agreements reached with other countries. This was explained as being a response to a greater international competition in the cultural field.²⁸ Still, because of the shortage of foreign currency, this did not noticeably increase the Akademie's subsidy, whilst by now it ran forty-five language schools and employed fifty-seven teachers for the teaching of about seven thousand pupils and teachers in training.²⁹

Under the pressure of Nazi party politics, the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland became a Volksbund but was still granted some degree of independence, so as not to put on guard foreign governments.³⁰ An unequivocal sign of the changing political significance of foreign cultural propaganda was the creation in 1937 of the Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, which worked closely with the SS. The Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle was intended to centralize the control over almost all organizations dealing with *Volkstum*. Both the Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland and the Deutsche Akademie, though officially independent, now fell under the authority of the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle.³¹ Between 1939 and 1940, the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle was in charge of moving *Volksdeutschen* from bordering parts of Poland 'back' within the Reich. As for the cultural promotion among non-Germans, this remained the task of the Akademie, although it became restricted to those areas of Europe that were not occupied, annexed or populated by races deemed by Nazis to be unworthy of German culture. As the Second World War broke out, cultural foreign propaganda was seen as so useful contribution to the war effort that the subsidy for the Akademie soared in 1940 to one million Reichsmark.³²

Altogether, in Germany the promotion of national culture abroad can be said to have gone through a complex development. Starting at the turn of the century with several private initiatives to maintain the cultural unity of the German *Volk* that were in part financed by the government, after the First World War these organizations grew in number and in purpose, as they became a political instrument in the power game to obtain a revision of the Versailles Treaty borders and a tool to influence foreigners as well. Then the National-Socialist quest to provide a greater *Lebensraum* for the German *Volk*, finally to be

²⁸ Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 221, 223-224 and 227.

²⁹ Ibidem, 223.

³⁰ Luther, *Volkstumpolitik*, 65-76.

³¹ The historian Lumans gives the example of a the Deutsche Akademie being prevented from publishing a calendar, entitled *Aufbau des Reiches*, because the VDA had already produced one: *Deutsche in aller Welt*. See: Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 64.

³² Michels, 'Deutsch als Weltsprache?', 224-225.

united under one 'Great German Empire', gradually took over the *Volkstumpolitik*.³³ By the time the Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle emerged, the traditionalist intrinsic value attached to *Volkstum* was set aside for a more opportunistic and political use in the opportunistic foreign policy of the National-Socialist government.³⁴ *Volkstum* together with the national culture became part of an international power-struggle between states.

The Alliance Française (1883)

Mission civilisatrice and France's new orientation after 1870

According to the statutes of the Association for the Promotion of the French Language (Association pour la Propagation de la Langue Française), otherwise known as the Alliance Française, the aim of the organization was to spread the French language outside France, principally in the colonies and in the countries under its protectorate.³⁵ For this purpose it would set up and subsidize French schools abroad, offer training for teachers, award travel grants and prizes to the best pupils and encourage the production of publications that could serve the Alliance's purpose. Right from the start it was not only the colonies and the protectorates that were targeted, but the world at large. Besides offering education, the Alliance undertook the promotion of French literature by giving books to foreign libraries and organized theatre productions and conferences abroad.³⁶

Where did this desire to promote the French language originate from? Since the Enlightenment and the ensuing French Revolution, France had seen

³³ Luther, *Volkstumpolitik*, 149-157, 169.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 158-159.

³⁵ Until recently, a serious obstacle for historians was the disappearance of the Alliance's archive. This was stolen during the Second World War by the occupying German forces, then partially retrieved in Moscow and eventually repatriated to France, albeit far from complete. François Chaubet, author of the most recent study of the Alliance's history, admits this has been meagre archival material to work with. He had to rely on other sources: documents of the Quai d'Orsay, private and public archives, periodicals and dailies, and the rich monthly *Bulletin* of the Alliance. (Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 15-16) A commemorative publication was produced for the organization's centenary in 1983 (Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*). Other studies are very broad in scope or focus on French cultural action in a particular region of the world, for example: Albert Salon, *L'Action culturelle de la France dans le monde* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris I, 1981); Gilles Mathieu, *Une ambition sud-américaine, politique culturelle de la France (1918-1939)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991); Francis Berguin, *Le fonctionnaire expatrié: une construction méconnue. L'action culturelle extérieure de la France et ses personnels* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Denis Rolland, *La crise du modèle français. Marianne et l'Amérique Latine. Culture, politique et identité* (Rennes: P.U.R., 2000); Alain Dubosclard, *L'action culturelle de la France aux Etats-Unis de la première guerre mondiale à la fin des années 1960* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris I, 2002).

³⁶ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 38 and 42.

for itself a *mission civilisatrice* aimed at the diffusion of its Enlightenment principles as formulated in the *Droits de l'homme et du citoyen*.³⁷ French was seen as a language that was particularly adept for the expression of abstract ideas and universal concepts. But in the second half of the nineteenth century the country was to witness a rise in status of the German language, which partly due to the advances in industry and science was increasingly regarded as the scientific language *par excellence*. The founding of the Alliance Française in July 1883 should be seen in the context of the new impulse given to French culture after the military defeat in the war against Prussia in 1870. Having suffered the humiliation of seeing Paris besieged and of losing important territories such as Alsace and parts of Lorraine to the victors, French society embarked on a general quest for moral and intellectual reform. Military loss would be compensated by a revitalized intellectual and artistic supremacy to be made manifest across the world.³⁸

A crucial moment for the creation of the Alliance came when France was able to solidify a part of its colonial control. The Al-Marsa Convention (9 June 1883) formally recognized the French protectorate in Tunisia, giving way to a full-fledged French educational policy in the country to counteract the influence of the large Italian presence there. The great pioneers in the spreading of the French language had been the various French Roman-Catholic orders and congregations that had set up schools abroad. Since 1822, when L'Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi was founded in Lyons, the French Catholics were the main force behind faraway missionary enterprises. L'Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi was a French association connected to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome, founded in 1622 to spread Catholicism across the globe and to deal with ecclesiastical matters in non-Catholic countries. It has been estimated that there were about fifty thousand French missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, providing an extensive network and at a relatively low cost.³⁹ Even if official French cultural policy in the homeland was outspokenly secular, the French government was eager to accept and encourage this missionary activity abroad.⁴⁰ An impressive network of Catholic schools had been realized under Cardinal Lavignerie, made apostolic administrator in Tunisia by Pope Leo XIII in June 1881. Remarkably, these schools were meant to counter the spread of the Italian language that was brought about by the

³⁷ Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 29; Jacques Lafon, 'Langue et pouvoir: aux origines de l'exception française', *Revue Historique* 292 (1995) 393-419.

³⁸ An original approach to the issue of national regeneration after 1870 is presented by Bertrand Taithe in *Defeated Flesh: Medicine, Welfare, and Warfare in the Making of Modern France* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

³⁹ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 24-25, 30-34, 45. The well-organised Alliance israélite universelle, founded in 1860, had also established a number of schools. See: *Ibidem*, 30 and 32. See also: Aron Rodrigue, *De l'instruction à l'émancipation. Les enseignants de l'Alliance israélite universelle et les Juifs d'Orient 1860-1939* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1989); André Chouraqui, *L'Alliance israélite universelle et la renaissance juive contemporaine (1860-1960)* (Paris 1965).

existing Catholic schools in the Middle East, often run by Italian members of the Franciscan order. Paul Cambon, Plenipotentiary Minister in Tunisia, like the other French civil servants in Tunisia involved in the founding of the Alliance Française, saw this private organization as an ideal instrument to accelerate the growth of cultural influence in the protectorate. Rather like the missionaries, the Alliance could operate there where French government policy as well as budget did not yet provide the means to do so. Out of pragmatism the Alliance did not specify in its statutes what kind of French schools abroad it would support, allowing the inclusion of schools run by religious orders and congregations.

At the origins of the Alliance there was also a group less directly connected to French colonialism: the geographical societies. In France, these had been growing in popularity from the 1860s onwards and can be regarded as the breeding ground for the Alliance. Its members showed a keen interest for the colonial expansion and its activities brought together political ambitions as well as financial motives for finding new markets. Historians too were well represented among the active members.⁴¹ There appeared to be some possible connection between the Alliance Française and the Freemasonry. Although the Alliance – which was avowedly apolitical – managed in its governing bodies to bring together figures with different political or ideological backgrounds, from Republicans to members of the clergy, there were occasional accusations of the organization being anticlerical or even Freemason. Furthermore, there is evidence of Pierre Foncin – one of the founding fathers of the Alliance besides founder of the Société de Géographie Commerciale de Bordeaux (1874) – having been a Freemason.⁴² A lesser-known society that showed a personal overlap with the Alliance's membership was the Cercle Saint-Simon.⁴³

As the first Secretary General of the Alliance, Foncin, poignantly remarked in one of his speeches: "Tout client de la langue française est un client naturel des produits français."⁴⁴ The commercial sector that had the most obvious interest in the international promotion of French language and culture was the publishing business. German was surpassing French as scientific lingua franca and the export of French books was in noticeable decline. It is therefore not surprising that the Alliance would receive significant support from major French publishing houses, such as Delagrave, Delalain and Hachette. In 1884, Auguste Armand Colin, the most important publisher of educational books, became the President of the Central Propaganda Committee of the Alliance. Until his death in 1900 he remained closely involved in the affairs of the Alliance. Publishing houses donated books for distribution in libraries abroad, but also provided one sixth of the total capital that the Alliance needed when in

⁴¹ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 26-29 and 54-55.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 41 (footnote 3).

⁴³ Pim den Boer, 'Historische tijdschriften in Frankrijk (1876-1914)' in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 99 (1986) 530-546, 539.

⁴⁴ Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 20. See also 50-51.

early 1914 it bought a new central office at 101 Boulevard Raspail in Paris.⁴⁵ It proved harder to recruit members from other areas of commerce or from industry, as is illustrated by the fact that the Alliance failed to win support in financial cities such as Le Havre, Rouen or Lyons. Possibly these interest groups saw more usefulness in the French Chambers of Commerce that were in this same period being set up abroad and with which the Alliance would soon co-operate.⁴⁶

One of the great strengths of the Alliance was that it was able to attract and unite different parts of the French elite, though mainly those belonging to the higher ranks of civil service and to universities. That public authorities supported the activity of this private association was clear from the rapidity with which it was recognized as legal entity and granted the status of *association d'utilité publique*.⁴⁷ A senior diplomat, Charles Joseph Tissot, was made the first president and his successors, when they did not come from the diplomatic corps, were either from the army or the French Ministry of Education (Ministère de l'Instruction Publique).⁴⁸ Pierre Foncin, who started as Secretary General (1883-1897) and later became President (1899-1914), is illustrative in this respect. He was made professor of history in 1876. Subsequently he joined the civil service as inspector general of education (1882-1911), which enabled him to act as liaison between the Alliance and the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique. Through his pedagogical publications he was among the great educators of French youth.⁴⁹ The honorary presidents and honorary members were generally chosen out of the military, academic, religious or political top. One of the two central bodies of the organization, the Conseil d'Administration, had fifty members, including several members of parliament and ministers.⁵⁰ The other body was the Bureau du Conseil d'administration, which consisted of about fifteen members.

In the first years of its existence the Alliance witnessed an immediate growth in membership, reaching more than eleven thousand by the end of 1886. A Comité Général de Propagande with seven members was in charge of organising the establishment of local Committees, in France and abroad. For the setting up of the Committees abroad the cooperation of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères proved to be essential. A ministerial circular letter of 26 May 1884 encouraged such help by authorising all French diplomats to

⁴⁵ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 35-36, 42 and 57.

⁴⁶ Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 50-51. Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 29, 57 and 120.

⁴⁷ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 38 and 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 39 and 58.

⁴⁹ Numa Broc, 'Patriotisme, regionalisme et géographie: Pierre Foncin (1841-1910)' in: *L'information historique* 38 (1976) 130-132.

⁵⁰ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 40 and 59.

officially support the Alliance.⁵¹ The foreign Committees were formally independent from Paris, and although receiving subsidies from the Paris headquarters, they generated most of their own income through membership and donations.⁵² In terms of geographical spread, the focus was initially on the old spheres of influence in the Ottoman Empire and in the Middle East.⁵³ A slow but steady spread took place in South America, until 1914 mainly in Chile. The United States of America and Canada, both attractive expansion territories, showed similar results.⁵⁴ On the European continent, the Alliance was active in Belgium, Spain, Germany, Bohemia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands, England and Russia. In the French colonies and protectorates, the eagerness to offer education to the local population nevertheless did not lead to any expansion. The Alliance failed to grow in Algeria and in Indochina.⁵⁵ Whether a Committee abroad could be created and maintained depended on the qualities of the teachers and the members in the respective French colony. The decentralized structure of the Alliance permitted flexibility in the choice of approach and forms of action, and hence a great adaptability to the local realities.

As we have already seen in the development of foreign cultural policy in Germany, the organizations active in this field and the government intervention were in part triggered by the growing international competition. It has been suggested that a particular characteristic of the Alliance was that from the start it was aimed at foreigners as well, whereas the German and the Italian organizations were principally meant for their own national immigrants abroad.⁵⁶ It is clear that France with its longer history as a centralized state 'turning peasants into Frenchmen', could focus more on its universal ambitions than two new-born countries such as Germany and Italy, where 'Germans' and 'Italians' were in fact still in the make. Nevertheless, these countries were also trying to influence foreign opinion. For example, in Piedmont before the Italian unification, the priest, philosopher and politician Vincenzo Gioberti (1801-1852) envisaged a global civilizing mission for Italy. Gioberti argued that Italy had lead the world morally and politically in Roman and in mediaeval times, and should do so again as a federal union of states presided by the pope. The model

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 38-42 and 44. The first local Committees abroad emerged in Algiers, Tunis, Saint-Louis of Senegal, Barcelona and Madrid (1884), followed by Copenhagen, Cairo and Alexandria (1885); Prague, Ile de Maurice, Thessaloniki and Syra (Cyclades) (1886); Constantinople and Smyrna (1888).

⁵² Between 1883 and 1917 the Alliance's Committees abroad paid 70% (5 million francs) of their total expenses (7,4 million francs) from their own means. [*Ibidem*, 73-74].

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 102. By 1914 there were twelve Committees in the Ottoman Empire and around forty subsidized schools were run by the Alliance in the Middle East.

⁵⁴ The main centres in the US were in New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Cincinnati; in Canada this was Montréal (*ibidem*, 104-106).

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 79, 123-126, 252 and 269.

he proposed was named neo-Guelfism.⁵⁷ Another example of Italian expansionist cultural ambitions is the strong competition between France and Italy to have cultural influence on local elites in the Mediterranean area (for example, in Thessaloniki, Smyrna and Bucharest) as well as in South-American cities.⁵⁸ But increasingly it was Germany that challenged France's cultural expansion. From around 1870 to 1914, a period that has been described as "la crise allemande de la pensée française", French society observed with concern the German university system, the advancing use of the German language in the world, and the success of the country's innovative commercial methods.⁵⁹ The latter also applied to the more efficient organization of German publishing. In North America there appeared to be more German professors and German book shops, just as their cultural presence in South America was being more felt. Furthermore, in the field of archaeology – especially in the Ottoman Empire – the Germans superseded the French.⁶⁰

The Ministère des Affaires Étrangères and the impulse of the Great War

As a private association, the Alliance trod the ground for the more official cultural foreign policy that the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères would gradually develop. Starting from 1908, with support of different French universities a number of so called Instituts Français were created in important capitals of Europe.⁶¹ In 1910 a governmental Bureau des Écoles et des Oeuvres Françaises à l'Étranger was created, but because of its very limited budget the Bureau had to rely on the cooperation with the Alliance and the missionary orders and congregations. In the meantime at the new central office on the boulevard Raspail the activities of the Alliance continued to expand, most importantly in the field of university exchanges. In Paris at the turn of the century the Alliance began offering summer courses in French language for foreign teachers and students. Similar courses were soon taking place in fifteen other centres outside Paris. Triggered by the competition with German

⁵⁷ Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del primato civile e morale degli italiani* (Brussels Meline: Cans & Compagnia, 1842-43).

⁵⁸ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 125 and 269-270.

⁵⁹ Claude Digeon, *La crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870-1940* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959). Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 126.

⁶⁰ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 104-106 and 127-128.

⁶¹ Notably in Florence (1908), Madrid (1909), Saint Petersburg (1911) and London (1913). Thereafter these Instituts were considered instrumental in the French policy aimed at containment of German cultural influence in the new Eastern European nation-states. By the mid-1930s, just over a quarter of the existing Instituts français were in Central and Eastern Europe (Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Bucharest, Sofia, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Belgrade). See: Annie Guénard, 'Les Instituts français en Europe centrale dans les années 30' in: *Paris « capitale culturelle » de l'Europe centrale? Les échanges intellectuels entre la France et les pays de l'Europe médiane 1918-1939* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1997).

universities, from 1898 onwards the Alliance was also engaged in attracting American students with help from the local Committee of Chicago and the university there. The French government followed the trend by introducing an Office national des universités et écoles françaises (1910).⁶²

The outbreak of the First World War gave a further impulse to French cultural diplomacy. To help in the war effort, the Alliance produced a stream of propagandistic pamphlets, books and other print matter. Its patriotic *Bulletin de guerre* was translated into ten languages and in 1917-1918 more than 210,000 copies were distributed.⁶³ At Affaires Étrangères a newly devised Maison de la Presse was also promoting French culture abroad.⁶⁴ However, throughout the war the German cultural propaganda was perceived as being more effective. After the war, other external factors put pressure on the Quai d'Orsay to rethink its strategy. The Paris Treaties heralded an 'open diplomacy'; public opinion no longer accepted that secret dealings in international affairs should put countries at risk of landing in war and wanted to be informed of what agreements were made between states. The call for more information that came from a broader social participation in the democratic process and a growing role assigned to media went hand in hand with greater activity in international cultural politics. Complying with the American request, the negotiations in Paris were made in English as well as French, until then the main diplomatic language.⁶⁵ A new Service des Oeuvres Françaises à l'Étranger (January 1920) intensified government action in the field of cultural promotion abroad. Its tasks included the maintenance of schools and French sections at universities abroad, the creation of academic chairs, the promotion of literature or theatre performances, image-building, tourism, sports and giving subsidies to organizations such as the Alliance.⁶⁶

Even if Affaires Étrangères continued to encourage the creation of new Instituts français in foreign cities, these institutes do not appear to have been a threat to the position of the Alliance.⁶⁷ The Ministère des Affaires Étrangères

⁶² Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 34-35, 62, 74-78, 96-99.

⁶³ Ibidem, 139-148; Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 82.

⁶⁴ Georges Dethan, 'Le Quai D'Orsay de 1914 à 1939' in: *Opinion publique et politique extérieure*, II, 1915-1940 (Rome: École française de Rome, 1984) 157-163, 157 and 161.

⁶⁵ Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 153, 160-161; Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 87.

⁶⁶ This Service des oeuvres français à l'étranger had a budget of 17 million francs in 1920 and this gradually rose to 38 million francs in 1933. Thereafter, as was the case for the entire ministry, it had to cope with a constant shortage of funds (Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 162-164 and 177). See also: Antoine Marès, 'Puissance et présence culturelle de la France. L'exemple du Service des Œuvres françaises à l'Étranger dans les années trente' in: *Relations internationales* 33 (1983) 65-80.

⁶⁷ Bruézière hints at a possible reduced visibility of the Alliance because of the growing number of Instituts français, and at the internal competition coming from the Mission laïque, the Comité des Amitiés françaises, and the Alliance israélite universelle (Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 122-123). However, in 1920 the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères gave the central office of the Alliance in Paris a subsidy of 500 francs, 400 hundred francs in 1921 and 1922 and 250 francs in 1923. In addition, in 1922 the Services

still gave subsidies to the Alliance, and though the sum of the subsidy decreased the government involvement augmented. In former strongholds such as Turkey the Alliance was losing ground but in the new countries of Central and Eastern Europe - including the members of the Little Entente that France supported - the Alliance provided a valuable network for the government organizations.⁶⁸ The Alliance also remained well represented in Great Britain, The Netherlands and North America, as well as in the Scandinavian countries.⁶⁹

Decline and revival of the Alliance

In the inter-war period French writers became the most visible missionaries of French cultural diplomacy, reflecting a still strong confidence in French literary prestige. Various initiatives to improve the export position of French literature received financial support from the government. In these years university scholars too were instrumental; they were frequently asked by both the Office national des universités et des écoles françaises and the Alliance to give lectures abroad, especially in Central Europe and Latin America. Although they were not numerous in the Council of the Alliance, these academics were increasingly important motors and mediators for the foreign committees of the Alliance, rather like French diplomats had often been. Since they were frequently also connected to an Institut français or lectured at the local university, they ensured that the Alliance continued to be complementary to the French government initiatives. It is worth noting that the audience of the Alliance lectures abroad was mainly female: the emancipation of women in the 1920s led to their massive attendance, especially in Latin America.⁷⁰

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Alliance showed signs of decline. One of these signs was the aging of its membership, which revealed that it had failed to recruit a younger generation. Some components of the Alliance suffered from the worldwide economic malaise as well. Starting from October 1919, French language and culture courses for foreigners were given by the Alliance in Paris at the so-called *École Pratique de la langue française*. Whereas in 1930 these courses had attracted 4800 students, from then on the financial crisis significantly reduced the number of registrations.⁷¹ What made matters

des Oeuvres françaises gave different Committees abroad a total of 246 francs (Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 176).

⁶⁸ The Alliance had no less than seventy local Committees in Czechoslovakia and notable success in Poland and Bulgaria (13 and 10 committees respectively in 1931) [Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 181, 212 and 233; Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 105-106].

⁶⁹ Great Britain had 39 committees in 1931, The Netherlands 19 committees in the same year, and North America had 197 committees in 1922 (Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 228-229, and 233).

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 165-171, 187-188, 191-192, 196-202, 206 and 216.

⁷¹ Ibidem, 210 and 262; Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 91-93 and 117-119.

worse was that Italian and German cultural organizations made sure to exploit the potential of new mass media, whereas the Alliance went no further than sporadic use of radio. Italian and German books were massively distributed on the international market. In 1934 the creation of the British Council meant competition from that corner of Europe too. Yet the greatest threat to France's cultural sphere of influence came from the influence of American film since the First World War and the subsequent rise of American English. Philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation (1913) and the Carnegie Foundation (1905) offered study grants, subsidized lectures and exchange programmes, and recruited scientists. This rivalry of course also affected government policy. Hence the new and first predominantly socialist government of 1936-1937 reformed its instruments for foreign cultural diplomacy, introducing a Commission permanente de l'enseignement français à l'étranger, with joint forces from both the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale and the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, and a Commission interministérielle d'action et d'information françaises à l'étranger. With these measures and a raise in budget, there was indeed a resurgence of activity ranging from art exhibitions to new institutes and the distribution of films.⁷²

As of 1937, a new impulse was given to the Alliance by the presidency of Georges Duhamel (1884-1966), an enterprising man, an internationally renowned novelist and a member of the Académie française. The first sign of renewal was the rising number of students who came to the École Pratique: from 2606 in 1934 to 4200 in 1938 and 5000 in 1939. In this same period of flourishing activities a more systematic control on the part of Affaires Étrangères, mainly regarding the Alliance's educational responsibilities abroad, prefigured what would be the relationship between the two after the Second World War.⁷³

Besides its significance for the promotion of French language and culture abroad, the Alliance's historical role must be sought in the way it brought about a fusion between the interests of high-ranking civil servants and those of an intellectual elite, and in its creation of a model for cultural foreign policy that the French government would eventually emulate.⁷⁴ To some extent this conclusion 'normalizes' the history of similar private organizations in Germany and Italy. It was not just in countries where a totalitarian regime emerged that foreign cultural promotion developed by private initiatives

⁷² Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 245-251, 262, 271, 276-278.

⁷³ Ibidem, 282-283 and 287-296.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, 49, 82 and 133-134. Bruézière had already indicated this in explaining why the Alliance's activities in the colonies and the protectorates diminished between 1900-1914: "La raison est simple: l'Alliance, au début de la colonisation, avait tenté de suppléer à la carence des services officiels de l'Instruction publique dans les territoires nouvellement conquis; mais à mesure que ces services (...) vont prendre le relèvement, l'Alliance aura tendance à s'effacer et à ne plus jouer qu'un «rôle d'auxiliaire»" (Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*, 62).

gradually became one of the areas entrusted to the State. This appears to be connected to a reconfiguration of international relations during the inter-war years that called for the use of 'cultural export' as a tool in the battle for the greatest political and economic influence.

The Dante Alighieri Society (1889)

Italian irredentism, emigration and national expansion

The Dante Alighieri Society was established in 1889.⁷⁵ The structure of the organization resembled that of the Alliance Française, but it is misleading to see it as the most important model. The context in which it was created and its aims were more comparable to those of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein. The initial idea came from Giacomo Venezian, who together with a number of citizens of Trieste and Trentino was actively involved in the movement for a completion of the Italian unification. On linguistic, historical and geographical grounds, a number of territories were considered to be part of the Italian nation even if they had remained in Austrian hands after 1866: Trentino, Alto Adige, Venezia Giulia and Dalmatia. These were known as the *terre irredente*.⁷⁶ Venezian's letter to the nationally revered poet Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), dated 21st of November 1888, wherein he suggested creating a Society for the maintenance and propagation of 'Italianness' (*italianità*), is considered the founding document of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁷⁷ The initial aim of the organization was to prevent the 'Germanification' and to keep alive the *italianità* of the communities living in the *terre irredente*. In these territories the Dante Society was involved in financing Italian libraries, Italian newspapers and pro-Italian parties' campaigns in local elections, as well as buying property for future initiatives. Just as in the case of the Allgemeiner Deutscher

⁷⁵ Until recently, the various existing histories of the Dante Alighieri Society were written by members of the Society's statutory bodies and based on personal experiences: Piero Barbera, *La «Dante Alighieri»* Relazione storica al XXV Congresso (Florence 1920); Enrico Scodnik, 'La Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri nei suoi primi anni di vita' in: *Rivista Dalmatica*, I, II, III, IV (1966); Filippo Caparelli, *La «Dante Alighieri»* (1920-1970) (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1985); idem, *La Dante Alighieri* (Rome 1987); idem, *Una vita nella Dante* (Rome 1997). In 1995, two scientific studies based on thorough archival research were published in the series '*I fatti della Storia*', directed by the eminent historian Renzo de Felice: Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995) and Patrizia Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995). These studies cover the period from the foundation to 1931.

⁷⁶ Richard J.B. Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World, 1860-1960* (London: Routledge, 1996) 154-155.

⁷⁷ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 32-33. Giacomo Venezian belonged to the irredentist Società Pro Patria (1885-1890), whose members were closely involved in the creation of the Dante (ibidem, 26).

Schulverein and to a lesser degree the Alliance Française, the apolitical nature of the Dante Alighieri Society was considered vital. Given the divisive discussions within the irredentist movement as to how and when the Italian unification launched by the Risorgimento would be complete, it was the Dante's function to unite the various factions in order to obtain concrete results through joint forces. The Dante was also marked by the Mazzinian ideal of a 'Europe of Nations', whereby Italy could serve as example in advocating a new, peaceful international community where each state was based on the principle of nationality.⁷⁸

In the *terre irredente* and elsewhere in the world where many Italians lived, a core activity of the Dante was to help create and maintain Italian schools. The Italian government was only just beginning to take on this task and in the case of the *terre irredente* it was easier for a private organization such as the Dante to run schools without being accused of foreign intrusion into local political affairs. The first Italian school abroad, which was located in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, dates back to 1862. Almost three decades later, on 8 December 1889, a law was passed that made the Italian government responsible for establishing and running Italian primary schools abroad, employing teachers and setting educational curricula. Where necessary the government would create secondary schools as well. An inspectorate of education within the Ministero degli Affari Esteri would ensure the quality of the teaching. Catholic schools that met the set standards and allowed official inspection were eligible for subsidy just as other Italian schools. Not surprisingly the law was proposed by Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, a politician known for having wanted an imperialist foreign policy for Italy.⁷⁹ In 1902, following a thorough reform of Affari Esteri, the policy regarding schools abroad was handed over to a full-fledged Direzione Generale delle Scuole all'Estero.⁸⁰ Even then, the Dante remained closely connected to educational enterprises abroad.

Dante Alighieri, the name chosen for the organization upon the instigation of the patriotic poet Giosuè Carducci, reflected the significance attached to language as expression of the national soul. It was Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) who had fathered the national language, the Tuscan-based Italian that was recognized throughout the peninsula as the common tongue. "What he [Dante Alighieri] embodied, every commentator agreed, was there in his

⁷⁸ Sergio Romano, 'La cultura della politica estera italiana' in: Richard Bosworth and Sergio Romano ed., *La politica estera italiana (1860-1985)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991) 17-34, 27-33.

⁷⁹ Giorgio Floriani, *Scuole italiane all'estero. Cento anni di storia* (Rome: Armando, 1974); Patrizia Salvetti, 'Scuole italiane all'estero' in: Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi and Emilio Franzina ed., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana II Arrivi* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2002) 535-549; Stefano Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale. Diplomazia culturale e propaganda 1918-1943* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005) 52-53.

⁸⁰ Enrico Serra, 'La burocrazia della politica estera italiana' in: Richard Bosworth and Sergio Romano ed., *La politica estera italiana (1860-1985)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991) 68-89, 75-82.

pages. It was the Italian language; Dante incarnated Italian even more than Shakespeare did English.”⁸¹ The first public document issued by the organization, a *Manifesto agli Italiani* written by Giuseppe Chiarini and signed by 159 members of the cultural and political elite, spoke of the Italian language as carrier of Italian civilisation and as symbol of the *patria* extending beyond the material borders of the State.⁸² Ruggero Bonghi, President of the Society from 1889 to 1895, defended the name against arguments for a more explanatory name, considering it said enough without saying too much.⁸³ Connections with irredentism were not to be too apparent, nor could the Dante Alighieri Society too openly profess its mission to support Italian nationalist feelings in the *terre irredente* lest this should provoke Austrian suppression of its activities. Hence the emphasis on the apolitical, non-governmental nature of the Society is also explained. In actual fact, there were close personal ties with the government and the Society could with time count on more and more support from the Affari Esteri and the diplomatic corps.

The Dante was characterized by its fusion of three elements: the educational approach of the Pro Patria movement, which within the Austrian Empire was initiating Italian local schools mainly with an irredentist scope; the democratic inspiration contributed by the Freemason component, largely influenced by the Risorgimento; and the strictly apolitical stance emphasized by the Dante’s first President, Ruggero Bonghi. We have seen that the Alliance Française also appeared to have connections with Freemasonry but in the case of the Dante this relationship was a closer one. Right from the start, the Freemason members were an essential force within the Dante, determining its prevalently secular nature, shaping the guiding principles and providing funding. The root cause of many of the conflicts within the Dante was the disagreement between the secular Freemasons and members who were prepared to support religious groups that could help achieve the Society’s aims. Seeing the position of the Papal States in the new Italian nation had not yet been resolved and Catholicism was often presented as the antithesis of patriotism, this was a very divisive issue. One of the leading figures of the Dante was Ernesto Nathan (1845-1921), originally an English citizen of Jewish descent, Freemason and twice elected Grand Master of the Masonic organization Grand Orient of Italy, and Mayor of Rome (1907-1913). His death was to some extent a turning point, because he had been capable of mediating between the two opposing parts of the Dante membership and of reconciling their differences. Although Mussolini practically banned Freemasonry after 1925, the Masonic wing certainly remained influential until 1932.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World*, 154-155.

⁸² Caparelli, *La “Dante Alighieri”*, 11; Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 34.

⁸³ As quoted by Pisa: “dire tutto senza compromettere nulla” (Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 37).

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 31, 34, 176-177 and 202-218.

Although the main incentive for setting up the Dante Alighieri Society was the concern about the *terre irredente*, there was also the element of political prestige to be gained as a new nation among the major European states. Committees of the Dante did not only emerge in the *irredente* or in countries where many Italian emigrants resided, for instance in South America or around the Eastern Mediterranean. In European cities such as Bucharest (1896), Copenhagen (1911) and The Hague (1914), Committees with numerous non-Italian members were set up.⁸⁵ The Dante's activities clearly served an economic purpose as well, the reasoning behind it being that cultural influence and the spread of language determined also the choice of products and of business partners.⁸⁶ One such area where the Dante evidently took into consideration political and economic interests was Tunisia, a French Protectorate where the dominant European presence was that of the Italians. Here the rivalry between the Alliance Française and the Dante Alighieri Society to establish a cultural and economic sphere of influence was strong. Hence it was one of the first areas abroad that the Dante focussed on.⁸⁷ However, the Dante hardly had any personal connections with the commercial and industrial sector, other than the Italian publishing houses. Even if there was a great awareness of the role it could play for Italy's economic interests, especially in the Mediterranean area, its goals remained primarily literary and educational. Because of the secrecy required by its irredentist aims and the apolitical standpoint it projected outwards, the Dante was often accused of being too abstract in its purpose, guided by inconclusive idealism and having little awareness of the social reality.⁸⁸

In contrast to the Alliance Française, which was focussed on foreigners, and sharing more of the concern for co-nationals expressed by the Schulverein/VDA, the Dante would soon also be involved in the 'nationalisation' of its masses of emigrants abroad. Under the presidency of Pasquale Villari (from 1896 to 1903) the Society's attention for emigration as a national problem grew.⁸⁹ The many Italians who emigrated in the second half of

⁸⁵ Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 193 en 253.

⁸⁶ A good illustration is Carducci's observation about the Alliance française's function: "La propagazione della lingua francese è un'opera patriottica al supremo grado. La nostra ricchezza vi è interessata. Chi sa francese diviene cliente della Francia. Il libro francese dà le abitudini francesi; le abitudini francesi conducono all'acquisto dei prodotti francesi" (Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 13).

⁸⁷ The Committee of Tunis was established in 1894. For more on the Dante in Tunisia, see: Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 22, 24-25 and 45-49.

⁸⁸ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 61 and 70-73.

⁸⁹ Villari's attention for emigration was triggered by the harsh working conditions of Italians working in Switzerland on the construction of the almost twenty kilometres long Simplon railway tunnel (built between 1898 and 1906). To improve these working conditions Villari mobilised his network, and the fact that he called for support especially from religious organizations was not accepted by all within the Dante. Eventually the aid that the Dante focussed on was given in the form of education, which was more congenial to the Society's regular activity (Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 267-270).

the nineteenth century because of hunger and unemployment, often hardly considered themselves Italian. They spoke only their local dialect and were attached to their local customs. Furthermore illiteracy was still widespread. Once Italy was made, it was clear that much remained to be done to “make the Italians”.⁹⁰ Italian schools were established by the Dante Alighieri Society in the Middle East, in Africa, in North and in South America to ensure that the Italian emigrants learnt their national language and identified themselves with the Italian state. Again, to some extent there was an economic interest in maintaining the ties with faraway, fortune-seeking Italians who might well one day contribute to the national economy. Attitudes towards this emigration did change with time. Under Pasquale Villari’s presidency it was regarded as a social issue and a shameful manifestation of Italy’s poverty. The improvement of the conditions of Italian emigrants was partly a paternalistic mission for the Dante but also an attempt to increase support, by reaching out to potential working-class members. Some within the Dante leadership were sceptical about opening the Society to the masses, arguing that the Risorgimento too had not been a popular movement. During the first decades of the twentieth century, with the increasing popularity of nationalist-expansionist thinking, a far more positive interpretation was given to Italian emigration. It began to be presented as a sign of Italy’s abundance, of the manpower, creativity and knowledge that it could offer to the rest of the world.⁹¹

In terms of organization, the Dante Alighieri Society had a centralized structure. The President and the Central Council were based in Rome, since 1870 the capital of Italy. The Committees within and outside the Italian state could elect Council members through their representatives at the annual congress. At these congresses policy discussions took place, but in actual fact the course of action was determined by the central board of governors, who insisted on the unity of the Society’s action. The Annual Congress was more an occasion to report on the activities that had taken place at the various Committees and to ask public attention for them. Ultimately, the central board of governors had only a limited control over the Local Committees, which often demanded a high degree of independence and did not comply with all the statutory prerequisites such as sending financial reports and lists of members.⁹² In 1899 there were 48 Committees in Italy and 22 abroad. By 1916 these had risen to 238 in Italy and 79 abroad. Because not all Local Committees provided reliable figures, if any at all, it is very hard to judge how many members the

⁹⁰ Referring to the famous words by Massimo D’Azeglio (1798-1866) spoken at the inaugural session of the new Italian parliament on the 18th of February 1861: “L’Italia è fatta, bisogna fare gli italiani” (Italy is done, we need to make the Italians).

⁹¹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 168-169; Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 203 and 235.

⁹² For more details on the organizational structure, see: Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 174-201 and 256-257.

organization had as a whole.⁹³ Around the turn of the century, the Dante Alighieri Society co-operated with some of the other national associations that were emerging at that time, such as the Lega Navale, the Touring Club Italiano and the Società Geografica. Italy was relatively late among the Western European countries in developing such new organizations which illustrated the transition from a rather exclusive, co-opted group of local elite to a more open, accessible and mass-oriented kind of association.⁹⁴ The Dante was a good example of this trend. Most of its members belonged to the Italian middle class and it had particular following among lawyers, academics and teachers. With time secondary school teachers proved to be the driving force of the Local Committees in Italy, although not a very stable one due to their regular transfer to other locations.⁹⁵

Initially, it was of crucial importance that the Dante Alighieri Society presented itself as an autonomous, private organization. It could benefit from its well-established personal ties with high-ranking civil servants, members of parliament and senators but it also made sure that those who became members were of different political orientation, to maintain the apolitical imago. Government subsidies were – out of principle - not accepted, though there were some exceptions. The secrecy that was required to prevent the Austrian or any other government from accusing them of undesired political activity meant that income and expenses were never fully revealed. Generally the income was made up of membership fees, interest rates, donations from private persons and from a variety of organizations, with frequent contributions coming from Masonic lodges and also from the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Modest sums came also from the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione and Affari Esteri, but frequency of these was uncertain. In 1889, Paolo Boselli, who was then Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione and who later became President of the Dante, allowed for 1,000 lire to be transferred to the organization. This practice was continued by his successors at the Ministry. Bonaldo Stringher, director general of the Banca d'Italia and member of the Dante, was involved in yet another source of income. As of 1902, three tenths of the money raised by the state lottery would go to the Dante. However, until 1926 the Dante continued to have a non-declared fund, defined as *fondo isolato*, that did not appear in the financial report. This secret financing served the purposes that the President together with the Secretary personally decided upon, such as the spread of religious publications by the Sodalizio Cattolico Italiano, which maintained the Italian language of co-nationals abroad. The sources of this fund remain unknown.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibidem, 151-152 and 185-186.

⁹⁴ Giovanni Montroni, *La società italiana dall'unificazione alla Grande Guerra*, 2nd ed. (Rome-Bari: Giuseppe Laterza & Figli, 2007) 134-160, in particular 144.

⁹⁵ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 151 and 169.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, 39-41, 97, 101, 245-248, 256 and 416-417.

Where for political or financial reasons the Italian state could not take on responsibility, the Dante Alighieri Society was paving the way for what would eventually become recognized as an area of government policy to be managed by the state.

The (Dante Alighieri) Society partly acted as surrogate of the state and partly it invited the state to come into action, presenting itself from time to time as institutional reality and as fundamental reality, as state and as nation at the same time. These two aspects seemed destined to coincide in a big utopian project, which clearly alluded to a possible dismantling of the Society within a fully matured institutional reality.⁹⁷ [Translation TvK]

For now the Dante served as intermediary to procure secret ministerial funds to irredentist initiatives across the border without putting the Italian government in a compromising position.

Effects of the Italo-Turkish War and the First World War: Fascism and virulent nationalism

During the Italo-Turkish War (29 September 1911 - 18 October 1912), through which Italy obtained the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica that together formed Libya, the first signs of a change of spirit within the Dante Alighieri Society began to appear. The Libyan enterprise, although not automatically glorified as heroic act for the nation, did spark off among a number of members a desire for national expansionism and for a sacralisation of the nation. Dante supporters of the Libyan war tended to underline that this was not a brutal conquest, but one that brought civilization and well-being to the local inhabitants.⁹⁸ Upon the outbreak of the First World War, again it was clear that a part of the leading Dante members was in favour of a more aggressive and openly active position for the Society. After much discussion on the issue, the President made an appeal to unite in support of the Italian King, Victor Emanuel III, and declared that the war was morally necessary. During

⁹⁷ "La Società ['Dante Alighieri'] in parte surrogava lo stato, in parte lo sollecitava ad agire, ponendosi di volta in volta come realtà istituzionale e realtà di base, come stato e nazione allo stesso tempo. Due aspetti che sembrano destinati a coincidere in un grande utopistico progetto, che alludeva chiaramente ad un possibile scioglimento della Società all'interno di realtà istituzionali di raggiunta maturità" (ibidem, 97). This is in fact quite a different view than that exposed by the Dante historian Piero Barbera, who wrote in 1920 that the more the modern State had vast and numerous tasks, the more it would need the assistance and co-operation of private citizens united in strong and independent organizations, created to integrate, execute, encourage and if necessary syndicate the State's work. Barbera envisions a continuous interplay between State and private association (Piero Barbera, *La "Dante Alighieri"*. *Relazione storica al XXV Congresso* [Florence, 1920] quoted by Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 17).

⁹⁸ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 279, 283 and 286-289.

the war, from June 1916 to October 1917, the President of the Dante, Paolo Boselli, was also prime minister. In response to the need that was felt for an organization that would coordinate the war propaganda abroad, Boselli proposed to put the Dante Alighieri Society in charge of all activity in that field. The Central Council of the Dante unanimously opposed, preferring to maintain the Society's independence and to operate less in the forefront. The Dante did however contribute to the propaganda effort, joining forces with other initiatives and taking into account the government standpoints. After Italy's humiliating defeat at Caporetto (24 October 1917), the new government led by Victor Emmanuel Orlando created an Undersecretariat for Propaganda Abroad and Press (Sottosegretariato per la Propaganda all'Estero e per la Stampa).⁹⁹

Once the war was over, a part of the Dante's active members thought it wise to continue functioning somewhat covertly, cautiously positioning themselves as the Italian government negotiated at the Paris Treaties, whereas an opposing group led by the Committee of Milan lobbied for a more open engagement abroad. By the time the March on Rome took place (1922), a considerable part of the Dante Society welcomed Mussolini's subsequent accession to government and the new impulse this gave to the country. The nationalist elements that acted within the Dante could easily merge into the Italian Fascist movement, rather like the Associazione Nazionalisti Italiani could fuse with the National Fascist Party. Dante leaders spoke of the interests the Society shared with the new government, while however making clear that there was no question of subordination or political partisanship. At the Dante annual congress in Padua (September 1923), Boselli was given an honorary party membership card of the National Fascist Party by a thousand members of the party branch in Savona, Boselli's town of origin. In turn Boselli awarded medals to Mussolini and another symbol of Fascist revolutionary spirit, D'Annunzio, for their heroic actions in Fiume. Boselli was above all a fervent nationalist. There are some reasons to believe that he supported Italian Fascism, which is not surprising given the importance that Fascism gave to nationalism. Yet until his death in 1932 he remained eager to defend the Dante's autonomy, whatever his sympathies for the regime might have been.¹⁰⁰ There was a certain paradox in the Dante's still emphatic claim to be apolitical and to remain as

⁹⁹ Ibidem, 106-107, 307-314, 330-334, 340.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 394. Pisa gives as evidence a quotation from a letter Boselli wrote to the vice-president of the Dante, Donato Sanminiatielli: "Io dico: oggi Mussolini è la necessità per la vita d'Italia dentro e fuori; fuori d'onde viene giù un vento malvaggio." (I say: today Mussolini is the necessity for Italy's life inside and outside: outside from where an evil wind is coming down.) Does this really say what Boselli thought of Fascism? The "evil wind" is presumably what Boselli perceived to be the threat of communism. In my opinion, Boselli's views on Fascism need further investigation and interpretation (Boselli to Sanminiatielli, 29 April 1924, Archivio della Società Dante Alighieri, fasc. 1924, B 2.).

always faithful to the nation above all when gradually the Italian state and nation were becoming synonymous with Fascism.¹⁰¹

A turning point was the meeting of Committee presidents of the Dante Society in June 1926. At this meeting the Dante top made an evaluation of activities and redefined the Society's aims and methodologies in order to be in line with the new political climate, which by early 1925 was shaped by the overt introduction of a single-party dictatorship. It was decided to support Mussolini's government in its imperial quest - a revived Roman Empire - and to embrace the broader mission of spreading Italian culture across the world. To some extent this was a strategic necessity. As the Italian government was gradually taking on more tasks related to irredentist issues, the Dante was more or less obliged to give more importance to its role as promoter of Italian language and culture abroad. Another effect of the changed political context that emerged at the 1926 meeting was the request of several participants to create a more centralized decisional power within the Dante, which would have more control over the Local Committees. There appears to have been a gradual process of ideological convergence between the Italian Fascist ideals and those of the Dante, both infused with nationalist sentiment. Admiration for Mussolini in speeches and publications of the Society was outspoken. Nevertheless, in the 1920s the modes of action and the managerial structure of the Dante remained largely unchanged, as did the very strong resistance to relinquishing the Society's autonomy. There were tentative government plans to fuse the Dante with other organizations or in some other way absorb it into the state apparatus, no doubt also because of the Society's considerable reserve funds. Until the end of Boselli's presidency in 1932, the financial state of affairs of the Dante Alighieri Society appears to have been solid. The Society owed its prosperity to a cautious maintenance of reserve funds, the real estate it owned, the inheritance it received from Achille Beltrami, and other well-invested reserves. The increasing number of *tesserine scolastiche*, Dante memberships for school children at the reduced price of 1 lira, was becoming an ever more important source of income, that was growing at a faster rate than the funds raised by Local Committees.¹⁰² Regardless of the internal and external pressure, the independence of action was defended for as long as possible, mainly thanks

¹⁰¹ According to the historian Beatrice Pisa it is difficult to reconstruct the process of diminishing autonomy of the Dante and greater subservience to the regime because the Dante's archive material for the period 1926 to 1930 (which is as far as her own study went) is scarce. Pisa partly attributes this to a growing use of telephone communication in those years, but also suspects an intentional destruction of compromising documents (Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 15 and footnote 86 on 422. See also: Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 11-12). Rather than conscious destruction, it seems more likely that the inconsistent preservation of documents is related to the private character of the organization and the lack of resources for systematic archiving.

¹⁰² Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 258-259.

to the personal prestige and the delaying tactics of Boselli, the Dante's President from 1907 to 1932.

Competition with the Fasci italiani all'estero and the Istituti di Cultura Italiana

The Dante Committees abroad were competing with a growing number of other organizations for cultural penetration, such as the Fasci Italiani all'Estero and the Istituti di Cultura Italiana. Under Mussolini's increasingly totalitarian rule, the way the Italian government dealt with its cultural propaganda abroad was characterized by shifts of tasks between ministries and the existence of various (semi-)public organizations that rivalled each other in claiming this field of action for themselves. Even when attempts were made to centralize the control, changes in strategy seemed to favour different organizations at different times. One such organization was the Italian Fasci Abroad (Fasci Italiani all'Estero), a product of the revolutionary phase in the Italian Fascist movement. The phenomenon emerged in 1920 as a network of unofficial fascist groups, set up by veterans, intellectuals and journalists in communities of Italian emigrants in Europe and around the Mediterranean. Subsequent to the March on Rome, the Deputy Secretary of the National Fascist Party, Giuseppe Bastianini, was made head of the Fasci all'Estero. A more centralized structure was given to the organization, with local sections choosing their own leadership but a central General Secretariat in Rome that appointed state delegates. The Secretary General was responsible to Mussolini directly but also had a seat in the Grand Council of the National Fascist Party. From 1922 to 1925, with Mussolini's encouragement, the Fasci grew in number mainly in Europe and the Americas, and to a lesser extent in the Middle East, especially Egypt and Turkey. However, even when it had as many as 65,000 members, it represented merely a small minority of the nine million Italians living abroad.¹⁰³

Secretary General Bastianini was intent on making the Fasci all'Estero the sole institution in charge of Italians abroad, surpassing even the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministero degli Affari Esteri). In 1925 Mussolini appointed Roberto Farinacci, a representative of the militant stream within Italian Fascism, as Secretary General of the National Fascist Party. This seemed to suggest that the more radical forces would have a say over the policy of the regime. In the same year Dino Grandi, a prominent party member, was made Undersecretary of the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, a ministry that had been accused by the Fasci of conservatism and of obstructing their goals. Furthermore, some first discussions in the press about the possible universal

¹⁰³ D. Fabiano, 'La Lega Italiana per la tutela degli interessi nazionali e le origini dei Fasci all'estero (1920-1923)' in: *Storia contemporanea* (April 1985) 203; Luca de Caprariis, 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero' in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, 2 (2000), 151-183, 152-159.

mission of Fascism were seen as an opportunity to present the Fasci as the ideal instrument to transfer the Italian Fascist model to the rest of the world. Presumably emboldened by these developments, at the annual congress of the Fasci held in Rome at the end of October 1925, Bastianini urged for a fascistization of the diplomatic corps and for a complete control over emigration by the Fasci all'Estero. Mussolini was subsequently unambiguous in his disapproval, issuing statements that excluded an international role for the Party or any meddling with foreign internal politics. The Fasci were meant solely to protect the *italianità* and the welfare of Italian emigrants. The signal being sent out was that Mussolini was not going to share his power with the National Fascist Party: his was a personal dictatorship.¹⁰⁴ In his cultural foreign policy as much as in other areas where he could exert his power, Mussolini used a 'divide and rule' strategy, securing allegiance from various groups in society but never giving any one group absolute preference and making them compete amongst themselves.

Thereafter, the Fasci – now basically just producing printed propaganda material – were gradually absorbed by Affari Esteri instead. Besides being poorly organized, the Fasci lacked firm ground in precisely that part of the world that Italian expansionism was focussed on: Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. Affari Esteri – including the diplomatic corps – was re-organized. In April 1927 all emigration affairs were handed over to a new Direzione Generale degli Italiani all'Estero, with at its head a diplomat. When in 1928 the diplomat Piero Parini became Secretary General of the Fasci, the political demise of the Fasci was sealed. The membership was purged and its more than five hundred branches made directly responsible to the Secretariat in Rome. A year later Parini was also made director of the Direzione Generale Italiani all'Estero e Scuole, which resulted from the fusion between the department in charge of Italian emigrants and that of Italian schools abroad.¹⁰⁵

Another instrument that the Italian government developed together with its growing interest in cultural propaganda abroad was the establishment of Istituti di Cultura Italiana. These were cultural institutes comparable with the Instituts Français, aimed at the Italian community abroad and italoophile foreigners. Through its activities the Istituti were meant to spread the knowledge of Italian language and culture, as well as advertise the achievements of the Italian genius and stimulate intellectual relations with other countries. The Istituti were introduced at the end of 1926 following a law proposal by Mussolini, Giuseppe Volpi, Minister of Finance, and Pietro Fedele, Minister of Education. These Istituti were to be headed by scholars of repute and run by staff approved by Affari Esteri. Each year a report had to be sent to

¹⁰⁴ De Caprariis, 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse', 166-172.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, 172, 174, 178 and 180; Patrizia Salvetti, 'Scuole italiane all'estero', 535-549, 548; Benedetta Garzarelli, 'Parleremo al mondo intero', 15.

Affari Esteri.¹⁰⁶ Since June 1925 an organization with a confusingly similar name existed: the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura (National Fascist Institute of Culture, renamed National Institute of Fascist Culture in 1937). This was created by the National Fascist Party to promote and coordinate the study of Italian Fascism, and to spread Fascist ideals and Italian culture both within Italy and abroad.¹⁰⁷

Other organizations concerned with spreading Italian culture abroad were financed by the Mussolini government, but these were generally poorly financed, rudimentary and with little chance of enduring through time.¹⁰⁸ As of 1923, a newly-created Istituto Interuniversitario Italiano - like the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura headed by the philosopher and Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile - sought to make Italian culture and ways of thinking more known among foreign students and to promote university exchanges.¹⁰⁹ In 1924 this Istituto Interuniversitario together with another academic foundation formed the Italian National Committee on Intellectual Co-operation.¹¹⁰ This Committee represented Italy at the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, an advisory body of the League of Nations that was created in 1922 to promote peace by encouraging cultural and intellectual exchange between the member nations. Between 1924 and 1930, even Maria Montessori, creator of her own unconventional, internationally-renown educational method, could count on financial support from Mussolini. From the new headquarters - the Opera Nazionale Montessori - now symbolically based in Rome, Montessori would further diffuse Italy's spiritual contribution to mankind. Tellingly, this support from the government came to an end in the 1930s when Montessori proved to be too single-minded to be harnessed and her message insufficiently centred on the Italian nation.¹¹¹

Intensification of cultural propaganda in the 1930s

From 1922 to 1929 Mussolini himself was at the head of Affari Esteri, and yet in those years he appears to have left this ministry more or less unchanged. The emphasis in the 1920s was on establishing internal consensus. Cultural politics abroad gained far more importance in the changed context of the 1930s. Internally, having laid the bases for his personal dictatorship, Mussolini aimed

¹⁰⁶ Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale*, 58-60.

¹⁰⁷ Gisella Longo, *L'Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura. Da Giovanni Gentile a Camillo Pellizzi (1925-1943). Gli intellettuali tra partito e regime* (Rome: A. Pellicani, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ For example, the Fondazione Leonardo per la Cultura Italiana (1921), absorbed in 1925 by the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista, and the Ente Nazionale Italica (1925).

¹⁰⁹ Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale*, 56-57.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 61-62.

¹¹¹ Marjan Schwegman, *Maria Montessori 1870-1952. Kind van haar tijd, vrouw van de wereld* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999) 200-211.

at solidifying his power through the further centralization of control and the construction of consensus in Italian society. As the Fascist ideology developed its conceptions of not only a new Italy but also a new Fascist man, a universal concept of Fascism began to fit within the objectives of the regime. Now that the backing of nationalists and the more conservative Italian establishment had been secured, restoring to some extent the revolutionary élan of the Italian Fascist movement was seen as a way to appeal to the youth. Furthermore, in 1929 the Lateran Accords between the Italian State and the Roman Catholic Church were signed, resolving the dispute over the papal territories lost during the Italian Unification. This reconciliation with the Pope made it easier for the Catholics in Italy and abroad to adhere to Fascism. At the same time, Fascism conceived of as universal value went hand in hand with a more aggressive, expansionist foreign policy that Mussolini was now driving towards with the reformed Ministero degli Affari Esteri.

Hence in the 1930s there was a great interest in promoting the Italian Fascist model abroad, with corporatism as Fascism's response to the social issues that Communism addressed. In a speech given in 1930, Mussolini officially spoke of the universal character of Italian Fascism and of a new Fascist Europe. The celebration in 1932 of the first ten years since the March on Rome, the so-called *Decennale Fascista*, further triggered the international ambitions of Italian Fascism. A year later, in July 1933, the Action Committees for the Universality of Rome (Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma - CAUR) were launched: a Fascist equivalent to the Communist Comintern, aimed at creating an international network of fascist parties.¹¹²

In addition, the German Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda set up in 1933 and led by Joseph Goebbels, presented a new challenge for Italy as well as a model to copy.¹¹³ The Direzione Generale degli Italiani all'Estero e Scuole was not considered to be a sufficiently adequate structure to be responsible for a systematic cultural and political propaganda in foreign countries. Organizations such as the Dante Alighieri Society and the Istituti Fascista di Cultura were thought to be ineffective and guided by somewhat otherworldly men. It was decided to hand over Affari Esteri's responsibility for any propaganda abroad to the Ufficio Stampa (Press Office) of the Head of Government, where in early 1934 a specific Direzione per la

¹¹² Michael Ledeen, *Universal fascism. The theory and practice of the fascist international 1928-1936* (New York: H. Fertig, 1972); Bruno Wanrooij, 'Il fascismo come merce d'exportazione' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome XLVI/11* (The Hague 1985) 155-163; Garzarelli, "Parleremo al mondo intero", 19-21; Marco Cuzzi, *L'internazionale delle camicie nere: i CAUR, Comitati d'azione per l'universalità di Roma, 1933-1939* (Milan: Mursia, 2005); Marco Cuzzi, *Antieuropa: il fascismo universale di Mussolini* (Milan: M&B, 2006).

¹¹³ The President of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Berlin, Giuseppe Renzetti, warned with some concern about how the Reich's government would soon start large-scale campaign to spread national-socialism abroad (Garzarelli, "Parleremo al mondo intero", 24 and 35).

propaganda was created. Mussolini's son-in-law, the former diplomat Galeazzo Ciano, was given the newly-created function of Undersecretary of Press and Propaganda. Until he was promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs in June 1936 his personal vision in great part determined how the office was run. It remained a rather hybrid body, falling under the Ufficio Stampa but located within Affari Esteri. In June 1935 it became part of a separate Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda. Though it could use a variety of contacts outside Italy – such as secretaries of the Fasci all'estero or directors of local Italian newspapers¹¹⁴ – it relied mostly on Italian diplomatic representatives. All modern means of communication were to be used. The Direzione per la propaganda distributed films, mainly the documentaries of the Istituto Nazionale L.U.C.E., and until April 1937 transmitted radio broadcasts. Other services included the production and distribution of publications, the sending of articles and photographs, and the organization of art exhibitions.¹¹⁵

Ciano was not insensitive to the negative connotations that the word 'propaganda' had. Hence, on his instigation, the activity of the Direzione per la propaganda was repeatedly presented in the Italian press as being a matter of demonstration rather than persuasion. It was claimed that the intention was not to proselytize but to inform; to provide facts that would enable the public to make an objective judgement of Fascism. As we shall see, this emphasis on simply giving information can also be found in the self-portrayal of the British Council. In both cases it was meant to mitigate any accusations of spreading propaganda.¹¹⁶

During Italy's war on Abyssinia in 1935, which was much disputed within the League of Nations, the recently created Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda was at the forefront of the propaganda campaign to convince foreigners – not just the higher classes but also the broader public – of the legitimacy of Italy's invasion. This propaganda claimed that the conquest was not only Italy's right but also in the interest of civilization and of the local population that needed to be freed from age-old slavery. Once Ciano became Minister of Foreign Affairs, in June 1936, the importance of the Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda diminished. Propaganda abroad seemed to concentrate on the ideological war against Bolshevism and the defence of Roman or European civilization. In May 1937 the Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda was turned into the Ministero della Cultura Popolare. The government funding that the Direzione Generale per la propaganda then received was considerably

¹¹⁴ Garzarelli refers these contacts with Italian institutions and fascist organizations abroad as the fascist 'paradiplomacy', which engendered a duplicity in the Italian presence in foreign countries (Garzarelli, *"Parleremo al mondo intero"*, 3).

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 30-31, 41-43, 48, 50-52; Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa*, 172.

¹¹⁶ Garzarelli, *"Parleremo al mondo intero"*, 31 and 41-43.

lower than what was being put into the general “confidential expenses” of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare.¹¹⁷

Subsequently to Italy’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, yet another new entity was formed to deal with the promotion of Italy abroad. This was the Istituto per le Relazioni Culturali con l’Estero, which in December 1937 replaced the Italian National Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. This new institute organized Italian language courses for foreigners, student exchanges, book exhibitions and the publication of the series *Opera del genio italiano all’estero*, besides sending out photographs and articles to the foreign press. In effect, the Istituto per le Relazioni Culturali con l’Estero was doing more or less what the Direzione Generale per la propaganda did, but with a greater emphasis on the cultural dimension. Significantly, the Istituto per le Relazioni Culturali had a mixed management board with representatives of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare and of Affari Esteri, but it was mainly responsible to the latter. This meant Affari Esteri was regaining control in this field of policy.¹¹⁸

In 1931, after Paolo Boselli had for several years managed to hold off the Dante’s incorporation by the Italian Fascist state, the remaining ‘old guard’ of the Dante Alighieri Society succumbed to the adoption of new statutes that placed the organization under direct control of the Duce. From now on Mussolini would choose the President of the Dante. The increasing number of Fascists among the Society’s members had argued that an organization of national interest could not remain outside the state structure and had to become part of the state’s instruments for cultural imperialism. Hence, a group within the Dante asked the intervention of the Prime Minister’s office to help reform the statutes. This resulted in the new statutes of 1931, of which the first article determined that the Dante Society acted according to the new spirit brought by the Great War and the Fascist Revolution. Henceforth the President would be chosen by Mussolini, as would the Directive Board. The annual congress would mainly have a promotional function: all agenda points were first to be approved by the directive board. On the 11th of March 1932, a few days after the new statutes were properly introduced, Boselli passed away. He had still been granted the freedom to appoint his successor: sixty-four-year-old Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco, a Fascist but not connected to the party leadership. This was to no avail though: opposition from the Vice-Presidents made Celesia di Vegliasco step down within a year. He was replaced by the relatively young Felice Felicioni, since 1931 Vice-President, who in his early thirties was being given the new function of Commissario Straordinario (Extraordinary Commissioner) of the Dante. Felicioni had been leader of the Fascist squad of Perugia and as such had played a role in the March on Rome. Thereafter he

¹¹⁷ The government funding of the MinCulPop reached the 14,700,000 lire (ibidem, 57-60, 230 and 225-226).

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 231-235.

became the National Fascist Party's Federal Secretary in Umbria and was member of the Party's *Direttorio Nazionale*. In other words, he was part of the Party hierarchy and was expected to be a faithful messenger of Fascist *italianità* across the world.¹¹⁹

The British Council (1934)

Cultural propaganda disavowed

During the interwar years, few people among the British general public could have expected that in 1934 a 'British Committee for Relations with Other Countries', soon to be known as the British Council, would be created. The British Foreign Office was well aware of the foreign cultural promotion the Germans, French and Italians were engaged in, and tried to obtain information about how much these foreign governments were spending in that field.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, government involvement in cultural propaganda had been deemed unnecessary in Britain and even rather disreputable, due to the propaganda techniques used by the British in the First World War. During the First World War the War Propaganda Bureau was in charge of an unprecedented, systematic propaganda campaign to win support for the Allies, especially in the United States of America. After the formation of a Ministry of Information in 1918, with as Minister the 'press baron' Lord Beaverbrook, the accent shifted towards mass propaganda and the War Propaganda Bureau disappeared in the background. Beaverbrook was the owner of the *Daily Express*. Lord Northcliffe, owner of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, and Robert Donald, the editor of the *Daily Mail*, were made directors of propaganda in enemy and allied territory.¹²¹ During that war the House of Commons had critically questioned these appointments. After the war, publications such as *Falsehood in War-time: Propaganda Lies of the First World War* (1928), by the British Member of Parliament Arthur Ponsonby, caused a commotion. That publication revealed how much false information had been spread in order to gain support

¹¹⁹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 419, 436, 440-441; Editorial, 'Il Commissario straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 2 (March-April 1933) 37-38.

¹²⁰ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 135-139. In 1929 the Foreign Office estimated that the French government was devoting the equivalent of £ 500,000 to cultural propaganda, the German government £ 300,000 and the Italians slightly less than £ 300,000 (TNA, FO 431/1, Cultural propaganda, introductory memorandum).

¹²¹ Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), in particular 'Targeting Elite Opinion: The War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House, 1914-1917' (33-48) and 'Targeting Mass Opinion: Crewe House, Psywar and British Propaganda against the Central Powers in 1918' (49-62).

for the British intervention and to incite hatred towards “the Hun” (as the German enemy was portrayed).¹²²

These propaganda institutions had a very short existence, being dismantled by the end of the war. In their place a News Department was formed within the Foreign Office, with a far more restricted communications task. Notably, in May 1919 the Treasury specifically warned the Foreign Office against “a general desire to spread British culture throughout the world.”¹²³ A decade later, in December 1928, the promotion of British culture took on the form of a Travel Association. This organization was meant to encourage foreign holidaymakers to visit Britain and, through the positive impression made on these visitors, stimulate the export trade.¹²⁴ Another post-war organization, which instead proved to be more durable, was the English-Speaking Union. This was a worldwide association created by Evelyn Wrench in 1918 to foster international friendship and communication through the common use of English. After five years as editor of the conservative weekly *The Spectator* (1925-1935), Evelyn Wrench went on to found another international association, this time supposedly having no intention to promote any particular language or culture: the All People’s Association (1930). Members of the All People’s Association were offered lectures, libraries and language courses. In 1934 it had branches in fourteen European countries and yet already two years later the Association went bankrupt. The English-Speaking Union continued to flourish. This may indicate that sharing a language had more binding power than the abstract goal of creating international friendships. In the educational field, British writers, schoolteachers, missionaries and governesses were already teaching in various parts of the world for decades and as of 1913 the Cambridge University Syndicate offered teachers of English abroad exams for an official Proficiency Certificate.¹²⁵ Privately funded British Institutes in Florence, Paris, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Montevideo offered English language courses and the Foreign Office regularly distributed English literature to foreign universities and schools.¹²⁶

Cultural affairs were on the whole seen as a matter of private initiative, and apparently among the British upper class and in the civil service there was no feeding ground for an organization specifically devoted to the promotion of British language and culture abroad. As the influential British diplomat Harold

¹²² Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-time: Propaganda Lies of the First World War* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928). See also: Garry S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

¹²³ Donald S. Birn, ‘The war of words. The British Council and Cultural Propaganda in the 1930s’ in: *Peace & Change* 14, 2 (April 1989) 176-190, 180.

¹²⁴ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 14-16.

¹²⁵ Bernard Lott, ‘ELT and the British Council – the first fifty years’ in: *ELT Journal* Volume 38/4 (October 1984) 283-285, 283.

¹²⁶ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 35-36.

Nicolson remarked, the general opinion was that the “genius of England, unlike that of lesser countries, spoke for itself”.¹²⁷ Similarly deploring the British lack of interest in promoting their own cultural achievements, an official of the Foreign Office, Reginald (‘Rex’) Leeper, commented: “Good wine, we optimistically feel, needs no bush.”¹²⁸ Two documents showed the first signs of a gradual change in this attitude.

An investigation into British communities abroad, the Tilley Report (1920), was the first sign of a greater government interest in cultural promotion overseas. In 1919 Lord Curzon, Foreign Secretary, had appointed a committee to investigate how the government could stimulate more solidarity among British communities abroad and make British ideals known by foreign nations. The result was the Tilley Report of 1920, named after the Chairman of the Committee, Sir John Tilley. It recommended establishing British schools, Institutes and libraries abroad, as well as facilities for foreign students studying at British technical schools and universities.¹²⁹

Twelve years later, Stephen Tallents brought forward similar suggestions in his influential pamphlet on the ‘projection’ of England. Tallents was at that moment Secretary of the Empire Marketing Board (1926-1933), a governmental organization to stimulate trade within the British Empire through scientific research, economic analyses and advertisement campaigns promoting goods produced in the Empire. No doubt drawing from this experience, in *The Projection of England* Tallents argued in favour of a school for “national projection” that would find ways to make known to the world England’s “national institutions and virtues”. Speaking of England, he was however also addressing the other citizens of the United Kingdom of Britain: the Scottish, the Welsh and the Northern-Irish. ‘Projection’ as a term for cultural promotion was a particularly adequate innovation, given that Tallents expressly advocated the use of film as well as other modern communication technologies. He argued that such promotion was now necessary to defend Britain from the growing power of European fascism, the Soviet Union and – notably – the United States of America.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Harold Nicolson, ‘The British Council 1934-1955’, *Twenty-first Anniversary Report* (London: British Council, 1955) 4.

¹²⁸ Reginald A. Leeper, ‘British Culture Abroad’ in: *Contemporary Review* 148 (August 1935) 201.

¹²⁹ Donaldson refers to the Tilley Report as “a blue-print for the British Council” (Donaldson, *The British Council*, 15).

¹³⁰ Stephen Tallents, *The Projection of England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932); Scott Anthony, *Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain. Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

Counteraction to protect trade, territory and democratic tradition

However, all histories of the British Council concur in seeing economic interest as being the determining element that made the creation of the Council possible. It was only after three economic missions had shown that trade was being affected by a lack of cultural propaganda that sufficient political goodwill was found. These missions were the D'Abernon British Economic Mission to South America (1930), and to a lesser degree Ernest Thompson's British Economic Mission to the Far East (1930-31) as well as Sir Alan Anderson's Trade Mission to Scandinavia (1933). The D'Abernon Report revealed how British business in South America was stagnating and how Britain's lack of cultural policy translated itself into declining trade. Less and less South American students were going to British universities and schools, preferring those of other European countries instead. This plea for a greater British cultural influence could no longer be ignored when the Prince of Wales upon his return from a visit to South America in 1931 endorsed the Report's conclusions. A direct result of the Prince of Wales' tour was the Ibero-American Institute, established in London a year later, which was mainly responsible for bringing Argentinian scholars to Oxford with the aid of a Prince of Wales Scholarship and for the exchange of lecturers.¹³¹ Furthermore, the findings of all three missions triggered the bureaucratic machinery and the political will to put into practice the proposals for a proper foreign cultural policy, primarily formulated by the afore-mentioned Reginald Leeper.

Another crucial factor for the creation of the British Council was the emerging concern about control over the Empire. The Government of India Act (1919) had given Indians a slightly greater say over how their country was governed. This meagre reward for India's participation in the First World War could not prevent the movement for national independence from growing, leading to protests and even to violent clashes. In Egypt, constant revolts led by the Egyptian nationalist movement had forced the British to declare the country independent in 1922, though British control and political unrest continued. A safe passage through the Suez Canal as well as the airports and radio stations established in Egypt were essential for a good communication with India and the other British territories in Asia. On 28 November 1933, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Percy Loraine, communicated in a despatch to the Foreign Office his grave concern about Britain's weak cultural influence in Egypt and about the growing competition coming from France and Italy.¹³² As will be shown in Chapter Five, this document provided an essential stimulus for the creation of the British Council and further explains the attention that the

¹³¹ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 15-21.

¹³² British Council historian Donaldson states Loraine's paper was "one of the most important and famous papers in the history of cultural relations." (*ibidem*, 21).

Council gave to what it broadly called the Middle East. In the Far East, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 made the British aware of the threats to its interests there as well. Meanwhile Britain was militarily and financially at a low-point due to the drainage of resources brought about by the First World War.¹³³

Close connection to the Foreign Office

These circumstances would possibly not have led to an active cultural promotion abroad had there not been the driving force of Reginald Leeper, a man generally recognized as motor behind the creation of the British Council. During the First World War Leeper had served the Foreign Office's Political Intelligence Department. In the early 1930s he was working for the same ministry's News Department and was well acquainted with the government's policy towards foreign press. He was known to have an excellent relationship with Robert Vansittart, Permanent Undersecretary to the Foreign Office from 1930 to 1938, and Anthony Eden, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1931 to 1934, then Foreign Secretary until February 1938.¹³⁴ The support of such high-profile contacts was certainly necessary. The British Council's institutional framework was from the start different from that of similar organizations in France, Germany and Italy. The British Council was a private entity but under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with HRH The Prince of Wales as Patron. It began with a small grant from the Treasury of £ 5,000 and the assurance that it could rely on co-operation from the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, the Dominions Office, the Board of Education, the Department of Overseas Trade, the Scottish Education Department and the Board of Trade. There were government nominees on the Council's Executive Committee to represent these various departments and Leeper himself was the Foreign Office nominee.¹³⁵ In addition the British Council received three private donations¹³⁶ while "one or two leading industrial firms and publishers" offered

¹³³ Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London: Abacus, 1994; 1998 ed, reprinted 2004) 386-427; Michael Hughes, *British Foreign Secretaries in an Uncertain World, 1919-1939* (London: Routledge, 2005) 86-123.

¹³⁴ Philip Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 28-31.

¹³⁵ *Report by The Rt. Hon. Lord Eustace Percy, MP of activities from 1st April 1936 to 15th July 1937*, BW 151, TNA. Regarding the Executive Committee in the 1930s and 1940s, Donaldson also mentions a nominee of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (only intermittently exercised) and of the Travel Association (Donaldson, 370- 372) whereas Eastment doesn't mention there being as many nominees of government departments for the 1939. Her total is nine (Eastment, *The policies and position*, 15).

¹³⁶ The donations came from Viscount Wakefield of Hythe, Sir Herbert Brent Grotrian and Mr William Graham. Charles Cheers Wakefield was founder of the Wakefield Oil Company (later named Castrol), former Lord Mayor of London (1915-1916) and involved in several charitable works in the City. Could his donation to the British

contributions and the Book and Music Publishers' association gave moral and material support.¹³⁷ It was expected that as a private organization the Council would in time be able to gather sufficient funds to not have to rely on government grants, but this did not happen and instead the Council remained fully dependent on the Treasury for its existence. The Government grant rose to 15,000 pounds in 1935-36 and was already double this amount in July 1937. Nevertheless, the British Council officials had to keep convincing the Chancellor of the Exchequer that despite the economic hardship it was worth investing in cultural policy.¹³⁸ From 1939 onwards, Lord Beaverbrook made life harder for the Council by leading negative campaigns against its alleged wasteful ineffectiveness through his major newspapers. This criticism was so enduring as to make Council staff produce a pamphlet in 1945 - at their own personal expense, without wasting any public funds - that could disprove the accusations.¹³⁹

The official objective of the Council was eventually agreed to be "[...] to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of Great Britain and the English language abroad, and to develop closer cultural and commercial relations between Great Britain and other countries."¹⁴⁰ To this end, the Council encouraged the study of the English language and literature in foreign schools, technical colleges and universities. Instead of having local Committees, like the Dante and the Alliance Française, the Council helped establish British Institutes where English was taught and that in addition could function as British cultural centres. These British Institutes were modelled on those already existing in Paris, Florence and Buenos Aires, which the Council now supported. Furthermore, the Council closely co-operated with Anglo-foreign societies and other suitable bodies abroad, helping to arrange speakers, donating books, periodicals and newspapers, and in special cases providing financial support. Libraries with English literature or technical publications were established and the Council assisted the foundation of Chairs of English at foreign universities. Students from overseas who wished to study in the United Kingdom were assisted with scholarships or fellowships and temporary placing for training with British industrial firms could be arranged. The Council was eager to receive distinguished foreigners, whom it could put in touch with prominent individuals, public bodies, universities and other organizations to let these

Council be connected to his becoming Viscount on 28 June 1934? Sir Herbert Brent Grotian was a Conservative Member of Parliament (1924-1929), High Sheriff of Bedfordshire (1931-1932), and coincidentally was created a baronet in 1934 too.

¹³⁷ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 29. With reference to Lord Tyrell's opening speech at the inaugural meeting of the British Council in St. James's Palace, on the 2nd of July 1935.

¹³⁸ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 29, 32, 57-63.

¹³⁹ TNA, BW 2/112, British Council Staff Association, *The Beaverbrook Press & the British Council*, April 1945.

¹⁴⁰ TNA, FO 141/624, P 411/267/150, Confidential Memorandum 'The British Council for Relations with other Countries', News Department, Foreign Affairs, 8 February 1935.

visitors experience British life and institutions. Unlike the Deutsche Akademie, the Alliance Française and the Dante Alighieri Society, which far more gradually tightened relations with their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the British Council right away was closely connected to the Foreign Office. It expected advice from the British diplomats, even in the form of draft schemes of work, though it would try to relieve them as much as possible from routine correspondence. Most notably, all initiatives and proposals involving expenditure had to first be considered by the Foreign Office and subsequently transmitted to the Council.¹⁴¹

This is how a confidential Memorandum described the way in which the Council was expected to operate. The subsequent development of activities shows that this was indeed how it worked and that this was not just a plan on paper. Harold Nicolson has described the origins of the Council as follows: "Like so many of our institutions, the British Council began without any clear definition of its purpose, policy or scope. It developed, as all organizations develop, by processes of evolution: by processes, it might be said, of trial and error."¹⁴² Nicolson's view seems to be more an example of British self-perception underlining the organic and the practical, than a true reflection of how things went. There appears to be a distinct idea of what course the Council was meant to take, certainly in Leeper's mind. Initially the British Council 'risked' being dominated by commercial interests. The Board of Trade and the Department of Overseas Trade, both represented in the Council's Executive Committee, wanted more industrial representation. Leeper was opposed to this. He distrusted the vision of industrialists, whom he expected to be only focussed on commercial results and not on political ones. To this he preferred more involvement of the Foreign Office, where he could count on a better understanding of culture as a political instrument. For this reason the Council was not made too dependent on financing from industry.¹⁴³ On the other hand, justifying the public expenditure by pointing towards the Council's purpose in the context of international power politics required great caution. Among supporters of an active foreign cultural policy there was a conscious taboo on speaking of cultural propaganda, a remnant of the controversies around British propaganda in the First World War. At the same time it was clear to someone like Leeper that German and Italian antidemocratic and often anti-British propaganda made some form of British counter-offensive desirable and the Council made no secret of deploring the rise of totalitarian states in Europe.

The areas that the British Council chose to concentrate on reflected this defensive propagandistic function. It rapidly launched a Near East Committee

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴² Harold Nicolson, 'The British Council 1934-1955' in: *Twenty-First Anniversary Report* (London: The British Council, 1955) 4-30, 7.

¹⁴³ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 41; TNA, BW 82/5, transcript of Reginald Leeper to Robert Vansittart, 14 March 1935.

and began to organize activities in the areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea: Spain, Portugal, Malta, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and Egypt. When in 1937 Lord Lloyd, the former High Commissioner of Egypt, became Chairman of the Council, the emphasis on the Mediterranean and the Near East further increased, for it was here that he saw the greatest threat from Italian and German cultural propaganda coming.¹⁴⁴ South America, where the concerns about diminishing economic relations because of Italian and German cultural activity first arose as a result of the D'Abernon Report, of course also had a certain priority. Attention for Scandinavia and Finland was in part a matter of economic interests too. It was thought wise to engage in some kind of follow-up on the British trade exhibitions that had recently taken place and on a number of commercial treaties. Yet this choice was also made "in view of the energy with which Germany is at present endeavouring to influence opinion in Scandinavian countries."¹⁴⁵

Nevertheless, a typical characteristic of the British Council was that it maintained at all times not to be involved in propaganda, but in providing information. The people involved in the council's activities preferred to speak of publicity or cultural diplomacy. In the words of Rex Leeper: "Publicity, as opposed to political propaganda, is the attempt to make known abroad the main features of our political, economic and cultural activities, to give an accurate picture of this country and to refrain from criticizing the activities of other countries."¹⁴⁶ Some of the guiding lines of the British Council can be traced back to the War Propaganda Bureau that operated during the First World War under supervision of the Foreign Office. Examples of this include the targeting of actions at the influential elite of a country and the use of printed material written by established writers that would seem as truthful and untainted as possible. Some of the texts concerned would even be distributed under the imprint of commercial publishing houses. This is no surprise, given the close relations with the Foreign Office and Leeper's own work experience. Yet time and again the British Council emphasized its mission to encourage a better mutual understanding between countries so as to promote global peace and stability. It was part of the British "fair play" image to never be anti-foreign in their statements and to limit itself to a pro-British stance.¹⁴⁷ The activities of

¹⁴⁴ A.J.S. White, *The British Council: The First Twenty-Five Years, 1934-1959* (London: British Council, 1965) 14.

¹⁴⁵ TNA, FO 141/624, P 411/267/150, Confidential Memorandum 'The British Council for Relations with other Countries', News Department, Foreign Affairs, 8 February 1935, page 3.

¹⁴⁶ TNA, FO 800/396, Memorandum by R.A. Leeper, 22 October 1938. Enclosed in Leeper to Cadogan, 22 October 1938, quoted in Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ This is an aspect encountered even today. Marshall and Martens describe how in their interview with Dr. Tom Craig-Cameron, Director of the British Council in Malaysia, the latter noted that the Council is "apolitical" and he "firmly rejected the notion that the British Council works with a fixed set of 'British values' which it is obliged to promote" (Martens and Marshall, 'International organisations', 266).

the British Council were to be mutual, allowing also the other country involved to present itself in Great Britain. As Lord Lloyd phrased it: "We do not force them to 'think British'; we offer them the opportunity to learn what the British think."¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Increasing significance of cultural foreign policy

The Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein and the Dante Alighieri Society, with their emphasis on language and literature as expression of the national soul, can be regarded as typical products of Romantic, Herderian nationalism. As could be expected given the recent creation of the two nations they represented, both organizations were initially concerned with those compatriots who through emigration or 'incomplete' unification resided outside the national territory. The Alliance Française differed from the Schulverein and the Dante because from the start it had the ambition to promote French language and culture among foreigners. This was in part the heritage of the *mission civilisatrice* connected to the French Revolution and the universal value attached to Enlightenment principles. As long as French remained the diplomatic language and the nineteenth-century faith in progress based on Enlightenment principles prevailed, the Alliance Française could to some extent be seen as representing European civilization. Before the First World War, there still was among the European concert of nations a sense of shared supremacy vis à vis the rest of the world.

So far the organizations for the promotion of national language and culture abroad were private initiatives, generally led by writers, academics, civil servants and other groups in society who benefited from and helped shape the nation-state. They regularly received government funding but remained in principle non-governmental. We have seen that after the turn of the century, and especially following the First World War, the governments in Germany, France and Italy respectively began to see cultural foreign policy as a task for the state as well. The weight given to foreign cultural politics grew as a result of an interplay of factors that changed international relations: democratization processes leading to universal suffrage; the rise of aggressive, imperialist nationalism; the experience of the First World War and the resentment caused among the now politically empowered men who had served at the front; new communication technology, able to cross large distances and spread information among broader segments of society. All of these phenomena increased the potential political and economic power of cultural foreign policy.

¹⁴⁸ Colin Forbes Adam, *Life of Lord Lloyd* (London: Macmillan, 1948) 283.

Universal ideologies and state control

What further enhanced the significance of promoting ones culture abroad was the emergence of all-encompassing political ideologies. These made use of culture and modern communication tools to spread their conceptions of society, thereby displaying international ambitions as well. The Second International (1889-1916) dissolved when it was unable to unite socialist and labour parties in the refusal to support the First World War. Once the October Revolution in Russia brought the Bolsheviks to power there, the Communist Third International (1919-1943) was launched in Moscow to rally worldwide support for an international Soviet Republic. In Italy the March on Rome (1922) brought to power Mussolini and the National Fascist Party. From the mid-twenties onwards this government turned into dictatorship, with concurrent propaganda strategies. Germany too came in the hands of a dictators when in 1933 the National-Socialist Party leader Hitler became Chancellor and began to realize his plans for a Third Reich. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) would show to what extent the clash of ideologies in one country would involve the entire international community. It is in this changed political climate that the British Council was created. The Council was also meant to improve trade relations and promote British cultural products abroad but, more so than the Schulverein, the Dante or the Alliance, originated with a clear political function in mind: the mission to defend the British concept of democracy in Europe.

It could be argued that cultural promotion of the kind exercised by the Alliance Française and other such organizations was the symptom of a declining political power that needed to be compensated in the form of aggrandized cultural prestige. The activities of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein were intensified after Germany lost the First World War, the Alliance Française was founded partly in response to its military defeat in 1870 and its weakening position on the international political arena. Similarly, the Dante Alighieri Society was initially hoping to gain the territories it had not been able to claim militarily, its *terre irredente*, and to prove that the young nation was equal to the other major European powers. The relatively late creation of the British Council could from this perspective be explained as a reaction to, if not symptom of a decline that was beginning to make itself felt in the British Empire. However, for such cultural politics to have a compensating effect for countries in military or political decline there needed to be a widespread sense that cultural domination mattered in the first place.

An aspect that is often ignored in studies on foreign cultural propaganda in the interwar years is the emerging influence in Europe of

American culture.¹⁴⁹ We have already mentioned that English at the Paris Treaties was for the first time recognized as diplomatic language besides French. This was demanded by the American delegation, not by the British. Woodrow Wilson spoke no foreign languages. A concrete example of how American culture challenged European models is the American film, widely popular and therefore making it less easy for organizations such as the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council to impress audiences with their own promotional films. Mass consumerism, epitomized by the production processes and social ideas of Henry Ford, was regarded by the established elite in Europe as a threat to their cultural norms and socio-political position. In both democratic and totalitarian states ways were sought to integrate elements of American culture in the political landscape. At the same time, the United States of America too were being drawn into the cultural rivalry of the interwar years. Like Britain it had a tradition of voluntarism, permitting its government to assume in matters concerning the arts and culture that any worthwhile initiative could count on private backing and should not be dependent on the state. Yet in 1938 a Division of Cultural Relations was introduced in the Department of State and from then on the Americans embarked on a promotion of internationalism steeped in a belief in the universality of ideas that shows some similarities with the assumptions we encounter in the British Council.¹⁵⁰

As has been concluded in a particularly balanced and perspicacious analysis of the ‘war of words’ during the interwar years, the activity of the British Council “shows that fascist or communist states were not the only ones to press culture into the service of political objectives.”¹⁵¹ This also demonstrates that to make a distinction between cultural politics and cultural propaganda is highly questionable¹⁵² and that a greater involvement or even control by the state was part of a general historical trend in the tense international climate between the two World Wars.

¹⁴⁹ Interestingly, Chaubet – perhaps sensitized by the Gaullist tradition of anti-Americanism - does mention American competition on the field of cultural propaganda. (Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*, 245-251.) Donaldson, Pisa and Salvetti do not.

¹⁵⁰ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Donald S. Birn, ‘The war of words. The British Council and Cultural Propaganda in the 1930s’, 181; Frank A. Ninkovich, *The diplomacy of ideas. U.S. foreign policy and cultural relations, 1938-1950* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁵¹ Birn, ‘The war of words’, 189.

¹⁵² As proposed by Chaubet by assigning *politique culturelle* to democratic states and *propagande culturelle* to authoritarian states.

CHAPTER 2

THE DANTE ALIGHIERI SOCIETY AND THE BRITISH COUNCIL: THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE

This chapter takes a closer look at how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council were organized in the 1930s. Far from providing an exhaustive and detailed description of the administrative and operational structure of the two organizations, the aim is to concentrate on two particular aspects. Firstly, what was the relationship between the two organizations and the state they were functioning in? The Dante had to adjust itself to an authoritarian government while the Council was expected to have all the freedom of movement possible in a liberal and democratic state. How did this work in practice? Secondly, who were the people at the head of the Dante and the Council in this period, and what professional, political and social background did these key-players have? This latter question is obviously related to the first. It extends further though by giving us information about the motivational drive behind the two organizations that did not come from any governmental influence, including the power of private agency.

In the case of the Dante, the Risorgimento ideals that had stood central to the organization determined what type of persons supported it and to what extent it could adapt to the Fascist regime. To begin with, the social groups engaged in the Dante's activities belonged to those layers of Italian society who benefited from the function they had in a unified Italy, such as politicians, civil servants and teachers. At the same time these groups were part of a national educated upper class that still showed significant regional differences; their heterogeneity made it harder to attach concrete values or institutions to the notion of *italianità*. This might in part explain the tendency to opt for abstract ideals, for seeking roots in the shared Ancient Roman past or in the new future promised by Italian Fascism. In this chapter it will be necessary to take a few steps back in time to explain why the Dante's Risorgimento heritage led to a clear shift in interest once an older generation of members left the scene and how the past determined the relationship with the state. The two most recent histories of the Dante Alighieri Society do not cover the period of the 1930s but the authors suggest that the organization was taken over by the Mussolini's regime.¹ The main reason for the latter conclusion is sought in the change of

¹ Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella Società "Dante Alighieri"* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995) and Patrizia Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella "Dante Alighieri"* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995).

statutes in 1931 that introduced the article that Mussolini would from then on appoint the Society's President. However, there has been no in-depth research into how the position of the Dante Alighieri Society was affected by the tightening of control from above nor has attention been paid to the Dante's attempts to remain independent. Given the longer history of the Dante, the background and structure of this organization has claimed a greater number of pages in this chapter than the section on the Council.

Like the Dante, the British Council was officially a non-governmental, private organization. An important difference is that it was from the start closely connected to the Foreign Office. The Dante and its Committees abroad regularly cooperated with the diplomats and civil servants of *Affari Esteri*. But even during the Fascist years it was not as embedded in *Affari Esteri* as the Council was in the Foreign Office. There was also a degree of homogeneity, a consensus about what the best of British culture was; a result of the Oxbridge formation that in the 1930s most of the high-ranking British civil servants still had. This does not mean that the Council always followed the Foreign Office's policy. Several figures within the Council were known for being critics of appeasement. In 1938-39 preparations were made for a Ministry of Information that could serve during wartime. According to the initial plans, the Council was meant to be absorbed by this new ministry. The Council was able to block this and maintain its relatively independent position under the aegis of the Foreign Office. One of the most important arguments used in favour of the Council's independence was that its apolitical position was essential to the efficacy of its work. This echoes the arguments put forward by the Dante when it tried to maintain its independence from the state.

Internal leadership and government ties. The Dante Alighieri Society between two centuries

Risorgimento and freemasonry

Numerous central figures in the Italian *Risorgimento* and in the early days of the new Kingdom were Freemasons. The best known example is Giuseppe Garibaldi, the national hero, who was initiated as Freemason in the lodge of Montevideo (Uruguay) in 1844 and became Grand Master of the first national Masonic organization: the Italian Grand Orient. In 1889, at the time when the Dante Alighieri Society was founded, Francesco Crispi was for a second term the Italian Prime Minister. Not only was Crispi himself a member of the Grand Orient: so were Giuseppe Zanardelli (Minister of Justice), Federico Seismidoda (Minister of Finance), Paolo Boselli (Minister of Public Instruction and later President of the Dante), Pietro Lacava (Minister of Post and Telegraphs) and Benedetto Brin (Minister of Naval Affairs). Furthermore, it was well known

that Francesco Crispi was close friends with Adriano Lemmi, the Grand Master of the Grande Oriente. Although the Masons denied having any political agenda these personal ties certainly enabled them to influence government policy, allowing them to safeguard the secular character of the state and to encourage the passing of civil and social reforms cherished by their democratic wing.² The Italian Freemasonry, besides having a considerable albeit covert part to play in the political developments of the country, was also influential in the social life of the upcoming bourgeoisie. Rather than being an exclusive network of intellectuals and aristocrats like it had been in the past, by the late nineteenth century the Freemasonry became far more a social and political training ground for the bourgeoisie of the new nation. It gathered mainly middle-class entrepreneurs, traders, clerks, artisans and liberal professionals who found in the massonic lodges a way to establish their identity as the guardians of Italy's new secular, republican and unified state. Observing with concern the emergence of a mass politics that gave ever more voters to the socialists and – after Don Luigi Sturzo founded the Partito Popolare Italiano in 1919 – also the Catholics, the Masons sought to encourage a more centrist political direction.³

Given the significance of the Freemasonry in the context of Italy's nation-building and its worship of mazzinian republican ideals, it is not surprising that so many Masons were members and even leaders of the Dante Alighieri Society. The foundation of the Dante was to a large extent driven by the support it received from Masons and at times the Grand Orient actually made donations.⁴ Occasionally this provoked clashes within the Dante because of the strictly anticlerical stance of the Masons and the fear that they were too dominant a component within the organization.⁵ Possibly the process of 'ritualisation' that has been seen as a characteristic of the Dante in its first decades of its existence should not be connected solely to the 'sacralisation of politics'.⁶ This strongly felt connection with the Risorgimento, the sacred duties that the members saw for themselves, the faith in the nation and the almost religious rituals with which these sentiments were expressed at the annual congresses might also have been inspired by the Masons' ceremonial cult.

The patriotism of the Dante Alighieri Society could potentially have implied warm ties with the royal family that had played so great a part in the Italian Unification: the House of Savoy. However, because of the many republican Masons amongst its members and leadership, the Dante had to be careful with how it officially dealt with the monarchy. It had to be made clear to

² Fulvio Conti, *Storia della massoneria italiana. Dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003) 120-122.

³ Anna Maria Isastia, *Massoneria e Fascismo. La repressione degli anni Venti* (Florence: Libreria Chiari 2003) 28.

⁴ For example, in December 1904 the Council of the Grand Orient decided on giving 500 lire to the Dante (Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 208, footnote 154).

⁵ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 31, 34, 176-177 and 202-218.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 279.

the republican Dante members that gaining the royal family's sympathy was of instrumental value rather than ideological. A first sign of rapprochement came subsequent to the murder of King Umberto I of Savoy on the 29th of July 1900. The Dante Congress that was being held at that moment in Ravenna passed a motion in support of the mourning Queen Margherita and was then immediately suspended. At the King's funeral, Pasquale Villari laid a wreath on the tomb as the President and representative of the Dante. Thereafter, while Queen Margherita's son Victor Emmanuel III took over the throne, the now Queen Mother continued to follow the Dante's activities. Good relations between the Savoys and the Dante Central Office were from then on maintained. In 1918 Queen Elena of Savoy, wife of King Victor Emmanuel III, became Life Member of the Committee in Rome and registered Prince Umberto of Savoia and the four Princesses as well. After the March on Rome these relations went a step further, with even the King himself presiding at the Annual Congress held in 1927.⁷

The members connected to the Italian Grand Orient were a cardinal force in the Dante Alighieri Society right until the early 1930s. How the Grand Orient reacted to the rise of the Fascist movement in Italy is therefore relevant to a better understanding of the Dante in the same period. In June 1908 a schism took place within the Grand Orient, leading to the creation of the Grand Lodge of Italy (*Gran Loggia d'Italia*). In the early days of the Italian Fascist movement, the Grand Masters of the two Masonic organizations – Domizio Torrigiani and Raul Palermi respectively – both had the difficult task of mediating between the Fascists and the anti-Fascists among their members.⁸ However, the Grand Lodge's members tended more to support Mussolini and soon this was also being used as a way to set the Duce against the more left-wing Grand Orient. The members of the latter had initially reacted positively to the rise of Fascism. The programme that the *Fasci di combattimento* first proposed at their launch in 1919 appeared to be fairly progressive and democratic. Even when that turned out to be misleading, the Masons of the Grand Orient made the same mistaken judgement as many Italian liberals did. They assumed that it would be possible to control the National Fascist Party, to transform it into a force for civic reform and to use it as an instrument to fend off the revolutionary left.⁹

Only gradually did it become clear to the Grand Orient's leadership that Mussolini's government was taking a very different direction than they had hoped for. In February 1923 the Grand Orient's Council officially declared that membership of the Fascist National Party was incompatible with being a Mason belonging to the Grand Orient. Only then did key figures in the Party, such as Italo Balbo, Giuseppe Bottai and Galeazzo Ciano, leave the Lodges they

⁷ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 107-109; 'La Dante a Fiume. Atti del XXIX Congresso' in: *Pagine della Dante* 6 (November 1924) 18.

⁸ Isastia, *Massoneria e Fascismo*, 48.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 26, 37 and 38.

had been part of. The murder of Giacomo Matteotti in June 1924 was the turning point. On the 30th of May Matteotti had accused the Fascists in a parliamentary speech of violent intervention in the national elections of April 1924, crimes that he had previously denounced in a book published in London. Thereafter Matteotti was 'eliminated', an act that was immediately attributed to Mussolini. Subsequently, the Grand Orient outspokenly chose for a militant anti-Fascist position.¹⁰ Mussolini declared the Grand Orient an enemy of Fascism and on 19 May 1925 a law was passed that by implication declared Freemasonry illegal. By the end of the year both the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge had disbanded their Lodges. Some of these had been severely attacked by Fascist squads, as were the Masons themselves.

It is worth noting that the ban on Freemasonry was only implemented in Italy. In Italian communities abroad, the local Fasci were prepared to accept a Fascist Party member's affiliation to a lodge because of the central role that Masons often played in maintaining the *italianità* of these communities.¹¹ This means that the Dante's Central Office and Local Committees in Italy had to reckon with the ban, but not necessarily the Local Committees abroad. The ambivalence of the situation is also sustained by the observation that Italian Freemasonry and Fascism clashed because both were claiming for themselves the cultural heritage of the Risorgimento.¹² The Dante Alighieri Society too was competing with the National Fascist Party in this respect. It was not as secretive as the Freemasonry and was less involved in internal politics, yet the Dante had such a strong Masonic component that one could have expected it to suffer a worse fate during Mussolini's regime. It shows once again how very complex the political game was during the *ventennio fascista* and how the Dante had a special position on the stage. The longest ruling President of the Dante Alighieri Society, Paolo Boselli, was a Mason of the Grand Orient. His story illustrates how Risorgimento, Freemasonry, the Dante and Fascism could be interconnected.

From Risorgimento to Fascism: President Paolo Boselli

Paolo Boselli, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society from 1906 to 1932, more than any other of its active members embodied the legacy of the Society. Born on the 8th of June 1838 in Savona, on the Ligurian coast, he graduated as a law student in 1860. In that year the Kingdom of Sardinia had unified much of Northern and Central Italy and was well on its way to proclaiming a Kingdom of Italy. In 1870, when Rome was conquered and added to the new Kingdom,

¹⁰ Ibidem, 56-59.

¹¹ Luca de Caprariis, 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse', 162.

¹² Ibidem, 86.

Boselli was elected as Member of Parliament. He served in various ministerial posts, from Minister of Agriculture to Minister of Finance. Most notably, he was Minister of Public Education (Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione) from 17 February 1888 to 6 February 1891. In 1906, at the ripe age of sixty-eight, Boselli was appointed as President of the Dante. He managed to remain at the head of the organization throughout both the turmoil brought about by the First World War and the changes that came with the rise of the Italian Fascist movement. In June 1916, in the midst of the war, Boselli took on the function of Prime Minister but he resigned in October 1917, following Italy's severe military defeat against the Austro-Hungarian army at Caporetto.

In its official publications, the Dante Alighieri Society prided itself in having such an aged president. For example, in 1928, on Boselli's ninetieth birthday he was referred to as the 'Grand Old Man' (il 'Grande Vegliardo') who had presided over the organization for well over a decade. The extensive ceremonial celebrations on this occasion showed what importance was attached to making known how well established Boselli was.¹³ Boselli was expected to inspire admiration for how in his advanced age he always guided the Dante Alighieri Society with "intelletto d'amore", an intelligence guided by love.¹⁴ Here love was presumably intended as patriotic love and the expression itself originated from the first canzone in Dante Alighieri's *Vita nuova*: "You women who have understanding of love" ("Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore"). But by the 1920s, it was not what was tried and tested that was per definition praiseworthy. In the avant-garde cultural movements that had been gaining ground since the turn of the century and in the Fascist revolutionary movement, it was not age and wisdom but youth and dynamism that were revered. As if to satisfy traditionalists and modernists alike, the youthfulness of Boselli was emphasized as well. Hence in an interview with Boselli on his eighty-seventh birthday, this "great teacher of Italianness" ("grande maestro d'italianità") was described as an "illustrious Old Man" ("illustre Vegliardo") with yet a magnificent and blooming old age ("magnifica e fiorente vecchiezza"), with a firmness of thought and a sharp memory. In the same interview, it was recalled how the year before, on the 10th of June 1924, Mussolini had received from the hands of Boselli the first golden medal of the Dante for the "champions of Italianness" ("benemeriti dell'italianità"). On this occasion Mussolini had in turn praised Boselli for being the man whose name brought together all the noblest tradition of the Risorgimento, up to and including the triumph of youth brought by the Fascist Revolution.¹⁵ This was the same vision of Italian history as the one canonized in 1927 by the historian Gioacchino Volpe's *Italia in cammino: l'ultimo cinquantennio* (Milan: Treves, 1927), whereby Fascism was seen as the final act in the struggle for national

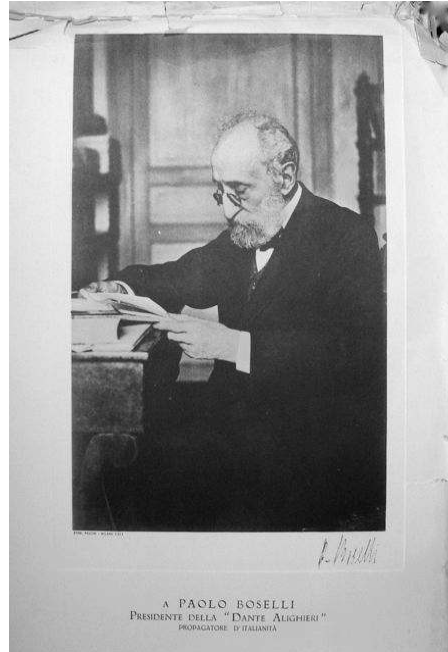
¹³ 'La « Dante Alighieri » per Paolo Boselli' in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1928) 37.

¹⁴ 'Plausi alla « Dante » in Parlamento' in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1930) 61.

¹⁵ 'Paolo Boselli parla della «Dante»' in: *Pagine* 4 (July-August 1925) 72-74.

unification. At Boselli's ninety-third birthday, in 1931, in celebratory speeches held in the Senate he was described as being in his "green old age" ("verde vecchiezza").¹⁶

Boselli's relationship with the Duce and the National Fascist Party must be seen in the light of the initial convergence that Mussolini sought with the nationalist factions of Italian society. In the early 1920's, before Matteotti's murder made evident the violence and lawlessness that accompanied Mussolini's growing power, having the Duce at the head of the government was seen by many – also foreigners abroad – as a good safeguard for order in the country. Boselli's political position had initially been liberal but he drew closer to right-wing, nationalist expansionist politics under the authoritarian government of Francesco Crispi. The strikes of 1919 had augmented the conservative Italians' aversion for socialism. No doubt Boselli belonged to those who saw in the leadership of Mussolini, the once socialist journalist turned champion of a Fascist revolution, a way to curb the socialist threat. Boselli's dedication to furthering Italy's cultural and political power as a nation, just as the nationalist ideals that motivated most Italian Dante members, makes it likely that he genuinely sympathized with the goals defined by the National Fascist Party. In 1924, a thousand members of the National Fascist Party of Savona ceremoniously gave Boselli honorary Party membership. Boselli officially thanked the Fascists from Savona with a letter, published in the Dante's internal bi-monthly. Here Boselli asserted that he saw in the Fascist Party a similar striving to that of the Dante Alighieri Society, equally achieved through ideas and action, spiritual and factual renewal.



Paolo Boselli, President of the Dante Alighieri Society, 1906-1932 (Photo: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri).

¹⁶ 'Per Paolo Boselli e per la «Dante»: discorsi al Senato del Regno di S.E. Grandi e S.E. Federzoni per la «verde vecchiezza» e il 93o genetliaco di Boselli' in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1931) 57.

Your Duce is the Duce of those who with Him want an Italy that is great in its heart, in its intentions, in its work, great in its own being, great compared with other nations.¹⁷

Boselli refers to “your Duce”, suggesting that what he sees is an alliance between the Dante and the National Fascist Party, with both being equal to and independent from each other. For it appears from Boselli’s words that Mussolini in his eyes was not yet the key symbol of the nation, which is something the Duce became in the process of constructing his personal dictatorship. The Dante President described the Party membership card as a distinctive of those who with the help of God and the tricolour flag of the People and the King wanted to make Italy ever more worthy of its martyrs, heroes and prophets. It was the cross, the national flag and the crown that mattered; no mention was made of the pervasive *Fascio Littorio*. We may add that once again Boselli’s agedness and vitality were brought to the fore, as he wrote that the words of Savona’s Party members had given him in his old age the fervour of youth.¹⁸

In 1927 a message from Boselli to the Italian youngsters was published in *Il Tricolore*, a weekly for young supporters of the Fascist movement published by the *Libreria del Littorio*. It was apparently thought to convey a message that was also suitable for the Dante members and therefore reprinted in the Dante bi-monthly. Grateful as Boselli was to God for having experienced the passion and victory of the Risorgimento, so too – he wrote – should the Italian youth be thanking God for living during the wonderful ascent of the resurgent nation. He encouraged the young to educate themselves in action and sacrifice, gaining knowledge from books and learning from their mothers how to love the fatherland. An “ardent youth” (“giovinezza ardente”) was needed to further build the nation. This time Boselli did refer to the *Fascio Littorio*, which he presented as a symbol of restorative, liberating and creative energies.¹⁹

One young author, Dario Lischi, devoted an entire article to the “spiritual youth” of the then ninety-three-year-old Boselli. Whereas spiritual renewal had removed all the “stale and rancid old stuff” (“vecchumi stantii e rancidi”), Lischi, on behalf of the young revolutionary generation of “impenitent old-age eradicators” (“svecchiatori impenitenti”) wanted to express his admiration for Boselli. According to Lischi, despite his old age and the more than sixty years at the forefront of Italian political life, he had maintained a youthfulness of spirit, heart and mind so sturdy and fresh, so healthy and active, in short, so “anti-old-times-revering” (“antipassista”) that

¹⁷ “Il vostro Duce è Duce di quanti vogliono con Lui l’Italia grande nel cuore, nei propositi, nel lavoro, grande nell’essere suo, grande al confronto delle nazioni” (Paolo Boselli fascista *ad honorem* in: *Pagine* 3 (May 1924) 58).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ ‘«Ai Giovani d’Italia», messaggio di Paolo Boselli nel n. 2 de *Il Tricolore*’ in: *Pagine* 1 (January-February 1927) 5.

he could be regarded as among the best of the present day youth.²⁰ Placed among the “Apostles of our Risorgimento” (“Apostoli del nostro Risorgimento”), on a par with figures such as Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi, Boselli was viewed by Lischi as a man who knew about sacrifice and whose motto was “to act” (“agire”).²¹ Some direct remarks followed about how the past was to inspire the future. Seeing Boselli came from the Ligurian coast, he was held to be aware that Italy’s power had once been gained at sea and that it was from the sea that such power would return. The example of Imperial Rome, of the medieval glories of Genoa, Venice and Pisa, were to be levers for the future: tradition was to be an incentive to venture ever further. With this vision of the national past as confirmation of the greatness that Italy was on its way of achieving, Lischi claimed that the young Fascists revered Boselli as a prophet who lead the way. The symbolical and promotional value that was attributed to this image is evident in the editorial introduction to this article, which explained that the Dante had been eager to reprint these words because the spiritual youth of the ‘Eminent Old Man’ (“Insigne Vegliardo”) was the same perennial youth of the ideal that led the Dante.²²

Another initiative that illustrates the veneration accorded to Boselli is that of the Dante Committee of Busto Arsizio, which had several thousand copies made of a photographic portrait of the ‘Illustrious Old Man’ (“Illustre Vegliardo”), reading the pages of a book in thoughtful meditation. In presenting this initiative, the Committee members wrote about Boselli’s various political functions, his belonging to the Italian parliament since 1870 and his joy as a patriot at having witnessed the conciliation between the Italian Kingdom and the Vatican. The members were convinced that:

[...] honouring Paolo Boselli, means honouring the continuity and the glory of our race in its works of peace and thought. Having His meditative effigy means possessing in Him the symbol of the inexorable freshness of Italian thought.²³

The Presidents of the various Dante Committees were asked to offer their members the possibility to give a donation in return for a copy of the portrait.

²⁰ “[...] che pure conserva una giovinezza d’animo, di cuore e di mente così robusta e fresca, così sana e attiva, così...antipassista da esser ben degno di figurare tra i primi dei « giovani » del tempo presente e fra i migliori di questi giovani [...]” (Dario Lischi, ‘La giovinezza spirituale di Paolo Boselli’ in: *Pagine 4* (July-August 1931) 91-92, 91).

²¹ *Ibidem*, 92.

²² *Ibidem*, 91.

²³ “[...] significa onorare la continuità e la gloria della nostra stirpe nelle opera della pace e del pensiero. Averne l’effigie meditabonda vuol dire possedere in Lui il simbolo della freschezza inesauribile del pensiero italiano” (Circular letter from Francesco Gianni and Luigi Milani of the Busto Arsizio Committee to the Presidency of the Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society, date to be indicated by the postal stamp, 1930, Busto Arsizio, N. 11115, Anno 1930, Fasc. 3, Fasc. 3/3.10, Busta 1239, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1928-1930, ACS).

All the money collected would be sent to the Central Office in Rome to support the Society's activities.

It was not only in the interest of the Dante Alighieri Society to underline how the Society and in particular its President represented the continuity between the Risorgimento and the Fascist Revolution. For Mussolini as well, to secure political support from part of the administrative and entrepreneurial elite, it was useful to keep in place such a respected organization that could help legitimize his regime as the fulfilment of the Risorgimento. This is well-illustrated by Boselli's intervention as spokesman in the Italian Senate of the project for the approval of the Lateran Accords, the agreements reached between the Italian state and the Roman Catholic Church in 1929. Alfredo Bacelli, a fellow member of the Italian Senate, described the vote on the Lateran Accords as a historic moment not only for the "vigorous and clear" ("vigoroso e lucido") speech held by the Duce as Head of Government, but also for the words spoken by Boselli. Bacelli claimed that even Mussolini had said to be touched by Boselli's intervention.²⁴ Praising the clarity of mind and the ardour of this man beyond his nineties, Bacelli saw in this event the proof that even while youth was renewing Italian life, there was still a place for "noble and worthy old age" ("vecchiezza nobile e degna"). No one better than Boselli could reassure those people who held on to the past for fear of what this unforeseen settlement between Church and State could bring. This Dante President was the only survivor of those who in 1870 had signed the Law of Guarantees that was offered to the Pope Pius IX once the Papal States had been taken over. As such, Bacelli pointed out, he had a unique symbolic function.

The new generation, guided by the great Man that God has conceded to Italy [Mussolini], could with more assured openness take a step along the new road because beside it, with serene tranquillity, the Man that represented the spirit of the Italian Risorgimento [Boselli] was also taking this step.²⁵

The paternalism that was projected on Boselli in such descriptions made him a kind of spiritual father for all patriotic Italians. In this specific case, we also see what function such a figure could have for Mussolini when making his policy, *in casu* the Lateran Accords, acceptable to the traditionalist and nationalist groups of Italian society.

²⁴ "[...] lo stesso Mussolini, non uso a commuoversi facilmente, affermò di aver ascoltato con emozione" (Alfredo Bacelli, 'Paolo Boselli e i Trattati Lateranensi' in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1929) 45-46, 45).

²⁵ "La nuova generazione, guidata dall'Uomo grande che Dio ha concesso all'Italia, poneva con franchezza più sicura il piede sulla nuova via, perchè, accanto a lei, ce lo poneva, con serena tranquillità, l'Uomo che rappresentava lo spirito del Risorgimento Italiano" (ibidem, 46).

A new generation

However much the vigour of Boselli was emphasized, the Dante Alighieri Society's central leadership could not deny the need to attract new members among the youth. The image of a vibrant organization capable of connecting the Risorgimento heritage with the new élan of Italian Fascism was more on paper than in actual reality. One could suspect that the very focus on Boselli's youthfulness is evidence of the Dante leaders' concern about connecting with the next generation. Towards the end of the nineteenth century it had become harder to rejuvenate the membership, seeing the irredentist movement began to be seen as a thing of the past, of little current relevance. Young people, and certainly many of the intellectuals among them, were more easily interested in socialism or in modernist movements. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, the participation of younger members had been stimulated by the creation of local Youth Sub-committees (*sottocomitati giovanili*). The First World War, with the renewed assertion of Italy's international position and of its territorial claims, helped to increase the popularity of the Dante's ideals among the youth. Furthermore, by then somewhat dissatisfied by the answers that a positivist philosophy could provide, there was a swing towards irrational life visions.²⁶

Though the revival of nationalist thinking provided welcome new blood for the Society, it was also evident that there was a considerable ideological gap between the generations. The younger generation was fed by a more aggressive nationalism. They longed for an active involvement of the Dante in the First World War, in the form of propaganda and military training. Like other interventionists, the younger members of the Dante saw the war as regenerative event. Many cultivated the disregard for life, the voluntarism and the vitalism brandished by the Futurists. This was a different set of motives than those that drove the older generation of Dante members to support the war, which saw it more as a necessary evil to defend the beloved fatherland.²⁷

During and after the First World War, the dissatisfaction of veterans and the generational revolt were both key to the further development of the Italian Fascist movement. From the start, Mussolini recognized the importance of appealing to the youth and knew how to capitalize on the need of those who hadn't fought in the war to dedicate themselves to the nation in some other way. Particular attention was given to university students, who were

²⁶ Boselli can be said to have belonged to the intellectual generation that contributed culturally to the construction of Italy. June Edmunds and Bryan Turner have posited that newer generations play an important role in deconstructing primordial versions of national identity in favour of more open ones. In the case of the generation that followed Boselli's, the contrary was true (June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* [Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002] 119-120).

²⁷ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 310-312.

approached as the future new leaders and formed a considerable part of the Fascist Party membership. By focussing on the generational change, a sense of revolution was created that did not however touch the social class structure. The older generation of the ruling class was to be replaced by the younger generation of that same class, so that apart from the mobility of middle classes, Mussolini was maintaining the social order as it was. At the same time, by presenting Fascist forms of entertainment and activity as the modern-day occupations for all young people, the intergenerational cohesion within the working classes was reduced, thereby weakening their political force.²⁸

In the interwar years the Dante was obliged to seek a compromise between the organization's fairly rigid and well-established traditionalism and the youthfulness (*giovanilismo*) held high by the new politics.²⁹ Quite inevitably the style and mindset connected to Italian Fascism gained evermore influence within the organization. The rise of Fascism coincided with the gradual dying out of the 'old guard' of Dante members, which meant that the ideological tendencies of the younger generation gradually gained the upper hand. The death of Ernesto Nathan³⁰ in 1921 was a prelude of the changes to come. With no longer such a strong defender of secularism in its leadership, the Dante secularist and Massonic tradition began to wane.³¹ In 1927 a number of the most prominent leaders passed away: Giuseppe Zaccagnini, Donato Sanminiatielli and Giannetto Valli.³² Luigi Rava, who had been President of the Dante from 1903 to 1906 and also belonged to the old generation, replaced Sanminiatielli as Vice-President, staying on until he died in 1938, aged seventy-eight. Libero Fracassetti, a member of the Central Council in charge of promoting Italian books, became the new Secretary General until he too died, in 1930.³³ Together

²⁸ Bruno Wanrooij, 'Youth, Generation Conflict, and Political Struggle in Twentieth-Century Italy' in: *The European Legacy* 4/1 (1999) 72-88, 73-76.

²⁹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 171-174.

³⁰ Anna Maria Isastia, *Scritti politici di Ernesto Nathan* (Foggia: Bastogi, 1998); Alessandro Levi, *Ricordi dei tempi e della vita di Ernesto Nathan*, Andrea Bocchi ed. (Domus Mazziniana-Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, Pisa-Lucca, 2006).

³¹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 399.

³² Giuseppe Zaccagnini (d. 1927) until 1907 directed several Italian schools in Constantinople and wrote articles from there for Italian newspapers. He was closely involved in the Dante Committee of Constantinople and from 1907 up to his death was secretary general of the central Dante in Rome. Donato Sanminiatielli (1866-1927) after leaving a diplomatic career became a close friend of Pasquale Villari, with whom he joined the Dante central council. From 1898 onwards Sanminiatielli was the Dante's vice president; Giannetto Valli (1869-1927) was auditor of the Dante from 1907 to 1910, since the First World War a member of the central council and between 1921 and 1922 the mayor of Rome (Giulio Natali, 'Giuseppe Zaccagnini, "Il segretario ideale"' in: idem, *Ricordi e profili di maestri e amici* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1965) 183-191; Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 280-281, 287 and 296).

³³ Luigi Rava (1860-1938), professor of philosophy of law at the universities of Siena and Pavia, then of administrative sciences in Bologna, had a distinguished political career serving as member of parliament, minister of agriculture, of public instruction and of finance, and mayor of Rome (1920-1921). As of the end of 1920 he was a member of the

with Boselli, they tried to still defend the original nature of the Dante. As more criticism against the old management came from the younger generation of members, who were often members of the National Fascist Party, so too the younger leaders with Fascist sympathies moved to the forefront: Enrico Scodnik, Roberto Forges Davanzati, Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco and Eugenio Coselschi.³⁴

Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco (b. 1866) was several times Member of Parliament, former Undersecretary at the Ministries of Public Works, of Interior and of Mercantile Navy, and Senator from 1929 onwards. He was part of the Dante's Central Council as of 1920. Roberto Forges-Davanzati (b. 1880 – d. 1936) worked as a journalist. Initially driven by syndicalist ideas, he had been a collaborator of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*. Subsequently he joined the burgeoning nationalist movement, became travelling editor and Roman correspondent of the *Corriere della Sera* and founded *L'Idea Nazionale* (1910). Enrico Scodnik (b. 1866 – d. 1951), after a military career, became staff member and then Director General of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (INA). From 1912 to 1929 he had been a member of the Dante's Central Council especially concerned with Italy's territorial claims in the Adriatic area. From 1933 to 1943 he was Vice-President and then administrator of the Dante. He helped found the Museum of Italian Patriots at the Fortress of Spielberg, in Brno (Czechoslovakia), which was an almost holy 'lieu de mémoire' of the Italian Risorgimento. His interest in maintaining the collective memory also came to the fore in his contribution to organizing the historical archive of the Dante as well as a historical exhibition on occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. Interestingly, he was also a member of the Società Geografica Italiana. Forges Davanzati was President of the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers (from 1929-1933), a member of the Italian Senate as of 1934 and a Central Councillor of the Dante.³⁵ Upon his death he was praised for having expressed his belief in Fascism both in thought and in action, making it his way of life, for having been antidemocratic and antimasonic, and for having sensed early on the demise of the old political parties, choosing instead nationalism as guiding principle.³⁶ Coselschi was the President of the National Association of War Volunteers

Italian Senate. The Rava Law of 20 June 1909, number 364, was the first in Italy to protect cultural heritage on a national scale. Following his earlier efforts in nature conservation, Rava also became president of the Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche (Enit), Italy's national board for tourism. Libero Fracassetti (1863-1930), also a former minister of public instruction (1906), was a close collaborator and friend of Rava. Fracassetti joined the Dante central council in 1920 and from 1926 on was specially charged with the promotion of Italian books. From 1927 until his death he was the secretary general of the Dante. He was closely involved in the restoration of Palazzo Firenze, the Roman base of the Dante's Central Council. (Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 282 and 295.)

³⁴ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 31, 399 and 419-420.

³⁵ Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 301.

³⁶ Speech by Luigi Federzoni, President of the Senate, The Italian Kingdom's Senate, Parliamentary Acts – Discussions, 15 December 1936.

(Associazione Nazionale Volontari di Guerra) and former collaborator of D'Annunzio, who however did not have a flattering opinion of him, despite his active involvement in the Fiume enterprise. In the words of historian Michael A. Ledeen, Coselschi was an "opportunistic and rather mediocre" man.³⁷

Symbolic for the constricted space in which the Dante would find itself was Palazzo Firenze, the building in Rome where until this day the organization is based. Boselli had until 1925 insisted that though the Dante aided government activity, it was by no means to accept any offer of a new office building given by the State. Attempts were made to buy an old, noble palace but eventually Boselli could find no way to refuse Mussolini's 'politically indebted' gift. It was confirmed in the spring of 1926 that the Dante would be given Palazzo Firenze after the Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia had moved out of it at the end of the year. Once the building was indeed handed over, an extensive restoration began. On 21st of April 1930, officially the day dedicated to the poet Dante, Mussolini, accompanied by Bottai (Ministero delle Corporazioni) and Giunta (Ministero degli Affari Esteri), ceremoniously visited the new location of the Central Office of the Dante Alighieri Society. In thanking Boselli for the reverent inaugural speech, Mussolini quoted Gioberti's phrase "There where the language is, the Nation is" ("Dove è la lingua, ivi è la Nazione") to illustrate the importance of defending the Italian language at home and abroad and commented on the coincidence that the palace's name, Palazzo Firenze, coincided with the hometown of Dante. All nations, Mussolini was keen to recall, had similar institutions to spread their own language and with infinitely more means, especially France and Germany. In talking about cultural foreign policy, it so appears that even Mussolini could not avoid succumbing to the claim that the grass on the other side was greener.³⁸

³⁷ "Many things can be said of Eugenio Coselschi, but D'Annunzio perhaps summed the man up best one day in a letter to Giuseppe Piffer, his private secretary, who had written D'Annunzio to announce the arrival of an excited female nationalist who was desperate to see him. What should Piffer do? The comandante replied: 'Have her flutter off to Coselschi, or some other literary figure with time on his hands.' The change from the passionately committed Kochnitzky to the opportunistic and rather mediocre Coselschi may well epitomize the situation in D'Annunzian Fiume [...]" (Michael Arthur Ledeen, *D'Annunzio: The First Duce*, 2nd ed. [Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2002] 186).

³⁸ Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 76; 'La Casa della "Dante"' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1926) 30; Benito Mussolini, 'L'assegnazione del Palazzo di Firenze alla "Dante"' in: *Pagine 1* (January-February 1927) 5; Rodolfo Bonfiglietti, 'Il Palazzo di Firenze ed il suo restauro' in: *Pagine della Dante 4* (July-August 1929) 70-74; 'Il Duce a Palazzo di Firenze' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1930) 27-29; 'Inaugurazione della nuova sede della "Dante Alighieri". Un discorso del Duce sulle finalità della benemerita istituzione' in: *Il Popolo di Roma*, 23 April 1930, 6; 'Per il Palazzo di Firenze' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1930) 35-36.

Issue of independence

The revision of the Dante statutes was already being discussed in 1931, when Boselli was still President. It is unclear where the initiative came from, whether it came from an internal call within the Society or was urged for by the Head of Government. Boselli himself presented a proposal via Giunta, the Undersecretary of State, to Mussolini at the end of January 1931. A commission composed of Forges Davanzati, Celesia di Vegliasco and Marotta had helped draft the new statutes and Boselli requested Mussolini's comments and approval before letting the Central Council vote on it.³⁹ In general terms, the changes suggested were meant to reduce the democratic participation in decision-making, increase control over the finances and improve efficiency. The old statutes foresaw a Central Council made up of 28 members and an Executive Board, without further specifying the tasks of the members of either group. With Boselli's proposed new statutes the Central Council was to be limited to 24 members of which eight were to form the Directive Board (Direttorio). The Directive Board was to be in charge of the entire running of the Society and of choosing the Secretary General that would lead the Central Office.⁴⁰

The Directive Board together with the sixteen remaining members of the Central Council were expected to discuss decisions and approve the yearly financial report. Until then the participants of the Annual Congress approved the financial report. However, the Congress gave no opportunity to examine the figures closely and for tactical purposes some details regarding propaganda expenses could not be openly mentioned. The finances of the Society were now to be under better supervision. A Secretary-Treasurer and a delegate specifically in charge of finances – both appointed by the President – were to be part of the Directive Board. The Central Council would vote on the financial report after two auditors chosen outside the Council had examined it. Committees were to be instructed not to spend more on their own administration than a fourth of their income through annual individual membership fees.

Care had to be put in making sure that the Presidents of the major local Dante Committees were to be included in the Central Council. Here Boselli appeared to want to mitigate the discontent that could be expected if financial control was restricted to a body that would not include them. Furthermore, the old statutes enabled the Annual Congress to elect the Dante President and the Central Councillors. The new statutes would only give Local Committee Presidents the right to vote. They were deemed most capable to judge who

³⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli to possibly Giunta, Personal, 28 January 1931.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, Statutes of the Dante Alighieri Society, January 1931.

deserved to be in the Council and, as Boselli argued, a more hierarchical elective process was more suited to the new – modern – times.⁴¹ Significantly, the idea was to let the Committee Presidents vote for the Councillors on the 21st of April, the Anniversary of Rome, thereby symbolically connecting the procedure with the myth of Rome as carrier of the Roman imperial heritage and capital of Fascist Italy. The 30 Honorary Councillors were instead to be chosen by the Council. Even if the proposed new statutes took away any decisional impact the Annual Congress could have, what was to be put on the Congress agenda was first to be approved by the Directive Board. All registered members could participate in the Congress and its main purpose was to be the promotion of the Society.⁴²

Furthermore, Local Committees were to be created only with prior authorization from the Central Council, preventing undesired ones from being formed, and the local Councils had to be approved by the central Directive Board so as to ensure that Local Committees were led by people adhering to the principles held high by the Regime.⁴³ Every Committee was expected to have a President and ten Councillors, to be chosen by the Committee members at a general assembly. Within twenty days the list of chosen members had to be communicated to the Directive Board for ratification. In serious cases the Central Council was to be able to dissolve a Local Committee. Each Committee was responsible for its own finances. Inheritances and Life Membership fees were however to be considered as part of the inalienable property of the Dante Society as a whole. By the end of January, Committees were obliged to send an activity and a financial report.⁴⁴

Grandi, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, let Giunta know that he was interested in following what was going on with the reorganization of the Dante. He explicitly added that this interest was not because of any intention of his ministry to incorporate the Dante but because it needed to know how the Dante would act abroad.⁴⁵ That Grandi felt the need to be clear about this, suggests that there was some talk of Affari Esteri taking over all of the Dante's tasks. Grandi further explained his wish to be involved by pointing out that in Tunisia, where local National Fascist Party sections did not exist, a great part of the battle against the 'denationalisation' (*snazionalizzazione*) of the Italians living there was being entrusted by the Ministry to the Dante. Therefore Grandi was

⁴¹ "Ciò sembra opportuno per abolire un sistema elettivo non più consono coi nuovi tempi [...]" (Statutes, articles II-III, *ibidem*).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ "[...] si garantisce che le persone poste a Capo dei Comitati stessi siano tutte di provata fede e operanti conformemente al Regime" (Statutes, article IV, *ibidem*).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ "La cosa interessa moltissimo il mio Dicastero che, pur escludendo ogni intendimento di assorbire la "Dante", ha però necessità di seguirne da presso i programmi di azione all'Estero [...]" (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, N. 1207, Dino Grandi, MAE, to Francesco Giunta, Undersecretary of State of President of the Council of Ministers, 26 March 1931).

eager to be kept informed and to be given the possibility to give feedback regarding the Dante's reorganization.⁴⁶ Hence, when he was shown the proposed new statutes as re-elaborated by Giunta, his main concern was that one of the articles seemed to suggest that the Dante Committees outside Italy were totally exempt from supervision by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri. Grandi instead expected Affari Esteri to have some grip on the schools run by the Dante abroad and on the relations between the Committees and the Fasci all'estero, and he wished to see this clearly stated in the new statutes. This was furthermore in line with what to Grandi's satisfaction had already been done within Affari Esteri to avoid dualism: unification of the post of Segretario dei Fasci with that of Director General of Italiani e Scuole all'Estero.⁴⁷

After the new statutes had been amended and approved by the Head of Government, the Ministero degli Affari Esteri and the Secretary of the National Fascist Party, Giunta, sent a copy for consideration to Boselli. The tone in the accompanying letter was not imperative. Rather cautiously Giunta communicated the suggestion made by the Secretary of the Party to make Gigi Maino the Secretary General – here named Director General – of the Dante and the endorsement of this idea by Mussolini who “wished that the proposal of H.E. the Secretary of the N.F.P. were to be approved”.⁴⁸ Taking into account also Boselli's response, the process of changing the statutes does not appear to be one of imposition but of diplomatic negotiation. Boselli's reply to Giunta, and more extensively to Mussolini, on 12 August 1931, by no means suggests he was cowed into the position he took. The amended new statutes as proposed by the government contained articles that coincided with Boselli's already envisaged reforms, meant to bring more unity between the Dante and the Fascist Regime, with which the Society collaborated - in thought and in action – for the promotion of *italianità*, or so Boselli claimed (“rendere la ‘Dante’ [...] sempre più concordemente unita col Regime Fascista, così come ne è ferma e fervida collaboratrice nel pensiero e nell'azione di antesignana e banditrice di italianità.”). Boselli blamed his age for not being able to leave his holiday address in Cumiana, up north in the province of Turin, to come to Rome immediately. He assured Mussolini that he would implement the new statutes as soon as possible and could do so thanks to the special trust the Dante had in its President. Yet Boselli may also have found it useful to delay matters a little.

⁴⁶ Dino Grandi, MAE, to Francesco Giunta, Undersecretary of State of President of the Council of Ministers, 26 March 1931.

⁴⁷ “Se d'altronde la vigilanza sulla azione della Dante fuori del Regno, nel modo come tale Società viene ora organizzata, debba essere esercitata, come sembra naturale, a mezzo dei Reggi Uffici diplomatici e consolari, occorre, ai fini gerarchici non dare ai medesimi l'impressione che per questo servizio essi non dipendono dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri” (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Grandi to Giunta, 8 June 1931, N. 5467/1).

⁴⁸ “[...] gradirebbe che la proposta di S.E. il Segretario del P.N. F. fosse accolta” (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Giunta to Boselli, 31 July 1931, N. 5467).

There were after all a few things that Boselli wished to discuss with Mussolini verbally upon his return to Rome; issues which he, with his twenty-five years of experience as President of the Dante, saw as important for the Society. Among these were matters such as agreeing on specific conditions whereby other members than the Committee Presidents would be able to participate in the Annual Congress, the need to make inalienable that part of the property that formed the financial backbone of the Society and the desirability of avoiding a forthright statement ascertaining that the Dante had and could receive contributions from the State. The latter aroused far too much suspicion in the *irredente* where the Dante's position was delicate. Boselli announced that the following year new rules would be designed for the internal working of the central organs and offices, as well as the peripheric ones. These he was willing to present to Mussolini in due time, but the nomination of the new Secretary General could not wait because of the preparations that had already been done for the coming Annual Congress, already approved by Mussolini himself. It was to take place in the Sicilian city of Siracuse. The vicinity of Sicily to Malta, the visit to Tripolitania that would be arranged and the lectures on *italianità* in the Mediterranean to be given by the archaeologists Biagio Pace and Giulio Quirino Giglioli would all help affirm Italy's cultural position in the Mediterranean. Now that Affari Esteri had agreed with the plans, suspending the congress would have given a bad impression and could have damaging effects for the Society.⁴⁹

Firmer statements were still to come. In further comments, transmitted to Mussolini via Celesia di Vegliasco, Boselli questioned the fundamental principle behind the new statutes as amended by the government. The heart of the matter was "[...] whether it is worth turning the Dante into a cultural political body dependent on the Government [...], or whether it is preferable to let the Dante continue to be a cultural Society, so as to disguise the political ends that it pursues." ("se convenga che la Dante divenga un organismo politico culturale alla dipendenza del Governo [...], ovvero non sia preferibile lasciare che la Dante continui ad essere una Società culturale, in modo da mascherare il fine politico che essa persegue."). The statutes proposed by Giunta were seen by Boselli as working from the former assumption whereas he regarded his own version of the statutes as resulting from the latter. He was also straightforward in declaring himself in favour of the latter stance. For example, independence from the government was crucial because the Dante would otherwise no longer be able to open schools in those countries where the Italian government could not. According to Giunta this argument was inspired by ideas that had by now been surpassed by the Regime ("ispirata a concetti ormai superati dal Regime") and tended towards the conclusion that there was

⁴⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli to Mussolini, 12 August 1931.

no need for reform. Giunta dismissed Boselli's concern with three counter-arguments. Firstly, Giunta believed it was wrong to think that the statutes proposed by the government would transform the Dante into a State body because legally it would remain a Society. This was also confirmed by the fact that the Ministry of Affari Esteri fully supported the proposed statutory changes. Secondly, the Dante would not be directly dependent on the Government but would be only under its control and supervision. In the eyes of Giunta this merely meant adjusting the Dante to a fundamental Fascist principle that an organization of national character which even operated abroad could not function outside the grasp of the State. Thirdly, according to Giunta the Regime had reckoned with the distinction between culture and politics that Boselli continued to make:

If culture is not informed by the political ideals of the Regime, it is no longer the culture of today's Italian; but a wrong, false and at least superseded culture. And in that case it is better not to spread it.⁵⁰

Fourthly, Giunta dismissed the argument that the new statutes could meet with hostility from the governments of the countries where the Dante operated. If the Dante could not organize the activities set down by the new statutes, then it had better not be there at all. Fifthly, Giunta did not think that ideals could be spread and at the same time disguised. This would also be in contrast with the tradition and spirit of Fascism, seen by him as being marked by the frankness and openness regarding its ideals.

What Giunta did object to were Boselli's proposals to exclude the mention of the contribution from the state, to not set the rules regarding the Congress in the Statutes but in the separate list of Regulations of the Dante, to limit the Council meetings to one every six instead of one every three months so as to reduce travel expenses, to let ordinary members take part in the Congress, to drop the prerequisite of fifty members for a Local Committee to be formed, and to keep the fees lower so that individual members would pay 12 lire per year instead of the 20 lire Giunta envisaged. Instead, Giunta accepted having the category of student members, declaring the inalienability of the Dante's most essential property, and including in the Statutes a mention of Boselli's nomination as President for life at the Congress of Treviso (1928). Boselli must have asked to have the latter specified in the Statutes to secure his position as President but also to postpone as long as possible the risk of there being a new President who might accept to give up the Dante's independence entirely.

Removing the article in the Statutes demanding that the President of the Dante each year handed in a report of the Society's actions over the past

⁵⁰ "Se la cultura non è informata alle idealità politiche del Regime, non è più la cultura dell'italiano d'oggi; ma una cultura errata, falsa o quanto meno superata. Ed, in tal caso, è meglio che non sia diffusa."

year and an activity plan for the year to come was instead out of question for Giunta. A number of points were just as categorically rejected: that the President and the Directive Board could be elected by the Presidents of the Local Committees instead of by the Head of Government; that the leadership would be entrusted to the Directive Board rather than to the President and that within the Board there would be a Secretary and a Treasurer, an idea disliked by Giunta on the grounds that a collegiate system reduced efficiency and that a full-fledged Secretary General at the President's side who could devote all his attention to the Society would improve activity; the suppression of the article requiring the approval by the Head of Government of the regulations and the changes in the statutes. Furthermore Giunta preferred neither to have Honorary Councillors nor an article determining that one quarter of membership income of Local Committees could be reserved for their own administration. Altogether it would seem that Giunta was intent on getting as much economic benefit out of the Dante and its Committees as possible, on having a clear decisional hierarchy and of extensive state control. Boselli sought ways to maintain a minimum of independence and to keep giving voice to more members than just those belonging to the Council or the Directive Board.⁵¹

Thus Giunta's answer to Boselli's letter, though he made sure to stress that great care had been put into examining the matter both because of its singular importance and because of the respect owed to the high authority of Boselli, here even called "His Excellency" ("sia per la singolare importanza dell'argomento, sia per il riguardo dovuto all'alta Autorità dell' E.V.."). As for the confirmation of Boselli's nomination as President for Life, Giunta added that if he had known about this decision, an article referring to it would have been included in the proposed new statutes right from the start. Clearly Giunta thought it necessary to maintain good relations with Boselli and to prevent him from feeling surpassed.⁵² The cordiality was returned. Boselli, playing the game without quite saying he had been mistaken, let Giunta know that his remarks about the institutional status of the Dante had come from the past and that the Dante had to conform to the basic principles of the Fascist State. As if it were a question of religious doctrine, Boselli wrote that his faith in the Fascist Regime was such that he would certainly not come with heretical proposals.⁵³

However, this cordial exchange did not bring the negotiations to a conclusion. Almost two months later, whilst the new statutes had not been

⁵¹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Rilievi sulle osservazioni fatte da S.E. Boselli in merito al progetto di nuovo statuto per la Dante Alighieri, September 1931. A report was made for Mussolini – presumably by Giunta – of observations Boselli had made in a document on the project of the new statutes handed over to Mussolini by Celesia.

⁵² ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Copy of Giunta to Boselli, 19 September 1931, N. 5467/1.

⁵³ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli (from Cumiana) to Giunta, PERSONAL, 23 September 1931.

implemented, Affari Esteri seems to have had second thoughts. An official memorandum from the ministry advanced the opinion that the Dante Alighieri Society, and in particular its Secretary General, ought to receive advice for the Society's activities abroad from a Vice-Secretary General or an Inspector General chosen and paid by Affari Esteri. To reinforce this position, it was pointed out that Affari Esteri provided nearly all the funding for the Dante's activities abroad, even if to the outside world this wasn't apparent. This funding had to remain concealed, hence Affari Esteri in this memo endorsed Boselli's proposal to not mention government funding in the new Dante statutes. The ministry's connection with the Dante's Vice-Secretary General could also be left out of the statutes and for confidentiality's sake be arranged with an exchange of letters between Affari Esteri and the Dante. Despite the fact that Piero Parini, the head of the Directorate General Italiani all'estero, twice wrote to recommend accepting the ministry's plan, it was right away rejected by Giunta and by Mussolini as being counter-productive for the unity of action.⁵⁴

The statutes that Boselli eventually proposed to Mussolini for approval by Royal Decree, attributed an important degree of control to the Head of Government.⁵⁵ The first article now explicitly referred to the Dante's mission to promote *italianità* as defined by the new spirit brought by the War and the Fascist Revolution. As was to be expected from the course of the negotiations, the statutes determined that at the beginning of each calendar year the Dante President was obliged to present an activity report of the past year and a final account to the Head of Government. The President was to be named by the Head of Government. This President proposed the candidates for the eight members of the Directive Board, of which four were Vice-Presidents and one the Administrator, all of them to be appointed by the Head of Government. The thirty members of the Central Council, or the Consulta as it was now called, the Secretary General who would run the Central Office and the Central Office staff could not be appointed without the approval of the Directive Board. Twice a year the Consulta would convene to give its view on the moral and financial report presented at the Congress, on budget plans and on final accounts. As Boselli had pressed for, thirty Honorary Councillors could be appointed. The President of a Local Committee had to be chosen by the Dante Directive Board and a local Directive Council of ten members approved by the President of the Dante. Notes in the margin show that at the last minute Boselli agreed with Giunta to have four Vice-Presidents instead of three. Perhaps having discussed

⁵⁴ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Parini to Giunta, 2 November 1931; Ibidem, MAE, DIES, Appunto per S.E. l'On. Giunta, 2 November 1931; Idem, Appunto per S.E. Il Capo del Governo, 17 November 1931; Idem, Parini to Giunta, 19 November 1931.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, Boselli to Mussolini, 17 November 1931, and attached statutes.

the candidates it was deemed wise to have the four rather than leave one aside?⁵⁶

On 21 November 1931 a communiqué from the Presidenza del Consiglio announced that new statutes for the Dante Alighieri Society proposed by Boselli were that day officially been approved per Governmental Decree. The Directive Board was composed of the illustrious Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel, Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco, Felice Felicioni (Vice-President) and Luigi Rava as Vice-Presidents, Domenico Marotta as Administrator, and Roberto Forges Davanzati, Giulio Quirino Giglioli and Piero Parini as members. Making Parini a member established a personal connection with the Directorate General Italiani all'estero, so in some way must have satisfied Affari Esteri's request for greater control over the organization.⁵⁷ The composition of the Directorate would suggest that those in favour of a pro-Fascist stance were on the winning hand.

After Boselli's demise (1932)

Despite his praised vitality, Boselli passed away in Rome on the 10th of March 1932 at the age of ninety-three. An extensive procession accompanied his coffin across the streets of Turin, where he was buried. Presumably the choice of burial location was in part motivated by the fact that Turin had been the first capital of a unified Italy as well as by Boselli's several terms as President of the province of Turin. A Paolo Boselli Foundation was created and a collection of Boselli's speeches and writings were published to honour him. The aforementioned Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco became the new President of the Dante Alighieri Society. Concurrently the journalist and politician Ezio Maria Gray (1885-1969) was made Vice-President, a man described in the *Pagine della Dante* of having an "exquisitely Fascist temperament" ("temperamento squisitamente fascista"). His Fascist credentials were unequivocal: founder of the Fascio di Combattimento of Novara, front-line participator in the March on Rome, made member of the Direttorio Nazionale of the National Fascist Party in 1924 and in the same year of the Gran Consiglio Fascista. Having initially been a member of Enrico Corradini's nationalist party, the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*, he was also a typical example of how nationalist convictions could develop seamlessly into Fascist ideals.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibidem, Boselli to Mussolini, 17 November 1931, and attached statutes, p. 2.

⁵⁷ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Communiqué from the Cabinet of the Presidenza del Consiglio of 21 November 1931.

⁵⁸ 'Re, Governo e Popolo rendono omaggio alla memoria di Paolo Boselli in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1932) 26-27; 'Il grande lutto della 'Dante'', idem, 31; 'Il nuovo Presidente

However, Celesia di Vegliasco's presidency lasted only a year: he himself for 'personal reasons' handed in his resignations, which were officially recognized by the Head of Government on 3 March 1933.⁵⁹ Because the entire Directive Board resigned too, Mussolini intervened by appointing former Vice-President Felice Felicioni (1898-1982) as Extraordinary Commissioner (Commissario Straordinario). Like Ezio Maria Gray, Felicioni had been a Fascist of the first hour. Starting as the leader of the Fascist squad of Perugia, he had played a role in the March on Rome, became the Federal Secretary of the National Fascist Party in Umbria and was then asked to join the Party's Direttorio Nazionale (1924-25). If Celesia di Vegliasco with his then 48 years of age had already been a relatively young President of the Dante, Felicioni being 35 was even more so. He had joined the Central Council already in 1925 and the Directive Board in 1931. With this veritably young President, it was hoped that the spirit of the Fascist Revolution could help advance the Dante Alighieri Society, aiding it to act rapidly and with clear action, with faith in the youth and in the future, enabling it to be not only ambassador of Italy's traditional thought and culture, but also of Fascist *italianità*, here made synonymous with Italy's modernity.⁶⁰ Within the same year that Felicioni took over the Dante leadership, new statutes for the Society were finalized and then approved by Royal Decree on 26 October 1933. These statutes were later to be regarded as a sign of the Dante's definite 'fascistization' and loss of independence. Thus, by closer examination the negotiation process that led to the statutory shows a less straightforward picture than that of a regime that imposed its will on a by now powerless private organization.⁶¹

When Felice Felicioni took over the leadership of the Dante, some further changes to the statutes were introduced. The Secretary General would be allowed to discuss the budget in the National Council but still without taking part in the voting procedure. Predictably, more power now went to the President. Instead of eight members the Directive Board was now to have six,

della "Dante" in: *Pagine* 2 (March-April 1932) 51-52; 'Saluto all'on. Gray' in: *Pagine* 2 (March-April 1932) 53.

⁵⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 3, Anno 134 e segg. – 3/1, fasc. 3.1.2, Dimissioni dell'on. Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco da Presidente (D.C.G. 3 March 1933).

⁶⁰ "[...] per il maggior sviluppo della Dante che vuole essere non solo ambasciatore del nostro pensiero e della nostra cultura tradizionale, ma messaggera di italianità fascista nel mondo" ('Il Commissario straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine* 2 (March-April 1933) 37-38, 38).

⁶¹ The press release of Stefani as reproduced in 'Annuncio: Il Duce nomina l'on. Felice Felicioni Commissario Straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine* 1 (January-February 1933) 1; 'Il Commissario Straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine* 2 (March-April 1933) 37-38; 'Il Fascismo nel Mondo – parte della conferenza tenuta da u.s. il Commissario Straordinario della Dante Alighieri on. Felice Felicioni, nell'Aula Magna della R. Università di Messina, sul tema "Il Fascismo nel mondo"', 8 May 1933 in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1933) 65-67; 'Il Nuovo Statuto della S.N.D.A. (approvato con R. Decreto 26 ottobre 1933 – XI)' in: *Pagine* 6 (November-December 1933) 207-210.

with only one Vice-President. The Secretary General running the Central Office would be one of the six, replacing the Administrator, and his was to be the only paid function. Four bodies were to lead the organization: the Presidency, the Directory (*Direttorio*, formerly *Consiglio direttivo*), the National Council (*Consiglio nazionale*, formerly the *Consulta*) and the Auditors' Committee (*Collegio dei revisori dei conti*). The most drastic reform concerned the National Council, which was now to be made up of so-called Provincial Fiduciaries (*Fiduciari provinciali*), by which were meant the Presidents of the Committees located in the provincial capitals. Introducing a new hierarchical distinction, the statutes determined that Local Committees were grouped per Province and were to be guided by the Provincial Fiduciaries. The latter were expected to maintain good relations with the Prefects of the Federal Secretariats of the National Fascist Party. Besides the Fiduciaries, the National Council would also include representatives of a variety of (semi-)governmental institutions: the National Fascist Party, the Directorate General of Scuole Italiane all'Estero, the Directorate General of Italiani all'Estero, the Directorates General of the Ministry of Educazione Nazionale (for higher, secondary, technical and elementary education), the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura, the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the Istituto Nazionale L.U.C.E. and the E.N.I.T.. The National Council approved the financial accounts, appointed the auditors and advised on matters presented by the President. In the statutes of 1933 it was even more plainly stated that the President of the Dante chose the Presidents of the Committees within the Kingdom, in the Colonies and abroad. Every two years there was to be a National Assembly (*Raduno nazionale*) of members from cities within the Kingdom and in the Colonies to promote the Dante. No mention was made here of the Committees abroad, whereas at the same time the standard Regulations were discarded on the grounds that each Committee, especially abroad, had its own requirements. Elementary school children no longer had to pay a membership fee and the category of Student Members was added, for whom the fees could be lowered according to local regulations. This made it easier to raise the total number of members.⁶²

When two years later the statutes again underwent some modifications, permission was given for Local Committees to vote for their Presidents in a general assembly, after which the decision would be ratified by the Dante President. For the law in other countries that concerned private associations sometimes required a direct choice of President and in practice some of these Committees had continued to choose their Presidents this way. The revision of the statutes in 1935 also enlarged the Directive Board so that it again had eight

⁶² ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1B, Cabinet's copy of the Royal Decree of Approval and a copy of the paper for the Adunanza della Sezione Prima del 24 ottobre 1933, No. sezione 1159, Consiglio di Satato, Firmato E. Filippini, Segretario della Sezione.

members, needed to assist an ever busier President. The Secretary General was no longer to be member of the Directive Board so that he could fully concentrate on managing the Central Office. A representative of the *Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda* would now replace the E.N.I.T.'s representative in the National Council, as the E.N.I.T. had come under the direction of the *Sottosegretariato*.⁶³

Not everyone was happy with the fact that the Dante managed to maintain a niche for itself in the field of Italy's cultural relations abroad. In June 1937, Parini handed in his resignation as member of the Dante's National Council, on the grounds that he believed the Dante to be by now obsolete. The *Fasci* and the *Scuole Italiane all'Estero* provided the state with sufficient instruments for it to spread Italian language and culture abroad.

In the heart of the collective group abroad, the Dante no longer has any effective task seeing that the educational and fascist organization has already been put in place and is in progressive and rapid development, such that it will soon be absolutely totalitarian.⁶⁴

Felicioni tried to mitigate this critical opinion by juxtaposing it to the view held by Mussolini and the highest Fascist representatives that the Dante could and should assume some vital tasks in this field. He argued that the Dante had increased its activity abroad and doubled its forces within Italy. There was now more than ever a strong need to spread the Italian language and culture, as was being shown especially in the Americas and in the Mediterranean basin ("come si sta dimostrando in special modo in alcuni settori delle Americhe e del bacino del Mediterraneo"). Felicioni also pointed out that the Dante could reach those places that the governmental organizations could not and that by working alongside the State the Dante helped reduce public expenses. As a voluntary society that was predominantly cultural, the Dante was to his opinion well equipped to spread Italian political thought among foreigners and could do so in cooperation with *Affari Esteri* and *Cultura Popolare*.⁶⁵

Whether it was through the right personal connections or Felicioni's arguments in favour, the Dante was allowed to keep going. It must therefore have been regarded by most of the higher functionaries of the regime and by Mussolini himself as useful enough to be maintained or too prestigious to be

⁶³ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1C, Felicioni to Presidenza del Consiglio, 6 June 1935; Report to the Head of Government for the Council of State, June 1935; Copy of the Royal Decree of 18 July 1935.

⁶⁴ "In seno alla collettività all'estero la 'Dante' non ha più alcun compito efficace dato che l'organizzazione scolastica e fascista è già salda ed è in via di progressivo e rapido sviluppo così da diventare fra poco assolutamente totalitaria."

⁶⁵ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 3, Anno 1934 e segg., 3/2, Felicioni to Medici del Vascello, 10 June 1937; Idem, Copy of Parini to Felicioni, 19 May 1937.

dismantled. Parini was replaced in the Dante's National Council by Baron Andrea Geisser Celesia di Vegliasco, Director General of Propaganda at the Ministero della Cultura Popolare. On 8 June 1938 a Decree issued by Mussolini approved the revised internal regulations of the Dante, which essentially brought these regulations more in line with the new statutes of 1935. At the same time a stronger emphasis was put on the role of the Dante in the Italian colonies. At the beginning of the year a Dante Day (*Giornata della Dante*) was to be held by all Committees in Italy, Libya and Italian East Africa. This event was comparable to what had once been the Annual Congress except that members now could only listen to the annual report given, without any possibility of discussion, and watch good examples of patriotic fervour being awarded prizes.⁶⁶ These same Committees were emphatically given the task of divulging the mission and ideals of the Dante amongst the people, through activities that would show the importance of spreading the Italian language and culture throughout the world, the creations of the Italian genius abroad, the life of their conationals abroad and Italy's linguistic and cultural ties with other countries. Gathering income through membership fees and fundraising activities was important too.⁶⁷ The degree to which the Committees in Italy, Libya and Italian East Africa were integrated into the regime's official policy abroad is illustrated by the fact that by now the directive councils of these Committees were expected to include representatives of the local Italian schools, of the Fascist youth and free-time (*dopolavoro*) organizations, and of the local section of the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista.⁶⁸ At the same time it is worth noting that this was only expected of the Committees in Italian colonial territory: all other Committees abroad were less tightly regulated.

To reinforce the opinion that the regime could not simply set aside the Dante Alighieri Society, the Central Office occasionally emphasized the Dante's essential international position among other similar organizations, especially those of France, Germany and Britain. For example, in an article in the *Pagine* of July-October 1938, the Dante drew attention to the various examples of foreign cultural promotion in Italy itself, including the activities of the British Council.⁶⁹ The British Council for Cultural Relations was described as having issued directly from the Foreign Office ("emanazione diretta del Foreign Office") and as being equipped with all the instruments of linguistic propaganda imaginable: schools, libraries, radio broadcasts, film projections, theatre performances and the like. Furthermore, the article pointed out that the Council had enhanced the methods of English language teaching to make possible the

⁶⁶ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 2, Anno 1934 e segg. – 2/3, Regolamento della Società Nazionale "Dante Alighieri", probably attached to Felicioni to Marchese G. Medici del Vascello, Sottosegretariato di Stato, 1 April 1938.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, Article 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, Article 24.

⁶⁹ 'Lingua e cultura degli altri in Italia' in: *Pagine* 4-5 (July-October 1938) 12-13.

spread of a “subsidiary” language known as “basic English” (“Giova ricordare che questa istituzione va perfezionando sempre di più i suoi metodi e si arricchisce sempre di mezzi più potenti. Attualmente sta favorendo la diffusione di una lingua sussidiaria – il *basic english* – che permette, con l’acquisto di un migliaio di parole tutto al di più, di possedere uno strumento sussidiario linguistico di tipo inglese.”). Hence, the Dante called for the Italian people to assign ever more means to the Dante Alighieri Society to defend the Italian language and culture in this battle. Clearly rampant rivals could serve to reassert one’s own indispensable position.

Superseded by the Istituti di Cultura

Such remained the prestige of the Dante Alighieri Society that in spite of the gradual hollowing out of its independence by Mussolini’s regime and the creation of rival organizations, it did not entirely lose its function. In 1938 a *modus vivendi* for the Dante and its competitors was established. In January that year the Direzione Generale degli Italiani all’estero sent out a circular letter to all Italian embassies, legations and consulates, setting the following guidelines. If a Dante Committee was active in a town where there was no (section of the) Istituto di Cultura, and where Affari Esteri did not intend to create one, the Committee could continue to function and was to be assisted by the Italian diplomatic authorities. In such cases the diplomatic authorities could also help set up a new Dante Committee. Furthermore, the Istituto Interuniversitario Italiano and the Fasci all’Estero were both to refrain from offering courses of Italian language and culture abroad. Such courses were to be left in the hands of the Dante. The Dante Committees were expected to rejuvenate themselves and to provide the ministry with regular reports of their activities. A hint was made at the occasionally mediocre quality of these activities in the words: “All manifestations of pseudo-intellectual and verbose provincialism are to be banished; [...]. (“Dovranno rigorosamente essere bandite tutte le esibizioni di provincialismo pseudo-intellettuale e verboso; [...]”) However, in the same letter it was explained that if in a given town there was a (section of the) Istituti di Cultura as well as a Dante Committee, the latter was to be dismantled. The Committee’s activities and its members would be handed over to the (section of the) Istituto di Cultura. If the town in question did not have a local section of the Istituto di Cultura, but the country’s capital did have an Istituto di Cultura, the Dante Committee would have to cease to exist and lay the foundations for such a section of the Istituto. Hereby the Dante was officially made secondary to the Istituti di Cultura, though it was still granted a significant function in Italy’s foreign cultural policy.

The consequences of this circular letter are not so straightforward to determine. It depended on the implementation by the local representatives of Affari Esteri and of the Dante. This dependence on the persons involved is well-illustrated by case of the Dante in The Netherlands. Here the Direzione Generale delle Scuole Italiane all'Estero of Affari Esteri had decided against establishing an Istituto Italiano di Cultura. In October 1938 the Dante's President Felicioni agreed with Affari Esteri to instead send M. Ferrigni, the former director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Prague, to The Netherlands as a representative of the Dante. Ferrigni's task was to oversee and co-ordinate the activities of the Dutch Committees and he was paid for this by the Dante. Why the Istituto di Cultura was not thought necessary in The Netherlands could be because the Dante had eleven Committees there, all of them active and self-supporting. It was also less interesting to invest in The Netherlands now that the biggest Dutch Fascist Party, the Nationaal-Socialistische Bond, had lost a considerable number of votes at the general elections a year before and was turning more towards German National-Socialism. When in December 1938 Ferrigni called an assembly of Presidents of Dutch local Dante Committees, he was confronted with considerable opposition to his role. The Committees, mostly made up of Dutch members, refused to give up any of their independence of action.⁷⁰

On the other hand, we know that in Poland's capital, Warsaw, the Dante Committee was closed down once an Istituto Italiano di Cultura was opened there in 1935. The founding of this Institute was attributed to Giuseppe Bastianini, Italian Ambassador in Warsaw between 1932 and 1936. In Athens, where Bastianini had also been ambassador, a similar institute had been created under his care. The addition in 1935 of an Institute of Culture in Warsaw to the existing Institutes in Athens, Lissabon, Brussels and Vienna was presented as a homage that Italy wished to pay to Poland.⁷¹ However, what must have played a role in this decision was that the political situation in Poland appeared favourable for a successful promotion of Italian Fascist ideals and the principles of corporatism. Just as in Italy and in many eastern European states, the "masses proved either apathetic or hostile towards parliamentary forms of government and accepted or welcomed strong leadership."⁷² In February 1935, the President of the Dante Committee in Warsaw, Prince Włodzimierz Czetwertyński, reported to Felicioni that at the last general assembly of the Committee the members had unanimously decided to transform the Dante Alighieri of Warsaw into a 'Poland-Italy Committee'. The recently inaugurated

⁷⁰ Tamara van Kessel, *Tussen italianità en fascisme. De Haagse afdeling van 'Dante Alighieri' en de Italiaanse cultuurpolitiek in Nederland, 1914-1938* (MA-Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1999) 61-64.

⁷¹ 'Nos Interviews – L'«Istituto Italiano di Cultura»' in: *Echo de Varsovie*, 31 October 1934.

⁷² Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 512.

Istituto Italiano di Cultura had absorbed and concentrated all those cultural activities that had until then been taken care of by the Dante there. The Poland-Italy Committee would focus mainly on events meant to celebrate friendship between the two countries.⁷³ To still have some form of representation in Warsaw, Felicioni made Czetwertynski the local Fiduciary of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁷⁴ This replacement of the Dante by an Istituto di Cultura took place three years before the circular letter, showing that there was already a tendency within Affari Esteri to push forward the Istituti at the expense of the Dante. With the right people in place, such as the particularly active Ambassador Bastianini, this had concrete consequences.

In many respects the position of the Dante in the 1930s was comparable to that of similar Italian organizations in that period, balancing between desired independence and gaining sufficient approval from Mussolini to be able to receive grants and recognition. As has been concisely described in a study on the Istituto di Studi Romani, an international centre for studies on Ancient Roman history, organizations in the cultural field that were not in government hands would have to constantly win the favour of Mussolini. Grants and other forms of support were never sure to endure. Mussolini judged the organization's utility from day to day, on the basis of opportunism.⁷⁵ As long as Boselli was President of the Dante, there was at the head of this Society a man with sufficient prestige and leverage to be able to manoeuvre the Dante into a compromise with the regime. After Boselli's death in 1932 this was no longer the case. Felicioni too would have to continue the tightrope act of keeping this vestige of the Risorgimento erect all through the 1930s.

The British Council: an offshoot of the Foreign Office

Emergence in the age of 'new diplomacy'

Whereas the Dante Alighieri Society with its emphasis on the national genius encapsulated in literature and art clearly originated in the age of Romantic nationalism, when the British Council was launched, in 1934, the cultural and political context was in some respects significantly different. To begin with, the process of democratization that took shape throughout Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was by then undeniably a factor to be reckoned with. Across the continent, the rise of socialism and the human sacrifices of the

⁷³ AS-SDA, 627, Varsavia, Czetwertynski to Felicioni, 20 February 1935, N. 110.

⁷⁴ AS-SDA, 627, Varsavia, Felicioni to Czerwertynski, 15 March 1935; ASDA, Czetwertynski to Felicioni, 24 May 1935, N. 207.

⁷⁵ Romke Visser, 'Storia di un progetto mai realizzato: il Centro Internazionale di Studi Romani' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituute te Rome / Papers of the Netherlands Institute in Rome* LIII, 53 (1994) 44-80, 50-51.

Great War pushed political elites into accepting universal suffrage. In Britain, the Representation of People Act of November 1918 had removed nearly all property qualifications for male voters and for the first time allowed women over thirty who met minimum property qualifications to vote, thereby tripling the electorate. Given that the majority of the British electorate was in favour of peace, it was important for the British Council to emphasize the non-aggressive nature of the British international relations. The awareness of the importance of public opinion in modern democracies also affected the significance given to cultural policy abroad. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 had seemingly left behind the age of secret diplomacy and the presence of some 500 members of the world press was symptomatic of the greater weight now conferred to the public opinion. The so-called 'new diplomacy' made cultural promotion abroad by definition a more valuable instrument in international politics.

However, the British governments' controversial use of propaganda in the First World War left an aversion among the British for anything that could be identified as 'propaganda' and furthermore there was a liberal tradition of seeing culture as something to be left in private hands. This meant that even if the Council pleaded for Britain's active role in stimulating international understanding and securing peaceful relations in a further developing world, the approach to cultural policy was deliberately presented as being modest. Reputedly this was not because of limited means, which was certainly the case with the Council when compared to its other European counterparts, but out of principle. Harold Nicolson, the British diplomat - also well known for creating the iconic gardens of Sissinghurst Castle with his wife Vita Sackville-West - was one of the British Council's frequent lecturers. In one of his many publications, *Diplomacy* (1939), he describes the transition from the old diplomacy to the new and specifically mentions the sums spent by the German, French and Italian government on their propaganda services. He made a point of emphasizing how little is spent on - what he openly alluded to as - propaganda by the British government in the form of grants to the British Council.⁷⁶ Nicolson described "the best antidote to the hysterical school of broadcasters" as being "a policy of truth, under-statement and calm".⁷⁷ By the "hysterical school of broadcasters" he meant the propaganda of the Italians and the Germans, especially Italian anti-British broadcast in Arabic from the Bari radio station.

⁷⁶ "It is estimated that Germany spends some £4,000,000 to £6,000,000 annually on foreign propaganda. France spends some £1,200,000 and Italy the equivalent of nearly £1,000,000. In Britain no sums are allocated for propaganda as such, although grants are given to the British Council as follows:

1935.....£5,000

1936.....£15,000

1937.....£60,000

1938.....£100,000 with a possible addition of £40,000"

Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939) 171-172. These figures correspond with those given by Donaldson.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 171.

While on the one hand being created at a moment in time when the need to influence 'the masses' was to some extent being recognized in international politics, the British Council still held on to a modest approach and also to targeting the higher echelons of foreign societies. Its activities were explicitly aimed at reaching out to the social groups that were expected to be culturally, financially and politically the most influential.⁷⁸ This elitist attitude was just as noticeable in the composition of the Council's managing bodies and staff. Although the Council's Executive Committee was made up of diverse figures - members of Parliament and the general public, civil servants and representatives of the three main political parties - so as to be viewed as an unbiased organization, the Council was still regularly criticized for being unrepresentative, too traditional and at times simply too upper class.⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the British Council had to deal with parts of British society who were vehemently opposed to such an organization being at all created. The most remarkable attack came from Lord Beaverbrook, who as owner of the newspaper *Daily Express* made sure criticism was constantly levelled at the Council's activities and existence. He claimed the Council was a waste of public money and liked to portray Council staff as "a bunch of effete and ineffectual amateurs, precious cultural dilettantes."⁸⁰

How was the Council organized? To some extent it had a more centralized structure than the Dante Alighieri Society. At the core there was an Executive Committee, with no less than fifteen and no more than thirty members, of which nine were government nominees. This committee met four times a year to discuss financial and policy issues. However, a sub-section of this group, which was known as the Finance and Agenda Committee, met once a month to take care of the day-to-day affairs. The seven members of the Executive Committee that were part of this sub-committee and headed by the same Chairman, would in time become the most important body within the organisation. The Chairman presided over the Council as a whole, was appointed by the Foreign Office and was initially unpaid. Until 1940 the Secretary General was seconded by the Foreign Office.⁸¹ There were also a number of Advisory Committees, dealing with specific tasks: the Books and Periodicals, Fine Arts, Ibero-American countries, Lectures, Music, Students/Universities, Near East and - as of 1939 - Drama and Dance, Films, Resident Foreigners, and with time many more. In turn, the Advisory Committees cooperated with the various departments being managed by the

⁷⁸ In 1935, writing about the educational activities that the Council was hoping to develop in Egypt, Leeper gave clear priority to influencing the educated Egyptians. (TNA, FO 141/624/4, Rex Leeper, London, to Sir Miles Lampson, Cairo, 28 February 1935.) This is one of many examples of how the Council specifically targeted the foreign elite.

⁷⁹ Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 15-16.

⁸⁰ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 63-67.

⁸¹ Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 36.

Secretary General. Initially these departments were in charge of particular geographical areas (Britain, Middle East, Latin America) or particular products. Functional departments could supply material wherever demand arose whereas the regional departments needed Foreign Office and Treasury approval before embarking on work in a country.

In foreign countries the Council had three forms of representation. In areas where the educational infrastructure was scarce, the Council set up its own Institute. In some countries where Anglophile societies already existed, especially in South America, such societies maintained an autonomous administration but received subsidies and teaching staff from the Council. In educationally well-organized countries like those in the Scandinavian area, the Council would set up an office that could support local organizations such as anglophile societies, extramural departments of universities, or other British-oriented associations. The preferred arrangement for the Council was to have a Representative working in close contact with the British Mission, with an administrative assistant at his side and possibly a number of officers for the targeted distribution of information material.⁸² The first Representative to be was C.A.F. Dundas, who was appointed in 1938 to co-ordinate all activities in the Middle East from his base in Cairo. Even if the economic malaise meant that the Council had to keep safeguarding the grant from the Treasury, its number of permanent staff grew from two in 1934, to over forty by 1939 and 333 by February 1941, half of which based abroad.⁸³

The leading men

Despite never being a Chairman of the Council, one of the key figures in the existence of the Council was Rex Leeper. Leeper's full conviction of the need for such cultural policy and his good connections within the Foreign Office were crucial to obtaining a grant from the Treasury that would make the creation of the British Council possible. Leeper's own career had taught him which steps to take to gather sufficient political backing for his plans. Brothers Reginald (Rex) and Allen Leeper (the elder by one year) were born in Australia and had worked in the wartime propaganda machinery.⁸⁴ Rex had been in charge of the Russian section of the Political Intelligence Department and Allen of the Balkan section. Allen after the First World War became assistant private secretary to Lord Curzon and became close friends with Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs. In 1933 Allen was appointed head of the League of Nations and Western Department of the Foreign Office but he died

⁸² *Ibidem*, 17-18.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 22; Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 177.

⁸⁴ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 28.

suddenly in 1935. It was through this brother that Rex had built an excellent relationship with Vansittart and with Eden.⁸⁵ These contacts were useful in his lobbying for the Council. Given Leeper's background, the Council was more or less born under the aegis of the Foreign Office.

The first two Chairmen of the British Council were Lord Tyrell of Avon (from 1934 to 1936) and Lord Eustace Percy (from 1936 to 1937). Both of these men had held important political posts. Lord William Tyrell of Avon had served the Foreign Office since 1889. Between 1916 and 1919 he was head of the Political Intelligence Department, where Leeper was then also working. After a few years as Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1925 to 1928) Lord Tyrell became British Ambassador to France. Returning in 1934, he took on the Chairmanship of the Council with a rich diplomatic experience. Lord Eustace Percy had less connection to the Foreign Office. He was in the diplomatic service during the First World War. Thereafter, in 1921, he became Conservative Member of Parliament for Hastings. During the first Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin (1924-1929) it was education that was entrusted to Lord Percy. He was made President of the Board of Education. When Baldwin in 1935 again became prime minister, Lord Tyrell joined the cabinet for a year as Minister without Portfolio. Having such high-ranking civil servants at its head, meant that the Council could not distance itself entirely from government policy.

The person who is praised for having given the Council its solid basis is Lord George Lloyd, who was Chairman from 1937 to 1941. Lord Lloyd was successful in putting pressure on the Treasury to increase the grants, in defending the purpose of the Council and in obtaining a Royal Charter that would secure the Council's independence from government.⁸⁶ "It was Lloyd who moulded the British Council into the embodiment of those ideas conceived in the minds of Rex Leeper and Stephen Tallents, and it was his dynamism which inspired the council's work in such a way as to inject a sense of real purpose and direction into the concept of national projection."⁸⁷ As Governor of Bombay (1918-1923) and High Commissioner in Egypt (1925-1929) he had often proved to be a convinced imperialist, critical about the principle of self-determination and in favour of a hard-line colonial administration.⁸⁸ As a result of his Egyptian experience, Lord Lloyd saw British control of the Eastern Mediterranean as vital for the Empire and was in favour of developing the Council in this area and in the Near East, with which was meant Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Irak and Transjordan. He personally toured the Near East 1937, 1938 and 1939 to assess what needed to be done. An anonymous donation

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 28-31.

⁸⁶ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 46 and 55; Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 178.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *ibidem*.

⁸⁸ John Charmley, *Lord Lloyd and the decline of the British Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).

of 50,000 British pounds for the Council's work in this region proved that Lord Lloyd was not the only one to see this area as a priority.⁸⁹

An aspect that has never been commented upon is the fact that Lord Lloyd, although coming from a Quaker family, was Anglo-Catholic. Brothers Reginald and Allen Leeper are also known to have been "devout Anglo-Catholics".⁹⁰ It remains an area of speculation what influence this might have had on their view on 'Britishness' and their sense of mission. Britain had a long tradition of anti-Catholicism. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the so-called Oxford Movement brought about a theological re-examination of the Anglican Church religious practice with the aim to restore its bond with the Catholic tradition. Inspired by this movement, the Anglo-Catholics reinstated much of the Catholic liturgical practice and the sacraments, without thereby returning under the fold of the Roman Catholic papacy. The popularity of Anglo-Catholicism reached its peak in the interwar years. By then Leeper and Lord Lloyd would presumably not have to fear being seen as less loyal to 'British' values. Yet feeling part of the 'universal' Catholic faith may well have strengthened their belief in the missionary purpose the Council could have through its spreading of certain moral codes. Though deserving further research, the complexities in the distinctions between Anglo-Catholics and the relation to Low and High Church would at this point take us further than the scope of this book.⁹¹



*Sir Reginald ('Rex') Leeper
Founder of the British Council*

Gendering the Council

Unsurprisingly, the social background of most officials working for the British Council was similar to that of Foreign Office recruits, who in the interwar period still nearly all came from the pool of Eton and 'Oxbridge' as well as belonging for a large part to the British aristocracy or gentry. It is said of Vansittart's view of diplomacy that it was "relentlessly Edwardian", perceiving the international arena "as a vast extension of London's clubland, where all the members obeyed certain accepted rules."⁹² This image fits with the

⁸⁹ Taylor, *The projection of Britain*, 171.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 28.

⁹¹ W.S.F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Study on Religious Ambiguity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, revised edition, 2008); Ian Bradley, *Believing in Britain: the spiritual identity of 'Britishness'* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007).

⁹² Paul W. Doer, *British foreign policy, 1919-1939. 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst'* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998) 137.

representation of 'Britishness' that the British Council promoted, where certain codes of conduct were encouraged. Curiously, the above-mentioned accusation of being "effete" was something that would endure through time. In Egypt this suspicion appears to have played a role in the political and generational gap that was perceived between on the one hand the British civil servants and businessmen already established there, and on the other hand the relatively young, educated men that were sent by the Council. C.A.F. Dundas, who became the Council Representative in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean region, in October 1940 complained to the headquarters in London that:

[...] some of the Council's Greek staff have gained (and a few deserved) a reputation which makes their position untenable in the especially delicate circumstances of the present time. It is variously said they are indiscreet, extravagant, lack any serious purpose, do not consider the public effects of their personal behaviour, or are irresponsible in financial matters. It is, too, repeatedly said, however slanderously, that they are 'pansies', 'long-haired', or 'soft'.⁹³

According to Dundas, this reputation had also reached Egypt and Cyprus. However, this comment dates from the war period and by then all the able-bodied men working for the Council were being called back to Britain to join the armed forces. Possibly those staff members who could remain abroad were quickly negatively judged for not serving the war effort and for the lack of masculine virtues associated to this. It is also worth pointing out that this reputation concerned the Council representatives and teachers abroad, and did not necessarily coincide with the staff in London. The question how 'effeminacy' came to be associated with the Council's cultural policy deserves more research and could be part of a broader investigation into the gendering of cultural policy in different countries.

Because of the many men that had died in the First World War, Britain had become a country where a notable number of women worked and played an active part in society.⁹⁴ Was increased participation of women reflected in the composition of the British Council's paid staff or its advisory committees? In December 1936 a countess from Dublin, Lady Gwendolen Iveagh, saw reason to write to the Secretary General of the British Council on account of the organization's presumed lack of women. "It occurred to me (though far from being a feminist!)," she wrote, "that it might be helpful if you had a woman on your committee [intending the Council - TvK]. There must be directions in which one could be useful." This was no attempt on her part to canvas for a job,

⁹³ Quoted in Roger Bowen, "Many Histories Deep". *The Personal Landscapes Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (Cranbury, London & Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1995) 43.

⁹⁴ Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out. How Two Million British Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

she immediately added, as she had no time for any “public work” these days. But it had occurred to her “that unless the Committee is misogynist, it might be a want.” The Secretary General replied two days later, claiming to have been amused by the countess’ letter as he had “pressed for the inclusion of ladies on the Council from the outset.” Two women, the Principal of Bedford College and a member of the Victoria League, were part of the Students Committee. Lady Austen Chamberlain had just joined the Executive Committee, so the Council was in his view not quite so misogynist as the Countess of Iveagh thought. He remained open for any names she could suggest for the Comité d’Accueil in London.⁹⁵

Critical of appeasement

Although the structure of the British Council and the professional background of its core staff would suggest that the Council’s views on British foreign policy could be equated with those of the British government, this cannot be automatically assumed. The interaction between Cabinet, Foreign Office and British Council was, needless to say, riddled with the complexities of party politics. This was especially so when the Council was confronted with the ‘appeasement’ policy under Neville Chamberlain’s premiership (1937-1940). On the eve of the Second World War civil servants of the Foreign Office were making extensive assessments of the different political ideologies endangering Britain: Communism, Italian Fascism and National Socialism. Essentially, the position of the Foreign Office was not based on ideological grounds but on what was at that moment being perceived as the most direct threat to peace in Europe, and consequently in Britain.⁹⁶ Generally, the Communist ideology was seen as the greatest evil. Varying degrees of animosity were directed towards National Socialism and Italian Fascism, some arguing that Germany was far more efficient and had more worldwide ambitions. As Hitler began to put in effect his expansionist ambitions, defusing the threat National Socialism posed became the first priority. Hereby rapprochement with Mussolini could even serve to isolate Nazi Germany.

In 1938, after Germany annexed with Austria and subsequently threatened to occupy Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia populated mainly by Germans, Chamberlain negotiated with Hitler. The result was the Agreement of Munich, with which the partition of Czechoslovakia was settled. Robert Vansittart, who was then still Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign

⁹⁵ TNA, BW 2/55, Gwendolen, Countess of Iveagh in Dublin to Colonel Charles Bridge in London, 2 December 1936; Charles Bridges to the Countess of Iveagh, 4 December 1936.

⁹⁶ Donald Lammers, ‘Fascism, Communism, and the Foreign Office, 1937-39’ in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, 3 (1971) 66-86.

Office, was unequivocally against such an appeasement policy, believing that the aggressive Third Reich needed to be squarely dealt with, a position he defended to the extent of being removed from his post.⁹⁷ Leeper too put his position within the News Department at risk by openly criticising the Munich Agreement. This appears to contradict evidence showing that to him, like to most of his other Foreign Office colleagues, it was not the ranking of enemy ideologies that mattered but the degree of concrete danger. Leeper is said to have conceded that the trend of the times was for states to gain more control everywhere, but to have nonetheless denied “[...] any distinctive newness to the regimes in power in Russia, Germany, and Italy – the messianic universalism of communism, the racialism and militarism of the nazi movement, the Italian recourse to dictatorial rule, all were [according to Leeper] thoroughly typical of the societies which produced them.”⁹⁸ National interests and ambitions posed the most immediate threat to peace, not the ideologies, and for the time being Germany and Italy were a graver concern than faraway Russia. If Leeper had an underlying equal aversion to all three ideologies, this would indeed coincide with the image of ‘Britishness’ that was divulged by the main publications of the British Council, *Britain To-day* and the *British Life and Thought Series*. These publications presented a general dichotomy between on the one hand British democracy and defence of individual freedom and on the other hand those political systems that handed absolute power to the State and bureaucratic control, without further specifying the ideological “colour” of such States.⁹⁹

Battling for independence from the Ministry of Information

As early as October 1935, the British government began to prepare plans for the creation of a Ministry of Information so that it could be put into place in the event of war. This was being done under secrecy by a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, made up of various civil servants (from the Cabinet, the Treasury, the Home Office, the Dominions Office, the Foreign Office, Naval and Military Intelligence, and Air Staff) and the directors-general of the General Post Office and of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All members of the sub-committee were working on these plans in their spare time, on top of their regular functions, making it a lengthy process. Leeper was also member (until early 1938), both as Foreign Office representative and because of his experience with wartime propaganda in the First World War. His proposal to make the Foreign Office News Department the nucleus of the impending Ministry of Information until the actual outbreak of war was one of the many

⁹⁷ Michael Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934-1937* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 72-73.

⁹⁹ See Chapter Three.

contentious issues that would occupy the committee. All parties involved were anxious not to hand over tasks that so far were under their control.¹⁰⁰

In February 1939 it was decided that the Council would be taken over by the Ministry, which from then on would be responsible for all cultural promotion abroad - in enemy and in non-enemy territory - that could serve as a tool for political propaganda. Only the Council's name and idea would remain, as a guise for any purely cultural or educational activities that the Ministry would be engaged in. This would also make it easier for the Council to be reinstated after the war should that be necessary. Lord Lloyd at first accepted this decision but in second instance, together with the Secretary General Charles Bridge, firmly presented his objections to this plan. Leeper could not be of much help at this point, being already heavily burdened with the Political Intelligence Department that would also need to be revived and brought in line with the other wartime preparations. Furthermore, he had fallen out of grace at the Foreign Office as had Vansittart. Lord Lloyd managed however to prevent the merger of the Council by convincing the Foreign Office that cultural activities would raise far more suspicion abroad if identified as coming from the Ministry of Information, making it thereby less effective. At the same time Lord Lloyd submitted a request for a Royal Charter to be granted to the Council. This would give the organization recognition as a legal person and make it harder for it to be disbanded.

On the 3rd of September 1939 Britain together with France declared war on Germany. The Ministry of Information was launched the next day while being still very much in construction. Though it was soon agreed that the Council could remain independent and in liaison with the Foreign Office, a prolonged negotiation remained concerning the precise delineation of its tasks. Leaving the Council in charge of only the strictly cultural and educational activities left too much room for confusion, as practice proved. In addition to this ambiguity, the Council could benefit from the advantage that it had already acquired contacts, experience and material such as film and photographs. Lord Lloyd is quoted as having said to his staff:

It is important ... never to admit, in our correspondence with M of I [Ministry of Information], that it is not possible to distinguish the borderline between cultural and political propaganda in wartime - that has always been their contention on which they based their attack on the Council, and we have always denied their thesis with the result that we are distinct.¹⁰¹

John Reith, the former BBC director who for a brief period was Minister of Information understandably questioned the functionality of the distinction:

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, 'Propaganda for war' in: idem, *The projection of Britain*, 260-292.

¹⁰¹ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 71.

Lloyd said that the duty of the British Council was the propagation of British culture; and it would never do to have the taint of propaganda about it. And where, I asked, does the propagation of culture end and the propagation of propaganda begin?¹⁰²

Reith's attempts to have all technical sections of the Council, such as the Film Committee, transferred to the Ministry were to no avail, and that despite having considerable support from the Treasury in the process. Throughout these months Lord Loyd doggedly held on to the argument that the Council had its own irreplaceable function by being apparently non-governmental and in doing so found the support of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. By mid-October 1940 the Council also obtained the Royal Charter.

Duff Cooper, Reith's successor after the fall of Chamberlain's government in May 1940, was equally unable to surmount the Council's refusal to relinquish its activities. Even if organising purely cultural propaganda in a country Britain was at war with immediately called into question the 'purity' of such activity, Cooper failed to obtain the political leverage necessary to claim at least propaganda in enemy territory for the Ministry of Information alone. In January 1941, Cooper wrote to Anthony Eden, by then once again Foreign Secretary:

There is no real division between cultural and political propaganda since the ultimate object and, indeed the sole justification for cultural propaganda, must be political and commercial.¹⁰³

Less than a month later, on the 4th of February 1941, Lord Lloyd passed away unexpectedly after contracting a rare disease. Churchill, then prime minister, seized this most unfortunate moment in the Council's existence to fundamentally question the necessity of its continuation. He was inclined to see it as unnecessary luxury given the war and the already existing Ministry of Information, but above all wanted an end to the constant disputes between the Ministry and the Council. Eden continued to defend the Council's legitimacy and proposed Malcolm Roberston as new Chairman. Churchill subsequently entrusted Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Supply and archenemy of the Council, with the task of reaching an agreement with the ministers of the War Cabinet. In July 1941 the conclusion was that the Council would continue its cultural and educational work, whereas anything it organized that could be considered propaganda would require prior approval by the Ministry of Information. To

¹⁰² Eastment, *The Politics and Position*, 28, quoting from John Reith, *Into the Wind* (London 1949) 366-367.

¹⁰³ Eastment, *ibidem*, 32, quoting from TNA, T161/1104, S35581/03/41, Duff Cooper to Anthony Eden, 11 January 1941.

this end a liaison officer was to be appointed.¹⁰⁴ The distinction between cultural and political propaganda remained a conundrum.

What is shown by the tug-of-war between the British Council and the Ministry of Information is the interest that the Foreign Office had in maintaining a separate Council and, ipso facto, in remaining closely involved in cultural promotion abroad. Under the guidance of strong-minded figures such as Leeper and Lord Lloyd, the Council had a certain degree of autonomy in its activities. However, even then, the Council had to make sure it remained on good terms with the Foreign Office. Under the aegis of the Foreign Office, the Council made more chance of getting grants from an interwar Treasury that had tightened the strings of its purse. It also proved essential to have Halifax and Eden's support in remaining separate from the Ministry of Information.

Conclusion

The Dante's balancing act

We have seen how the Dante Alighieri was an organization led by nineteenth-century men and ideals, not all of which remained viable in the 1930s under Mussolini's more totalitarian grip on Italian society. The reverence for the Italian nation that the Dante divulged was one of the components also integrated in Fascism, so that in this respect the Dante could easily legitimize its continued existence. Its Masonic roots were more problematic. However, these had already weakened when the rapprochement between Catholicism and the Italian State culminated in the Lateran Accord of 1929. Furthermore, the generation connected to Freemasonry died out and was replaced by members who had outspoken sympathy for Fascist ideals. Hence in terms of ideology the transition was smooth.

In terms of its relation to the State, the Dante had to reposition itself in the interwar years. Because Italian Fascism was presented as the completion of the process set in motion by the Risorgimento, it was useful for Mussolini to have good ties with an institution like the Dante. On the other hand, in the 1930s his regime further developed and established Italy's propaganda apparatus, thereby aiming also at Italians abroad and international recipients. It was part of Mussolini's strategy to keep several organizations at his disposal and to decide opportunistically when to use them for his own purposes. At the same time, for an organization like the Dante that relied so frequently on its cooperation with Italian diplomatic representation abroad, it was impossible to continue without some form of state approval. Hence the Dante's leadership was trapped in a balancing act, trying to maintain the organization's own

¹⁰⁴ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 77-81; Eastment, *The Politics and Position*, 32-33.

identity and freedom of movement, while securing enough endorsement by Mussolini and his Cabinet for the organization not to have to fear disbandment or absorption.

The Janus face of the Council

The British Council had the benefit of being created in the midst of the 1930s and under the leadership of persons like Leeper and Lord Lloyd who were extremely aware of the new significance that cultural promotion was gaining. There was also a greater homogeneity in its leadership and a long-established code of conduct that was part of the Foreign Office environment it had sprouted from. As will be illustrated in the next chapter, this can be seen also in the consistent image of Britishness that revolved around specific British institutions and values. Leeper's experience with British propaganda during the First World War no doubt helped too in developing clear guidelines for the Council's communication strategy, though it was this same propaganda that in the interwar years raised suspicion among the British about the ethical boundaries of the Council's work.

While in no way wishing to equate Mussolini's totalitarian regime in Italy, which was responsible for many a trespass of human dignity and rights, with the democratically-chosen British government at that time, I would like to argue that it is still possible to compare the Dante's precarious position under the regime with that of the Council. In many respects the Council was from the start less autonomous than the Dante. It relied almost entirely on government grants and many of its key-figures came from the Foreign Office, most importantly Leeper, who guided the organization while continuing his career as civil servant. Yet even if the Council was closely connected to the Foreign Office, it still had to compete for recognition. If at first its problem was that the British government did not always recognize its utility, as the prospect of another war drew close there followed a ceaseless power struggle between departments and persons who wanted greater control over the propaganda machinery. The creation of a Ministry of Information put in danger the Council's very existence and the protection of the Foreign Office was needed for it not to be absorbed by the new Ministry. It was obvious that the Council's work had political significance. Making a distinction between political and cultural propaganda was an argument that worked both ways, like Janus' face. It could be used by those who felt that the Council should leave all propaganda activity to the Ministry of Information. But it also strengthened the notion that an organization could hide its political propaganda behind the facade of dealing only with innocuous cultural propaganda, thereby favouring the Council.

CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'ITALIANITÀ' AND 'BRITISHNESS'

Both the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council intended to promote an image of their national culture. How this image was constructed and communicated, differs greatly between the two organizations. The way in which concepts of *italianità* and 'Britishness' were defined, reflects the role that culture was given within the internal national politics of Italy and Britain. Not surprisingly, given that the nation-state Italy had only been created in 1861, 'Italianness' remained an abstract idea, described in terms of spirit and genius. With Mussolini's rise to power, 'italianità' also began to embody specific values and a model of society, the corporatist state. Yet the Italianness that the Dante Alighieri Society divulged remained very much defined by the Romantic ideal of the national soul expressed through the arts. Despite the totalitarian nature of the state that the Dante was functioning in, its Italianness never showed the same degree of consistency as the idea of 'Britishness' held high by the British Council. We see from the publications of the British Council that it had a very consistent representation of 'Britishness' and, unlike the Dante, sought to promote particular British institutions, such as its parliamentary democracy, its justice system or its educational system.

In this chapter we shall have a closer look at how *italianità* and 'Britishness' were represented by the Dante and the Council respectively, taking into account a number of aspects. What kind of national characteristics were emphasized? How were the national cultures positioned with respect to modernity or tradition? How did the Dante and the Council respond to the emerging mass consumption of culture in their choice of image? The *italianità* of the Dante will be studied using the case of the cruises that the Society organized for its members and a number of articles in its internal review, the *Pagine della Dante*. In the case of the British Council, we will analyse how it gave shape to 'Britishness' through its internal review *Britain Today*.

Cultural pilgrimages across the Mediterranean

The *italianità* of the Dante Alighieri Society presupposed a special focus on the Mediterranean as Italy's natural and age-old sphere of influence: its Mare Nostrum. One of the ways in which the Dante manifested Italy's relationship with the Mediterranean area, was the organization of yearly cruises for its members. These cruises, starting in 1927, poignantly illustrate how the

nationalism embodied by the Society showed many traits of a secular religion. They also underlined the hierarchy implied in the relationship between Italy and its Mediterranean neighbours and show how modern tourism could serve to consolidate national identity.

The President of the Society's Committee in Milan, Filippo Mezzi, was the main organizer of this initiative and he always accompanied the participants. Reports of each trip appeared in the Society's bi-monthly review, *Pagine della Dante*, and the cruise was a regular item on the agenda of the Society's Annual Congress. Consequently, the messages that were to be conveyed through these cruises were not only transmitted to those who participated and the people they encountered on their journey, but also to the readers of the *Pagine* and the Annual Congress attendees, thereby enlarging the scope. In most cases it was Mezzi himself who spoke at the Congress or wrote the account. The number of participants was generally between 150 and 200 persons. The account of the 1934 cruise mentions that on that journey members from 30 different Local Committees were present, although the majority came from Rome, Milan, Turin or Bologna, making it likely that these people mainly belonged to the urban, well-to-do classes of Italian society.



Dante cruise participants, year unknown (Photo: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri).

Various benefits were attributed to the Dante cruises, both practical and ideological ones. Under the former, we can see the creation or revitalisation of local Dante Alighieri Committees abroad. For example, not long after the Dante travellers had visited Cyprus (1930), a new Committee was formed there.¹ Similarly, an account of the group's stop in Fez (1931) mentions that a first seed was laid for the setting up of a Committee in this city.² One can also imagine that the preparations leading up to a cruise aided the Dante Central Council's efforts to have a better grip on the various foreign Dante Committees. Arranging the visits to the foreign Committees required contact between the Dante headquarters in Rome, the Milanese Committee and the foreign

¹ 'Per l'insegnamento dell'italiano all'isola di Cipro' in: *Pagine della Dante* 1 (1931) 22.

² Filippo Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria' in: *Pagine della Dante* 2 (1931) 30-33.

Committee in question, possibly giving this contact new impetus. As was the case with the Dante Alighieri Society as a whole, the economic advantages were not forgotten either. Ensuring the Italian spiritual prevalence in the world ("prevalenza spirituale nel mondo") was seen as a key instrument in obtaining a greater economic foothold in the area.³

Such practical arguments were seldom explicitly referred to. At the forefront were the ideals of national brotherhood and spiritual expansion. Mezzi believed that it was in foreign territory that an Italian felt himself to be more Italian than ever. He remembered seeing an Italian man who had stood by the railway track in a deserted area between Oudjda and Oran, just because he had heard that a train with Italians would pass – in casu the participants of the Dante Alighieri cruise – and wanted to be there to greet them. We may conclude from this very plausible thought that whilst cruise participants themselves may have been the ones feeling more consciously Italian as they travelled around in foreign countries, at the same time the Italian emigrants they met on their way would have both reinforced that sentiment and recognized it as being their own. In this process, the nationals abroad would confirm the nation's legitimacy and identity. Furthermore, the journeys brought participants into contact with new horizons, with the lives of Italians abroad and the 'natives', giving them the opportunity to compare the Italian spiritual values with local ones.⁴

The Italian government fully endorsed this activity of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁵ At each location the travellers were welcomed by the Italian consul or ambassador, invited to a reception at the Italian Legation or an Italian club, introduced to the secretary of the local Fascist bureau and proudly presented to the Italian 'colony' and the local authorities. In a number of his accounts, Mezzi tactfully addressed words of gratitude to Piero Parini, the head of the Scuole Italiane all'Estero (the department of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of Italian schools in foreign countries). Undoubtedly a certain prestige was gained from the fact that the third cruise had close family members of the Duce among its participants: the wife and son of Arnaldo Mussolini, the Duce's younger brother.⁶ Governmental endorsement, however, also meant extra security. There is evidence that the Ministero dell'Interno was prepared to grant passports to the participants of the 1929 cruise, but not without first checking these members' political history ("dovrà però subordinarsi ad accertamenti circa precedenti politici richiedenti"). The validity

³ Filippo Mezzi, 'La nuova Crociera della «Dante»' in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (1932) 214.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ ACS, PCM, 1931-1933, Busta 1519, Fasc. 3/2.4, Anno 1931-1932, N. 3858, Crociere indette della Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri. This file contains correspondence between Mezzi and Mussolini regarding the official "nulla osta" for the itineraries of the cruises.

⁶ 'La Terza Crociera Mediterranea' in: *Pagine della Dante* 1 (1929) 8-9.

of the passports would be limited to the period of time needed for the cruise.⁷ This is a reminder of the controlled freedom of movement inherent in Mussolini's by now dictatorial government: a reality that the Dante, like all organizations, willingly or unwillingly had to take into account.

Reviving the Roman heritage

Significantly, the initial seven cruises altogether covered the Mediterranean area, in accordance with the priority that was given to strengthening the "coscienza mediterranea" (Mediterranean consciousness) of the Dante Alighieri members.⁸ It began in 1927 with a cruise to Tunisia, Malta and Tripoli, shifting to the east the following year to cover Rhodes, Constantinople, Athens and Zante. Having covered Tripoli, in 1929 the cruise returned to the Southern coast of the Mediterranean to introduce its participants to Cyrenaica (Benghazi, Cyrene, Derna and Apollonia) and Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan Dam). The Holy Land was one of the next destinations. In 1930 the group stopped at Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Jericho, Nazareth, Lake Tiberius, Damascus, Baalbek, Beirut, Famagusta, Nicosia and Larnaca. The cruise of 1931 covered Morocco and Algeria. The following year, the focus partly shifted away from the Mediterranean to Vienna, Spielberg, Budapest, Sinaia, Bucharest, Sophia, and back again to Constantinople and Athens. After that the cruises moved on to northern Europe, Scandinavia, the Baltic States and across the Atlantic to the United States and Brazil.

What is the symbolical significance of those sites that were chosen for the Dante Alighieri Cruises in the Mediterranean? The most obvious locations were those connected to the Ancient Roman Empire, Roman heritage that appeared to prove the age-old Italian spiritual influence in the Mediterranean area. In Baalbek (Lebanon), the cruise participants were impressed by the extraordinarily imposing pre-Roman stone constructions and the Trilithon monoliths; raised stones of such size that until this day the building techniques employed remain a mystery to archaeologists. Yet it was the grandness of lines and the refined detail of the Roman temples and propylea built above these giant stones that drew their attention.⁹ In the Bay of Tangiers, those on board thought of the legend of the sweet-smelling Garden of Esperides, but Mezzi especially recalled the four centuries of triumphant Roman domination in this

⁷ ACS, SPD, Carteggio ordinario 1922-1943, Busta 1199, F. 509641/509644, F. 509461/1, Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, Roma, Varia: Telegramma, Ministero dell'Interno ai Prefetti del Regno, Ufficio Cifra, 10 dicembre 1928, ore 21.15.

⁸ 'Una nuova crociera mediterranea' in: *Pagine della Dante* 6 (1927) 133.

⁹ Filippo Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nell'Oriente Mediterraneo' in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (1930) 56-59, 57.

region.¹⁰ The Roman past left a promise for the future. On top of the Roman ruins of Djemila and other traces of Roman domination of Numidians and Mauritians in Algeria and Morocco, which were an invaluable document testifying to the Italian nation's roots, Mezzi felt that the Italian community in Algiers represented the new Italy that would pave the way to the future.

Secular pilgrimages

Given the symbolic significance that was attached to the Dante tours and the choice of destinations, I would argue that these travels ought to be interpreted as secular pilgrimages. Parallels between pilgrimages and modern-day tourism have been frequently drawn. As has been well illustrated elsewhere, it is the experience of the visitor that makes the difference between the two polarities between pilgrims and tourists.¹¹ The pilgrim experiences the place visited as a holy site, a site of metaphysical significance, and travelling to the site is felt to bring about an internal, spiritual change. In the case of the Dante Alighieri cruises, during each of these journeys a number of the places visited were obviously meant to inspire a certain reverence and to strengthen the sense of 'Italianness' and of 'Mediterranean consciousness' among the participants.

Mezzi himself repeatedly wrote about the cruises in terms of "peregrinazioni". Regarding his decision to include the Cyrenaica in the programme for 1929, a destination usually left aside by tourists, Mezzi explained that the Dante Alighieri Society in its pilgrimages had to be inspired by what emblazoned or roused the Society and not by ordinary tourism criteria.¹² The following year, upon the company's return to the ports of Naples and Genoa, Mezzi's reflections were centred around even deeper spiritual motives. The fatherland seemed more sacred and cherished when the participants were abroad, where they found so many brothers who held up high their sense of patriotism. There they felt the voice of duty calling them to fulfil Dante's mission, to engage in the "beautiful and glorious battle" for the expansion of the Italian language and the Italian genius as expressed in science, arts and in the way of living.¹³ In the case of these nationalist cruises, the spiritual benefit was felt not only by the pilgrim but also by the co-nationals he or she encountered on the way. In making the presence of the Italian language and culture felt, the cruise participants - according to Mezzi - were contributing

¹⁰ Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria', 30.

¹¹ Shalini Singh, 'Secular pilgrimages and sacred tourism in the Indian Himalayas' in: *Geojournal* 64 (2005) 215-223, 216-217; Rob van der Laarse, 'De beleving van de buitenplaats. Smaak, toerisme en erfgoed' in: idem ed., *Bezeten van vroeger. Erfgoed, identiteit en musealisering* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005) 59-87.

¹² Filippo Mezzi, 'La terza crociera mediterranea della «Dante»' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 3 (1929) 51-54, 51.

¹³ Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nell'Oriente Mediterraneo', 59.

to a spiritual action, meant to reinforce the patriotic soul of the faraway brothers.¹⁴ Not only the visited sites and the mission were given a pious significance; so were the travellers themselves, who Mezzi described as being above all a symbol, the embodiment of the Dante Alighieri Society with its shining halo of its ideals (“la Dante coll’aureola fulgida delle sue idealità”).¹⁵

It is not a peculiarity of Mezzi’s to have written about the Dante Alighieri cruises in terms of pilgrims and spiritual missions. Senator Ettore Tolomei, who took part in the 1931 cruise to Morocco and Algeria, referred to the voyage as “that African and Latin pilgrimage of ours” (“quel nostro pellegrinaggio africano e latino”).¹⁶ Writing about how his eight years of teaching at Italian schools in the Levant made him personally feel more like a veteran than a pilgrim during the cruise, Tolomei described those years as being “the apostolate of the teacher abroad” (“apostolato del professore all’estero”) which he exercised “with sincere passion” (“con sincera passione”).

Paying homage to the dead

Another element that gave the cruises the quality of a pilgrimage, whilst subtly conveying the idea of a legitimate Italian rootedness in the Mediterranean area, was the visit to Italian burial sites.¹⁷ The modern imperial conquests had required the sacrifice of Italian men and the monuments to these heroes were part of the itinerary. In the Cyrenaica, at Marsa Giuliana, a bronze wreath was placed at the Monument to the Fallen, a tribute to those who fought for the military conquest and to the brave pioneers in the agricultural colonization of the area.¹⁸ At Derna the cruise participants were welcomed by a dense crowd of people, authorities, associations, schools, members of the Fascist youth movement (“gagliardetti fascisti”) and “indigenous people in their fantastic costumes” (“indigeni nei loro fantastici costumi”) carrying gaudily coloured local flags, and by the sound of Italian national hymns being played. Again, this time presumably accompanied by the lively crowd, the Dante members made a long procession to the Monument of the Fallen.¹⁹ A third such commemoration during this cruise took place in Cairo, where a bronze wreath was deposited at the memorial stone for the Fallen Soldiers in the building that housed the Italian schools. Balilla, Piccole Italiane, Avanguardisti and all the schoolgirls

¹⁴ Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria’, 30-33.

¹⁵ Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nell’Oriente Mediterraneo’, 59.

¹⁶ Ettore Tolomei, ‘Con la quinta Crociera della «Dante»’ in: *Pagine della Dante*, 2 (1931) 34-35, 34.

¹⁷ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁸ Mezzi, ‘La terza crociera mediterranea della “Dante”’, 51-52.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 52.

attended the ceremony.²⁰ The cruise to Morocco and Algeria in 1930 was less laden with commemorations. It seems that only in Algiers, during a reception in the Casa degli Italiani, flowers were placed before the memorial stone for the Fallen of the Great War and the Martyrs of the Fascist Cause.²¹ A stop in Bucharest during the cruise of 1932 allowed a group of representatives to pay homage to the two thousand Italian soldiers buried around a monument at the Genchea cemetery.²²

Occasionally the travelling Dante members paid their respects at less likely monuments, meant apparently to express solidarity with other nations who had fought for independence. In Budapest they stopped at the Monument for the Unknown Soldier and at what was referred to as "the Square of Liberty". Probably the latter was what is officially called the Heroes' Square, the location of a monument for the leaders of the seven tribes who founded Hungary as well as other national heroes. The square had only been completed in 1929 and in 1932 there still may have been some confusion about its name. Mezzi in his account mentioned a plaque quoting Mussolini's words about peace treaties not being eternal.²³ When cruise participants sojourned in Istanbul, which Mezzi called by its older name of Constantinople, Hakki Pasha had just returned from talks in Rome that had revived the Italo-Turkish relations. Hence the Turkish press was reported to have paid friendly attention to how the group of Italians laid a wreath of flowers at the Republic Monument at Taksim Square. This monument to the creation of the Turkish Republic that had only recently been unveiled - in 1928 - was commissioned by Kemal Atatürk and designed by an Italian sculptor, Pietro Canonica. The fact that an Italian had created a central symbol of Turkish nationalism was no doubt an important additional incentive for including it in the Dante travellers' itinerary.²⁴

In these latter cases we find again the Mazzinian ideal of Italy as a nation among nations who all deserved their own place. Hence, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, Paolo Boselli, in his farewell message urged the participants of the 1928 cruise to carry the tri-coloured flag



Dante cruise participants visit the Monument to the Fallen at Marsa Giuliana, Libya, 1929 (Photo: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri).

²⁰ Ibidem, 53.

²¹ Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria', 31.

²² Filippo Mezzi, 'Con la «Dante» dallo Spielberg al Bosporo' in: *Pagine della Dante 6* (1932) 237-241, 239.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, 240.

with the effigy of Dante as a sign of brotherly union with all people who work for national rights, for the victories of civilization (“segnacolo di fraterna unione con tutte le genti che operano per i diritti nazionali, per le vittorie della civiltà”).²⁵ De Marchi too was not immune to this idea of solidarity between nations, writing about the 1928 cruise that the hearts were united in wishing well for the future of the Adriatic nations.²⁶

Cultural crusades

Given the frequent references to pilgrimages in the report on the Dante Alighieri cruises, it is not surprising us that the Crusades also featured in this context. Boselli, in his above-mentioned farewell at the start of the 1928 tour which included Rhodes, made allusions to the Knights who vindicated Christian culture.²⁷ The visit of the island inevitably included the Palace and the Hospital of the Knights of St. John, who later in history sought refuge on Malta and are hence also known as the Knights of Malta. However, an unambiguous admiration for the Crusaders transpires: De Marchi spoke of the Mediaeval architecture being so evocative “as to make us suddenly live once again in the age of the heroic defence of Christianity in the Orient” (“da farci rivivere di colpo nell’epoca dell’eroica difesa della Cristianità in Oriente”). Symbolically, the Local Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society was housed in the Palace of the Tongue of Italy, properly known as the Inn of the Order of the Tongue of Italy, where a copy of the old flag of the Italian Knights still hung.²⁸

The fourth cruise, in 1930, had as destinations Palestine, Syria and Cyprus. The biblical sites of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Jericho, Nazareth and Lake Tiberius were all on the programme. A smaller delegation met with the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Monsignor Barlassina, and with Father Marotta, Father Custodian of the Holy Land.²⁹ It may well be that the decision to visit the Holy Land was inspired by the concern about the custody of holy places in that region. In the May-June 1929 issue of the *Pagine della Dante*, an extensive article by the prominent member Eugenio Coselschi (as of 1933 director of the Fascist Action Committees for Roman Universality) called attention to this issue, focussing on the custody of the Room of the Last Supper

²⁵ Paolo Boselli, ‘Messaggio alla Crociera’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 1 (1928) 7.

²⁶ M. de Marchi, ‘Echi della Crociera mediterranea: la visita ai comitati dell’oriente’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 2 (1928) 29-30, 30.

²⁷ Boselli, ‘Messaggio alla Crociera’.

²⁸ De Marchi, ‘Echi della Crociera mediterranea’, 29. The Knights of St. John had been organised in eight Langues (Tongues), namely Provence, Auvergne, France, Castile and Leon, Aragon, Italy, England, and Germany, each of them housed in separate buildings, known as Auberges (Inns).

²⁹ Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nell’Oriente Mediterraneo’, 56.

(or Coenaculum) in Jerusalem.³⁰ The Italian government claimed to be the rightful custodian of the Room of the Last Supper, on the basis of the site having been bought in 1333 from the Sultan of Egypt by the King of Naples, who left it in the care of the Franciscans. The Treaty of Sevres (1920) had foreseen the creation of a special Commission charged with taking into examination the various claims made by religious communities in Palestine. However, due to the many controversies surrounding the issue, the commission was still not officially formed. Coselschi was particularly bitter about the British role in this process, which he considered extremely biased.

The grievance makes clear there were possibly reasons for a special visit of the Dante Alighieri to Jerusalem, even if Mezzi in his report made no mention of the group going to the Room of the Last Supper. But, above all, the Lateran Accords of 1929 must have been crucial for the timing of this cruise. With these accords the Vatican as a sovereign state was recognized by the Italian State, bringing an end to a conflict that dated from 1870, when the Papal States were made part of unified Italy. This reconciliation between Church and State marked a growing use of Catholicism within Mussolini's internal cultural propaganda. It is striking, but not surprising, that in the Dante Alighieri Society, with its original reputation of having many Freemasons and atheists among its members, gradually strengthened and even preached the relationship between Italian national identity and Catholicism.

Missionaries of modernity

Besides treasuring the traces of their national past, the participants of the Dante cruises appear to have been missionaries of modernity in the Mediterranean, presenting Italy as the bringer of scientific and cultural progress. The travelling group, when not on board of a steamer was being transported with speed by a string of cars. Repeatedly, there was mention of the building of a *Casa d'Italia* having just been completed. Near Benghazi, the group went to see the experimental fields and the Park of the *Littorio*, where Italians were bringing about an agricultural rebirth of the area.³¹ Know-how was being provided in Egypt too. Mezzi boasted that the Aswan Dam was a huge modern operation, which owed its success largely to the knowledge and manpower of the Italians involved. Crossing over Morocco by car from Fez to Taza and Oudjada, close to the border with Algeria, the Dante voyagers came into contact with Italians who were employed to build a railway within three years, in order to improve the agricultural development of the area.³² During a long car race from Sinaia to

³⁰ Eugenio Coselschi, 'La questione del Cenacolo' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 3, (1929) 54-55.

³¹ Mezzi, 'La terza crociera mediterranea della «Dante»', 52.

³² Mezzi, 'La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria', 31.

Bucharest, a planned stop at the Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP) oil-rigging site had not taken place. But after an excursion in the Rila Mountains near Sofia, the cruise participants were surprised in the open countryside by a large banner with the words: “Viva la Dante Alighieri!” and an Italian crowd offering refreshments. These were the managers and workers of the Società Generale di Costruzione, who were building a large aqueduct for bringing water from the Rila Mountains to the capital city.³³

All the pride and excitement about Italy’s achievements of modernity seem to have been concentrated in the euphoria surrounding Italo Balbo’s transoceanic flight in 1933. Balbo, at the time a very young Minister of Aviation, flew between 1 July and 12 August with a team of 25 aeroplanes from Rome to Chicago and back. The Dante ‘pilgrims’ were crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Spain to Morocco just as Balbo and his team were on their way home aboard the ocean-liner *Conte Rosso*. At midday on deck, the cruise participants spotted the passing *Conte Rosso* and immediately the ship’s siren was called, the flag was hoisted and everyone waved hand-kerchiefs at the heroic pilots sailing by.³⁴



Dante cruise participants wave at the ocean-liner Conte Rosso that is bringing Italo Balbo and his team back home from Chicago after their transatlantic flight in 1931 (Photo: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri).

Italy’s widespread presence across the Mediterranean

After 1933, the itineraries of the Dante cruises concentrated on the northern part of Europe, but the particular attention for the Mediterranean remained. Much of the symbolism and importance given to the Mediterranean during the cruises was reflected in the official view of the Dante Alighieri Society, as expressed in the articles and the reports of the Annual Congress published in the Society’s periodical *Pagine della Dante*. Throughout the interwar period, strong opinions were voiced through the *Pagine* about the question of the Italian language in Malta and in Corsica, and about Italy’s colonial ambitions along the North African coast. Taking a closer look at a number of representative articles that appeared between 1929 and 1937, we can see how the Dante Society’s

³³ Mezzi, ‘Con la «Dante» dallo Spielberg al Bosporo’, 239.

³⁴ Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria’, 30.

Mediterranean policy became evermore geared up towards the re-establishment of a Roman Empire.

The larger role Italy was expected to play in the Mediterranean is vividly illustrated by a speech given at the 36th Annual Congress in Siracuse, in October 1931. There to pronounce this speech was the archaeologist Giulio Quirino Giglioli. In his extensive report on the state of affairs of the Italian cultural presence in the Mediterranean, in particular there where the Dante Society was taking the lead, Giglioli mentioned a wide range of historical arguments to support the idea that Italy was destined to dominate this corner of the world. The opening of his speech, touching upon a document he saw many years before in the Historical Museum of Athens, set the tone. The document in question was a passport that Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, had issued for a Greek patriot more than a century ago. Although the British Empire had been at its peak when this document was made, it had been written in Italian, here and there with traces of Venetian dialect. Italian was then the common language in the Mediterranean, as was also illustrated – Giglioli pointed out – by Chateaubriand's description of his travels through the Middle East in 1806.³⁵

Giglioli regretted that this age-old cultural dominance had come to an end by the beginning of the 20th century. But he was proud to say that, after some first positive steps with the occupation of Libya and the Dodecanese Islands (settled with the First Treaty of Lausanne in 1912), the decline was definitely reversed with the rise of Fascism. Giglioli described Tripoli as having become one of the most enchanting cities of the Mediterranean, with all of Tripolitania benefiting from the new roads the Italians had made and the agriculture that they had revived. Cyrenaica too was to have a great future, both in terms of production and of Italian population. Freed from the nomadic populations that opposed civilisation, the land was expected to rapidly regain civilized conditions.³⁶

However, there were also many cities in foreign states where large numbers of Italians, members of "our prolific race" ("la nostra razza prolifica") were living. Giglioli quoted figures from the census taken by the Directorate General for Italians Abroad (Italiani all'Estero) halfway through 1927. The numbers of Italians then registered in Greece were 7964, with a strong nucleus on Patras, where 2,880 of the 3,650 Italians were born locally; proof of the tenacious nationality of the families, Giglioli added. On the European side of Turkey, mainly in Constantinople, 9,500 Italians were counted, and on the Asian side 5,306. Egypt was home to a far larger group (49,106), as was the case in Algeria (28,528) and Morocco (10,402). The greatest colony was in Tunisia, the land regarded as a continuation of Sicily, "enriched by blood of our blood,

³⁵ Giulio Quirino Giglioli, 'L'Italia nel Mediterraneo' in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (1931) 148-164.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 150.

by very noble Italians against which in vain the oppressive foreign enemy", i.e. the French, had tried to fight. There 97,000 Italians resided of which 57,000 were born on African soil and were "no less Italian in blood, language and heart".³⁷

Teaching Italian language and culture

According to Giglioli, the Dante Alighieri Society had realized from the start how important it was to support the teaching of Italian to its co-nationals abroad, especially in the Mediterranean. The Committees in Tunis, in Alexandria and in Constantinople were among the most active, soon followed by many others, he recounted. Italian language and culture had to be spread not only among the co-nationals, but also among the elite of the local population, for whom Italian could be the means of connecting to western civilisation.³⁸ Looking at the data in the *Annual Report of Italian Schools Abroad* (*Annuario delle Scuole Italiane all'Estero*), Giglioli concluded that the Government, the Dante Alighieri Society and other bodies had done much to increase teaching abroad but that still very much more could be done. In Tunisia, for example, only ten thousand pupils had been to an Italian government or Dante Alighieri school, as many as in Egypt where half as many Italians lived. In Greece, where many hundreds of Greeks were following courses, attending lectures and using the library of the Dante Alighieri Society in Athens and Thessalonica, admittedly among the cultural elite French was still more widespread. Hope was expressed for the rapid setting up of a centre of advanced learning on Rhodes, which would function as a lantern of Italian science and civilisation to irradiate the whole Orient.³⁹

Totally undisputable was the status of the Italian language and culture in Malta and Corsica. Giglioli considered these lands undeniably Italian, by way of geography, lineage, language, tradition and history. It was therefore natural that people in these areas wished to be reunited to their Fatherland. Giglioli made sure to underline that the Dante Alighieri Society fully respected the political state of affairs and was embarking on a peaceful mission to merely favour and defend the Italian language and culture everywhere, both in areas that belonged geographically to Italy and those that didn't. The Maltese had always been faithful to the British Crown and did not deserve to have their language and culture taken away by the anger of "a maniac", as Giglioli described Strickland, the British governor of Malta. In Corsica, the French rule had long ago removed the Italian from official usage but the language had taken refuge in the dialect spoken inland, which was thought to be one of the

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 150.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 150.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 152.

purest Italian dialects, with generally a noticeable Tuscan influence. To convince the audience, Giglioli quoted the local poet Santu Casanova, writing about the loss of language being worse than the loss of liberty, whereby it was made clear how similar the Corsican dialect was to Italian.⁴⁰

Giglioli clearly disapproved of the anti-Fascist circles in Paris, in his view the only ones to have denied their Fatherland. The vast majority of Italians, Giglioli claimed, were patriotic and grateful to the National Government and to Mussolini for having renewed the prestige of Italy and for not having forgotten them. He dreamt of a day when every Italian child abroad would have not only an Italian school, but also maternal care, when every sick Italian would have an Italian hospital, every community however small its own Italian church where to pray to God in Italian, and a Casa d'Italia to nurture his soul and maintain his own language, his own nationality.⁴¹ According to Giglioli's prediction, as Italy grew to its full power, there would also be more foreigners gathering around its cultural institutions and Italy would be once more what he felt it deserved to be: the centre of civilization. The Dante Society was placed squarely at the head of this movement.

Finally, Giglioli gave an example of what he considered to be a praiseworthy initiative: the holidays in Italy organized for the children of Italians abroad. In a phrase that echoed the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Giglioli described these favoured children of the Nation ("figli prediletti della Nazione") as being redeemed. Having seen Rome and heard the Duce, they would return to their foreign countries with Italy in their hearts forever, aware of belonging to a great nation and decided on being its faithful soldier in war and peace, for an even greater Italy.⁴²

Promising a Pax Romana

By 1937 the rhetoric within the Dante Alighieri Society definitely took over the triumphant imperialist tones of Mussolini's propaganda apparatus. Italy had invaded Abyssinia, a move condemned by the League of Nations and punished ineffectively by means of sanctions. Abyssinia had been merged with Somaliland and Eritrea to form Italian East Africa. Public indignation about this war meant the British and the French could no longer try to keep Italy on their side, thinking of a possible German offensive. While Mussolini's image abroad changed from that of a strong and necessary leader for Italy to that of a dangerous aggressor, the idea of a *Pax Romana* that would reign once Italy could play its natural leading role in the Mediterranean became ever more

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 159-160.

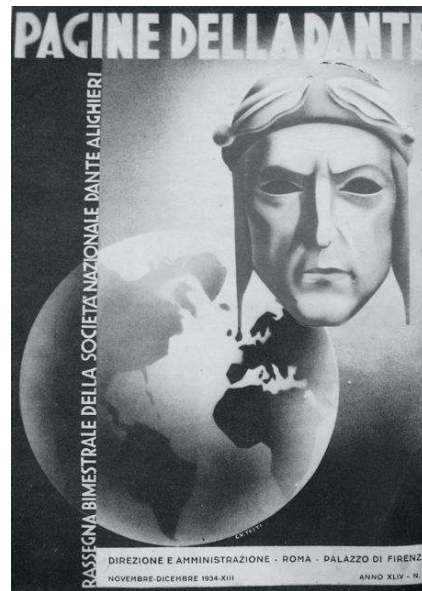
⁴¹ Ibidem, 163.

⁴² Ibidem, 163.

prominent in the pages of the Dante Alighieri Society's review. A speech held in 1937, at the Annual Congress in Naples, by Gaspare Ambrosini, professor at the Royal University of Palermo, and subsequently published in the *Pagine*, portrayed Italy as the mediator of the Mediterranean, naturally predestined to lead the cooperation between the countries in that area.⁴³ Not only the geography of the peninsula and the history that connected it to all Mediterranean cultures, but also the Italian temperament was seen as the most ideal one. No people had a temperament like that of Italians. According to Ambrosini, it was the most suitable temperament to bring other countries closer to each other and to understand their needs, their mentality and their material and spiritual necessities, and respond to them. The Italian temperament had what Ambrosini called the sense and the character of universality and of harmonising the opposites. Commercial influence and military power were not enough to sustain this role. This task required a captivating superior idea and more "intimate human factors, spiritual factors".⁴⁴ Now, thanks to Fascism, Italy had both the ideal and the power to fulfil this spiritual need, Ambrosini triumphantly asserted.

As in previous speeches, the large numbers of Italians living in the other countries around the Mediterranean Sea were listed, the investments of the Fascist Government and the Dante Society in schooling abroad was praised, the Italians in Egypt and Tunisia were encouraged to continue keeping their patriotism alive and the 'Italianness' of Malta was reaffirmed. A special mention was made of the Course for High Culture that was by now being given on Rhodes, meant to illustrate past and present relations between Italy and the Levant, and to teach foreigners about Italian culture. An alleged Bulgarian course-participant was quoted as being "grateful to this Sacred Institute, true hearth of this luminous culture" destined to lead the world.

Interestingly, Ambrosini paid particular attention to the issue of Italian custody of those places in the Holy Land that were vital to what he called



Restyled cover of the Pagine della Dante 6 (November-December 1934)

⁴³ Gaspare Ambrosini, 'L'espansione della cultura italiana nel mediterraneo' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 4-5 (1937) 32-40.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 39.

'Latin-Catholic' civilisation ("civiltà latino-cattolica"). Since the British had been making proposals for a division of Palestine, the focus had been on the Jewish-Arab relations in the area. Ambrosini viewed the Italian custody of the Holy Places as a problem that still needed to be solved with justice.⁴⁵ An aspect of Ambrosini's rhetoric that was not referred to so outspokenly in previous issues of *Pagine*, was the decidedly anti-communist position he took. The pacifist declarations of the Soviet government were accused of being deceiving. To launch a universal revolution and establish a worldwide soviet republic could not but mean infringement of international law. The Bolshevist propaganda in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria incited class struggle and local nationalisms, causing unrest and danger. Libya, by contrast, where the Italians kept out such propaganda, was described as a scene of harmony, where the local populations were grateful to their Italian rulers for being so well taken care of. Throughout Ambrosini's speech an emphasis was put on the non-aggressive rule of the Italians, who did not oppress other civilisations or religions but harmoniously brought them together, offering them understanding and justice. The publication of Ambrosini's speech in the *Pagine* was followed by another one of Giglioli's appraisals of Italy's role in the world. As one of the organizers of the *Mostra della Romanità* in Rome, Giglioli spoke about the Augustan traces throughout the world. The second empire of Rome was thereby implicitly compared to that of Augustus, suggesting the advent of a new Pax Romana.⁴⁶

The mass emigration of Italian labourers having by now been recast into a symbol of Italy's abundance and its generosity towards the world, in the late 1930s the Dante Alighieri Society published the first volumes of a series entitled *Civiltà italiana nel mondo*. Each volume would show what Italian ingenuity and labour had created abroad. The initiative was intended as a contribution to the series that Mussolini had launched in 1931: *L'opera del genio italiano all'estero*. This series was published by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri and was meant to comprise more than sixty volumes.⁴⁷ Among the countries that the Dante's more modest scheme would focus on were Argentina, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Malta, Poland, Russia and Tunisia. Volumes on Italian civilization in Austria, Corsica, Czechoslovakia, Dalmatia, Egypt, Hungary, Romania, Spain and the United States of America were also being planned. By way of prelude, the series began with *Avanguardie d'Italia nel mondo* (Italy's vanguards in the world), written by the anti-Semitic Fascist writer Paolo Orano.⁴⁸ The list of content mentioned Saint Francis of Assisi, Marco Polo, Italian art in France, Leonardo da Vinci, America as an Italian name, Giacomo

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 37.

⁴⁶ Giulio Quirino Giglioli, 'Orme augustee nel mondo' in: *Pagine della Dante* 4-5 (1937) 40-41.

⁴⁷ The only twelve volumes to be appear were published between 1933 and 1962, meaning that the project continued after the Second World War.

⁴⁸ Paolo Orano, *Avanguardie d'Italia nel mondo* (Rome: Dante Alighieri Editore, 1938).

Quarenghi as the architect of the Russian tsars, Bernardino Ramazzini as the creator of social hygiene, emigration as creative source and Italy's Fascist mission. Several of the authors that contributed to the series were not convinced Fascists, such as the slavacist Ettore Lo Gatto and the writer Mario Puccini. As the *Pagine* announced, every Italian reader was expected to feel profoundly touched and extremely proud upon reading books from this series. This was because they would show how no other people on earth had given so much to the civilization and the wellbeing of others.

A Christian soul with a Mediterranean conscience

All the above examples illustrate how the Dante Alighieri Society was primarily infused with a Romantic national ideal, whereby the arts and the products of Italian 'genius' were thought to embody the national soul. As we have seen, this nationalism had the traits of a secular religion. The attention given to ritual, which the Dante may also have inherited from its Masonic roots, seemed to give the national identity an almost transcendental value. Italianness became even more of a spiritual matter when, parallel to Mussolini's reconciliation between the initially modernist Fascist movement and the Roman Catholic Church, the Dante's anticlerical element waned and the notion of *italianità* become bound to (Latin) Christianity.

By attaching particular importance to the Mediterranean conscience ("coscienza mediterranea") as part of Italian citizenship, the Dante gave Italian identity the semblance of belonging to a 'natural' habitat that historically and geographically stretched across the Mediterranean Sea. It was common among contemporary Italian scholars to write about Italy's primordial leadership in the Mediterranean and even to draw parallels between on the one hand the high ideals that motivated the imperial Ancient Romans, equated with Italy, and on the other hand the egoistic 'Semitic mercantilism' of the Phoenicians, now embodied by Britain.⁴⁹ These theories rested on ideas of the Mediterranean already invoked during the Risorgimento but could just as well serve Fascist imperial propaganda. Gradually the nationalist mission of the Dante coalesced with the guiding principles of Italian Fascism, although even then much of the rhetoric remained abstract, filled with ideals that were open to different interpretations. For example, the Dante did not systematically promote corporatism as a concrete socio-political model that Fascist Italy could offer. Because of the interconnection and abstractness of ideals it is difficult, if not

⁴⁹ Mariella Cagnetta, "Mare nostrum": Roma e nazionalismo italiano fra Otto e Novecento' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut de Rome / Papers of the Netherlands Institute in Rome* LIII, 35 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1994) 39-40; Alexander de Grand, 'Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940' in: *Contemporary European History* 13, 2 (2004) 127-147, 128-129.

pointless, to seek clear distinctions between between cultural and political propaganda, and between Dante's Risorgimento ambitions and Fascist world views. Hence, in the second chapter the process of 'fascistization' is investigated in terms of the evident changes in the decisional structure of the Dante, rather than in its rhetoric.

In recent years academic research into the appropriation of the Middle Ages and Renaissance by the Fascist regime has demonstrated that an amalgam of these two periods of history was also instrumentalized – in festivals, urban planning and architecture - to suggest a continuity between this past and modern, Fascist Italy. An example of such appropriation is the never-realized plan to build a so-called Danteum in Rome, that would have served as monument, museum and library dedicated to Dante, symbol of national unity.⁵⁰ Once the Dante Alighieri Society accepted Christianity as being a fundamental part of Italian civilization, it would have been logical for the Dante to take advantage of the Fascist revival of the Medieval/Renaissance past by also emphasizing this element of *italianità*. Yet in the Dante's activities abroad, Italy's Roman heritage was more frequently referred to than its Medieval/Renaissance legacy, with the exception of the figure of Dante himself who was however 'lifted' out of his historical context.

The Projection of Britishness

'Britishness' was no less a complex idea to promote than *italianità*, even if Great Britain as a political unity had a longer history to speak of. In 1707 the Act of Union formally united Scotland with England under the Kingdom of Great Britain. Ireland, which had been incorporated in 1801, had in 1922 regained independence with the exception of Ulster. Although internal tensions existed, as proven by Ireland's nationalist aspirations and Scottish attachment to its own judicial and education system, the Kingdom had to some extent managed to create an idea of 'Britishness'. In the Victorian age this had become closely intertwined with the Empire. Given the fact that the Empire too was being threatened by emerging nationalist movements, what specific image of British culture did the British Council promote? This is a question that has remained untouched in much of the research on the Council done so far.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Thomas L. Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum* 2nd Engl. ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985); D. Medina Lasansky, 'Tableau and Memory: The Fascist Revival Revival of the Medieval/Renaissance Festival in Italy' in: *The European Legacy* 4, 1 (1999) 26-53; idem, 'Towers and Tourists: The Cinematic City of San Gimignano' in: Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum ed., *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2005) 113-131.

⁵¹ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*; Eastment, *The Policies and Position*; Donaldson, *The British Council*.

For an organization that repeatedly claimed not to be engaged in propaganda but to merely “make the life and thought of the British peoples more widely known abroad; and to promote a mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples”,⁵² the British Council presented a remarkably consistent image of what it considered to be Britain’s essential qualities. The icons of this constructed imago can be traced in two of the British Council’s publications: the review *Britain To-day* and the series *British Life and Thought*. What were the recurring themes? What values were praised? Englishness as a distinct cultural identity, not automatically equated with Britishness and Empire, had been elaborated since the 1880s and received a boost from the Great War.⁵³ How interchangeable did the concepts of Englishness and those of Britishness nevertheless remain? And how were Britain’s international position and its relationship with its empire portrayed?

Format and circulation of Britain To-day and British Life and Thought

The first issue of *Britain To-day* appeared in March 1939. The purpose of this review, as expressed in the foreword of its first issue, was “to bring the friends and, for that matter, the critics of Great Britain into closer touch with current happenings in our country”.⁵⁴ As the title suggests, its prime focus was on the current developments in British society, from innovative approaches in industry and in local or central government, to cultural movements. Providing this information was beneficial for the world at large, for were not all nations facing similar challenges of the modern world? In spite of political and cultural difference, *Britain To-day* argued, did not all countries have the task of:

[...] improving and adjusting the civilization handed down to us by our ancestors: a civilization which has a common basis although its expression takes different forms suited to the genius of particular peoples.⁵⁵

It was a question of sharing best practices and of offering the fruits of British civilisation to its Dominions, Colonies and the world at large. In giving such

⁵² TNA, BW 151, The British Council Report by The Rt. Hon. Lord Eustace Percy, M.P. of Activities from 1st April 1936 to 15th July 1937.

⁵³ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Idem, ‘English and British National Identity’ in: *History Compass* 4/3 (2006) 428-447, 435-436; Peter Mandler, *The English National Character. The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) 141-195.

⁵⁴ Foreword, *Britain To-day*, 1 (17 March 1939) 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 1. Note that this quote seems to suggest there was some influence noticeable of the Boasian anthropological idea of the uniqueness of each culture, as opposed to the more traditional British concept of different stages of development in a universal human civilization (Mandler, *The English National Character*, 157-159).

information, *Britain To-day* claimed to be providing a background to the ordinary news.⁵⁶ In the foreword there was also a clear invitation to send comments and suggestions for any subjects that readers wished to see further explained.

Britain To-day generally contained three articles and a number of photographs or drawings: in total sixteen pages of reading-matter and four pages of illustrations. The articles were free of copyright, presumably with the intent of encouraging the reprinting of the content by foreign press. Initially it was a fortnightly publication, but as of January 1942 it became an extended monthly publication. Rex Leeper himself, the mind behind the creation of the British Council, wrote some of the anonymous articles in the initial phase.⁵⁷ After the first year, the name of the author was more often added to the article. To start with, *Britain To-day* had a print run of five thousand and was distributed for free to "carefully selected mailing lists".⁵⁸ With 68,000 copies in 1941 and more than 120,000 in 1934, the circulation reflected a steady increase in popularity. The review was (in some cases intermittently) published in several languages besides English: French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Most of its readers were located in Europe's neutral countries, the United States of America and South America.⁵⁹

The projected series of brochures on *British Life and Thought* was first mentioned in February 1938.⁶⁰ Stanley Unwin, a member of the Council's Books and Periodicals Committee created the series. He was a publisher, well-opposed to censorship and concerned about the rise of Nazi Germany. The brochures were meant to be easily readable, informative essays, written by experts on the subject matter, richly illustrated with photographs, and to be sold singly, at a shilling per booklet. In 1940 the first ten booklets appeared, all of them devoted to specific British institutions: *The British Commonwealth*, *The British System of Government*, *British Justice*, *British Education*, *The Face of Britain* (about its geography and geology), *British Sport and Games*, *British Ships and British Seamen*, *British Aviation*, *The Englishwoman* and *The Englishman*. Each booklet, as described on the back cover, was to be:

complete in itself, and taken together they provide a unique account of the life and work, the ideas and ideals, of Britain today. The English reader will find them as informative as they are stimulating. For the foreign reader who has never visited Britain they are the best substitute for such a visit, and they will

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.

⁵⁷ TNA, BW 119/2, M.C.H. and R.H.J., 'Britain To-day. A Council Periodical in War and Peace' in: *Monthly Review* (British Council, November 1947) 170-172; Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 58.

⁵⁸ Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 59-60; Byrne, "Boosting Britain", 85-97.

⁶⁰ TNA, BW 70/1, Minutes of the 7th meeting of the Books and Periodicals Committee, 3 February 1938.

go far to make plain to him how life is lived in this country, how the British Commonwealth of Nations is organised, and in what spirit Britain now stands for liberty and justice throughout the world.⁶¹

Admittedly, these two publications give only the official view within the British Council of how the British culture was to be presented to the outside world. Enough has been written about the propagandist nature of the review and about the controversies that this occasionally led to among the Council staff.⁶² However, though the archival sources do not give a complete picture of how the content of the publications was decided upon, we must assume there was some degree of consensus both among British Council staff and at the Foreign Office on the proposed image of British culture or else it would not have been so consistent. My question is not how far beside the truth this ideal image of British culture was. I will also leave aside the reception of the image by foreign readers of *Britain To-day*, something that requires an entirely different corpus of source material. My central question is what the ideal image consisted of and how it justified promoting British language and culture across the world, giving it a global relevance.

In a thesis by Alice Byrne on *Britain To-day* defended in 2010, three different phases are identified in the image of Britain portrayed by the review between 1939 and 1945.⁶³ While recognizing that this adds further nuance to the topic, I will here concentrate on a more continuous idea of Britishness formed in the 1930s. As argued elsewhere, in this period the new mass media as well as influential literary figures helped lay the basis of a common culture that would endure throughout twentieth-century British society.⁶⁴ In 1937, a Ministry of Information was created, from which the Council managed to remain independent.⁶⁵ Though being two different organizations, both had to appeal at least in part to the predominant ideals of the 1930s if their proposed icons were to be convincing. Hence it is not surprising that much of the imagery used by the British Council to be projected abroad, coincides with depictions of nationhood and Britishness used by the Ministry of Information to motivate the British home front during the Second World War.⁶⁶ In the summer of 1939, just before the war, the British Council had been able to reverse initial plans for it to be absorbed by the Ministry of Information.

⁶¹ The Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, *The Englishman*, (Edinburgh: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1940).

⁶² Byrne, "Boosting Britain", 10-21; Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 60.

⁶³ Byrne, "Boosting Britain".

⁶⁴ D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 228.

⁶⁵ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 68-81; Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 283-284.

⁶⁶ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; paperback edition 2007) 19-54.

Britain and European or World Civilization

One recurring idea was that of Great Britain being the custodian and beacon of European civilization. As was emphatically stated in a 1939 issue of *Britain To-day*:

It is not too much to say that, with the increasing pace of modern life, the people of Great Britain have become increasingly aware of the value to their own and to European civilization of maintaining the standards and the inheritance received from their forefathers.⁶⁷

Such references to the way Great Britain was to engage itself in defending European civilization stressed the tradition that it had to preserve but also called for the constant interaction with external cultural influences to maintain the dynamism of the civilization. This seemingly contradictory mission was, for example, illustrated by an editorial entitled 'In the Defence of Culture' which appeared in *Britain To-day* in April 1943, in the middle of the Second World War. It explicitly spoke of the rival claim among nations for primacy in creating what could be named European culture, Western culture or modern culture.⁶⁸ The author went on to say that this European civilization had always been subject to a rapid circulation of ideas and that it was indeed important to stimulate this openness. Such cultural dynamism coincided with the cultural mission expressed by the renowned Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, paraphrased in the editorial as "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas".⁶⁹ European cultural heritage – defined as being based on the Roman conception of law, the Greek conception of freedom of thought, and the religious conception of love and the sanctity of the individual soul – could benefit from contact with the new worlds of North and South America, as well as with the ancient worlds of Russia and China.

By the end of the war, the literary scholar Benjamin Ifor Evans in an article entitled 'Great Britain and Western Europe' regretted the wartime isolation between countries in Western Europe and praised pamphlets such as *Britain To-day* that had tried to break through this isolation by making known the new cultural climate in Britain.⁷⁰ It was in this crisis of Western civilization that, according to Evans, Great Britain had discovered her unique role. The

⁶⁷ Unnamed author, 'Preserving the Past' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 10-16, 16.

⁶⁸ The Editor, 'In the Defence of Culture' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 84 (April 1943) 1-4, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 3-4.

⁷⁰ B. Ifor Evans, 'Great Britain and Western Europe' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 112 (August 1945) 10-14.

“prolonged stay within her shores of distinguished representatives of all the occupied countries” had made many British men and women, more than ever before in their lives, aware of “their common heritage with Europe” and of the “conception of Western Europe as a community with common spiritual origins”.⁷¹ Whereas in peacetime the cultural agencies in any country would usually be in charge of presenting their own national history and cultural inheritance, a different task was now required from them.

Rather than the discovery and the emphasis on what is best in the national tradition, there should be the exploration of what the common European inheritance possesses. [...] England, by the very fact that its internal problems are momentarily less severe than those of other European countries, can serve Europe by being one of the prime participators, and the depository for the European idea.⁷²

The British proposals for the setting up of a Conference of Inter-Allied Ministers and an Association of University Professors of the Allied Countries were to be seen against this background.

It was not only Europe that was seen to benefit from Great Britain’s endeavours in the defence of European civilization. Humanity at large was expected to be a grateful recipient of the fruits this would bear.⁷³

Let us therefore look at the man who will take his stand for civilisation, not of his own country but of Europe: not of Europe, as will one day be recognised, but of the world.⁷⁴

Evans sketched a world where technological advances had so greatly increased international contact that a mental and spiritual transformation towards worldwide cultural understanding was needed. Western European culture was not to be exclusive. Certain European principles, deriving from Christianity, such as the “supreme value of the individual man” were considered by Evans as being by now so universally accepted that they could serve as a basis for humanity as a whole.⁷⁵ However, part of the consistent image of Britain spread by the British Council was the belief that it did not wish to export abstract ideological principles, but rather good practice that had proven to be such through experience.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 12.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 13.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 10-14.

⁷⁴ Earl Baldwin, ‘The Englishman’ in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 439-461, 458.

⁷⁵ Evans, ‘Great Britain and Western Europe’, 13.

He [the Englishman] has instructed other races committed to his charge in the only school with which he is familiar, the school of self-government, not from any high moral motives, but for purely practical reasons.

Self-government is the Englishman's ideal because it seems to him more likely to work than government imposed from above. The Englishman is not interested in theories of government; he wants results. [...] The English are varied in their practice, but uniform in their aim. They are the least ideological nation in the world, but they are the most consistent in pursuing their ultimate aims.⁷⁶

And so with this same practical sense, the British "preached" to other countries the "cult of games and pastimes"⁷⁷ and through the British Admiralty Charts put their hydrographic information to the service of the whole world.⁷⁸ Similarly, it was seen as wisest in Britain's relations with the Commonwealth to offer means by which the Dominions and the Colonies could learn to govern themselves and reach greater prosperity. The African 'native' had to be encouraged to "rise in the scale of civilization" or else he would be doomed to an even more hopeless condition.⁷⁹ The British Colonies would through self-government grow stronger in character and become more self-reliant, learning from their mistakes as they went along.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, although the Council publications underscored the image of Britain being "the least ideological nation in the world", after a critical analysis of the themes they dealt with a number of values can be identified that were evidently considered typically British yet exemplary worldwide. We shall now have a closer look at these.

Freedom, Democracy and Peace

One of the essential values that British culture was felt to represent and that was considered of supreme importance for all civilization was freedom. It was portrayed as the guiding principle both within Britain's own system of government⁸¹ and in that of the British Commonwealth.⁸² In *Britain To-day* it was emphasized that the communities of the British Commonwealth of Nations

⁷⁶ 'The English Way of Life' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 1-3, 2.

⁷⁷ Bernard Darwin, 'British Sport and Games' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 279-310, 279 and 295.

⁷⁸ Michael Lewis, 'British Ships and British Seamen' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 313-358, 345.

⁷⁹ Unnamed author, 'British Rule in Tropical Africa' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 3 (14 April 1939) 1-8, 7.

⁸⁰ Arthur Berriedale Keith, 'The British Commonwealth of Nations' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 3-48, 20.

⁸¹ William A. Robson, 'The British System of Government' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 51-80, 80.

⁸² 'Commonwealth', the author felt, was as term more preferable than Empire because it underlined the aspect of voluntary choice. (Keith, 'The British Commonwealth', 1 and 8)

were “freely and closely associated with one another” and that there was free co-operation but no compulsion.⁸³ Thereby the policy of the British Commonwealth was contrasted to that of the French, characterized as aimed at making the Africans adapt where possible to the social and cultural institutions of French civilization.⁸⁴ The Commonwealth was said to be built on the willingness to benefit from British cooperation, not on brutal conquest like the Empires of Alexander, Charlemagne, the Ottomans or Napoleon.⁸⁵ In the *British Life and Thought* booklet *British Ships and British Seamen*, glossing over many a historical fact, it was candidly stated that after having erroneously upheld the Mercantile Theory, Britain discovered Free Trade and the concurrent need for Freedom of the Seas. The Pax Britannica had henceforth defended trade and worldwide freedom. Great Britain had become the “policeman” of the seas, “big and good-tempered” such as British police were, there to protect the public and prevent evil deeds.⁸⁶

According to this picture of reality, Great Britain invested in the Pax Britannica not just in its own interest but in the interest of all nations.⁸⁷ Great Britain’s global commitment to freedom was said to be demonstrated among other things by the leading role it played in the abolition of slavery, thereby giving its Navy the task to patrol the seas as more countries agreed to renounce slave trade.⁸⁸

What the opening-up [of the ‘Dark Continent’] would have meant, not only to millions of coloured people who inhabit it, but also to world-civilisation as a whole, had slavery remained the normal procedure of the white pioneers, it is terrible to contemplate.⁸⁹

⁸³ Unnamed author, ‘The British Commonwealth of Nations’ in: *Britain To-day*, Number 2 (31 March 1939) 1-7.

⁸⁴ ‘British Rule in Tropical Africa’, 6.

⁸⁵ Lewis, ‘British Ships’, 334.

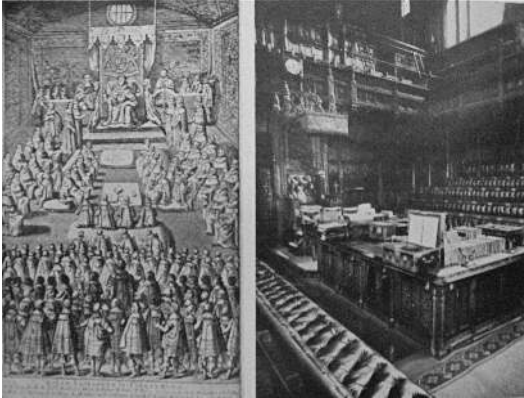
⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 334-6.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 340.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 348-349; Keith, ‘The British Commonwealth’, 13. See also: Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992; 2005) 361.

⁸⁹ Lewis, ‘British Ships’, 349.

Britain saved the world from this "by making the discovery, on the nick of time, that the Black Man has a soul."⁹⁰ Besides mentioning the aid given to freedom-fighting Greeks and Italians seeking national independence, British love of liberty was also projected on the contemporary dislike for dictatorship. Subtle references were made to the way in which British freedom was totally incompatible with dictatorial state systems. The *British Life and Thought* booklet



"Parliament in Queen Eliabeth's reign
The interior of the House of Commons today"
From: W.A. Robson, 'The British System of
Government' in: *British Life and Thought*
(London, Toronto and New York: Longmans
Green & Co., 1941) 49-80, 45.

on British education, in stating that the mass production of ideas was entirely foreign to British culture, portrayed its education system as one of "genuine freedom" and with which "the State has no axe to grind."⁹¹ Elsewhere, over-government was considered detrimental for the initiative of the individual and for a nation's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.⁹²

The best safeguard for the freedom of the individual and the nation was held to be democracy. *The British System of Government* made very clear

how central democracy was to what the British Council considered as being British. The sovereignty of Parliament was presented as "the corner-stone of the British Constitution". The ultimate sovereignty within Parliament belonged to the House of Commons, of which almost anyone could become a member. The author conceded that the House of Lords, with its privileged members, was something of an anachronism, but explained that no alternative to this body had so far been found that would suit all parties, thereby reiterating the positive notion of compromise.⁹³ In underlining the importance of debate and openly expressed criticism in Parliament, there was an overt reference to totalitarian states, where dictators were made to appear infallible and the media were prevented from voicing any criticism.⁹⁴ Even more explicit was the assurance that, unlike in totalitarian states, the citizen in Great Britain was free from fear of arrest by secret police, imprisonment without trial, unformulated

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

⁹¹ Ibidem, 351-3; J.E. Hales, 'British Education' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 127-170, 169.

⁹² 'Democracy in a Changing World', 5.

⁹³ Robson, 'The British System of Government', 55.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 61.

offences and political censorship.⁹⁵ Similarly, the Civil Service was described as possessing integrity and a commitment to the public interest, without any of the partisanship that would be demanded of it in an authoritarian state. Local government's relationship with central government was essentially one of partnership.⁹⁶

Again, as in other institutions, the adage in democracy was that it was based on experience and not on an intellectual theory, and the result of a compromise between ancient forms and modern needs. Hence, as was stated in an issue of *Britain To-day*, it was not because of some abstract theory that the British had chosen their political system but on the basis of present experience.⁹⁷ It was hereby repeatedly added that there was no wish to impose British views on others or to disparage other systems, but that it was simply "from the evidence of fact" that British people knew that a democratic government had created the best opportunities, giving them the habit of enterprise and self-help.

[...] we speak for ourselves without wishing to impose our views on others – we have been brought by the facts of to-day to a reaffirmation of our fundamental democratic liberties.⁹⁸

By not being dependent on an authoritarian central power, the British had become particularly capable of coping with crises.

However great the praise was for government institutions such as Parliament or the system of justice, a deep-seated belief in the importance of private initiative underlay the way Britain was presented. In examining social services, the assertion was that "in this respect the totalitarian countries differ from democracies not in the amount of 'social service' provided, but in the methods by which this service is organized, the scope allowed to private initiative".⁹⁹ Whereas under a totalitarian system social services were frequently used "as instruments to create a servile mentality", in Great Britain they were "the jealously guarded responsibilities of scores of democratic bodies and of tens of thousands of public spirited citizens."¹⁰⁰ The leading idea in Great Britain was to diffuse the spirit of leadership instead of concentrating it, allowing a multitude of self-governing private initiatives to cooperate with the State or local authorities. Pioneer work was best left to voluntary organizations

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 76.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 68-70 and 74.

⁹⁷ 'Democracy in a Changing World', 2-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁹⁹ Unnamed author, 'Voluntary Social Service' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 2 (31 March 1939) 13-15, 13.

¹⁰⁰ A.D.K. Owen, 'British Social Services' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co. 1941) 173-216, 186. See also similarities with the British modernist reformers in health, housing and architecture inspired by Fascist projects in: Elizabeth Darling, *Re-forming Britain. Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

before it was taken over by the State, fitting in with the preference for gradual evolution rather than revolution.¹⁰¹ The contribution of private organizations, with or without state help or patronage, was commended as one of the most interesting and characteristic features of British democracy. An enormous number of voluntary associations were able to participate in shaping both legislation and administration, thereby teaching individuals "a valuable lesson of self-government".¹⁰² This room for private initiative was a longstanding tradition, but also something that was regarded as the solution to the problems of the future.

In our opinion, the future course of history in the twentieth century will be determined largely by the success or failure of this blending of public and private activity, of which we in Great Britain can show so many examples.¹⁰³

Even the most vital infrastructure for British trade and for the Empire, the Navy, was to a large extent dependent on the voluntary service of British seamen, with as notable example the role ordinary British seamen had played in the successful retreat from Dunkirk.¹⁰⁴

What was purportedly the objective of letting the world know about British attachment to (individual) freedom and democracy? Right from the start, the British Council justified its existence by arguing that informing people abroad about British culture and society and sharing ideas would contribute to world peace. As stated in a policy paper of 1937:

[...] the Council's policy is inspired by their belief in the decisive contribution which the character, ideals and achievement of the British people can make to the cause of peace and peaceful trade; and by the desire that the nature of this contribution shall be understood and appreciated by the rest of the world.¹⁰⁵

This concept of Pax Britannica was part of the parallels that British civil servants were taught to see between the Ancient Roman Empire and the British civilizing mission in its Empire.¹⁰⁶ There is evidence however of a preference in Council publications to emphasize the affinity with the Athenian model of colonisation, to distance itself from the aggressiveness of the Roman expansion. Hence the Commonwealth is described as having since its earliest days "had closer affinities to the Empire of Athens in the fifth century B.C. than to that of

¹⁰¹ 'Voluntary Social Service', 14.

¹⁰² 'Democracy in a Changing World, 4; 'Preserving the Past', 11; Robson, 'The British System of Government', 57.

¹⁰³ 'Democracy in a Changing World', 8.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, 'British Ships and British Seamen', 331 and 356-357.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, BW 2/112, *The Work of the Council. Its History, Present Programme and Future Policy* (London, January 1937) 6.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen. The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000) 9-10, 52-53 and 70-71.

Rome". What is more, at no times had it resembled the Empire of Rome, "the result of the subjugation of foreign peoples" and control over them by force.¹⁰⁷ This Athenian 'turn' was probably a reaction to a revived Pax Romana Mussolini aspired to in the context of Italian Fascism's cult of *romanità*.¹⁰⁸

The harmony of hierarchy

The British Council publications were geared to underline the social harmony of the British nation. In *The British System of Government* as well as *The Englishman*, such qualities as tolerance, justice and fair-play were attributed to the British as well as a willingness to take into account the voices of all minorities. Thanks to this spirit of tolerance and consent, the Marxist philosophy of class war had made little progress in Britain. In the field of industrial relations, for example, the voluntary negotiating between trade unions and employers' associations was said to have prevented any clashes from arising.¹⁰⁹

Politics in England is one long essay in the gentle art of compromise, English education one long lesson in the business of avoiding extremes of conduct or thought.¹¹⁰

The authors touching upon the subject of class did not deny that there were huge differences between classes in British society, but nevertheless concluded that there was a fundamental harmony in this arrangement. There was in their view no hatred between classes.¹¹¹ The upheaval of the Cromwell period had made any notion of revolution repellent to the British ever since and had created a stronger sense of community. Subsequently the middle classes had recognized the necessity of social reform for the proletariat, just as the unions had regarded the weapon of striking to be avoided at all costs. It was proudly pointed out that no major strike had taken place in Great Britain since 1926.¹¹² Gradual reform had been notable in poor relief, in social housing and in education. In brief, all parties agreed that more was to be gained through constitutional means than through violence or revolution.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Keith, 'The British Commonwealth', 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Romke Visser, 'Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità' in: *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 27, No. 1 (1992) 5-22.

¹⁰⁹ Robson, 'The British System of Government', 77.

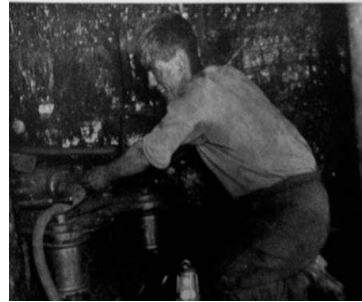
¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 78.

¹¹¹ The Editor, 'Step by Step' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 81 (January 1943) 1-4.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, 2-3.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 3-4.

Not everyone agreed with this view of British society. For instance, *The English People: Impressions and Observations*, a book written by the Scotsman Denis William Brogan for an American public, criticized England for failing as a social democracy because of its class-divisions, each class being identified through accent, manner of speech, posture or gesture.¹¹⁴ No doubt the combination of these two factors – Brogan's Scottishness and his American target group – explains this critical approach to British so-called social harmony. Tellingly, Ernest Barker in his review of *The English People* countered these accusations.¹¹⁵ Describing himself as "one who was born and bred, and lived for a quarter of a century, within ten miles of Manchester, among cotton-factories and coal-pits (in which, by the way, his mother and father worked)", Barker put forward quite a different experience, that of an "industrial democracy" where masters and men regarded one another "as being of the same stuff."¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Barker wrote favourably about the new, professional aristocracy that had emerged in the nineteenth century. It comprised of "the old and established families of civil servants, lawyers, doctors, school-masters, clergy, university teachers, and the like" which according to Barker were now largely in charge of running the country and did so "as a matter of an honourable professional job which is a matter of simple duty". The social structure was based on mutual respect and acceptance of each individual's specific position. Barker did not see this as being hierarchical or snobbish but in fact "genuinely democratic". Each had his or her pride in sticking to the position he or she naturally fell in, be it that of a domestic servant or that of a scavenger. These positions were part of "the pageant, or solemnity, of English life", as old as the sixteenth century and as old as the English Book of Common Prayer which taught that each person had a duty assigned to him or her by God.¹¹⁷ *The British System of Government*



"ATHLETE. Mr. A. G. Pilbrow, an Oxford University Hurdler
MINER, using a mechanical saw on the coal face"
From: Earl Baldwin, 'The Englishman' in: *British Life and Thought* (London, Toronto and New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1941) 437-462, 460.

¹¹⁴ Denis William Brogan, *The English People: Impressions and Observations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943).

¹¹⁵ Ernest Barker, 'The English People' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 87 (July 1943) 15-19.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 15-16.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 17-18.

presented a less roundabout way of resolving the issue of class differences. While conceding that enormous inequalities of wealth, birth and opportunity existed in Britain, the conclusion drawn by the author was that the “truth of the matter appears to be that the people of Britain do not care greatly for social and economic equality.”¹¹⁸

Besides this idea of harmony between social classes, British society was also portrayed as having peacefully incorporated different nations. Officially the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland encompassed English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish populations.¹¹⁹ Did the British Council publications make its readers aware of the internal cultural diversity of what was frequently simply referred to as ‘Britain’? We have already noted that the terms ‘British’ and ‘English’ were more often than not used as interchangeable qualifications, as if ‘Englishness’ was unquestionably the essence of ‘Britishness’. This tendency to equate ‘Britishness’ with ‘Englishness’, whilst reducing the Welsh, the Scots or the Irish to the peripheral status of Celtic ‘other’, has already been signalled as part and parcel of identity building in the British imperial context.¹²⁰ We also recognize in the Council’s publications the idea of Britain being a racially-mixed nation, combining the racial virtues of Britons, Romans, Danes, Saxons and Normans to forge a united Britain, in which the English appear to have been the prime inheritors of Roman civilization.¹²¹ However, the impression that the British Council was intent on presenting to the world “this false idea of Britain as a ‘homogeneous’ nationality which was, of course, entirely English in concept” needs a certain nuance.¹²²

Even if nearly all articles of *Britain To-day* either dealt with British or with English matters, this review by no means presented Britain as a monolithic phenomenon. There was also occasional attention for the specifically Scottish, Welsh or even Irish heritage. For example, one article opened with the recent publication of the official biography of W.B. Yeats, arguing that it was hard to make a clear-cut distinction between English and Irish literature. Yeats’ “imagination in youth” was described as being “fired by the Irish scene and Irish legend” and his concentration on Ireland undeniable, but it was added

¹¹⁸ Robson, ‘The British System of Government’, 79.

¹¹⁹ The Act of Union of 1707 had unified the Kingdoms of England and Scotland, including also Wales, and was followed by another Act of Union in 1801 that added Ireland to this United Kingdom. Since 1927, the year in which the partition brought about by the Irish War of Independence was recognized by Parliament, this political territory became known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

¹²⁰ Murray G.H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1999) 6-12; Ian Baucom, *Out of Place. Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (1999) 80; Hingley, *Roman Officers*, 65-68.

¹²¹ Baldwin, ‘The Englishman’, 12. Compare with: Hingley, *Roman Officers*, 162.

¹²² Peter Berresford Ellis, ‘When was the United Kingdom?’, Lecture under the auspices of the University of Reading’s Town Hall Lecture Series on The United Kingdom, Reading, 19 January 2004.

that he owed much to English poetry and the English writers he interacted with.¹²³ The Irish literary movement, in the words of the editor, was "an expression of the distinctively Irish genius," which contributed in its own way to British literature, yet would never have emerged without the background of English literature and in a way discovered itself through the awareness of being different, of having a separate individuality.¹²⁴ The author then went on to argue that just as there were rival claims among the English, the Irish, the Scottish and the Welsh regarding certain elements of British culture, so too different countries claimed their contributions to the creation of European culture. There was recognition of the fact that Great Britain was a composite of parts.

Admittedly such an article still implied that the English culture stood above the rest. Rather like the different classes each had their own position within England, so too the different nations fitted into Great Britain. It is well imaginable how such thinking in terms of a harmonious hierarchy of classes or countries could easily be transposed to the Empire and the Commonwealth, justifying in noble words what was in fact cultural domination. Yet there are equally examples of Council publications that recognized difference without obviously reducing it to a subjugated 'otherness'. For example, in *British Sport and Games* the author described rugby football in South Wales as giving vent to intense local patriotism and producing "an almost religious enthusiasm", thereby confessing that he too having some Welsh blood in himself became wholly Welsh whenever he was at a match the Welsh team was playing in.¹²⁵ It is perhaps useful to recall that the Scots are until this day unusually well represented in Britain's Foreign Office and its diplomatic service.¹²⁶ The effects of this phenomenon as well as the fact that Charles Bridge, the Council's Secretary General, was of Irish origin may have made it harder for the Council publications to ignore the 'Celtic fringe' entirely.

Contrasts between past and future, as well as between rural and urban life, are also ably reconciled by Council publications to form an impression of harmony. In British war propaganda the Southern English countryside was often conflated with Britain and made to represent 'authentic England' unchanged by time.¹²⁷ In a *Britain To-day* article tellingly entitled 'Preserving the Past', the English countryside was described as being "studded with the remains of every period from prehistoric times onwards" and village names, their buildings and their boundaries as "redolent of the past".¹²⁸ This was attributed to the insular character of the nation and its relatively peaceful

¹²³ The Editor, 'The Defence of Culture', 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 1-2.

¹²⁵ Darwin, 'British Sport and Games', 293.

¹²⁶ Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992; 2005) 132.

¹²⁷ Rose, *Which People's War*, 198-218.

¹²⁸ 'Preserving the Past' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 10-16, 10.

internal history. Concern was voiced about the damage caused by the industrial revolution and the modern urbanisation. A remedy was sought in educating town-dwellers to a greater degree about the unspoilt character of rural districts and in protecting the landscape through private as well as government initiatives.¹²⁹ To interpret the portrayals of the English landscape in *Britain To-day* as pure nostalgia would be to ignore the actual response to the changing of times that is expressed in Council's combined attention for urban and rural planning.¹³⁰ Plenty of triumphant articles were dedicated to modern urban planning projects, to the development of new, functional housing and public buildings. For example, *Britain To-day* took the opportunity to present innovative projects in urban planning and reconstruction that had been executed or were intended for after the end of the war. Already in 1941, one could read that a new era in housing development would begin once the war ended. The destruction caused by the bombing of London and other big cities had "provided an opportunity for creative town-planning and reconstruction unequalled since the aftermath of the Great Fire."¹³¹

Truth will triumph

The British Council's motto was "Truth will Triumph". Propaganda was allegedly not needed; the facts would speak for themselves. Hence there was no wish on the part of *Britain To-day* to focus on the organization of defence in Great Britain, on the resources it possessed in its Empire and on its military endurance. Generally the review would provide "a description of the more positive and fruitful developments in spheres of other activity than those of preparation to defend [...]."¹³² Nevertheless, articles on military subjects and photographs of munition factories, the British Navy and women involved in military activities were certainly not lacking.

The Council strongly condemned the relentless German propaganda in the Middle East, which was spreading false rumours and news to discredit the British. An article in the 1941 edition of the B.B.C. Handbook by Harold Nicolson, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Information, was referred to as source. In this article, Nicolson insisted that there had to be British propaganda too, but that it would be of a completely different nature from that of a totalitarian regime. Instead of creating slavish, unthinking opinion and appealing to the lowest in human nature, as was the case with the deceitful

¹²⁹ Ibidem, 11.

¹³⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s the campaigns for what was a modern experience of rural life went hand in hand with those for modern urbanity (David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998) 32-33).

¹³¹ Owen, 'British Social Services', 205.

¹³² 'Democracy in a Changing World', 8.

German propaganda, the British democratic propaganda would be a long term one "seeking gradually to fortify the intelligence of the individual."¹³³ British propaganda would rest on truthfulness.

It must seek to build up an unshakable edifice of ascertained fact which will defy falsification and rumour. [...] Concealing nothing that can safely be disclosed, it invites the free-minded men to whom it appeals to form their opinion in the light of realities [...].¹³⁴

According to *Britain To-day's* editor, an excellent example of this kind of propaganda was the "Open Letter to Hitler" recently published in the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*, signed by the editor, G.A. Vlachos. It was a reminder that Greece had wished to stay outside the war and a defence of the help from British airmen that the Greeks accepted once the Italians attacked. This defiant message was effective because of what Greece had meant for civilization and because of the epic battles the country had fought in the past. Here Greece had defended what in British eyes was all that its ancient cultural heritage stood for.¹³⁵

At the end of the Second World War, reflecting on how the age of internationalism had begun in 1935-9 and how more than ever people of all countries had found themselves talking about the same issues and challenges, the editor of *Britain To-day* concluded that the cure for the post-War world "lies not in less but in more internationalism". The press had to be free, intellectual, social and economic barriers removed and the "malignant giants of ignorance" destroyed. This attitude implied a great confidence in the capacity of the individual to evaluate facts and in the notion that worldwide communication benefited from open cultural exchange.¹³⁶ The example of a totalitarian state in Germany had shown that spiritual slavery could be imposed whereas spiritual freedom could by no means be enforced. Although totalitarianism had been militarily defeated, its evil had not yet been entirely extinguished and "complete victory remains to be won, not by force of arms, but by reason, by right thinking, by the persuasion of sound example."¹³⁷

¹³³ Nicolson as quoted in: The Editor, 'Propaganda', *Britain To-day* Number 50 (4 April 1941) 1-3, 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, 3.

¹³⁶ The Editor, 'Before War, And After' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 111 (July 1945) 1-4.

¹³⁷ The Editor, 'The Mind of a Nazi - The Nuremberg Trials' in: *Britain To-day*, Number 122 (June 1946) 1-4,4.

Conclusion

The images of *italianità* and Britishness spread by the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council show that in the Italian concept of national identity the spirit was held to be central whereas British identity was embodied by institutions that were thought to express underlying British principles. The emphasis on the British system of government, of justice and of social order which can be traced in the national image that the British Council was presenting abroad, was part of an elitist preference for thinking in terms of civilisational progress, manifest in the institutions and the persons shaping these, rather than cultivating a feeling of Englishness that could rouse the masses.¹³⁸ Indeed, it was the attachment to social stability and harmony, expressed in Britain's determined avoidance of the unrest caused by the French Revolution, which remained influential in the British construction of national cultural identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. By contrast, the Italian spirit diffused by the missionaries of *italianità* issued from the tumultuous Italian Risorgimento.

Ironically, while *italianità* was meant to come across as fully embracing twentieth century modernity the Dante still used fairly old-fashioned instruments of communication, whereas Britishness was represented as conserving a democratic tradition but promoted by a Council that used more modern means. The *Pagine della Dante*, the review of the Dante, was a rather plain bulletin of events when compared to *Britain To-day*, the Council's review, which always had several pages of pictures and consciously contained articles of general interest that could easily be re-used by the foreign press. It is in that respect worth noting that the Council very soon had a Film Committee, whilst the Dante remained primarily concerned with the printed word. At the Dante's XXXII Annual Congress in Ancona (1927) a delegate from the Committee of the same city proposed to make more use of radio broadcasting and cinematography. The Italian spirit and culture was not only to be spread through books. All instruments for diffusion that modern civilization offered could be put to use, of which the delegate thought cinematography to be the most effective because it easily reached all classes of society.¹³⁹ This difference of approach was in part the result of the Dante having nineteenth-century origins whilst the Council as a relative late-comer was created at a moment when mass-communication through modern media had become an undisputed tool in the influencing of opinion. The concept of Italianness held high by the Dante was too tied to the classical products of 'national genius' to be rapidly converted into a different discourses.

¹³⁸ Mandler, *The English National Character*, 22-23.

¹³⁹ *Pagine 5* (September-October 1927) 102.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE FOR CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN MALTA

In its protectorate Malta, the British government from the early 1920s onwards tried to suppress the Italian nationalists who were asking for greater independence. The embodiment of this hard-line policy was the leader of the pro-British Constitutional Party and Prime Minister in Malta between 1927 and 1932, Lord Gerald Strickland. In 1932 the use of Italian language at Maltese primary schools was banned and in 1934 Italian was even excluded as official language in the public administration and legislation. Whilst Italy was reclaiming the Mediterranean as 'mare nostrum' and strengthening its ties with the Italophile Maltese, the same Strickland sought to demonstrate that the Maltese were descendants of a Phoenician colony and that through the Phoenician presence in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall the Maltese were in fact closer to the British than to the Latin people. The Dante Alighieri Society condemned the British policy and protested through its publications against the unjust treatment of its Italian-speaking brothers. In the meantime the British Council established a British Institute, opened in 1939, with which it could help strengthen the position of British culture on the island. Malta played an emblematic and pivotal role in the battle for cultural hegemony across the Mediterranean. This chapter sheds light on the close involvement of the Dante and the Council.

Malta: a chess-piece in the Mediterranean

Over the centuries the island of Malta, situated between the south-western coast of Sicily and the north-eastern shores of Tunisia, because of its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea witnessed various shifts of power. At the beginning of the twelfth century, after having been part of the Roman and then of the Byzantine Empire, Malta was incorporated by the Norman-ruled Kingdom of Sicily. Subsequently it came into the hands of the Aragon family, whose descendant Charles V in 1530 gave Malta in feudal tenure to the Military Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, known also as the Knights Hospitaller. These knights had fled from their former base, Rhodes, after being defeated by the Ottoman Empire. A miniature, harmonious Europe developed in Malta as Knights of the Order's eight *Langues*, or Tongues, settled there.¹

¹ The Tongues here referred to were comparable with nationalities. They were: Aragon, Auvergne (central France), Castile, England (including Scotland and Ireland), France

Italian soon became the lingua franca between them and among the long-residing elite. The Knights' reign over the island ended in 1798, during the French Revolutionary Wars, when Napoleon seized and plundered Malta on his way to Egypt. French forces were left behind to administer the island but their anti-Catholicism and their mismanagement provoked such anger as to cause a popular insurrection. The Maltese besieged the French troops. With the supplies provided by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and by Great Britain, as well as the blockade the British Royal Navy executed upon Maltese request, in 1800 the French were forced to surrender. It was the express wish of the Maltese to subsequently become a British Dominion. At this point there were other contenders ready to seize Malta. One of these was the Russian Tsar Paul I, who had claims on the island. However, in 1801 his son, upon becoming Tsar Alexander I, renounced these 'rights'.² The Final Act of the Vienna Congress of 1815 declared Malta officially part of the British Empire. It was assured that under British protection, the Maltese laws, customs and religion would be respected. However, with the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869, Malta became ever more important for the British. Already its central location in the Mediterranean had made it an ideal port for the Royal Navy. Once the Suez Canal was completed, Malta came to be regarded as a vital stop on the way to India. This meant the stakes were higher if Britain were to lose grip on the island, which explains the rigid policy with which the British responded to the upcoming Maltese nationalism among the Italian-speaking population of this highly strategic stronghold.

In the 1880s, under the leadership of Fortunato Mizzi, the pro-Italian, nationalist Anti-Reform Party, later known as the Nationalist Party, in Malta began to oppose British rule. A limited degree of participation in the representative government introduced by the constitution of 1887 did little to diminish the opposition. Instead, the conflict worsened as the British continued to suppress the movement, to enforce unjust taxation and to 'Anglicise' the institutions of the island. A language substitution decree announced in 1899 set a deadline of fifteen years to replace Italian in the Maltese law-courts with English, a deadline which was later withdrawn. Language in schools also became a contentious issue, with the Italian nationalists urging that both English and Italian were taught.³ By 1903 Malta was once again under direct colonial rule, feeding yet more dissatisfaction. The Maltese economy subsequently suffered from the British involvement in the First World War. On 7 June 1919 riots broke out, which like others earlier that year were caused by

(northern France), Germany (including Bohemia, Dacia, Hungary Poland and Sweden), Italy and Provence (southern France).

² P.J. van Kessel and E.M.R. van Kessel-Schulte ed., *Romeinse Bescheiden*, III, 1727-1853 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975) 98.

³ Henry Frendo, 'Italy and Britain in Maltese colonial nationalism' in: *History of European Ideas* Vol. 15, No. 4-6 (1992) 733-739, 734.

discontent about rising food prices and about the insufficient degree of self-government being granted to the Maltese even after a National Assembly had been formed specifically to campaign for this cause. The British troops fired at the protesters, killing four Maltese men and causing widespread outrage. Throughout the year 1921, other nationalist struggles within the British Empire gave fresh hopes to the Maltese striving for greater independence. As autonomy was granted to India, nationalist protests were heard in Egypt and agreements were reached to form an Irish Free State, Malta too was able to obtain a new constitution. Finally the Maltese could elect their own legislative Assembly from which the Ministers making up the government were chosen and could have their own Senate. Significantly though, all decisions related to the treasury and defence remained under British control.

Nevertheless, in the 1920's the cultural and political conflicts in Malta hardened. In 1927 the Nationalist Party lost in the elections against an alliance between the pro-British Constitutional Party and the Labour Party. The Nationalist Party was by now led by Fortunato Mizzi's son, Enrico, and had absorbed the more moderate wing that had detached itself in 1921 to form the Maltese Political Union, led by Monsignor Panzavecchia and Ugo Mifsud. Gerald Strickland, the leader of the Constitutional Party and owner of the first Maltese newspaper *Il-Progress*, became premier and initiated a further, this time aggressive 'Anglicisation' of Malta. Streets and public places were given English instead of Italian names, so that for example *Strada Reale* and *Porta Reale* became Kingsway and Kingsgate. Notarial acts had henceforth to be in English or Maltese and all civil service communication in English only. In education too, parents were allowed to choose for their child just to be taught in English. Lady Strickland founded St. Edward's College, a public school that provided fully-English education. Intervention even took place in religious orders, especially among those that ran schools such as the Jesuits. Here Strickland's government tried to ensure that Italian or French clerics were replaced by English ones.⁴ All the while Strickland exacerbated the tensions and exaggerated the Nationalists' attachment to Italy to make them appear more threatening.

In actual fact, only a small faction surrounding Mizzi was irredentist and wished therefore that Malta were annexed to Italy. The majority of the Maltese, even within the Nationalist Party, preferred remaining with the British Empire, provided that Malta was given some form of self-government, their cultural traditions were respected and Italian continued to be accepted as official language. Even the Italian Consul-General in Malta was fully aware that Italian irredentism was practically non-existent and only made to seem

⁴ Frendo, 'Italy and Britain', 737; Henry Frendo, 'Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, Religion and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta (1927-1930)' in: *History of European Ideas* Vol. 21, No. 1 (1995) 47-65, 51-52.

widespread by opportunistic anglophile fear-mongers.⁵ The British offered better military protection and economic opportunities than Italy did and it was not viable for Malta to become an entirely independent state. The fact that Italian had for a long time been the language of the higher educated Maltese meant that the political poles partly overlapped a social dualism. The Maltese upper class was divided between a majority that was engaged in commercial activities, whose members spoke English and mixed with the British aristocracy, and an Italian-speaking intellectual minority that supported the pro-Italian nationalists in Malta and had close ties with the Catholic clergy. Through the local clergy, this segment of the nationalist movement could have a disproportionate influence over the larger group of unlettered and devout Maltese labourers.⁶

An additional factor in the relationship between the British and the Maltese were the large numbers of Maltese living and working in other British-governed territories, in particular Egypt. The way in which the Maltese were treated in Malta could therefore have repercussions for the good name the British had in those territories. What in turn made the position of the Maltese awkward was their ambivalence towards belonging to Europe. On the one hand, having a long-standing tradition of emigration to the North-African coast to find work, they felt a sense of allegiance with that part of the world and were inspired by the nationalist, anti-colonial uprisings that took place there. On the other hand, the Maltese attachment to the Catholic Church and their desire to belong to Europe implied a greater loyalty to Britain or Italy, even if these were colonial powers. "Though still colonized at home, the Maltese assertion of a national identity as European Christians forced them into a double bind of being identified with the very European colonialists viewed as oppressors in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya."⁷

After Strickland's polarizing premiership (1927-1930), the general elections of May 1930 occasioned the decision by the Bishops of Malta and nearby Gozo to issue a pastoral forbidding Catholics to vote for Strickland or any of his supporters. Pope Pius XI backed the position of the Maltese clergy. Ever since the anticlerical attacks that broke out in the late 1920s the Pontiff had considered Strickland *persona non grata* and the British authorities co-responsible for the violence.⁸ Elections were suspended and the British Cabinet held Strickland's government in office while in effect the Colonial Office once more ran the country's affairs.

⁵ Frenzo, 'Britain's European Mediterranean', 49.

⁶ Claudia Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator' and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy's 'Cultural War' in Malta' in: *Modern Italy* Vol. 13, No.1 (February 2008) 5-20, 6.

⁷ Stefan Goodwin, *Malta, Mediterranean Bridge* (Westport and London: Bergin & Garvey, 2002) 91.

⁸ Goodwin, *Malta*, 92.

The heavy-handed intervention of the British was partly induced by growing concerns about Italy's expansionist ambitions emerging in the 1930s. Mussolini's government eagerly encouraged Italian colonists to settle in Libya and Tunisia. In February 1932, the year in which triumphant celebrations of the Italian Fascist Revolution's tenth anniversary took place, the Italian Government opened an Italian Istituto di Cultura in the capital city Valletta. While not wishing to antagonize the British government, Mussolini was all the same confident that Italy could reinforce its cultural ties with the Maltese and thereby claim the island as belonging to its natural Mediterranean sphere of influence. Local sections of the Fasci all'estero organized activities and as of 1930 ran an Italian bookshop in Valletta.⁹ The Istituto di Cultura was regarded by the British as a lavish building, which according to their own information had cost the Italians nearly 1,200 British pounds. Its library, reading room and social events were viewed with suspicion. The 800 Italian and Italian-oriented Maltese members that the Institute was able to recruit by spring 1932 promised no good for the 'Anglicisation' of Malta. Ever more concerned about the Italian cultural and political infiltration, on the 25th of April 1932 the British Parliament put an end to using Italian in Maltese primary school teaching, allowing only Maltese and English. The Nationalist Party, which in that same year won the re-instated elections, hardly had time to repeal this measure. In November 1933, on the grounds that the Nationalist government's attempts to restore the Italian-language education in schools violated the Constitution, the British Governor of Malta dismissed the government, suspended the Constitution and allowed for a return to full colonial rule.

Though the British could not exert control over Italian nationals on the island, they could in 1933 forbid all British subjects from being members of the local Fascio. At the end of 1933 the British introduced a law ordaining that 25 percent of all teachers had to be British. The majority of the school teachers had until then come from Italy and this influence was also clear in the textbooks used. By December 1934, the use of Italian had been banned in all sectors of administration and legislation as well as at the Faculty of Law of the University of Malta. In 1935 Italy's invasion of Abyssinia seemed to justify Britain's fears concerning Mussolini's expansionist ambitions. Hence, the suspicion that the Istituto di Cultura was involved in Italian espionage deepened. In July 1936 the Istituto was forced to close down.¹⁰

⁹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator' and the Mare Nostrum', 15.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 11 and 13.

The Dante Alighieri Society in Malta

It has been suggested that under Mussolini's government Italy's policy towards maintaining Italian culture in Malta was essentially a continuation of that upheld during the liberal period, whereby Malta was seen as one of the unredeemed territories (*irredente*) where Italians lived outside Italian national borders. The Italians on Malta as well as the pro-Italian Maltese nationalists were supported by Affari Esteri, the local Fasci and especially the Dante Alighieri Society.¹¹ However, given that there is no traceable archive material left of the Dante Committee in Malta it is hard to determine what exactly the activities of the Dante in Malta were. We know that as of 1890 there was an Italian school on the island that was subsidized by the Dante, although barely sufficiently to keep the institution going. There appears to have been a chronic insufficiency of funds that the appeals of the Italian consul in Malta to the Dante central office in Rome could not resolve.¹² The first local Dante Committee, situated in Valletta, was created in 1900. When in 1899 the British government announced it would begin to introduce a language policy in favour of English, the opinion within the Dante was initially sharply divided. A part of its members was disdained at the British betrayal to its self-professed liberalism and felt that the Dante had an obligation to protect Italian language and culture in Malta. There were also members who preferred not to antagonize Great Britain and to rely on reasonable negotiation. The foremost figure within the organization to defend this peaceful policy was Pasquale Villari, who was President of the Dante precisely in this period (between 1896 and 1901) and was furthermore married to an Englishwoman, Linda White Mazini Villari. Yet enough members were in favour of some form of involvement for a Local Committee to be set up at the turn of the century. Two years later, in 1902, Villari responded to the cry for help that came from the pro-Italian Maltese by entering talks with Prime Minister Chamberlain. As a result the British decision to replace the use of Italian in Maltese courts and schools with English was temporarily withdrawn.¹³

Indignation expressed in Dante publications

The worsening tensions in the 1920s meant that Malta remained an item on the agenda of the Dante Alighieri Society. The importance that the Dante, or at least its central office, attached to the Maltese question is reflected in the occasional articles on the subject that were published in the Society's internal review, the

¹¹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 6.

¹² Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 193.

¹³ Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 78; Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 113-114.

Pagine della Dante. For example, in January 1924 a letter that Enrico Mizzi, Fortunato's son, had sent to the Italian newspaper *Idea Nazionale* and that was published on 2 October 1923, was reprinted in its entirety in the *Pagine*. Here Mizzi accused Gerald Strickland of denying the 'italic' lineage ("la nostra stirpe italica") of the Maltese and argued that natural and moral elements of the Maltese people – their geography, race, language, religion, legislation, traditions, history and national consciousness – amply demonstrated that they were a Latin race, and more specifically Italian.¹⁴ However, Enrico Mizzi did not perceive this sense of identity as being incompatible with a loyalty to the British nation, to which the Maltese attributed moral and civic virtues that they admired. It was Gerald Strickland who was damaging the relationship through his anti-Maltese and anti-Italian policy, claiming in spite of all protests and even of plebiscites that the majority of the Maltese did not want the Italian language. Furthermore, Strickland asserted that the law passed by the Maltese parliament regulating the simultaneous teaching of Italian and English at schools was anti-constitutional whereas the law was actually in accordance with the Letters Patent of 1921.¹⁵

A typical example of the resentment Strickland's policy caused among the members of the Dante Alighieri Society is the speech of a member of the Society's Central Council, Domenico Marotta, given on the 34th Annual Congress of the Society held in Pisa and Livorno in autumn 1929. As we can read in the version that was published in the *Pagine* that year, it was argued that not only Malta's geography made the island obviously not English, but also the centuries of history that connected it to the Roman Empire, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and ultimately to Italy. The English, in the *Pagine* rarely referred to as the British, were accused of trying to prove the existence of a Maltese language that, as Marotta and others retorted, didn't really exist. Quoting former Dante Alighieri President Pasquale Villari's speech at the Annual Congress of 1902, Marotta melodramatically asked whether it could be at all right to forbid the Maltese to use the language of their clergy and their lawyers, the language used to pray to God and to ask for justice. Italian was being abolished on notices of the Post Office, on lottery tickets and in street names. The official language at court, where Italian had still been used, was now English, and Italian newspapers were prevented from reaching the island. Strickland was portrayed as a narrow-minded, unjust man: did he really think, Marotta wondered, that when all two-hundred-thousand inhabitants had been forced to speak English, he would be able to prove Malta belonged to the

¹⁴ "Sir Gerald Strickland nega la nostra stirpe italica, ma sta di fatto che tutti gli elementi naturali e morali che costituiscono la nazionalità d'un popolo (vale a dire la Geografia, la Razza, la Lingua, la Religione, la Legislazione, i Costumi, la Storia e la stessa coscienza nazionale) dimostrano con la massima evidenza, che noi siamo latini, e più propriamente italiani" (*Pagine della Dante*, 1 [1924] 29).

¹⁵ "Riprodotta una lettera del on. Enrico Mizzi, capo del Partito italiano di Malta [the National Party - TvK], dall'*Idea Nazionale* di 2 ottobre' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 1 (1924) 29.

British archipelago? For Marotta there was no doubt. Even if all traces of what was Italian on the island were to be destroyed, the Roman heritage would nevertheless resurge. Marotta ended by asking all members of the Dante Alighieri Society to express support for the Maltese in their battle but also to have faith in England, that no doubt would not wish to betray its noble tradition of liberty.¹⁶

The generational change within the Dante Alighieri Society's membership after its first two decades of existence had brought with it a less anticlerical identity. This was in part connected to the better relations between the Italian State and the Roman Catholic Church that Mussolini had realized to consolidate his dictatorship. This reconciliation between State and Church culminated in the Lateran Accords of 1929. Even before this date the image of *italianità* promoted abroad by the Dante began to encompass Christianity and the idea of Rome as the heart of Catholic universalism. Hence, the fraternal bond that the Dante members felt with the Italian-speaking Maltese was enhanced by religious commonality, especially because the clergy was generally speaking Italian. There may also have been a sense of indignation with regards to the British, not so much because the Italian identity of the Maltese was being dismissed but because expressions of high culture were being replaced by a language – Maltese – that had never been more than an informal mode of communication. Like some Italian writers had written, the Dante members could have thought that the British did not think the Maltese worthy enough to require a language with so rich a cultural heritage as Italian.¹⁷ It is hard to determine whether such expressions of solidarity were essentially a moral justification for wanting to keep Italian cultural manifestations in Malta alive. The fact remains that a difference was claimed between the way the Italians sought to elevate the Maltese by sharing with them the benefits of their language and culture, as opposed to Strickland and his British supporters who merely sought to control the island.

Hence there were articles in the *Pagine* summing up the injustice caused by Strickland's rule over Malta. It was also argued that Italian was the written and the literary language of the island, as proven by the fact that the laws set under the government of the Order of Saint John had all been recorded for posterity in Italian. Every Maltese writer had written either in Italian or Latin. The Maltese dialect was only used for informal conversations within the family. Italian was the commercial language across the Mediterranean area, so that Malta's geographical position at the heart of it and its closeness to Sicily made Italian the most useful language for the Maltese to have. This the unnamed author of the article in the *Pagine* stated, without reckoning in any way with the

¹⁶ Relazione del prof. Domenico Marotta su Malta, XXXIV Congresso a Pisa e Livorno in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (September-October 1929) 136-143.

¹⁷ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 7, referring to Guido Puccio, *Il conflitto anglo-maltese* (Milan: Treves-Treccani-Tuminelli, 1933).

British counter-argument that knowledge of English enabled many Maltese to work in other countries of the Commonwealth.¹⁸ The defence of the Italian language and culture in Malta was indeed taken so much at heart by the Dante that at a meeting of the Central Council presided by Senator Celesia di Vegliasco, on 21 March 1932, it was decided to issue an official statement on behalf of the Dante Alighieri Society. In this statement the Society regretted the decision of the British Government to ban the teaching of Italian at Maltese schools and sympathized with the Maltese who, having always been loyal to the British Crown, merely asked for the “language of Dante”, so closely connected to their history and life, not to be disparaged. To make the Maltese feel the fraternal solidarity that tied the Italian nation to their cause, the Dante Committee in Rome organized an event a month later whereby Giulio Quirino Giglioli spoke of the glories of the Italian language in Malta. Giglioli was an active Dante member and an eminent Italian archaeologist, involved in many of the state-sponsored excavations of the 1930s. Various political and academic authorities attended the event, giving extra weight to the message conveyed.¹⁹

Annibale Scicluna Sorge: the intermediary

In summer of that same year, 1932, Annibale Scicluna Sorge, who frequently published pamphlets on Maltese history as well as on current affairs and who was connected to the Ministero della Propaganda all’Estero, wrote about Malta in the *Pagine*. He reiterated the familiar arguments in support of the Italian character of Malta. Then he described how the English had refused to leave Malta once they had been called for to help the Maltese in their revolt against French rule. He stated that the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had never been consulted about the final settlement which gave Malta an English governor. The Maltese were portrayed as a repressed people, deprived of their spiritual freedom, which nevertheless was proving to be grand and morally noble for holding on to its *italianità*. Furthermore, to make the Anglican English rulers seem even more foreign and lacking in legitimacy, Scicluna Sorge underlined the very Catholic character of the Maltese.²⁰ Recommending Italian publications about Malta was another way in which the Dante through its review gave voice to its support for the Maltese nationalists. In its book review, the *Pagine* recommended reading an illustrated introduction into contemporary Maltese poetry, with the comment that this poetry was proof to the contrary of what

¹⁸ ‘L’Italofobia di Lord Strickland’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1930) 84; ‘La lingua italiana a Malta – dalla relazione della Reale Commissione nominata per Malta nel 1836 dal Governo Britannico’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1931) 63.

¹⁹ ‘Per la lingua italiana a Malta’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 2 (March-April 1932) 49-50, 49.

²⁰ Annibale Scicluna Sorge, ‘Il dominio francese e l’origine della sovranità britannica su Malta’ in: *Pagine della Dante*, 3 (May-June 1932) 78-81.

Strickland and his supporters claimed: that the Italian language was foreign to the Maltese and that their true language was Phoenician. So too a brief history of Malta was described as being written by a Maltese who had been nobly educated in the cult of the small and the large Fatherland, meaning Malta and Italy (“nobilmente educato nel culto della piccola e della grande Patria”). The purpose of this history was evidently to demonstrate the enduring italianità of Malta throughout the centuries.²¹

Remarkably enough, the *Pagine* of July/August 1934 had a pink sheet of paper placed just before the opening page. Following the news that the Governor of Malta had banned the use of the Italian language in all public offices and court rooms of Malta, the editors of the *Dante* had decided for the extra a page to immediately express their indignation. In its statement the *Dante* joined what were said to be all the Maltese, the Italian public opinion and a fair number of authoritative papers belonging to the English press in condemning a measure that was regarded as unfitting for a great Nation such as the British. A number of local *Dante* Committees had sent expressions of solidarity with the Maltese to the Central Office. The Central Office in turn made a public statement. The President of the *Dante* on behalf of its members protested against the recent attack on the Italian language in Malta launched by the Governor. By elevating the Maltese dialect (“gergo maltese”) to the status of language, the Governor tried to uproot the traditional use of Italian also in the offices and courtrooms of the island. The *Dante* President sent a greeting of solidarity to all on Malta who upheld unabatedly the sentiment and the religion of the culture and the language of *Dante* (“il sentimento e la religione della cultura e della lingua di *Dante*”).²²

The aforementioned Annibale Scicluna Sorge appears to have been one of the key figures in the cooperation between Enrico Mizzi’s Democratic Nationalist Party, the *Dante* Alighieri Society and the Italian government. To be able to publish the Nationalist Party’s organ, *Malta*, Mizzi needed advertisers. It is known that in 1937 and 1938 the Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo (Enit) paid Mizzi 70 British pounds for advertisements of Italian tourist attractions to appear in *Malta*. Private companies also advertised in this newspaper, such as the National Institute of Insurances (Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni), the Banco di Roma and Fiat, Mizzi often asked Scicluna Sorge to help him in finding suitable advertisers and subscribers. There have been suspicions on the basis of Galeazzo Ciano’s published diaries that Mizzi received funding from the Ministero degli Affari Esteri for his party. Ciano, who was Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1936 to 1943, mentions in his diaries of the period 1937-

²¹ Oreste Ferdinando Tencajoli, *Poeti Maltesi d’Oggi* (Roma: Angelo Signorelli Editore, 1932) and Annibale Scicluna Sorge, *Malta. Visione storica. Sintesi politica* (Livorno: Raffaele Giusti Editore, 1932), announced in the section ‘Fra libri e opuscoli’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1932) 140.

²² *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1934).

1943 that he authorized the Italian Consul in Malta to subsidize the Nationalist Party. Mizzi after the Second World War, in 1948, had the Consul confirm that this subsidy was never given because he, the Consul himself, knew how attached Mizzi was to his party's independence.²³ On the other hand, the Consul's statement still does not entirely exclude the possibility that Scicluna Sorge, working for the Ministero per la Propaganda Estera, may have secured covert Italian government funding for the Nationalist Party by letting this run through the Italian private companies that advertised in the *Malta* or by putting pressure on these companies to advertise. Furthermore, in 1938, the *Malta* had seventy-two subscribers in Italy, among which twelve Dante Alighieri Committees and thirty-six Fascist organizations such as the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, the Istituti di Cultura Fascista and the Fasci di Combattimento of various towns across the country.²⁴

Evidence of Italian civilization in Malta

Finally, a typical illustration of how the Dante Alighieri Society presented the Maltese case by the end of the 1930s is provided by a book published in 1940 as part of the series *Civiltà italiana nel mondo* (Italian civilization in the world): Scicluna Sorge's *La civiltà italiana di Malta*.²⁵ To Dante members Scicluna Sorge was already known as writer on Maltese matters.²⁶ In his pocket-size monograph of 1940, Scicluna Sorge once more showed through the history of Malta how the current inhabitants of the island were ethnically, culturally, linguistically and emotionally predominantly Italian. His arguments are seemingly scientific and his account of the various issues does not at first sight betray bias. Mussolini or the achievements of Italian Fascism are barely mentioned. In explicit terms, Scicluna Sorge only once described a person as being "clever and very Fascist" ("bravo e fascistissimo"), when referring to Don Giuseppe Jaccarini who as a Maltese priest had served the Italian parish of Rocca Sinibalda. For the rest he mentioned Mussolini having given a speech to a group of Maltese students when they visited Rome in 1930 and his own role in welcoming them as head of the Universitari Fascisti di Roma.²⁷ There is no doubt that Scicluna Sorge felt an allegiance to the Fascist Party and because of that it seems likely that his treatment of the issue of italianità in Malta acquired a political colour.

²³ Joseph M. Pirota, 'Enrico Mizzi's Political Integrity: Fact or Fiction?' in: *Proceedings of History Week* (Malta: The Malta Historical Society, 1986) 93-113, 106-107.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 106.

²⁵ Annibale Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana di Malta* (Rome: Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, 1940).

²⁶ Annuncio del libro di A. Scicluna Sorge, *Malta sotto il dominio britannico – Fra Libri e Opuscoli*, in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1935) 49; Annibale Scicluna-Sorge, 'Isole Mediterranee: Malta' in: *Pagine 3* (May-June 1937) 18-19.

²⁷ Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana*, 93 and 106.

In his foreword, Scicluna Sorge thanked Felice Felicioni, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, for having offered him the opportunity to close the series *Civiltà italiana nel mondo* with an overview of the Maltese civilization at a time when Malta “is bound to become once more a beacon of Italy in a sea that will return under the legitimate rule of Rome”. He wrote that his intent was not to demonstrate the Italianness of Malta, which to him was an obvious fact. Instead he wished to show how through the ages Malta had been inextricably linked with the ethnic, historical, cultural and artistic development of Italy and having been unable to participate in the Italian Reunification in the nineteenth century now deserved to become a province of Italy. Though mentioning the “Civiltà di Roma” to which Malta belonged and the fresh impulse to reunification which the new Italy of Mussolini had given, the rest of the foreword was mainly framed in the discourse of irredentismo which was so much part of the early, pre-Fascist history of the Dante Alighieri Society. Scicluna Sorge saw in the Dante Alighieri Society an essential continuity between the mission of the Risorgimento and new universal role of Italy in the world envisioned by the Fascist Revolution.²⁸

Scicluna Sorge outrightly dismissed the Phoenician origins that the British, with Strickland first and foremost, ascribed to the Maltese with the following statements. Serious archaeological evidence to support the Phoenician presence was non-existent. Of the current population of Malta more than ninety percent was purely Italian of origin (“di schietta origine italiana”) and the rest had mostly ‘Latinising’ elements (“elementi latinizzanti”). Despite almost a century and a half of British domination, the predominance of the Italian racial characteristics among the Maltese was still reflected by the family names in use, of which a near ninety percent derived from Italian names. Here Scicluna Sorge illustrated his point with a three-page list of such Maltese names, ranging from Abela to Zimelli. In the Palaeolithic period Malta had belonged to what Scicluna Sorge described as the unconscious primordial unity of the Mediterranean race (“l’inconscia unità primordiale della razza mediterranea”). To today’s reader this ‘Mediterranean race’ is as disputable a notion as the suggestion that the Maltese descended from Phoenicians, but to Scicluna Sorge it was an unquestionable given. Subsequently the Roman settlement in Malta had laid a first basis of Latin ethnic presence. Then, after 1091, when the Normans had freed the Maltese from their Saracen occupiers, the immigration to Malta from the Italian peninsula and especially Sicily had been ongoing, creating long-lasting blood ties.²⁹

Since this was after all a publication of the Dante Alighieri Society, it is no surprise that the greatest significance was given to language as identifier of of the Maltese soul. In the words of Scicluna Sorge:

²⁸ Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana*, 7-10.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 39-42, 53-54, 60 and 62-65.

Language is of the spiritual heritage of a people, of the constituent elements of their nationality, certainly the most important, precious, sacred element. It is the language that defines and faithfully reflects the typology and the maturity of a civilization; it is what expresses the soul of a people.³⁰

As the Tuscan Italian, the language of Dante, came to prevail on the Italian mainland, so too in Malta. Even under the rule of the Order of the Knights of Saint John, which consisted of several 'langues' or cultural groups, Italian was used as the official language. Scicluna Sorge portrayed the Maltese dialect as mistakenly raised to a language by the British, when it was just an Arabic-Sicilian dialect. The most tender and intimate feelings of the Maltese, such as those between mother and child, were rendered with words of Italian origin. All words regarding moral, intellectual, economic-scientific, artistic and civic matters were Italian. Even if the British had tried to suppress any trace of *italianità*, the majority of the books that were being read in Malta were Italian as were those being written by Maltese writers. Holding on to the Italian language was for the Maltese a matter of preventing their 'denationalisation' (*snazionalizzazione*) and of asserting their belonging to the race and civilization of Rome ("alla razza e alla Civiltà di Roma").³¹

Faith also united the Maltese with the Italians, Scicluna Sorge asserted. In his view Malta was the first part of Italian territory to have been evangelized. He referred to the Acts of the Apostles written by Saint Luke where it was described how following a shipwreck the apostle Paul set foot on Malta and Christianised the island. Italian was still the language of the Church in Malta and therefore also the language connected to education, explaining why the University of Malta had been so active in defending the use of Italian. Maltese poetry and literature were proof of the enduring cultural ties with Sicily and Genoa. There had been an array of Italian newspapers before they were banned. The works of art in Malta had also been inspired and created by Italian engineers, architects, painters, sculptors and craftsmen, which was abundantly visible in the capital city Valletta, designed by the Italian architect Francesco Laparelli and a typical example of Italian Baroque architecture. Yet what Scicluna Sorge saw as the most evident sign of *italianità* in Malta was the dominant influence of the Italian theatrical and musical tradition, and especially the Maltese love of opera.³²

³⁰ "Del patrimonio spirituale di un popolo, degli elementi costituivi della sua nazionalità, la lingua è certamente il più importante, prezioso, sacro elemento. È la lingua che definisce e rispecchia fedelmente il tipo e la maturità di una civiltà; è essa che esprime l'anima di un popolo" (ibidem, 67).

³¹ Ibidem, 68-71, 75, 80-84 and 86.

³² Ibidem, on Catholicism: 87-89, 96-97, 104-107; on literature, poetry and press: 146-147; on art and architecture: 157-161; on theatre and music: 165-173.

Against this background, Scicluna Sorge made it seem only natural that the Italian government should put some effort into defending the Italian language and culture in Malta. The Italian consuls in Malta had worked quietly and factually to this end: Scicluna Sorge wrote of their “*opera silenziosa ma fattiva*”. The Italian school of Umberto I appeared in his account to have been eventually closed down by the British because of its success whereas the Istituto di Cultura Italiana was portrayed as having been an oasis of spiritual comfort during the anti-Italian persecutions.³³ By contrast, the British government’s course of action was depicted as brutal and unjust. Bemoaning how during 1932 and 1933 the Italian language was abolished completely in all areas except in the teaching of Italian language and literature at university and at the *liceo*, Scicluna Sorge wrote of an “unprecedented spiritual rape of a people” (“*inaudita violentazione spirituale di un popolo*”) to whom the British had promised full respect for their spiritual, civic and political rights. Elsewhere Scicluna Sorge lamented an “illegal total ban” (“*delittuoso bando totale*”) and “a dogged battle” (“*lotta accanita*”) against any expression of *italianità*.³⁴ The blame was not only attributed to the British government. Scicluna Sorge described how the Maltese language first developed a written form upon the suggestion of English civil servants and Protestant missionaries.³⁵ The most emblematic detail that stood for the British disrespectful way of dealing with culture concerned Malta’s Roman heritage. In the past, the marble and stone found among the ruins of Roman villas had been used to decorate churches and palaces or to build fortifications. Nowadays British speculators were using Ancient Roman ruins, not to construct any works of art or architecture but as a source of calcium for their factories of soda-water.³⁶

Scicluna Sorge was not only concerned about the *italianità* of Malta. He connected the Italian roots of Malta to its recognition as a part of Europe. Ironically, he saw this connection as being related to a British Act of Parliament passed on 2 July 1801, just after Malta had been occupied. With this Act the Maltese archipelago was declared to be geographically part of Europe. At a time that Malta was not yet a threat to British imperial interests such a decision must have seemed fairly trivial to the parliamentarians, Scicluna Sorge pointed out. But the seed of doubt about Malta must have remained, he conjectured, for with time Malta was treated not as a noble part of European civilization and territory but rather like some obscure African settlement (“*non lembo nobilissimo di terra e civiltà europea, ma pari ed [sic] oscuro anonimo stabilimento africano.*”).³⁷ Scicluna Sorge even went as far as to speculate that if some Members of Parliament had been able to foresee the changes in imperial

³³ *Ibidem*, 108-110.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 75-78.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 80.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 151.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

politics, they would have proclaimed Malta part of Africa to thereby provide a justification for the actions of the future “denationalizers” (“snazionalizzatori”), meaning Strickland and his supporters.³⁸ The British had only accepted the Europeanness and the Italianità of Malta as long as the island was of little significance for the imperialists. This, according to Scicluna Sorge, explained why until the mid-nineteenth century the British had fully respected the Italian language, culture and traditions in Malta. The Italian unification gave a new course to events, making the British Parliament revise their consideration of Malta. Unable to remove the Maltese archipelago from the geographical map of Europe, the British had instead tried to take Malta away from European civilization. It was European civilization, Scicluna Sorge explained, that had provided the island with the “Faith of Rome” (“Fede di Roma”) and the language of Dante. Similarly he quoted Ignazio Bonavia, one of the first Maltese to be Head of the Magistrates, as having written in his unpublished private diary from the mid-nineteenth century that depriving Malta of the Italian language and of Roman Law would have given rise to the humiliating question whether Malta was an African region rather than a European one. Taking away that clear link with European identity that the Italian language and legislation represented, Bonavia allegedly wrote, would have made Malta seem like a non-descript, isolated British possession, subject to any conquest.³⁹

For a moment Scicluna Sorge imagined how Malta could have been a fruitful point of encounter between two different cultures, how Dante and Shakespeare could have serenely and peacefully coexisted there. But the withdrawal of constitutional liberties and the introduction of anti-Italian measures by the British between 1933 and 1939 had made this impossible, he felt.⁴⁰ From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century Malta had been:

[...] an unconquerable stronghold of heroic Christianity, the surviving bastion of Europe’s crusader aristocracy” and also “a serene and flourishing centre of Latin, Italian civilization; a splendid Court of princes adorned and enlivened by the Italian genius in Literature and in Art.”⁴¹

Now, Scicluna Sorge seemed to suggest, the island that had once held back the Muslims had succumbed to an imperial British domination that relegated Malta to the African continent, away from the benefits of European civilization.

Altogether Scicluna Sorge’s emphasis on the Italian genius, on the peaceful and beneficial Italian dominance in the Mediterranean and on the

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 23-25.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 28-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 37-38.

⁴¹ “[...] fu inespugnabile rocca di cristianesimo eroico, la superstite bastiglia dell’aristocrazia crociata di Europa” e anche “un sereno e fiorente centro di civiltà latina, italiana; una splendida Corte di principi abbellita e animata dal genio italiano delle Lettere e delle Arti” (*Ibidem*, 20-21).

accomplishments of the Risorgimento fitted in the habitual rhetoric of the Dante. This can barely be identified as a Fascist stance. Studying the cartography produced in Italy before the rise of Fascism reveals that maps showing evident patriotic and expansionist interests – for example by depicting the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum* or by indicating where Italians abroad lived – frequently appeared in atlases already then.⁴² Furthermore, the Italian historian Pietro Silva, who never supported Italian Fascism, showed a view on Italy's position in the Mediterranean similar to Scicluna Sorge's. Silva's *Il Mediterraneo dall'unità di Roma all'unità d'Italia* (The Mediterranean from the Unity of Rome to the Unity of Italy) was widely read in the years following its publication in 1927. Silva also viewed with concern the shift in the British Royal Navy's focus after the First World War from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

Silva described in a fairly factual manner the interests that led the British to choose Malta as their main naval base, such as the safeguarding of the access to the Suez Canal and to the acquired territories in the Near East. Yet there was a clear sense of threat in his mention of the naval manoeuvres the British had reintroduced. As of 1924, each year in March the Home Fleet – passing through the British-controlled Straights of Gibraltar – joined the Mediterranean Fleet to practice naval manoeuvres in the Eastern waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The event represented in Silva's view the most impressive gathering of naval forces that had ever been seen (“il più imponente raggruppamento di forze navali che mai si sia visto”).⁴³ The reaction to British aggressive expansionism coming from Kemalist Turkey and Leninist Russia, as well as the anti-British sentiments arising in Persia, Aghanistan, India, Egypt and Sudan, appeared understandable in Silva's account.⁴⁴ There is a trace of discontent in his observation that Britain and France were impeding Italy's expansion in the Mediterranean by encouraging the ambitions of the Yugoslavs, the Albanians and the Greeks. Britain's instrumental use of Greece's feudal dependence on the “City” (“[...] infeudata finanziariamente alla ‘City’”) in order to curb Turkish and Italian moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, apparently met with little approval on the part of Silva.⁴⁵ To him Italy was destined to play a civilizing role in the Mediterranean, through a rule not based on violence but on intellectual and economic exchange. Here Silva suggested a parallel with the glorious role the Italian Risorgimento had played in helping nationalist movements across Europe to triumph. Whenever the Mediterranean had been at the centre of civilization, Italy had benefited, be it during the Roman Empire

⁴² Edoardo Boria, ‘Geopolitical Maps: A Sketch History of a Neglected Trend in Cartography’ in: *Geopolitics* 13, 2 (2008) 278-308, 294.

⁴³ Pietro Silva, *Il Mediterraneo dall'unità di Roma all'unità d'Italia* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1927) 412.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 411-416.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 420.

or in the medieval period. The wellbeing of the Italian nation meant good for the world around it and vice-versa. Hence, inspired by those same Mazzinian ideals that had driven many members of the Dante Alighieri Society, Silva could proudly claim: "This re-awakening of Mediterranean life has been accompanied by the re-awakening of Italy, resurrecting to the unity and grandness of a Nation." ("A questo risveglio di vita mediterranea si è accompagnato il risveglio dell' Italia risorgente ad unità e a grandezza di Nazione.")⁴⁶

The British Council in Malta

How did the British Council react to the cultural conflict that took place in Malta? In the summer of 1938, two years after the Istituto di Cultura had been forced to close down, the British Council decided to establish a Cultural Institute in Malta. Already the Council financially supported a number of cultural initiatives on the island, including school essay prizes, school journeys to England, teachers' bursaries, the Boy Scouts, university scholarships and the English public school, St Edward's College, which had been opened in 1930.⁴⁷ Initially the plan for an Institute took the form of appointing someone who could fulfil the combined post of Professor of Archaeology at the University of Malta and of Director of the Institute. That the Council prospected a Chair of Archaeology was likely to be inspired by the desire on the part of the British in Malta to prove that the Maltese had Phoenician origins. This would imply a common ancestry with part of the British population, such as the Scottish and the Welsh, rather than with the Italians. In 1921, Gerald Strickland, then leader of the pro-British Constitutional Party, had given a lecture in La Valletta to argue that the Maltese were descendants of the Phoenicians. Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall shared the same Phoenician origin, so that the Maltese were according to Strickland closer to the British than to the Latin peoples.⁴⁸ One of the supporting arguments was a genetic one. That the increase of intermarriage between Maltese and English people did not lead to physical deterioration was in his view evidence of a common racial ancestry. Other prominent figures shared this idea, such as Augustus Bartolo, Minister of Education and Emigration.⁴⁹ It also fitted in the general trend towards 'scientific racism', which could just as well provide arguments to prove the opposite. For example, the anthropologist Robert Noël Bradley, demonstrated that the Maltese were essentially descendants of the dolichocephalic (long-headed)

⁴⁶ Ibidem 411-416, 427 and 432-440; citation from page 435.

⁴⁷ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, William Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 20 December 1938, enclosed copy of the Memorandum Wickham sent to Ramage.

⁴⁸ Gerald Strickland, *Malta and the Phoenicians* (Valletta: Progress Press, 1950).

⁴⁹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 10.

Eurafrican or Mediterranean race, which in other European countries such as England had intermixed with the 'superior' brachycephalic (short-headed) Aryan race.⁵⁰

However, candidates for the planned Chair of Archaeology were required to be experts on the pre-historical period, familiar with important archaeological sites in Europe and the Near East and able to make a comparative study of the local sites. If the candidate could also lecture on Ancient History, an expertise that was so far missing at the University of Malta, that would be welcome but was not essential. Since the Professor was not expected to have many hours of lecturing, it was thought that he could combine his academic tasks with running the British Institute. This Institute was meant to offer a reading room and clubroom, where British newspapers and periodicals would be available, a small library with modern British literature, and various social events as well as lectures.⁵¹

By mid-August the Chairman of the Council, Lord Lloyd, had decided to no longer combine the position of Director of the Institute with that of Professor at the University. It is not clear for what reason. Possibly it was a result of the applications that were received after advertising the post in *The Times*. The Chair of Archaeology was offered to John Bryan Ward-Perkins.⁵² Ward-Perkins had graduated from New College, Oxford, in 1934 and had been working since 1936 at the London Museum as assistant of the renowned British archaeologist Robert Wheeler. In October, William Reginald Wickham was asked to transfer from Egypt to Malta where he was to become the Director of the British Institute. He seems to have been a close friend of Henry Croom-Johnson, who since 1935 had been the British Council's Regional Officer for the Balkans and the Middle East, as well as Director of Lecturers and Teaching Appointments. The thirty-year-old Wickham had been teaching English at the Fuad al-Awal University in Giza since October 1936. The Professor of English Literature for whom Wickham worked there occupied a Chair that had also been created and financed by the British Council.⁵³ In any case, Wickham's work-experience in Egypt clearly made him a suitable man for the British

⁵⁰ Robert Noël Bradley, *Malta and the Mediterranean Race* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1912); Goodwin, *Malta*, 84-85.

⁵¹ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential: Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor, concerning the British Institute at Malta, by Charles Wickham, 20 December 1938, No. MGG/1/1; Governor's Memorandum 'Establishment of a Cultural Institute and a Chair of Archaeology in Malta', 13 July 1938, N. 520/1938/17; Copy of letter British Council to Mr Mayhew (with copy to Colonial Office), 13 June 1938, MALTA/5/2.

⁵² TNA, BW 43/1, Advertisement of vacancy sent by the British Council to the Advertisement Editor of *The Times* on 18 July 1938; BW 43/1 - Memorandum, Secretary-General to [unknown], 13 August 1938, ML/5/4.

⁵³ TNA, BW 43/1 - Wickham to Colonel Charles Bridge, Cairo, 11 October 1938; Colonel Charles Bridge to Professor Robert Allason Furness at The Anglo-Egyptian Union, 12 October 1938, ML/2/1; Details of career of Mr. W.R.L. Wickham, attached to copy of Council to Lieutenant-Governor, 21 October 1938, ML/2/1.

Institute in Malta. Thousands of Maltese resided in Egypt, many of them working in the harbours of Alexandria and Port Said, and the British were keen to instil a pro-British attitude in these British subjects.⁵⁴

Establishing a British Institute

After consultation with the Government of Malta, the British Council chose to house the British Institute in the Auberge d'Aragon. This in itself was a delicate matter. During the twelve years of Maltese Self-Government, before the Constitution of 1921 had been suspended in 1933, the Auberge d'Aragon had been the office of the Prime Minister. Any redeployment of the building was bound to lead to malicious rumours.⁵⁵ Hence the Government was clear in limiting its financial involvement in paying for the renovation of the building, the structural maintenance and the lighting. Indeed, the Director of the British Institute was an employee of the British Council but in the case of the Professor of Archaeology, the University of Malta as a government institution could not have staff members that were not responsible to the Government itself. Arranging for the Government to pay the necessary costs on re-imburement from the Council made it possible to circumvent this rule.⁵⁶ However, in the case of all other expenses, it was agreed "solely for reasons of local politics" that all bills would be directly paid from an Institute account. On an island like Malta, it would otherwise very soon be known that bills were going to the Government, which would give substance to the accusation that the Institute was in actual fact merely a propaganda machine.⁵⁷

Modern media were considered essential. An His Master's Voice radio-gramophone was needed so that concerts of records could be given, British music could be received via radio and even dance events could be organized.

⁵⁴ Wickham would be reminded of this on Malta by one of Gerald Strickland's daughters: "Miss Strickland asked me yesterday whether the Council had prepared a detailed statement of its work in Malta and for Maltese abroad, especially in Egypt and Turkey. She had discussed this with Lord Lloyd in the summer and I agree that a press notice of this kind would do good, for it is incredible how few people here have ever heard of the work of the Council either in the island or elsewhere. The Maltese are apt to think themselves neglected, and it would be pleasant for them to know you are helping them. I enclose a list of papers to which such a notice should be sent [...]." (TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 28 December 1938, BCP/1/3.)

⁵⁵ See for example the request by the Overseas League to use the Institute's premises for its Empire Day Dinner in: TNA, BW 43/1 - Confidential, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, undated but received on 27 February 1939; Croom-Johnson to the the Chairman, ML/2/1, 1 March 1939.

⁵⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Assistant Lieutenant-Governor of Malta, Richard Ogilvy Ramage to the Deputy Secretary-General of the British Council, Kenneth Johnstone, Malta, 20 October 1938, Conf. 559/38; Johnstone to Ramage, 23 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁵⁷ TNA, BW 43/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, 7 March 1939, BCF/1/4.

As Wickham argued, the Maltese were largely unaware of the best British music, “partly, no doubt, because the local Opera is devoted solely to Italian singing.” The radio-gramophone together with a full collection of records of British music would help to change the situation. However, as had been made clear to Wickham, the “best means of propaganda is visual”. Hence he was confident that proving the British Institute with a film projector would significantly increase its popularity.

The films Wickham had in mind were documentaries such as *Drifters* and *Man of Arran*, no doubt because of their emphatically British character and because Wickham thought the maritime themes in these films would interest the Maltese. Wickham referred to these films as being made by the Imperial Institute with government funding, when in fact neither of the two examples were. *Drifters* is a documentary film about the North Sea herring fisheries, produced by the New Era Studios for the Empire Marketing Board. The film’s director, John Grierson, subsequently established the iconic ‘British documentary film movement’ at the Empire Marketing Board, which in 1933 was turned into the General Post Office Film Unit (also known as GPO Unit). In the film Grierson portrayed the tension between tradition and modernity, tending however to praise the latter. There is a clear influence of Sergei Eisenstein’s work, in particular *The Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925), although the style was less dramatic. *Man of Aran* (1934) is a fictional documentary film on the hard, traditional life on the Aran Islands, off the western coast of Ireland.⁵⁸

Another option was for the British Council to provide free copies of the films for distribution among local cinemas but Wickham feared this would be less effective. If the Institute was to do without a projector, Wickham suggested an epidiascope were bought instead so that lecturers could “appeal to the eyes as well as to the ears of their audience.” Other requested equipment included a “British-made ‘Imperial’ typewriter” and a duplicating machine. It is worth noting how the use of modern media was simultaneously an occasion to promote technology produced in Britain. “It is, of course, essential that the machine be British”, Croom-Johnson remarked in one of his letters.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the Board of Trade was represented in the British Council’s Board and played a significant part in the setting up of the

⁵⁸ *Man of Aran* (1934) was directed by Robert J. Flaherty and produced by the Gaumont - British Picture Corporation.

⁵⁹ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor concerning proposed increases in the grants made by the British Council to the British Institute, Malta, during the financial year 1938-39, by Wickham, dated 24 December 1938, MGG/1/2; Copy of Croom-Johnson to Wickham, ML/2/1, 16 February 1939.

Council, even if curtailed by Leeper's opposition to giving too much importance to commercial interests.

The visiting lecturers would be paid from the British Council's block grant for Lecturers at the disposal of the office in London. Arrangements would be made so that English lecturers going to Egypt and other countries east of Malta could stop there on the way, reducing the Council's overall travel expenses.⁶⁰ The library grant for the British Institute was modest (250 pounds). However, the Council had signed a book agreement and could buy the books Wickham wished to order at trade rates. Film projection material could be paid for from the budget of the Council's Joint Committee on Films. Similarly, the British gramophone records would fall under the Music Committee's block grant. Posters, lanternslides and other visual propaganda would also be covered – if finances allowed – and on demand the Council could send out lecture records for use during classes or other occasions. A Union Jack and two portraits of Their Majesties, the King and the Queen, were sent to Malta.⁶¹ Wickham had earlier suggested asking the Fine Arts Committee for the loan of pictures. As example, he referred to the French Embassy in Cairo, where "intelligent use" was made of the nation's artistic objects. British works of art were better off in Malta than getting "damaged every time the cellars of the Tate are flooded."⁶²

Wickham warned the Council that revenue from subscriptions could not be expected to be high. The activities of the now suppressed Italian Istituto di Cultura had been free, which meant that certainly not more than five pounds per year could be asked as membership fee for the British Institute. Furthermore, the already "converted" were mostly the better-off inhabitants of Malta, whereas the people the Institute intended to reach out to were "the apathetic imbibers of more active propaganda" who generally could not afford high membership fees.⁶³ Interestingly, in summing up the three main principles that ought to guide the British Institute in Malta, the first and foremost was that "the equipment and amenities of the British Institute must be superior, or at least equal, to those of the former Italian Istituto [sic] di Cultura." The second principle must be seen as following from the first: that what the British Institute offered would be regarded "as the best that the British Council and the Government of Malta can provide and, therefore, should be worthy of these

⁶⁰ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Ramage to Kenneth Johnstone, Malta, 20 October 1938, Conf. 559/38; Johnstone to R.O. Ramage, 23 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁶¹ TNA, BW 43/1, Copy of Croom-Johnson to Wickham, ML/2/1, 16 February 1939.

⁶² Extracts from private letter dated 28th October from Wickham, Cairo, to Croom-Johnson, London, in: TNA, BW 43/1, Memorandum from Croom-Johnson to Lance [?] Everett, 28 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁶³ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, Valletta, 20 December 1938, BCP/1/2, with enclosed a copy of the Memorandum Wickham wrote to Ramage; Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, Valletta, 20 December 1938, BCP/1/2, with enclosed a copy of the Memorandum Wickham wrote to Ramage.

god-fathers.” Thirdly, he believed it was not usual, certainly not at the beginning, to “expect proselytes to pay for their conversion” and that subscription revenue must be considered a gift from the people of Malta and not be expected to pay more than five to ten percent of the total running costs of the British Institute.⁶⁴ Godfathers, conversion and proselytes: these words give the impression Wickham was seeing his mission as one regarding a cultural ‘faith’.

Advance in the renovation of the Auberge d’Aragon was slow, especially because of the low priority it received now the Government of Malta had to deal with financial difficulties. Nevertheless, Wickham hoped Croom-Johnson could remind the Government that the building needed to be ready by 15 March and would urge the Government to agree with the estimates for the Auberge d’Aragon that Wickham had pressed for (2,500 to 3,000 British pounds at the most). From the phrasing, it is evident that Wickham took personal pride in making the most of what he was already considering ‘his’ Institute:

It is so essential that fittings be of good quality that I am very reluctant to lower estimates and I propose, unless you instruct me otherwise, to resist all attempts to make my lighting installation look like Milan railway station or a public lavatory and, similarly, to oppose the economy mania which threatens to make the Institute furniture ugly and not very durable. You will have noticed the cheapness of the carpets and curtains, a result of economy which I must leave you to judge.⁶⁵

The first Council lecture

In January 1939 plans were made to send a first British Council lecturer to Malta, even if the Institute was not yet ready to host such an event. The lecturer was Harry Snell, at that time leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords. Snell, a son of agricultural workers, had worked his way up the political ladder as a convinced socialist. He disapproved of the British Government’s refusal to intervene in the Spanish Civil War and like many in the British Council was against the appeasement policy towards Hitler’s government. The lecture that Snell gave on the 17th of January 1939 in the Aula Magna of the Royal University of Malta was entitled: ‘The British Heritage: its past and its future’. The themes he touched upon are typical for the image of ‘Britishness’ that the British Council divulged. The Governor introduced him as a man who after

⁶⁴ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor concerning proposed increases in the grants made by the British Council to the British Institute, Malta, during the financial year 1938-39, by Wickham, dated 24 December 1938, MGG/1/2.

⁶⁵ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 28 December 1938, BCP/1/3.

many years of hard work was still spending his life in service of the countries of the British Empire. On this same patriotic note, Snell began by saying that whoever would have held a lecture on 'The British Heritage; its past and its future' would have presented it in the same way, no matter what his personal political convictions would have been. All people shared the same natural pride in Britain's history and traditions. The "conception of the British heritage of civilization" was summarized by Snell as being: live and let live. Praising the achievements of British civilization was not meant as criticism towards other nations, for if others are

[...] satisfied with their form of government, it is no business of ours, we feel sure that ours is the best, but each nation has its special qualities and each has contributed to world civilization.

Critics in newspapers and elsewhere had said that the British statesmen had lost their former grip on the Empire and were not as capable as their ancestors in governing it. Snell dismissed this as merely judging by the past instead of the present. He described the British Commonwealth of Nations as a great fellowship of freedom, whereby England wished each part of the Empire to achieve self-government and liberty. The British Empire was perhaps no longer the stabilising factor in the world that it had formerly been, but the world had "never seen an empire so democratic and so united [...]." This unison, Snell claimed, was not enforced in any way but sprang from the desire to live within the British Commonwealth of Nations.⁶⁶

Snell gave the "great experiment of self-government" in India, with its population of 350 million people, as an example of the growth of freedom that was secured within the Commonwealth. In Malta too, he pointed out, representative institutions were being restored.

The Mother of Parliaments is proud to see her children grow up in other parts of the world in the practice of individual political freedom to which gradual stages in evolution have brought them.

As he saw it, small dissensions accompanied this progress just as a combustion engine was propelled by a series of small explosions. Snell was not too concerned about the troubles on the way, as long as the value of British heritage remained recognized. Modern civilization depended on it. Britain was in an advantageous position to protect this civilization. Geographically it was a central island, naturally defended by the sea, never too large a territory for "the least gifted of its kings to comprehend" and one of the best climates in the

⁶⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, account entitled 'Lecture delivered by the Rt. Hon. Lord Snell of Plumstead', dated 18 January 1939.

world. Still according to Snell, the character of the Englishman was also part of the British heritage.

The comic Englishman who used to travel abroad was really not typical of life at home and he does not exist any longer. He was the man who would descend in the hotel in the morning, want all windows thrown wide open and demand *The Times*. If these things were not forthcoming, he would ask what could one expect from foreigners.

The modern Englishman was different. Nor did he resemble John Bull. Snell instead saw the inheritance of self-control, improvisation and a quick way of checking things which was due to their lack of logic. Inherent respect for law and for the will of the Parliament had for centuries ensured the continuity of institutions and traditions. This latter element of British heritage was deeply rooted in Ancient Greek and Judaeo-Christian tradition. In the words of Snell, the British had “fed from crumbs that have fallen from the Athenian table some two thousand years ago.”⁶⁷

The crux of Snell’s lecture was Churchill’s statement that freedom and the rights of man were enjoyed wherever the Union Jack flew and that it was the duty and responsibility of the English to keep it flying. Neither revolutions nor dictatorships, Snell added, were to prevent modern England from guarding this heritage. The current times required a new kind of adhesion to what Snell saw as the central purpose of the Commonwealth of Nations: maintaining freedom together with a personal sense of responsibility. Therefore, Britain was investigating the possibility of increased independence for all the “continents in different stages of social development” that were part of the Commonwealth. Britain itself was a democracy in the making. Though all empires known from the past had passed away, there was no law in nature determining that all empires came to an end. Snell ended in triumphant tone, suggesting that Britain would learn from the past and face the future with responsibility. The British heritage of democracy and freedom was as always in good hands, and would remain so in future. Such praise on the part of a British Council lecturer could have no other goal than to convince the Maltese public of the benefits Malta enjoyed by being under British rule and that British policy was shaped by only the highest values.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, Wickham could afterwards report that the English-speaking press had been friendly, though admittedly critical letters were sent to the editors too. It was Wickham’s policy not to react to the attacks. Altogether, Wickham was pleased with this first lecture: “[...] the waters have

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

been stirred and, despite the mud therein, the result seems to me not unsatisfactory.”⁶⁹

Snell was agnostic and a member of the National Secular Society. Alluding to a controversial statement that had appeared in *Lehen is-Seuua*, the Maltese organ of Catholic Action that in the 1930s cooperated with the Nationalist party, Wickham wrote to Croom-Johnson that the island was “fanatically Catholic” and that its leaders’ bias was anti-British. The next lecturer to be sent over by the Council would preferably have to be an eminent Catholic so that the Church in Malta would have no objections to make. Rumours about the Institute’s alleged Masonic and Protestant propaganda had to be dispelled.⁷⁰ Apart from asking for Catholic lecturers to be sent, Wickham confided to Croom-Johnson that he was making private enquiries in Rome to obtain a Papal blessing for the Institute and its work. He expected this to require a donation of about ten pounds, a sum well worth paying for mitigating the attacks. If his own attempts failed, he counted on the Council to take this up semi-officially. Croom-Johnson, apparently a little anxious about such a Papal blessing, urged Wickham to keep the Governor closely involved, since he could judge the political implications best. Croom-Johnson himself would ask the Colonial Office for advice as well. However, the Lieutenant-Governor had no concerns, providing the Institute would be asking the blessing on its own, standing well apart from government circles. Furthermore, Wickham felt some messages of goodwill from authorities in England ought to be conveyed at the official opening, for the British Institute in Malta was the first the Council had established within the British Empire. Such a gesture gave added prestige to the opening and would help “to show the Maltese that they are not quite as forgotten and forlorn as they like to imagine”.⁷¹

Dispelling suspicions of anti-Catholicism

What Wickham also understood about the Maltese situation was that there would have been no grievance about removing Italian as official language, except for among the Maltese lawyers and clergy, had the measure not also been applied to schools. He himself saw no reason why Italian could not be

⁶⁹ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/[unreadable number], 28 January 1939, folio 10. With translations of articles that appeared in the *Malta* of 3 January 1939, in the *Lehen is-Seuua* of 24 January 1939 and in the *Il-Berka* (Maltese organ of Lord Strickland) of 24, 25 and 26 January 1939.

⁷⁰ TNA, 43/1, BCL/1/5, W.L.R. Wickham Esq., Osborne Hotel, Valletta, Malta, to Mr. Croom-Johnson, dated 2nd January 1939; BCP/1/12, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, 3 March 1939.

⁷¹ TNA, 43/13, ML/2/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, Confidential, 7 February 1939, folio 12; Reply to Wickham from Croom-Johnson, 16 February 1939, folio 14; Confidential, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, undated but received on 27 February 1939.

taught after the age of thirteen, in addition to the English and Maltese that school children would first learn to fully master. Had the Government of Malta opted for this compromise, eighty percent of the current Nationalist Party supporters would have accepted the situation, Wickham believed. This coincides with the fact that only a very small minority of the Maltese, even within the Nationalist Party, was irredentist and wanted Malta to be part of Italy.⁷² The majority of the population was satisfied with the constitution of 1921, which allowed for self-government whilst keeping the security and economic advantages of belonging to the British Empire. The difficulties the language issue created in Wickham's view mainly took the form of attacks on the British Institute as a supposed instrument for Protestant propaganda. In addition to Catholic lecturers, Wickham recommended enquiring about the possibility for an English Bishop or Monsignor to come to Malta for the Diocesan Eucharistic Conference being organized there and to bless the Institute's premises as well as give a lecture there. This blessing would be in addition to the papal blessing that Wickham was already trying to arrange.⁷³

Wickham's suggestion to ensure that an English Catholic clergyman was present at the Diocesan Eucharistic Conference in Malta was picked up on. A letter from Lloyd was sent to the Archbishop of Westminster. Here it was presented as if the British Institute reported that the Maltese themselves had expressed the desire to see Roman Catholic representatives from Great Britain attending the conference. The Conference was now expected to take place in April, but Lloyd was informed that it might for a second time be postponed because of the internal disputes that were taking place. The conflicts centred on who was to be the Papal Legate at the conference. While many of the most influential clergy in Malta wanted a Legate of Italian nationality, the Bishop appeared to prefer an Englishman. Lloyd asked the Archbishop of Westminster what his view was on sending prominent members of the English Catholic clergy to the Eucharistic Conference, how they could be encouraged and whether he thought any of them might accept to give a lecture at the British Institute. Just over a month later Croom-Johnson let Wickham know that the Council had decided to take no further action regarding the Diocesan Eucharistic Congress, explaining that he was "afraid that our efforts to be of assistance only resulted in our putting our foot in it very heavily." The Council had been warned to stay out of this "purely spiritual matter".⁷⁴

⁷² Henry Frenco, 'Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, Religion and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta, 1927-1930' in: *History of European Ideas* (1995), 47-65, 49.

⁷³ TNA, BW 43/1, Extracts from a private letter from Mr. W.R.L. Wickham to Mr. Croom-Johnson dated 25th of January, 1939 (Extract made 17 February 1939).

⁷⁴ TNA, BW 43/1, copy of Lord Lloyd to His Eminence The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, GB/29/3, 14th March 1939; Confidential, Croom-Johnson to Wickham, GB/29/3, 19 April 1939, folio 51.

The Institute opening its doors

The opening of the Institute was a public event that required careful preparation if it was to win the sympathy of as many Maltese as possible. The ceremony would take place at four o' clock in the afternoon and – one could not have expected otherwise at that hour among British – would be followed by tea for the approximately 750 guests. Wickham found the Archbishop of Malta, Monsignor Dom Mauris Caruana, willing to bless the premises of the Institute on the same occasion, provided that Wickham would give a written guarantee that nothing would be said or done at the Institute that was contrary to Catholic principles. The Council authorized him to do so.⁷⁵ The Chairman was meant to come to Malta in early May but was obliged to postpone his visit due to the “European situation”, meaning presumably Hitler’s intervention in Czechoslovakia, Germany’s renouncement of the non-aggression pact with Poland, Italy’s invasion of Albania and the inter-Allied missions initiated to prepare for a possible war. Wickham underlined the need to open the Institute by mid-May at the latest and suggested that if necessary an eminent person such as the British Ambassador in Rome could replace the Chairman at the ceremony. Consultation with some of his Maltese acquaintances had made it clear to Wickham that it was better not to start recruiting members before the Institute was officially opened and especially not before it was blessed. To start recruiting later than end May, just before the long summer break started, would make it hard to find enough members before starting the new social season in October.⁷⁶

The opening indeed took place at the beginning of May, in the presence of Council Chairman Lloyd. It was instead Wickham who was unable to be at the ceremony, because of illness. He reported that a large crowd had turned up at the opening, in great part motivated by the curiosity of seeing what had been done to the former Prime Minister’s office. This curiosity was fed by

[...] rumours, spread with skill, that undesirable changes had been made and that the former luxurious furniture of the place had been sent to England. I was able to scotch these with the kind help of the Governor, parts of whose speech were devoted to such canards.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ TNA, BW 43/13, telegram, Director of the British Institute in Malta to British Council, 4 April 1939, folio 40; Telegram, British Council to the Director of the British Institute in Malta, 6 April 1939, folio 42.

⁷⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/17, 26 March 1939; TNA, BW 43/13, telegram, Director of the British Institute in Malta to the British Council, 4 April 1939, folio 40; telegram, the British Council to the Director of the British Institute in Malta, 6 April 1939, folio 42; TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/21, 13 April 1939, folio 45.

⁷⁷ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/25, 11 May 1939, folio 58.

Since then Wickham had been able to recruit 110 members; a figure he judged not unsatisfactory though he was caustic about the many Maltese who were pro-British in words only and not in deeds. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about the future. Much depended, according to Wickham, on whether the Council was able to send him a lecturer each month. Music had been one of the greatest attractions of the Italian Istituto di Cultura and generally the Maltese scarcely believed that there were any good English musicians. Therefore sending a concert player every month Wickham thought was essential too. Wickham himself planned to start giving a lecture course as of October. He also thought some "simple lectures about England, illustrated with lantern slides" in the villages could be useful. By 17 May the number of members had already risen to 258, the library was proving popular and he and the Secretary were working 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. to keep things going.⁷⁸

The clerical attacks directed towards the Institute continued to trouble Wickham. While the usual criticism in the press kept appearing, after the local Diocesan Eucharistic Congress the Archbishop had also issued a Pastoral wherein he proposed to establish an Institute of Religious Culture. This, Wickham had no doubts, was a direct reply to the establishment of the British Institute. Such an Institute of Religious Culture would have the advantage of being supported by the Catholic Church in Malta, which was supposed to own about a third of the total landed property in the island. Besides material wealth, the organization would have spiritual power. Spiritual penalties, veiled or direct, against members of the British Institute, which was not Roman Catholic or Italian, were not to be excluded. The "truly mediaeval position and mentality" of the Catholic Church in Malta meant it was a very strong force to reckon with.⁷⁹ Wickham concluded:

You [the British Council] have to face here something which, perhaps, you have not had to face before, a fully-established previous competitor on a grand scale, backed by a strong local party and by the influence of the Catholic Church in Malta: exceptional and continued efforts are needed to erase the impression made by it.⁸⁰

The "previous competitor" was the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, which for only five pounds a year had offered lectures and concerts, even to non-members. From the high quality of the lecturers and artists to the free refreshments, all elements showed that these Italian cultural events had been "most lavishly conducted". The majority of its members would not have known about its

⁷⁸ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/25, 11 May 1939, folio 58; Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/27, 17 May 1939, folio 60; Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/28, 23 May 1939, folio 61.

⁷⁹ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/28, 23 May 1939, folio 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

“other and more dubious activities”, namely the espionage that the British had suspected the Istituto di Cultura to be involved in.

Having in mind only the impression the Italian Institute had made, the average Maltese would think that if a poor country like Italy could afford to spend so much on promoting its culture in Malta, then surely the far wealthier Britain could and would rival these Italian efforts. Wickham’s concern about the competition with Italy would later transpire in a personal letter that Lord Lloyd sent to Governor Bonham-Carter, on the 26th of December 1939. Wickham had sent Lord Lloyd the leading articles in *The Malta* of 5 and 9 December and warned him about the danger that as a result of the recent inauguration of the British Institute in Rome, the Italian government might demand for the re-opening of the Italian Institute in Malta. Lloyd informed Bonham-Carter of the Council’s strong opposition to allowing the Italian Institute to re-open, mentioning also his enquiries confirming that the Colonial and Foreign Offices would back this position. Though he was confident that Bonham-Carter would also object, he let him know that he saw no grounds for analogy, given that “the history of the Italian Institute has been one of political rather than cultural activity.” Lloyd obviously did not wish to recognize that the Council’s own activities were more than just cultural.⁸¹

A final illustrative detail of how the British Council reacted to the competition with the foreign cultural politics of other countries is the way radio was used by the British Institute in Malta and the disadvantages felt in comparison with the Italians. The British Council had given the Institute a wireless radio and this was often used by the members. With the exception of the British News Bulletin at 7 p.m., Wickham left it up to the members to chose the programmes, partly out of policy and partly because he and his staff had no time to control the radio settings. From listening to the radio while members handled it, Wickham noticed that people were right in complaining that British short-wave radio stations faded badly and much more so than the French or the German broadcasts.⁸² Furthermore, the programmes that were aired between about 5.30 and 8 p.m., which was when most members listened to the wireless, were not suitable for the audience. “English comedians have a peculiar technique, and accent, which non-English people find both puzzling and not very funny [...]”, he remarked. Instead of broadcasting various forms of vaudeville, the British station according to Wickham should offer music of all kinds, with latest news interspersed between items. Maltese radio-listeners did not deliberately seek broadcasts from Rome or Zeesen, but were driven to do so because “non-British stations do, at critical hours of the day, provide what the

⁸¹ TNA, BW 43/13, Private and Personal, Lord Lloyd to Governor Bonham-Carter, 26 December 1939, folio 138.

⁸² Wickham refers to the Zeesen short-wave radio transmitter located in the German village of Zeesen as of 1931. This wooden structure was one of Germany’s first short-wave broadcasting transmitters. In 1939 it was replaced by a steel construction.

average person here considers better entertainment.” The popularity of the British short-wave could be increased by merely programming more music and transmitting the current dance-music programmes earlier than was now being done.⁸³

Conclusion

From what can be reconstructed of the Dante Alighieri Society’s intervention in the case of Malta, it is clear that the arguments used to defend the *italianità* of the island were draped in the rhetoric of nation-building and of giving each people the right to self-determination as well as freedom to maintain their own organically developed cultural tradition. Language was regarded as an essential part of the national soul. Although Scicluna Sorge took into consideration not only the role of Italian in forms of elite culture – literature, academic studies and legal documents – but also its more intimate use in the communication between mother and child, generally the Dante focussed on what Italian had meant for Maltese high culture. Removing the Italian language and the cultural influences the Maltese people had benefitted from ever since the Romans had dominated Malta meant depriving them of their connection with the larger European civilization. Being part of the Roman ‘cradle of civilization’ was deemed essential to Malta. Similarly it was treated as a matter of self-evident historical destiny that Italy should lead the way in the Mediterranean. This idea was not exclusively linked to a Fascist world-view.

The British Council equally felt it had a civilizing mission to fulfil in the Mediterranean and in Malta, but as part of a world-wide contribution it could make in expanding and defending the British “democratic Empire”. At the centre of this idea was a concept of national culture and tradition that had mainly to do with political and social institutions. The Mother of Parliaments was there to help the world forward. Needless to say, the Council was also aware of the desire to protect British political and commercial interests abroad, hence also the attention for the promotion of British-manufactured goods, such as the film-projector and other technical instruments. Theirs was a carefully considered course of action. On the one hand Wickham and the other Council members involved in Malta were self-conscious about their meagre financial resources. On the other hand, there was a detectable sense of pride in not wasting these on outward luxury with which to appeal to the Maltese, like the Istituto di Cultura had done. The tools invested in had to be effective and Wickham was well aware of the importance modern media played in shaping

⁸³ TNA, BW 43/13, Copy Wickham to Miss Pamela Henn-Collins, BCP/1/64, 16 January 1940, folio 142. A copy of the letter was sent on to the Secretary-General of the BBC, Duncan Fyfe, see: British Council to Wickham, ML/24/1, 6 February 1940, folio 163.

the ideas of the general public. There was also an attempt to win sympathy among the Maltese by using religion. Given that the island's history was closely connected to that of the Christian Crusades, Christianity had a particularly symbolic significance in Maltese society. It was hoped that inviting British Roman-Catholic speakers would make the inhabitants less distrustful of what was easily seen as a Protestant culture.

In Malta, the British repression of the Italian language and of the Maltese desire for greater self-government revealed a treacherous Mother of all Parliaments. She unblushingly set aside her principles of freedom and democracy for the sake of her strategic interests in the Mediterranean. The British Council waited on her needs, while the Dante Alighieri Society - appealing to Italy's re-emerging role as guiding light in the region - unmasked her.

CHAPTER 5

CULTURAL POLICY AND COLONIAL CONQUEST: THE DANTE ALIGHIERI SOCIETY IN ABYSSINIA AND THE BRITISH COUNCIL IN EGYPT

The Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council were closely involved in the imperial ambitions of Italy and Britain around the Mediterranean Sea and its outlets. Italy, with its numerous co-nationals living around the Mediterranean, was trying to establish firmer control over its colonies in Libya and as of 1935 embarked on an ambitious colonial expansion by conquering Abyssinia, nowadays known as Ethiopia. This stood in the way of British interests in the region. Tensions were manifest in the language conflict between the British and the Italians in Malta. Whilst the British rule in Egypt was troubled by national uprisings, Italy's movements in Abyssinia threatened Britain's main concerns in dominating the Mediterranean: access to India and to oil through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Using my research into the Dante Alighieri Society's activities in Abyssinia and those of the British Council in Egypt, this chapter will show how the Dante and the Council operated in the region and put into practice their aims. How did the two organizations use the various instruments at their disposal? What characterizes their way of operating and how successful were they? While looking for answers to these questions, it will be shown how the two organizations dealt with the cultural, political and economic rivalry in the Mediterranean.

The Dante Alighieri Society's imperial dreams in Addis Ababa

The precariousness of the Dante Alighieri Society's position as a well-established institution vis à vis Mussolini's authoritarian government in the 1930s is well illustrated by the setting up of the local Committee of Addis Ababa after May 1936, when the city was pronounced the capital of Italy's new empire: Italian East Africa (*l'Africa Orientale Italiana*, which consisted of Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland). This episode in the history of the Dante Alighieri Society provides a contribution to the still much-neglected study of

Italian colonialism.¹ The establishment of control over Abyssinia by army and administration shows Italian Fascism in its most brutal form, functioning as “a gigantic testing ground for a Fascism that sought to free itself from any constraints.”² After 1935, Fascist dreams of a new society were transposed to the African colonies. Corporatism as a new social system had failed in Italy. Instead the focus came to lie on the creation of a ‘new Fascist man’ as shaped by a more totalitarian and militaristic regime; a creation that could be achieved in the colonies – considered to be a ‘tabula rasa’- and then serve as a model for Italy as well.

Another reason that makes looking into the Dante Alighieri Society’s activity in Addis Ababa particularly worthwhile is the fact that the conquest of Abyssinia meant a turning point in Italy’s image abroad, especially in popular opinion.³ Both countries were members of the League of Nations. Upon Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia on the 5th of October 1935, the League of Nations was obliged to condemn this act of aggression against a League member and in November economic sanctions were imposed. These sanctions, however, were doomed to be ineffective. Vital resources such as oil were exempted and the British did not deny access to the Suez Canal. The British and the French government were keen to maintain good relations with Italy, believing that Italy could be a potential ally in containing Hitler’s power. A deal was made, the Hoare-Laval Plan, which would hand over a major part of Abyssinia to Italy for it to control as a kind of protectorate, provided the war would be ended immediately. When the news of this deal leaked out to the general public in France and Britain, the outrage and the post-Versailles influence of public opinion on diplomacy were so strong that the British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare and the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval were forced to resign. This coincides with the reputation for moral indignation that the British had acquired. A small but very vociferous minority was said to express such indignation that “the very pacifists among them are almost ready to fly dropping bombs over the tyrants’ domains”.⁴ Eventually, on 4 July 1936, with none of the League members wishing to enter into war, the economic sanctions were lifted.

¹ Angelo del Boca, ‘The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism’ in: Patrizia Palumbo ed., *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003) 17-36; Nicola Labanca, ‘Studies and Research on Fascist Colonialism, 1922-1935: Reflections on the State of the Art’ in: *ibidem*, 37-61.

² Alexander de Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940’ in: *Contemporary European History*, 13, 2 (2004) 127-147, 138.

³ See for example Frank van Vree, ‘In het land van Mussolini. De Nederlandse pers en fascistisch Italië’, in: *Incontri* 6 (1991) 3-26, about the damage to fascist Italy’s positive reputation in the Dutch press following the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

⁴ Rose Macaulay, ‘Moral Indignation’ in: Hugh Kingsmill ed., *The English Genius* (London: The Right Book Club, 1939) 175-190, 176.

The Dante Alighieri's dealings in Addis Ababa provide a significant illustration of the dynamics of the Society's interaction with the local Italian authorities. The cooperation that can be traced back is not such as to suggest a complete submission of the Dante Society to Mussolini's regime. Setting aside for a moment the question of 'fascistization', how did the Dante go about to promote Italian culture in Italy's new imperial territory?

A new Dante Alighieri Committee in Addis Ababa

The Central Council of the Dante Society itself took the initial decision to launch a Committee in Addis Ababa. So far no archive material has been found to determine whether Felicioni, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, had discussed this beforehand with Mussolini or with someone from his cabinet. What we know is that right away an ambitious plan was made. At a meeting of the Council on 17 May 1936, it was agreed to put fifty thousand lire at disposal for the creation of a big Dante Alighieri library in the new capital of the Italian empire. The local Committee of Venice was prepared to donate ten thousand lire to the budget for the library, as well as three thousand books it had collected for this purpose.⁵ The fact that the Venetian Committee had been collecting books for this purpose, suggests the library had been talked about already for quite a while. A day after the Addis Ababa initiative had been decided upon, Felicioni wrote to Giuseppe Bottai. Bottai had shortly before, on the 5th of May 1936, been named the first Italian Governor of Addis Ababa, a function which he was to retain only until the 27th of that same month.⁶ Felicioni informed him about the Dante's plans and asked if he could name a person in Addis Ababa who would be suitable as a local fiduciary of the Society.⁷ A similar letter was sent to Vezio Orazi, Federal Secretary of the Fascio of Addis Ababa.⁸ Obviously, Felicioni wanted to be sure such a fiduciary would be someone the local (political) authorities could accept, as well as someone the Dante itself could trust.

When over a month later Felicioni had not yet received a reply from either Bottai or Orazi, he wrote to Giuseppe Floriano dall'Armi, Colonial Inspector at the Ministry of Colonies in Rome, to ask him if he knew of a suitable fiduciary. In his letter, Felicioni explained to Floriano dall'Armi that

⁵ AS-SDA, Fascicolo 6, Addis Ababa, President of the Dante Alighieri Society to Bottai, Civil Governor of Addis Ababa, 18 May 1936.

⁶ Was Bottai one of the several *gerarchi* (highly-placed party members) who were 'promoted' to a post in the Italian colonies to be temporarily out of the way on the mainland? (Alexander de Grand, 'Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940' in: *Contemporary European History*, 13, 2 (2004) 127-147, 132.)

⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felice Felicioni to Giuseppe Bottai, Civil Governor of Addis Ababa, 18 May 1936.

⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Vezio Orazi, 20 May 1936.

besides setting up a local Committee with the usual activities to spread language and culture, the fundamental aim of the Dante Alighieri Society in Addis Ababa was to create a large library in the capital of Italian Abyssinia. He mentioned the fifty thousand lire that the Central Council was prepared to invest, as well as the ten thousand lire and the three thousand books being offered by the Dante Committee of Venice. In addition, Felicioni wrote about an extraordinary sum of hundred thousand lire that was being offered by the Committee of Catania for the purpose of building a Casa della Dante, as a proper home for the Addis Ababa Committee. However, Felicioni openly remarked that he hoped the fiduciary in Addis Ababa could arrange with the local Italian authorities for the Dante to obtain a building in reasonable condition for free. That way the money could be spent on refurbishing the building and furnishing it. The donation of the building would be commemorated with a small plaque.⁹

To maximise the chance of getting official support, Felicioni also asked Guido Cortese, recently appointed as the Federal Secretary of the Fasci in Italian East Africa, to react favourably when within days Floriano dall'Armi would meet him together with the Viceroy in Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani, to discuss the issue of a fiduciary for a local Dante Committee. He kindly begged him to do so out of his "ancient affection" for the Dante.¹⁰ Guido Cortese had until recently been the Secretary General of the Ente Nazionale della Mutualità Scolastica. Felicioni had probably made acquaintance with him through the Dante's involvement in the Italian educational system. It is worth noting that Felicioni starts the letter by saying he has tried to call Cortese in Rome but was unable to get hold of him. This is a small piece of evidence that could help substantiate Beatrice Pisa's claim that the relative scarcity of the head office's correspondence kept in the central Dante Alighieri Society archives for the period after 1930 is in part explained by the increased use of telephone.¹¹

At first, Felicioni was given different suggestions as to who could be a suitable candidate for the post. Orazi finally replied at the end of June, suggesting Carlo Milanese, director of the *Giornale di Addis Abeba* and in charge of running the Istituto Fascista di Cultura.¹² The Viceroy of Abyssinia, Graziani, instead suggested Grand'Ufficiale Aurio Carletti.¹³ No decision was made though; a letter from the Viceroy Graziani to Felicioni dated the 30th of October 1936, shows that the issue was then still unresolved. In this letter the Viceroy pointed out that finding a suitable building in Addis Ababa for a future local Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society had proved to be extremely difficult.

⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Giuseppe Floriano dall'Armi, 17 June 1936.

¹⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Guido Cortese, 24 June 1936.

¹¹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 422, footnote 86.

¹² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Vezio Orazi to Felicioni, 30 June 1936, Prot. 504.

¹³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani to Felicioni, 10 July 1936.

The few buildings in viable conditions had to be reserved for the most indispensable public services. Hence the Viceroy had examined the possibility of letting the local Dante Committee establish its office in the headquarters of the *Fasci*. Cortese, the Federal Secretary of the *Fasci*, had agreed to accommodate the Dante and its library. Furthermore, Graziani had reconsidered the question who could be made fiduciary. Floriani dell'Armi, by now transferred to Addis Ababa as head of the Direzione degli Affari Economici e Finanziari of the Vice-Kingdom of Abyssinia, had advised Graziani not to rely on Government personnel as they had not a minute to spare in their task of running the colony. The choice had therefore fallen on someone who was expected to be well capable of combining the delicate task of fiduciary with the ordinary execution of his work: the inspector of education (sovrintendente scolastico) Edmondo Pietrosi.¹⁴ A month later, Pietrosi was appointed.

While the practical details still needed sorting out and nothing tangible had yet been achieved in Addis Ababa, the Italian press in the motherland had already been alerted. An article in the newspaper *La Terra* of August 1936, spoke of the Dante Alighieri Society working alongside the *Fasci all'estero* to contribute to Italy's empire in the Dante Society's specific field of competence: culture. As if all had been arranged, the article announced that the Dante was going to create a library and build a 'Casa della Dante' in Addis Ababa, as well as launch propaganda activities. What kind of propaganda was hereby intended? The most recent and obvious example was what had already been done through the Dante Committees abroad to convince the foreign "educated classes" and the "masses" of the righteousness of Italy's historic, social, political and legal reasons for conquering the Abyssinian territory. For this purpose the foreign Dante Committees had spread more than 110,000 folders and had organized lectures. Munich, Geneva, New York, Paris, Sao Paolo and Tirana distinguished themselves as main centres of propaganda.¹⁵ This would suggest that the negative effect of the Italo-Abyssinian war on the image of Italy abroad had made the Dante particularly aware of the function it could have for the cultural 'education' of foreigners as opposed to their own nationals. Indeed, in many of the newspaper articles dealing with the prospected Dante library in Addis Ababa, it is indicated that the library will be of use for Italians and foreigners.¹⁶

At the same time though, the official news agency Stefani had apparently been instructed to announce what seems to be a competing project. The Florentine newspaper *Il Giornale* of 7 August 1936 contained an article that mentioned an initiative of Federal Secretary Cortese, supported by the Viceroy,

¹⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani to Felicioni, 30 October 1936.

¹⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, 'L'Attività della «Dante Alighieri» per l'Impero' in: *La Terra* (Rome, [1?] August 1936).

¹⁶ 'La prima riunione ad Addis Abeba degli iscritti alla «Dante Alighieri»', *Corriere Adriatico*, Ancona, 1 March 1938.

about which Stefani was spreading the news. The plan was to create a Casa dell'Ospitalità Fascista with reading and writing rooms, a theatre with two-hundred seats, a tennis court, a swimming pool and other modern facilities. This first big construction in the emerging imperial capital, with its majestic appearance in 'Italic' and agrarian style ("...un corpo maestoso di schietto stile italico ed agrario"), was to house the local offices of the Fascist Party, the syndicates, the social services, a room for press conferences, the Club Alpino Italiano, the Colonial Institute and the Dante Alighieri Society. Other amenities that were to be provided would show Italy's technological modernity. Besides a telephone and telegraph service, the plan was to have a radio tower with a film projector to show films in the open air. The latter, the article commented, would no doubt impress the 'indigenous' population.¹⁷ Cortese, it would seem, was trying to keep the honour for himself and for the National Fascist Party.

Initial obstacles

Once Pietrosi had taken on the voluntary function of fiduciary – a task that he seems to have accepted without further delay – Felicioni could finally move on with the establishment of the Committee in Addis Ababa. This was a project Felicioni had described as particularly close to his heart. By creating a library and a reading room with the best Italian periodicals, as well as organising artistic and musical events, the Addis Ababa Committee would provide a vigorous campaign for *italianità*, or so Felicioni claimed.¹⁸ On the 27th of November 1936 he gave instructions to Pietrosi to start recruiting the minimum number of members required for a local Committee of the Dante to be statutorily recognized: twenty-five ordinary members (paying twelve lire per year) or life members (paying every now and then at least two-hundred lire). As soon as this was achieved, Felicioni could officially make Pietrosi President of the Addis Ababa Committee. The funds for a Dante headquarters, with room for its office, a large library and a salon for its cultural and artistic activities, now totalled a hundred and seventy thousand lire, but Felicioni explained that the shortage of suitable buildings in Addis Ababa meant that for the time being such an office and library had to be hosted by the Fascist party headquarters.¹⁹

¹⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Attilio Crepas, 'Un altro implicito riconoscimento dell'impero etiopico' in: *Il Nuovo Giornale* (Florence, 7 August 1936).

¹⁸ "[un] Comitato che mi sta particolarmente a cuore ed al quale intendo far svolgere una vigorosa e complessa azione di italianità, sia nel campo culturale, con la formazione di una importante biblioteca e con una sala di lettura, fornita dei migliori periodici italiani, sia con manifestazioni artistiche e musicali, che potranno concretare nel tempo en nella maniera che V.E. mi vorrà gentilmente" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Rodolfo Graziani, 3 August 1936).

¹⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 27 November 1936.

That same day, Felicioni wrote to Guido Cortese to inform him about the arrangements with Pietrosi.

In the following weeks, Pietrosi made the necessary agreements with Cortese to have the local Dante Committee temporarily based in the Fascist party building. In order to set up a proper library, Pietrosi asked the central Dante office in Rome to make part of the funds destined for this project available to him right away. Shelves needed to be built along the walls of an entire room, as well as tables and chairs. Carpenters were very expensive in Addis Ababa.²⁰ The investment Pietrosi foresaw evidently alarmed Felicioni, who soon after wrote to remind him that this was to be only a temporary solution, that the aim was to eventually have a '*Casa della Dante*' and that costs for furnishing the library needed to be kept to a minimum. To cover the expenses involved in running the library, Felicioni suggested that a supplementary fee should be asked of Dante members in Addis Ababa for the use of the library and the lending of books. He asked Pietrosi to send an approximate budget overview, after which Felicioni could make sure the necessary sum was transferred.²¹

On the onset of the new year, 1937, several articles appeared across Italy, reporting on the creation of a new Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society in Addis Ababa, by the will of the Viceroy and under the chairmanship of Edmondo Pietrosi, temporarily to be accommodated in the Federal Fascist Party headquarters until a residence worthy of its function in the empire was found.²² Despite these optimistic announcements, the actual establishment of the local Committee progressed slowly. It wasn't until the 10th of February that Pietrosi was able to post a budget overview, having - as he claimed - finally found some carpenters who could commit themselves to completing the work by the end of March. Carpenters being so scarce, Pietrosi had been obliged to right away agree, without consulting the Dante headquarters in Rome first. Half of the twenty thousand lire he budgeted for 1937 would go to the shelves and furniture for the library. Assuming that there would be no further ado about the shelves, Pietrosi recommended Felicioni to immediately start sending books, especially light reading, Italian classics, and books on history, philosophy and politics. These would then probably arrive by the end of

²⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Edmondo Pietrosi to Felicioni, 22 December 1936.

²¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 30 December 1936.

²² Le Colonie, Agenzia Quotidiana di Informazioni Coloniali Mediterranee ed Orientali, Organo dell'Istituto Coloniale Fascista, n. 15, foglio 1 (21 January 1937); 'La «Dante» ad Addis Abeba', Il Gazzettino, Venice, 12 January 1937; 'La costituzione nell'Impero della «Dante»', Il Resto del Carlino, 20 January 1937; 'La costituzione della sezione della «Dante» ad Addis Abeba', Il Veneto della Sera, Padova, 20 January 1937; 'Comitato della «Dante Alighieri» ad Addis Abeba, Il Regime Fascista, Cremona, 21 January 1937; 'Un Comitato della «Dante» costituito ad Addis Abeba', La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, Bari, 21 January 1937.

March.²³ The budget was indeed accepted and Felicioni even mentioned that in the future the Dante might consider creating libraries elsewhere in the empire, in towns such as Harar, Gondar, Dessie and Dire Dawa.²⁴

Thanks to airmail the correspondence between Rome and Addis Ababa was by the mid-1930s rapid and trustworthy. Shipping crates with books was a different matter, or so it proved to be. On 11 March 1937 the central Dante Alighieri Society office in Rome had a first portion of books sent. These were mainly classics, in Italian and Latin (with Italian translation), a collection of Benito Mussolini's and of Alfredo Oriani's writings and speeches, and the most important publications on the Abyssinian war. Among the books was also an artistic edition of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* which Pietrosi was to ceremoniously deliver to the Viceroy. This present was possibly meant to provide some leverage in a task Felicioni hoped Pietrosi could fulfil. For Felicioni had heard that the General Government of Italian East Africa intended to buy four or five copies of the *Enciclopedia Treccani*, with the purpose of giving them to a number of cultural institutions in the empire. Pietrosi was instructed to discretely try to get hold of a copy. The money that would be saved by this move - five or six thousand lire - could then be spent on other books.²⁵ This is a small but revealing example of the manoeuvring and networking that was required, which would not have been the case had the Dante Alighieri Society been a mere puppet of the regime.

On the 1st of April yet another crate of books was shipped. By the 13th of May Felicioni had still not received any news from Addis Ababa confirming the arrival of the first load of books and was so concerned that he wrote to Pietrosi for more information. The long silence on behalf of Pietrosi made him wonder not only about the books, but also about the number of members that had joined the local Dante Committee. In addition there was a complicating factor Felicioni wished to be reassured about. In view of the discussions about moving the capital of Abyssinia away from Addis Ababa, did it make sense to send any more books for the time being?²⁶ His worries about the development of the new Committee were not unwarranted. Things were looking bleak. Because the Committee had not yet officially been launched nor had the library, Pietrosi was having trouble recruiting new members. He was resorting to the pupils of the secondary schools in Addis Ababa by making them all become student members, for the annual price of two lire per person. That would amount to fifty-two new members. As for the books, there was no sign of them yet and they were presumably being held at Djibouti. However, Pietrosi dismissed the plans for a new capital city as no reason for alarm, seeing such a city would

²³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Edmondo Pietrosi to Felicioni, 10 February 1937.

²⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 18 February 1937.

²⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 11 March 1937.

²⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 13 May 1937.

have to be built from scratch and would therefore require at least two or three years before being ready.²⁷

That summer there was little improvement in the situation. Although the Dante office and library shelves were ready for use, nothing could be done because the books still had not arrived and no explanation could be given for this from Djibouti. The Governing Board of the local Committee could not be formed either. A change of Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party was imminent and Cortese had advised Pietrosi to wait with forming such a board until his successor was in place. Even the postage from Rome of membership cards, the flyers and membership registration forms that had been announced with a letter dated the 17th of May, had so far not been received.²⁸ Felicioni found it inconceivable that the books had not reached their destination and hoped to resolve the issue through the Italian courier in charge of the transport.²⁹ The courier, the firm Sicco, was able to show Felicioni a letter from their correspondent in Djibouti confirming that two cases had been carried on to the dockyard and sent on to Addis Ababa by train, whilst a third case had been sent via Massawa.³⁰

At the beginning of October, finally one case of books arrived. It was the third case and some books were missing. After further investigation, the two other cases had been found still waiting in the harbour of Djibouti. The transport by rail was not possible at that moment, probably because of Abyssinian attacks on the railway line, so Pietrosi was obliged to have them brought the ordinary way, presumably by truck or car, even if the fees were high (150 lire per tonne). There were indeed ongoing attacks by Abyssinian rebel forces on the railway line between Addis Ababa and Djibuti. This obliged the Italians to post guards along it at fifty metre intervals.³¹ At least by truck or car it was sure that the cases would arrive on the 20th of that month. The official opening of the local Dante Alighieri Committee had been arranged with the new Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, Marcello Bofondi, to take place in the second half of November.³² Instead the time schedule proved again to be too optimistic. Pietrosi's next letter came no sooner than the 27th of November. The books from Djibouti had arrived. In future books were to be sent via Asmara, Pietrosi recommended, since this would save time and avoid French obstruction. Whether there really had been a conscious attempt on the part of

²⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 May 1937.

²⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, prot. 25, unknown date.

²⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 27 August 1937. Felicioni also mentioned that twenty-five membership cards were on their way to Pietrosi for the members who had so far paid and issues of the bi-monthly *Pagine della Dante* had been posted to the regular members of Addis Ababa.

³⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 15 October 1937.

³¹ John Gooch, 'Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-39' in: *The Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 28, no. 6 (December 2005) 1005-1032, 1023.

³² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, Prot. 46, 6 October 1937.

the French authorities in Djibouti to withhold the two crates, as Pietrosi suggested, remains questionable.

Still, with only a thousand books in the library, Pietrosi doubted whether the lending out of books should begin. Everyone in Addis Ababa – the Italian community, that is to say – was focused on concrete, material problems related to the construction of the new city. Most of them had a modest cultural upbringing, so Pietrosi estimated it would take a few years before Addis Ababa could become the capital of the empire also from a cultural point of view. Hence, he did not believe the local Dante Committee would for the time being have much chance to flourish. Despite the low expectations, he urged Felicioni to send more books to reach the three thousand volumes originally envisaged, preferably novels and easily readable history series (“collane storiche”). Only then could the official opening of the local Committee take place, Pietrosi felt.³³ Another stock of books was sent from Rome and as soon as the new delivery route would prove to be faster, more would be sent. Felicioni recommended starting to lend out books, making sure these were only lent to members of the Dante and after having received a deposit that was worth at least the average value if the books in the collection. He also asked for a copy of the library regulations to be sent to him first.³⁴

Again, changes in the government of Italian East Africa meant that the official opening of the Committee had to be postponed. Pietrosi was able to hand over the special edition of the *Divine Comedy* to the Viceroy Graziani in December, but because of the government transitions it was not possible to ensure that public authorities would be present at an opening of the Dante.³⁵ What Pietrosi did not explicitly mention was that this “transition” was due to the fact that on 11 November Mussolini had informed Graziani that he would be recalled as Viceroy and replaced by the Duke of Aosta, as a consequence of his still too feeble military control of Abyssinia.³⁶ This change of government meant that the opening would have to wait until no sooner than the end of January. Felicioni had made clear earlier in December that he wished this opening to be of a most solemn kind and, if possible, filmed by the cameramen of the Istituto L.U.C.E..³⁷ It was therefore to be expected that Felicioni, referring to all the sacrifices the Central Council had made for the Addis Ababa Committee, would be prepared to postpone the event to a more suitable

³³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 27 November 1937.

³⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 December 1937.

³⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 27 November 1937; Pietrosi to Felicioni, 20 December 1937. An article in *Il Messaggero* erroneously reported that this gift had been given on the occasion of the opening of the Dante Alighieri library in Addis Ababa (‘Un dono della «Dante Alighieri» di Addis Ababa al Maresciallo Graziani’, *Il Messaggero*, Rome, 15 December 1937).

³⁶ Gooch, ‘Re-conquest and Suppression’, 1025.

³⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 December 1937.

moment.³⁸ But Pietrosi also made a suggestion, which seemed to point towards (potential) tensions that could obstruct the Dante's local Committee. He let Felicioni know he ought to write a letter to Bofondi, the Federal Secretary, asking him to support the local Dante Alighieri Committee and making clear to him that the Dante Alighieri and the Istituto Fascista di Cultura could coexist in Addis Ababa, each of them being involved in different activities anyway. The Dante could limit itself almost entirely to running what was meant to become the most important library of the city.³⁹ This is the only letter that Pietrosi signs with a Fascist greeting ("auguri e saluti fascisti"). It does not have to imply that he felt any particular allegiance to Fascist ideology. The fact that he scarcely uses such a greeting when it was standard jargon, would rather suggest that he was at times conforming to the expectations.

Felicioni followed Pietrosi's advice and was told by Bofondi that he had already made arrangements with Pietrosi for the official opening, now scheduled for the 13th of February 1938.⁴⁰ Subsequently, it was once more postponed, until Sunday the 27th of February.⁴¹ The eagerness to maintain good relations with the local Italian authorities is also demonstrated by the inclusion in the Addis Ababa Committee's Board of a representative of the Gruppo Universitario Fascista and of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio. Both nominees had been approved by the Federal Party Secretary Bofondi before being officially appointed.⁴²

In the meantime, against all the odds, Felicioni's ambitions were not quelled. He was already looking ahead at the formation of other Dante Alighieri Committees in the colony. When Pietrosi confirmed the arrival of the latest case of books, he also wrote that Felicioni's brother-in-law had paid him a visit in Addis Ababa to discuss the planned creation of other propaganda centres of the Dante in Italian East Africa. Pietrosi was willing to investigate the possibilities for expansion and could combine this with a school inspection trip through the Empire that he had scheduled for the coming month. For this purpose he needed to know if there were already some other Committees and who their presidents were. It seems rather curious that he should not have had this information already, given the key position of the Committee in Addis Ababa. This would suggest that the Central Office in Rome wanted to keep the Committees in Abyssinia under its direct control. Or must this be seen as

³⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 30 December 1937.

³⁹ "[...] facendo presente che la Dante Alighieri ed Istituto Fascista di Cultura possono coesistere in Addis Abeba, svolgendo un'attività diversa, in quanto la Dante potrebbe limitarsi quasi completamente a far funzionare la biblioteca che dovrà diventare la più importante della città" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 20 December 1937).

⁴⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 30 December 1937; Bofondi to Felicioni, 10 January 1938.

⁴¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 February 1938.

⁴² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 13 January 1938.

evidence of distrust with regard to Pietrosi? He also wished to receive a letter from Felicioni stating that he had been given the task of setting up other Committees.⁴³ What he would subsequently know was that so far only a Committee in Asmara existed and that someone had been asked to set up a committee in Harar or Dire Dawa, without having given any news about it ever since.⁴⁴ Some months later Pietrosi displayed no less optimism than Felicioni, claiming he had sent some propaganda material to Harar and stating that he expected a Committee to be set up there soon, something which in fact didn't happen until many decades later.⁴⁵

The official opening of the Dante library

At last on the 28th of March 1938, after two years of preparation, the Dante Alighieri Committee of Addis Ababa was officially launched. Gathered in the cinema 'Impero' were the members of the Committee, political, ecclesiastical and administrative authorities, and many students. The press coverage that appeared in Italian newspapers on the peninsula and in the Empire a few days later, included the news of the hundred thousand lire being offered by Citelli, the President of the Committee of Catania, and the announced anonymous donation of a precious library, namely a rare collection of the late Severino Ferrari, a famous poet in Bologna specialized in 'Carducciana'. This book collection, together with sixty thousand books that the Dante intended to provide, was proudly described as destined to be the greatest library of the Empire, to be put at the disposal of all Italian and foreign scholars residing in Addis Ababa.⁴⁶

An article in the *Corriere dell'Impero* – published in Addis Ababa – brought this message across more emphatically by referring in its heading to the spiritual expansion of the Dante and to the new library being a cultural centre for Italians and foreigners.⁴⁷ The Federal Secretary, Cortese, gave a

⁴³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 February 1938.

⁴⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi 25 February 1938. The committee of Asmara was presided by Giuseppe Rocco di Torrepadula whereas Giambattista Forlivesi had been charged with setting up a committee in Harar or Dire Dawa.

⁴⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 8 May 1938.

⁴⁶ 'La prima riunione ad Addis Abeba degli iscritti alla «Dante Alighieri»', *Corriere Adriatico*, Ancona, 1 March 1938. See also AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 28 February 1938.

⁴⁷ 'La «Dante Alighieri» inizia nell'Impero la sua azione di espansione spirituale. La biblioteca di Addis Abeba centro culturale per gl'italiani e gli stranieri' in: *Corriere dell'Impero*, 1 February 1938. This must have in fact been the issue of the 1st of March, not of February. Pietrosi admitted that due to transport difficulties the library collection so far consisted of only one thousand five hundred volumes but he underlined that Felicioni, who has shown full commitment to the library in Addis Ababa, would ensure that the total of sixty thousand volumes would be reached.

speech, saying he was glad to chair this first meeting. It is not clear whether the author of the article paraphrased something Cortese had said or simply added his own view when mentioning how Mussolini had taught everyone that the spirit dominated matter, and that glory and grandness could only be achieved through the spirit. Next spoke the President of the local Committee of the Dante Alighieri, Edmondo Pietrosi, with a conference on Dante in history, in the world and in the Empire. Pietrosi was quoted as saying that language was not only to be considered from a philological and aesthetic point of view, but especially as a social and political fact, with which a people (“popolo”) manages to expand and affirm its power.

Language must not only be considered from a filological or aesthetical point of view but especially as a social and political fact, through which the power of a people manages to expand and affirm itself.⁴⁸

Internally, according to Pietrosi, the unification of the Italian language had also brought about a spiritual unity. To conclude, he presented the library as a cultural centre for Italians and foreigners in the Empire.

Furthermore, this particular article of the *Corriere dell'Impero* recounted the plans that had been laid out for the Dante Alighieri Society. The Central Presidency of the Dante in Rome would work in tight co-operation with the Fascist Party's on Italy's cultural propaganda (sic), and would welcome the participation of any other organization wishing to support the 'mission of Italianness in the world' (“missione d'italianità nel mondo”). The money donated by Citelli, President of the Committee of Catania, was considered to be a first financial basis for the eventual construction of a Casa della Dante. Once Addis Ababa's new urban plan (“piano regolatore”) was ready, a worthy building was expected to be built, that besides a library would have a meeting room where lectures and artistic events could take place.⁴⁹

In conformity with the style of the Fascist regime in Italy, the launch was enlivened with the band playing the Fascist songs *Giovinezza*, *Roma* and *Giovani Fascisti*. Subsequently, Archbishop Castellani performed a solemn act of legitimisation by invoking a divine blessing for the Dante Alighieri Society. From the cinema, Pietrosi then guided Cortese to the elementary school building where – as it appears – the Dante library was now located, and not in the local office of the National Fascist Party as was negotiated earlier. Again, a typically Fascist-style spectacle was performed, with female students of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio welcoming them, presumably in some well-coordinated and visually pleasing manner. From the newspaper articles it also

⁴⁸ “La lingua non va considerata solo dal punto di vista filologico ed estetico, ma specialmente come fatto sociale e politico, per il quale la potenza di un popolo riesce ad espandersi e ad affermarsi” (ibidem).

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

becomes clear that the library was named after Gigi Maino, a member of both the Fascist Party and the Dante Alighieri Society who was said to have committed suicide as a result of his excessive dedication to the Dante. Maino had been made Secretary General of the Dante at the end of 1931, an event which Felicioni himself in his 'in memoriam' had described as coinciding with the fascistization of the Society or its incorporation in the regime.⁵⁰ Remarkably, the initiative to dedicate the library to this "comrade" did not come from Felicioni but from Cortese, and it was subsequently backed by Achille Starace, the national Secretary of the Fascist Party.⁵¹ This makes one wonder whether Maino's suicide was turned by Fascist Party authorities into the martyrdom of a man exemplarily dedicated to the supreme ideals of the Dante because this dramatic end had in fact been triggered by a conflict in Maino's moral conscience that grew as his career in the regime advanced.

Pietrosi's launching speech

Fortunately the speech held by Pietrosi at the launch of the Committee and library at Addis Ababa has been kept for posterity in the central archives of the Dante Society in Rome. The rhetoric contained in this document is a prime example of the moral superiority the Italians felt in Abyssinia as well as of the high ideals that were typical of the Dante. Pietrosi used the occasion to look back on the past half a century of the organization and its essential involvement in the irredentist battle against the "barbarization of the race" ("imbarbarimento della razza") that the Italians outside the national borders were threatened with. It was a holy battle ("lotta santa") led by the very pure minds ("le tempre purissime") of Dante presidents such as Paolo Boselli. Having played its vital role in the completion of Italy's unification, the merits of the Dante were subsequently recognized by the Duce, who gave it the task of spreading Italian prestige and civilization throughout the world. This linguistic and spiritual conquest reached not only the Italians abroad, but also ever more foreign members of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁵² Pietrosi praised the yet again expanding activity of the organization.

⁵⁰ "Questa nomina rappresenta un'importante data nella vita della benemerita Associazione, in quanto con essa ha inizio quella che è stata definita la fascistizzazione della Dante, ossia l'immissione dell'Istituzione nel Regime fascista" (Felice Felicioni, 'In memoria di Gigi Maino' in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1935) 1-3).

⁵¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Starace, 26 February 1937; Felicioni to Pietrosi, 9 March 1937.

⁵² "Così mentre si volevano le ossequie della Dante, questa è risorta a nuova vita; i suoi soci si sono moltiplicati, i suoi Comitati all'estero si sono raddoppiati, le sue scuole hanno visto decuplicata la popolazione scolastica, specie per intervento dell'elemento straniero, e, quello che più è interessante, il numero dei soci stranieri in Italia e all'estero è in continuo aumento e degna di rimarco è la loro attività in seno ai Comitati di una

After a brief reflection on language being not only of philological and aesthetic significance, but also a social and political fact, Pietrosi went on to describe the unified Italian language as one of the few to be suitable for domination of the spiritual relations between civilized countries, thanks to its modernity and universality. The diffusion of Italian language and culture could help convey to the world the extraordinary Italian genius and its contribution to world civilization. A superior concept of justice stood at the centre of this spiritual dominion. So too in the new imperial role of Fascist Italy, it was with justice that an empire of culture and spirit was being established. In complete denial of the ruthless killings that were taking place to establish Italian control over Abyssinia, Pietrosi could declare that Italy's empire hence bore no trace of violence or abuse. Here was the triumph of Fascist civilization over the negation of civilization, wanted by Bolshevik barbarity.⁵³

It seemed only fair to Pietrosi that, given the Society's history, the Dante would seek a special function for itself in the new capital of the empire. The Presidency in Rome had seen this embodied in the plan for an imperial library that would serve as the main cultural centre for both Italians and foreigners residing in Addis Ababa. Pietrosi, after recalling the dedication with which Gigi Maino had engaged himself in the Dante, concluded his speech with an appeal to unite the will of all - Italians and foreigners who loved Italy - so that in the capital of the empire too the Dante could fulfil with dignity the mission assigned to it. This mission would take place in the name of Dante the poet, described as he who knew how to universalize the imperial idea, "unifying in one symbol the eagle and the cross" ("riunendo in un unico simbolo l'aquila e la croce"). This was a reference to Dante's *De Monarchia*, a treatise in which Dante argued in favour of the autonomy of imperial versus papal power, defying the theocratic conception that instead gave supremacy to the Pope. Herein Dante also advocated the establishment of a strong Holy Roman Emperor, who being chosen by God for the defence of temporal power reunited in himself the cross (God) and the eagle (the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire). Clearly Pietrosi's literary reference was meant to underline the legitimacy of the Dante Alighieri Society's activity in the empire.⁵⁴

associazione che ha come suo unico scopo la propaganda dell'italianità nel mondo" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi, speech given in Addis Ababa on 27 February 1938, 3).

⁵³ 'La «Dante Alighieri» inizia nell'Impero la sua azione di espansione spirituale. La biblioteca di Addis Abeba centro culturale per gl'italiani e gli stranieri' in: *Corriere dell'Impero*, 1 February 1938.

⁵⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi, speech given in Addis Ababa on 27 February 1938, 11.

Giving body to the library: the books and the building

As had been announced in the press, the Dante Committee in Addis Ababa was due to receive an anonymous donation consisting of the Severino Ferrari library. This was in fact a gift from Stella Cillario, a member of the Dante Committee in Bologna, who had inherited the library from the poet Severino Ferrari. The collection, known as the Biblioteca Carducciana, was especially devoted to the works of the national poet, Giosué Carducci, a co-founder of the Dante Alighieri Society. One may wonder what sense it made to send such a precious collection all the way to Addis Ababa, with the many risks the transportation involved. In addition, these were not the kind of books that the inhabitants of Italian East Africa were particularly interested in. The Viceroy, it appeared, was especially keen on having the library as soon as possible filled with scientific books.⁵⁵ Pietrosi would a month later repeat that request, asking in particular for some treatises on legal issues.⁵⁶ Even Bofondi, the Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, wrote to Felicioni to tell him about the Viceroy's positive reaction to the Severino Ferrari library. He added though that the Viceroy also wished to see the library filled with technical, scientific, historic, artistic and political works that were otherwise hard to find in Italian East Africa and most missed by the many officials and clerks of the colony. Having heard that the Dante headquarters in Rome intended to provide new books, Bofondi was eager to stress the Viceroy's wishes. What Addis Ababa needed were the most recent studies on commerce, law, politics, history and especially scientific missions, explorations and journeys made by scientists and by national or foreign pioneers, in Africa and in particular in Abyssinia.⁵⁷ These were not the kind of books the Severino Ferrari library contained.

Felicioni found out about the donation of the Severino Ferrari library through the newspaper articles covering the launch of the Dante Alighieri Committee in Addis Ababa. Was there not a slight tone of alarm when he wrote to Pietrosi, asking for more details such as who the unnamed donator was, how many books the collection consisted of and when they were expected to arrive?⁵⁸ His worry would be justified, for shortly afterwards Pietrosi let him know that a lady called Stella Cillario was the generous benefactress and that she expected the Dante's central office in Rome to make arrangements with her for the packing and sending of these nine hundred volumes. The Dante was expected to pay for the sending.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 28 February 1938.

⁵⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92.

⁵⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Bofondi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 2063/XIV.

⁵⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 8 March 1938.

⁵⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92. Pietrosi later wrote that the Severino Ferrari library contained some very rare editions from the 16th century (Pietrosi to Felicioni, 6 April 1938, Prot. 108).

Despite the cordial relations that seemed to exist between Pietrosi and the local Italian authorities there were some indications of how the various private and public projects in the new capital of the empire still needed to be coordinated and in fact appeared to be competing with each other. In March 1938, a meeting took place in Addis Ababa between all cultural organizations, chaired by the Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, Bofondi. According to Pietrosi, the outcome of the meeting was that all Party-controlled bodies agreed to not create any libraries for themselves and to instead lend moral and material support to the Dante Alighieri library, the wish of the Federal Secretary being to ensure a most favourable position for the Dante.⁶⁰ Felicioni could see this confirmed in an article published in Italy the day after the meeting.⁶¹ It reported that the Federal Secretary had met with the directors of the Istituto di Cultura Fascista, of the local Dante Alighieri Society Committee and of the Istituto Fascista dell'Africa Italiana, to coordinate the cultural and propaganda activities. The Federal Secretary was said to have called for a more practical and active propaganda amongst the working-class masses, even in the furthest building-sites, be it through lectures, libraries or the lively reporting of national and international events. Furthermore, he emphasized the need to organize appropriate cultural activities in Addis Ababa on festive days. There is no mention of pooling resources for the Dante Alighieri library, though it is referred to as being the only one in Addis Ababa and recently inaugurated.

Whether the cultural bodies in Addis Ababa indeed helped to establish the importance of the Dante Alighieri library or not, the result was meagre. At the end of March 1938, the local Committee of the Dante had sixty-two members and Pietrosi complained of there being a lot of mobility in the population of Addis Ababa, making it hard to count on long-term members.⁶² By the end of 1938, if the budget overview is to be believed, the number of ordinary members had risen to a hundred and 205 student members had been enrolled, presumably mostly school pupils.⁶³ On 31 December 1939 Pietrosi requested new membership cards for 1940: one hundred for ordinary members, forty for school teachers and 550 for students.⁶⁴

The costs involved in this not yet flourishing Committee were cause for concern on the part of Felicioni. Having seen and approved the Committee's financial report of 1937, Felicioni complained to Pietrosi about the elevated expenses involved in the employment of a librarian (three-thousand-six-hundred lire), the printing matter for the library and the various events. If these weren't reduced, Felicioni could no longer guarantee that the Central Council

⁶⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92.

⁶¹ 'Attività di enti culturali nell'Impero' in: *Il Mattino*, Naples, 11 March 1938, to be found in the AS-SDA.

⁶² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni 31 March 1938.

⁶³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 13 April 1939.

⁶⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, printed form completed by Pietrosi and sent to the central office in Rome on 31 December 1939, prot. 30.

would be able to compensate the Committee's deficit. He therefore admonished Pietrosi to bear in mind that the key activity of his Dante Committee for the coming year would remain the library and that this should be run in such a way that the income generated by the membership and the book-lending fees would cover all the normal expenses. The Central Council was only prepared to invest in the extra expenses, such as the buying of books and shelves. Felicioni also encouraged Pietrosi to try to obtain additional funding from the local government or major institutions. Nevertheless, for 1938 the Council had granted the Addis Ababa Committee a sum of one thousand lire.⁶⁵ Free and disinterested involvement of Dante members in the running of the library as suggested by Felicioni was according to Pietrosi quite impossible in Addis Ababa, where everyone was working hard on the rise of this new city. If he was able to find someone prepared to be the librarian for three hundred lire a month, it was only thanks to the fact that the man in question was one of the primary school teachers working under Pietrosi's supervision. Attempts to receive financial support from the Governor of Addis Ababa had so far been in vain.⁶⁶ When Pietrosi went to Italy on leave in July 1938 and came to see Felicioni in Rome, this matter must have been further discussed.⁶⁷ However, we have no report of that conversation.

Whatever may have been discussed, great confidence remained in what the Dante Alighieri Society could achieve in Addis Ababa. During an official audience in January 1939, Pietrosi discussed the future of the Dante library with the Governor. If Pietrosi is to be believed, the Governor intended to have a large library and office built for the Dante Committee in the 'city of studies' ("città degli studi") that was included in the new urban plan of the imperial capital. This urban plan ("piano regolatore") would remove the old city centre, deemed of no historical value. In its place would come a functional and ordered space - something which the Abyssinians were judged to be incapable of creating - in which the supremacy of the Italians would be expressed and the 'natives' segregated. Like the EUR, the 'new Rome' planned outside the Italian capital to host a world fair in 1942, the urban plan for Addis Ababa was all about asserting the 'new Italy' through visual self-representation and by putting it on par with other colonizing nations.⁶⁸

The new Casa della Dante was expected to be a richly designed and expensive building that would certainly cost more than a million lire. Pietrosi seems to suggest that these were the Viceroy's wishes but it's more likely that these were his own. He himself showed the Viceroy the plan of the projected

⁶⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 2 April 1938.

⁶⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 8 May 1938.

⁶⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 21 June 1938.

⁶⁸ For a fascinating comparison between the urban planning of Addis Ababa and EUR '42, see: Mia Fuller, 'Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR '42'in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 2 (April 1996) 397-418.

library; a building of considerable dimensions (forty by sixty metres) that included a central hall (of ten square metres) and six reading rooms divided by subject matter. It would be located on the main square of the “città degli studi” and would be worthy of the Dante’s lordly reputation (“degnà delle tradizioni di signorilità”). Without prior consent from Felicioni, Pietrosi had guaranteed at this meeting that the Dante would contribute two hundred thousand lire to the construction of the building. Thereafter, far from showing any doubt regarding the financial commitment he had made, Pietrosi asked Felicioni to thank the Viceroy in writing for the interest he had shown in the Dante’s initiative to build the biggest library of the Italian Empire.⁶⁹

Felicioni followed up Pietrosi’s advice to thank the Viceroy, but was also clear in voicing his concern.⁷⁰ Although the projected building seemed to him indeed in style with Dante Alighieri’s significance in the new Italian Empire, the cost of over a million lire was problematic. As appears from this letter, the plans were discussed face-to-face between Felicioni and Pietrosi during the latter’s visit to Rome back in July or August 1938. Now, rather bluntly, Felicioni wrote to Pietrosi that over the past months the Central Council of the Dante had been forced to take on a number of weighty financial obligations to face the urgent needs of some Committees abroad, and that the situation had in the meantime changed considerably. The two hundred thousand lire that Pietrosi had guaranteed as a contribution to the building project on behalf of the Dante Alighieri Society, even if only a fifth of the total construction cost were still a sacrifice that the Central Council could no longer afford to make. It could not be difficult for the Government of Italian East Africa to find those two hundred thousand lire elsewhere, whereas the Dante preferred to concentrate its resources on providing books for the library, making sure it could be generous in this matter instead.

Strangely, no evidence remains of any further correspondence on the building plans. Any discord that may have been caused by Felicioni curbing Pietrosi’s ambitious ideas for a new Dante building, may have been placated by the Central Council’s decision at the beginning of 1939 to award a diploma (“diploma di benemerenzà”) and a bronze medal to Pietrosi in recognition of his fruitful activity for the Committee of Addis Ababa in 1938.⁷¹ It is important to note that Felicioni hereby wrote that the Dante Council hoped this would encourage Pietrosi to continue his propaganda for their “glorious Society” (“per il nostro glorioso Sodalizio”), without referring to this as also being propaganda for the Fascist regime or Italy’s empire. This I believe is a significant detail, showing that even for a Fascist sympathizer as Felicioni was, the prime interest was to promote the position of the Dante Alighieri Society.

⁶⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 12 January 1939, prot. 2.

⁷⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 February 1939.

⁷¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 7 February 1939.

Rumours regarding neglect

The necessity to distinguish between the different interests involved, becomes even more evident when the following is revealed. In November 1939, Angelo Manaresi, President of the Dante Committee in Bologna, enquired about the Severino Ferrari library.⁷² He wrote to Felicioni on headed paper of the Chamber of the Fasci and of Corporations (Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni), that replaced the Chamber of Deputies in January 1939. This gives us reason to believe that Manaresi was a member of the said Chamber. Manaresi's letter concerned the Severino Ferrari library – in Manaresi's description grown to the size of twelve hundred volumes – that had been sent to the Dante Committee of Addis Ababa. As explained by Manaresi, Stella Cillario, the heiress who had donated the books, happened to be the aunt of the Commissario di Governo of Addis Ababa, Franco Roversi. She had not long ago been able to visit her nephew in Addis Ababa and had stayed there for a while. Without saying explicitly that she had relayed the rumour, Manaresi observed that it appeared to be the case that the Severino Ferrari library – a donation that was meant to form the core of this greatest library of the Empire that the Dante Society had planned – was left abandoned and considered totally useless by the local fiduciary of the Dante, Pietrosi. It was not even sure whether all the books had arrived and were in good condition. Manaresi had heard that it was being said that Pietrosi was not at all interested in the Dante Alighieri Society and that he didn't hesitate to communicate his indifference in the presence of others. For this reason, Manaresi claimed, the Dante Society in Addis Ababa practically didn't exist and remained unknown. His solution was to ask Felicioni to at least make sure that the library was sent to the Fascist Federation and to put someone who was genuinely engaged in charge of the local Committee. Realising that he was possibly intruding in a delicate matter, Manaresi closed his letter with his apologies for writing on a subject that was in fact remote to him and with his hope that Felicioni would see this as an expression of his affection Manaresi felt for the Dante Society and for him personally.

Felicioni's reply to Manaresi, dated 29 November 1939, gives a different impression of what he thought the Dante Committee could achieve in Abyssinia than what he wrote in his correspondence with Pietrosi.⁷³ In the letter to Manaresi, Felicioni appears to confess that the Central Office had long given up its initial ambitions regarding Addis Ababa. Felicioni thanked Manaresi for his warning and wrote that he was not at all affected by what Manaresi had informed him about, maintaining that the Dante Office was well aware of the situation of the Committee of Addis Ababa. He admitted that the head office of

⁷² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Angelo Manaresi (Bologna) to Felicioni (Rome), 22 November 1939.

⁷³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, RISERVATA, Felicioni (Rome) to Angelo Manaresi (Bologna), 29 November 1939.

the Dante Alighieri Society had originally envisioned a wide-ranging plan for the Dante in Addis Ababa, i.e. a *Casa della Dante* and a library that would mark the Dante's position in the capital of the new empire of Italian East Africa. However, while the Dante Society sought the means and ways of realising such a project, other institutions more directly involved with the spreading of Fascist culture and colonial propaganda within the empire had ensured that the question of cultural policy in the empire was given a different orientation.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Felicioni confessed that the Central Council had hoped to receive more help on the ground from the local representatives of the Italian government, especially in resolving the problem of accommodation for the Dante offices, in Addis Ababa and in other cities. This lack of support had slowly created a situation whereby the Dante Alighieri Society would have had to make considerable investments for a project that was not being sufficiently appreciated. Such investments were out of reach, according to Felicioni, now that the existing Committees abroad and the traditional tasks of the Society were demanding exponentially more resources each year. Having drawn this conclusion, Felicioni had then decided to maintain the Addis Ababa Committee within more modest margins, so that it could operate alongside the Istituto di Cultura Fascista and the Istituto dell'Africa Italiana. The focus for the Dante there would be on the library that would be further expanded as soon as the Central Council had some more funds available to do so. Although Felicioni wrote to Manaresi as if all this were a settled matter, he did find it necessary to add that he would write to Pietrosi immediately to ask how he could best proceed along those lines. In conclusion, he assured Manaresi that the conjoined efforts of the Central Council, of the Committee of Bologna, that through its connection with Stella Cillario had provided the Severino Ferrari library, and of other Committees, would not be in vain.

We do not know what Felicioni subsequently wrote to Pietrosi on 6 December 1939, but the result was a positive-sounding end-of-year report from Addis Ababa.⁷⁵ The library now consisted of 2837 volumes, excluding magazines and pamphlets of little value and most probably including the Severino Ferrari collection. A total of 539 books had been lent by 149 readers, which included students. Sixty of these readers had made use of the reading room. From these figures, Pietrosi drew the optimistic conclusion that the library was regularly being used and that it was beginning to become one of the major cultural centres of Addis Ababa. Meanwhile, the Italian Government had given the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana the task of constructing a large building at the centre of the Città degli Studi, which would also house the Dante Committee's library. Pietrosi warned Felicioni that more books were needed to

⁷⁴ “[...] altri Enti, certo più direttamente impegnati nella diffusione della cultura fascista e nella propaganda coloniale entro i confini dell’Impero, fecero orientare il complessivo problema culturale nell’Impero diversamente” (ibidem).

⁷⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 31 December 1939, Prot. 29.

manifest the importance of their library at the moment of its transfer to the new building. Presumably the actual size of the library's collection would serve as leverage for claiming a bigger portion of space in the building.

However, it was not all good news. Due to a shortage of funds, Pietrosi saw himself obliged to reduce the librarian's remuneration to two thousand lire per year.⁷⁶ For the time being, he had been able to cover the Committee's expenses with the first transfer of money that the Dante Alighieri Society's head office had made. For the following year though, he demanded a contribution of at least three thousand lire, without which the library would not function properly. Despite the questions raised around Pietrosi's genuine commitment to the cause, there is evidence that the head office agreed to concede him an extraordinary contribution of three thousand lire for 1940.⁷⁷

Competition in view

The next obstacle appeared in the form of a proposal by the firm Principato to set up a circulating library in Italian East Africa, a business for which it wished to claim exclusive rights. As the President of the Dante Alighieri Committee of Addis Ababa, Pietrosi felt obliged to protest against this initiative. He pointed out in a letter to the department of Civil Affairs of the General Government of Italian East Africa that it would be unfair to grant such a firm exclusive rights when already a number of libraries existed and the head office of the Dante Alighieri Society had provided for a library in Addis Ababa. Secondly, he argued, the Dante had absolute priority in Addis Ababa's cultural field. Furthermore, the Society had already invested 100,000 lire in the construction of a new building that the Viceroy had agreed to locate in the rising Città degli Studi. Being such an important motor of culture and *italianità*, the Dante could not be obstructed in its activity by a private enterprise of mere commercial interest. Besides, there were already some good bookshops in the most important centres of the empire. Moreover, Pietrosi was eager to stress, the Dante Alighieri Society already had a long experience running such library services abroad and may as well take on such a task for Italian East Africa. Pietrosi proposed a system whereby subscribers would pay thirty lire (ten lire as irretrievable deposit and twenty as guarantee for the maximum of two books that could be borrowed) and the Government would finance the tax fees, postage and transportation. This would be a cheaper option for both the subscribers and the government. Books on loan would not be sent to the single subscriber but to the Reale Residente or the Comandante di Presidio, two times

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, note for the Administrative Office, 15 January 1940, signed by the Vice President, giving order to transfer the sum.

per month. Sufficient books would be sent so that in the fifteen days between the new arrivals the books could circulate among the local subscribers.⁷⁸

A copy of this letter to the General Government was sent by Pietrosi to Felicioni, accompanied by a letter in which he explained that the urgency of the matter had made him decide it was better to act immediately without prior consent from Rome. He asked Felicioni to give him response and possible suggestions on how to deal with the issue. Thereafter, the President of the Dante simply agreed with the course of action already taken.⁷⁹

This small incident is an example of the business interests that could also play a part in the daily management of the Dante Alighieri Society, both at central level and in Local Committees. Enormous state investments were being made in Abyssinia to develop its infrastructure and to create a modern economy. These projects were managed by state umbrella organizations like the Hotel Real Estate Office for East Africa, or parastatal agencies such as the Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP). It seems highly likely that an “intense traffic in government contracts and concessions” took place throughout the empire.⁸⁰ No doubt Pietrosi and Felicioni, each in his own way, tried to seize the opportunities that colonized Abyssinia could offer the Dante Alighieri Society and – not to forget – themselves.

Great expectations: ideal and real power

It has been observed that Mussolini during the course of his regime had to give in to the “bourgeois power centres” that he had once hoped to surpass, despite his Fascist ideology, his intention to apply corporative theory and his desire to establish new leadership through totalitarian rule. The power and economic interests of these ‘bourgeois’ groups were simply too deeply rooted and politically advantageous for Mussolini to do without.⁸¹ This view on Italy’s Fascist regime may well be applied to the way in which the Dante functioned in the colonial context. In Abyssinia, the rivalling position between the Dante Alighieri Society and various Fascist organizations, and the way in which relations with the Italian Fascist authorities required constant negotiation, is one that puts into question the claim that Dante was ‘fascistized’, without clearly specifying what is meant by it.⁸² To say that the organization had become an instrument of the regime to spread political propaganda, is to reduce

⁷⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, copy of Pietrosi’s letter to the General Government of the AOI, Direzione Superiore degli Affari Civili, 16 February 1940.

⁷⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 24 February 1940.

⁸⁰ De Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies’, 133-134.

⁸¹ De Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies’, 145.

⁸² Compare with Claudia Baldoli: “By the early 1930s, the Dante Alighieri Society appeared completely fascistized, and served thereafter as an instrument in the hands of the *Fasci* Abroad” (*Exporting fascism*, 15).

the complex interplay of economic, political, ideological and emotional interests to the convenient top-down model that is generally made of authoritarian regimes. It remains to be further investigated what promises had been done to Felicioni by officials of the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana or by Mussolini's entourage. What is so far clear is that high-fledged ideals were proclaimed to set in motion the creation of a Dante Committee and a library in Addis Ababa. This initiative, realistically speaking, was far from the minds of the many Italians pouring into Abyssinia to grab their chance, either on construction sites, in mining fields, in the army or administering the infrastructure of a country constantly at war with Abyssinian rebels. Also, the local representatives of the National Fascist Party, like those of other Fascist organizations, were competing with the Dante to be the main cultural institution in the Italian colonies. Precarious negotiations were needed for everyone to get a piece of the pie.

The way in which the Dante envisioned Italian East Africa did not entirely match Mussolini's vision of the Empire. However, the Dante did help to feed the idea of a better civilisation being brought to the areas that Italy conquered. Although it is not named in any of the primary sources, upon reading about the Dante Alighieri Society's plans for the biggest library in Italian East Africa it is hard not to think of the Ancient Library of Alexandria (Egypt), founded in the third century B.C. and for a number of centuries the largest library in the world. The Library of Alexandria was said by Plutarch to have been burnt down by Caesar during the Alexandrian War of 48 B.C., though other possible explanations for its destruction exist as well. What is clear is that through time this Alexandrian 'temple of knowlegde' gained mythic importance and is until today iconic for any grand library.⁸³ Tragically, thinking in superlatives was not enough to realize Felicioni's dream.

The British Council in Egypt: using the word instead of the sword

Whereas the Dante Alighieri Society tried hard to have its activities in Abyssinia officially recognized as part of Italy's effort to establish itself as a new colonial power, the origins of the British Council were directly connected to the British government's need to reinforce the grip it had on its existing colonial empire. In Egypt, the British came to realize that influence on the local population could be increased by actively engaging in the promotion of British culture. This would have to counter the pervasiveness of French culture and – if not halted – that of Italian culture as well. Although formally the British had granted Egypt a greater degree of self-rule through the treaties of 1922 and 1936, they had no intention of losing control over the vital route to India: the

⁸³ Roger S. Bagnall, 'Alexandria: Library of Dreams' in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 146, No. 4 (December 2002) 348-362.

Suez Canal. But nationalist uprisings in Egypt were brewing, making it harder for the British Council to devise ways of presenting British culture that would not here and there raise animosity or suspicion among the Egyptians. What was the connection between British concern over Egypt and the creation of the British Council? And how did the Council set up its activities in Egypt?

Alarm about Latin rivalry

A report prepared by Kenneth Johnstone at the News Department of the Foreign Office on 10 October 1936 gives a fascinating glance into the British Council's tentative strategy for the Mediterranean.⁸⁴ The report dealt with British cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean region, an area viewed by Johnstone as a historically important meeting-place between cultures that had contributed to the formation of Western civilization. Johnstone regretted that the rise of the national state had now turned national culture into a political weapon. National culture "like every other asset of the nation" had been "pressed into political service, and cultural propaganda, exceeding its legitimate and useful function of interpreting one people to another", had "become a weapon of aggression".⁸⁵ According to Johnstone this development was particularly noticeable around the Mediterranean and hence he intended to show how other governments' cultural propaganda was affecting British interests in the area as well as how Britain could counter this in an effective and inexpensive way. In his view, the main area of cultural conflict was the eastern half of the Mediterranean. We must bear in mind the strategic importance of this area for the British control of its Empire: the Suez Canal was the vital passage to India and since the Navy started replacing the use of coal for its ships by oil, access to the oil fields in the Middle East was also deemed vital. Hence the control over the Mediterranean waters that the British Navy wished to exert from the islands of Malta and Cyprus.

Johnstone was unequivocal in his treatment of France's cultural policy. France was:

[...] the original home of cultural propaganda, both in its better and in its worse aspects, and of all modern nations the French have come nearest to realising the national propagandist's dream of intellectual domination.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ TNA, BW 2/90, 'British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean' by K.R. Johnstone, 10 October 1936, Cultural Report No. 63: correspondence and papers (1919-1935) (old file name: British Cultural Propaganda Abroad).

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.

This verdict was no doubt sharpened by the Johnstone's assumption that the French were still the most successful in promoting their national culture abroad. He attributed this success to their long experience, their "national genius" which was "pre-eminently lucid and accessible" and their belief in the power of culture, especially their own. The French government's spending in this field was noted as evidence of the importance attached to such policy. According to Johnstone's sources for 1936 a budgetary estimate of 82.5 million francs was reserved for foreign cultural policy, of which over two thirds was allocated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The budget went to all kinds of initiatives, from French schools outside France to archaeological missions, from tourist propaganda to subventions to French Chambers of Commerce abroad. Even the Alliance Française, a private association, was being supported by considerable public financing, be it from the Government or from the city of Paris, to Johnstone's knowledge totalling around 380 thousand francs a year. The Alliance was a solidly established and widespread organization. Johnstone had no latest figures but was informed that at the end 1933 the Alliance's assets were just under 5 million francs and during 1935 more than 6 million francs were distributed to its sections abroad.⁸⁷ However, as of late the supremacy of public and private French cultural politics abroad was seriously under threat. In the Mediterranean, these French initiatives were increasingly aimed at defending the French cultural influence against the Italian and German rivalling aspirations.

The German cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean was "not as troublesome" as the Italian, Johnstone commented, but he warned that it could become so. German commercial and cultural penetration, two aspects that Johnstone automatically coupled, was especially noticeable in Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, but altogether it engaged in "more discreet and more thorough" methods than those adopted by the Italians. Though Johnstone had no information on how much the German government invested in culture abroad, he thought it could not be much less than what the French and Italian governments currently spent per year, estimated to be around 1,000,000 British pounds.⁸⁸

The Italian approach to cultural policy abroad was according to Johnstone "generally based on the French example, though pursued with a lavishness which occasionally defeats its aim by causing satiety and even ridicule."⁸⁹ In his analysis Johnstone identified the establishment of the Fascist regime as the reason for the large scale upon which the Italian cultural propaganda took place, criticizing it as "the most ostentatious, and consequently the most expensive, scale possible."⁹⁰ Johnstone's sources

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 3-4.

indicated that the propaganda estimates for 1935-6 made for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Education amounted to 69,229,130 lire (something over 1,000,000 British pounds) and included expenditure on Italian colonies in foreign countries (11,265,000 lire). Herein Johnstone made a distinction between the justified "feeling that Italy has a magnificent cultural tradition as worthy of publicity as that of any other country" and the Mussolini government's "appreciation of the political advertisement value of cultural activity abroad."⁹¹ The main principle of that menacing political advertisement was recognised by Johnstone as being the Roman imperial past and the current revival of this empire. Furthermore the Italian cultural propaganda was characterized by its efforts to disparage the already existing imperial power of the British. Johnstone also mentioned that a modest government grant went to the Dante Alighieri Society but made no further observations about the function of this Society.

Great Britain was instead described by Johnstone as "an unwilling participant in the cultural struggle."⁹² The British, or interchangeably the English, were conscious of their national tradition and outlook but saw no need to define or explain it to foreigners. Considering as a failure all foreign imitations of the British parliamentary or public school system - to mention these two institutions seems typical - the British were convinced that their culture "does not travel". Johnstone ascribed this attitude to "mental indolence and pride". Just as the First World War had compelled the British to use propaganda, so too the widespread use of cultural propaganda by foreign governments now forced the British government to use this tool as well.⁹³ However, this was done on what Johnstone judged "a very modest scale". He subsequently pointed out that the year in which he was writing (1936) the total sum the treasury assigned to the British Council, the Travel Association and British schools in Egypt would altogether not exceed 30,000 British pounds. Even if the Treasury assumed that a considerable amount of private funding would be given too and although Johnstone did not wish to suggest "that His Majesty's Government should contribute to the same extravagant extent as the three foreign Governments in question", he thought a slightly higher government grant would more adequately convey the political importance of cultural propaganda. There was little doubt that Italy was striving for "cultural ascendancy" in Egypt, Palestine and Malta, just as the Germans were in Greece. Johnstone urged the British government to counteract in order to protect its interests in the Mediterranean.⁹⁴

Johnstone's concern about the British lagging behind in the battle for cultural ascendancy around the Mediterranean echoes similar worries

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 4.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 5.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 6.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, 6-7.

expressed in 1933 that had in fact served as an argument in favour of creating the British Council. Since 1882 the British had occupied Egypt. Constant revolts led by the Egyptian nationalist movement had forced the British to declare the country independent in 1922, though British control and the ensuing political unrest continued. It is against this background that on 9 November 1933 the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Percy Loraine, communicated in a despatch to the Foreign Office his grave concern about Britain's diminishing cultural influence in Egypt. Loraine's paper has been described as "one of the most important and famous papers in the history of cultural relations."⁹⁵ However, the significance of this paper for the Council's strategy has not been elucidated and the role Italian rivalry in Egypt played in mobilizing the British cultural intervention is frequently understated. The fact that almost two years after it was written, in March 1935, an extract of Loraine's despatch was sent to all staff members of the British Council proves the documents key significance.⁹⁶

In this despatch on 'British cultural propaganda in Egypt', Loraine made clear that the role of English education and culture in Egypt, as well as in the rest of the Arabic world and in Persia, needed serious re-examination if the British political and economic future was not to be "irremediably compromised" in these regions. The British cultural initiatives in Egypt were private, sporadic, insufficiently financed and co-ordinated, and not adapted to local circumstances, whereas the "Latin cultural enterprise" was supported by "Latin" governments and rich Catholic congregations. This "Latin" cultural ascendancy in Egypt, in particular that of the French, persisted while forty years of British rule had hardly done anything to change the situation. Loraine wrote about the ever-growing French expenditure on schools, as well as on cinema, radio and press. But he remarked that the number of Egyptian children going to Italian schools was increasing at a higher rate. Loraine pointed out that since 1922 the number of French private schools in Egypt had grown and that between 1928 and 1931 French expenditure for culture in the Orient (meaning Turkey, Palestine, Persia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Egypt) had doubled.⁹⁷ Italy too had increased spending in that area. All the while, the number of Egyptian children going to British schools was decreasing. The French made use of other instruments as well, such as cinema, radio and the press agency Havas, which now rivalled with Reuters.

⁹⁵ TNA, FO 371/17034, J 2790/2790/16, Sir Percy Loraine to Sir John Simon, 9 November 1933.

⁹⁶ TNA, BW 29/3, FO 141/624/4, Extract from Loraine's despatch, Charles Bridge to Rex Leeper, 5 March 1935.

⁹⁷ The French in 1928 had spent 47,800 pounds and three years later 94,100 pounds. In Cairo France subsidised seven secular, two Jewish, and thirty-one religious schools and in Alexandria one secular, three Jewish and sixteen religious schools. Furthermore, the French School of Archaeology in Cairo received 3,988 pounds in 1928 and as much as 21,572 pounds in 1931 (*ibidem*).

Influence on the education of the local inhabitants of the Near and Middle East was considered by Loraine to be of such vital importance for the British Empire, that he recommended establishing some form of direction in London to be put in charge of cultural policy abroad. He suggested “[...] that it might be more advantageous if the direction were rested in some unofficial body, similar to the Dante Alighieri Society, with, however, Government representation on the Managing Board.”⁹⁸ His further recommendations included measures such as encouraging Egyptian students to study at British universities and adapting entry requirements for them; making sure that British lecturers remained prevalent in the Egyptian university faculties of Medicine and Sciences and that as many as possible were retained in the Humanities, considered the “nursery of amateur politicians”⁹⁹; supporting a Boy Scouts movement in Egypt, adapted to be more like the Balilla, the Italian Fascist youth organization. Loraine also thought that if, like their French colleagues, British teachers would not lose years of service by working abroad and would be certain to find a job upon return to their home-country, there would also be less difficulty securing staff in Egypt. The whole idea of having so far missed an opportunity is encapsulated in Loraine’s quotation from a study on the conflict between French and English educational philosophies in Egypt: “In Egypt, England had an army, France an idea. England had an educational control – France a clear educational philosophy. Because the French did have such an organized philosophy and the English did not, the French pen has proved mightier than the English sword.”¹⁰⁰ The battle was not yet over though. Egypt was one of the foremost regions that the British Council would concentrate on.¹⁰¹

The danger of a “Latin cultural supremacy” in Egypt was felt also in the preferences of the Egyptian King Fuad I. In 1925 Fuad I, known to have a “pro-Latin attitude”, had ensured that French professors were appointed at the University of Cairo. Thus the entire faculty of humanities had become “Latinised”.¹⁰² This went against the agreement that all Chairs would go to Egyptians or British men, except if the area of studies required knowledge of a language that could not be found among either of them. Where no suitable British professor could be found, the Chair would have to be filled by someone from a smaller, non-Latin country, preferably one of the northern countries. Lord Lloyd, then High Commissioner in Egypt, reported this to Foreign Minister Austen Chamberlain, complaining that four years of persistent effort

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Russell Galt, *The Conflict of French and English Educational Philosophies in Egypt* (Cairo: American University at Cairo, 1933).

¹⁰¹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Rex Leeper to Miles Lampson, High Commissioner for Egypt and the Sudan, 28 February 1935.

¹⁰² TNA, FO 141/624/7, Copy of a letter by Lord Lloyd to Austen Chamberlain, 15 March 1929.

had been needed “to undo part of the evil done by this Latinisation of the University” and he still saw this achievement threatened by some of the appointments the King wanted to make.¹⁰³ It could therefore not have been reassuring for the British that Fuad I had spent part of his youth in Italy. Warm ties between the two Mediterranean countries had been established when during the Risorgimento a number of Italian radicals fled from persecution to Egypt. There they supported the plight of the Egyptian nationalists, including the Khedive, in their opposition to British and French colonial rule.¹⁰⁴ In 1879, following the outbreak of revolution in Egypt, Fuad’s father Ismail Pasha was deposed as Khedive and sought refuge in Italy, where he was welcomed by King Victor Emmanuel III. The years Ismail Pasha and his family spent in the company of the House of Savoy, Italy’s royal family, nurtured a long-lasting friendship between the two lineages. Fuad grew up in Naples and went to the military academy in Turin. He spoke Italian fluently.

Looming in the background during the 1930s was also Italy’s military presence in Libya, in Somalia and as of October 1935 in Abyssinia. In June 1935 the British Foreign Office was informed about two Italians that had recently been touring across Egypt to spread the rumour that the Italian government would invade Abyssinia. Their message was accompanied by the threat that if the British tried to obstruct the attack Malta would be destroyed within twenty-four hours. What would then still remain of the British Mediterranean fleet would be forced to flee.¹⁰⁵ The British Government had so far tried to remain on good terms with Mussolini, not wanting to drive him into a coalition with Nazi Germany. However, from the early 1930s onwards Mussolini’s imperial ambitions began to take on a concrete form, posing a threat to the stability of the British Empire. There were numerous instances of Italian anti-British propaganda being spread in Northern Africa and in the Middle East by means of the local press and of Arab-language emissions from Radio Bari.¹⁰⁶ One must bear in mind at this point that the British Broadcasting Corporation only started transmitting programmes in Arabic as of January 1938.¹⁰⁷ Besides having a technical advantage in communications, the Italians had a growing national air force: the Regia Aeronautica. Though the British Army and Navy generally did not consider Italy a serious military threat, the Italian aircraft industry’s pumping out heavy bombers alarmed some among them. With air bases in Libya, Sicily and the Dodecanese Islands, it was not unthinkable that the Aeronautica would try to control the entire Mediterranean. Once Abyssinia was

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ Saho Matsumoto-Best, ‘British and Italian Imperial Rivalry in the Mediterranean, 1912-1914: The Case of Egypt’ in: *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 18 (2007) 297-314, 299.

¹⁰⁵ Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935-1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Oxon and New York: Frank Cass, 2005) 27-37.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, FO 141/659/6 and FO/659/47. The latter file includes correspondence regarding secret R.A.F. attempts to jam Radio Bari by emitting interfering waves.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, FO 141/645/1, News Department file of 1937 on transmissions in Arabic.

conquered, air attacks on the outer regions of Egypt were equally not to be ruled out. All the while Britain was only just recovering from the material losses it had suffered during the First World War.¹⁰⁸

In July 1936, several months before Johnstone wrote his report on cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean, he received a letter from Frank K. Roberts, Private Secretary to the High Commissioner in Egypt, based in Cairo.¹⁰⁹ Roberts argued for the creation of a British Institute in Cairo, warning that it would have to compete in outward appeal with other foreign institutes as in Egypt “more than in most countries, appearance counts for a great deal.”¹¹⁰ He suggested giving this institute a social function, to make it a club for Egyptians with a British education. There could be some evening classes of English but by no means was it to arouse the already strong suspicions of the Egyptians, for example by serving too blatantly as an instrumental information centre. Roberts, declaring himself aware of the fact that Johnstone must be weary of comparisons with Italy, emphatically added:

[...] we cannot help but remarking that the total grants allocated by the British Council not only for Egypt but for the whole world, i.e. some 24,000 British pounds, are smaller than the sums spent by Italy on propaganda in Egypt alone.

He admitted that exact figures were hard to calculate. Italian cultural propaganda included a wide array of activities such as financial assistance to the press, the remission of school fees and free trips to Italy for Italian children. What Roberts described as “the main Italian propaganda agency in Cairo” – referring most probably to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura – spent about 9,000 British pounds a year on its ordinary running expenses. The Fascio, or local branch of the Italian National Fascist Party, had yearly administrative costs of nearly 2,000 British pounds and the Italian schools in Egypt were being subsidized. Was Roberts exaggerating the Italian expenditure to put pressure on the Foreign Office and thereby help the British Council obtain a higher grant? Seeing he had no direct interest in the Council, this does not seem likely.

Given the concerns that the Foreign Office was dealing with, it is not surprising that Johnstone in his report ‘British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean’ of October 1936 advocated strong measures in Egypt to counter the active cultural propaganda of the French and especially that of the upcoming Italians. Since the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 almost nothing

¹⁰⁸ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, ad passim; Claudia Baldoli, ‘The ‘Northern Dominator’ and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy’s ‘Cultural War’ in Malta’ in: *Modern Italy* 13, 1 (2008) 5-20, 8.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, Private Secretary to the High Commissioner in Egypt, Miles Lampson, to Kenneth Johnstone, News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

had been done “to make Great Britain the chief educational and cultural, as well as the chief political, force in that country”, with the exception of Lord Lloyd’s period as High Commissioner (1925-1929).¹¹¹

French culture remained the dominant foreign culture in Egypt. This by means of Francophile associations and institutions headed by the Institut de France in Cairo, through French professors and teachers at Egyptian universities and schools as well as at independent French schools, both secular and religious. However, the French influence was being: “[...] vigorously contested by Italian cultural propaganda and less vigorously, though in certain spheres effectively by our own [the British cultural propaganda].”¹¹² The Italian government was spending “immense sums” on building and running Italian schools in the main Egyptian cities and non-Italian children were being allowed to receive education there virtually free of charge. Through lack of British schools there was the risk that even children of the Maltese and Cypriot communities in Egypt, whose primary allegiance was now still towards Britain, would eventually go to French “or even more competing Italian schools.”¹¹³ Johnstone believed that the suspicion which the “blatant manner” and the “obvious political intention” of Italian cultural propaganda aroused, to some extent defeated its purpose. Nevertheless, if allowed to continue over time he expected the Italians to gain a considerable cultural grip on the rising generation of Egyptians. This could then be translated into political advantage. There is in fact some ambivalence in Johnstone’s dismissal of Italian cultural politics being too extravagant, as if the British could continue to claim superiority by looking down on the methods used even if the threat was undeniable.

As for the adult Egyptians, Britain had nothing comparable to an Alliance Française or Dante Alighieri Society with which to spread British ways of thinking, nor an Institut de France or an Istituto di Cultura. The budget that the British Council had at its disposal to set up a British Institute was derisory if it was to compete with the Latin counterparts. Rather exasperated, Johnstone concluded that without the Treasury’s willingness to secure adequate grants - more specifically, a capital grant of about 30,000 British pounds and 3,000 British pounds per year - it was hopeless to even consider setting up an institute. There is an echo of Roberts’ remark from his letter of 30 July 1936 in Johnstone’s final warning that with a total budget which equalled what Italy spent annually on Egypt alone, the British Council could not create an institute that would stand up to the competition and that anything on a lesser scale would generate “contemptuous comparison” and fail.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Johnstone, ‘British Cultural Propaganda’, 7.

¹¹² Johnstone, ‘British Cultural Propaganda’, 8.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 10.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 11.

Keeping teachers and children British

What actually happened on the ground in Egypt? How did the British Council go about tackling the competition British culture encountered in a country so crucial to British imperial interests? In early 1935 the British Council was still waiting for the 5,000 British pounds it was expecting from the Treasury. How much it would spend on Egypt would depend on how many private funds it was able to raise. At this point 5,000 British pounds was also the full sum it intended to spend on Egypt.¹¹⁵ Charles Bridge, the Secretary General of the Council, had a clear idea of what the priorities would have to be. He proposed to improve the position of English teachers at Egyptian schools as well as the education of British subjects, including the Maltese and the Cypriots, throughout the Near and Middle East. More than Leeper it seems, Bridge attached importance to the creation of a British Institute in Cairo, an idea that had already been put forward in the speech that the Prince of Wales had held at the official launch of the British Council.¹¹⁶

By granting the Egyptians a limited independence in 1922, the British had managed to keep some degree of control over the country, primarily in terms of guarding free access to the Suez Canal. After the new arrangements in Egypt a large part of the British army was to retreat from the country as also the majority of the civil servants, leaving it to the Egyptians to take over a greater part of the country's administration. The Chief Inspector of English Language at the Egyptian Ministry of Education, M.F. Simpson, at first hoped to convince the Egyptian Ministry of Education to increase the time devoted at Egyptian schools to English language teaching, at the expense of French. Instead, the Ministry chose to reserve an equal amount of time for the two languages. What Simpson did obtain was a salary rise for English schoolmasters and schoolmistresses as of 1937.¹¹⁷ By then in government schools only the teachers of English in class 4 and 5 were still obliged to be British and so were the lecturers of English at university. Although the Egyptian parliament tried to push through an entire Egyptianisation of the teaching staff, for as long as this could be held back some two hundred British teachers would remain necessary in Egyptian schools. Furthermore, there were still forty British teachers of English employed in classes below 4 and 5, despite the growing number of Egyptians who could replace them. The British Ambassador at the time stoically observed that in the long run the British teachers of English would be

¹¹⁵ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Letter from Leeper to Sir Miles Lampson in Cairo, 28 February 1935.

¹¹⁶ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Charles Bridge to Rex Leeper, 7 September 1935.

¹¹⁷ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson to Sir John Simon, 31 May 1935; M.F. Simpson, Chief Inspector English Language at the Egyptian Ministry of Education to the British Ambassador in Cairo, 31 December 1936.

the only British civil servants paid by the Egyptian government.¹¹⁸ In the spring of 1938 the British could indeed still count on a notable presence of British teaching staff, the Association of British Schoolmasters in Egypt still consisting of a hundred and eighty men and seventy women.¹¹⁹ In absolute terms this was a tiny part of the country's total teaching staff, but if just looking at the main cities this was a potentially influential group.

One of the ways in which the Council sought to strengthen British cultural influence in Egypt was by ensuring that enough British teachers would continue to work in Egypt. To make this career-path more attractive, the position of British teachers needed to be improved by arranging two important benefits: the guarantee that teachers could find a post upon their return to Britain and the continuation of service years even while teaching abroad so that these would equally contribute to building up a pension.¹²⁰ As the Secretary General of the Council reported from Cairo in 1938, British teachers could only work until the age of sixty and thereafter received no pension from the Egyptian government. Their salaries were not sufficiently high for them to be able to save a pension for themselves or to send their own children to school in England, which – one presumes – would enable them to rely on income-earning offspring to take care of them.¹²¹ By comparison, the French teachers that taught at the Egyptian government schools were seconded by the French state's department of public education. Upon return in France, they were reintegrated in the French civil service and where possible given a teaching post. Though the Egyptian government provided their salaries, the French government continued to build up opportunities for promotion within the French civil service and by paying a regular contribution to the French Treasury these French teachers abroad could maintain their pension rights and receive their pension in France once they reached the eligible age.¹²²

The British Council's educational concerns did not restrict themselves to the British teachers but also included the children. For British children in Egypt there were a number of schools to choose from; English schools subsidized by the British government, such as the Victoria College founded in Alexandria in 1902, and missionary schools, either Protestant or Roman

¹¹⁸ Copy Lampson to Eden, 13 August 1937, BW 29/3.

¹¹⁹ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹²⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson's accompanying letter to the Preliminary Report of the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, 20 April 1935; TNA, BW 29/4, Charles Bridge, Cairo, to A.J.S. White, London, 12 March 1938.

¹²¹ TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy from Bridge from Embassy in Cairo to A.J.S. White, British Council in London, 12 March 1938.

¹²² TNA, BW 29/4, Note concernant la situation des professeurs français détachés des cadres de la Métropole, Bureau de l'inspection de l'Enseignement Français, 15 December 1938.

Catholic.¹²³ Yet there was concern about British children in Egypt losing their British identity. For example, it was pointed out in an educational report of 1938 that about half of the children at the English School in Cairo were from families of policemen who had been discharged from the British Army around 1919. Many of these men had married Maltese, Italian or Greek women, which meant that their children grew up speaking French, Italian or Greek. As was reported to the Council's Chairman in 1938, it was feared that if these children went to Italian, French or Greek schools they would lose every chance of knowing the English language, and would "cease to be British in anything but name."¹²⁴ Although not explicitly referred to as such, this problem was also seen as one of racial degeneration. The children of these marriages were reported as having little intelligence and it was thought that their development was impaired by language problems. Hence, they were actually not suitable for a normal school but the English School in Cairo did what it could. Experience had shown that a free lunch had more effect than the teaching, at least in the first two years. Nevertheless, the result of this concern was that English soldiers were strongly discouraged from marriage with "Levantine women".¹²⁵ Lord Lloyd, the Chairman of the British Council, believed it was crucial that every British child of United Kingdom parents, however poor, should have English education and that it was one of the first concerns of the Council in Egypt to keep English schools running.¹²⁶

As High Commissioner of Egypt, Lord Lloyd had already played an important part in setting up a British Boys' School in Alexandria for British and other non-Egyptian children of lower classes as well as the English school in Cairo for British pupils. This attention to schools was part of Lloyd's general effort to hold back the influence of "Latin culture" at schools and at university. His successors, High Commissioner Percy Loraine and the Ambassador Miles Lampson, continued this strategy by improving the position of British staff at the Cairo University and by helping to set up the British Girls' school in Alexandria. Lampson also created a permanent Educational Advisory Committee to assist the Embassy in this policy area.¹²⁷

However, there was another category of children the Council was obliged to focus on: the Cypriot and especially the many Maltese children living

¹²³ Sahar Hamouda and Colin Clement ed., *Victoria College: a history revealed*, 2nd print (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

¹²⁴ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd.

¹²⁵ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd; James Whidden, 'Expatriates in cosmopolitan Egypt: 1864-1956' in: Robert Bickers ed., *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 45-73, 57-59.

¹²⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting in the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee, 11 May 1939.

¹²⁷ TNA, BW 29/3, Foreign Office Memorandum circulated to members of the Near East Sub-Committee, 12 November 1935.

in Egypt, both regarded as British subjects. In his period as High Commissioner, Lloyd had promoted the foundation of a school in Suez aimed at educating the numerous Maltese children residing there.¹²⁸ In 1935 Lampson pointed out that there was concern about the generally poor Maltese community. The few Maltese who could afford it, sent their children to the British school in Cairo or to the one in Alexandria. Most of the children though were educated at French or Italian schools. Lampson therefore recommended subsidizing some of the British Catholic educational institutes, which were most likely to appeal to the generally Roman Catholic Maltese anyway.¹²⁹ In his accompanying letter, Lampson referred to Percy Loraine's despatch of 9 November 1933 with which the examination of the matter began, saying he agreed with Loraine's advice to put British education and culture in a position to compete on more even terms with the Latin rival. For this same purpose more English schools needed to be opened in other provinces as well.¹³⁰ Though the British Council did embark in subsidies for Maltese schools such as that in Port Said, in part also sponsored by the Suez Canal Company, on the whole its budget was too small to provide British education for all the Maltese. Bridge in 1938 reported a presence of thirteen thousand Maltese in Alexandria alone.¹³¹

During a visit to Egypt in April 1937, Lord Lloyd told Lampson that if not enough funds could be collected to set up a secular Maltese school in Cairo to exist alongside the English School he was prepared to make use of the existing Catholic schools and even to assist them financially. On his return to London, Lloyd would consult the Foreign Office about their experience with the activities run by the "African Fathers", British Roman Catholic missionaries, elsewhere on the continent. Caution was required when engaging with Roman Catholic organizations. Lloyd himself had warned for the danger of these schools falling in anti-British hands. Lampson saw need for suspicion confirmed by what was being indicated in some recent police reports; namely, that the Italian priests in Egypt and even the Apostolic Delegate himself were now co-operating with the Italian Legation and other Italian organizations suspected of fostering Fascist propaganda. At the Roman Catholic cathedral in the Egyptian town of Damanhur, a loudspeaker attracted passers-by with Radio Bari broadcasts in Arabic. This seemed to Lampson in contradiction with the assurance given by the Apostolic Delegate a year before that the Vatican's

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson to the British Council, 20 April 1935, accompanying the printed preliminary report of the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, by Sir M. Lampson, 25 March 1935.

¹³⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford, sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935.

¹³¹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, The Report of the High Commissioner's Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, 1935[?]; TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy of Bridge's letter No. 9 from Alexandria to [?], 15 March 1938; Bridge to the Council, letter no. 10 from Alexandria, 15 March 1938.

policy was to keep clear of international politics. Amidst this caution, Lampson still thought there was no sign that British or Irish priests were affected by the propaganda and "if Italian priests put their country first, I see no reason to suppose that English and Irish priests will be less patriotic." Administratively though the Vatican was represented in Egypt by Italians. Indirectly, through the advice given by an English priest running a Catholic Presbytery in Kerac to a member of the Council's Near East Committee during his journey in Transjordan, Lampson had been given to understand that the difficulty was that English priests did not like serving under Italian bishops or apostolic vicars and that the British Legation at the Vatican ought to press for English clergymen to be appointed for offices such as the Catholic bishopric of Wan in Southern-Sudan or the apostolic vicar in Jerusalem.¹³²

The caution, it seems, led to a lengthy process. More than a year later the idea of setting up a British school for the Maltese in Alexandria under the auspices of a British member of a Roman Catholic teaching Order, either the African Fathers or the Marist Brothers in Egypt, was still in the phase of consideration and negotiation.¹³³ Existing schools run by British Catholic missionaries were willing to take on more Maltese students but only if extra funding was provided.¹³⁴ In the meantime, the competition with the Italians was increasingly felt. Because of the great success that the Casa d'Italia in Port Said was having among Maltese youngsters, it became desirable to set up a Maltese Community Centre.¹³⁵ The British Council attached importance to safeguarding the secular character of the British school in Alexandria to be run by Roman Catholic fathers. To this end, Lloyd had the idea of retaining the ownership of the school premises and equipment in the hands of the Council and of employing the Fathers as teachers, while making sure that the governing body was also predominantly secular. The desirability of keeping these schools secular was presumably also connected to the fear of them being potentially influenced by the Fascist tendencies that Italian Roman Catholic prelates in Africa risked spreading. There would still be room for religious lessons. This is shown by the opinion that if Cypriots were to be accepted as pupils, they should then have Greek-Orthodox religious lessons.¹³⁶

In the case of the Maltese and the Cypriot children, there appears to have been a practical reason to offer them education besides the desire to keep

¹³² TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Lampson to Leeper, 27 April 1937, 29/3; Copy of Miles Lampson from the British Embassy in Cairo to Leeper, 30 April 1937.

¹³³ TNA, BW 29/3, Message from the British Council to the Ambassador in Cairo, 2 June 1938.

¹³⁴ TNA, BW 2/233, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹³⁵ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹³⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of the Meeting of H.M. Ambassador's Advisory Committee on Education of 20 November 1939, chair Sir Robert Greg, secretary B.A.B. Burrows, Dundas also invited.

them “British”. This emerges from the fact that Cypriot children were less of a concern for the Council, even if most of them went to Greek or to French schools, the reason being that they were deemed more intelligent and with better future prospects than the Maltese. These Cypriots would by themselves see that learning English would give them the advantage of working for British organizations such as the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI).¹³⁷ Considering the education to be offered to Maltese boys in Alexandria, the Advisory Committee on Education connected to the British Embassy recommended aiming for a moderate technical training sufficient to make them useful for the British Services in Egypt.¹³⁸

New effort to reach out to Egyptian children as well

During his visit to Egypt in March 1938, Bridge wrote to the Council in London that even as the worst riots – referring to the nationalist riots against British domination – had raged there had been no incidents between Egyptian pupils and English teachers.¹³⁹ This might have confirmed to him and others connected to the Council that teachers had a surprisingly good diplomatic function. Apart from aiming to keep within the fold the British subjects such as the Maltese and the Cypriots, the British Council was also aiming to increase the appeal of British education for Egyptian pupils. In 1935, the English School in Cairo had more than four hundred pupils, of British and other nationalities, but none of them Egyptian. Unlike in Alexandria, where the Victoria College offered tuition to both British and Egyptian boys, not many British children whose parents lived in Cairo were sent to England for education.¹⁴⁰ The English School in Cairo was founded during the Great War, with the guarantee – thanks to a bursary system – that all children of British parents could receive education here.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ TNA, BW 29/4, John Lupton, St George’s English College in Shoubra, to Dundas, 19 July 1939.

¹³⁸ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of the Meeting of H.M. Ambassador’s Advisory Committee on Education of 20 November 1939, chair Sir Robert Greg, secretary B.A.B. Burrows, Dundas also invited. The dependence of the Maltese-Cypriot community on the metropolitan British was evident in the 1950s, when many of the Maltese and Cypriots left Egypt as a consequence of the small number of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ British still there (Whidden, ‘Expatriates in cosmopolitan Egypt: 1864-1956’, 71).

¹³⁹ TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy from Bridge from Embassy in Cairo to A.J.S. White, British Council in London, 12 March 1938.

¹⁴⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt, written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford, sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935.

¹⁴¹ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

In 1935 there was talk of a plan to build a new edifice for the English school in Cairo. A considerable gift had reduced the costs of purchase of the grounds (from 4,700 British pounds to 1,950 British pounds) and the British Council had given 1,000 British pounds.¹⁴² The existing school was in an old and crowded area of the city, providing insufficient space for extra amenities. Among the aspired additions was a school chapel, certainly deemed quite essential by Lloyd given the importance he attached to giving school children at least some kind of religious instruction.¹⁴³ The new school was to be built in Modern Heliopolis, a luxurious new suburb of Cairo created in 1907. Because most of the inhabitants of this area were wealthy Egyptians, at first glance this plan would seem to fit in a more active British educational policy towards the Egyptian children. Instead, the main incentive appears to have been a financial one. The school wished to attract Egyptian children as well as pupils from other countries in the Middle East (mentioning Palestine, Syria, Cyprus and Sudan) because contrary to the children of British subjects they had to pay the full tuition fee.¹⁴⁴ Yet even then the newly housed English School in Cairo would only allow up to twenty percent of its pupils to be Egyptian so as to maintain the English character of the school. Very soon, the school had six hundred pupils of which only three percent were Egyptian.¹⁴⁵ It was then already running into a growing deficit despite cuts on salaries. Yet there was reluctance to attract too many Egyptian pupils and a tendency to prioritize the accessibility for British pupils, to maintain the undiluted British character of the school.¹⁴⁶

A British Institute or an Anglo-Egyptian Society

From the point of view of the Foreign Office, the creation of a British Institute was felt to be the most important instrument for British cultural propaganda,

¹⁴² Ibidem.

¹⁴³ Ibidem; TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹⁴⁴ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of 'Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt', written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford and sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935. Since 1931 the English School in Cairo was making loss partly because of the rise in the number of pupils not paying the full fee. (In 1937/38 30% of the pupils were paying 60% of the fees, and 25% less than 5%.) Forty percent of the pupils were children of British Army Personnel or civilians working for the Army. This meant that the planned moving of troops to Ismaïlia, a move probably connected to the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the retreat of British troops to control the Suez only, would bring serious financial problems. Although the colony of British subjects in Cairo was on the whole growing, it was also becoming poorer. (TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.)

¹⁴⁵ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁴⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting at the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee for Education, 11 May 1939.

more important than other projects such as education of Maltese children in Egypt.¹⁴⁷ In the crucial despatch that Percy Loraine had written in 1933, he had suggested creating an Anglo-Egyptian Society. In July 1936, Lloyd asked the High Commissioner Lampson to plan what he instead called a British Institute in Cairo on the basis of the considerable sum of 1000 British pounds per year.¹⁴⁸ Attempts to create an Anglo-Egyptian society had so far failed because of the strong divisions among Egyptians. Therefore the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt that Lampson had created preferred the option of a purely British society rather like the Alliance Française or the British Institute in Florence. The Embassy in Cairo had however indicated that the primary importance of the institute would be to keep Egyptians with a British education in touch with the British way of thinking. The Foreign Office agreed that this was politically of highest importance. Too much of the Egyptian sympathy for Britain risked going lost with all the efforts other countries put in gaining cultural influence in Egypt. To properly function as a social and cultural meeting place for British and anglophile Egyptians, the British Institute in Cairo would ideally have a library with English daily, weekly and monthly reviews and would organize lectures of high quality in cooperation with the university.¹⁴⁹ Courses, mainly evening classes of English for business, could also be offered. In serving as an information point about Britain, the Institute would however have to be careful given the suspicion that could easily arise among Egyptians.¹⁵⁰ On 15 October 1936 a meeting took place between Rex Leeper, Kenneth Johnstone, Alexander Keown-Boyd of the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, Henry Hopkinson of the Council's Near East Committee and William Houston-Boswall of the Foreign Office's Egyptian Department on the proposal for a British Institute in Cairo. Though the importance of teaching English remained at the forefront, the creation of some form of club was considered possibly even more important. As Hopkinson is said to have commented, this seemed "the most crying necessity so far as our propaganda among Egyptians was concerned".¹⁵¹ Although it is nowhere explicitly referred to in the Council correspondence, the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty that year had been accompanied by much protest from Egyptian nationalists and all British involved must have felt the precariousness of the situation.

¹⁴⁷ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, the Residency in Cairo, to K. R. Johnstone, The News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹⁴⁸ TNA, BW 29/1, Extract from Minutes of the 18th meeting of the Executive Committee, 14 July 1936.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, The Report of the High Commissioner's Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt; TNA, BW 29/1, Leeper to Bridge, 15 October 1936.

¹⁵⁰ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, the Residency in Cairo, to K. R. Johnstone, The News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹⁵¹ TNA, BW 29/1, Leeper to Bridge, 15 October 1936.

Whether for financial or tactical reasons, it was eventually decided that instead of setting up an Institute the Council would establish what would be called an Anglo-Egyptian Union. Probably the Council and the Foreign Office feared that an organization bearing the name "British Institute" would too easily raise suspicion among the Egyptians, whereas "Anglo-Egyptian Union" suggested more reciprocity. The Council put 2,000 British pounds at the disposal of the new Anglo-Egyptian Union launched in February 1937 and the Egyptian Government made a one-time donation of 3,000 British pounds, plus around 1,100 British pounds were collected from member subscriptions. None of the funding was earmarked for a specific purpose with the exception of 700 British pounds intended for books that the Council itself would purchase, seeing it had special price arrangements with publishers. Part of the initial grant was spent on furnishing the library, the reading room and the social accommodation. In the summer of 1937 the Anglo-Egyptian Union had three hundred and seventy members, a figure that was still largely insufficient for the membership fee to cover the costs of running the club.¹⁵²

There is scarce evidence left of the activities organized by the Anglo-Egyptian Union. We do know what lectures were organized for the year 1937/38: The Spirit of English Poetry; English Drama and Theatre; The English Film; Teamwork, its inevitability and weakness; The Place of Parliament in British History; Youth Movements; T.E. Lawrence; The Application of the English Public School Method in Egypt; and a course of six lectures giving a review of English Government of the Commonwealth.¹⁵³ There is no reason to assume that in other years a less broad range of topics was dealt with. British institutions such as the Parliament and the educational system were key to the British Council's concept of 'Britishness' and as for the arts the emphasis was usually on British literature.

British Evening Institutes

The shift in focus in the cultural policy from British subjects to Egyptians also occurred in adult education. There were meant to be evening classes of English for Egyptians in Cairo, both a course in elementary English as a University extension course that would lead to matriculation. The English School did not have the capacity to support this. Instead the Council sought a location to hire.

¹⁵² TNA, BW 29/3, Carbon copy of letter from F.K. Roberts, private secretary, British Embassy Cairo, to the secretary of the Anglo-Egyptian Union in Cairo, 15 July 1937; Ibidem, Carbon copy of W.H. Wilson and M. Sharif, Honorary Secretaries of the Council of the Anglo-Egyptian Union, to Frank Roberts, date unclear, 1937.

¹⁵³ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by the Sub-Committee of the Anglo-Egyptian Union appointed to organize cultural activities, for the meeting of the Advisory Committee on Education and Culture on 14 January 1938.

It also considered combining it with a Library of Information, or with the Anglo-Egyptian Union to form a British Institute after all.¹⁵⁴ Eventually it set up what became known as Evening Institutes for English language courses.

In September 1938 C.A.F. Dundas was chosen to become the Council's Representative in the Near East. As the Council got involved in the funding of English schools in Egypt, it became more important to have someone on the ground who could supervise the schools' use of Council grants. Because Dundas was until then Principal of the Government Matriculation School in Baghdad, he had the right qualifications to oversee the Council's activities in the Egypt as well as in Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan, Turkey, Cyprus and Sudan. Furthermore, he seemed a suitable person to organize the evening classes in Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁵⁵ There is evidence that Dundas was also capable of acting with the degree of tact that the function required. The English schools in Egypt received the Council's grants with some reserve, for they were not particularly keen on the control from outside that they entailed. A solution was found by making Dundas ex-officio Governor of the schools that the Council invested most in: the English School in Cairo, the British Boys' School in Alexandria, the British School in Alexandria and that at Port Said. Reporting on this arrangement, Croom-Johnson significantly commented:

Mr Dundas has obviously made a very firm position for himself in Egypt; he appears liked and respected by everybody and at no time did I hear the smallest criticism of his attitude or activities either from British or Egyptians; surely rather a triumph in Egypt. [underlining TvK]

This is evidence of the suspicion or animosity with which Council or Foreign Office representatives were often received, not only by the Egyptians but also by the local British community.¹⁵⁶

By May 1939 Dundas' other triumph would be apparent: that the Evening Institutes for English language classes in Cairo and Alexandria were a remarkable success. The Institute in Cairo was being doubled and the one in Alexandria also expanded. There were twice as many evening classes at the British schools in Port Said and Suez, and plans were being made for the opening of new Institutes in Asyut, Tanta, Zagazig and Mansoura. Initially the British Ambassador in Egypt had shown little confidence in this instrument and had seen no need to create other Institutes elsewhere in Egypt. In the spring of

¹⁵⁴ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April 1938.

¹⁵⁵ TNA, BW 29/4, K.B. Johnstone, British Council, to Charles Bateman, British Embassy in Alexandria, 5 September 1938.

¹⁵⁶ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939; Roger Bowen, *"Many Histories Deep" The Personal Landscapes Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (Cranbury, London & Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1995) 42-43.

1939 he changed his mind, in part because of the increased propaganda activity of Germany and Italy (especially in the Delta area, where there was in fact little demand for English) and in part because they were touching the class of Egyptians that was not directly affected by any other British activity. He now recommended that the rising demand should be met as far as possible, plus new institutes to be created, and soon directors for the provincial institutes were being selected and sent out to Egypt. The relatively high expenses held neither the Council nor the Ambassador back. The Institute in Cairo had more than 600 pupils and mainly Egyptian teachers. The classes could be no larger than fifteen pupils, the experience being that Egyptians expected more personal guidance and otherwise left the course. This made the Institute a lot more expensive than similar Institutes in Athens, Malta and Bucharest, where classes comprised about twenty-five pupils. An intriguing detail in the plans laid out in May 1939 is that Croom-Johnson noted that there were already several private Coptic schools in Asyut, a city with a high concentration of Copts, admitting that to teach English there “might seem like carrying coals to Newcastle”.

Calling for the use of new media

Unquestionably the British Council in London was well aware of the anti-British radio propaganda that was being spread throughout the Middle East, including Egypt, by the Italian broadcasting station Radio Bari.¹⁵⁷ In November 1935 there were some successful attempts by the British military to jam Radio Bari using damp waves, a technique that made it possible to neutralize airwaves, even though this was in contravention with international agreements. A similar strategy was used by the Italians to disturb British radio channels whenever news bulletins were broadcast.¹⁵⁸ The British reticence to broadcast in any other language than English was due to the suspicion of propaganda attached to broadcasts in local languages, precisely because of the obvious propagandistic use by other countries, as had been stated in a strictly confidential memorandum of the British Broadcasting Corporation.¹⁵⁹ While the British Council knew that other European countries were actively using long-distance short-wave radio broadcasts in other languages than their own to reach foreign populations, it was only in January 1938 the British Broadcasting Corporation started broadcasting news bulletins in Arabic from the British

¹⁵⁷ TNA, BW 2/222, *Memorandum. Proposals for expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the financial year 1937/38* [printed matter], K.R. Johnstone, Foreign Office, 11 May 1937.

¹⁵⁸ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Letter from Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief R.A.F. Middle East to the Chancery at the British Residency in Cairo, 16 November 1935. This method was in contravention with the Madrid Convention of 1932.

¹⁵⁹ TNA, FO 141/613/8, Strictly confidential, Memorandum The Use of Languages, other than English, in the Empire Broadcasting Service, BBC, June 1936.

radio station at Daventry. Even then the British Council's task of promoting British life and thought in Egypt was not made easier. The BBC transmissions in Arabic were considered dull and "too Egyptian", and the more cultivated Egyptians were critical about the kind of music that was chosen.¹⁶⁰ A far more enthusiastic response was obtained with the broadcasting of English lessons in Arabic.¹⁶¹

The insufficiently used potential of film was another matter of concern for the British Council operations in Egypt. According to British observers the Egyptians loved theatre, cinema and amusement, and so far the American films were dominating the market.¹⁶² Film screenings were occasionally organized by the Anglo-Egyptian Union but according to the report made by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson after a tour of the Near East in the spring of 1939, the most important problem was that there were not enough high-quality British documentary films. Dundas could only sparsely deal with films and it was felt that to undertake large-scale activity in Egypt would require appointing a special film officer who could co-ordinate the supply of films to the Egyptian Ministry of Education, the British schools, the Anglo-Egyptian Union and the Evening Institutes, as well as the commercial distribution to cinema theatres. There was already a suitable candidate in mind: Mr F. H. Taylor, currently in Palestine, who for seven years had been the representative in Egypt of the Gaumont-British film theatre chain. He had offered his services to the Council and the Embassy was positive about him. Croom Johnson's suggestion was to provide for the budget for 1940/41 to have a salary and costs for him taken into account.¹⁶³ More films with Arabic subtitles were needed as well as newsreels. It was suggested that British films could be sent around with touring "tea vans". The companies concerned were to be approached to see whether they would be willing to do this.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938; TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd.

¹⁶¹ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁶² TNA, BW 29/3, 4 July 1935, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt, written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford and sent to Lord Riverdale.

¹⁶³ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁶⁴ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting in the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee, 11 May 1939.

Conclusion

The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and the subsequent efforts by the British government to halt Italian expansion through the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations, brought to the fore a conflict of interest between Italy and Britain. Even if the Foreign Office was in favour of maintaining good relations with Mussolini to isolate Hitler, frictions between the British and the Italians had been simmering for a number of years. If we take the example of Egypt, it is clear that since the early 1930s Italy's active cultural policy was being perceived as a threat to British control over the country, all the more so in combination with the anti-British propaganda being sent from Radio Bari. The activities of the British Council in Egypt can be identified as part of the Foreign Office's effort to improve cultural relations with the local Egyptian elite and thereby maintain its economic interests in the Nile valley and its strategic military strongholds along the Suez Canal. In a fresh attempt to save what could be saved of British rule over Egypt, the Council offered an alternative instrument with which to secure power and counter foreign interference.

By contrast, the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society in the capital of newly proclaimed Italian East Africa, Addis Ababa, seemed out of synchrony with the plans made by Italian government officials sent there. The Dante was obviously trying to claim a central role for itself in the colonial project. But whereas cultural propaganda had in this period gained importance on the Italian peninsula, as part Mussolini's engineering of consensus, in Addis Ababa culture was for a long time not one of the regime's pressing concerns. Establishing military domination of the areas beyond Addis Ababa remained problematic and in the city itself an entire urban infrastructure needed to be built. As far as there were plans for cultural initiatives, these did not match those of the Dante that rested on old tools for the diffusion of Italian language and culture. Creating a large library was not what would effectively shape the minds of the many Italian fortune-seekers arriving in Abyssinia to help build a thriving colony, nor was it likely to impress the local Abyssinian population, or so the Fascist organizations and authorities thought. It is typical that when in 1936 the Federal Secretary of the National Fascist Party announced via the news agency Stefani the plan to build a Fascist Hospitality Centre (*Casa dell'Ospitalità Fascista*), the emphasis was on modern technologies: the new modes of communication that could reach the masses, with as highlight the radio tower with film-projector to project films in the open air.¹⁶⁵

During the Dante's cruises across the Mediterranean described in Chapter Three, the participants were repeatedly inspired by visions of a

¹⁶⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Attilio Crepas, 'Un altro implicito riconoscimento dell'impero etiopico' in: *Il Nuovo Giornale* (Florence, 7 August 1936).

renewed Roman Empire, wherein their reinforced 'Mediterranean consciousness' would enable them to once more spiritually guide the region. Speeches at the Dante's Annual Congresses and articles in the internal review, the *Pagine della Dante*, referred to Italy's primacy in the Mediterranean area and to the export of Italian 'genius', of which there was an age-old abundance. But in practice the Dante was not fully equipped for the imperial project. Its plans for Addis Ababa demonstrate that the Dante had not translated its ideals into activities for a mass audience and also seemed unaware of the raw brutality that was part and parcel of Italy's difficult conquest of Abyssinia, one of the few 'native' people never to be entirely colonized. The British Council, while by the 1930s eager to show that it had inherited an Athenian, democratic concept of empire rather than the aggressive Roman model, displayed a more strategic approach to its mission in Egypt. In part, this was the benefit of the Council's close ties with the Foreign Office. But it also had Mussolini's more innovative propaganda institutions, the Third Reich's propaganda techniques and – not to forget – the success of the American film industry to counter and learn from. Britain of course had a long experience as a colonial ruler to draw lessons from. However, the creation of the Council indicates the recognition that changing times called for a difference in approach. Now it was not just a double-edged sword that was needed, one that subjected its people while allegedly protecting their rights as citizens of the Empire. Sharpened words and images were required to defend the universal values thought to be contained in 'Britishness'.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the lead up to the 1930s, cultural foreign policy became increasingly an indispensable instrument in international politics. This is illustrated by the history of the Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Alliance Française and the Società Dante Alighieri, private organizations that at the end of the nineteenth century began to promote national language and culture abroad. All three organizations, regardless of the kind of government in their home country, would witness an increased activity by the state in the domain of foreign cultural promotion. This was already noticeable after the turn of the century but became particularly pronounced after the First World War.

In Great Britain, where an Empire that still covered almost a third of the world could amply feed self-confidence, society felt no need for an organization that would spread British culture. To have the British government implement a foreign cultural policy was even more out of question. Culture was regarded as a matter of private initiative and any cultural promotion by the state risked degenerating into the wartime propaganda that British public opinion had abhorred during and after the Great War. Nevertheless, in the 1930s a public servant of the Foreign Office News Department, Reginald Leeper, was able to gather enough political support for the creation of the non-governmental British Council. A combination of factors made this possible: nationalist uprisings in countries like Egypt and India that were weakening Britain's grip on its Empire; the negative effects that active German and Italian cultural promotion was having on British international trade interests; the threat to European peace and British freedom and democracy posed by Fascism, by National Socialism and, further afield, by the international aspirations of the Bolsheviks.

A key area for Britain's control over its Empire was the Mediterranean Sea, which gave access to the easiest sea route to India, namely the Suez Canal. This was also the area that Italy saw as its natural sphere of influence and of territorial expansion: its *Mare Nostrum*. Its ancient orientation towards the Mediterranean became pivotal in the 1930s, when the cult of *romanità* and the revival of the Augustan Empire were made central to Mussolini's ever more totalitarian regime. Around the Mediterranean Sea and its key outlets, British interests inevitably clashed with Italian ambitions. As the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in Malta, Abyssinia and Egypt showed, promoting Italian and British culture respectively in this area was a major instrument in the ongoing power struggle between the two imperial nations.

Since its creation, the Dante Alighieri Society had co-operated with Affari Esteri but it was an independent, private organization. Once Mussolini came to power, the Dante had to reposition itself. Especially in the 1930s, it had to strike a balance between maintaining its autonomy and winning sufficient approval from Mussolini. At first, it was in the regime's interest to associate itself with a venerable organization connected to the Risorgimento. In the 1930s, however, when several government institutions for Fascist propaganda functioned alongside organizations for cultural promotion, the threat of being absorbed by the state increased. As demonstrated by the cases of Malta and Egypt, the British Council worked under the aegis of the Foreign Office and was never as independent as the Dante had been in origin and remained for a long time. In the Mediterranean, the Council's policy was aligned to the Foreign Office's priorities. The Dante also attuned its activities abroad to the policy of Affari Esteri but, as the example of Abyssinia shows, it had to make sure it maintained its own relevance within the changeable political landscape that developed under the Duce's 'divide and rule' dictatorship.

In part to comply with the requirements of the new regime and in part through a natural generational change in its membership, the Dante tried to take up the striving for modernity that Fascism had as its rallying cry. The Dante was hampered by its nineteenth-century heritage, which was in some way a guarantor of the organization's respectability but also an argument for those who claimed that the organization was now becoming obsolete. In the strategy used to promote Italian culture abroad, the Dante's central management was guided by a concept of nationalism that remained literary and abstract, and the key figures were slow to pick up the new tools of mass communication. The British Council, while presenting Britain as the beacon of European tradition, was seemingly far more aware of the need to make use of modern media and emphatically positioned itself in the changing world of global communication, which would require ever more cultural understanding between peoples. Although the Council complained that British film production was lagging behind and that more had to be produced for promotional ends, in its awareness of the need for more visual communication it was comparable with the propaganda institutions of Mussolini's regime, and more precisely with the Istituti di Cultura.

Another burden of the past that weighed on the Dante, closely related to the issue of diffusion via modern tools, was the definition of Italianness promoted by the organization. Italianness remained a highly abstract concept, with undefined qualities that were attributed to the Italian spirit or genius. The cult of the *romanità* possibly enabled the naming of a few values but generally, even under the Mussolini regime, the Dante did not promote a specific model of society. In contrast, the British Council, which could rely on a far older history of national and imperial unity, spread a well-defined, coherent image of Britishness that was centred on institutions. These institutions - such as the

system of justice, parliamentary democracy, education and sports - were all regarded as embodiments of fundamental British values, primarily freedom, a sense of duty, pragmatism and fair play.

The different chapters of this thesis have led to yet more conclusions. The first chapter demonstrates that looking at the histories of the Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Alliance Française, the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in relation to each other provides a better insight into the broader European context in which these organizations were created. By the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed (1919), it had become clear that democratization and new communication technology had made influencing public opinion an important factor in international relations. What comes to the fore in this chapter are the different ways in which private and public bodies in four major European countries approached cultural promotion abroad. In Germany and Italy, two relatively young nations, the concern about co-nationals remaining outside the established national borders added a distinctive feature to their cultural foreign policy. Initially, private bodies saw it as their task to protect the national identity of these co-nationals abroad. With the establishment of totalitarian governments in Germany and Italy, which recognized cultural propaganda as an essential instrument of expansionist foreign policy, the private bodies were gradually suppressed or forced to adapt. In France, it was again a private body – the Alliance Française – that began promoting French culture abroad, and in the first two decades of the twentieth century governmental bodies were created to develop an official foreign cultural policy. But from the start the Alliance's mission had been of a more universal nature: the promotion of the Enlightenment values that were epitomized in the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*. Given the timing of its creation, the Alliance seems to have wanted to compensate for France's weakening political and military power by bolstering its cultural influence, thereby reinforcing colonial control. Yet here too, it was in the interwar period, as the significance of cultural influence for foreign policy grew, that French governmental efforts in this field increased. The history of the British Council, a late-comer on the scene, shows that its creation was a response to the British realization of the ever greater importance of cultural foreign policy. Although the Council presented itself as being a private body, it was closely linked to the Foreign Office and its policy adhered to the proprieties set by British foreign policy. The Council denied being in any way involved in cultural propaganda, speaking instead of cultural promotion or of providing information for a better international understanding. Rather like the Alliance Française, it saw itself as having a universal mission to defend democracy and Western civilization.

In the second chapter, the evidence shows that the relationship between the Dante and Mussolini's dictatorial rule was problematic, but so too was the position of the Council with respect to the democratic government in Britain.

This chapter deals with two very different state structures and Mussolini's dictatorial regime did not permit the openness of Britain's political debate in Parliament. However, after closely analysing Dante's attempts to maintain independence, it becomes clear that 'fascistization' was not as straight-forward a process as is usually suggested. Negotiation needed to take place between established power bases and new ones, and between the accumulated assets of an older generation and the will to succeed of a new generation, for they depended on each other. The latter generational dynamics are less apparent in the Council than in the Dante, due also to the Council's recent creation. However, a relatively young visionary like Leeper fought his way through much resistance in Parliament to advance the idea that it was time for Britain to engage in cultural promotion, and that, due to its noble cause, this could be distinguished from the aggressive and evil propaganda of authoritarian states. Individuals matter. This can be said for both organizations: the driving force of Paolo Boselli within the Dante and that of Leeper together with Lord Lloyd for the Council, are a testimony to this basic factor in human interaction.

As illustrated in the third chapter, the Council's and the Dante's definitions of national culture were fundamentally different. The paramount components of the *italianità* promoted by the Dante were the national 'soul' and its manifestations through art, music, literature and other expressions of 'genius'. By contrast, the Council's 'Britishness' emphasized the role of institutions. Non-governmental institutions, like the voluntary organizations for mutual help and charity, were also included in this iconography. Furthermore, the Dante was at times proud to underline Italy's modernity but held on to the Dante's old-fashioned methods. In contrast, the Council frequently presented Britain as a country only willing to succumb to novelty if time had shown its practical value, yet it seemed far more aware of the need to use modern means of communication. Ironically, though the Dante hoped to reach out to the poorly educated Italian emigrants abroad as well as to the more cultivated foreigner, its leaders were less aware of the new mass culture than the Council's were. The irony lies in the fact that it was the Council's initial policy to aim at the higher, influential strata of society abroad but it appeared far better prepared to adapt to the requirements of mass communication.

In the fourth chapter the cultural conflict in Malta between British colonial rule and Italy-oriented Maltese nationalists is examined, and this is where the role of the Dante and the Council in international relations is particularly evident. In this context, the Council's projection of Britain as the defender of freedom and democracy is revealed as being particularly hypocritical. In trying to strengthen British cultural influence in Malta, the Council was in effect working to protect Britain's strategic, military interests in the Mediterranean. What made the British position more difficult, given the history of the island as home of the Knights of St John, was the risk of being

perceived as a Protestant threat to the Catholic tradition that most Maltese cherished.

A similar interconnectedness between cultural and religious threat is noticeable in the fifth chapter, where British concern about the 'Latinisation' of Egypt went hand in hand with the suspicions about Roman Catholic religious orders. The establishment of the Council was in great part a response to the British realization of its weakening control over Egypt. Contrary to what has so far been suggested in the history of the Council, it was not the waning of trade interests in South America that shaped the Council. A more significant factor was the British experience in the Southern Mediterranean that forced the Foreign Office to recognize cultural influence as having become an essential part of foreign policy. It is no coincidence that the first British Council Representative to be appointed was based in Cairo. Both the Council and the Dante were applying cultural propaganda to the consolidation of imperial power, with the difference that the British Empire was a declining one and the Italian Empire resurgent. However, while full of optimism, the Dante proved to be poorly equipped to meet the needs of the new imperial project.

Further research into the connection with religion would add an important dimension to the emergence of cultural politics so far sketched. The Dante Alighieri, despite being fundamentally a secular organization, could not avoid co-operation with and eventual support for the Roman Catholic Church, even if only to benefit from the worldwide network that the Catholic religious orders maintained. In its rhetoric too, the Dante could not entirely distance itself from the Catholic mind-set most of its members had still grown up with. Britain's church history made the British Council's relationship with religion also problematic but in a different way. In Italy, until 1929 the dominant Church refused to recognize the nation-state, whereas in Britain, the British monarch was the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. This union between Church and State ensured that the monarchy remained Anglican, protecting the core of the British nation from the influence of its Roman Catholic communities, mainly in Ireland and Scotland, as well as the Methodist, Baptist or Pentecostal minorities. Hence the British Council had to be careful about which missionary orders it cooperated with abroad. How did these religious backgrounds affect the definition of national culture promoted abroad? And to what extent were old religious hostilities interwoven in cultural rivalries?

Needless to say, new questions could be raised if instead of analysing the **intentions** of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council the attention were to shift to the **reception** of their cultural promotion. Focussing on this aspect would require extensive interdisciplinary research into the use of foreign culture in the self-definition of local elites. How did foreign cultural promotion influence the choices of the receiving social groups regarding the use of a 'distinguished' language, the education of their children, trade partners

and international sympathies? The use of foreign languages by the upper class of society would in this context be a crucial area of study.

Harold Goad, who was director of the British Institute in Florence from 1922 to 1937, in his later years reflected on the part played in history by the great languages of western civilization. Goad's words show that, after several years of experience with British cultural promotion abroad, he was convinced that a typical relation between a country and its own national language could be identified for different European countries:

For a Frenchman, his language is the palladium of French and European civilization; for the Teuton, High German is the citadel of his Kultur; for the Italian the Tuscan tongue is the chief bond by which many cities and provinces are held together and the symbol of his *italianità* all the world over; but for the easy-going Englishman his tongue is no more than a practical means of making himself understood by other people.¹

The history of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean area during the 1930s demonstrates that it is illusory to consider language as no more than a practical tool. The disinterestedness that Goad attributes to the British in the use of the English language is far from the truth. By the 1930s, the British too were obliged to recognize that promoting their national language and culture abroad, and thereby winning the hearts and minds of foreign peoples, was an essential tool in the maintenance or expansion of international political power. The British Council was more successful than the Dante Alighieri Society in projecting a model of modern society and framing specific values, while cultivating the semblance of 'not wishing to impose'. Altogether, it seems advisable to consider foreign cultural promotion in first instance a wolf in sheep's clothes.

¹ Harold Goad, *Language in History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958) 228.

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AS-SDA	Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri
TNA	The National Archives

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SAMENVATTING

Bij het naderen van de jaren 1930 werd buitenlandse cultuurpolitiek in toenemende mate een onmisbaar instrument in de internationale politiek. Dat valt af te lezen aan de geschiedenis van een drietal particuliere organisaties die eind negentiende eeuw de verbreiding van nationale taal en cultuur buiten de landsgrenzen gingen bevorderen. Dat waren de Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, de Alliance Française en de Società Dante Alighieri. Deze organisaties zouden alle drie te maken krijgen met een steeds sterkere bemoeienis van de staat met buitenlandse cultuurpromotie. Dat in weerwil van het verschillende karakter van de betreffende overheden. Die ontwikkeling viel al na de eeuwwisseling te constateren maar na de Eerste Wereldoorlog trad zij nog duidelijker aan het licht.

In Groot-Brittannië, waar een koloniaal rijk dat nog altijd bijna een derde van de wereld omvatte het zelfvertrouwen rijkelijk kon voeden, had de samenleving geen behoefte aan een organisatie die de Britse cultuur zou verspreiden. Dat de Britse overheid een buitenlandse cultuurpolitiek zou ontplooiën, daarvan was al helemaal geen sprake. Cultuur werd gezien als een zaak van particulier initiatief en iedere vorm van cultuurpromotie door de staat droeg het risico te ontaarden in de oorlogspropaganda die tijdens en vlak na de Eerste Wereldoorlog door de Britse publieke opinie zo verafschuwd was. Niettemin lukte het een ambtenaar van de Foreign Office News Department, Reginald Leeper, om de nodige politieke steun te vinden voor de oprichting van de niet-gouvernementele British Council. Dat was mogelijk dank zij een combinatie van factoren: nationalistische opstanden in landen als India en Egypte die de greep van Groot-Brittannië op haar *Empire* verzwakten; de negatieve effecten van de actieve Duitse en Italiaanse cultuurpromotie op de Britse internationale handelsbelangen; de bedreiging die Fascisme, Nationaal Socialisme en, verder weg, de internationale aspiraties van de Bolsjewieken vormden voor de vrede in Europa en voor de Britse vrijheid en democratie.

Bij de controle van Groot-Brittannië over haar *Empire* werd een sleutelpositie ingenomen door de Middellandse Zee, die toegang gaf tot het Suezkanaal, de snelste weg naar India. Maar door Italië werd de Middellandse Zee beschouwd als het gebied van haar natuurlijke invloedssfeer en territoriale expansie: haar *Mare Nostrum*. Italië's eeuwenoude oriëntatie op de Middellandse Zee werd cruciaal in de jaren 1930, toen de cultus van de *romanità* en de revival van het Augusteïsche Keizerrijk een centrale plaats kregen in het almaar meer totalitaire regime van Mussolini. Rond de Middellandse Zee en haar voornaamste toegangswegen kwamen de Britse belangen onvermijdelijk in botsing met de Italiaanse aspiraties. De activiteiten van de Società Dante Alighieri en de British Council in Malta, Abessinië en Egypte laten zien hoe de

promotie van Italiaanse en Britse cultuur in het Middellandse Zee gebied een belangrijk instrument was in de onophoudelijke machtsstrijd tussen de twee imperia.

Sinds haar oprichting had de Dante Alighieri weliswaar samengewerkt met het Italiaanse Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (Affari Esteri), maar zij was niettemin een onafhankelijke, particuliere organisatie. Toen Mussolini aan de macht kwam moest de Dante haar positie opnieuw overwegen. Vooral in de jaren 1930 moest zij de juiste balans zien te vinden tussen het handhaven van haar autonomie en het verkrijgen van voldoende goedkeuring van de kant van Mussolini. Aanvankelijk had het regime er belang bij om zichzelf te associëren met een dergelijke venerabele organisatie verbonden met het Risorgimento. Maar in de jaren 1930, toen een aantal overheidsorganisaties voor fascistische propaganda een plaats gingen innemen naast de bestaande organisaties voor cultuurpromotie, ontstond een toenemend gevaar om door de staat geabsorbeerd te worden. Zoals de casus Malta en Egypte aantonen, werkte de British Council onder de vleugelen van de Foreign Office en was zij nooit zo onafhankelijk als de Dante in oorsprong geweest was en lange tijd bleef. In het Middellandse Zee gebied bleef het beleid van de Council in lijn met de prioriteiten van de Foreign Office. Ook de Dante bracht haar buitenlandse activiteiten in overeenstemming met het beleid van Affari Esteri, maar zij moest ervoor zorgen dat zij haar eigen relevantie behield binnen het veranderlijke politieke landschap dat zich ontwikkelde tijdens de dictatuur van de Duce en diens 'verdeel en heers' tactiek, zoals het voorbeeld van Abessinië aantoonde.

Deels om te voldoen aan de eisen van het nieuwe regime en deels door een natuurlijke generatiewisseling binnen haar ledenbestand probeerde de Dante het streven naar moderniteit te omarmen dat het Fascisme als slogan hanteerde. De Dante werd gehinderd door haar negentiende eeuwse erfenis, die in zekere zin garant stond voor haar respectabiliteit maar ook koren op de molen was voor degenen die beweerden dat de organisatie inmiddels verouderd was. Bij haar strategie om de kennis van de Italiaanse cultuur in het buitenland te bevorderen, hanteerde het centrale bestuur van de Dante een concept van nationalisme dat literair en abstract bleef. Bovendien waren de leidende figuren traag in het oppakken van de nieuwe middelen van massacommunicatie. De British Council, die Groot-Brittannië weliswaar presenteerde als het baken van de Europese traditie, was zich schijnbaar veel meer bewust van de noodzaak moderne media te hanteren en plaatste zichzelf nadrukkelijk binnen de veranderende wereld van onbegrensde communicatie, die steeds meer begrip vereiste omtrent culturele verschillen. Ofschoon de Council zich erover bekloeg dat de Britse filmproductie achterop raakte en te kennen gaf dat er meer geproduceerd moest worden voor promotionele doeleinden was zij wat betreft haar kijk op de behoefte aan meer visuele communicatie te vergelijken met de propaganda-organisaties van Mussolini's regime, en met name met de Istituti di Cultura.

Een andere last van het verleden op de schouders van de Dante, die nauw samenhang met de kwestie van de verspreiding via moderne middelen, was de definitie van *italianità* die de organisatie uitdroeg. *Italianità* bleef een uiterst abstract concept van onbestemde kwaliteiten toegeschreven aan de Italiaanse geest of 'genius'. De cultus van de *romanità* schiep weliswaar de mogelijkheid tot het benoemen van enkele waarden maar in het algemeen verbreidde de Dante geen specifiek maatschappijmodel, zelfs niet onder het Mussolini-regime. De British Council daarentegen, die kon steunen op een veel oudere geschiedenis van nationale en imperiale eenheid, verbreidde een helder gedefinieerd en coherent imago van *Britishness*, waarin de instituties centraal stonden. Deze instituties – het rechtssysteem, de parlementaire democratie, onderwijs, sportbeoefening – werden allemaal beschouwd als de belichaming van fundamentele Britse waarden, op de eerste plaats vrijheid, plichtsbesef, pragmatisme en *fair play*.

Naast de bovenstaande conclusies, kunnen aan de hand van de diverse hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift bovendien de volgende conclusies getrokken worden. Het eerste hoofdstuk laat zien dat het nader bekijken en onderling vergelijken van de geschiedenis van de Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, de Alliance Française, de Società Dante Alighieri en de British Council een beter inzicht verschaft in de bredere Europese context waarbinnen deze organisaties tot stand kwamen. Tegen de tijd dat het Verdrag van Versailles werd getekend (1919), was het duidelijk geworden dat democratisering en nieuwe communicatietechnologie ertoe hadden geleid dat het beïnvloeden van de buitenlandse publieke opinie een belangrijke factor in de internationale betrekkingen werd. In dit hoofdstuk wordt veel aandacht geschonken aan de verschillende manieren waarop particuliere organisaties en overheidsorganisaties in de toen toonaangevende Europese landen de bevordering van cultuur in het buitenland aanpakten. In Duitsland en Italië, twee relatief jonge naties, werd de buitenlandse cultuurpromotie gekenmerkt door de zorg voor natiegenoten die bij het vaststellen van de staatsgrenzen daarbuiten vielen. Aanvankelijk zagen particuliere organisaties het als hun taak om de nationale identiteit van deze natiegenoten in het buitenland te behoeden. Maar toen in Duitsland en Italië autoritaire regeringen aan de macht kwamen die culturele propaganda zagen als een essentieel instrument voor hun expansionistische buitenlandse politiek, werden deze particuliere organisaties gaandeweg onderdrukt of gedwongen zich aan te passen. In Frankrijk was het ook allereerst een particuliere organisatie – de Alliance Française – die startte met het bevorderen van Franse cultuur in het buitenland. Vervolgens werden in de eerste twee decennia van de twintigste eeuw overheidsinstanties gecreëerd om een officiële buitenlandse cultuurpolitiek te ontwikkelen. Maar de missie van de Alliance had van meet af aan een meer universeel karakter: het uitdragen van de idealen van de Verlichting vertolkt door de *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*. De periode waarin de Alliance tot stand kwam,

doet vermoeden dat zij de tanende politieke en militaire macht van Frankrijk wilde compenseren door de Franse culturele invloed te versterken en daarmee ook een steviger koloniaal bewind realiseren. Tijdens het interbellum, toen culturele invloed steeds meer van belang werd voor buitenlands beleid, namen net als elders ook in Frankrijk de overheidsinspanningen op dit terrein in omvang toe. De geschiedenis van de British Council, een laatkomer op het toneel, toont aan dat haar oprichting een reactie was op het groeiende besef dat buitenlands cultuurbeleid steeds belangrijker werd. De Council presenteerde zich dan wel als een particuliere organisatie, maar zij was nauw verbonden met de Foreign Office en zocht voor haar beleid aansluiting bij de prioriteiten geformuleerd door het Britse buitenlandse beleid. De Council ontkende ook maar iets te maken te hebben met culturele propaganda en sprak bij voorkeur over culturele promotie of het verstrekken van informatie voor een betere internationale communicatie. Zij zag voor zichzelf een universele missie, de verdediging van de democratie en de Westerse beschaving, min of meer als de *Alliance Française*.

In het tweede hoofdstuk wordt aangetoond dat niet alleen de relatie tussen de Dante en Mussolini's dictatoriale heerschappij problematisch was, maar ook de positie van de Council ten opzichte van de Britse democratische regering. Dit hoofdstuk behandelt twee zeer verschillende staatsstructuren. Mussolini's dictatoriale regime liet geen plaats aan een open politiek debat zoals dat in het Britse parlement bestond. Niettemin maakt een nauwkeurige analyse van door de Dante ondernomen pogingen om haar zelfstandigheid te behouden duidelijk dat 'fascisering' niet zo'n rechtlijnig een proces was als doorgaans wordt gesuggereerd. Het ging gepaard met noodzakelijke onderhandelingen tussen gevestigde en nieuwe machtsbases, en tussen een oudere generatie met haar verworvenheden en een nieuwe generatie met haar drang naar succes, want zij waren van elkaar afhankelijk. Deze generationele dynamiek is minder zichtbaar in de nog jonge Council dan in de Dante. Hoe dan ook, het was een relatief jonge visionair als Leeper die in weerwil van sterke tegenstand binnen het Parlement het idee wist uit te dragen dat Groot-Brittannië zich nu moest gaan toelagen op cultuurpromotie, die zich gezien haar eerbare doeleinden kon onderscheiden van de agressieve en nefaste propaganda van autoritaire staten. Individuën maken verschil. Dit is voor beide organisaties van toepassing. De drijvende kracht van Paolo Boselli bij de Dante en die van zowel Leeper als Lord Lloyd bij de Council getuigen van deze wezenlijke factor in menselijke interactie.

De Council en de Dante hanteerden fundamenteel verschillende definities van nationale cultuur, zoals in het derde hoofdstuk nader wordt toegelicht. De overheersende componenten van de *italianità* die de Dante uitdroeg waren de nationale 'ziel' en dat wat zij voortbracht aan kunst, muziek, literatuur en andere uitdrukkingen van de Italiaanse 'genius'. De Council daarentegen legde bij haar presentatie van 'Britishness' de nadruk op de rol van

instituties. In deze beeldvorming waren ook instellingen opgenomen die niet onder de overheid vielen, zoals vrijwilligersorganisaties voor wederzijdse hulp en liefdadigheid. Daarnaast benadrukte de Dante soms trots de moderniteit van Italië maar hield zij niettemin vast aan haar ouderwetse methodes. De Council echter presenteerde Groot-Brittannië dikwijls als een land dat aan nieuwigheden pas toegaf wanneer de praktische waarde daarvan mettertijd was gebleken, maar ondertussen leek zij zich veel beter bewust van de noodzaak moderne communicatiemiddelen te gebruiken. Ofschoon de Dante, ironisch genoeg, hoopte zowel de Italiaanse emigranten in het buitenland die maar weinig opleiding hadden genoten als ook de meer ontwikkelde buitenlander te bereiken, waren haar leiders zich minder bewust van de nieuwe massacultuur dan bij de Council het geval was. De ironie bestaat daaruit dat de Council aanvankelijk in haar beleid gericht was op de hogere, invloedrijke lagen van de samenleving in het buitenland, maar toch veel beter in staat was zich aan te passen aan de eisen van de massacommunicatie.

Het vierde hoofdstuk behandelt het culturele conflict op Malta tussen het Britse koloniale bestuur en de Maltese nationalisten. Hier komt de rol van de Dante en de Council op het terrein van de internationale betrekkingen bijzonder duidelijk naar voren. De voorstelling van zaken van de Council als was Groot-Brittannië de verdediger van vrijheid en democratie blijkt hier wel bijzonder hypocriet. Met haar pogingen de Britse culturele invloed op Malta te versterken beoogde de Council in feite de strategische, militaire belangen van Groot-Britannië te beschermen. Wat de Britse positie moeilijker maakte was het risico gezien te worden als een protestantse bedreiging voor de katholieke traditie waaraan de meeste Maltezers gegeven de geschiedenis van het eiland als thuisbasis van de Maltezer Orde eens te meer gehecht waren.

In het vijfde hoofdstuk komt een soortgelijk onderling verband tussen culturele en religieuze bedreiging aan de orde. Daar gaat het om de Britse bezorgdheid over de 'latinisering' van Egypte die hand in hand ging met verdenkingen ten aanzien van rooms-katholieke religieuze ordes. De oprichting van de Council was grotendeels een respons op het tot de Britten doorgedrongen besef dat hun controle over Egypte aan het afkalven was. In tegenstelling tot wat tot nu toe in de geschiedschrijving over de Council wordt gesuggereerd, was het niet het teruglopen van de handelsbelangen in Zuid-Amerika dat bepalend was voor het ontstaan van de Council. Belangrijker factor was de Britse ervaring in het zuidelijke deel van de Middellandse Zee die de Foreign Office dwong tot de erkenning dat culturele invloed een wezenlijk deel van buitenlandse politiek was gaan uitmaken. Het is geen toeval dat de eerstbenoemde vertegenwoordiger van de British Council in Caïro gestationeerd werd. Zowel de Council als de Dante gebruikten culturele propaganda ter versterking van imperialistische machtsuitoefening met dit verschil dat het Britse imperium een neergang vertoonde en het Italiaanse in opkomst was. De Dante, hoezeer ook overlopend van optimisme, bleek echter

armoedig uitgerust voor het beantwoorden aan de behoeftes van het nieuwe imperium in opbouw.

Nader onderzoek naar de samenhang met religie zou een belangrijke dimensie toevoegen aan de opkomst van cultuurpolitiek zoals tot nu toe beschreven. Ondanks het feit dat de Dante Alighieri fundamenteel een seculiere organisatie was, werd samenwerking met en eventuele ondersteuning van de katholieke kerk onvermijdelijk, alleen al om gebruik te kunnen maken van het wereldwijde netwerk dat de katholieke religieuze ordes bezaten. De Dante kon zich, ook in haar retoriek, niet helemaal distantiëren van de katholieke geestesgesteldheid waarmee de meeste van haar leden waren opgegroeid. De kerkgeschiedenis van Groot-Brittannië maakte de relatie van de British Council met religie eveneens problematisch, zij het op een andere manier. In Italië had de dominante kerk tot 1929 geweigerd de natie-staat te erkennen. In Engeland was de Engelse koning het hoofd van de Anglikaanse Kerk. Deze band tussen Kerk en Staat hield een garantie in dat de monarchie anglicaans bleef. Daarmee was de kern van de Britse natie beschermd tegen de invloed van zijn rooms-katholieke gemeenschappen, vooral in Ierland en Schotland, als ook van de methodistische, baptistische of pentecostische minderheden. Bijgevolg moest de British Council voorzichtig zijn op het punt van samenwerking met missie-orde in het buitenland. In hoeverre hadden deze religieuze achtergronden invloed op de definitie van nationale cultuur zoals gepropageerd in het buitenland? En in welke mate waren oude religieuze vijandschappen vermengd met culturele rivaliteiten?

Overbodig te zeggen dat nieuwe vragen kunnen opkomen als het onderzoek zich niet richt op de **bedoelingen** van de Dante Alighieri en de British Council maar verschuift naar de **receptie** van hun cultuurpromotie. Concentratie op dit aspect zou een uitgebreid onderzoek vereisen naar het gebruik van buitenlandse cultuur bij de wijze waarop lokale elites zichzelf definiëren. In hoeverre beïnvloedde buitenlandse cultuurpromotie de keuzes van de ontvangende sociale groeperingen met betrekking tot het gebruik van een taal waarmee zij zich konden onderscheiden, de opvoeding van hun kinderen, handelspartners en internationale connecties. Het gebruik van vreemde talen door de maatschappelijke bovenlaag zou in dit verband een cruciaal onderzoeksterrein zijn.

Harold Goad, van 1922 tot 1937 directeur van het Britse Instituut in Florence, keek in zijn latere jaren terug op de rol die de grote talen van de Westerse beschaving in de geschiedenis speelden. Zijn woorden laten zien dat, na zoveel jaren ervaring met Britse cultuurbevordering, hij ervan overtuigd was dat voor verschillende Europese landen een kenmerkende relatie tussen een land en de eigen nationale taal kon worden vastgesteld:

Voor een Fransman is zijn taal het summum van Franse en Europese beschaving; voor een Teutoon is Hoogduits de vesting van zijn Kultur; voor de

Italiaan is de Toscaanse taal de voornaamste band waarmee vele steden en provincies bijelkaar worden gehouden en het symbool van zijn *italianità* in heel de wereld; maar voor de gemoedelijke Engelsman is zijn taal slechts een praktisch middel om zichzelf verstaanbaar te maken voor andere mensen.

De geschiedenis van de Società Dante Alighieri en de British Council in het Mediterrane gebied gedurende de jaren dertig van de vorige eeuw toont aan dat het een illusie is om taal als enkel en alleen een praktisch communicatiemiddel te beschouwen. De belangeloosheid die Goad het Britse gebruik van de Engelse taal toedicht, ligt ver bezijden de waarheid. Tegen de jaren 1930 moesten ook de Britten erkennen dat de promotie van de nationale taal en cultuur in het buitenland, en daarbij de “winning of hearts and minds” van buitenlanders, een essentieel instrument was geworden voor het behoud of de uitbreiding van internationale politieke macht. De British Council had meer succes dan de Dante Alighieri bij het uitdragen van een model van moderne samenleving en het omlijnen van specifieke waarden, waarbij zij de schijn cultiveerde van niets aan anderen te willen opleggen. Al met al lijkt het raadzaam om buitenlandse cultuurpromotie in eerste instantie te beschouwen als een wolf in schaapskleren.

Cover illustration: 'Mediterraneo, Isoterme dell'acqua e dell'aria; porti principali;
linee di navigazione; cavi telegrafici' from the lemma 'Mediterraneo'
in: *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti XXI*
(Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Treccani, 1934).