

## The Socialization of Italian Youth: Educational Reforms, Youth Movements and the Cost of Disillusionment

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Throughout the twenty years of fascist rule in Italy, Mussolini made continuous efforts to politically indoctrinate Italian youth. “Mussolinian” policies aimed towards youth, particularly young males, sought to create both a new ruling class and a resource of devoted soldiers that would together preserve Italian fascism beyond his era. Brought up under the guide of fascism and untouched by Liberal or Socialist experiences, the young generation seemed to offer a vast amount of candidates that could be molded easily into “the new fascist man,” or citizen-soldier.<sup>1</sup> The successful socialization of Italian youth, however, proved to be a difficult task that required great pains to achieve even minimal results. Exploring the main components of fascist educational reforms between 1923 and 1939, reveals both how the regime sought to indoctrinate its youth and also, how these educational policies failed to create a new generation that was willing to unconditionally “believe, obey and fight.”<sup>2</sup> Equal in importance to educational reforms, and connected on many levels, the new regime sought to “fascistize” young Italians through youth programs centered on notions of conformity and collectivism over individualism. Surveying the effects of fascist educational policies and youth movements in practice reveals what internal shortcomings hindered the successful creation of a new generation of young Fascists. Likewise, this analysis also reveals how political indoctrination

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta Vescoui, “Children into Soldiers: Sport and Fascist Italy,” in *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons*, ed. J. A. Mangan, (Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 169.

<sup>2</sup> One of the more popular Fascist slogans used in propaganda aimed towards youth.

within these institutions eventually worked against the regime, as external factors, such as Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War, the Rome-Berlin Axis, and the Second World War, created a bleak reality greatly different than what young Italians had been promised.

Mussolini recognized the importance of Italian youth, as it was to these generations that he would pass down the torch of fascism. The *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) realized that the political socialization of Italian youth required substantial state influence in the experiences of the young. State authority in the education system combined with politically driven youth movements, were the main means used in the creation of a new generation of young avid Fascists. Ideally, young Italians would be raised under the influence of fascist ideology, life and culture from birth, and not knowing different circumstances, as well as not holding any other party affiliations, Italy's youth would then be ready to be absorbed into the fascist world. Educational reforms at all levels of schooling would breed more than enough dedicated Fascists from which Mussolini could then create a new ruling elite,<sup>3</sup> while the regime's militaristic youth movements would foster citizen-soldiers exemplifying military vigor, national pride and unquestioned faith in the 'Duce'. Although Mussolini's efforts were not completely futile, and fascist ideology certainly inspired a substantial amount of young Italians, in reality, these two leading institutions did fail to instill long-lasting Fascist commitment within enough young Italians to create the envisioned new generation.

Two major reforms were undertaken during fascist rule in Italy, the *Riforma Gentile* in 1923 and the *Carta della Scuola* in 1939. The former, coined as 'the most fascist of all reforms' and penned by Idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile, limited access to higher education and increased state control of school curricula. The reform sought to limit the number of students swelling Italy's universities, as unemployment and underemployment of the *laureati* and *diplomati* continued to be a significant problem.<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Education from 1936 to 1943 and editor of *Critica Fascista*, recognized that unemployment

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<sup>3</sup> Bruno Wanrooij, "The Rise and Fall of Fascism as a Generational Revolt," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22:3 (1987), 402.

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Wolff, "Fascistizing Italian Youth: the Limits of Mussolini's Educational System," *History of Education* 13.4 (1984), 288.

threatened the socialization of Italian youth, as frustrated intellectuals had previously aimed their grievances towards the liberal state.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the regime's attempts to solve this impeding issue were not unwarranted. In an effort to curb the number of university students, graduates of technical institutes no longer had access to higher education.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, elementary students were guided into programs that did not lead to university study. However, despite these efforts, the *Riforma Gentile* was ultimately unable to address the problem successfully. The economic distress of the depression aggravated the situation, as lawyers and other qualified individuals worked jobs for which they were overqualified. Unemployment and underemployment levels continued to rise, and by 1938, approximately 100,000 teachers could not find suitable teaching positions.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Bottai's *Carta della Scuola* also made efforts to limit access to higher education in 1939,<sup>8</sup> suggests that unemployment remained a significant problem. Thus, as young Italians grew up under the impression of a new, young and vital Italy, in which the fruits of one's labour were plenty, the reality of unemployment greatly damaged this myth.

While great efforts were made to solve the problems of unemployment, these efforts did little to attract Italy's youth towards Fascism. Increasing political indoctrination in schools began only after the abolition of democratic parties in 1926; once Mussolini's regime began to consolidate its totalitarian claims. Increased state influence on the education system was reflected through the content of school curricula. The muscle of state control varied greatly from one level of education to the next. The most direct and overt political indoctrination was exercised at the elementary stage, which decreased as one moved up to secondary and university levels of education.<sup>9</sup> In 1928, a national board was established to review all school textbooks, which were limited to "*libro di stato*,"

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<sup>5</sup> Wolff, "Fascistizing," 291.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>7</sup> R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 431.

<sup>8</sup> Wolff, "Fascistizing," 290-291. Bottai's educational reform highlighted class differences in education, and openly expressed that education was not a means of social advancement. In this way, Bottai tried to limit higher education to upper social classes, and to keep the lower classes working.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Italy, 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 73.

textbooks produced within Italy.<sup>10</sup> The effects of this law were felt mostly by elementary students, especially in history subjects. The propaganda projected through primary readers and daily class rituals, painted Italy and its infallible leader in magnificent terms. In her book, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Italy, 1922-1943*,<sup>11</sup> Tracy H. Koon argues that: “the children reading these state textbooks were...left with one overriding impression: the world revolves around Italy, and Italy, in turn, revolves around Benito Mussolini and the Fascist Party.”<sup>12</sup> Fascist curricula portrayed an Italy that was leading the way, in front of Britain, France and Germany. Certainly, Mussolini was crucial to this new found national status, as he had led “his followers...courageously, in the face of extreme danger... [and] fought and defeated the deceived, the weak and the evil...”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Bottai’s *Carta della Scuola* of 1939 made membership in youth organizations obligatory.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as arms of the Fascist regime, school education and the youth movements worked together to strengthen the party’s grip on the developmental experiences of the young.

Despite such great efforts, many young Italians emerged from the schools without a strong connection to Fascism.<sup>15</sup> Fascist reforms failed to restructure the educational system completely. Overt political indoctrination was not as influential in the secondary schools and even less, in the universities, when students could see through simple fascist slogans and propaganda. Although classes made up solely of fascist content were created for the university level in 1934-35, these courses were not obligatory like those in the primary level.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, religious education continued to be practiced throughout the Fascist years, reflecting Mussolini’s wishes to have his regime regarded with the same level of respect and acceptance as the country’s predominant religion.<sup>16</sup> In practice however, the Catholic Church’s *Azione Cattolica* remained a significant competitor to Fascism’s youth organizations.

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<sup>10</sup> Wolff, “Fascistizing,” 292.

<sup>11</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Wolff, “Fascistizing,” 292.

<sup>13</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 165.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

The realities of Italian life often worked against the promises of an ideal Italy. Especially by the mid 1930s, when Italy's imperial agenda and involvement in the Spanish Civil War were at their peak, many young Italians began to question the incentives of this "new Italy".<sup>17</sup> The low number of volunteers for the Spanish campaign and the numerous youth demonstrations and pamphlets support this point.<sup>18</sup> Equally, images of Italy as a leading state were hampered by the Rome-Berlin Axis of 1936, as many young Italians felt that it made Italy subservient to their German ally. Likewise, the fascist regime's claim of infallibility began to crumble during the Second World War, as military defeats coupled with home front grievances revealed the truth of Italy's situation. Many Italians no longer wished to renew their party memberships and scores of students were no longer inclined to support a regime whose defeat seemed likely. In Bologna, for example, roughly half of the students asked to join the Fascist Party in 1942 declined the offer.<sup>19</sup> Just as the realities of unemployment hindered the successful socialization of Italy's youth, these external factors clashed with the images the regime repeatedly tried to instill in its youth. The drastic differences between what young Italians were promised and what they were now given, created strong sentiments of disillusionment. This sense of disappointment grew and fostered, in the most extreme cases, anti-fascist sentiments, or more likely, the realization that alternatives to the Fascist Party were possible.<sup>20</sup> Whatever route the young eventually chose, there was certainly no new generation of avid young Fascists that was ready to accept the torch of Fascism from Mussolini by 1943.

Youth organizations on all levels shared similar outcomes with the educational reforms. Their history and function, although comparable to education, were extremely militaristic in nature. The general consensus among fascist leaders that educational intervention alone could not successfully "fascistize" Italian youth opened the door for the coordination of pre-existing youth groups.<sup>21</sup> In 1926, with Renato Ricci as its leader, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*

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<sup>17</sup> Wanrooij, "Generational Revolt," 411.

<sup>18</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 239. Out of the 78, 846 soldiers who served, only 3,364 volunteered.

<sup>19</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 476.

<sup>20</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 232-233.

<sup>21</sup> Wolff, "Fascistizing," 293.

(ONB) was established. Enrolling children between the ages of six and eighteen, the ONB had its members declare an oath of loyalty: "In the name of God and of Italy I swear to carry out the orders of the Duce and to serve with all my strength and, if necessary, with my blood, the cause of the Fascist revolution."<sup>22</sup> Similar ideals of patriotism and militarism were also apparent in the two other youth organizations of the time, the *Fasci Giovanili di Combattimento* and the *Gioventu Universtaria Fascista* (GUF). Unlike the GUF, however, The *Fasci Giovanili* focused on overt military indoctrination, seeing that its main function was: "to constitute through a selective process based on moral, spiritual, and militaristic education an ample reservoir for the ranks and leadership."<sup>23</sup> Thus, through the *Fasci Giovanili*, Mussolini sought to create resources of young Fascist soldiers and military personnel. While the *Fasci Giovanili* enrolled males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one who were not in school, the GUF rallied university students inclined towards Fascism in the aim of creating a new ruling elite. Although each youth organization had its separate audience, they shared the basic duty of "fascistizing" young Italians. The distinctions between each group remained intact when the *Fasci Giovanili* and the ONB merged under the *Gioventu Italiana del Littorio* (GIL) in 1937, leaving the GUF independent of the other organizations, but still very much under the control of the PNF.<sup>24</sup>

Within each youth movement, sport and military exercises were the main agents exploited to create the new generation of Fascists. Through team oriented sports, members experienced being part of a mass organization, which Mussolini hoped would influence the children to submerge their thoughts and individuality. In her 2003 article, "Children into Soldiers: Sport and Fascist Italy," Roberta Vescoui sums up the effects of the youth movements: "[a]s soon as children enrolled in the ONB, they lost their individuality: they dressed alike, behaved alike and even thought alike."<sup>25</sup> Sports not only sought to accustom Italian youth to a collective identity, but also to physically prepare them for military training. Thus, the activities of the youth movements complemented each other and also consolidated what young Italians learned in school.

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<sup>22</sup> Edward R. Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience: Italian Society and Culture, 1922-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Vescoui, "Children into Soldiers," 172.

However, whether the children actually behaved and thought alike is impossible to assess correctly without risking some level of generalization. The socialization of the youth was constantly susceptible to individual variants within a person and thus, was not as easily effected as Vescou's statement might suggest. Despite favorable membership statistics,<sup>26</sup> evidence suggests that the actual number of active participants in fascist meetings and activities was drastically lower than the figures on paper. A provincial report from Turin in 1937 represents the common situation facing many youth leaders across Italy: "[t]he young Fascists are deserting the meetings....only the books are full of members, but the truth is that the young no longer go to the groups."<sup>27</sup> Thus, while statistical records might suggest an overwhelming success for the youth movements, provincial reports reveal a much different reality.

The failure of youth organizations to quell the problem of absenteeism with a firm hand further worsened the situation. Despite the high levels of absences, only severe cases were addressed.<sup>28</sup> Thus, without fear of consequences, many young Italians were not inclined to participate in the activities. Many found other ways to spend their time, such as going to the Saturday matinee, especially as they got older.<sup>29</sup> Absenteeism hindered political instruction, as it was impossible to influence members who simply did not show up. The general lack of passion and desire to attend meetings suggests that many young Italians were not enrolled in the youth movements because they felt a deep connection to the Fascist Party. This might have been the case particularly after 1939, when the membership of school children in youth movements became obligatory through the *Carta della Scuola*. Passive acceptance of the regime, thus, became standard among many GIL members, who otherwise would not have joined the youth movement. Equally, many young Italians might have joined the Party for opportunistic reasons rather than due to Fascist fervor. Self-interest might have been a determining factor for many memberships, where

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<sup>26</sup> See Table 6-9, Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 179. Statistical evidence of 1936 shows a high percentage of participation among Italian youth, Balilla (ages 8-14) 74.6% of total population in age group, Avanguardisti (ages 15-17), 75.4%, and Giovani Fasciste (ages 18-21), 53.1%.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience*, 122.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

scholastic bursaries and awards, or the opportunity to increase one's chances of future employment, might have outweighed their interest in fascist ideology. In these ways, either out of obligation, passive acceptance or for reasons of self-interest, many memberships in the youth movements might only have been superficial.<sup>30</sup>

Undoubtedly, many young Italians were truly committed to fascist ideology and believed in its leaders. Especially within the GUF, which according to one historian had the most "enthusiastic supporters of Mussolini's regime," many members felt a deep connection to Fascism.<sup>31</sup> Many aspired to be the new ruling elite that would take over from Mussolini and guide Fascism into the future. In his article "The Rise and Fall of Fascism as a Generational Revolt," Bruno Wanrooij explains that "the prospect of becoming part of this new Fascist ruling class was at the base of support offered by young intellectuals..."<sup>32</sup> The prospective new ruling elite was promised active participation in the government through apprenticeships in Mussolini's "Firm Points about Youth" in 1930. However, in reality, only a small minority was able to acquire meaningful political positions within the regime. Out of 145 new deputies appointed in 1934, 117 had either joined the Party before or in 1922.<sup>33</sup> Aspirations of upward mobility soon became myths as many young Fascists were unable to attain significant roles in the party.

Although Mussolini had called out to the youth in his search of a new ruling class, many Fascist leaders were in fact weary of the youth's questioning of Mussolinian Fascism. Unlike the regime's claims that it was a "system of action" not limited to any concrete doctrine, the Party was in fact unwilling to alter its political policy.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the same generation that had once been seen as the key in the conservation of Fascism, was now regarded as a threat by some leaders.<sup>35</sup> While youthful interpretations of Fascism were not disregarded by more liberal fascist leaders such as Bottai, who strongly encouraged the

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<sup>30</sup> Wolff, "Fascistizing," 297. Includes preceding sentence.

<sup>31</sup> Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Wanrooij, "Generational Revolt," 408.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 410. Includes preceding sentence.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Ledeen, "Italian Fascism and Youth," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4:3 (1969), 138-139.

<sup>35</sup> Wanrooij, "Generational Revolt," 409.



participation of young Italians,<sup>36</sup> Mussolini's personal opinion outweighed all others. Young Italians were expected to continue Mussolini's form of fascism, and not other alternatives adapted to the experiences and ideas of their generation. This general discontinuity between the "March on Rome" generation and the youth of the 1920s and 1930s made it difficult for many young Fascists to make their way through the period of, as the Duce put it, "transition from one epoch of civilization to another."<sup>37</sup> Thus, Mussolini's desire to create an autonomous totalitarian state and his desire to renew the ruling elite conflicted. This clash of interests eventually worked against the regime, as many young Fascists who had once sought to join the higher echelons of the party were now left empty handed.

Since the end of fascist rule in Italy, many historians have asked why the regime was unable to successfully "fascistize" Italian youth. While the internal shortcomings of educational reforms and youth programs do not provide a complete answer to this question, their importance as tools in the socialization of Italian youth, and thus in its failure, is greatly significant. Educational reforms failed to restructure the education system completely, as students at the secondary and university level were free from overt political indoctrination. Although fascist instruction was exercised at the elementary level and textbooks produced within Italy toed the party line, even these efforts proved incapable of instilling long-lasting fascist commitment within the youth. Equally, while sport and military exercises certainly gained an unparalleled level of popularity through the youth movements, they failed to thwart the individualistic identity of many members. Passive acceptance of the regime, memberships out of self-interest, or forced participation in the youth groups, often led to superficial involvement, which in turn, resulted in high levels of absenteeism.

The regime did little to address this situation and thus, limited its chances of influencing these types of members. Additionally, disillusionment played a crucial role in the demise of fascist support among the young. Images of

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<sup>36</sup> See Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 146 and Wanrooij, "Generational Revolt, 409. Bottai and other leaders understood that young Italians could give new life to the party and thus keep it from becoming stagnant and aged. Some Liberal members also petitioned for democratic proceedings and competitive exams in the election of new leaderships positions.

<sup>37</sup> Ledeen, "Fascism and Youth," 151.

a leading, strong and infallible Italy were damaged as the consequences of Italy's foreign policy, high levels of unemployment among the *laureati* and *diplomati*, and limited upward mobility into the ranks of the Fascist Party made many young Italians question the incentives, abilities and credibility of the regime and its myths. Perhaps, Mussolini said it best when he judged fascism's effects on the Italian population as a "tenacious therapy of twenty years [that] has succeeded in modifying only superficially."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ledeen, "Fascism and Youth," 142.