Mussolini's rhetoric on youth and the Opera Nazionale Balilla, 1926-1937

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A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the Graduate Academic Unit of History

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This report is accepted by the Dean of Graduate Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

May, 2012

Abstract

Italian Fascism was a unique and complex political construction of the twentieth century. It attempted to remodel Italian citizens and their daily lives according to Mussolini's ideals of virility and militaristic values. The regime's main goal was to create a nation that embodied the vitality of the Duce's speeches and would always be ready to serve the Fascist revolution. Fascist policies and reforms touched all political, economic, religious and educational realities of Italy in that period, but the re-education of the youth was among the main goals of the totalitarian state. The Fascist state tried to create perfect followers of the regime and devoted supporters of Mussolini.

This report will explore the relationship between the Fascist organization Opera Nazionale Balilla and the Italian youth. Through analysing Mussolini's speeches and the regime's concentrated efforts this report finds that Italian youth's universe of childhood was dramatically altered, and available alternatives to Fascist propaganda and social policies were drastically limited. These factors, coupled with the sacralisation of the Fascist political discourse resulted in an important degree of Fascistization of Italian youth.

To my parents and my wife

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Sean Kennedy for his guidance and support. His suggestions and patience with my research were crucial and always extremely helpful. I would also like to thank Dr. Marc Milner for his valuable advice on historiographical matters and academic writing. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Gail Campbell and Dr. Erin Morton for making my experience as a graduate student one of the most important formative experiences of my life. Finally, I would like to thank my parents and my wife for their love and support.

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The mechanisms of social control and youth indoctrination were and still are very important for all political regimes. Perpetuating the values of a certain political regime has been an objective of all political systems ranging from the Greek city-states to contemporary populist or theocratic one-party states. Controlling youths and instilling in them certain values of citizenship involves school reforms, rewriting textbooks and organizing after-class activities that should follow distinctive doctrinal and political goals. For some totalitarian regimes, some of these practices of social control and indoctrination were profoundly successful and proved to be a very important component of their attempt to alter the fabric of a nation. Fascism, Communism and National Socialism were some of the political systems that employed these mechanisms on a large scale.

This report will explore the functioning and results of ideological indoctrination through focusing upon the mobilization of youth in Fascist Italy by the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) as reflected in the speeches of the regime's leader, Benito Mussolini, legislation relating to the mobilization of youth, and the actions undertaken by the leaders of both the National Fascist Party (PNF) and the ONB in the realm of youth Fascistization. By analyzing the significance, the content and the evolution of Mussolini's rhetoric about youth, this report will show that Italian Fascism used, manipulated and reconfigured not only specific age groups in Italian society, but the whole Italian population.

Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini came to power on 29 October 1922, at the age of only thirty-nine. A few years earlier, on 23 March 1919 in Milan, Mussolini launched the Fascist movement that two years later was to become the Fascist Party.[1] The Fascist doctrine was initially an amalgamation of different radical views that were rapidly discarded by Mussolini in his quest for power.[2] The regime evolved from a democratic society to a personal dictatorship, a totalitarian regime in which "nothing existed outside the state." Mussolini's role also evolved from that of a prime-minister to that of *Il Duce*, the head of the government and of Fascism, and the founder of the Italian empire. The Italian state evolved from a democratic society to a corporatist economy with centralized and corrupted institutions, and an ever-expanding bureaucratic system. Militarization and large scale agricultural and industrial projects were implemented, coupled with a draconian regimentation of the Italian citizens. The personality cult of Mussolini was also an everyday reality and all Italians were to "believe, obey, and fight" for *Il Duce* and Fascism. In foreign affairs, Mussolini proclaimed Italy as one of the European powers, and demanded a colonial role for Italy in Africa, actions which eventually resulted in the brutal conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-36 and the proclamation of the Italian empire in 1936. The relationship with Hitler was a sinuous affair, but in the end Italy and Germany formed the Axis. In 1943 Italy was invaded by the Allies and Mussolini, with Hitler's support formed a Fascist state in Northern Italy- the Salò Republic. He was arrested and executed by Italian partisans on 28 April 1945.

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[1] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 35.

[2] "Land to the peasants, workers' representation in industrial management, progressive tax on capital, expropriation of land and factories, nationalisation of the armaments industry, a legally fixed minimum wage, the abolition of the senate, and a large scale decentralization of the government." Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 36.

His legacy was characterized by many disasters, and although Italian Fascism was more than Mussolini himself, *Il Duce* was the "crucial factor in both its successes and failures."[3] His role in shaping the Fascist doctrine was quintessential, his writings and speeches became laws the next day and altered millions of lives in Italy and elsewhere. His rhetoric evolved from a socialist militant to a dogmatic warmonger.

Benito Mussolini's approach to youth re-education was not entirely original but it created a model for other totalitarian regimes around the world. The ONB was established in 1926 and functioned independently until 1937 when it was absorbed into the youth section of the National Fascist Party as the Gioventu Italiana dell Littorio (GIL). Mussolini's plan for conquering Italian society involved a very unique approach for the youth. His tactic evolved, expanded and became centralized in time, but was always animated by his public appearances, his speeches and the expansion of his personality cult. This report attempts to uncover and analyse the evolving structure and policies of the ONB, its goals and the methods employed in achieving them. I will try to present a clear picture of the policies of ONB and the importance of youth to Fascist doctrine. I argue that Mussolini's rhetoric regarding youth was a crucial part of his regime, and that following its evolution coupled with the efforts of institutionalizing a tight civil control on the masses, one can draw a better picture of the level of assimilation and re-education of the whole Italian society. I will also endeavour to assess the impact of the ONB- to what extent was it successful in implanting Fascist values in Italian youth? My argument is that while the ONB did not have a lasting educational impact and that after the war the Fascist policies for youth education were discarded, during the era of the Fascist regime it did achieve youth mobilization and helped spread the cult of Il Duce on

[3]Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, xiv.

a larger scale. It also provided support for the National Fascist Party by modelling youth leaders in concordance with Fascist political and organizational goals.

The role of youth as a mobilizing force, as an organization constantly serving the Fascist revolution was always present in Mussolini's speeches. The significance of youth for the Fascist leader has often been acknowledged in the relevant historiography, but rarely has it been explored in depth. The issue of youth was always crucial to Mussolini but it varied in his speeches over time. Between 1926 and 1937 youth was omnipresent in all aspects of the Fascist rhetoric. I decided to concentrate my research on this period because after 1937 the focus on youth declines, giving way to military preoccupations and the growing importance of foreign relations, which shifted Mussolini's attention to military preparations and the relations with Hitler and the European powers. The start of the war marked the beginning of the end for both the importance assigned to youth by Mussolini and for Fascism as a whole.

My report will focus on Mussolini's attention to youth re-education and social control under the umbrella of the ONB. The goals outlined in Mussolini's speeches were reflected in numerous activities coordinated by the ONB. The scale of the organization reflected the importance assigned to youth by the regime and was quintessential in maintaining the momentum of the Fascist revolution through the years. My report will try to uncover the push and pull factors that were used in rallying the youth under the flag of Fascism. I argue that the role played by sports, social aid programs, and Mussolini's personality cult were very important in re-educating the Italian youth according to Fascist requirements. Mussolini's speeches offer ample proof here, and had always incorporated virility, militarism and Il Duce's personal example as a guiding light for youth. These

techniques and Mussolini's speeches were implemented and broadcast in all schools, universities, radio programs and movies, and their effects were felt from Milan to Sicily.

Historians of Fascism have paid some attention to the regime's youth policy, but many have been more interested in explaining why Fascism happened and what features are peculiar to Italian Fascism in comparison to German Nazism than in explaining the evolution and impact of these programs. This report aims to reassert the centrality of the category of youth to Fascist rhetoric and organizational tactics, and in the process contribute to the ongoing debate over the extent to which Mussolini and his colleagues were successful in remaking the Italian nation in the Fascist image.

Renzo De Felice is the most important historian of Italian Fascism; his massive seven-volume biography of Mussolini is a milestone for every scholar or student interested in Il Duce. It is a difficult read due to De Felice's style of writing and peculiar choice of syntax, featuring countless sub-clauses and cluttered endless phrases, but the text is a rich study of Mussolini's life and compensates for the complicated grammar. His book on the interpretations of Fascism[4] is also a must read for modern European historians. De Felice's distinction between Italian Fascism as a "movement" (characterized as positive by him) and Fascism as a "regime" (characterized as oppressive) is still a controversial concept for historians. He divided his study of the interpretations of Italian Fascism into "classic," "minor," and "social sciences," with each category being subdivided into smaller sections that incorporate earlier studies of Fascism from Mussolini's contemporaries to De Felice's colleagues. The text is rich with information, but because De Felice had unlimited access to Mussolini's archives, his

[4] Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, translated by Brenda Huff Everett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

conclusions about contrasting interpretations can seem unfair.[5] His discussion on the Italian interpretations of Fascism concluded with a pledge for new interpretations that "will result from new analysis and deep rethinking of the events that transpired between the two wars and all Italian contemporary history."[6]It is clear that De Felice wanted an integral approach to Fascism that would consider comparative studies, and which would include the history of Italy since unification. Without this constant reference to Italian society as a whole, any study of Fascism would be dismissed by De Felice. Though his methodology was controversial his massive archival research cannot be overlooked or ignored. A great number of historians built their research on De Felice's foundation in regards to archival documentation or the "revisionist" methodology.

As mentioned above, De Felice calls for a "national history" that would explain Italian Fascism, and that would organically integrate small topics. This approach can trigger overgeneralization, because not every historian would write seven volumes on one specific topic. Fascism is a fascinating topic for a lot of historians and researchers, but small topics can provide the necessary pieces which in the end provide a composite portrait. There exists a large historiography regarding Italian Fascism, but within this considerable historiography the number of books and articles devoted specifically to the issues of youth re-education and the mechanisms of youth social control is quite limited: the topic is often treated in passing, as a small component of a broader discussion about the successes and limitations of the Fascist regime.

For many historians, narration of the political decisions of the Fascist Party regarding youth organizations is almost the only way of assessing Mussolini's policies in

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[5] Ibid., 174.
[6] Ibid., 173.

this field. Questions like: who took control of the youth section, who was demoted or promoted inside the Fascist Party, and how much money were spent on youth organizations are ever-present in a majority of Fascist studies in relation to the youth problem. De Felice's book about the interpretation of Fascism is a very good survey of these studies. De Felice does not have dedicated chapters in his books about youth indoctrination, but he describes in detail the evolution of different youth organizations under Mussolini and concludes that the Fascist goal for youth conformed to the plan for the whole Italian society of creating a totalitarian state.

Another way of approaching the topic of youth re-education under Mussolini, besides political histories, involves exploring the regime's cultural policies. The Fascist cultural revolution that started with the March on Rome is outlined by Philip Cannistraro's article.[7]Questioning the novelty of Mussolini's cultural policy, Cannistraro asserts that the Fascist culture was not created *ex novo*, but rather was built on a nationalistic past of "greatness and the magnificence of Rome." He explores the multitude of changes introduced by Mussolini in every aspect of everyday life in order to create "the new man," noting that various intellectuals who joined the movement proposed different ideal features for the new man. Cannistraro's study does not offer specific insights into the Fascist youth policies, but it is a good introduction to the debates about the form and content of the Fascist cultural revolution.

Michael Ledeen's article "Italian Fascism and the Youth" adopted a similar approach, but had a more specific focus.[8]Leaving aside his strong fascination with and

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[7] P.V. Cannistraro, "Mussolini's Cultural Revolution: Fascist or Nationalist?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (1972): 115-139.
[8] Michael A. Ledeen, "Italian Fascism and the Youth," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4:3 (1969): 137-154.

admiration for De Felice and his controversial career, Ledeen's study is still valuable today. It involves the discussion of some selected journals that spoke about Fascism's new world, criticized old Europe, and offered new philosophical ways of describing Italian culture. In discussing different articles published in *Il Popola, Il Sagiattore,* and *La Sapienza*, Ledeen tried to capture the intellectual debates that surrounded the conceptual evolution of Fascism. He argues that internal critique was limited but possible, and that brilliant young minds developed strategies and theoretical frameworks intent on spreading the values of Fascism to a decrepit and morally bankrupt Europe. Ledeen's conclusion that Fascism was not a "rigid system of ideological regimentation," and that it encouraged "alternative world views" is a very generous proclamation. The value of the alternative world views suggested in the pages of those journals is limited from a philosophical point of view. They can be easily described as utopian, biased or childish. What these journalistic debates suggested about the future of Europe and the roles planned for the Italian history and culture in the process of shaping young minds are important and noteworthy. The Italians were called to fulfill their civilizing role in the same manner as the Roman Empire helped civilize the barbarian hordes of Europe. The feeling of superiority and the urgency of this mission were passed from the pages of Fascist journals into the school curriculum and textbooks. Thus, Ledeen shows us that the Fascistization of Italian youth did not happen in a vacuum of ideas. Different strategies were implemented as youth policies, and their formation and origins can be traced in the pages of numerous Italian journals.

While scholars like Cannistraro and Ledeen focused on rhetoric and ideas, other historians have taken an interest in the relationship between state and society, or Fascist

control over Italian society. The process of re-educating Italian youth during Mussolini's dictatorship was seen by some historians as part of the process of controlling Italian society as well. Besides the need to rally the youth around the image of Il Duce, controlling the masses and their cultural life was part of the Fascist design. According to Doug Thompson's study, this was a central goal of the regime.[9] Thompson's book is based on the principle that Italy was a police state under Mussolini and that almost everything was controlled or at least supervised by the regime and the Fascist Party. The author describes Mussolini's speech of 3 January 1925, in which he assumed responsibility for the Mateotti Crisis and asserted his goals for transforming Italy, as a turning point in implementation of state control aimed at a national conformity. Thompson used Hannah Arendt's definition of fascism and built his analysis around it. In the section dedicated to youth, the author discussed school reforms, in the process citing Tracey Koon's 1985 book and the periodical published by the GUF, *Libro e moschetto*. He concluded that the control and indoctrination of the Italian youth was almost complete and always supervised in secret by the police. Thompson's study is a general radiography of Fascist Italy based on the principles of a totalitarian state developed by Arendt, but fails to distinguish between certain levels of control and supervision, the results is that his depiction of Fascist Italy is more totalitarian than it actually was. Nevertheless, his notes were sources of valuable information in my search for studies dedicated to the Fascistization of Italian youth.

The reforms introduced by Mussolini and his colleagues touched all aspects of life in Italy. From culture and work relations to schools and universities, all institutions

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[9] Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy: Culture and Conformity, 19251943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 9.

were reshaped by Fascist ideals. Fascist reformers also turned their attention to promoting their values even during leisure activities, and here the work of the Italian-American historian Victoria de Grazia is of great importance. Her first book, which examined the Fascistization of Italian society with a study of the organization of leisure[10] under Mussolini, is a great read and includes important insights on the topic of youth re-education. De Grazia explains in her study that, in contrast to northern urban centres, the penetration of the countryside proved to be more difficult for the Opera Nazionala Dopolavoro (OND), as large industrial cities were more receptive to Fascist organizational goals and strategies than the rural south. Workers were a mass that could be controlled and geared towards specific goals of Fascist propaganda in a relatively easy manner. The duality of workers unions and the clubs of OND was a special characteristic of the industrialized north. The central and southern regions experienced different policies accustomed to their demographic, economic and educational realities. There was the risk of stimulating rather than appeasing the peasants' taste for the amenities of town life. Running water, sewage, and consumer goods proved to be appealing factors for large numbers of peasants. The Fascist strategy for this task was similar to the strategy adopted by the Opera Nazionale Balilla in the same environment: a combination of leisure activities and aid measures. Through clubhouse radio, sports, and free newspapers, different social classes were brought together. De Grazia argues that OND was a success in industrial settings, and that Fascist control and propaganda was reaching a huge number of people.[11]Regarding youth mobilization, De Grazia argues that the same principle of mixing and levelling people from different social backgrounds was employed

[10] Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
[11] Ibid., 243.

by the officials of ONB as well. Young workers marched at parades organized by OND, as a continuation of the parades organized by the Balilla's groups.[12] The ONB and OND were different organizations but had one important common goal: levelling all class differences between their members in order to introduce new common goals, beliefs and practices for all the participants. De Grazia's study proved to be a very good starting point in my search for the specific measures aimed at levelling social differences, and producing a new generation of young Fascists.

De Grazia followed up in 1992 with her landmark study, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, continuing her effort to move beyond a traditional political approach.[13] In it she contends that Fascism fell back on the traditional roles of mother and caretakers of Italian women. The regime built on the legacy of liberal division between men and women, and exploited the huge diversity of social mores and sexual behaviours in order to isolate upper and lower class women from one another. De Grazia also explores the lure of commercial culture and the conflicts between the American ideas of women and the Fascist ideals of womanhood and teenagers. The roles assigned by Fascism to young girls are very well encapsulated in one sentence: "girls were to be prolific mates, dutiful mothers and ardent patriots."[14] Her study provides a convincing analysis of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Fascist power structures. Mutual agreements between the Catholic Church and the Fascist regime were signed, and a complementary relationship ensued. Catholic youth groups were dissolved and the ONB took complete control of the education of children, but in compensation religious

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[12] Ibid., 231.
[13] Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1992).
[14] Ibid., 12.

instruction was introduced into the state school system. Young girls were allowed to praise the Virgin Mary, but had to include Il Duce in their prayers too. Sexual relations outside marriage were forbidden, but the duty of nursing their children as "ardent patriots" was reinforced. The mechanics of re-educating the young girls in the spirit of Fascist ideals are well represented in this study; it would be useful to compare the regime's policies regarding boys in this regard.

Whereas De Grazia assessed Fascist youth policy in relation to other initiatives, Tracy H. Koon's *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943*[15] is almost the only book available that deals specifically with the relationship between the Fascist regime and youth. It was published in 1985; though in many respects it is an impressive work, it necessarily overlooks some of the latest developments in Italian historiography regarding Fascism. The Italian historiography is now far richer on this topic, but translations have lost their appeal to publishers today, and Italian historical journals are also impossible to access online. Koon divides her book into three main components, investigating youth-oriented propaganda, examining the various categories of youth, and evaluating the success of the youth programs in turn. She also connects the evolution of the youth problem to the political evolution of Italian Fascism, and identifies four different stages in this relationship. From the period of the *squadristi* until 1925 and it was a "period of struggle to install the movement as a regime,"[16] followed by a period of consolidation of the movement into a regime up to the early 1930s. The early 1930s were also seen by Koon as a period in which the regime tried to "reawake and mobilize

[15] Tracy H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
[16] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, xix.

the energies of the youth."[17] The beginning of the Spanish Civil War and the passing of the racial laws coincided with the period of a "general realization among the youth that the regime has not lived up to its promises."[18]

Koon's book is divided into eight chapters which are very well structured around a specific theme. Chapter 1 is entitled "The Kingdom of the Word," and involves an analysis of propaganda myths, slogans, words and phrases used in the process of Fascistization. For Koon, Fascist propaganda was intrinsically connected with Mussolini's personality and his masterful use of words and phrases aimed at galvanizing the masses. The myths of his personal courage in war, his amazing memory, and his father-like care for every Italian were conveyed in words and stories that were immortalized in "oceanic mass rallies."[19]

Chapter 2 explores educational policy, in particular the legislative process of what regime officials referred to as "the most fascist reform." In this chapter, Koon captures the fact that the most important change in the school system was the "change in spirit." The militaristic and nationalistic sentiments were the key concepts in reforming education. In chapter four, Koon's investigation moves into "the breeding ground" of Fascism, tracing the roots of the ONB and describing its evolution. However, the book does not fully convey the process of regimentation, or how various activities were performed in urban and rural settings. Koon discusses Education Minister Achille Starace's role in streamlining the ONB, but does not really elucidate why some of the leaders of the PNF were unhappy with the lack of discipline and participation in Fascist street demonstrations in their locality.

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[17] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight,* xix.
[18] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, xix.
[19] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight,* 17.

In Chapter 8 Koon turns to the "battle for the custody of the child" between the Catholic Church and the Fascist state and concludes that the former ultimately prevailed in this struggle because it remained a strong political force after Mussolini's regime collapsed. This conclusion is open to revision; it is true that Catholic Action groups were still active during Mussolini's regime, but Koon does not assess the religious amalgamation between Catholic ideas and Fascist principles which were present in the ONB's ideological framework. Fascist leaders understood that religious fervour and identification were also helping the spread of their ideals and incorporated them into their rhetoric and propaganda. The mixture of Catholic liturgy and Mussolini's personality cult is good proof of this trend, one which will be further explored in this report.

Following the last two chapters, Koon concludes that overall "the divergence between theory and practice was great," and that the regime's policy of '*making way for the youth*' had failed. She surmises that the regime had given the youth "nothing to believe in, no one to obey, and nothing to fight for."[20] This conclusion seems problematic. It is true that Fascist Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany and the passing of racial laws had triggered antifascist sentiments, but it does not mean that, overall, the attempted Fascistization of the youth was a futile process. Figures showed that mass participation was achieved by the ONB.[21] The personality cult of Il Duce was also a widespread reality: from all forms of media to Sunday sermons, all public spheres of life had to include references to Mussolini. Analyzing these aspects and coupling them with

[20] Ibid., 252.
[21] Giuseppe Zanzanaini, *Renato Rici. Fascista integrale* (Mursia: Milano, 2004), 80. In 1937 the ONB had under administration 890 Case Balilla, 1470 gyms, 2568 sports camps and 22 swimming pools. It enrolled almost one million children.

the prevalent militarism in all the youth camps, one can show proof that the system worked, at least to an extent.

Some evidence for this appears in Bruno Wanrooij's exploration of the growing disillusionment of Italian youth.[22] Though more theoretical than analytical, the article explores the concept of a generation which was the center of social organization under Mussolini. Wanrooij's analysis of the youth as replacement elite for the old liberal one is a good starting point for understanding the role assigned by Mussolini to Italian youth after the March on Rome. Wanrooij's research also focuses on the creation of new elites by the Fascist Party in order to replace the liberal structures of the Italian state. The concept of generation became crucial for the regime, and a constant source for drafting new policies regarding education, propaganda and the institutionalization of the tight social control of youth. Wanrooij's focus upon Fascism as a "generational revolt" is useful in assessing the spirit of the laws aimed at galvanizing Italian society; equally useful is his discussion of the growing disillusionment of Italian youth after the conquest of Ethiopia. Having fought in a war, they paved their way to social betterment with their blood, but the realities at home struck down their expectations and triggered dissent. The disparities between official rhetoric and real life began to show. Employment was difficult to find and the rigours imposed by the economic autarchy contrasted with the proclamation by Mussolini of Italy as one of the most important world powers. This was the moment when political apathy and anti-fascism was born and when youth Fascistization died, in Wanrooij's view.

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[22] Bruno Wanrooij, "The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism as a Generational Revolt," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22:3 (1987): 401-418.

More recent studies offer fresh methodological approaches, and empirical evidence, from which to build a more integrated account of Italian Fascist youth policy, though these new studies rarely focus upon youth per se. A good example of methodological innovation is Mabel Berezin's book, which examines how the Fascist regime sought to mobilize certain symbols and the ways in which it tried to do so.[23]According to Berezin, Italian Fascism was a "political project aimed to recreate the self."[24] In this process, public spectacles of various sorts were the favourite vehicle of expression used. These spectacles incorporated Catholic rituals and, thus, touched a huge number of Italians. Berezin discusses the historiography of Italian Fascism, emphasizing the distinction between historians who asked the question "what is fascism?" and those who focused instead upon establishing the practice of Mussolini's regime. Her innovative method involves exploring the roles played by feeling and emotions in Fascist discourse. While not focused on youth specifically, Berezin's analyses of commemorations, celebrations, demonstrations, symposia and inaugurations provided a potential model for better understanding the youth rituals staged by the ONB leaders. Berezin concludes that Fascist rituals were particularly suited to Italian political ideology and the Italian culture, because they favoured emotions as opposed to text in a country still characterized by a high rate of illiteracy among both adults and children, for whom textual messages held no value. Emotions induced by mass gatherings, parades, loud music, soccer games, religious symbols, and tearful speeches broadcast on the radio were the means to influence the masses. Berezin's discussion of Fascist ceremony and rituals in Verona offer a very good example of these myths at work. The utilization of particular symbols

[23] Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
[24] Ibid., 10.

such as the ancient Rome's glorious past by the Fascist party is masterfully explored in her study. It is a theme that, if explored in depth, can provide good answers to the questions about the depth of Fascist penetration in people`s lives and their vocabulary. Most of the existing literature does not adopt such a focus, despite its considerable potential. By employing Berezin's techniques with a particular focus on Mussolini's speeches at ONB's rallies, this report hopes to draw fresh conclusions about youth's role in Fascist rhetoric.

Both in conceptual and empirical terms, the work of Richard Bosworth offers much when it comes to understanding how the Fascist regime tried to mobilize youth. In chapter six of his historiographical study *The Italian Dictatorship*[25], Bosworth stresses the importance of regional differences within Italy, especially the division between North and South. Previous work done by historians and sociologists, especially regarding the underdevelopment of the South, helped to explain the character and limits of Mussolini's efforts to re-educate the youth. Bosworth asks questions in his study, both with respect to Italian society in general and Italian youth in particular, that are worthy of further investigation. What was the role of the educators in elementary school in Italy? How did they respond to the new educational goals set by Emilio Gentile and Achille Starace? Bosworth concludes that a large numbers of educators were merely paying lip service to the regime's educational policies and in fact kept Fascist principles out of their classrooms.

Subsequently Bosworth took a step forward by editing *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, which contains a variety of essays dealing with relations between the Fascist

[25] R.J.B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998).

state and Italian society.[26] From chapter six to chapter twelve, different scholars tried to offer plausible answers to the relationship between Italian intellectuals and the Fascist cultural policies, between peasants and the Fascist approach to the agrarian problem, and to analyze the relationship between Fascism and the Catholic Church. With respect to youth, Patrizia Dogliani presented a concise chronological evolution of youth organizations under Mussolini, noting as she did that any research into the process of youth indoctrination by the Fascist Party should incorporate the imagery that accompanied this process. From the architecture of the new *Case del Balilla*[27] to the *Case della Giovane Italiana* to the choice of specific colours in painting these buildings and many more across Italy, the use of symbols were a powerful tool at play. According to Dogliani, the Pompeian red colour was used as proof of continuity and also to stand alone in the dark-grey environment of the Italian city. The same colour depicted the greatness of imperial Rome, and triggered feelings of nostalgia and pride. The rural and industrial colourless buildings were heavily contrasted by the opulent and striking red ONB buildings, and constituted an attraction point for everyone who looked at them. Dogliani's conclusions are important in suggesting the variety of ways in which the regime tried to appeal to youth on an emotional level.[28]

Images, rituals and symbols were deployed by the Fascist propaganda in attracting the Italian youth, but vivid speeches and spoken words seem to be the most important method employed. Bosworth's recent analysis of life under Mussolini revolves

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[26] R.J.B. Bosworth, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[27] Case del Balilla and Case della Giovanni Italiana were centres of the ONB and the GIL organizations, which usually included a cinema, a gym or a stadium, a few classrooms, a swimming pool and offices for the instructors. All the ceremonies and activities organized by the ONB and the GIL were taking place at these locations.
[28] Patrizia Dogliani, "Propaganda and Youth", in Bosworth, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 185-203.

around the power of words.[29] The book encompasses the evolution of Italian society throughout the Fascist era. Bosworth's command of the historiography of this topic is impressive and his departure from a strictly political framework is refreshing. The chapters of the book follow Mussolini and his associates in their quest for power and the consolidation of their regime. Bosworth speaks about the creation of the "generation of Mussolini" through the youth organizations in Italy. He investigates the role played by Renato Ricci in shaping Fascist control of the Italian youth and describes the mission assigned to youth camps in re-educating them. He also explores the impact of Fascist autarky on the children's universe by discussing the toys available and their Italian names. Bosworth notes that the King and the Catholic Church also played a role in indoctrinating young minds, and the relationship between religious education and religious symbols is illustrated with eloquent examples of prayers and stories for children. Ultimately, Bosworth stresses the limits of the Fascist regime's success in remoulding Italian society, but his book provides evidence that the extent and impact of its efforts should not be dismissed.

Luca La Rovere's examination of Fascist mobilization in the universities is also suggestive in this regard.[30] Noting that the role and the goals of ONB were to breed the next generation of Fascist cadres, La Rovere finds that the youth enrolled in *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* were indeed "Mussolini's generation," going on to find their place in the Fascist Party, and ascending to higher echelons in the Fascist bureaucratic structure. La Rovere's methodological approach differs from what he calls "the

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[29] R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Fascist Dictatorship*, 1915-1945(New York: Penguin, 2005) 184-215, 249-277, 307-339.

[30] Luca La Rovere, "Fascist Groups in Italian Universities: An Organization at the Service of the Totalitarian State," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34:3 (1999): 457-475.

memorialistic interpretation" aimed at identifying signs of opposition. He argues that this method is the base of the literature aimed at erasing the Fascist past of a selected few leaders and of a whole generation too. La Rovere instead suggests a twofold approach in which the organizational efforts of the regime in incorporating, educating and employing youth are examined in tandem with an analysis of the attitudes and feelings of the youth regarding the regime itself. The author dismisses the findings of Tracy Koon as being based upon preconceived expectations of failure, and argues that such a view is dangerously reductive of Italian Fascism. La Rovere concludes that the system set in place by the "fathers of Fascism" worked, and that the second generation was in its place between 1940 and 1942, but that the "fragile Mussolinian regime" was unable to ensure that they could continue the revolutionary goals of the 1920s. The disastrous war toppled their aspirations and destroyed their role as heirs of the regime.

Roberta Vescovi's study of children and sports in Fascist Italy also underscores the determination of the Fascist regime to "shape Italians from their birth" in a variety of ways.[31]Vescovi distinguishes between the role assigned for boys as examples of virility, and the one for girls as qualified mothers for breeding the Fascists of the future. Vescovi also examines the composition of the ONB at the local level, down to squads and platoons, and highlights the role of physical education in levelling the differences amongst children. Dressing and behaving alike was the first step in inculcating obedience and discipline, and sports and competitions were essential to the activities of the ONB. Vescovi concludes that together with school propaganda, sports and youth camps penetrated all aspects of life under Mussolini. This does not mean that all children turned

[31] Robberta Vescovi,"Children into Soldiers: Sport and Fascist Italy," *European Sports History Review* 5 (2003): 166-186.

out to be devoted Fascist and party members, but that almost all children participated in some form of spreading Fascist ideals and the cult of Il Duce.

Through Mussolini's speeches I can explore the evolution, internal contradictions and various nuances of the regime's Fascistization of youth. Mussolini's speeches were charged with multiple meanings and also contradictions. They were delivered for an immediate audience and had a ripple effect. The collection *Opera Omnia*[32] has the advantage of inserting valuable information about each speech: location and time of day, what was the audience and how they reacted to the speeches, travel plans and patterns of Mussolini's speeches (lectures, conversations with the masses or parliamentary locutions, introduction of a law or legislative project and interviews with journalists), and also a strict chronology of his speeches. Using this collection as a primary source, the evolution of the issue of youth can be traced easily, and fresh conclusions about the importance of youth for Mussolini can be drawn. All these are to be interpreted and correlated with the information provided by secondary literature about the mechanisms of implementing these reforms. By integrating Mussolini's rhetoric with an assessment of the regime's youth policies, the extent of Italian Fascism's effort to inculcate youth with its values can be appreciated.

[32]*Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini,* ed. Eduardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel, (Florence: La Fenice,1972), 44 vols.

SECTION 2:

Towards a policy of Fascistization, Fascist institutions and Mussolini as a "political athlete"

The vast historiography of the twentieth century totalitarian systems imposes some theoretical and methodological choices when researching Italian Fascism. Historians, sociologists, philosophers and political analysts have debated how to interpret Italian Fascism since its appearance and are still doing so.[33] Different approaches have been suggested in trying to find answers to a multitude of questions, notably: how to define a totalitarian regime, and how to compare different political formations using a universal framework. Questions as to how one can measure levels of dissent and levels of assimilation or conformity to Fascist values, and whether some social structures were more prone than others to be moulded into a totalitarian mass subservient to the leader, also arise.

De Felice's distinction between Italian Fascism as a "movement" (characterized as positive by him) and Fascism as a "regime" (characterized as oppressive) is still a controversial concept for historians.[34] The characteristics of the

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[33]Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, translated by Jody Bruhn, (New York: Routledge, 2007), vol.3; Mac Gregor Knox. *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33. Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For an analysis of the different interpretations of Italian Fascism see Renzo DeFelice. *Interpretations of Fascism*, translated by Brenda Huff Everett, (New York: Harvard University Press, 1977). For a comparative study of totalitarianism see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1966).

[34]DeFelice.*Interpretations of Fascism*, 173.

Italian Fascist movement were not all incorporated into the Fascist regime. Governing and assuming power proved to be more complex than just a march on Rome, though some features of the "movement" became state policies. The Italian Fascism was among the first regimes to emphasize the term totalitarian and the first to try to institutionalize and re-educate the youth on a large scale. The pre-existing conditions for youth socialization were the "common experience of faith"[35]that united *squadristi* and spread like a wild fire after the Great War, engulfing the Italian youth. "Italian Fascism as Communism was the child of war,"[36] and interventionism together with the return of the war heroes ignited and fuelled a state of exhilaration and vitality that Mussolini was keen to capture in his speeches. In one occasion, speaking to his followers in Milan in 1922, he reiterated the indissoluble link between Fascism and the sacrifices made during the war, and between the defunct "old Italy" and the future that was now linked to the success of Fascism in Italy:

> The old Italy is dead and it will not rise again. The period of renunciations and obligations is past. You are asking me to inaugurate now your flame. I will guard it like I am guarding the flame of that belief for whom countless innocent youths have died; I will guard it for the fortune of Italy and Fascism.[37]

The term *giovinezza* (youth) and its social, political and energetic valences became a guiding principle, the Fascist hymn and a key political slogan of the new regime. The socialization of the Italian youth did not take place *ex-novo* but was built on similar organizational schemes that predated the March on Rome. The *squadristi* provided the

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[35]Gentile, Emilio. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, translated by Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21.
[36] Hans Meier, "On the Interpretation of Totalitarian Rule 1919-1989", in Hans Meier, ed. *Totalitarianism and Political Religions,* translated by Jodi Bruhn (New York: Routledge, 2007), vol.3, 98.
[37] Mussolini, London, December 13, 1922, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 19, 63.

necessary model to emulate and to inspire. Mussolini's personal life[38] and career before the year 1922 are also very suggestive of the way in which youth became a crucial component of the Fascist rhetoric. His journalistic career provided him with the necessary skills for writing firing speeches and action-glorifying articles. *Il Popolo d'Italia,* the newspaper founded by him on November 15, 1914, had as its motto the words of Napoleon: "The revolution is an idea which has found its bayonets."[39] The fight for Italy's participation in the First World War was seen by Mussolini as a legitimizing action that had to be taken in order to change the political and economic conditions of Italy. The creation of the *Fasci di Combattimento* at Milan on March 23, 1919, was supported by war veterans and members of the *arditi* groups. Thus, militarism, action, ruthlessness and self-sacrifice were values that were incorporated in the first "national rally of Italian interventionists."[40] Fascist discourse regarding Italian youth was founded on the sacrifice of the Italian troops during the war. The heroes of the Italian interventionism were to be replaced only by the heroes of the Fascist struggles before the March on Rome. The legacy of the fighting in the Alps was creating new political and emotional models for the Italian youth.

The aftermath of the Great War brought the need to rebuild Italy, the Italians and the European role of the Italian monarchy. Mussolini's political discourse was in this period evolving from including references to those who fought and died on the front, to urging his listeners and readers to support the *fasci* and explaining what Fascism was all

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[38] There are numerous biographies of Mussolini; among the most influential are: R.J.B. Bosworth. *Mussolini* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Knopf, 1982). For earlier periods of Mussolini's life I have consulted also De Felice, Renzo, *Mussolini il revoluzionario1883-1920* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1965).
[39] *Opera Omnia*, vol. 7, 7.
[40] Laura Fermi, *Mussolini*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154.

about: "What does Fascism want? First of all, it wants that the nation recognizes the gratitude for the veterans, for those mutilated by the war and for the families of the dead soldiers! We reiterate the oath of our heroes: for the magnificent youth of this city, I will never permit to the yesterday's tyrants to conquer this land!" [41]

In the electoral struggle before the March on Rome, the Fascist idea of perpetual movement, always advancing towards a better future, always working, always full of energy and vitality was constructed and perfected by Mussolini in his speeches and writings. As he declared in Milan in the spring of 1922: "Whatever will be the result of our struggle, either defeated of victorious, we will continue to march on. In the name of our faith, which we have consecrated with our blood, we will march on without stopping, and with our eyes always fixed upon a glorious destination: the greatness of our country!"[42] The March on Rome proved to be a landmark in the history of both Fascism and Mussolini himself. It provided a point of reference and pride, a historical mark on the evolution of Fascist Italy and a constant reminder of the latent forces that resided inside the Fascist groups. The Fascists changed the political establishment in Italy so that everything belonged to them. Mussolini's rhetoric about the importance of the March never changed. The event was easily used for multiple purposes and suited all sorts of events, but was used mainly to exemplify to youth that strong actions could trigger great results. Previous structures and regimes were thus seen as easily malleable to the Fascist strong will and determination.

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[41] *The discourse of Mortara*, 8 May1921, Mortara, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 16, 315.
[42] *Discorso Di Piazza Borromeo*, (Milan), May 14, 1922. *Opera Omnia*, vol. 16, 348.

The most important and the largest pre-existing youth groups were the Catholic youth organizations. Here Victoria De Grazia's critique of Tracy Koon's book[43] regarding the role of the Catholic Church as a school for altruism that would have undercut the alliance to the Duce has to be coupled with a further consideration of the sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy.[44] If the personality cult became a political religion in a deeply religious environment, then some of the Catholic values spread inside Catholic Action's[45] clubs and groups were at least invested with a double and reinforcing meaning. First, the process of situating Mussolini in line with Christ as the saviour of Italy would have produced a further diffusion of the personality cult inside the Catholic groups. A good example is the constant mix between the Catholic daily prayers and the prayers dedicated to Mussolini as the saviour of Italy which were to be performed during the same religious service. Secondly, the numerous limitations imposed by the Fascists upon the *Azione Cattolica* groups, especially not to sponsor any sports, render them useless as an option for the Italian youth interested in sports.[46]

As a consequence, sports, education and religious life were all restructured by the Fascist doctrine. The methodology of creating Fascist youth involved a total and concentrated assault using all means available both locally and at a national level.

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[43] Victoria De Grazia, review of *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* by Tracy H. Koon, in *The Journal of Modern History,* 60:1 (March, 1988), 175-17.
[44]Gentile, Emilio. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, translated by Keith Botsford. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Emilio Gentile, "New Idols: Catholicism in the Face of Fascist Totalitarianism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11:2 (2006), 143-170.
[45]Azione Cattolica was founded in 1865 by Pope Pius IX. It was reorganized several times and had multiple subdivisions such as: *Unione Donne Cattoliche Italiane, Gioventu Femminile Cattolica Italiana,* and *Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana,* which all had an authoritarian structure and worked for the spread of Catholic values and beliefs.
[46] Edward A. Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience: Italian Society and Culture 1922-1945* (London: Basic Book, 1972), 124.

Mussolini delivered a very important speech on 3 March 1925 in the Italian Parliament. It was a response to the Matteotti crisis[47] and also a shift in the role of Mussolini both inside the PNF and also as the head of the government: "I now declare before this assembly and before the entire Italian nation that I assume, I alone, full political, moral and historical responsibility for all that has happened."[48] It was a blow to the PNF's internal dissenters that held him responsible for the 'slowing down' of the Fascist revolution was, and also the beginning of what was termed *mussolianismo*. The idea behind it being that Mussolini was the single source of political decisions, and the only policy maker inside the Fascist government.

In the months that followed this critical speech, the Fascist regime accelerated its efforts to mobilize and indoctrinate the Italian people. In April 1926 the ONB was formed. The Fascist youth revolution was regaining momentum and different organizations were called to take part in it. The *Opera Nazionale Maternita ed Infanzia* (ONMI) was founded in 1925; its role was to protect and support Italian mothers and their children's health. The *Ente Nazionale per l'Educazione Fisica*, which was previously in charge of assigning school pupils to courses in designated gymnastic and sport clubs,[49] was incorporated in to the ONB in October 1927. All the sports clubs in Italy were forced to join one of the 32 national sports federations, which were also grouped inside the *Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano*. This Olympic committee had

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[47]Giacomo Matteotti (May22, 1885-June 10, 1924) was an Italian lawyer and the leader of the Italian Socialist Party. He was a critic of Mussolini's regime and accused the Fascist Party of election fraud in a very important speech on May 30, 1924. He was kidnapped and killed less than two weeks after that. For more information about the Matteotti crisis and the Italian left see Alexander J. De Grand. *The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Parties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[48]This speech was delivered to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in Rome on 3 January 1925.*Opera Omnia*, vol. 21, 238.

[49]Gori Gigliola, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body. Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.

additional funds and was provided with numerous legal powers in order to supervise all sport activities within Italy.[50] Labour relations and the after-work organizations were also modified during the same period by the creation of *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND),[51]and the introduction of the 'Rocco laws' on 3April 1926 that banned both strikes and lockouts. The OND proved to be also a very effective tool in the process of youth re-education. The industrial north, and major cities had very well-funded centers belonging to OND. Through these centers 'deserving' families and their children could access recreational activities provided by the Fascist party. Through radio clubhouses, sports activities and tickets for major sporting events, free newspapers and movies,[52] the working class and their children would all come to praise the new regime that made all these possible. Mussolini's personality cult was also expanding through these practices and institutions.

The formation of the ONB in 1926 was a critical part of this larger process, and the organization was soon given considerable authority, buttressed by Mussolini himself. After the creation of the ONB, the organization became the custodian of all educational practices both inside and outside the school. From 8 to 14 years old the boys were grouped into the *Balilla* formations. From 14 to 18 they belonged to the *Avanguardisti*, and after that to the PNF.[53]A parallel structure was in place for girls: from 8 to 14 years old they belonged to *Piccole italiane* group and from 14 to 18 to the *Giovani italiane,* and after the age of 18 they were able to join the women's organization of the PNF. Mussolini

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[50]Gigliola, *Italian Fascism,* 97.
[51] OND was legislated on 1May 1925 and the first national head was the Duke of Aosta.
[52] Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 243.
[53]G. Ricuperati, "La scuola italiana durante fascismo", *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 4:4, (1975): 481-505.

asserted the importance of school in all his speeches related to youth. In an address to the first national congress of the corporation of the educators,[54] he stressed the importance of school and the purpose of his regime's educational reforms:

> The government wants the school to inspire from the ideas of Fascism. The government wants the school to educate the Italian youth to understand Fascism, to reinvent themselves in Fascism, and to live inside the historical climate created by the Fascist revolution. The government had to intervene from the first days in power to reform the school. It was done surgically. It was necessary.[55]

The main purpose of this intervention was the removal of those opposing the new mission of the Fascist's regime revamped education system: those not interested in studying, parents too indulgent with their children, and those educators who did not accept the Fascist intervention in the educational curriculum. In subsequent years, ONB operations were increasingly integrated into the regime's educational bureaucracy. In 1929, for example, the head of ONB became one of the two under-secretaries of the newly reformed Ministry of National Education

In the early years of the Fascist regime tensions between the Catholic Chruch and the regime existed, tensions which had major implications for education. However, on 11 February 1929 the Lateran Pacts were signed. It was the "end of the cold war between the Church and the State."[56]Thereafter, there was an increasing fusion of Fascist discourse and symbolism with Catholic rhetoric and public practices. The mix between Catholic public practices and the Fascist propaganda was not new: it began after the March on Rome, and represented a territory of conflicting manifestations between the

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[54] The congress took place in Rome on December 5, 1925.
[55] *Parole ai docenti,* 5 December 1925, Rome, *Opera Omnia,* vol.22, 23.
[56] Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 231.

Church and the Fascist faith. From the oath of a member of the Fascist *squadristi*[57] to the ceremonies of *Leva fascista* (Calling to the Colours)[58], the lexicon involved was deeply religious and dogmatic. When presenting the young members at their graduation from one age group to the other with a symbolic party card and a rifle, the message was: "The former is the symbol of your faith; the later the instrument of your power".[59] However, the interpenetration of Fascist and Catholic discourse regarding youth was facilitated by the Lateran Pacts, and it became ever more prevalent in Mussolini's speeches and other regime discourse. Mussolini enjoyed taking part in various public manifestations and the founder of his personality cult, Augusto Turati[60] made sure that Il Duce was present to major events involving the youth. Under the next party secretary, Achile Starace[61] the personality cult became more formalized, the Fascist rituals were multiplied, and the formulae of devotion reached new peaks. Mussolini was now a statesman, legislator, philosopher, writer, artist, universal genius and prophet, messiah, apostle, infallible teacher, God's emissary, and elected bearer of destiny. Some formulas were almost taken for the popular catechism: "Believe blindly in the Duce! Always have faith! Mussolini

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[57] 'I swear by my faith as an Italian that I shall execute whatever orders I may receive from my colleagues, even if these orders should, for the good of Italy, call for the gravest responsibility and sacrifice; I swear to maintain absolute secrecy about orders given to me, or about any disposition of which I may come to have knowledge; I swear that in every place and at all times I shall be ready to defend our holy cause, which is that of Italy. Quoted in Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 47.

[58] Calling to the Colours was a very important ceremony in the ONB practices. It was organized and meant to symbolize a rite of passage for the youth moving from one age group to the next in the ONB hierarchy.

[59] Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 65.

[60] Augusto Turati was a Fascist from Brescia who loved and embraced a Spartan and sporting life. He proclaimed that Mussolini incarnated "the force of race, the force of the idea". For more details see Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship 1915-1945*, 240.

[61] Achille Starace (18 August, 1889-29 April, 1945) was a very important character in the PNF. Between 1931 and 1939 he was the Party Secretary and throughout his career a very devoted follower of Mussolini. He was also the mastermind of Mussolini's personality cult which during his tenure as the PNF Secretary was expanded and reinforced with profound religiosity.

gave you your faith! Whatever the Duce says is true! The Duce's words are not to be contested! Every morning, after your Credo in God, recite 'I believe' in Mussolini!"[62]

In his speeches, letters and newspapers articles, as well as in his interviews with foreign journalist, Il Duce made sure that his 'youthful' characteristics were always presented, displayed or at least implied. Mussolini was the image of the perfect athlete. It was a well-crafted image, omnipresent in all the Italian journals and party posters. He was a pilot, a swimmer, a feared opponent in fencing, an explorer, and worked continuously night and day for the betterment of Italy. Sports and militarism were two main features of Il Duce, and both of these were in turn used to lure the young. Just as Mussolini was depicted as the perfect athlete, statesman, and military commander, the chief goal of all the ONB programs was physical education for military purposes, and also to use Italian sporting successes to bolster national pride. Mandatory physical activities were enforced at all age levels and in all schools, even the private ones.

The physical preparation of the whole youth required also the transformation of all training institutes for teachers and educators. Scores of new highly trained physical education teachers[63] were educated at the Academia Fascista di Educazione Fisica at the Farnesina.[64] These instructors were strong believers in Fascist values and were characterized by a high level of devotion to Mussolini.[65] A special academy for women was also set up in 1932 at Orvieto. The values promoted by the teachers educated here were more related to hygiene, child care and home economics as opposed to militarism, virility and intense physical exercises. The results of these intense training programs were

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[62]Gentile, *op cit.*, 65.
[63] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943*, 100.
[64]Alessio Ponzio, *La Palestra del Littorio. L'Academia della Farnesina: un esperimento di pedagogia totalitarian nell'Italia fascista*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2009), 101.
[65]Ibid., 102.

routinely on display, for example, at Campo Dux, a training camp next to Mussolini's Forum in Rome. Mass parades, thousands of flags and rhythmic exercises were overseen by Mussolini himself and a huge number of foreign delegates. The number of youth camps grew exponentially in Fascist Italy. There were 107 camps in 1926 enrolling close to 60,000 children. In 1942 the camps numbered 5,805 with a total of 940,615 children who participated in sporting activities.[66] Celebrations and demonstrations of youth militarism and virility under the umbrella of the ONB were a weekly routine. This continuous assault on youth was depicted in historiography as a "political project to recreate the self."[67] It did not discard the role of formal education but coupled the book with the rifle, and added the generational spirit of the Fascist revolution. As Mussolini declared to a large group of students in May 1929: "For this, to the book on which you have to bend your head and your ingenuity, I wanted to add the rifle, the weapon that defends the country and the revolution of the black shirts. Fascist goliards! Rise up your rifles, rise up your pennants!"[68]

The association between the duty to fight and the duty to search for knowledge-leaving aside the search for a good life of the medieval goliards, was omnipresent in his speeches. All these ceremonies as well as Mussolini's special appearances at these events were carefully planned and guided, and special attention was given to the rituals that were to be observed. For example, the Fascist Grand Council was the institution that planned all the details of the *Leva fascista* for all age groups included in the ONB.[69] The

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[66] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 103.
[67] Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 20.
[68] Mussolini's speech delivered on May 24, 1929 in front of 15, 000 students, all members of the GUF, at the PNF's stadium in Rome. *Opera Omnia*, vol. 24, 97.
[69] *Opera Omnia*, vol. 24, 208. It was the 114th reunion of the Fascist Grand Council-April 1, 1930.

ceremonies were to take place on Sunday morning, the Fascist legions were to take special positions in the *piazza* of each town, musical bands and torches had to accompany the parade, local Fascist dignitaries were to deliver short speeches and each one of them played a special role in the ceremony. The new member of a particular youth group would take the new oath, kiss the flag of the old group and embrace the flag of the new one.[70] In almost all Fascist ceremonies the Catholic Church was present. High ranking priests were present at Campo Dux, performing *la messa* in advance of Fascist speeches. At a 1930 ceremony Mussolini punctuated the religious ceremony with enthusiastic praise for an audience of Fascist youth, imploring them to continue being loyal: "Fearless *avanguardisti* from all over Italy! After you gave your thought to God, I would like to show my deepest appreciation for your behaviour in these days at the camp. You have shown that you truly are the flower of the new Italian generation, and you have proven to be worthy of wearing the glorious and invincible black shirt of the Fascist revolution!"[71]

Sports, praising the Duce and God, and a Fascist communion were the values of these camps. But there was something else that kept some of the young people bound to the flag: strict police control, lack of alternatives and the threat of repression. Mussolini himself was not above invoking threats, as he did in a speech during a November 1930 ceremony: "By taking the oath you are accomplishing one of the most solemn acts of your life. Remember that those whom renege their oath will be struck as traitors by the Fascist axe."[72] Beside the clear message, the threat was also hidden in the liturgical similarities between the sin of a Fascist traitor and that of a Christian sinner. The

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[70] For the whole ritual see *114 Riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, Opera Omnia,* vol.24, 209-210.
[71] *Opera Omnia,*vol. 24, 223. It was the second Campo Dux at Parioli on May 4, 1930. The Catholic mass was delivered by *Monsignor* Angelo Bartolomasi.
[72] Ibid., vol.24, 290. On November 4, 1930, in Rome Mussolini presided over the oath ceremony for the young members of the PNF.

religiosity of the ascension into the PNF ranks was a long and well developed process which started with the Balilla group during the elementary school years.

During the 1930s, the assault on Italian youth increased its scope and became more aggressive. The educational system was the main focus of the regime, and the personality cult increasingly featured, alongside the sacred image of Mussolini, an imperial dimension. For the new minister of education, Giuseppe Bottai,[73] the Fascism of the young was the Fascism of the future, and the Fascist revolution was always in progress.[74]The apex of militarism was the proclamation of the Italian Empire following the conquest of Ethiopia. It represented proof that the Fascist experiment was the right choice for Italy's greatness, and also cemented Mussolini's cult in the minds of millions of Italians.

After the Mateotti crisis, Mussolini's rhetoric on youth evolved through different stages and culminated in an imperial dimension. By assuming full political responsibilities Il Duce also became the supreme educator and a perfect athlete, a living idol for millions of teens and the saviour of Italy. Luring, praising, threatening and promising a glorious future, Mussolini's speeches went hand in hand with a huge institutional effort meant to re-educate, socialize and instil participation. The Italian Empire represented a change in Mussolini's rhetoric. At the beginning of the war, the Italian Fascism needed loyal troops and a healthy population capable of fighting. Fascist youth was to be geared toward a glorious future forged with the gun.

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[73] Giuseppe Bottai (1895-1959), was a journalist, lawyer, mayor of Rome, deputy secretary of the Fascist corporations, and the founder of the magazine *Critica fascista.* He was the minister of education between 1936 and 1943. He sided with Grandi in 1943 to remove Mussolini, fled to Spain and joined the French Foreign Legion to fight Fascism. For a more complex portrait of Bottai see Alexander J. De Grand, *Bottai e la cultura fascista,* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1978).

[74] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight,* 146.

SECTION 3:

Fai largo ai giovanni, the Personality Cult and the Sacralisation of Politics

A major component of youth socialization during the Fascist regime took place in the schools. The regime deployed enormous resources in reshaping Italian education in order to fit the Fascist educational principles. Reading Mussolini's speeches in the pursuit of my research I realized that the methodological framework has to include the discussion of Mussolini's personality cult and his visions about Fascist youth alongside Fascist educational policies. Giovinezza (youth) was an ever present word in a lot of his speeches and it had a multitude of meanings in the Fascist linguistic profile. It was a generational and political category, a Fascist desideratum and a propagandistic reflection on the masses. For the Fascists, age was a problem of mind over matter. By extensively using the term giovinezza, Mussolinian discourse was probing the minds of adults as well as

youth. The concept of Fascist virility was thus a trans-generational concept that also became ingrained in the Fascist pantheon of virtues. The Fascist revolution was not meant to galvanize just the youth, but also their parents and indeed the entire adult population of Italy. Mussolini himself was not a teenager but he was repeatedly presented as possessing the energy of a youth, with the concomitant optimism and obstinacy to carry on and build a totalitarian state. Thus, his rhetoric incorporated a universal message valid for both young and old.

The introduction of *libro unico* (one single textbook) in all Italian schools in 1930 marked an important step in the process of Fascistization. All elementary education was now under one curriculum, and the state exams (taken when a student was moving from the 3rd grade to the 4th grade) were to be conducted using only specific textbooks approved by the regime.[75] In *Libro fascista del Balilla*, which was introduced in 1934 in all elementary schools, the author explained who Mussolini was:

> Mussolini, whom everybody calls Duce and you can call him grandpa, is a son of the people who came from poverty. He is the greatest and the best man in the world. In ten years he made Italy became the first country in the world. With the March on Rome, the government was removed from fearful men and the Fascist Regime was inaugurated which will last more than a century.[76]

The new textbooks were full of these stories and peculiar choices of examples that had to include Fascist characters, Fascist events, or Mussolini's biographical dates and his great accomplishments. Discussing the introduction of the *libro unico*, Tracy Koon acknowledged that the success of Fascistization in elementary schools was greater than in high schools. [77] Having one single textbook as a teaching resource in all Italian schools was a huge success in instilling the Fascist myth into young minds. Elementary students

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[75] G. Ricuperati, "La scuola italiana durante fascismo", *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 4:4 (1975), 481.
[76]Ibid., 491, from Vicenzo Meletti, *Libro fascista del Balilla.*
[77] Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight,* 199.

were apparently much more attracted by heroic Fascist figures then their high school counterparts. The diversification of subjects taught in high schools was not present in the elementary curriculum. Themes about Italy's greatness and mythical heroes were more easily assimilated by children in that age group.

If we couple an examination of these evolving educational policies with an assessment of the regime's sporting initiatives, we can draw a better picture of the process of national participation and involvement of the Italian youth. Physical activities and black shirt parades both aimed at boosting the pride of belonging to ONB. In 1935, a new discipline was introduced in all schools and at all levels, *Cultura militare* (Military Education). The instructors were members of the *Milizia Volontare Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN) and all male students had to participate in a minimum of 30 hours of military education per year. It involved drills, marches and theoretical courses about battle techniques and military gear.[78] For girls, the curriculum included special classes dedicated to hygiene, home-made crafts and role play games about the virtues of motherhood.

At the same time, the idea of *make way for the youth* was more and more present in Mussolini's speeches, radio broadcasts and newspaper articles. The militaristic and expansionistic tendencies in Mussolini's foreign policy were incorporated into the domestic rhetoric about youth. In speech after speech during youth parades, the imperial idea was mixed with the term *giovinezza*. For example, when Mussolini was observing the 24 *avanguardiste* legions and 6,000 Balilla officials which attended the sixth national campo Dux reunion in Rome in September 1935, he told the crowds: "Here are the three

[78] Ibid., 492.

words which you have to remember at the end of this glorious day: We have the right!"[79] He was referring to the right to invade Abyssinia. Foreign policy and youth celebration worked hand in hand to advance the Fascist revolution. Victory in Abyssinia, which was proclaimed the following year, was then celebrated in conjunction with the 10th anniversary of the ONB. Mussolini reiterated the need for you to embrace the Fascist Revolution, instructing his youthful audience as follows: "If the motherland will ask you tomorrow to endure heroic ordeal, prepare the rifles and your hearts. Only in this way you will be proud to wear the glorious black shirt of the revolution and to serve, at all times, and with whatever means necessary our Italy!"[80]

The myth of Mussolini was perfected and transformed into a totalitarian Caesarism.[81] The new Italian empire was the next step for the Fascist Caesar, who brought militarism to a successful conclusion. The Fascist rhetoric was bearing fruit. Education for war, marches and parades, sports, virility, and the wisdom of Il Duce made the Roman imperial idea a reality again In May 1936 Mussolini declared that: "Italy finally has it's empire! A Fascist empire, because it bears the indestructible signs of the will and the strength of the Roman *littorio*, because this is the destination towards which during the last 14 years all the energies of the disciplined youth were channelled."[82] The war in Africa now played a role analogous to that of the First World War in Fascist mythology. It was a catalyst for the youth and the whole Italian society to embrace the

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[79] *Le tre parole,* September 8, 1935, Rome, *Opera Omnia,* vol. 27, 123. In Italian there are only 3 words:"*Noi tireremo dirito."*

[80] Ibid, 250.It was April 4, 1936 in Rome, where 15,000 young black shirts were gathered to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the ONB.

[81] Emilio Gentile, "Mussolini's charisma," *Modern Italy* 3:2 (1998): 219-235.

[82] *La Proclamazione dell'Impero,*May 9, 1936, Rome, *Opera Omnia,* vol. 27, 268. From the central balcony of *palazzo* Venezia, Mussolini proclaimed the birth of the Italian Empire.

regime. It gave them a new enemy against which all Italians could unite.[83] The liberal democracies which formed the League of Nations were the enemy which provided the coagulant for the unity around the Duce. The Fascist propaganda machine was praising Mussolini's visionary leadership constantly, and the youth learned now that, indeed, the Duce had been correct to steer Italy towards a new historical course of greatness. The Pompeian red of the Balilla houses which decorated a lot of the Italian villages was now the point of convergence between the old Roman Empire and the new Fascist one.

Mussolini was now the new Caesar, an image that was superimposed on the Christ-like image. Mussolini's visits to all corners of the country, his conversations with the masses, his unannounced and impromptu visits to farms and factories were unique in the political history of Italy. No other prime-minister or famous political leader travelled as much as he did inside Italy.[84] He conquered the masses despite their distrust in the totalitarian state, because he personified trust and was seen as the last hope.[85] He was the much awaited 'new man,' and the 'regenerator of the nation,' and thus a Christ-like figure. The youths were mesmerized when after years of seeing only pictures of Il Duce inside their textbooks or the ONB posters, the time came when they had the chance of actually taking part in the personification of the myth by seeing Mussolini in flesh and blood.[86]

The camps and the ceremonies where Mussolini was present reinforced the cult and also helped spread it throughout different social media and family circles. The family universe was also under the influence of a multitude of programs dedicated to attract both

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[83]Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, 123.
[84]Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, translated by Keith Bitsford, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 149.
[85]Ibid., 152.
[86]Ibid, 148.

the youth and their parents. From social assistance programs to leisure activities organized by the OND, to new jobs and work opportunities in the Fascist reconstruction projects, land reclamation or public works programs, the Italian family was under constant assault to recognize the benefits of being a member of the ONB, GUF, or the Fascist corporatist state. Mussolini incorporated in his speeches and writings the need to help those who dedicate themselves to the Fascist revolution, and its militaristic goals. He constantly emphasized the regime's success in inculcating its values in the young boasting in 1935 that:" We have taken the small Italian from his younger years and forged his thoughts and his soul in harmony with the great ideal of motherland, and formed the present soldiers. Our organizations embraced all ages. Fascism can claim them as its own creations."[87]

Aside from being a soldier for the Italian forces, the youth were also called to carry on the Fascist revolution and form the badly needed cadres. Special positions were allocated at all levels for the next Fascist ruling class. Italian students were also called to investigate and expand the Fascist revolution and its' meaning in groups like *Scuola di mistica fascista*[88] or in the pages of numerous journals and magazines such as *Il Popola, Il Sagiattore* and *La Sapienza.*[89] The level of debate around these journals and many more was somewhat limited by the principle *debate with faith,* and the double game of control and critique was well observed by many historians. Any criticisms that were expressed in the pages of these journals were not aimed at the central tenets of Fascism. The authors had to have a strong believe in Fascist principles and its long term goals in order to

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[87] *La necessita di Espansione dell'Italia in Africa*, October 7, 1935, Rome. *Opera Omnia,* vol. 27,160.
[88] D. Marchesini, "Un episodio della politica culturale del regime: la scuola di mistica fascista", *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 3:1 (1974): 90-122.
[89] Michael A. Ledeen, "Italian Fascism and Youth"Journal *of Contemporary History* 4:3 (1969):142.

receive the right to debate. Mussolini's writings and wisdom were not to be touched or challenged. Only certain practical issues, the means of implementing certain policies, and organizational schemes were open to discussion and debate. The main purpose was not necessarily to allow the youth to formulate political alternatives to Fascism, but rather to create the illusion of participation, to lure and to captivate. I believe that *fai largo ai giovani* (make way for the youth) was aimed at the same emotional level as much of other Fascist policies and practices. The illusion of participation was as important for the regime as the illusion created by Mussolini's dialogues with the masses. It was the same tactic used to instil in the masses the illusion that they actively participated in Duce's decisions when they had conversations with him in the *piazzas*. And these practices both worked to a certain extent. The disillusionment came later for both the youth and the masses. For the moment, the personality cult praised daily the constant, energetic, and fruitful modernization of Italy under the capable leadership of Il Duce. One young member of the Balilla groups wrote home to his mother from a Balilla camp that: "I think of home and of Garibaldi (this was the dog's name) almost as much as I think of Duce. Just thinking of him when we do marches makes me stronger and helps me when I feel weak. His statue made of bronze is right in front of my window, and I fall asleep easily because I know that Il Duce is here with me as much is at home and everywhere."[90]

The mass liturgies were reminiscent of the Catholic faith, so a dual and complementary relation was at work too. *L'era Starace* was the apotheoses of the state-induced personality cult, mixing ridiculous propagandistic ideas with a very serious attempt to collapse the religious feeling of the Italians into a profound devotion for

[90] Emilio Gentile, "Mussolini's Charisma", *Modern Italy*, 3:2, (1998), 224.

Mussolini. The Fascist Saturday[91] was meant to replace *il weekend* and to a larger extent to decrease the importance of the religious Sunday, replacing them with activities dedicated to the Fascist state: parades, marches, sporting activities all 'imbued with the spirit of the Fascist revolution.'[92] Starace's personal love and obedience to Mussolini took over the Italian sport activities and he especially targeted the youth. His passion for uniforms and rhythmic, synchronized and disciplined marches was to be reflected in his guidelines for showcasing youth. Parades, sports and other events were to reflect the *stile Fascista* (Fascist style), and the Roman salute was to take the place of the handshake, both in private and in sporting events.[93]Mussolini did not protest the intensification of his personality cult, but apparently nor did he personally encourage these practices. He called Starace his 'personal mastiff' and took part in all the manifestations organized by the PNF or other Fascist organizations. The Italian youth was part of all his cultural and social initiatives and he took care to reform all the media that could influence the totalitarian doctrine.

The Istituto Luce[94] was another propagandistic instrument used extensively by Starace and his predecessors in re-educating the Italian youth. Newsreels (cinegiornale) were shown at the beginning of each movie in all the Italian cinemas. Itinerant screenings of newsreels or Italian made movies were promoted in all rural regions. The regime tried to create consent or instill patriotic feelings through the dissemination of recurring words (*patria*, Il Duce, *Giovinezza,* military, force, *avanguardisti*, believe, proud, Rome), and

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[91]Christopher Hibert, *Mussolini. The Rise and Fall of Il Duce.*(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63.
[92]*Opera Omnia,*vol.29, 99.
[93]Hibbert, *Mussolini*, 64.
[94]L'Istituto Luce was founded in 1924 and was used by Mussolini and the Fascist state in propagandistic programs. For a discussion of the Italian cinema during the Fascist period see Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds., Re-*Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema1922-1943*(Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2002).

images, (oceanic rallies, the chiselled face of Mussolini, the Fascist flags, the Fascist disciplined formations, new buildings and homes), that would serve to glorify the Fascist regime and deify its leader.[95]

The same linguistic characteristics can be found in Mussolini's speeches and writings. It is beyond the scope of this report to study the syntax and linguistic profile of Fascist discourse, but some characteristics are obvious for every reader: a constant use of active verbs and sentences; extensive use of short and provocative phrases; rises in pitch and *crescendo* tones coupled with emphatic and conclusive terms in the speeches delivered in public spaces; abundance of historical background in his written speeches that alluded to common facts or persons known to the public for their specific active and energetic actions like D'Annunzio or Garibaldi. Mussolini's discursive strategies were not always the same, but most of his speeches and writings maintained an energetic tone, a certain tension and apprehension that rendered the sometimes meaningless content as a very important message to the listeners or readers. In his speeches the terms *Camice nere* (black shirts) or *Legionari* (legionaries) were invested with youthful, energetic and ready-to-act characteristics, in such a manner that wearing the black shirt was synonymous with being as active as Mussolini himself.

The sacralisation of the Fascist practices went hand-in-hand with the modernization process and the militaristic proclamations. By transforming Italian culture, both low and high brow, the regime displaced traditional values associated with the Church or the civil society. The divine was redefined by the Fascist revolution and thus modified the material world. The propaganda machine made sure that all the effects of

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[95]Jaqueline Reich, "Mussolini at the movies: Fascism, Film and Culture," in Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds., *Re-Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema 1922-1943*, (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2002), 196.

this transfiguration were well known to everybody. The Italian cities and the rural population suffered from material reconfigurations and the impact of huge building projects that were intended primarily to impress travellers[96] and the youth. The architectural Fascist assault on the Italian urban and rural landscape created the need for greatness in all youth groups that moved into new schools, libraries, cinemas or sport facilities.The sensation of awe, wonder and ultimately submission[97] were doubled by the mass rituals that accompanied each and every inauguration. The introduction of the Fascist calendar was also an attempt to alienate traditional Italian civil society, to distance its economic and social events from the Gregorian calendar. Ceremonies were now connected to the March on Rome, the Fascist political progress, and all monthly activities and celebrations were supposed to relate to the Fascist revolution and not the rotation of the Earth around the sun. Fascist realities were in the mid-1930s at the center of Italy and Mussolini was its shining star.

Traditional holidays were replaced with new ones[98] which stressed nationalist sentiment to the detriment of local and regional customs and practices. Autarchy imposed new restrictions on toys and tried to further modify the taste for foreign toys of the Italian children. Anticipating the militaristic foreign policies of the regime, the Italian youth should play with an Italian-made machine gun destined to delight both young and old boys: "it can be moved and managed and actually works and fires thirty little projectiles each to a distance of ten meters."[99] The collaboration between the Catholic Church and

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[96]Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing Between the Wars*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 2.
[97]Ibid., 3.
[98] One good example is the *Befana Fascista* (Fascist Epiphany) of 6 January, which emphasized the Fascist charity with Mussolini and Rachele taking a central role in all the events.
[99] Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship,* 292.

the Fascist totalitarian state was also at its apex in the years following the proclamation of the empire. The Italian clergy took an active part in praising Il Duce and the regime for the victorious conclusion of the Ethiopian war. Mussolini was compared by Cardinal Schuster "to the great souls of Constantine and Augustus."[100] The same providential forces were at work in Mussolini's time as they were Constantine's time. The personality cult was backed from the pulpit, and infused with divine attributes which in turn reinforced all other forms of re-education and socialization.

The centralization of all youth groups in 1937 under the *Gioventu Italiana del Littorio*(GIL- Italian Youth of the Lictor) meant more coordinated efforts and more funds for youth programs, but the regime was losing momentum. The war in Ethiopia was supposed to represent the coming of age of the Fascist youth, their victorious moment which brought their instauration to the center of the decision-making process in Rome. Hence the ONB was incorporated in the GIL in 1937. But in spite of the fact that it maintained its main educational goals, the ONB was less prevalent in Mussolinian discourse by the end of the decade. Instead, preparations for the war, the need for and implementation of the 1938 racial laws, and the international pressure on Italy were more and more present in the Fascist discourse.

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[100]Emilio Gentile, "New Idols: Catholicism in the Face of Fascist Totalitarianism,"*Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11:2 (2006): 143-170.

SECTION IV: Conclusions

Mussolini's speeches and writings are a useful source of material for various historical studies. My reading of this material was concentrated on speeches that touched the subject of youth and especially the ONB groups. One singular conclusion can be applied to most of Mussolini's speeches and that is their immense mass appeal and also the perceived omniscient, omnipresent quality of the speaker. Mussolini was always careful in preparing his public appearances and speeches.[101] He understood that Italy was a "land of theatre" and that he, as the main actor, had to always perform his role to perfection.

It is my conclusion that the ONB was instrumental in the Fascist political experiment and that by using a vast array of methods and techniques it influenced and redefined the process of youth control and indoctrination. It is not possible to generalize

[101] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 126.

about the validity of this conclusion of the whole Italian society, but by restricting, altering and eliminating other alternatives for the youth, the ONB proved to be almost the sole custodian of youth education and sports participation.

The Italian youth enrolled in the ONB was defined by extensive participation in sports, parades, military exercises and activities and numerous trips to major cities or Rome to attend Fascist ceremonies and celebrations. All these activities were organized, planned and conducted following a very distinctive ideological framework. Unpacking this process of ideological construction and analyzing it inside the universe of childhood is a delicate task. A multitude of factors are to be explored and factored in if we try to measure the level of consent and indoctrination of these activities. The make-up of the Italian family and its respective community is also crucial in assessing the Fascist impact on the youth. Leveling social differences in a rhetorical rather than a material way was another Fascist goal, as noted by Victoria De Grazia[102] in her study of women during Mussolini's regime. The personality of Mussolini and the personality cult played an important role in the sacralisation of the Fascist political message. The youth were both displaced from the universe of their family and community and also invited, forced, and lead into re-creating their surroundings on a daily basis. The Fascist message was everywhere. From the coins to the flag, from textbooks to Sunday mass at church, Mussolini was in some way or another always addressing them. Continuous movement and betterment of their lives and surroundings were praised and preached daily. Youth were invited to take their place in the piazzas, in the street parades or in the sports fields and it always seemed that they had an avenue of their own which Il Duce was purposely

[102]Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

building for them. At home, daily routine and events were also touched by the Fascist revolution: new schools, new buildings, work projects and agricultural reclamations of the marshes, radio broadcasts and travelling movies, all these were signs that Mussolini was keeping his promises. Their family could go on trips and visit Rome, or participate in the activities organized by the OND. The stories in their textbooks spoke about the 'new man' with whom they could relate: he came from poverty, he was brave and fought in the Great War, he played all kind of sports, swam, and was now guiding Italy towards a better future. It was the same future that was happening all around them.

The Fascist effort for re-educating Italian youth was a gigantic undertaking both financially and organizationally. It involved aid measures for the poor and encouraging people to have more children. It meant building new schools and sports facilities, printing new books and organizing monthly events both locally and nationally. It supported Mussolini's deification and was in turn reinforced by the support received by the regime from the Catholic Church. The sacralisation of the political message was a plus for Mussolini. He was both ruler and god in one person; the first humanized the second and the second legitimized the first. After the incorporation of the ONB in the GIL, the traditional religious education was more marginalized. The time of imperial Italy could not coincide with the adulation of another god besides the new Caesar. All the militaristic activities and parades were now justified and welcomed .Italy was great again and Mussolini's generation had its own war. The coming of age of the ONB was finally completed, and now they could take their place ruling Italy and the colonies.

The ONB was part of the Fascist project of recreating the identity of the Italian people. It was a project that, for the youth, involved a combination of reward and also

displacement. Repression, it must be remembered, also touched different age groups and social classes. The youth needed to be levelled socially and rewarded for their participation. But at first the regime deconstructed, removed or alienated almost all other alternatives to its project. From the Catholic Action groups to youth groups belonging to other political parties, all other avenues of expression or social interaction were transformed. Schools were transformed and the educators were re-educated or replaced. The books were rewritten and the playground was either new or at least painted in a different colour. The toys and cartoon characters were also affected. With all these changes one message was the same: *gionivezza e future sei tu!* (The youth and the future are you!) The personality cults worked on the youth but also on their families and social surroundings too.They were the recipients and the carriers of the Fascist revolutionary message and the personality cult. This double function is not always explored in the historiography, though Mussolini's speeches are a constant reminder of it. In a speech at Campo Dux in Rome on March 3 1937, he told the spellbound masses: "You have shown great pride and virility in your activities today. Go home and remember this day in your stories about Rome! Tell everyone you bring them my Fascist salute!"[103] The diffusion and dissemination of the Fascist message inside the universe of the Italian family is an avenue not explored in the historiography, but important in the discussion of youth re-education. It created a common and complementary ground for the young minds grouped inside the ONB structure according to their age. The same values were spread horizontally throughout the age group and transmitted back and forth through the values of the family, which was to be immersed in a variety of Fascist activities and be made grateful for the financial or social opportunities created locally by the regime that would

[103] *Opera Omnia*, vol.29, 110.

resonate with the verses of *Giovinezza* in one single accord. Other families experienced only the assault and not the benefits. The perception of the Fascist discourse was not uniform, but the message embraced uniformly the whole societal expressions.

As a group university students were not entirely representative of the process of socialization of the ONB groups, as suggested by some historians. The re-education of the youth was not geared towards the formation of a university-educated second echelon of Fascists. Mussolini's own perception of the role assigned to the Italian youth changed and evolved over time, and the creation of a second generation of Fascist educated elite was not always the most stringent goals of his regime.

The avenues of indoctrination at the university level were somewhat similar but calibrated differently. The illusion of participation was induced through intellectual debate and critique that the system allowed and encouraged. Fascistization at this level was not as rigidly imposed as for the Balilla groups. The analogies between the glories of the Roman Empire and the Fascist one worked better, for example, with the *Figli della Lupa* then the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti.*

The ONB was a complex project that in my opinion did not ultimately fail, but rather mirrored the evolving concept of Fascist youth in the Duce's political discourse. Mussolini's rhetoric regarding Italian youth evolved constantly from his socialist years, through the March on Rome, and gained formed in the structures and practices on the ONB. It is true that not all the Fascist propaganda echoed favourably in the minds of the Italian youth, but it created a common experience of faith and practice that acted as a sounding board for the Fascist ideals throughout Italy's social landscape. The alliance

with Hitler, the racial laws, and the defeats of the Second World War shattered the fragile capillary construction aimed at the young minds.

The rush to create an anti-Fascist Resistance myth and anti-fascist tradition also pushed into forgetfulness some of the Fascist realities constructed by Mussolini. The effects of Fascist policies were downplayed in the aftermath of the defeat in the war. Personal and collective acts of devotion were characterized as actions of coerced individuals. The Fascist youth project was discarded in the process of comparing how many Italian divisions were on the front with the German ones.

Opera Nazionale Balilla was not the Hitler-Jungend organization. Measuring the level of success of the ONB is best assessed in relation to other initiatives launched by the Italian Fascist state. The success of the ONB policies must be assessed through social studies and micro-level analysis of different localities or regional and provincial participation. The strategy of the concentrated assault on the family, community and economic rewards for participation must be coupled with the overall analysis of the resonance of the Fascist message inside the family unit and the community. Local Fascist leaders[104] wielded important powers and their networks of alliances, privileges and support were crucial to the general reception of the Fascist discourse. As Gentile said "fascist made rational use of the irrational" and so an investigation into irrationality has to begin with the analysis of the role of emotions, religious experiences and individual manifestations of these feelings in the youth population. The role of Mussolini's speeches and discourse should also be incorporated in these types of studies due to its functioning as a vehicle of Fascistization, and as a very important indicator of the various transformations of the role youth played in the Fascist rhetoric.

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[104]Guido Nozzoli, *I Ras del Regime: Gli uomin iche disfecero gli italiani*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1972).

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